



2 SAMUEL  
CHAPTERS 1-7

Study #1 – 2 Samuel 2

## 2 SAMUEL 2 | ADVANCING THE KINGDOM

2 Samuel 2 concerns the advance of God's Kingdom. David is the king-in-waiting and now begins to pursue the beginnings of his reign following the death of Saul. We can examine the text in three parts:

1. **The King's Obedience (vv 1-4a):** The record of the death of Saul and the victory of David (v 1)
2. **The King's Appeal (vv 4b-7):** The account of how Saul died at the hands of an Amalekite (vv 2-10)
3. **The Kings' Politics (vv 8-32):** The mourning for Saul and Jonathan with judgment upon the Amalekite (vv 11-16)

### **The King's Obedience (vv 1-4a)**

#### **Enquiring of the Lord**

The chapter opens with the template that should be the given for any Christian leader (indeed any Christian): enquiring of the Lord (v 1). While the method by which the Lord responded to David is not our experience today (we have the Scriptures), this act at the beginning of his reign signals the pattern of his rule (contra Saul's failure). God was to advance his purposes through his chosen King David (1 Sam 16:13). The immediate response by the Lord was indicative of new steps in the progress of the Kingdom.

#### **Moving to Hebron**

We're not told how David's enquiry of the Lord took place (method and manner etc.). At other times David would receive the Word of the Lord through a prophet (1 Samuel 22:5). The language of 'go up' in the opening verses has a note of assent to it, indicating David's rise to the throne as Israel's king. Hebron was the city where Abraham had settled and there built an altar to the Lord (Gen 13:18; 14:13). It was the place where the promises of the covenant were first received, and the beginning of Israel's life in the land God had provided for them. David's rise to kingship and return to Hebron is the continuation of those promises being fulfilled. David's immediate response (v 2), and his family moving with him (v 2) indicated a transition to Hebron, just as Abraham had done before him.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Anointing the king**

The arrival of the men of Judah (likely numbering several hundred), representing David's fighting forces, reinforced that a new location for the king-in-waiting had now been established, from where his kingdom would expand. These men anointed David as king over the tribe of Judah (v 4). The brevity of the account is quite surprising. This was the confirmation of the anointing David had received some time before in Bethlehem (1 Sam 16:13) and signals for us the commencement of a new era in the affairs of Israel. The Kingdom of God had now been firmly established on earth under the reign of its rightful king.

### **The King's Appeal (vv 4b-7)**

#### **The kindness of Jabesh-Gilead**

David's first recorded act as king is to honour the people from Jabesh-Gilead who had given Saul a respectful burial following his demise on the battlefield (1 Sam 31:4-6). The town was one Saul had saved in his earlier military conquests (1 Sam 11:1-11), and now its people had honoured him in death. It was located around 70 miles north of Hebron in a region occupied by the Philistines.

#### **Kingdom blessing extended to an enemy**

David commends the burial as an act of kindness and seeks the Lord's blessing upon the people of Jabesh-Gilead, echoing the covenant language of steadfast love and faithfulness (v 6). David appeals to the town, loyal to Saul, to come and be unified under the blessings of the covenant. He assures them

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<sup>1</sup> The mention of David's wives indicates that polygamy was not prohibited in the Old Testament, although its challenges were previously anticipated in the words of Deut 21:15-17. And it would become so for David.

their act has merited favour in his eyes, which will one day be returned. As God's king and successor to Saul, he was persuading his opponents to unite under his covenant rule.

## **The King's Politics (vv 8-32)**

### **Two Kingdoms**

Rather than hear about the response of Jabesh-Gilead, the narrator directs our attention to a power-play developing in the north. Abner, the commander of Saul's army, shows no loyalty to David, and makes one of Saul's sons, Ish-Bosheth, king of the northern tribes of Israel (listed for us in v 9). Israel is now divided into "two camps" (the meaning of Mahanaim, v 8). The north/south battle would become a civil war that would represent a permanent split of God's people into two kingdoms named 'Israel' (north) and 'Judah' (south). V 11 confirms these two kingdoms emerging under their respective rulers.

### **Kingdom conflict**

There are three scenes described in the remainder of the chapter:

1. Vv 12-17 describe the opposing sides coming together in Gibeon.
2. Vv 18-24 outline the conflict over the remainder of the day.
3. Vv 25-32 provide details of a truce achieved.

#### **Scene 1: Together in Gibeon (vv 12-17)**

Abner is the leader of the men of Ish-Bosheth. Joab is the commander of David's army. We note that neither king was directly involved in the conflicts of the day. The symmetry of the scene of men sitting each side of the pool (v 13) is not given much attention. The contrast is rather that David's men had come off the victory over the Amalekites, while those loyal to Ish-Bosheth had recently suffered the defeat of the Philistines. The discussion in vv 14-15 could be argued as a proposal for presumed harmless competition between soldiers. However, the outcome was otherwise.

If Abner and Joab thought there could have been a negotiated settlement to their disputes, they were naïve. Just as the men 'met together' in v 13, now twenty four of them 'fell down together' (v 16) as each thrust their dagger into the side of the other. The site of this horrific event was called Helkath-hazzurim, meaning 'the field of stone knives'. Unsurprisingly, we are told by the narrator that a fierce battle ensued that day between the two sides of the northern and southern kingdoms (v 17), Abner's men succumbing to those loyal to David.

#### **Scene 2: A chase (vv 18-24)**

Joab's brother Asahel, fleet of foot, decides to take matters into his own hands, and pursues Abner, the one responsible for the twenty four men conflict that ended in disaster. In a youth verses wisdom exchange (v 21), Abner, aware of his superior military skill, urges Asahel to give up the pursuit and perhaps engage a lesser opponent (turn aside to the left or to the right), but Asahel would not give up. In a second warning Abner raises the family stakes that would eventuate if he took Asahel's life (v 22). Asahel remained undeterred, and Abner brought him undone through death by spear (v 23). V 24 tells us that all who came after saw the sorry sight of Asahel's ending, no doubt inflaming tensions, as Abner had predicted. Unsurprisingly, Asahel's brothers Joab & Abishai take up the chase.

#### **Scene 3: A truce (vv 25-32)**

The narrative meets with a further surprise when a truce is negotiated, as both camps are gathered around their leaders on respective hills (vv24-25). Abner appeals to Joab's sense of wisdom (that his brother would not heed) and asks whether pursuing the matter would be worth the bloodshed (it may even be inferred from this that Abner felt he was in the stronger position). Joab's response in v 27 has the effect of saying "You started all this by your 'competition' this morning, and my men intend to pursue you to the morning if necessary." Inexplicably, Joab calls the battle off at the end of the day, with the sound of the trumpet, and both camps return to their towns of origin (v 29 & 32).

The post script provides an assessment of the day's battle, with David's men achieving an interim victory (vv 30-31). The burial of Asahel at Bethlehem returns us to the birthplace of David. And so the chapter concludes with a town that in the future would be the birthplace of David's greater son.

## Some conclusions

1. **God's kingdom will not be established by power plays.** Our capacity to take matters into our own hands is relentless. We may not consider ourselves the war mongers that dominate this chapter, but our thirst for power and influence is never far from us. In family, in professional life, in church life, we are prone to manoeuvre and manipulate affairs to suit our own ends.

Gossip, rumour and innuendo are regrettably the tools of church life as much as they are the marks of our contemporary culture. Perhaps this is why they are mentioned so often in the pages of the New Testament (Romans 1:29; 2 Corinthians 12:20; Ephesians 4:31; Colossians 3:8; 1 Peter 2:1). The conflicts of 2 Samuel are a sobering illustration of what can happen when power goes to your head. In a very real sense people's lives are being played with. And we see how quickly matters can spiral out of control.

2. **God's kingdom prevails despite failed humanity.** The chapter starts on such a positive note for David and his kingdom. The personal direction of the Lord leads him to Hebron, the place of great significance for God's promises through Abraham. David's extension of the hand of friendship to the people of Jabesh Gilead fills us with a sense of hope for the days ahead. And then it all seems to go pear shaped.

It's no accident that the chapter depicts a display of exhaustion in v 26, as Abner pleads with Joab to call off the pursuit, even declaring that Joab's men are pursuing fellow Israelites! The day had been dominated by such a capacity for humanity to tear itself apart, that we wonder how God could be sovereign over such affairs. We are exhausted by our own hubris and hatred.

Yet the gospel brings direction from the Lord. Just as the chapter ends with the reference to Bethlehem (v 32), we are pointed to the seemingly unrestrained and unbridled opposition to the anointed one, born of Bethlehem, as he suffered, died and was buried for the sins of the whole world. God's kingdom prevailed in his resurrection and ascension, and that same power that raised Jesus that is at work in us today (Ephesians 1:19-20). It tells us that when we are faithful to his word, by the power of the Spirit, God's kingdom advances in our lives, in the church, and in the world.

## GETTING STARTED

1. What are the benefits or risks of human plans and strategies when it comes to the Kingdom of God?

## INTO THE TEXT

### Read 2 Samuel 2:1-7

2. What aspects of the opening 4 verses give us fresh confidence about David's kingship following the death of Saul?
3. What is the significance of David going up to Hebron, from Genesis 13:18, 18:1-15?
4. Though the people of Jabesh Gilead were loyal to Saul, and therefore David's enemies, what does he offer them for their act of the burial of Saul? How was this a contrast to the act of the Amalekite in 2 Samuel 1?
5. How is the Lord's blessing of v 5 described in v 6? How is this important for our understanding of God's plans (see Exodus 34:6; Pss 25:10; 40:10; 57:3; 61:7)?

### Read 2 Samuel 2:8-32

These rather macabre scenes are a sobering account of the battles that characterised the tensions between the northern (Israel) and southern (Judah) kingdoms outlined in vv 8-10. Abner's suggestion of competitive combat between the two groups goes horribly wrong in v 16, which sparks a day of vengeance and conflict, lasting until evening.

6. The chapter concludes with a reference to the burial of Aselah in Bethlehem (v 32). Why do you think the writer included this detail after all the conflict that has taken place?
7. What are the risks when we seek to take hold of the Kingdom of God on our own terms?

## TAKE AWAY

8. Would you describe the conflicts in the chapter as a political struggle? Does this make them any easier to understand?
9. Is it possible for politics to achieve Kingdom goals?