

Shall the Sword Devour Forever?  
2 Samuel 2-4  
July 23, 2023  
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## Introduction

We've all heard the name Icarus from Greek mythology, but if you're like me, you've forgotten the details of his story. Icarus was the son of Daedalus, an expert craftsman who lived in ancient Greece. The short story is that Daedalus built a labyrinth where the minotaur, a creature with the head of a bull and the body of a man, was held. Theseus killed the minotaur and then Daedalus helped him escape; which enraged King Minos, who imprisoned Daedalus and his son, Icarus, in a tower. Daedalus, the craftsman, built a set of wings for each of them to escape the tower, but he warned Icarus that he could not fly too low because the seawater would get on the wings or too high because the sun would melt the wings. But Icarus did not heed his father's warnings and flew higher and higher until, sure enough, his wings melted and he fell into the sea and drowned.<sup>1</sup> Icarus' story has become shorthand as a rebuke of ambition and arrogance – don't fly too high, too close to the sun or you'll get burned.

This morning's passage has a lot of twists, turns, and subplots, but at its core, it's about two men who flew too high, figuratively not literally, and got burned. Their ambition had them soaring in Israel's political sphere, in the top spots of leadership after King Saul's death. But they flew too high and their burning was in the form of betrayal at the hands of men that they thought were allies. These two men, Abner and Ish-bosheth, were enemies of David for a time, though David wanted no part in hurting them. In fact, he was so enraged when he found out about their deaths that he lashed out at their assailants. But we'll get to all of that, there's a lot of groundwork to be laid this morning as we find out what happened in the aftermath of Saul's death at a time that David was free to claim the throne of Israel that had been rightfully promised to him by the Lord. We'll witness a fair amount of chaos, shifting allegiances, multiple wives, concubines, bloodguilt, and dismemberment. It's going to be a messy, wild ride for David to reign over all of Israel. We start in 2 Samuel 2, that explores

### I. The Fate of the Nation After Saul's Death (Chapter 2)

*<sup>1</sup> 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." <sup>2</sup> So David went up there, and his two wives also, Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail the widow of Nabal of Carmel. <sup>3</sup> And David brought up his men who were with him, everyone with his household, and they lived in the towns of Hebron. <sup>4</sup> 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," <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> Now may the Lord show steadfast love and faithfulness to you. And I will do good to you because you have done this thing. <sup>7</sup> 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." <sup>8</sup> But Abner the son of Ner, commander of Saul's army, took Ish-bosheth the son of Saul and brought him over to Mahanaim, <sup>9</sup> and he made him king over Gilead and the Ashurites and Jezreel and Ephraim and Benjamin and all Israel. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> And the time that David was king in Hebron over the house of Judah was seven years and six months.*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.greekmythology.com/Myths/Mortals/Icarus/icarus.html>.

In the interest of time, I'll summarize the rest of the chapter (verses 12-32):

The two kings had commanders of their armies: Abner led Ish-bosheth's army and Joab led David's army. The two men brought their soldiers to the pool of Gibeon. Rather than begin a full-on battle, both sides sent twelve young men to engage in hand-to-hand combat. That ended with them all killing each other, which led to the rest of the armies joining in a full battle. The attention focuses on Joab's brother, Asahel, who ran after Abner with the intention of killing Israel's commander. Abner tried to talk him out of chasing him, but he wouldn't give up, so Abner killed him with his spear. Joab then tried to find Abner to avenge his brother's death, but Abner stood on a hill and called out for peace. Joab saw reason and withdrew his men. The chapter ends with a tally of this first battle: 19 dead on David's side and 360 dead on Ish-bosheth's side.

David was supposed to be king over all of Israel after Saul's death, that's what he had been anointed for. But he prayed and God told him to just stay in Hebron where he would rule over Judah, which was only one of the twelve tribal lands of Israel. Hebron was very significant in Israel's history – it's the first place that Abraham had gained possession and where all the forefathers and their wives in Genesis (Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Leah) were buried. In the meantime, the commander of Saul's army, Abner, decided that Ish-bosheth, Saul's surviving son, should be placed on the throne of Israel, over the other eleven tribes. Abner knew David well from their years of serving Saul side-by-side, but we are not told what his motives were for setting up this rival king. Perhaps he was suspicious of David's years among the Philistines, perhaps he had always had a jealous rivalry with David, or perhaps he just thought that the right thing to do was to place Saul's only living son on the throne. I think it's most likely that Abner was doing what was best for Abner – he felt that he could control things with Ish-bosheth and stay in his seat of power that way.

David had waited a long time to come to the throne, and then to still have to bide his time until he was king over all of Israel must have seemed like torture. And yet, he refused to eliminate his rivals, to clear things out so that the throne was empty. And so we have a divided kingdom, with David over just one tribe and Ish-bosheth over the other eleven. The fact that David was praying about these things is very significant; Saul had been rejected by the Lord because he did not obey the voice of the Lord. David was not perfect on that account, but he clearly desired to obey God in His timing. But he was also proactive: David reached out to the men of Jabesh-Gilead with diplomacy and tact. These were the guys you might remember from the last chapter who were so loyal to Saul that after his death that they had risked their lives to recapture his body and bury him. If they could accept David as their new king, anyone could.

Having the kingdom split into two factions, it was inevitable that conflict and fighting would break out. It's fascinating when you think about what was happening with this contest between the two armies. The two armies each sent out twelve men who can be seen as representatives of the twelve tribes. The implied challenge is that the winner would be the true representative of all of Israel. And what happened? They all died, everything devolved into chaos, into a bloody battle. That's what happens with a civil war with two kings crowned. It's a foreshadowing of the divided kingdom that will happen after Solomon's time.

The last half of the chapter will set up the tension in the next chapter: the story of one of David's nephews, Asahel, trying to kill Abner. Abner ended up killing him though he didn't want to; he knew that he would be creating a blood feud with Joab, Asahel's brother. But Asahel gave him no choice, he basically killed him in self-defense. When Joab looked for vengeance, Abner begged him in verse 26: *"Shall the sword devour forever? Do you not know that the end will be bitter?"* This referred both to his personal blood feud with Joab, but also to the kingdom as a whole. The next

sentence says, “How long will it be before you tell your people to turn from the pursuit of their brothers?” The main message is that if Israel is not united, it will be a bloodbath of countrymen killing one another.<sup>2</sup>

Peace eventually prevailed that day, but the bloodshed was far from over, and we’ll soon learn

## **II. The Fate of Abner (Chapter 3)**

Summary of the first 16 verses: The narrator tells us that the houses of Saul and David had a long war, with David growing stronger and Saul’s house getting weaker, though Abner personally was prospering. We’re told that David had six sons born to him by six different women while he lived in Hebron. Next, the action shifts to an argument between Israel’s king and his army commander: Ish-bosheth accused Abner of essentially claiming one of Saul’s concubines, a woman named Rizpah. An enraged Abner responded that he had shown steadfast love and loyalty to Ish-bosheth’s family and placed him on the throne, but because he was being accused of taking advantage of this woman, he would start working to put David on the throne. Abner sent messengers to David and said that if they made a covenant together, that he would get all of Israel to acknowledge David as king. David agreed, but had one stipulation: bring me Michal, Saul’s daughter, my first wife. David didn’t actually wait for Abner to deliver her, he reached out to Ish-bosheth, who was her brother, and the king took Michal from her new husband and gave her back to David. The narrator tells us that the husband followed and wept the whole way. Picking up in verse 17:

*<sup>17</sup> And Abner conferred with the elders of Israel, saying, “For some time past you have been seeking David as king over you. <sup>18</sup> Now then bring it about, for the Lord has promised David, saying, ‘By the hand of my servant David I will save my people Israel from the hand of the Philistines, and from the hand of all their enemies.’” <sup>19</sup> Abner also spoke to Benjamin. And then Abner went to tell David at Hebron all that Israel and the whole house of Benjamin thought good to do. <sup>20</sup> When Abner came with twenty men to David at Hebron, David made a feast for Abner and the men who were with him. <sup>21</sup> And Abner said to David, “I will arise and go and will gather all Israel to my lord the king, that they may make a covenant with you, and that you may reign over all that your heart desires.” So David sent Abner away, and he went in peace. <sup>22</sup> Just then the servants of David arrived with Joab from a raid, bringing much spoil with them. But Abner was not with David at Hebron, for he had sent him away, and he had gone in peace. <sup>23</sup> When Joab and all the army that was with him came, it was told Joab, “Abner the son of Ner came to the king, and he has let him go, and he has gone in peace.” <sup>24</sup> Then Joab went to the king and said, “What have you done? Behold, Abner came to you. Why is it that you have sent him away, so that he is gone? <sup>25</sup> You know that Abner the son of Ner came to deceive you and to know your going out and your coming in, and to know all that you are doing.” <sup>26</sup> When Joab came out from David’s presence, he sent messengers after Abner, and they brought him back from the cistern of Sirah. But David did not know about it. <sup>27</sup> And when Abner returned to Hebron, Joab took him aside into the midst of the gate to speak with him privately, and there he struck him in the stomach, so that he died, for the blood of Asahel his brother. <sup>28</sup> Afterward, when David heard of it, he said, “I and my kingdom are forever guiltless before the Lord for the blood of Abner the son of Ner. <sup>29</sup> May it fall upon the head of Joab and upon all his father’s house, and may the house of Joab never be without one who has a discharge or who is leprous or who holds a spindle or who falls by the sword or who lacks bread!” <sup>30</sup> So Joab and Abishai his brother killed Abner, because he had put their brother Asahel to death in the battle at Gibeon. <sup>31</sup> Then David said to Joab and to all the people who were with him, “Tear your clothes and put on sackcloth and mourn before Abner.” And King David followed the bier. <sup>32</sup> They buried Abner at Hebron. And the king lifted up his voice and wept at the grave of Abner, and all the people wept. <sup>33</sup> And the king lamented for Abner, saying, “Should Abner die as a fool dies? <sup>34</sup> Your hands were not bound; your feet were not fettered; as one falls before the wicked you have fallen.” And*

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<sup>2</sup> Tim Chester, *2 Samuel For You* (England: The Good Book, 2017), p. 18.

*all the people wept again over him. <sup>35</sup> Then all the people came to persuade David to eat bread while it was yet day. But David swore, saying, "God do so to me and more also, if I taste bread or anything else till the sun goes down!" <sup>36</sup> And all the people took notice of it, and it pleased them, as everything that the king did pleased all the people. <sup>37</sup> 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. <sup>38</sup> And the king said to his servants, "Do you not know that a prince and a great man has fallen this day in Israel?" <sup>39</sup> 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!"*

According to the first five verses, David had six children by six different women in the seven years that he ruled in Hebron. Which makes you scratch your head when he goes to great lengths to get his first wife, Michal, back, even though she had remarried. Either David loved her deeply or this was a way of righting the earlier wrong of her being taken from him or it was a shrewd political move to remind everyone of his connection to Saul's house. Whatever his motives, the narrator presents things in a way that shows us how David's using women could be selfish and destructive, a foreshadowing of what is to come.

The main action of this chapter, though, centers around Abner, Ish-bosheth's right hand man. But he was also quite the entitled man, wasn't he? He had taken Saul's concubine for himself, which was taboo in that culture. It's a horrible thing to think that women were used as objects, but the fact is that when a man slept with the king's concubine, that was equivalent to making a power play for the throne. Ish-bosheth, who we have only seen as passive and weak, actually confronted Abner on this, which didn't go over well. Abner flew off the handle, questioning why he would make such a big deal out of this. He was so angry at being disrespected that he threatened to switch sides and go help David. And that was no empty threat, he immediately sent a message to David; verse 12: *"Make your covenant with me, and behold, my hand shall be with you to bring over all Israel to you."* Then he met with the elders of Israel and got them all to back David. Abner was the kingmaker, the power player who thought he controlled all the action, but his wings would soon melt for flying too close to the sun.

David accepted Abner back into his fold, throwing him a feast and sending him out in peace. But not everyone welcomed him: Joab still held his brother's death against him, so he secretly went and killed him. He lured him aside under false pretenses in verse 27 and stabbed him in the stomach, giving him the same death that he had given his brother. When David found out what happened, he was livid, but Joab must have had too much power to be killed, or else David spared him because he was his nephew. He called curses down on Joab – wishing awful things on his descendants in verse 29, then in verse 39 says, *"The Lord repay the evildoer according to his wickedness!"* David will eventually leave his son, Solomon, instructions from his deathbed to kill Joab in 1 Kings chapter 2, but for now, Joab got away with it. This whole episode is a foreshadowing of David's inability to discipline some people who were close to him – as we'll see with Absalom in a few chapters.<sup>3</sup>

Now that David was acknowledged as king of all Israel, what would happen to the other king?

### **III. The Fate of Ish-bosheth (Chapter 4)**

Starting at verse 5: *<sup>5</sup> Now the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, Rechab and Baanah, set out, and about the heat of the day they came to the house of Ish-bosheth as he was taking his noonday rest. <sup>6</sup> And they came into the midst of the house as if to get wheat, and they stabbed him in the stomach. Then Rechab and Baanah his brother escaped. <sup>7</sup> When they came into the house, as he lay on his bed in his bedroom,*

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<sup>3</sup> Robert B. Chisholm Jr, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), p. 205.

*they struck him and put him to death and beheaded him. They took his head and went by the way of the Arabah all night,<sup>8</sup> and brought the head of Ish-bosheth to David at Hebron. And they said to the king, "Here is the head of Ish-bosheth, the son of Saul, your enemy, who sought your life. The Lord has avenged my lord the king this day on Saul and on his offspring."<sup>9</sup> But David answered Rechab and Baanah his brother, the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, "As the Lord lives, who has redeemed my life out of every adversity,<sup>10</sup> when one told me, 'Behold, Saul is dead,' and thought he was bringing good news, I seized him and killed him at Ziklag, which was the reward I gave him for his news.<sup>11</sup> How much more, when wicked men have killed a righteous man in his own house on his bed, shall I not now require his blood at your hand and destroy you from the earth?"<sup>12</sup> And David commanded his young men, and they killed them and cut off their hands and feet and hanged them beside the pool at Hebron. But they took the head of Ish-bosheth and buried it in the tomb of Abner at Hebron.*

The first verse of the chapter says that Ish-bosheth was terrified when he heard the news that Abner had been killed. You would think that he would have rejoiced that that traitor had been slain, but perhaps Ish-bosheth was terrified that David's men would be coming for him. Little did he realize that those he should have feared were already in his own camp. Baanah and Rechab were captains of Ish-bosheth's raiding parties. David did not order the assassination of his rival king, though most kings at that time would have. Instead, two of Ish-bosheth's own countrymen killed him while he slept, cut off his head (just like what had been done to his father), and brought it to David. It's interesting how they framed things for David as they presented the head to him. They had killed him so that they could have his gratitude; it was a purely political move, they were hoping to be richly rewarded. But they presented it with a theological claim to understand the mind of God: *"The Lord has avenged my lord the king this day on Saul and on his offspring."*

By now the reader knows what's going to happen, how David will respond to people thinking they were doing the right thing by murdering his rival. David even mentioned how he killed the man who brought him the news of Saul's death. Their fate was the same: they were executed with their hands and feet brutally cut off and their bodies hanged, most likely as a sign to everyone else that David didn't tolerate those kinds of vigilante actions.

## **Conclusion**

I heard a saying recently, "People will show you who they really are when you first meet them if you'll let them." And that's what's happening in these chapters: we're finding out who David is going to be as king – a lot of good and some obvious bad. It's good that he's not trying to kill all of his enemies or rushing his army to capture new territory. He had nothing to do with either Abner nor Ish-bosheth's deaths. He was at his most patient and forgiving – most kings would have reacted in a very hostile manner to Abner's setting up Ish-bosheth on the throne and schemed ways to kill them. But not only does he refrain from that, but he mourns them, honors them at their funerals, and avenges their deaths. David, at his best, is the picture of a believer who does not take revenge when his enemies plot against him; a man who did not let a lust for power control him and lead him into ungodly actions. He often let things unfold and trusted that the Lord would come through on His promises. As Christians, we are called to a high standard in these areas as well:

Matthew 5:44 – *"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."*

Romans 12:17, 19 – *"Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all... Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'"*

1 John 4:19 – *"We love because He first loved us."*

I remember a good pastor friend of mine who was hoping to receive a certain ministry position being undermined and what he interpreted as being backstabbed by a man that he considered a

friend. When he confronted that man, he did not get either a satisfactory answer or an apology. So he had to work through his anger and forgive him, or let it eat him up inside. Every one of us has felt the sting of betrayal and anger at others who hurt us. Will we lash out in anger, or will we find David's restraint and trust the Lord's timing?

But David was certainly not all good. He was cutting hands and feet off in his brutal attempts at justice, though he failed to punish Joab for murdering Abner. And he was adding women to his harem left and right, and fathering children with each of them.<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 17:17 says that the king of Israel should not multiply wives, but David was, as Robert Chisholm says, "becoming enamored with the trappings of kingship and (was) modeling his kingship after the cultural pattern of other nations."<sup>5</sup> And the great sin of his time on the throne will revolve around his reckless pursuit of women. The big picture of David's mixed record is that God works with this sinful, imperfect man, but there will be consequences. David's sins will come back to haunt him when his children, Amnon and Absalom, grow up. We'll save that for when we get to chapter 13, but the cracks in the family foundation are starting to show. We can either be discouraged that God uses such flawed men with feet of clay because we expect more out of them, or we can be encouraged that we're just as flawed and imperfect, and yet, God can use us as well.

Let's go back to Abner's plea on the hilltop in chapter 2: "*Shall the sword devour forever? Do you not know that the end will be bitter?*" That's the way of the world, isn't it? An eye for an eye; you put one of ours in the hospital, we'll put one of yours in the morgue? An endless cycle of violence and retribution that continues because the hearts of men are evil and self-serving. David's reign in Israel was the high point in Israel's history, it was the glory years of the kingdom. And yet, they are filled with violence, civil war, and rebellion. Is the Bible saying that there's no chance of peace? As we've been saying throughout this sermon series, David's reign points ahead to the coming of the true king, the Greater David, Jesus. When He came to earth, the angels announced that there would be peace on earth. And yet, we look around and there is war all over the earth. Russia is well into its second year of invading and bombing Ukraine and there are regional conflicts all over the world leaving orphans and refugees in their wakes. Where is the peace that was promised?

We have to look a little closer to what the angels promised in Luke 2:14: "*on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.*" Jesus brought peace, but it was spiritual peace with God for those who find reconciliation. Colossians 1:20-22 says that Jesus reconciles "*to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, He has now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before Him.*" We have each chosen to be enemies of God and God's perfect justice will be accomplished one day, judging His enemies with eternal damnation. But we are offered peace so that our end is not bitter. Jesus Himself achieves that peace, He reconciles us to God with His death on the cross, taking our sins on Himself and paying the penalty for them. As verse 22 says, God then accepts us as holy and blameless because Jesus cleansed us; we are forgiven and adopted into God's eternal family. Receive that good news, Amen!

Benediction - Romans 8:37-39 - "*No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"

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<sup>4</sup> Robert B. Chisholm Jr, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), p. 200.

<sup>5</sup> Chisholm, p. 212.