



2 SAMUEL
CHAPTERS 1-7

Study #1 - 2 Samuel 3 & 4

2 SAMUEL 3-4 | STRENGTHENING THE KINGDOM

2 Samuel 3-4 concerns the strengthening of God's Kingdom. V 1 is programmatic for the narrative through to the end of chapter 4:

The war between the house of Saul and the house of David lasted a long time. David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker.

The remainder of the account recorded by the author testifies to the growing strength of David's kingdom, in accord with God's promise to establish him as his anointed king. We can examine the chapter in the following parts:

1. **A stronger family (vv 2-5)**
2. **A stronger opponent (vv 6-21)**
3. **A stronger ally (vv 22-27)**
4. **A stronger king (vv 29-39; 4:1-12)**

A stronger family (vv 2-5)

These verses depict for us the expansion of David's family as a sign of his strength. All of the offspring in these verses are from David's wives. 1 Chronicles 3:9 tells us other sons were born to David's concubines.

A stronger opponent (vv 6-21)

Just as David's house had been growing stronger according to the narrator (v 1), we are informed that Abner had been strengthening 'his own position' in the ever weakening house of Saul (v 6). What follows is the two-fold strategy of Abner to reinforce his own position by engagement with the kings of Israel (vv 7-11) and Judah (vv 12-21), who were both personally absent in the conflicts of chapter 2 (vv 12-27). It's a very human power play before each ruler, with opposite outcomes.

Ish-bosheth's accusation regarding Abner sleeping with one of Saul's concubines (v 7) backfires on him, revealing the increasing weakness of the Israelite king (v 11) against one of his own. Abner's change of loyalty (vv 8-10) is used as a threat against his king, even invoking the covenant promises of God as his oath (v 9). Abner sees no problem in using heavenly warrant as a means to earthly gain.

By contrast, Abner's encounter with king David is about persuasion rather than pressure. He seeks an agreement with the king of Judah to bring all Israel under his leadership, an appeal that ultimately earns unbridled approval (vv 20-21). David's concern is for the return of his wife Michal, for whom he apparently had entitlement (v 14), taken previously from him by Saul (see 1 Sam 18:20-27; 25:44). Ish-bosheth's increasing weakness is depicted by his orders for the return, most likely at the insistence of Abner. The narrator's comments about the grief of Paltiel (v 16) only heightens the manipulative and callous motives of those with power and influence in these political games. We are increasingly given the impression that outside the kingdom of God life is simply about the survival of the fittest. We note Ish-Bosheth's further decline as Abner begins to deal direct with the elders of Israel and David, achieving the outcome of security and protection (v 21).

A stronger ally (vv 22-27)

Abner's political power play is quickly exposed for its human frailty. Believing he has secured 'peace' (note the word is repeated in vv 22 & 23) Joab is quick to accuse his own king of falling for the deceit of his opponent (vv 24-25). Two verses later Abner is dead, fooled by his self-deceptive sense of peace as Joab lures him into a place of vulnerability and meters out a violent end (v 27). We are left to ponder Joab's motives, aware that he had a personal vendetta against Abner for the death of his brother Asahel (2 Samuel 2:23). Joab's concern for his king may not have been his primary motive for his swift retribution. Nevertheless we are left with the understanding that the house of David is growing stronger and stronger (v 1), albeit by continually questionable motives. Even leadership amongst God's own people can appear superficially righteous while masking unrighteous intentions.

A stronger king (vv 28-39; 4:1-12)

This next section can be treated as a unit, even though it has distinctive accounts which at first glance appear unrelated.

3:28-39

The narrative that forms the rest of chapter 3 (vv 28-39) is recorded to reinforce the declaration made at v 28:

I and my kingdom are forever innocent before the LORD concerning the blood of Abner son of Ner.

Surprisingly, David is at pains to make this point, even while acknowledging that the activities of Abner and his brother have worn him down (v 39). The king pronounces a curse on Joab's house (v 29), orders Joab to publically mourn the death of the man he has murdered (v 31) while David displays his own grief for all to see, even writing a lament in the pattern of his grief for Saul (v 33 cf. 2 Samuel 1:19-27). After the rebuke of Joab, the narrator sets about substantiating David's innocence before his own people (vv 36-37) so the readers are left in no doubt regarding the unrighteous heart of Joab before the righteous and anointed king. The gospel parallels emerge as the character of the Lord's anointed is to be that of a righteous servant (Isaiah 32:1; 53:11) who has a concern to be distanced from injustice (Isaiah 42:1). David's climactic declaration of his concern for the Lord's justice in v 39 is then illustrated by the events that follow in chapter 4.

4:1-12

Ish-bosheth's leadership demise is not only personal, but now reflected in the life of the nation Israel (v 1), further fulfilling the declaration at the beginning of chapter 3. Two leaders of Saul's raiding parties (those who know only one form of might) take matters into their own hands (v 2). The vulnerability of the house of Israel is further enforced by the sobering account of Jonathan's son in v 4. The account of Ish-bosheth's death bears some resemblance to that of Abner's (v 6), and is given further macabre detail in v 7, just to emphasise the sanctimonious attitude of the murderers. They planned to use the removed head of the Israelite king for further gain (v 8).

Rekab and his brother Baanah approach the king in a parallel manner of the Amalekite in chapter one, only their act is not based on duplicity, but the apparent 'virtue' of vengeance. David is quick to compare them to the Amalekite, yet in doing so exposes that their crime is even greater than his (v 11). As if to symbolise the end to their savage habits as leaders of raiding parties, David has their hands and feet removed and their bodies exposed in shame (v 12). By contrast, Ish-bosheth is granted a respectful burial in Abner's tomb at Hebron, David declaring his righteous response to the death of both men.

The narrator's concern as we enter chapter 5, where David will be crowned king over Israel, is to present him as the ruler concerned to uphold God's justice in a time where hubris and self-centredness characterised those who presumed to serve the Lord's anointed.

Some conclusions

1. **Our understanding of leadership in God's kingdom is tainted by our sinfulness.** We all carry mixed motives when it comes to the responsibility of leading God's people. This does not dismiss us from leadership altogether (though it may where there is a lack of concern for repentance and renewal), but rather reminds us that integrity, and a desire to grow in godliness, are the essentials for any Christian leader. Some of us will be motivated by power and authority, in some sense applying the 'survival of the fittest' principle to our conduct. The apostle Peter warns against 'lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock' (1 Peter 5:3). Paul likewise exhorts Timothy that his own conduct will have a bearing on the church he leads (1 Timothy 4:16). While we can often be tempted to take matters into our own hands, the leader who pleases God is the one who flees from unrighteous habits and instead trains for that which has value for both this life and the life to come (1 Tim 4:8).

2. You can't establish Kingdom outcomes on your own terms. Jesus was famous for emphasising this principle:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

(Matt 16:24)

The contrast between David's behaviour and those of the military hardened operators in chs 3 & 4 of 2 Samuel is not to present him as perfect. We will see soon enough that his own rule is marred by downfall and compromise. The distinction is seen in his concern for righteousness (or innocence, as v 37 of chapter 3 implies). This means for the faithful disciple of Jesus, the means is as important as the ends. We cannot justify ungodly behaviour on the basis of supposedly achieving godly outcomes. This is just resorting to conduct on our own terms. Most of us would think we would never be susceptible to this sort of habit or behaviour, but it is sobering to see how often in church circles we are prepared to bring down others in order to build ourselves up, often in the name of personal agendas rather than godly growth, and unity in Christ. Denying ourselves does not seem to come naturally, but is a work of God in our lives enabled by the power of Holy Spirit through prayer. It can be a powerful and transforming blessing when we think twice about how we act towards others for Kingdom outcomes.

GETTING STARTED

1. Respect in Christian Leadership needs to be earned rather than entrusted. Discuss.

INTO THE TEXT

Read 2 Samuel 3

2. What are the contrasts between the leadership of Ish-bosheth and Abner the narrator wants us to observe in vv 6-16?
3. What do we learn about the leadership motives of Joab in vv 22-27?
4. Why does David distance himself from Joab in vv 28-29?
5. How does David call Joab to repentance in v 31? What impact would this have had on Joab and all those with him?

Read 2 Samuel 4

6. What are the parallels and distinctives between the actions of the Amalekite in 2 Samuel 1 and the brothers Rekab and Baanah in chapter 4?
7. David is quick to exercise retribution against Rekab and Baanah for their actions. Why are his actions presented as justified, when compared with the act of his military leader Joab in the previous chapter?
8. David sought to display a concern for righteousness in his leadership. Jesus was continually calling his followers to righteous living (Matt 5:6, 10, 20). What are the characteristics of such living (see Matt 6:1, 33; Luke 18:9-14)?
9. What are the characteristics of authentic Christian leadership in 1 Peter 5:1-4?

TAKE AWAY

10. What is the essence of Christian leadership? Setting an example, or meeting others' expectations?
11. What action should you take if you no longer trusted a Christian leader in your church?
12. How could you encourage Christian leaders in your church?