

The Weight of the Crown

A Chaotic Start

2 Samuel 2-3

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After this David inquired of the LORD, "Shall I go up into any of the cities of Judah?" And the LORD said to him, "Go up." David said, "To which shall I go up?" And he said, "To Hebron." So David went up there, and his two wives also, Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail the widow of Nabal of Carmel. And David brought up his men who were with him, everyone with his household, and they lived in the towns of Hebron. And the men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah. When they told David, "It was the men of Jabesh-gilead who buried Saul," David sent messengers to the men of Jabesh-gilead and said to them, "May you be blessed by the LORD, because you showed this loyalty to Saul your lord and buried him. Now may the LORD show steadfast love and faithfulness to you. And I will do good to you because you have done this thing. Now therefore let your hands be strong, and be valiant, for Saul your lord is dead, and the house of Judah has anointed me king over them." But Abner the son of Ner, commander of Saul's army, took Ish-bosheth the son of Saul and brought him over to Mahanaim, and he made him king over Gilead and the Ashurites and Jezreel and Ephraim and Benjamin and all Israel. Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, was forty years old when he began to reign over Israel, and he reigned two years. But the house of Judah followed David. And the time that David was king in Hebron over the house of Judah was seven years and six months (2 Sam. 2:1-11).

Are you ready for a culture quiz? Here it is: "What is the connection between *The Young and the Restless*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, and *General Hospital*?" Some of you really don't want to answer because you know but you don't want anyone to know that you know. They are the remaining soap operas on broadcast television. In full disclosure, I had to research all of this!

For those of you under forty, there was a time when soap operas dominated the airwaves. In the 1980s there was also *All My Children*, *One Life to Live*, *Guiding Light*, *As the World Turns*, *Days of Our Lives*, and *Dallas*. The whole country wondered "Who shot JR?"

Soap operas started as fifteen-minute radio programs in the 1930s. They received their name because they were sponsored by soap manufacturers. But as an entertainment genre, they were characterized by melodramatic characters, relational conflict, and overly sentimental plot lines. They were over the top with their drama. Some shows are now just called "soapy."

Now, you probably didn't have *Young and the Restless* on your church bingo card this morning. And you might be wondering "Where is this going?" Let me tell you. I'm not sure if you use the term "soap

opera” to describe certain situations in the real world, but I do. I’ve said, “Man, what a soap opera!” to describe situations and scenarios in life.

Wherever the world turns (see what I did there!), there’s bound to be drama. And we’ll see the same thing in 2 Samuel. It’s interesting to consider how many stories the narrator recounts in 2 Samuel about relational conflict, political power plays, palace intrigue, and scandal. The Bible is full of messy people and situations that might remind us of a soap opera.

Life involves a lot of drama, and the Bible calls believers to faithful, trusting obedience. Psalm 2 puts it this way:

Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us...As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill” (Ps. 2:1-3, 6).

Chaotic days require a kingdom perspective. **Bring the King and his kingdom into your chaos.**

Discernment

Chapter 2 starts out on a good note after David’s lament for Saul and Jonathan. It’s noteworthy and intentional on the part of the narrator that the first thing David does is to inquire of the Lord. He prays for guidance in what to do next. After five to seven years of running for his life, his first step is to seek divine discernment.

John Calvin reflects on this moment:

“The true way to distinguish brave from foolhardy action is just this: to ascertain the will of God. . . . Before we commit ourselves, we must know that a particular course of action is the will of God, and that he approves what we are doing.”¹

David’s first action is to seek wisdom from the Lord. As we move through 2 Samuel, we’ll notice that this isn’t David’s pattern as time goes on. It shows up in chapter 2 and chapter 5, but then we don’t read about “inquiring of the Lord” anymore. While this is a commendable and instructive moment, we’re left wondering if David’s life experience caused him to not live as dependently.

Chaos is exhausting, but it also tends to create prayerful desperation. Sometimes dependence can wane as life becomes more settled or familiar. When something is new or risky, we may find prayer soaring. But when life becomes more settled or when we’re more experienced, our prayerful dependence can dip.

¹ Richard D. Phillips, [2 Samuel](#), ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Iain M. Duguid, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), 29–30.

After receiving confirmation from the Lord, David moves to the city of Hebron (v. 2). It was a central city in the tribe of Judah, which his family was associated with. Hebron was the original place that Abraham settled (Gen. 13:18). His family, including his two wives and all his men, took up residence in the Hebron area (v. 3).

In verse 4 we read that the people of Judah gathered together and anointed David as king over the house of Judah. This was the first tribe of Israel to recognize David as king. Their public action here is merely affirming what Samuel had done in 1 Samuel 16. The rest of the tribes have not yet recognized David as king. David's rule is tenuous at best.

Probably in light of that, David reached out to the people of Jabesh-gilead. He learned about their recovery mission to remove the bodies of Saul and Jonathan from the wall at Beth-shean. He's impressed by the way they honored the royal family, and he informs them that he plans to honor them. We've no record of how they responded. The city was eighty miles to the north of Hebron, across the Jordan River, and in a territory soon to be controlled by Saul's family.

But we do see the opening moments of David's ascent to the throne marked by wise discernment. Chaos, however, is soon to follow.

Conflict

Saul's death creates a potential power vacuum. As often happens, military leaders are involved in orchestrating the rise and fall of leaders. We see this take place with a military leader named Abner who is identified as "commander of Saul's army" (v. 8). He was a decorated warrior and a close advisor to King Saul (1 Sam. 20:25).

Abner refuses to acknowledge David's leadership, and he takes a surviving son of Saul, Ish-bosheth, and sets him up as king. We're not sure why he wasn't in the battle. Some commentators suggest that he remained behind in case of a disaster, like a designated survivor. Abner takes him to the territory east of the Jordan, a long distance from the Philistine border. It's from this region that Abner declares him to be king "over all Israel." As we'll see, his reign is short lived and marked by conflict.

The narrator offers this summary in verses 10-11:

Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, was forty years old when he began to reign over Israel, and he reigned two years. But the house of Judah followed David. And the time that David was king in Hebron over the house of Judah was seven years and six months (2 Sam. 2:10-11).

Israel is divided. David is only reigning over Judah. Things are messy, and they are only going to become more so.

Abner, who is aligned with the house of Saul, travels for a meeting with Joab, who is a mighty warrior aligned with David. Joab is one of three sons of David's sister Zeruiah (Joab, Abishai, and Asahel), and his

nephew.² Joab and Abishai are important and interesting men in David's life. Abner and Joab meet at the pool of Gibeon, which was a well-known 37-foot-wide by 35-foot-deep cistern dug out of the rock with stairs on the side, leading to a source of water. They come up with a plan to have twelve men from each side fight each other to the death. However, the contest ends with all twenty-four soldiers dying (v. 16). A broader battle broke out with Abner's forces losing.

In verses 18-23 we learn that Abner is fleeing from the battle. One of the sons of Zeruiah, Asahel, is exceptionally fast, "as a wild gazelle" (v. 18). He runs after Abner. As Abner is being chased, he tells Asahel to stop. He tells him to pursue someone else (vv. 21-22). He warns Asahel that he doesn't want to kill him (v. 22). But when Asahel refuses, Abner strikes him with his spear. The text is pretty gruesome:

Therefore Abner struck him in the stomach with the butt of his spear, so that the spear came out at his back. And he fell there and died where he was. And all who came to the place where Asahel had fallen and died, stood still (2 Sam. 2:23).

Joab and Abishai continue to pursue Abner. Eventually Abner and his forces take their position on top of the hill (v. 25). Abner makes an appeal to Joab as he is approaching.

Then Abner called to Joab, "Shall the sword devour forever? Do you not know that the end will be bitter? How long will it be before you tell your people to turn from the pursuit of their brothers?" (2 Sam. 2:26)

This battle has already proven to be personally costly for the sons of Zeruiah. Asahel is dead. Joab relents on his pursuit of Abner. He blows a signal trumpet for his forces to cease fighting (vv. 27-28). The result is that Abner and his forces march through the night to territory east of the Jordan. And Joab returns to Judah. The narrator records a victory for David's men with 360 dead from Abner's army while only nineteen men were killed under Joab's command. This conflict ends on a sad note:

And they took up Asahel and buried him in the tomb of his father, which was at Bethlehem. And Joab and his men marched all night, and the day broke upon them at Hebron (2 Sam. 2:32).

The power vacuum in Israel creates a lot of conflict and bloodshed.

Complications

Life in this gray zone moment gets even more complicated. Chapter 3 opens with a summary of the trajectory of history:

There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David. And David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul became weaker and weaker (2 Sam. 3:1).

² Crossway Bibles, [The ESV Study Bible](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 545.

The narrator follows with a list of David's children and his wives. In chapter 2 the narrator records two wives, Ahinoam and Abigail (2:2). And now we read about six wives, marriages likely formed out of political alliances. Three of the sons (Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah) will have their own issues in the years to come. This insertion is more than a record of David's family. It appears to be a warning sign within David's family. These wives and sons will lead to trouble.

While the narrator again reminds us about the conflict between the house of Saul and the house of David (v. 6), Abner and Ish-bosheth had a falling out. Ish-bosheth accused Abner of sleeping with one of Saul's concubines. This could have indicated Abner's attempt to take the throne himself. Abner's response is telling:

Then Abner was very angry over the words of Ish-bosheth and said, "Am I a dog's head of Judah? To this day I keep showing steadfast love to the house of Saul your father, to his brothers, and to his friends, and have not given you into the hand of David. And yet you charge me today with a fault concerning a woman. God do so to Abner and more also, if I do not accomplish for David what the LORD has sworn to him, to transfer the kingdom from the house of Saul and set up the throne of David over Israel and over Judah, from Dan to Beersheba" (2 Sam. 3:8-10).

This accusation causes Abner to switch sides, and he reaches out to David with an offer to bring the rest of Israel under his reign (v. 12). However, David puts Abner to the test by demanding Michal, the wife Saul had given him years earlier. He convinces Ish-bosheth to give the command, and Michal's husband follows behind weeping until Abner tells him to go home (v. 16).

Abner then conferred with the elders of Israel to bring the rest of the country under David's rule (v. 19). Abner and David meet, but when Joab learns about the proposal, he strongly suggests that Abner should not be trusted. However, the real issue is Joab's desire for revenge.

Joab invites Abner to return to Hebron. In a private conference at the gate, Joab strikes Abner and kills him. When David hears about Abner's murder, he issues a curse over the house of Joab while also proclaiming his own innocence (v. 28-29). It seems that Joab should have been punished, but commentators suggest that Joab was too powerful.

David publicly mourns Abner's death and provides him with an official burial (v. 32) and a public lament (v. 34). Besides grieving Abner's death, this probably served as both a rebuke to Joab and a statement about David's innocence in his murder. We get a sense of this in verses 36-39.

And all the people took notice of it, and it pleased them, as everything that the king did pleased all the people. So all the people and all Israel understood that day that it had not been the king's will to put to death Abner the son of Ner. And the king said to his servants, "Do you not know that a prince and a great man has fallen this day in Israel? And I was gentle today, though anointed king. These men, the sons of Zeruiah, are more severe than I. The Lord repay the evildoer according to his wickedness!" (2 Sam. 3:36-39).

This is how the reign of David begins. It's complicated. It's filled with conflict. It sounds like a soap opera, doesn't it?

Lessons

Allow me to draw a few applications for us to consider from these chapters. Besides the text serving as an explanation of how David's reign started, there's also a few things for us to look at more closely.

Perspective

I love the honesty and the realism of this text. It shows us that life is often more like a soap opera than what we'd care to admit. This text reminds us that when sinful people are involved, some kind of conflict, drama, and controversy is sure to follow. The Bible repeatedly tells us that human beings are in desperate need of help and rescuing. Peace is rare. Romans tells us:

Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes (Rom. 3:15-18).

Therefore, Christians shouldn't be surprised when conflicts and controversy emerge. We know the condition of the human heart, and it's a constant reminder that we're desperately in need of a Savior. Without becoming jaded or cynical, we should remember the track record of human beings is filled with repeated conflict. We should invite the King into our chaos.

Prayer

Our text began with the heartfelt prayer of David, and there's a caution here about either not turning to God when we need help or about allowing experience to diminish our sense of dependency. Time and expertise can diminish our prayerful posture. I love what David wrote in Psalm 27:

One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple. For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock (Ps. 27:4-5).

Presence

This text brought to my mind the words of Jesus in John 16:

Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world (John 16:32-33).

Jesus was clear. The world is full of trouble. And the calling of the Christian is to live with an understanding of the presence of Jesus and his victory as we navigate a complicated and conflicting world. He is with us. He has overcome.

We can bring the King and his kingdom into our chaos.

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