
THE BOOK OF 2 SAMUEL

POWER PLAYS

(2 SAMUEL 3:1-11)

Ice Hockey and Abner

As a child my dad took me to my share of hockey games. Even though I didn't watch it much on television, between the games I attended and the video games I played, I was pretty familiar with the rules and regulations of the game. One that I found rather exciting is something known as a power play. A power play occurs when a player (or players) on a given team get penalized during the game and have to sit in the penalty box for a duration of time. While they are 'in the box' their team must play 'down a man' or more. With the increased strength in numbers the team on the attack during a power play is expected to take advantage of their opponents' weakness in numbers. So fundamentally a power play in hockey is an opportunity to exercise strength against an opponent's weakness. That is, in effect, what we see Abner do in the passage before us. At a time in which the house of Saul was getting weaker (2 Sam. 3:1), Abner was strengthening his grip on that same house (vs.6b). Ironically, his opponent was supposed to be his friend, and, as is the case with the power plays of many worldly men, it wasn't going to lead to greatness and grandeur but eventually to a funeral and a burial.

Creating Context

Although Abner knew God had promised the kingdom to David via an oath (2 Sam. 3:9-10), he established a rival monarchy and incited a long-standing civil war. The battle began at the Pool of Gibeon; first by way of representative combat, and then all-out war. David's side won the day, with the casualty count 360-20 in their favor. Now, rather than giving the grueling details of the sustained battle between these rival monarchies, the inspired narrator gives us a summary statement in the opening verse of chapter three.

Verse 1

¹ Now there was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David. But David grew stronger and stronger, and the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker.

The battle at Gibeon far from ended the opposition of Ishbosheth and Abner; instead, “**there was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David.**” You would think after reading that previous sentence we would be told that both sides became increasingly fatigued and diminished and weakened. But that's *not* what happened. Only the house of Saul **grew weaker**; the house of **David grew stronger and stronger**. What did growing stronger mean in this case? Perhaps more and more people did what

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the tribe of Manasseh did shortly before Saul died in battle - they joined themselves to David recognizing he was the true appointed king over Israel. Perhaps the immediate context of heirs is part of the answer as well (vs.2-5). But ultimately, given the context of war, the house of Saul was diminishing in its capability to fight and sustain a military conflict against David. This fact, in the final analysis, can be attributed to the reality that God the Holy Spirit was with David, preserving him, and directing the current of historical events to bring about the fulfillment of His promises. Here it is implicit, whereas later on, when David captures Jerusalem it will explicit: "David became greater and greater, for the LORD of hosts was with him (1 Chron. 11:9 ESV)."

David's Prolonged War and Ours

Prolonged war will often test the resolve of the individuals that comprise the nations that are engaged in it. One would have to imagine that, at some level, David had to contend with feelings of emotional exhaustion, having been a fugitive for a long time and now being engaged in a long civil war. Likewise, the prolonged battle against the flesh can test the resolve of Christians. One can feel emotionally exhausted when considering how long they have been fighting certain besetting sins. Christians should see the second half of this opening verse and be reminded of the Biblically-appropriate expectation of increased spiritual strength in their walk with Christ and war against sin (2 Pet. 1:3-11; cf. Prov. 4:18). Think of what Paul told the Thessalonians at the conclusion of his letter to them,

²³ Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.

Paul basically prayed a prayer for the Thessalonian believers' sanctification in verse twenty-three, and then in verse twenty-four he in essence said – *the prayer of verse twenty-three will be answered!*

In God's sovereignty the house of David grew stronger and stronger and the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker (2 Sam. 3:1) because God was bringing about the fulfillment of His promises. Likewise, we should expect that spiritually, as rest in Gospel promises and walk in Spirit, that we will grow stronger and stronger, i.e. become more mature in the faith, and that our flesh will, as it were, become weaker and weaker, as God brings about His glorious purpose of sanctification in our lives. And just as David's house became stronger through means, such as war and multiplication, likewise we must remember that we grow stronger via the means of grace that God has supplied us: His Word, His Spirit, His church, and faith in His promises (Heb. 5:12-14; 1 Pet. 2:2; Gal. 5:16, 22-23; Eph. 4:11-14; 2 Pet. 1:3-11).

Although the battle may seem arduous and difficult, just as the long war that David was engaged in strengthened his house, James said that it is the testing of our faith, via various trials, that produces in us endurance and perseverance (Jas. 1:3). Interesting isn't it how from God's perspective the prolonged engagement in trials is actually a means of producing staying power *not* diminishing it?

Now, contextually, part of David's increased strength dealt with the long war that he was waging and the military victories he was accruing, but coming into verses 2 through 5 it seems that the house of David was increasing numerically as well.

THE BOOK OF 2 SAMUEL**Verses 2 through 5**

²Sons were born to David in Hebron: His firstborn was Amnon by Ahinoam the Jezreelitess; ³his second, Chileab, by Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite; the third, Absalom the son of Maacah, the daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur; ⁴the fourth, Adonijah the son of Haggith; the fifth, Shephatiah the son of Abital; ⁵ and the sixth, Ithream, by David's wife Eglah. These were born to David in Hebron.

While living as a fugitive David had not had any children. But upon coming to the throne in Hebron that changed. In these verses we are told of six different children born to David by six different women. You get the idea that while David was in Hebron he began living like a king, particularly in the sense of the building up of his harem. I think those details should raise a red flag. The inspired narrator offered no commentary on David's growing harem; and it makes sense that he wouldn't; after all, he is showing us David's increasing strength and not his moral decline. But David clearly appeared to be violating Deuteronomy 17:17- a king shall not "multiply wives for himself."

See, when we come to the David and Bathsheba incident in 2 Samuel 11 it is important to remember that David was not entangled in a weed that sprouted up overnight. Rather, he had made *numerous* provisions for the flesh over the years that were like a consecutive series of steps taken towards his fall. I know a woman who committed adultery against her husband, and her foray into the realm of infidelity didn't happen because she accidentally walked into the arms of another man; rather, it began with 'harmless' social media interactions, interactions that had no warrant for a married woman no matter how 'harmless' they appeared to be. Those 'harmless' choices are like steps on a plank, ushering the transgressor towards a plunge into even greater transgression. Learn from David and watch out for 'little foxes' of moral compromise which spoil the vine of fruitful Christian-living. Whether they be in the forms of mental lust, spiritual laziness, habitual prayerlessness, or tolerated pride, catch those foxes and remove both the dangers that they pose today, as well as the potential ones they pose for tomorrow.

Details of David's Domestic Life

David's firstborn son is introduced to us in verse two. His name was **Amnon**, the son of **Ahinoam the Jezreelitess**.¹ We were introduced to Ahinoam earlier in 1 Samuel (1 Sam. 25:43; 27:3; 30:5). Perhaps we have here one of the many Old Testament hints as to why polygamy was a bad thing. The child of this polygamist relationship, **Amnon**, would later rape his sister, Tamar. And while polygamy is not overtly classified as a transgression against God's Law, it is nonetheless a deviation from His design. Monogamy, and not polygamy, was the divine order of creation that Jesus referred to in Matthew 19:4-5. Scriptures like Proverbs 5:18 and 18:22 infer that one man married to one woman is the normal expectation of marriage. Conversely, on multiple occasions in the Old Testament polygamy and the fruits of it are continually set in a negative light: i.e. Lamech, a murderer, was the first polygamist; Jacob's marriage to Leah and Rachel was filled with turmoil; and the forthcoming examples of David's dysfunctional household are just a few instances.

David's second born son, **Chileab**, the son **Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite**, is also called Daniel in 1 Chronicles 3:1. The name **Chileab** means "like his father" and the name Daniel means, "God is my judge". Perhaps Chileab also had the name Daniel as a reminder of how God dealt with Nabal (1 Sam. 25:2-38). Or perhaps Daniel was his real name and Chileab was name of affection. Interestingly, given the fact that we see David's fourth born son, Adonijah, try to ascend the throne when David was

¹ Because Ahinoam's name is mentioned first some think that David was married to her before he was married to Abigail. Granted that is a possibility but her name may simply appear first because to her was born David's firstborn son, Amnon.

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on his deathbed – at which point Amnon and Absalom are deceased, it is likely that Chileab, who is never mentioned in that narrative, died at a young age.

Next in the second half of verse three we are introduced to the third son born to David: **Absalom the son of Maacah, the daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur**. We do not know how David came into this relationship but, curiously, we are told that she was the daughter of the king of Geshur. Did David enter into the marriage as a way of securing greater victory in his battle against Ishbosheth? Did he enter into this marriage to further expand his power into the region of Syria, to the north of Israel? It seems possible, if not probable. Whatever the case was, the offspring of that relationship would be Absalom, the son that would usurp the kingship of his own father. In fact, later on in Absalom's life, before inciting a rebellion against his father and after killing his older stepbrother he would find himself fleeing to Geshur and to Talmai (his grandfather), the king of Geshur (2 Sam 13:34-37).² Concerning this expedient political arrangement and the fruit it bore Matthew Poole wrote:

"... he paid dear for making piety give place to policy herein, as the history of Absalom showeth."³

Then in verse four we are told of David's fourth and fifth son. **Adonijah**, David's fourth born son, was the one who tried to take the throne as David was lying on his deathbed (2 Ki. 1:1-27). He was eventually put to death by David's son and successor, Solomon, only after despising the mercy he was shown and the opportunity he had to live (1:28-53; 2:13-25). We do not know anything more of his mother **Haggith**. Then there was **Shephathiah**. We know nothing more of him than his name and the fact that he was David's son born of **Abital**, whom we also know nothing else about.

And finally there was David's sixth born son, **Ithream**, born of **David's wife Eglah** (vs.5). I don't think Eglah's identification as "David's wife" is because she was 'the principal wife of David' or something like that, but it is likely because her name is the conclusion to the list of wives presented. As far as both Ithream and Eglah are concerned, both are unknown to us outside of their names.

David had six sons listed in these verses, born to him while in Hebron, and we know that three of them were infamous and three were seemingly, as one commentator put it, "happy in their obscurity."⁴ Contextually, however, it appears to be a witness of how the house of David was growing stronger and stronger. And while that true in the natural David was transgressing the command of Deuteronomy 17:17. It's interesting how David was able to exercise self-control as it related to not exercising vengeance against Saul but he was repeatedly unwilling to exercise self-control as it related to women. Consider, then, the happiness that David's self-control produced, and on the flip side, all the incredible evils and heartbreak that were produced by these carnal allowances. May those two contrasting pictures inspire us to pursue self-control (2 Pet. 1:6) and abstain from fleshly indulgence (1 Pet. 2:11).

Now, having given us a peek into David's domestic life, the inspired narrator shifts our focus to shifting allegiance of Abner. An event inspired by Ishbosheth's confrontation of Abner.

² Additionally it is with noting that we see David invade the Geshurites in 1 Samuel 27:8. But note, Talmai was king in a part of Syria to the north of Israel. And Talmai was also one of the names of the sons of Anak expelled from Hebron by Caleb (Josh. 15:14).

³ Matthew Poole, *Annotations Upon the Holy Bible* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1853), 590.

⁴ Rev. A.F. Kirkpatrick, *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges: The Second Book of Samuel* (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1890), 67.

Verses 6 & 7

⁶ Now it was so, while there was war between the house of Saul and the house of David, that Abner was strengthening *his hold* on the house of Saul. ⁷ And Saul had a concubine, whose name was Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah. So *Ishbosheth* said to Abner, “Why have you gone in to my father’s concubine?”

So during this long war between the house of Saul and the house of David **Abner was strengthening his hold on the house of Saul** (vs.6). This wasn’t too much of an accomplishment. It was tantamount to buying more shares of a stock that was plummeting. But nonetheless, it tells something about Abner’s intentions – *the power broker was after power*.

It looks as though one of the ways that Abner was strengthening his hold on the house of Saul was by taking one of Saul’s former concubines, **Rizpah**, for himself. In the Ancient Near East the harem of a deceased king was considered, by and large, the inheritance of a successor. Thus, when Absalom took his father’s concubines it was as though he regarded David as dead and himself as king. The same idea is developed when Adonijah asked for Abishag to be his wife (1 Ki. 2:23-25); it was tantamount to claiming the throne. Understandably, Ishbosheth wanted to know what was going. At face value it looked as though Abner had eyes for kingship.

Ishbosheth’s five-word question - in the Hebrew - is met by the longest speech in the entire chapter. Beginning in verse eight we see Abner’s response...

Verse 8

⁸ Then Abner became very angry at the words of Ishbosheth, and said, “Am I a dog’s head that belongs to Judah? Today I show loyalty to the house of Saul your father, to his brothers, and to his friends, and have not delivered you into the hand of David; and you charge me today with a fault concerning this woman?”

Ishbosheth’s question sent Abner into a tirade. We’re told **Abner became very angry at the words of Ishbosheth**. Interesting how Abner hadn’t given thought to the way his support of a rival kingdom offended God, he just thought about Ishbosheth offended him! Abner acted like a monarch who esteemed himself above questioning. He asked Ishbosheth, “**Am I a dog’s head that belongs to Judah?**” It was Abner’s way of asking – ‘Do you see me as a vile and contemptible traitor?’ He went on to boast of his **loyalty** (Heb. *hesed*) to the house of Saul, and how he had not given Ishbosheth into David’s hands (vs.8b). And he had been loyal to the house of Saul – to a fault.

And though he boasted of loyalty, he would be loyal no longer.

Verse 9 through 11

⁹ May God do so to Abner, and more also, if I do not do for David as the Lord has sworn to him— ¹⁰ 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.” ¹¹ And he could not answer Abner another word, because he feared him.

Now, when you read verse nine you might think - did Abner actually swear by the LORD (vs.9)? Yes he did. It reminds me of how politicians can have bits of Scripture strewn into some of their speeches when, in many cases, their policies are steadfastly against the teachings of Christ and Scripture. They quote it when it suits their agenda. That’s kind of what was happening with Abner here. Was he referring to

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God's promise because he was zealous for God's honor? No. It is more likely that he saw he was part of a sinking ship. So rather than being a captain on the titanic of Ishbosheth's monarchy, he would settle for a lesser role in David's kingdom.

And we must again make mention of the fact that Abner knew God's promise to make David king over Israel (vs.9b)! Even though he knew it, up until this point he had warred against it or suppressed the truth of it in unrighteousness, only to cite it when it suited him.

He told Ishbosheth that he would **set up the throne of David over Israel and over Judah**, from the north in Dan to the south of Beersheba (vs.10). He pledged to bring all Israel under the umbrella of David's kingship. Clearly, this was a man with great influence. And Ishbosheth knew that. After all, Abner had wielded his sway to play 'king maker' and put Ishbosheth on the throne (2 Sam. 2:8-9). Now, since Abner saw that Ishbosheth was actually serious about holding on to his pseudo-throne, and was not going to allow Abner to strengthen his grip on the house of Saul further without confrontation, he thought it was in his best interest to switch alliances. He likely believed that he could use his influence to appeal to David and thus put him in a potentially influential position walking into David's kingdom.

Whatever the case was – *God was preparing the way for David*. What was David doing? He wasn't killing Ishbosheth – he had made a promise to Saul (1 Sam. 24:16-22). He was, instead, waiting and trusting. What was God doing? Working on his behalf via his enemies.

Abner, however, was walking into a very short-lived position (cf. 2 Sam. 3:27); Ishbosheth was on the way out (4:6-7); and the house of Saul was becoming weaker and weaker (3:1). Through this little intramural battle between David's enemies God was going to make the vengeance of Abner towards Ishbosheth into a proverbial piece of construction equipment whereby He would begin demolition of Ishbosheth's confederacy and begin construction of a united Israel. What manner of sovereignty is this? Well, it's the same kind that used the betrayal of Judas to fulfill Old Testament prophecy (Zech. 11:12-13); it's the same kind that used Sanhedrin's desire for Jesus' Gentile execution to fulfill the very words of Jesus (Jn. 18:31-32); and it's the same kind that used the combined treachery of Jewish and Gentile leaders alike to bring about the fulfillment of what God promised and predetermined to happen (Acts. 4:27-28). It's a sovereignty that should make both the rebel and redeemed tremble, but both for different reasons.

The Question: Was Abner innocent of this accusation?

Now it may not be a question that's keeping you up at night, but it is worth asking – did Abner actually do what Ishbosheth accused him of doing? Well, contextually, the inspired narrator told us that Abner was strengthening his hold on the house of Saul (vs.6). So he was clearly and purposefully enlarging his leverage and influence. Thus, taking one of Saul's concubines would have been a power play as well. Secondly, the closest thing that Abner does to deny the charge is ask Ishbosheth the following question – **“you charge me today with a fault concerning this woman?”** (vs.8b) He doesn't offer a clear denial. Could a denial be implied? Yes, it is possible. But it is not clear. Therefore, even though we see Abner become angry, likely because he either felt insulted and degraded that Ishbosheth was accusing him of this or because it thought it should have been overlooked, and that he shouldn't have been confronted, we don't even see Abner vehemently deny this accusation. Therefore, for those reasons, I don't think Ishbosheth made this up as some suggest. Ishbosheth had much to lose by approaching Abner the way he did. And not to mention, as verse 11 states, he feared Abner (vs.11).

THE BOOK OF 2 SAMUEL***Cords Easily Broken***

And with that, with the confrontation between Abner and Ishbosheth, the relationship between the two men had been torn asunder. Abner boasted of his faithfulness but yet was so quick to cut ties. Just as Abner was quick to set up a rival kingdom, he was also quick to dismantle the rival kingdom he set up. Despite the fact that they had fought alongside of one another and against David for years, look at how quickly the whole relationship not only broke down, but turned adversarial! What an illustration of how little holds together godless unions! To that end William Blaike wrote:

“And how often we see that godless men banded together have no firm bond of union; the very passions which they are united to gratify begin to rage against one another; they fall into the pit which they digged for others; they are hanged on the gallows which they erected for their foes.”⁵

Think about how shallow the things are that hold people together!

‘Oh you like making money? Great. I like making money, too! Maybe we can help each other make money.’

‘Oh you like partying? Great. I like partying too! Maybe we can party together.’

‘Oh you like that sport? I like that sport too! Maybe we can watch that sport together.’

Such a reality should make believers even more thankful for the fellowship they share with one another. Although there may be all kinds of differences among Christians of different ages, races, experiences, tax brackets, living places, likes, dislikes, and so on, the things that unite us are so much greater than the differences between us. If you are a Christian you share with the other Christians the reality of the indwelling presence of the Spirit of God! You share *Him* with other believers! You share the same trust in the same Gospel for the forgiveness of sins! You have been one family; you have one Father, an ultimate older brother, Jesus Christ, a shared destination, and much more. There’s so much more that holds you and other believers together than whatever temporarily held Abner and Ishbosheth together.

The Right Action with the Wrong Motive

At this point in the narrative, Abner was about to begin doing the work of God, not because he loved God and was sorry that he had been standing in opposition to His revealed will (there’s no hint of that in the text), but because he had an unhealthy blend of spitefulness and selfishness in his system. It was because he got angry at Ishbosheth’s question, which was also an implied accusation, that he was going to leverage his acumen and influence to fulfill God’s promise to David. And, because he appears to be a character that, in many ways, images Joab, it appears that Abner’s perceived piety (if it could even be called that!) was pragmatic. At this point in time doing the right thing appeared to be the best option, not for the glory of God, but for the good of Abner.

We must be careful of similar Abner-like tendencies. Our fallen flesh is made up of the same stuff that Abner was made of. As Dale Ralph Davis wrote, “Our orthodox line about supporting Christ’s kingdom

⁵ William Blaike, *Expositor’s Bible: The First Book of Samuel* (New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1903), 43.

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may only be a cover for using it.”⁶ He likewise shared one of Donald Grey Barnhouse’s stories where a boy named Willie received much praise and admiration after he rescued a friend that had fallen through the ice he was skating on. When asked by a lady how he was brave enough to do so he responded by saying, ‘I had to – he had my skates on.’⁷ Who would have thought that such a noble action had such a shallow motive? And because there isn’t a vaccination from the temptation of such carnality, a Christian needs to build their immunity by ingesting healthy amounts of Biblical text and Gospel grace. We need to see Abner so we know what he looks like if he starts to show up in the way we think and act; and we need to see Jesus so that we do the right things for the right reasons; namely, for His glory as a joyous response to His greatness and grace. Yes, as long as we live in our fallen frames we must be on the alert for Abner-like proclivities to use God’s kingdom as a means to our own ends, but thanks be to God that the Spirit of God who dwells in us is greater than all of the Abner-like tendencies that could arise out of us.

A Gospel-Application

Granted, this passage is not one where a Gospel-application comes glaring from the text; however, I think we can see a kind of ‘Gospel-antithesis’ portrayed in Abner’s thinking. For him to say to Ishbosheth that he would transfer the kingdom to David (2 Sam. 3:9a), and that he would set up the throne of David over Israel and Judah (vs.10), after having already set-up Ishbosheth on the throne, suggests to me that Abner saw himself as both a king-maker and a kingdom establisher. He was somebody! He saw himself as rich in influence when he should have seen himself as poor in spirit. He showed no sign of being contrite and repentant for his act of willful rebellion against God’s anointed. And so Abner, if you will, typifies the antithesis of the way in which people are to humbly receive the kingdom of God by repenting of their sin and receiving the king of the kingdom, Jesus Christ. Anyone who enters the kingdom must not see themselves as a ‘mover and shaker’ whose merit and influence can earn them a seat at the side of the king; rather, anyone who enters the kingdom must receive it as a little child, exercising dependence upon the grace of another, lest they be forbidden from entering it (Mk. 10:15)

⁶ Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity* (Christian Focus: Fearn, Ross-shire, 1999), 44.

⁷ Ibid, 43-44.