

# Civil War

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, we're looking at 2 Samuel chapter 2 on page 255, and I want to say that at the end of our Bible readings we say, this is the word of the Lord, and the thanks be to God was rather weak today.

And you know, you might have hesitated because you might be thinking, isn't it bad enough that I have to hear about a terrible civil war in Syria all week, and I come to church and I hear about a civil war in the Bible.

How do I give thanks for that? Why would I do that? And certainly this is a reading where we see human sin and treachery and violence, all the components of a Hollywood blockbuster in full display, completely unvarnished.

And it's not the kind of Bible reading that is usually in children's Bibles either. We have quite a number of them, and there is one reading in one of our Bibles that actually has it, but it's about three sentences, and there's no mention at all of Abner in this, or Joab, or any of the unlikely characters in this Bible passage.

And I know that Abner and Joab do not make the top ten lists of most people's heroes of the Bible either. They just don't show up. But the reason we can thank God for this is not because it shows us the dark side of humanity, but because it shows us that God has chosen to bring his powerful salvation into this context, this context of a broken and hurting, sinful world.

[ 1 : 46 ] And it shows us that even the worst of human sin is never outside God's saving plan and his rule. For you and I today, that means that any struggle, any strife or evil chaos that we experience cannot prevail against God's work of salvation in your life.

And that is made certain for us by the crucified and risen Lord Jesus, who triumphed over sin and death. He makes it certain.

This is an account that's hard for us because we don't see God directly working. It often seems that violence and power politics carry the day.

But as it all plays out, you see in the end God's mighty hand powerfully turning human sin and evil against itself.

And his plan prevail. And I just want to remind you that his plan, very simply, is to establish his kingdom for his people through David.

[ 2 : 54 ] It's part of his great saving work through the whole Bible. Last week, if you remember, we heard that David was publicly anointed king by the house of Judah, which is the southern part of Israel.

I want you to take out the map, have the map in one hand, a Bible in the other. We have a map that was supposed to have two different colors on it. The color of Ish-posheth in the north, northern Israel, and then another color in the south.

It doesn't work out in our reading here. But I do want to show you where Hebron is. It's right underneath David. David, that's the capital city of the tribe of Judah.

And we should note there that Hebron is in the middle of nowhere. It is a backwater town, very small beginnings for God's kingdom, that will one day grow to be great under David.

It is not unlike what Jesus is talking about when He says the kingdom of God is like a tiny mustard seed that grows to a large tree. There are small, insignificant beginnings to God's kingdom.

[ 3 : 57 ] And so as you turn to verse 7 in chapter 2, we see David saying, The house of Judah has anointed me king over them. And everything looks like it's coming together so that the way is clear for God to fulfill His promise to David to be king of all Israel.

And that way God's work, His kingdom, will be complete. But in verse 8, our passage starts with two words that are very ominous.

Those two words, but Abner. And that man is going to throw chaos, absolute chaos, into what looks like God's plan is for Israel.

And we're going to get our fill of Abner in the next two chapters. He's a very powerful, cunning, resourceful person. He's Saul's cousin, and he's the commander-in-chief of Saul's forces. He can make or break anyone in Israel. But for all his impressive gifts, everything he does opposes God's plan for David and for Israel.

[ 5 : 03 ] Out of pride, he subverts God's kingdom. And you can see at the end of verses 8 and 9 that on his own, he took Ish-bosheth, Saul's only living son, and he makes him king of the rest of Israel in Mahanaim.

He is a weak person and a puppet for Abner. And I want you to look at Mahanaim. It's that other star that's on the other side of the Jordan River, very far from Philistia. He's a weak king. He can't fight the Philistines. And there is Mahanaim. And in verse... And you can see it's very different from David's public anointing, where God sends David to be anointed, and all of the people anoint David as king in Judah.

And in verse 11, we're seeing that... or what we just saw is Abner taking things into his own hands. And in verse 11, you can see that because of Abner, David is going to wait in Hebron for seven years and six months before he finally becomes king of Israel.

And Ish-bosheth reigns for two years. It's a little confusing, but it's probably the last two years of David's reign down in Judah. The passage is very clearly and carefully written.

[ 6 : 20 ] It begins with Ish-bosheth being made king, and it ends at the end of chapter 4 with Ish-bosheth being killed. And in between, Abner opposes God's kingdom in three significant ways.

And that's what we're going to work through a little bit this morning. And I want to look at those three ways. First of all, he tries subverting the kingdom by military strength from verses 12 to the end of chapter 2.

So look at verse 12 at the end of that verse. Abner goes out with an army from Mahanaim to Gibeon. And again, you need to look at the map to see where he's going.

Capital city of Mahanaim in northern Israel. He goes down to Gibeon, which is right near the border of Judah, right near Jerusalem there.

That's the border. And so this is a very aggressive move by Abner. And Joab, who is David's own resourceful commander-in-chief, he's a rugged guy, he's very capable, he goes to meet Abner with his forces.

[ 7 : 28 ] And Abner suggests a competition, which is actually a terrible duel. It's a duel between 12 men from each army. And the idea, which was not uncommon in the Near East at that time, was for that to be the battle.

So whoever has the most men standing, that army wins. And the other must leave. But what happens, and it's a cruel thing to do, Joab takes him up on it, but Abner's plan fails because all 24 men are killed.

And a fierce battle follows in which Joab and the servants of David defeat Abner's men of Israel. And then there is this strange scene, and you wonder, why is this here?

Verses 18 through 24, where Joab's brother Asahel chases Abner, and he slowly catches up to him. But during the chase, Abner shouts back to him.

Maybe he's shouting down the mountain or across the valley, but Asahel's getting close. And he shouts these conversations that he doesn't want to kill Asahel. He says, turn away. You know, I can give you one of my men.

[ 8 : 34 ] But Asahel keeps coming. And the reason probably Abner doesn't want him to come, he doesn't want to kill him, is because he knows Joab will have a vendetta against him if he kills him.

But of course, in verse 23, Asahel comes, and Abner finally shows his power and easily kills Asahel. Now I want you to see what the point of all this is.

You can see it at the end of verse 23. All who came to the place where Asahel had fallen and died stood still. And you see, what happens here is that both sides are sickened by what has happened. These are all Israelites. They all, many of them know each other. They all knew Asahel. And here they are killing each other. Joab and his brother Abishai pursue Abner, continues to for a while, but a truce is eventually called.

Their hearts are not in it. The fighting stops for the time being because of the awfulness of what is happening in the civil war. So the question is, why does the Bible recount that civil war that Abner

started?

[ 9 : 50 ] Why is it here? And we need to know that everything in the Bible is there for a purpose. Sometimes we don't know why that is. But here the reason for it is to show us how deeply painful and completely evil this war is.

Friends and relatives are killed in it. God's own people are at war against each other. And it's going to be a long war. Look at chapter 3, verse 1.

There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David. But something happens here.

Despite Abner's strength in numbers and resources and his great gifts as a leader and general, in the midst of this deep pain of war, the house of David grew stronger and stronger.

That's why the evidence for all those sons with difficult pronounced names are put in there. David grew stronger while the house of Saul became weaker and weaker throughout that war.

[ 10 : 52 ] And you see, God here is turning Abner's evil against itself in the war. Slowly God's plan is unfolding, even as Abner continues to oppose God.

And the greatest sin of what Abner is doing here is revealed when we find out that he clearly knew that he was opposing God and his promises, his kingdom, in this disastrous war.

And I do want to say quickly that before we get too hard on Abner, there is a danger for us in this as well. Because two of the big issues about guidance, about God's guidance for us, is number one, when we don't know for sure a decision we should make, and we ask God, what should it be?

And we work to see what that answer is. But the second thing that we struggle with is when we know very clearly what God's word is for us, what his guidance is for us, and we don't want to do it, or we don't think we can do it, or we can't see that that's the right way forward.

That's Abner. That is a warning for each of us as well, especially as we examine ourselves in this season of Lent. But you can see how Abner opposes God's known will in the second way of subverting the kingdom.

[ 12 : 09 ] He tries to take over the power of the king himself. Look at verse 6. During the war, Abner was making himself strong in the house of Saul.

So within it, he's making himself strong. And one of the ways he did this was to take one of Saul's concubines, named Rizba, for himself. And that is significant, because in the ancient world, the way that you gain power, the power of the previous king, is to take over his harem.

And so taking Rizba, who was Saul's concubine, was a direct challenge to Ish-bosheth, Saul's son. But an amazing thing happens here.

For a change, this weak king, Ish-bosheth, stands up to Abner, and accuses him of treachery. And Abner gets very angry in verse 8 at the end.

I want you to look at that again. Here's what he says. 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, to his friends, and have not given you into the hand of David.

[ 13 : 16 ] And yet you charge me today with a fault concerning a woman? God do so to Abner. He feels some self-importance. He's got to talk in the third person. 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.

This is an amazing turn of events. It's an incredible thing God does. He is turning evil against itself again. He is using Abner's lust for power and his anger for his own purposes.

The great enemy of God's kingdom suddenly starts swearing that he will establish the throne of David over all Israel. And Abner doesn't say this because he's repented and suddenly does what is right.

In fact, we see Abner's great evil here because he admits he has known all along that God has promised the kingdom to David and has done everything he could to oppose God and caused much loss of life in this needless civil war.

No, what's happened here is an amazing change that only happens because God rules over evil. He limits it and he redeems even the darkest evil.

[ 14 : 42 ] Even though God's not mentioned by the writer here and seems hidden, he is clearly and powerfully at work overturning Abner's sin.

It's the only explanation of this incredible change. And this is important for us to see because the Bible consistently shows us that even as God rules, people often powerfully oppose God's kingdom.

And sin often seems to win out. God's people in every generation have seen this. And we ask ourselves, why is God allowing people to oppose him? Why is suffering continuing in my life? Why is there needless hurt and pain in my life? How long will God continue to allow evil to last around me?

Well, David sang about this. He understood this because of what he went through here. And I'd like you to just keep your finger here in 256 and turn to Psalm 13.

[ 15 : 48 ] You turn to the right to Psalm 13 and that's on page 450. Sorry, 453. This is a short psalm.

It's a wonderful psalm. Notice how many times in Psalm 13 on page 453 that David says, How long, O Lord? How long, O Lord?

Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God. Light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemies say I have prevailed over him, lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

We don't have a clear answer as to why God allows his enemies to flourish for a time. God doesn't even tell David here in his great prayer.

[ 16 : 54 ] He doesn't tell us either necessarily why there must be sorrow and death even as he rules. But we do know that this is the context that he works out his saving plan, plan his work in this broken world.

He comes into the chaos and the pain with his grace and his mercy. Jesus himself, the suffering king, comes into every darkness in this world to bring his love and salvation and every spiritual blessing in heaven.

And David is sure of exactly that grace as he continues in this psalm. Look at verse 5. But I have trusted in your steadfast love. My heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me. He has blessed me. We do live in an in-between time.

Jesus has won the victory and he is the Lord of lords. But his glorious kingdom with a restored creation is yet to come. And that is why it's in the midst of evil and suffering in our world that we can know that the Lord Jesus pours his powerful and saving grace on us now in this in-between time.

[ 18 : 19 ] Well, we need to turn back to 2 Samuel 3 and see Abner's final act. He's not done yet. Final act of subverting God's kingdom. And the way he does it is to try to gain influence now over David by diplomacy.

And again, this is all about Abner. It's all about him looking after himself and playing power politics. He sends messengers to David in verses 12 through 19 to make a covenant to bring all of Israel over to him.

And David says, Good, I'll make the covenant. But you have to send Michael, my wife, though she's married to another. You need to bring her back when you come to see me.

His rightful wife. Not only is she David's wife, but she would also bring Saul's family and David's family together. Bring unity. And David makes a further connection with Saul's family by sending messengers not to Abner, but to Ish-bosheth, directly telling him to return Michael with Abner.

And you know, Ish-bosheth agrees. And then the very able Abner does what he has promised. He does what he has promised to David. Look at verse 17.

[ 19 : 37 ] He gathers the elders of Israel and he tells them that for some time past you have been seeking David as king over you. Now bring it about as the Lord has promised.

David. And again, you see that Abner has been working against what he knew God had promised and also working against what the Israelites of North Israel wanted for years.

And he comes down to David, down into Hebron, and he says, Now I can give you Israel. Well, there's another wrench thrown in the works because Commander Joab, he's been away on a raiding party, he comes back to Hebron, and he hears about the deal that Abner was making, and he went ballistic.

He's very angry. He says, What have you done, David? You know he came to deceive you. And Joab takes matters into his own hands, not unlike Abner.

And he secretly sends messengers after Abner telling him to come back, and when he did, Joab, in a dark alley, assassinates Abner.

[ 20 : 47 ] And that's the final failure for Abner. Despite his impressive ability, his power to orchestrate everything, it all ends in his death.

And instead of Abner having a great influence in a united Israel, he is gone, and the way is open for David. Once again, here is God overruling Abner's sin and his opposition to God's kingdom. Nothing Abner does can prevail against what God has planned. In every attempt to oppose God's kingdom, whether it is his civil war, his coup attempt on Ish-bosheth, or his diplomacy with David, God turns Abner's evil in the end to good for the kingdom that he would establish under David. And I want to close by thinking about David here because he is important for us as we go away from the sermon. He has mostly been in the background.

He's not active at all. And the writer wants to make very sure that we understand that David is the one person in this chapter who does not try to take things into his own hands and decide the ultimate fate of Israel.

[ 22 : 03 ] He alone trusts God to be the ruler who will carry out the great promises of his kingdom, who will be true to his word. He's the only one who trusts that.

And so David rebukes Joab for killing Abner in verses 28-29. Abner's from Saul's family. So he gives Abner a state funeral.

He actually mourns him just as he mourned for his enemy Saul. And then in chapter 4, two of Ish-bosheth's own men murder their king in a cowardly way.

And when they come back with his head, a gruesome scene, David judges them. And he gives them the death penalty as he did with those who killed Saul.

And here then God uses David's deep respect for Saul's family, Abner and Ish-bosheth, to unite Israel. Israel knew it wasn't David's will to kill Abner or Ish-bosheth.

[ 23 : 03 ] And he now, here in chapter 4, he's on the verge of finally entering his kingship as we leave this passage. But David does something surprising.

Instead of looking ahead at what's going to happen very quickly, he looks back in verse 9. And I want to end with this verse because it is very, very important for us.

What has happened is that Rahab, Rachab and Benah have just brought Ish-bosheth's head to David and said that the Lord had avenged David on Saul and on his offspring.

Look at what we did for you, David. But David rejects what they have done. And he begins with these words. He says, as the Lord lives who has redeemed my life out of every adversity.

It's an amazing thing to say because David is looking all the way back to 1 Samuel 16 and he's thinking of all the adversity, all the attempts on his life, the hardship of living on the run, the loss of his wife, the loss of his best friend Jonathan, the depression that he went through, the terrible civil war and the long, long wait for God to fulfill his promises to him.

[ 24 : 26 ] And he could have been bitter. He could have said, why God? Why couldn't you just make it happen? Why did I go through all of this? But he doesn't. He says, the Lord lives and he has redeemed my life out of every adversity.

This is God-given faith. That statement is a gift from God. And here you can see that God's purposes for showing us all of that junk, that human sinfulness and the evil in these chapters, we see the reason for it.

God redeems David's life in that junk. God is worthy of Israel's trust. He is worthy of David's trust. And this reading is telling us that God is worthy of your trust.

And he calls us to hold fast to his promises, to hold fast to him who is our redeemer. Many of us today have gone through our own junk and have been hurt by sin and perhaps scarred by evil in different ways.

God is telling again in this word that Jesus is the world's redeemer. That he died on the cross to redeem and rescue all who believe from being separated to God to eternal fellowship with him.

[ 25 : 50 ] Even through every adversity by the forgiveness of sins of Jesus Christ on a cross. And if you do not know Jesus in this way today, ask him for his redemption, his freedom from sin and death.

We see in the Bible reading today that this is God's very nature, that he redeems those who trust in him. He redeems us in all of the junk of our lives.

And if you do know Jesus, can you look back on your own life and with gratitude see that God is your Ebenezer, your rock of constant help?

Can you see Jesus saving you in and through all the adversity and chaos and pain that you may have faced? Is there any doubt that he is the king of his church and over you and he will continue to redeem you in everything that you will go through and that our church will go through as well? No, Paul says, we don't doubt. In all of these things we are more than conquerors through Jesus 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.

[ 27 : 19 ] Amen. Amen. Please kneel for prayer.

Amen. Amen. Almighty God our Heavenly Father we come to you this morning freely admitting our inadequacies we bow before you very God of very God and we praise you for your timeless love and care for people past for us now and those yet to come.

We look at other peoples other places other times and comfort ourselves that we're not like them and in our complacency we think that our customs and cultures have evolved although civil wars are still being fought with the same old ferocity in far off places.

We thank you for your compassion towards those who lived in the times of David and we thank you for your compassion now and so while we ask for peace in the Middle East we acknowledge that we live in the security given by the crucified Messiah who suffered and paid the penalty you demanded of our sins.

Father may our lives reflect our delivery from that slavery of sin. Lord in your mercy Almighty God we ask for your mercy and grace to be showered upon us all and we especially pray this morning for Rowena Susan Derek Chris Brian Merv and Jean hold them and their dear ones in your arms as they endure sickness and its ramifications and in a moment of silence we add to those names those that are on the hearts of us.

[ 29 : 41 ] Lord in your mercy we pray for your protection of the Diocese of the Upper Shire in far away Malawi we ask your blessings upon it and as well for the work of Paul Ratsley of Lighthouse Harbor Ministries and Fran and Dan Gow of Seeds of Hope be with them as they seek to bring your light into darkness we uphold two Anic churches in Ontario the Church of the Epiphany and the Church of Good Shepherd this morning bless their congregations and may their work produce godly fruit we also ask that you guide those in St. John's Richmond as they seek a new location give them your wisdom help them as they investigate and negotiate and we pray your blessing on this church that's so dear to us as it transitions to its new place in the next few months in the midst of upheaval may their efforts to proclaim

Christ and his kingdom never falter Lord in your mercy Lord Jesus we thank you from the depths of our being for your love for us help us follow you as fervently as those we heard about followed their leaders into battle help us in the midst of our turmoil and troubles to remember that your yoke is easy and that your burden is light help us to eagerly assume it Lord in your mercy almighty and glorious God you are the flame in our lives give us power by your spirit to unabashedly worship you this morning help us understand your goodness your holiness your love we have nothing really to give you this morning except one thing ourselves help us to offer ourselves to you without boundaries without fine print or restriction and as we transition into the act of communion with you help us to worship and adore you with everything that is within us and lastly in the words of David may we trust in your steadfast love may our hearts rejoice in our salvation may we sing to you because you have dealt so bountifully with us our wonderful almighty three in one God in your mercy hear our prayers amen you