



# SEX, POWER, AND POLITICS

SERIES: ASCENDING THE THRONE

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2 Samuel 3:1-21  
Seventh Message  
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One of the things I enjoyed most about my college days was being part of a fraternity. I was motivated by a yearning for the camaraderie of older and younger brothers caring for each other. The value of this brotherhood was brought home to me when I studied in Italy during my sophomore year. In the villa where I was staying, I discovered a trunk, engraved with my fraternity's initials, Theta Delta Chi. Inside the trunk was a collection of paraphernalia passed down by older brothers to the incoming brothers. It had army surplus backpacks, athletic equipment, snorkels and fins, etc., but the real prize was a collection of meticulously documented class notes from several of the courses we had to take.

One notebook covered an art class, taught by the Director of the Uffizi Art Gallery, in Florence. Note-taking was difficult in this class of photographic slides. Working in the dark, students had only a few minutes to sketch the work and make notes to capture its significance. But, thanks to the class notes which I found in the trunk, I was prepared. I knew which slides were coming, so the pressure was off. I could sit back and enjoy the slide show, while the rest of the students were feverishly scribbling away in the dark. Wouldn't it be great if all of life was like that, where we had an older fraternity brother who kept an accurate log of life and passed it down to us?

Jesus had a "fraternity" brother, King David. Both Jesus and David were part of the same "fraternity"—Judah, the tribe of kings. In Jesus' day, while the rest of Israel was slaving away in the dark, trying to find their way in the kingdom, Jesus was poring over the "Davidic notebooks" of the Old Testament.

Our text this morning on the life of David, from the book of Second Samuel, prepared Jesus to face the greatest test in his ministry. Here we learn that life's greatest dangers come not when we are weak, but when we are strong. They come, not from those who oppose us directly, but from those who pose as friends seeking to make covenants with us.

## I. Sex and Power (3:1-11)

### (a) Legitimate Sons (3:1-5)

**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.**

**Sons were born to David at Hebron: his first-born was Amnon, by Ahinoam the Jezreelitess; and his second, Chileab, by Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite; and the third, Absalom the son of Maacah, the daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur; and the fourth, Adonijah the son of Haggith; and the fifth, Shephatiah the**

**son of Abital; and the sixth, Ithream, by David's wife Eglah. These were born to David at Hebron. (NASB)**

Here we have a summary verse describing David's rise to power after Saul's death. The first thing the narrator wants us to be aware of is that David's rise was neither immediate nor easy. His ascent was a long drawn-out process filled with conflict, confrontation and casualties. The second thing we observe is that though David was destined for conflict, there was an invisible yet powerful force driving him to the throne. It is God who moves history along. His "intention can be delayed but not defeated."<sup>1</sup>

We read that David "grew continually stronger." This is a Hebrew idiom formed from the verb "to walk," a key verb in the story, coupled with the verb "to become strong." Eugene Peterson graphically translates this: "David had a larger stride and a bigger embrace." The text goes on to reveal the secret behind David's strength. While the generals were fighting battles and turning pools of living water into bloody graveyards, David was at home, fathering sons. Three of these sons, Ammon, Absalom, and Adonijah, will take leading roles in the stories which follow; the others we know nothing about. While David is strengthening his house through legitimate sons, however, Abner is busy strengthening himself through illicit sex. But the text says that no house built on illicit sex will stand: "the house of Saul grew steadily weaker."<sup>2</sup>

### (b) Illicit Sex (3:6-11)

**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 Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah; and Ish-bosheth said to Abner, "Why have you gone in to my father's concubine?" Then Abner was very angry over the words of Ish-bosheth and said, "Am I a dog's head that belongs to Judah? Today I show loyal-love 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 today 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.**

The opening verses are set in direct contrast to the earlier scene. David becomes strong by giving six women their full dignity as wives, and fathering legitimate children. These women are not concubines, but mothers who are raising the future leaders of Israel. (Multiple wives were accepted by law in ancient cultures, although this practice was not encouraged by Scripture.) In contrast, Abner is

making himself strong (the Hebrew uses a reflexive verb) through illicit sex, taking what does not belong to him, the concubine of another. By law, Ish-bosheth had the right to his father's concubines, but because he was weak, he refused to act. Abner, on the other hand, seizes the initiative "as if he were the boss in Saul's house."<sup>3</sup> This was not merely a sexual act; this was sex in the service of politics, sex as the means of making a brazen challenge to the throne. Such a challenge could not go unnoticed, even by the weak Ish-bosheth, for to do nothing would be tantamount to handing the throne over to Abner uncontested.

The language of the confrontation portrays Ish-bosheth as a weak individual who is reluctant to contend for what is rightfully his. He refers to Rizpah as "my father's concubine"—the concubine of a dead man. It is as if he is afraid to say, "my concubine," lest he have to face Abner's wrath. Even so, the challenge still provokes Abner's rage. It is obvious that Abner is an authoritarian controller who is unaccustomed to being contradicted; but still his emotion seems out of proportion to the issue at hand.

Fokkelman makes the point that the reproach Abner receives from Ish-bosheth is merely the last straw which broke the camel's back, after months of pent-up frustration. All this time Abner had been single-handedly trying to keep the North intact under Saul's deteriorating household, and getting no support from a king who refused to act. Then Abner suffered tremendous military losses at the hands of Joab. Now this puppet king, Ish-bosheth, whom he disdains, has the gall to give him a moral reprimand. This puts Abner over the edge. "Am I a dog's head that belongs to Judah?" he demands. Abner's heated words betray his insecurity. They are reminiscent of Goliath's remarks when he saw that David did not respect him: "Am I a dog?" asked the giant. Before long, of course, Goliath would lose his head. Abner's "sense of self-respect is shaky as soon as the mirror of morality is held up to him."<sup>4</sup>

So Abner pouts with his childlike complaint, "How could you do this to me, when I've done so much for the house of Saul?" In his tirade he refuses even to mention Ish-bosheth's name until he speaks about what he refrained from doing: "I...have not delivered you into the hands of David" (an ugly omen). But now his days of loyalty are over.

To stress the seriousness and resolve of what he is about to do, Abner places himself under the curse of the living God if he is unsuccessful in handing over all Israel to David, from Dan to Beersheba (the geographical limits of the land, an inclusive term for "all" Israel). The fascinating thing is that Abner justifies his actions with religious piety. What he would do was the very thing the Lord swore to David. "Abner now poses as someone who decisively and willingly implements what God decides for the nation...without the slightest trace of...modesty."<sup>5</sup> Up until now, Abner had been doing everything in his power to stand against this "oath" of the Lord, but when things become grim, he uses an oath in the service of his own political ambitions. We should be leery whenever a politician uses religious justification for political decisions.

Faced with Abner's rage and newly acquired religious resolve, the terrified Ish-bosheth cannot answer a word. The king-maker is defecting, and with him all Israel.

Abner quickly sends messengers to open up diplomatic relations and negotiations in Hebron.

## II. The Politics of Power: The Painful Price (3:12-16)

**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." And he said, "Good! I will make a covenant with you, but I demand one thing of you, namely, you shall not see my face unless you first bring Michal, Saul's daughter, when you come to see me." So David sent messengers to Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, saying, "Give me my wife Michal, to whom I was betrothed for a hundred foreskins of the Philistines." And Ish-bosheth sent and took her from her husband, from Paltiel the son of Laish. But her husband went with her, weeping as he went, and followed her as far as Bahurim. Then Abner said to him, "Go, return." So he returned.**

Abner sends his delegation to Hebron. He wastes no time laying his strongest card on the table. He asks, "Whose is the land? Make your covenant with me, and it shall be yours in its entirety." We can hear the devilish ring in this egotistical claim. David's acceptance is immediate ("Good!"), but conditioned, "If you want to see my face (a symbol of acceptance), bring me the prized princess." David's demand accomplishes two things: first, it tests Abner's loyalty; and second, once Saul's daughter is in the royal palace, that will serve as a guarantee that the rest of Israel will follow suit. So David lays claim to what is his by right, a bride whose dowry had been fully paid but was never given (Saul had betrayed David and given her to another).

When the messengers arrive, we see power politics at work, reducing human beings to being mere executors of the whims of political power brokers. A king is silenced in impotence; a general is reduced to the status of an errand boy; a husband is robbed of his home; and a wife stripped of her dignity as she becomes the final bargaining chip between political enemies. Her husband, Paltiel, is so distraught, he chases after his wife the whole journey, some forty miles, his every step soaked in tears. But tears are impotent in the game of power politics. Everyone caves in under the decree of the king. When the tanks enter the city center, they brook no resistance.

The speed with which Michal is extradited, and the utter lack of resistance, is a preview of what is to come for the rest of Israel.

## III. Successful Power Politics: Closing the Deal (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 hand of all 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, and he went in peace.**

Abner wastes no time soliciting the support of the rest of the nation for David. He appeals to a spirit that he believes was already at work within them, saying, "In times past you were seeking for David." Then he exhorts them to take immediate action: the window of opportunity was wide open! Next, he bolsters the need for immediacy with God's irrevocable vow, "The Lord has spoken." Ordinarily, God's oath alone should be sufficient motivation to do what is right, but Abner carefully words his oath so as to make it seem beneficial to them. The oath is God's guarantee of their future military success—a shrewd move on Abner's part, since Israel had just suffered back to back military defeats. To close the deal, Abner makes a personal appearance in Benjamin, Saul's tribal home. Abner is not one to leave anything to chance, to leave loose ends untied. What a strategist! He gets unanimous support for his new venture, and he heads for Hebron on a very good note. A wave of unification is sweeping over Israel.

Convinced he has all the bargaining chips he needs, Abner arrives in David's court. There he is welcomed as a VIP, and invited to a royal feast. The former enemies now sit and eat at one table, symbolizing the unification of the entire nation. Lest too much time pass and Israel change her mind, Abner asks David's permission to leave in order to gather all Israel to him, so that David might be king over all that his soul desires. The last time David heard such an unlimited offer as these words, "whatever your soul desires," it came from the lips of Jonathan, who out of loyal-love was willing to do whatever David's soul desired (1 Sam 20:4). But this vow cost Jonathan his life. Now David hears it from a power broker who is seeking political advantage. The terms of peace are ratified, and the narrator is careful to note that Abner leaves in *shalom*, reiterated three times for emphasis (vv 21, 22, 23).

## **IV. Reflections on Sex, Power and Politics**

### **(a) David and the Price of Power Politics**

This text is the story of the relationship between sex, power and politics. Here we are presented with a power triangle made up of three politicians, two kings and one general. Each plays the game of power politics, vying for what he wants, and each has a card to play. Ish-bosheth comes out as the loser. He loses his concubine Rizpah to the strong man Abner, and loses his sister Michal to David. David comes out the winner, with the ultimate prize, Israel, the final card in Abner's possession, taken from the hand of Ish-bosheth. The game ends with Abner leaving in peace and David in possession of a united nation.

Such is the successful result of power politics: one king walking and becoming strong, the other walking away in peace. What a deal! The only compassionate figure in the midst of these power brokers is Paltiel. His home is trampled in the game of politics. He weeps with every step until he is ordered to return home. Walking and weeping, Paltiel is set in contrast to a king whose stride is so large,

no one dare get in his way.

In my opinion, at this juncture David crosses a sacred line that opens the door to corruption within his kingdom. Ironically, what prompted the temptation was the gift of God's success. David is riding the wave of euphoria that popular support gives. When Abner arrives, the euphoria takes his breath away. Instead of turning to God in prayer, he quickly succumbs to immediate action and uses popular support for his political advantage. Though he takes what is rightfully his, it comes at an ugly price, Paltiel's tears, and the tearing apart of a home. And what of the devaluation of a woman who isn't even mentioned by name when she arrives, or given the honeymoon reception she deserves? (That is reserved for the general, Abner.) We can see that it won't take long for David's euphoria over the power that is now his to further corrupt him. The door is open for him to take what is not his and to use power politics as a means for sexual favors—worse still, as a cover for murder.

If this text alone were enough to convince us of the evil of power politics, all we have to do is turn the pages of Scripture, where we are afforded a view of the escalating costs. First, Abner's "gift" of a united Israel does not last. This "peace" gives way to a civil war that lasts hundreds of years. The point is this: in the kingdom of God, why negotiate with a strong man, since what he has to offer will not last? Second, and most tragically, we see how easily the way of the power brokers is passed on to three of David's sons. All three, observing their father, learn to be takers rather than givers. Women become objects to satisfy, not wives to honor. Driven by lust, Amnon rapes his own sister; Absalom, in an effort to defy his father's rule and establish his own, goes into David's ten concubines while David is yet alive; and Adonijah seeks to challenge Solomon's throne by requesting one of David's former wives. What is so painful for David is his inability to rebuke any of these sons. He can only stand by in frozen silence and watch his own sons repeat his iniquity, and then pay for their sins with their own blood. That is the price for using sex in the game of power politics.

And the game still goes on... When I was in Bali last year, I went to a marketplace buy earrings as gifts for my wife and daughters. As I left a store, I was greeted by a smiling man. Beside him stood a young girl. The man looked into my eyes and said, "You want woman?" It was then I realized that his smiling at me was a power play. I was a "rich" American, he wanted my money, and the pawn was someone's daughter. When I told him I was a pastor, he said, "I'm sorry. You are a holy man!" I left, angered that I had not done something other than say this. Children were the brokerage fee in this power game.

But we can look even closer to home. At a high school football game a few weeks ago, I was part of the group that moves the chains that mark the down and distance. As I listened to the coaches on the sidelines, I realized that what I was watching was not football, but power politics, played out between a triangle of coaches, parents and boys. I was appalled at the abuse heaped on the kids by the coaches when they didn't meet the expectations of the power brokers.

### **(b) Jesus on Power, Politics and Women**

When we read the gospels, we can see how important

these stories were in shaping Jesus' understanding of the kingdom of God. In Luke's account of the child Jesus, we hear the words of 2 Samuel 3:1 echoed twice, almost word for word: "And the child continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him" (Luke 2:40); "And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52). Hearing these words would serve as a warning to Jesus. As the new David, he would ride a wave of popular support, but on the heels of that support would come temptation from the "strong man" who would try to make an agreement with him.

In Luke 4, the very next scene where Jesus appears, this happens right on schedule. The new Abner, the devil himself, comes on stage. All three of his temptations deal with the wrong use of power for personal gain. We hear the echo of Abner's words resonate in the second temptation, "To whom belongs all the kingdoms of the earth...make a covenant with me." But Jesus refused the gifts of the power broker. He wouldn't even negotiate, because the kingdom of God is non-negotiable.

So Paul says of Christ, "who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself" (Phil 2:6-7). Jesus would not use the power of deity for personal gain. He laid it aside, emptying himself, taking his place at the end of the line, where authority is best served by way of a basin and a towel.

Because Jesus refused to play power politics, no one was victimized in his kingdom. Women were restored to their rightful position of honor. No longer were they considered nameless political pawns, stripped of their dignity to serve as political symbols in a royal court. In our Lord's kingdom, women were raised to the role of prophets in their own right. They were the first to hear the gospel, through angelic messengers, and the first to see the Risen King. Elizabeth and Mary, dual echoes of the ancient Hannah, became vessels of the new creation and mothers of the new order, the sacred wombs of Israel's final prophet and consummate King. These women modeled the best in ancient Israel by their resounding praise and humble obedience.

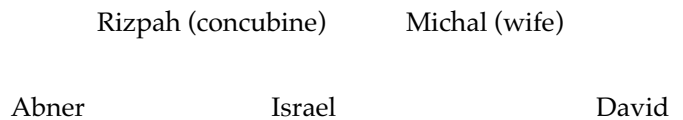
And children, nameless, powerless children, once the victims in the heinous slaughter of Herod's Bethlehem politics, were raised to the status of kingdom heralds. As Jesus entered the city, humbly, mounted on a colt, the children took their place among the perceptive few who recognized that this was The Event in history, the Messiah's public coronation in his capital, Jerusalem. The power brokers in Israel were blind to this, but nameless, powerless children discerned it. From this time forth, greatness would be measured by the infinite value accorded a child; and Christians are described as being eternally "childlike" in respect to their faith.

As we contemplate the meaning of things at this festive time of year, let us not forget that Christmas is the story of the time when the reign of the power brokers came to an end, and the kingdom was given to a Child.

*"There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace,  
On the throne of David and over his kingdom" (Isaiah 9:7).*

*Power Triangle*

Ish-bosheth



1. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*. Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 224.

2. I have been greatly helped for many of my observations by J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. III, Throne and City* (Assen: Van Gorcum 1986), 67-94.

3. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 70.

4. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 73.

5. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 74-75.