

Fighting for Right Among The Lord's People

(II Samuel chapters 2 & 3)

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The Book of Psalms leaves little doubt that David was a type of the Lord Jesus Christ in the suffering he endured during his rejection as the rightful king of Israel. But David's humiliation at the hand of Saul finally came to an end.

II Samuel 2:4

Then the men of Judah came and...anointed David king over the house of Judah. Those who were closest to David finally acknowledged His authority over them.

II Samuel 2:8-10

But Abner the son of Ner, commander of Saul's army, had taken Ishbosheth the son of Saul, and brought him over to Mahanaim, and made him king over Gilead, over the Ashurites, over Jezreel, over Ephriam, and over Benjamin, even over all Israel. Ishbosheth, Saul's son, was forty years old when he became king over Israel, and he was king for two years. The house of Judah, however, followed David.

There is no question about who was right. God had anointed David as king over His people years before (I Samuel 16). His authority to reign over the Lord's people came directly from heaven. But only the tribe of Judah acknowledged it. The rest of Israel clung to their own agenda, derived from protocol rather than subjection to God. They were absolutely wrong not to bow to David's authority.

II Samuel 2:12-17

Now Abner the son of Ner went out from Mahanaim to Gibeon with the servants of Ishbosheth the son of Saul. And Joab the son of Zeruiah and the servants of David went out and met them by the pool of Gibeon; and they sat down, one on the one side of the pool and the other on the other side of the pool. Then Abner said to Joab, "Now let the young men arise and hold a contest before us." And Joab said, "Let them arise." So they arose and went over by count, twelve for Benjamin and Ishbosheth the son of Saul, and twelve of the servants of David. And each one of them seized his opponent by the head, and thrust his sword into his opponent's side. So they fell down together. Therefore that place was called Helkath-hazzurim, which is in Gibeon. And that day the battle was very severe, and Abner and the men of Israel were beaten before the servants of David.

The Lord's people had become totally polarized over the issue of subjection to David. In the Christian context, the issue is not so much whether or not the Lord's people should be subject to Him as it is what constitutes subjection to the Lord. Twelve young men from either side pitted themselves against each other. Each grabbed his opponent by the head and thrust him through with his spear. Nothing was accomplished except that twenty-four young men died in the prime of their lives. Parents lost their sons, wives lost their husbands, children lost their fathers, and the issue still resulted in a brutal battle between the Lord's people, which the right side was destined to win anyway.

II Samuel 18-23

Now the three sons of Zeruiah were there, Joab and Abishai and Asahel; and Asahel was as swift-footed as one of the gazelles which is in the field. And Asahel pursued Abner and did not turn to the right or the left from following Abner. Then Abner looked behind him and said, "Is that you, Asahel?" And he answered, "It is I." So Abner said to him, "Turn to your right or to your left, and take hold of one of the young men for yourself, and take for yourself his spoil." But Asahel was not willing to turn aside from following him. And Abner repeated again to Asahel, "Turn aside from following me. Why should I strike you to the ground? How then could I lift up my face to your brother Joab?" However, he refused to turn aside; therefore Abner struck him in the belly with the butt end of the spear, so that the spear came out at his back. And he fell there, and died on the spot. And it came about that all who came to the place where Asahel had fallen and died stood still.

Joab's brother was determined to settle the issue by destroying the leader of the erring side. His dogged persistence only ended in his own death. Seeing the destruction of one of Israel's finest young men awakened a few of the Lord's people to the folly of the fight. But the majority persisted in the destruction of their opponents

II Samuel 2:24-29

But Joab and Abishai pursued Abner, and when the sun was going down, they came to the hill of Ammah, which is in front of Giah by the way of the wilderness of Gibeon. And the sons of Benjamin gathered together behind Abner and became one band, and they stood on the top of a certain hill. Then Abner called to Joab and said, "Shall the sword devour forever? Do you not know that it will be bitter in the end? How long will you refrain from telling the people to turn back from following their brothers?" And Joab said, "As God lives, if you had not spoken, surely then the people would have gone away in the morning, each from following his brother." So Joab blew the trumpet; and the people halted and pursued Israel no longer, nor did they continue to fight anymore. Abner and his men then went through the Arabah all that night; so they crossed the Jordan, and walked all morning, and came to Mahanaim. Then Joab returned from following Abner; when he gathered all the people together, nineteen of David's servants besides Asahel were missing. But the servants of David had struck down many of Benjamin and Abner's men, so that three hundred and sixty men died. And they took up Asahel and buried him in his father's tomb which was in Bethlehem. Then Joab and his men went all night until the day dawned at Hebron.

The right side prevailed. Thoroughly beaten, the erring side regrouped on a hilltop. Abner asked Joab how long he intended to press his victory, when it would only cause bitterness in the final analysis. Joab replied that they would have continued to fight until daybreak if Abner had not surrendered. The battle broke off, and each side returned to its original position. Nothing had been accomplished except that three hundred and eighty more men were destroyed. Over four hundred families of the Lord's people were devastated in a single day's conflict, and they were still no closer to a solution that they were before the battle was pitched.

It is noteworthy that David himself was not involved in this battle. The Lord is always on the right side of every issue, but He is not obligated to take sides in any fights between His children over the issues. Each side may be convinced that they are right, but conflicting issues may make both sides right to a degree. And though the Lord's people may fight each other until He comes, little will be accomplished--except for the destruction of those who insist on prolonging the conflict.

II Samuel 3:1

Now there was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David; and David grew steadily stronger, but the house of Saul grew weaker continually.

II Samuel 3:6-12

And it came about while there was war between the house of Saul and the house of David, that Abner was making himself strong in the house of Saul. Now Saul had a concubine whose name was Rispah, the daughter of Aiah; and Ishbosheth said to Abner, "Why have you gone in to my father's concubine?" Then Abner was very angry over the words of Ishbosheth and said, "Am I a dog's head that belongs to Judah? Today I show kindness to the house of Saul your father, to his brothers and to his friends, and have not delivered you into the hands of David; and yet you charge me with a guilt concerning the woman. May God do so to Abner, and more also, if as the Lord has sworn to David, I do not accomplish this for him, to transfer the kingdom from the house of Saul, and to establish the throne of David over Israel and over Judah, from Dan even to Beersheba. And he could no longer answer Abner a word, because he was afraid of him. Then Abner sent messengers to David in his place, saying, "Whose is the land? Make your covenant with me, and behold, my hand shall be with you to bring all Israel over to you."

Although fighting could never bring the Lord's people into agreement with each other, the Lord was perfectly able to resolve their differences in His own good time. He swayed Abner to David's side without the loss of a single life.

II Samuel 3:17-21

Now Abner had consultation with the elders of Israel, saying, "In times past you were seeking for David to be king over you. Now then, do it! For the Lord has spoken of David, saying, By the hand of My servant David I will save My people Israel from the hand of the Philistines and from the Hands of their enemies." And Abner also spoke in the hearing of Benjamin; and in addition Abner went to speak in the hearing of David in Hebron all that seemed good to Israel and to the whole house of Benjamin. Then Abner and twenty men with him came to David at Hebron. And David made a feast for Abner and the men who were with him. And Abner said to David, "Let me arise and go, and gather all Israel to my Lord the king that they may make a covenant with you, and that you may be king over all that your soul desires." So David sent Abner away in peace.

Abner finally feasted at David's table, where he belonged. The diplomatic skills of the one that the right side had always considered to be their worst enemy were conscientiously applied to bring about a reconciliation of all the Lord's people.

II Samuel 3:23-27

When Joab and all the army that was with him arrived, they told Joab, saying, "Abner the son of Ner came to the King, and he has sent him away, and he has gone in peace." Then Joab came to the king and said, "What have you done? Behold Abner came to you; why have you sent him away and he is already gone? You know Abner the son of Ner, that he came to deceive you and to learn of your going out and coming in, and to find out all that you are doing." When Joab came out from David, he sent messengers after Abner, and they brought him back to the well of Sirah; but David did not know it. So when Abner returned to Hebron, Joab took him aside into the middle of the gate to speak with him privately, and there he struck him in the belly so that he died on account of the blood of Asahel his brother.

What a shocker! The one who was responsible for the destruction of so many of the Lord's people because they would not be subject to David was not any more subject to David than they had been. The bitterness of the conflict had distorted his integrity. Joab allowed his own judgment to take precedence over David's authority. He used deceit to lure Abner back to Hebron, and murdered a man more righteous than himself (1 Kings 2:32). He unjustly avenged his brother's death under the pretense of faithfulness to David. It is next to impossible for Christians not to confuse their own agendas with godly motives when they sink to fighting with each other.

The leaders of conflicts between the Lord's people are not always as godly as they may appear to be, even when they are on the right side. Joab was more zealous of his position of leadership than of his king's sovereignty. He eventually killed Absalom against David's wishes (II Samuel 18:14), and murdered Amasa to retake his command over the armies of Israel (II Samuel 20:9). He finally became guilty of the very sin he opposed so much in Abner, rebelling against the Lord by trying to make Adonijah successor to David's throne instead of Solomon.

II Samuel 3:28-34

And afterwards when David heard it, he said, "I and my kingdom are innocent before the Lord forever of the blood of Abner the son of Ner. May it fall on the head of Joab and on all his father's house; and may there not fail from the house of Joab one who has a discharge, or who is a leper, or one who takes hold of a distaff, or who falls by the sword, or who lacks bread." So Joab and Abishai his brother killed Abner because he had put their brother Asahel to death in the battle at Gibeon. Then David said to Joab and to all the people who were with him, "Tear your clothes and gird on sackcloth and lament before Abner." And King David walked behind the bier. Thus they buried Abner in Hebron; and the king lifted up his voice and wept at the grave of Abner, and all the people wept. And the king chanted a lament for Abner and said, "Should Abner die as the fool dies? Your hands were not bound, nor your feet put in fetters; As one falls before the wicked, you have fallen.

David personally hurt for the wrong done to Abner. He made it very clear that he did not condone Joab's assassination of one of the Lord's people. Christians will be held responsible for any damages or personal vendettas or character assassinations resulting from fights with each other—even though they may have been committed against those who were on the wrong side. Before he died, David admonished Solomon, "Now you also know what Joab the son of Zeruiah did to me, what he did to the two commanders of the armies of Israel, to Abner the son of Ner, and to Amasa the son of Jether, whom he killed; he also shed the blood of war in peace. And he put the blood of war on his belt about his waist, and on his sandals on his feet. So act according to your wisdom, and do not let his grey hair go down to Sheol in peace." (I Kings 2:5 & 6). Solomon finally executed Joab, vainly appealing his innocence by clinging to the horns of the altar in the tabernacle (I Kings 2:28-35). And although he was perhaps the best warrior in David's army, Joab's name was omitted from the honor roll of David's mighty men (II Samuel chapter 23).

Each side of virtually every controversy between Christians generally considers itself to be subject to Christ, and the other side to be resisting His authority. We can learn a lot from the struggle of the Lord's ancient people over David's sovereignty. Fighting, whether man-to-man or side-versus-side, rarely accomplishes anything except the total discouragement of some of the Lord's people. It results in sorrow and bitterness that can distort the integrity of the very strongest of Christian leaders—even when they are in the right. Neither the godliness of those on the right side nor the ungodliness of those on the erring side can be taken for granted. And although it is very easy to confuse personal agendas with godly motives when they sink to fighting with each other, Christians are accountable for their behavior towards each other. The Lord does not participate in such fighting among His people, even when one side is definitely right and the other is absolutely wrong. He is perfectly capable of maintaining His own sovereignty over His people without our help. We would do well to behave ourselves while waiting patiently for Him to act in His own way, and on His own schedule.