**Saul’s house falters and falls** 16/4/23 dkm

Read: 2Samuel 3, 2Samuel 4

Text: 2Samuel 3,4

Psalms: 146, 19:7-14, 26:1-9, 72old

After the death of King Saul, David moved his family and followers to the Hebron in the territory of Judah. Abner, who was Saul’s general, took Saul’s son, Ishbosheth, and made him king over Israel in the north. Civil war ensued; ‘There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David’ (3:1). A truce was called after an initial battle in which David’s men, led by Joab, sent Abner and his men fleeing. During this long war David’s house grew stronger and Saul’s house grew weaker. By the end of these two chapters, no one is left in Saul’s house except the crippled son of Jonathan called Mephibosheth.

Saul’s house was crippled by two cold-blooded murders, murders from which David distanced himself, thereby gaining favour with the people of Israel. David was the divinely anointed king but he had refused to kill ‘the Lord’s anointed’, and even now patiently waited for the Lord to open the way from him to become king of Israel. The Lord allowed wicked men to pave David’s way to the throne, men who were condemned by David for their wickedness. David was being politically astute of course, but his focus was on being righteous. It is righteousness, not wickedness or political manoeuvring, that advances and exalts a nation.

David’s house grew stronger through numerical growth: ‘Sons were born to David in Hebron’ (3:2). Our first subheading is, ‘David’s house grows’, our second, ‘David agrees to peace’, our third, ‘David deplores the murder of Abner’, and our fourth, ‘David condemns the murderers of Saul’s son’.

**1. David’s house grows**

David’s first wife was Michal, the daughter of Saul. She helped David flee the sword of Saul but remained in the family home all the time David was on the run. During this time Saul gave her to another man (1Sam 25:44). In the desert he married Ahinoam from Jezreel and Abigail, the widow of Nabal. Ahinoam gave him Amnon, his firstborn. Abigail’s son does not feature beyond this mention (3:2). After settling in Hebron, David married another four women. Polygamy was common in those days, especially among the ruling class, although kings of Israel were warned not to ‘multiply wives’ (Deut 17:17).

David’s third son, Absalom, was born to a wife who was the daughter of the king of Geshur, a region northeast of the Sea of Galilee. Sometimes leaders took wives to cement political alliances. His fourth son was Adonijah who will feature in a contest with Solomon to replace David as king.

David’s house was growing and he ruled it well, despite multiplying wives- at least to this point in time. Moreover, he continued to enjoy popularity with the people, in Judah at least; they anointed him as their king (2:4). The house of Saul, by contrast, was not enjoying such blessings. Ishbosheth was not a strong leader and we read nothing of his sons. Abner was the man in charge in Israel; he installed Ishbosheth and told him what to do.

But one day Ishbosheth accused Abner of sleeping with one of Saul’s concubines, an act that was seen as treason. Abner angrily turned on Ishbosheth for treating him like an enemy, a dog’s head at that. With a self- maledictory oath, he announced he was transferring his support to the house of David (3:9). It appears that Abner knew of David being anointed by Samuel. Ishbosheth was so scared of Abner that he said no more.

**2. David agrees to peace**

The king’s accusation so infuriated Abner that he decided to switch his allegiance to David. He moved quickly to send messengers to David, setting out terms for him switching his allegiance. His first question is interesting; Abner asked, ‘Whose is the land?’ (3:12). Whose indeed! Abner was the effective ruler of Israel. He promised to bring all Israel over to David under the terms of a covenant he proposed. We are not told of these terms but no doubt this ambitious and powerful general was looking out for his own interests. David already had an ambitious and powerful general in Joab of course! Joab was as much in the dark as us with regard to the terms of Abner’s covenant. David agreed to Abner’s terms, making only one demand, namely that when he comes he must bring Michal, daughter of Saul (3:13).

Why was David so insistent on his first wife being restored to him? He now had six other wives! Did he really love Michal? She loved him, when she married him at least. And David risked his life in getting a dowry of one hundred Philistine foreskins- two hundred in fact. He reminded the new head of Saul’s house of this in a message sent back to Abner (3:14). Michal was Saul’s daughter so David was the deceased king’s son-in-law. With Michal as his wife David was not without claim to the throne of Israel. So, love or no love, it was politically astute for David to reclaim his wife, Michal.

Ishbosheth, who was not so politically astute, sent for Michal to be taken from her current husband, Paltiel (43:15); no doubt Abner was till telling him what to do. The picture of Paltiel weeping as he watched his wife being taken from him is moving; one wonders if David loved her as this man did. Nathan’s parable about the man with one pet lamb comes to mind. David may have had the right to claim Michal but he already had six wives. Moreover, Michal later despised David and had no children (6:23).

When David agreed to the covenant he proposed, Abner moved to fulfil his part of the covenant and bring all Israel over to David. He consulted the elders of Israel, reminding them of the Lords’ promise concerning David as king (3:17, 18). The people of Benjamin get special mention because Saul was from this tribe, as was Abner himself (3:19). After getting everyone’s support, Abner set off with twenty men to meet David in Hebron. David received him and hosted a feast for them. David then sent Abner off in peace to gather all Israel and make a covenant installing David as their king. While Abner was sidelining Ishbosheth in this agreement with David, David was sidelining Joab. Would David end up with two generals, two ambitious and ruthless men who hated each other?

**3. David deplores the murder of Abner**

David had just finished his meeting with Abner and sent him off in peace when Joab returned from a raid with loads of plunder (3:22). Joab learned about the meeting and that Abner departed in peace. He angrily asked David why he had not arrested Abner, the effective ruler of Israel. With mixed motives, he accused Abner of spying rather than making peace (3:25). Joab of course, knew all about deception, as we will see!

Everyone in the land was politically on edge; they were in a state of civil war, at least as far as Joab was concerned. Joab hated Abner for political and for personal reasons. Abner had killed his little brother and Joab was set on revenge as ‘the avenger of blood’. The fact that Abner warned Asahel and that he was killed in battle did not matter to Joab; nor did the fact that Hebron was a city of refuge.

Without David’s knowledge, Joab quickly sent messengers to bring Abner back to Hebron. Joab was at the city gate to welcome him. Abner had been sent away in peace and returned in peace. Joab took Abner aside and, in an act of great treachery, stabbed him in the stomach and killed him (3:27). When sin first entered the world Cain acted with the same treachery in murdering his brother Abel. I do not need to remind you that the same treachery continues today. Those who think the human race is evolving and advancing are gravely mistaken. The only advance in the human race was seen at Calvary. Only through Jesus Christ can we rise above deceit, hatred, revenge, and treachery (cf. Mat 26:52). In David we see a man who, with God’s help, was able to rise above revenge and treachery, at least up to this point in his life!

When David heard of Joab’s treachery he immediately made it known that he had nothing to do with Abner’s death. As king of Judah he had recently met with Abner, so people might have assumed that David was behind his murder. But David had sent him away in peace. David was not powerful enough to judge Joab as he might have liked (3:39), but he did curse Joab and his family with four curses (3:29). David was sufficiently powerful to make Joab and all with him tear their clothes, put on sackcloth, and march before the coffin of the man he had killed in cold blood. King David followed the coffin as Abner was taken and buried in Hebron (3:31, 32). David stood at the grave and wept. In a song of lament he declared that Abner did not die as a chained criminal but at the hands of a wicked man. Moreover, David refused eat anything at the funeral wake. With a self-maledictory oath, he refused to eat until sunset (3:35).

David’s words and actions surrounding the death of Abner pleased the people (3:36). The people of Israel heard of Abner’s murder and were watching David closely; initially they probably suspected David of involvement. David’s mourning was genuine but also politically astute. His final words to the people were, ‘Do you not know that a prince and a great man has fallen this day in Israel?’ (3:38).

Before moving on to the next murder we might pause and compare David and Joab. We have all had times when we felt wronged by others or even by God. Like Joab many seek revenge, plotting for months, even years, how and when they will get back at those who hurt them. But like David, we can commit our way to the Lord, knowing that he will vindicate us in the end, if we are innocent. ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay’ says the Lord (Rom 12:19).

**4. David condemns the murderers of Saul’s son**

Are you up to hearing of another murder in cold blood? Was David thinking he was back in Noah’s day when, ‘the wickedness of man was very great in the earth’ (Gen 6:5). God was, of course, preparing for David to captain the ship of God’s people, as it were. Just as David points forward to Christ, so the land of Israel points forward to the church and the kingdom of God.

News of Abner’s death broke the heart of Saul’s son, Ishbosheth (4:1). He had no strength to rule over Israel. Into the power vacuum stepped two opportunists, two men ready to do whatever it takes to get ahead in life. In this case it was political gain, but it could have been in business, or even in the church.

Two of the kings captains, men accustomed to making quick decisions, saw an opportunity to impress the man who would soon be their king. Not only were these men in the king’s service, they were actually from the king’s tribe, making their action even more treacherous. These two men came to the palace in the middle of the day, supposedly to get supplies. Seeing Ishbosheth lying on his bed, they proceeded to stab him in the stomach and then cut off his head (4:6, 7). They managed to escape and wasted no time in conveying the head of Saul’s son to David in Hebron.

We recall David’s response to the Amalekite who brought Saul’s head to David; David reminded these two men of this incident. If they had heard about it they learned nothing from it regarding David’s character (4:10). They thought David hated Saul and all his family because he tried so hard to kill David (4:8). They thought they were doing David a favour. They thought as worldly men not as a man after God’s own heart. David declares that the Lord is the one who avenges and redeems a man’s life. They acted foolishly and treacherously in killing a man in cold blood.

David refers to Ishbosheth as a ‘righteous person’. He was not the Lord’s anointed but he was innocent and not deserving of death. These two murderers, on the other hand, were deserving of death, so David gave the command for them to be executed, their hands and feet cut off and their bodies hung in a public place in Hebron (4:12). They would die in shame, unlike Ishbosheth, whose head was buried in the tomb of Abner in Hebron.

After two murders the way for David to become king of Israel was clear; but this was the Lord’s doing not David’s. David mourned both men who were murdered, and judged the murderers. There is a brief aside in verse 4, put in parenthesis in the NIV, about Jonathan’s crippled son, Mephibosheth. This aside may be to indicate that Mephibosheth was the only person left to dispute David’s claim to the throne of Israel, or it may be to introduce this man whom David will later honour (9:1f).

David waited upon the Lord to fulfil his promise, refusing to take matters into his own hands. What about you? Are you patiently waiting upon the Lord to deliver you from some difficulty or difficult person, to provide for you or to strengthen you? If so, you have learnt something from David.