

The Return of the King
2 Samuel 19:9-20:26
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Introduction

Anybody remember reading Homer's *The Odyssey* in school? I'm not sure if they still require that in literature classes, so if you are not familiar with it, it is the story of King Odysseus, who had fought in the Trojan Wars for ten years, then spends another ten years trying to return home to Ithaca. His wife, Penelope, and his son, Telemachus, are both awaiting his return, though men have lined up to try to win Penelope's hand in marriage and thereby take the throne, assuming that her husband is dead. The reason that the journey takes so long is that he has quite the adventure and many forces trying to kill him or prevent him from travelling; from the one-eyed Cyclops to a group of cannibals to the witch-goddess, Circe, to the travels past the deadly Sirens to his journey to Hades to fighting a sea monster to being imprisoned by the nymph, Calypso. So with the help of the Greek gods (after all, this is part of Greek mythology), he finally endures through all of those adventures and arrives near Ithaca where he learns of the suitors who want to kill his son and marry his wife. So he goes to his home in disguise, where only a few recognize him. Penelope organizes an archery contest with the winner getting her hand in marriage. Spoiler alert: Odysseus is an expert archer, and wins the contest easily, and then kills all of the suitors to complete his return.¹

I taught the *Odyssey* as a freshman English teacher at a Christian high school back in the mid-90s. I remember it being a fascinating story, but one that most of the students didn't fully appreciate because of its length and structure as an epic poem. I also didn't fully appreciate it because I was not happy teaching literature in school, I wanted to be a youth pastor and escape the confines of a classroom so that I could take kids on retreats and mission trips, and teach them the Bible. But, interestingly, Homer's poem parallels the Bible in some ways. Our sermon text today is also about a king returning from war to his palace to regain his kingdom after being away. He has several encounters with people from his past where he has to decide their fate; they are not cyclops or sirens, but men of his tribe. He also has to appease various factions in the land, as well as deal with a rival for the throne. "Winning the war is one thing, winning the peace is something else."²

So let's join David on his mini-*Odyssey*, on the trek home. Our first section, verses 9-39, shows how **I. David Swayed the Hearts of the Men (19:9-39)**

⁹And all the people were arguing throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, "The king delivered us from the hand of our enemies and saved us from the hand of the Philistines, and now he has fled out of the land from Absalom. ¹⁰But Absalom, whom we anointed over us, is dead in battle. Now therefore why do you say nothing about bringing the king back?" ¹¹And King David sent this message to Zadok and Abiathar the priests: "Say to the elders of Judah, 'Why should you be the last to bring the king back to his house, when the word of all Israel has come to the king? ¹²You are my brothers; you are my bone and my flesh. Why then should you be the last to bring back the king?' ¹³And say to Amasa, 'Are you not my bone and my flesh? God do so to me and more also, if you are not commander of my army from now on in place of Joab.'" ¹⁴And he swayed the heart of all the men of Judah as one man, so that they sent word to the king, "Return, both you and all your servants." ¹⁵So the king came back to the Jordan, and Judah came to Gilgal to meet the king and to bring the king over the Jordan. ¹⁶And Shimei the son

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Odyssey> and <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/odyssey/summary/>

² Derek Thomas' sermon, "Homecoming Not Quite," found at fpcjackson.org.

of Gera, the Benjaminite, from Bahurim, hurried to come down with the men of Judah to meet King David. ¹⁷ And with him were a thousand men from Benjamin. And Ziba the servant of the house of Saul, with his fifteen sons and his twenty servants, rushed down to the Jordan before the king, ¹⁸ and they crossed the ford to bring over the king's household and to do his pleasure. And Shimei the son of Gera fell down before the king, as he was about to cross the Jordan, ¹⁹ and said to the king, "Let not my lord hold me guilty or remember how your servant did wrong on the day my lord the king left Jerusalem. Do not let the king take it to heart. ²⁰ For your servant knows that I have sinned. Therefore, behold, I have come this day, the first of all the house of Joseph to come down to meet my lord the king." ²¹ Abishai the son of Zeruiah answered, "Shall not Shimei be put to death for this, because he cursed the Lord's anointed?" ²² But David said, "What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah, that you should this day be as an adversary to me? Shall anyone be put to death in Israel this day? For do I not know that I am this day king over Israel?" ²³ And the king said to Shimei, "You shall not die." And the king gave him his oath. ²⁴ And Mephibosheth the son of Saul came down to meet the king. He had neither taken care of his feet nor trimmed his beard nor washed his clothes, from the day the king departed until the day he came back in safety. ²⁵ And when he came to Jerusalem to meet the king, the king said to him, "Why did you not go with me, Mephibosheth?" ²⁶ He answered, "My lord, O king, my servant deceived me, for your servant said to him, 'I will saddle a donkey for myself, that I may ride on it and go with the king.' For your servant is lame. ²⁷ He has slandered your servant to my lord the king. But my lord the king is like the angel of God; do therefore what seems good to you. ²⁸ For all my father's house were but men doomed to death before my lord the king, but you set your servant among those who eat at your table. What further right have I, then, to cry to the king?" ²⁹ And the king said to him, "Why speak any more of your affairs? I have decided: you and Ziba shall divide the land." ³⁰ And Mephibosheth said to the king, "Oh, let him take it all, since my lord the king has come safely home." ³¹ Now Barzillai the Gileadite had come down from Rogelim, and he went on with the king to the Jordan, to escort him over the Jordan. ³² Barzillai was a very aged man, eighty years old. He had provided the king with food while he stayed at Mahanaim, for he was a very wealthy man. ³³ And the king said to Barzillai, "Come over with me, and I will provide for you with me in Jerusalem." ³⁴ But Barzillai said to the king, "How many years have I still to live, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem?" ³⁵ I am this day eighty years old. Can I discern what is pleasant and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks? Can I still listen to the voice of singing men and singing women? Why then should your servant be an added burden to my lord the king? ³⁶ Your servant will go a little way over the Jordan with the king. Why should the king repay me with such a reward? ³⁷ Please let your servant return, that I may die in my own city near the grave of my father and my mother. But here is your servant Chimham. Let him go over with my lord the king, and do for him whatever seems good to you." ³⁸ And the king answered, "Chimham shall go over with me, and I will do for him whatever seems good to you, and all that you desire of me I will do for you." ³⁹ Then all the people went over the Jordan, and the king went over. And the king kissed Barzillai and blessed him, and he returned to his own home.

David's returning to Jerusalem and regaining power was not automatic. With Absalom's death, the people didn't just all say, "Well, that didn't work, I guess we go back to bowing to David." There was confusion and heated arguments throughout the land as to what to do. The text doesn't say this, but there may have been fear that David would take revenge on those who had sided with his son. If that was a common fear, then the people didn't know the heart of David very well. He wanted peace and a united kingdom. We read that he reached out to his countrymen of Judah in the south first, offering Amasa, who had been working for Absalom, a position as his military commander. You can see it as a bribe, a reward, a compromise, or just a good faith offer, but it signaled that David was in a forgiving mood. So, verse 14 says that he swayed their hearts or won them over. He is either the consummate politician here or he is doing everything within his power to avoid more bloodshed.

We had a series of encounters on David's way out of Jerusalem back in chapter 16, now we have several encounters on his way back to the capital city:

-The first one is the crazy man who had cursed and thrown rocks at David and his men named Shimei. He hurried to the banks of the Jordan River to be the first person to greet David and to apologize for the terrible things that he said before: "Hey, David, let me be the first one to welcome you back. And as for that last time we met, we can just overlook that, right? Water under the bridge? I was talking crazy, I know it was wrong, let's just let bygones be bygones, I'm just glad you're home!" It's hard to know how sincere he was being, he might have had a change of heart, but it seems that he was just trying to save himself since David was back in the position of power. Abishai, David's nephew, had the exact same response to Shimei that he had in that earlier encounter: this guy needs to die. But David was in a forgiving mood, probably tired of the killing, and not wanting to send a message of vengeance, so he gave Shimei an oath that he would not kill him. Later on his deathbed, he will give Solomon instructions to kill this man, so either David knew all along that's what he'd do or he changed his mind later in life.

-The second encounter was with Mephibosheth, the crippled son of Jonathan that David had brought to eat at his table, that beautiful story back in chapter 9. If you remember, more recently his servant, Ziba, had told David that Mephibosheth had stayed in Jerusalem hoping that he would have an opportunity to become king himself. But Mephibosheth here vehemently denied that version of events; he said that Ziba had tricked him and left him, then slandered him to David. One of them was lying, but David either didn't really know who to believe (and didn't feel like taking the time to investigate) or he was unwilling to alienate Ziba's family and friends – he just decided to split the land between the two.

-The last man that David met was the man who had supplied the king and his men with food back in chapter 17 when they were in exile, Barzillai. David wanted to return the favor and provide for him in his palace, but Barzillai responded with a speech describing the fact that he was eighty years old and would just be a burden. He gave Chimham, either his servant or his son, for David to show kindness to in his place, and David was happy to honor him instead.

So, David pardoned two outright enemies, restored to favor one whose loyalty was not entirely certain, and rewarded a loyal subject. Next, we see that the kingdom was divided and unstable, and in the midst of that,

II. Amasa Spilled His Guts (19:40-43, 20:1-13)

⁴⁰ The king went on to Gilgal, and Chimham went on with him. All the people of Judah, and also half the people of Israel, brought the king on his way. ⁴¹ Then all the men of Israel came to the king and said to the king, "Why have our brothers the men of Judah stolen you away and brought the king and his household over the Jordan, and all David's men with him?" ⁴² All the men of Judah answered the men of Israel, "Because the king is our close relative. Why then are you angry over this matter? Have we eaten at all at the king's expense? Or has he given us any gift?" ⁴³ And the men of Israel answered the men of Judah, "We have ten shares in the king, and in David also we have more than you. Why then did you despise us? Were we not the first to speak of bringing back our king?" But the words of the men of Judah were fiercer than the words of the men of Israel.

¹ Now there happened to be there a worthless man, whose name was Sheba, the son of Bichri, a Benjaminite. And he blew the trumpet and said, "We have no portion in David, and we have no inheritance in the son of Jesse; every man to his tents, O Israel!" ² So all the men of Israel withdrew from David and followed Sheba the son of Bichri. But the men of Judah followed their king steadfastly from the Jordan to Jerusalem. ³ And David came to his house at Jerusalem. And the king took the ten concubines whom he had left to care for the house and put them in a house under guard and provided for them, but did not go in to them. So they were shut up until the day of their death, living as if in widowhood. ⁴ Then the king said to Amasa, "Call the men of Judah together to me within three days,

and be here yourself.”⁵ So Amasa went to summon Judah, but he delayed beyond the set time that had been appointed him. ⁶ And David said to Abishai, “Now Sheba the son of Bichri will do us more harm than Absalom. Take your lord’s servants and pursue him, lest he get himself to fortified cities and escape from us.”⁷ And there went out after him Joab’s men and the Cherethites and the Pelethites, and all the mighty men. They went out from Jerusalem to pursue Sheba the son of Bichri. ⁸ When they were at the great stone that is in Gibeon, Amasa came to meet them. Now Joab was wearing a soldier’s garment, and over it was a belt with a sword in its sheath fastened on his thigh, and as he went forward it fell out. ⁹ And Joab said to Amasa, “Is it well with you, my brother?” And Joab took Amasa by the beard with his right hand to kiss him. ¹⁰ But Amasa did not observe the sword that was in Joab’s hand. So Joab struck him with it in the stomach and spilled his entrails to the ground without striking a second blow, and he died. Then Joab and Abishai his brother pursued Sheba the son of Bichri. ¹¹ And one of Joab’s young men took his stand by Amasa and said, “Whoever favors Joab, and whoever is for David, let him follow Joab.”¹² And Amasa lay wallowing in his blood in the highway. And anyone who came by, seeing him, stopped. And when the man saw that all the people stopped, he carried Amasa out of the highway into the field and threw a garment over him. ¹³ When he was taken out of the highway, all the people went on after Joab to pursue Sheba the son of Bichri.

The last four verses of chapter 19 (vv. 40-43) are a window into how dysfunctional the kingdom of Israel could be. The bickering and accusations went back and forth when they should have been striving for being united. Remember that the nation was made up of twelve tribes that roughly corresponded to the twelve sons of Jacob from back in Genesis. Here the argument is between Judah, the southern part of the kingdom and Israel, the northern tribes. This is a foreshadowing of the separation of the kingdom after the reign of Solomon, where Israel and Judah will divide and each choose a king. They will remain divided until they are each conquered by a foreign kingdom – Israel by Assyria in 722 BC and Judah by Babylon in 586 BC.

There’s really no wondering what kind of man Sheba was when we first meet him in verse 1 because the narrator introduces him as “*a worthless man*”; other translations say “*a scoundrel*” or “*a troublemaker*”. He took advantage of the bickering between the factions of the kingdom and called the men of Israel to follow him and reject David’s kingship. David’s peacemaking and forgiving attitude had worn off by the time he had to address Sheba’s rebellion. His assessment is in verse 6: “*Sheba... will do us more harm than Absalom.*” So, he sent first Amasa then Abishai to chase down Sheba and end this rebellion before it really picked up steam.

And now Joab, the crafty old army general, comes back into the story. He keeps showing up to do the dirty deeds that he thought needed to be done. Joab was David’s “fixer,” sometimes against David’s will, as we saw with Absalom and as we see here. He was intensely loyal to David but completely uncontrollable.³ Perhaps he thought again that he was doing what was in the king’s best interest, or perhaps he was just jealous and full of vengeance – Amasa had been a traitor and now he was promoted to top army general over Joab. So, he tracked him down, pretended to greet him with a friendly kiss, and stabbed him in the gut with the sword in his left hand. Amasa never saw it coming. He was left to bleed out by the side of the road as the army moved on without him.

The final thirteen verses recount the end of this latest rebellion when

III. Sheba Lost His Head (vv. 20:14-26)

¹⁴ And Sheba passed through all the tribes of Israel to Abel of Beth-maacah, and all the Bichrites assembled and followed him in. ¹⁵ And all the men who were with Joab came and besieged him in Abel

³ Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity* (England: Christian Focus, 2013), p. 255.

of Beth-maacah. They cast up a mound against the city, and it stood against the rampart, and they were battering the wall to throw it down. ¹⁶ Then a wise woman called from the city, "Listen! Listen! Tell Joab, 'Come here, that I may speak to you.'" ¹⁷ And he came near her, and the woman said, "Are you Joab?" He answered, "I am." Then she said to him, "Listen to the words of your servant." And he answered, "I am listening." ¹⁸ Then she said, "They used to say in former times, 'Let them but ask counsel at Abel,' and so they settled a matter. ¹⁹ I am one of those who are peaceable and faithful in Israel. You seek to destroy a city that is a mother in Israel. Why will you swallow up the heritage of the Lord?" ²⁰ Joab answered, "Far be it from me, far be it, that I should swallow up or destroy! ²¹ That is not true. But a man of the hill country of Ephraim, called Sheba the son of Bichri, has lifted up his hand against King David. Give up him alone, and I will withdraw from the city." And the woman said to Joab, "Behold, his head shall be thrown to you over the wall." ²² Then the woman went to all the people in her wisdom. And they cut off the head of Sheba the son of Bichri and threw it out to Joab. So he blew the trumpet, and they dispersed from the city, every man to his home. And Joab returned to Jerusalem to the king. ²³ Now Joab was in command of all the army of Israel; and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada was in command of the Cherethites and the Pelethites; ²⁴ and Adoram was in charge of the forced labor; and Jehoshaphat the son of Ahilud was the recorder; ²⁵ and Sheva was secretary; and Zadok and Abiathar were priests; ²⁶ and Ira the Jairite was also David's priest.

This is a similar story to the earlier one in 1 Samuel 25 of Nabal and Abigail, where David was going to destroy Nabal and his house because of his insults, but Abigail intervened and talked him out of it, giving him what he needed. Here, Joab and his men finally tracked down where Sheba was hiding out, in a city called Abel, which we find out in verse 18 was the city where you would go to get wise counsel. They were setting up a siege on the city in verse 15, where they would surround it and cut off supplies from going in, and just wait for everyone inside to die from starvation or come out to fight. An unnamed woman who is simply called "a wise woman" by the narrator (in contrast to Sheba being labelled worthless) decided to intervene and see if she can save her city. She asked Joab if he really wanted to destroy a whole city that was so important to the Jews. And he explained that, no, we're just here for the leader of the rebellion. Give him up and we'll be on our way. It doesn't sound like it took her long to convince the people of the city to cut off Sheba's head and send it over the wall. Joab was a man of his word, the army heads home, peace was established, rebellion #2 put down.

Conclusion

If there's one thing you notice throughout David's life, particularly in the ups and downs of his years on the throne, it's the wide variety of ways that people responded to him. Early in his life, everyone loved David – he was the slayer of the giant, he was the up-and-coming handsome, warrior-poet. Then Saul turned on him, jealous with envy. And as the years went by, David's list of enemies grew, people who worked against him from every angle. It's a reminder that no matter who you are, you will always have those who support you and those who oppose you:

- You've got the people who outright love you and give you whatever help you need, people like Barzillai the Gileadite.
- But some people's support is on their own terms, people like Joab. He's always loyal and on David's side, but he "re-interprets" David's directives however he wants; so that in his mind, killing David's opponents like Abner, Solomon, and Amasa are what need to happen.
- Then there are the people who have been faithful all along but whom other people have whispered of their disloyalty; people like Mephibosheth, who was slandered as a traitor.
- Then there are the former enemies who realize that it would be better to get on your good side, men like Shimei, who went from insulting David to flattering and begging him.
- Then there are the people who use the chaos of change for personal gain, men like Sheba.

As the renowned theologian, Kenny Chesney, says: "God is great, beer is good, and people are crazy." Why can't everyone just love us, have the best in mind for us? In a fallen world, it's easy to feel constantly on guard, as people judge us, gossip about us, use and abuse us. We must be gentle as doves and wise as serpents to know how to deal with different people. When everybody has their own agenda and you're not sure who you can trust, do what David did: remind yourself of the One who is always trustworthy. Chapter 23:2-7 records David's last words (*turn there*):

"The Spirit of the Lord speaks by me; his word is on my tongue. The God of Israel has spoken; the Rock of Israel has said to me: When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth. For does not my house stand so with God? For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure. For will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire? But worthless men are all like thorns that are thrown away, for they cannot be taken with the hand but the man who touches them arms himself with iron and the shaft of a spear, and they are utterly consumed with fire."

Throughout David's life, and here at the end we see that his confidence was always that the Lord would deliver him no matter what. God had made a covenant with him, and He would honor it and keep it secure. It didn't matter what men did or said, how they attacked or opposed him. In the end, God would deal with the worthless men, consuming them in judgment. Over and over in the Psalms, David pointed out that human beings would fail him, but God would protect him:

Psalm 3:1,3 – *"O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me... but You, O Lord, are a shield about me."*

Psalm 4:2-3 – *"O men, how long shall my honor be turned into shame? How long will you love vain words and seek after lies? But know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself; the Lord hears when I call to him."*

Psalm 27:3,5 – *"Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear... For He will hide me in His shelter in the day of trouble."*

Psalm 38:12,15 – *"Those who seek my life lay their snares; those who seek my hurt speak of ruin and meditate treachery all day long... But for you, O Lord, do I wait; it is You, O Lord my God, who will answer."*

We are surrounded by people. That's a good thing, God designed it that way. We need them, we thrive off of them, we are commanded to love and to do good to them. But if you live for the praise of others, you will be crushed when you don't get it. If you need other's love and approval to fulfill you, you will become desperate in seeking it. People will hurt you, scheme against you, slander you, and you're probably doing all those things to those around you too. We are able to rise above all of that because, like David, we know that we have a loving heavenly Father who is for us. And *"if God is for us, who can be against us?"* (Romans 8:31)

But the Bible teaches us that God is not automatically for us. As I've said in the past few weeks, in our natural state, we are more like Absalom and Sheba, rebels to the king, than we are like the loyal men, Barzillai and Abishai. From birth, we are fallen and our sin separates us from a God, whose holiness requires that the debt of sin be paid. Like David, we need a covenant with God that we can trust to see us through to the end. The covenant of God is through Christ, our mediator and reconciler. The new covenant in Jesus' blood says that Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sin, bearing the wrath of God on our behalf. Our sin was imputed to/placed on Jesus on the cross, and His righteousness is imputed to those who believe in Him, to make us holy and forgiven. That is

what brings us the peace of God and a security that no matter how men treat us, no matter what this life brings, we are hidden with God in Christ.

Ultimately, we see that despite the conflict and rebellion, God's kingdom through David was preserved. And God's kingdom will persevere as well despite the threats that it faces. A much greater king rules the eternal kingdom, David's greater Son, Jesus Christ. And one day, our King will return again in power to judge the living and the dead. And there will be no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, we will be ushered into the New Heavens and the New Earth. Amen, let's pray.

Benediction

1 Timothy 6:14-16 - *"... keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which He will display at the proper time - He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen."*