



COMPETING WAYS OF POWER

SERIES: ASCENDING THE THRONE

Catalog No. 1019

2 Samuel 2:1-11

Fifth Message

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November 19th, 1995

A few years ago I was invited to visit a church in Canada as a candidate for the position of senior pastor. Calls like that can tantalize the ego with dreams of taking over and building something from scratch. This is especially tempting for someone who has been part of an organization like Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino, where there is no "up." When I visited the church, I was impressed with the size of the facility. There was a beautiful new sanctuary, and right next to it a new gym. There were plenty of Sunday school classrooms, and best of all, unlimited parking! I had visions of preaching to the multitudes, of Christian education classes, an intern program, and built-in athletic fun for the youth. (Later, my elder would say to me, "Brian, it's obvious they don't know you!") As things turned out, when they did get to know me they weren't interested in pursuing the matter further.

However, a year later I was invited back to lead a men's retreat at the church. I noticed that their new pastor remained in the background and never identified himself. On Saturday, a number of the men hiked to the top of a nearby mountain. As we sat around resting from our climb, one of the men asked the pastor to share his story. "Do you mean my conversion?" asked the pastor. "No," said the man, "How are you doing in your role as senior pastor? The pastor replied, "I really did not come here on this retreat to participate. I came to hide. The truth is, this has been the toughest year of my life." He said that the factions within the church were tearing him apart. The dream of being "king" in a dynamic church was quickly transformed to being a "pawn" caught between warring factions. The dream of "come and take over" quickly had turned to "come and get rolled over"—by the steamroller of division.

As we resume our studies in the life of David, from 2 Samuel, today we find that at last, David is about to take over as king of Israel. King Saul is dead. The funeral ceremonies are over. It is time for David to set about the task of being king. But that will not be easy. He will not roll up to the oval office in a limousine and begin dictating orders. There still is a lot of opposition to overcome in Israel. Though Saul is dead, a number of his sons remain in positions of power, together with some capable generals. Israel is fractured within, and threatened from without. The Philistines still pose a major military threat, especially after their victory at Gilboa. Joyce Baldwin describes the situation well in her commentary:

The Philistines had their outposts as far north and east as Beth-shean, and had established their military hold over Israel, driving a wedge between the northernmost tribes and the central area of Ephraim and Benjamin. Israel's territory east of Jordan was more or less intact, but the general picture was one of fragmentation and uncertainty and in the absence of one commanding figure to establish a lead and unite the country.¹

Sounds like a typical troubled Silicon Valley company, doesn't it? A new man is invited to come and take over the company, but he discovers it in chaos from the number of turnovers within the management, and a leadership vacuum that has left the employees with more time for political maneuvering than taking care of business. Sales are down, and the threat of a takeover looms.

Considering the political fragmentation within Israel and the military threat from without, David's rise to power is nothing less than amazing. Our story has three sections, each of which ends with the same verbal echo: *David anointed king*. In a mere eleven verses we learn how David is given uncoerced public recognition as the anointed king of Israel. That private, secret anointing that he had received at the hands of Samuel long ago (perhaps as much as ten years earlier) is now publicly acknowledged by ever-widening circles in Israel.

How did this come about so quickly? How did this chosen king, David, come to yield such influence over ever-widening circles on earth? And how do the decrees of heaven find their acknowledgment on earth? It is important for Christians to learn the answers to these questions, because oftentimes we find ourselves living in fractured families, broken communities, units that are torn apart by rivalries and power struggles. How does the kingdom of God transcend all that and gather a people into one? May God grant that we will learn the answers to these questions from our text today.

I. Uniting the Home Front (2:1-4a)

Then it came about afterwards that David inquired of the LORD saying, "Shall I go up to one of the cities of Judah?" And the LORD said to him, "Go up." So David said, "Where shall I go up?" And He said, "To Hebron." So David went up there, and his two wives also, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess and Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite. And David brought up his men who were with him, each with

his household; and they lived in the cities of Hebron. Then the men of Judah came and there anointed David king over the house of Judah. (NASB)

Fokkelman makes the point that in the Hebrew text, it takes only fifty-four words for David, at breakneck speed, to become king in Judah.² The key verb in the text is *'alah*, meaning "go up." This verb, used five times, moves the story along with a sense of immediacy and singular focus: "Go up, go up, go up, go up, go up." The verbal echo is a picture of David's rising ascendancy in Israel over increasing circles of influence. First, he is alone with God; then he comes, leading his two wives, Abigail and Ahinoam; then come his men and their families, until finally he is given a public reception by the entire tribe of Judah. David is pictured as the supreme gatherer who is able to unite all under his rule.

Even in the mention of David's wives and families the narrator inserts subtle hints that foreshadow David's future success. Fokkelman makes the observation that it was Abigail, the widow of Nabal the Carmelite, who declared that David would one day be king, and she asked to be remembered when that came about. With this tactful woman at his side, David can be assured of the support of the tribe of Caleb, in which she and her large family enjoyed prominence. There is also a hint of future success and fruitfulness for David's family in the place names associated with his two wives. Ahinoam is from Jezreel, which means "God sows"; and Abigail is from Carmel, which means "God's vineyard." Furthermore, when the families are listed they are described as "every man with his household," in contrast to the earlier tragedy in Ziklag (1 Samuel 30), when each man was separated from his wives and children (Fokkelman). The point is clear: David is forging ahead, uniting all with powerful force.

The movement ends in the serenity of settling down. David is warmly received by the entire community, and the men of Judah anoint him king. This is the culmination of the great journey not merely from Ziklag to Hebron, but the whole wilderness period. The wilderness days are over!

What is the secret behind David's influence? We find the answer in the first verb of the text: "David *inquired* of the Lord." "Inquired" is the Hebrew word *sha'al*. While the word has the same consonants as the name Saul, ironically, *inquire* is one thing Saul never bothered to do, as we have already noted. Certainly, David had a plan, but unlike Saul, he wants to make sure that his plan has divine sanction, so he prays. Judah was a logical choice for David. Judah was his tribe, and he had deposited spoils of war there. But he doesn't presume on God; he asks.

Notice the total lack of formality and absence of ritual in David's prayers. There are no introductory formalities, no carefully worded formulas, no complicated rituals. The directness and simplicity of his prayers are

reminiscent of a conversation between two intimate friends. David uses but two and four words in Hebrew to state his questions, and each time God answers with merely one word in Hebrew. David learned to pray like that during his wilderness years (reminiscent of the days in Keilah and Ziklag, 1 Sam 23:9-12; 30:7-8).

So, under divine sanction, David goes up to Hebron, the largest and most central city in Judah. The city once founded by Abraham, whose name means "to join together," is now the home of the king who has come to gather all Israel. Three different verbs summarize the beauty of the scene. There is first the kneeling down in prayer; followed by a rising up higher and higher over ever-increasing circles of influence, until the community recognizes the king; then a settling down in peace and serenity within the security of a walled city.

Next, David's attention shifts to news regarding the men of Jabesh-gilead.

II. An Invitation To Former Rivals (2:4b-7)

And they told David, saying, "It was the men of Jabesh-gilead who buried Saul." And David sent messengers to the men of Jabesh-gilead, and said to them, "May you be blessed of the LORD because you have shown this loyal-love to Saul your lord, and have buried him. And now may the LORD show loyal-love and truth to you; and I also will show this goodness to you, because you have done this thing. Now therefore, let your hands be strong, and be valiant; for Saul your lord is dead, and also the house of Judah has anointed me king over them."

In the second movement of the story, David responds to what he hears were the courageous acts of the men of Jabesh-gilead. It was these men whom Saul had saved, earlier in the Samuel story, from a severe Ammonite threat (1 Sam 11:1-13). Now they repay the kindness Saul showed to them. 1 Sam 31:11-13:

Now when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all the valiant men rose and walked all night, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shean, and they came to Jabesh, and burned them there. And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days.

These brave men rescued their dead king's body from further desecration and, at great risk to themselves, gave him a proper burial. David describes what they did as an act of kindness (*chesed*: "loyal-love"). *Chesed* means "a responsible keeping of faith with another with whom one is in a relationship" (Sakenfeld). Who will return loyal-love to these men now that Saul is dead? David implies that God will, and that he will, too, hinting that he now occupies a new position of power. Further, David implies that since their responsibility to Saul is complete they are free to make a fresh covenantal relationship with him as the new king. The

phrase, "let your hands be strong," is an invitation to them to join his cause; in other words, "be stalwart," as men who can be counted on for loyal service (McCarter).

So David meets these men in their grief, and expresses solidarity with them. Then he uses the occasion as a stage to invite them to join the new regime. Though his offer is bold, it is flavored with humility, for he puts himself forward in the language of what others have recognized about him: "The house of Judah has anointed me king over them." The implication is that they were being invited, not coerced, to join. With such a carefully worded message, David is portrayed as an exceptional statesman. "David sends the community a positively worded letter in which he communicates a blessing and a promise, recognizes loyalty, extends encouragement, and announces a new development" (Fokkelman).

Fokkelman points out that it is remarkable that there is no sequel to the story. The city does not respond with a message of appreciation, a call for help, or how it will serve David. We simply do not hear any more about Jabesh. What did they do with their invitation? We do not know. The tension draws us into the story, and makes us answer the question, What did we do with our invitation?

While David is gathering all in Judah and sending invitations deep into Sauline territory, trouble is brewing in the north, however.

III. Quietly Waiting While the Opposition Organizes (2:8-11)

But Abner the son of Ner, commander of Saul's army, had taken Ish-bosheth the son of Saul, and brought him over to Mahanaim. And he made him king over Gilead, over the Ashurites, over Jezreel, over Ephraim, and over Benjamin, even over all Israel. Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, was forty years old when he became king over Israel, and he was king for two years. The house of Judah, however, followed David. And the time that David was king in Hebron over the house of Judah was seven years and six months.

In the third and final movement of the story we hear a strong note of dissonance and threat to David's rule coming from the formidable Abner, Saul's chief military officer and first cousin. Abner appoints Saul's son, Ish-bosheth,³ as king. Abner, of course, is the strong man; Ish-bosheth is merely a puppet. Now that there are two kings and two thrones in Israel, the threat of civil war looms. What havoc this situation will cause in Israel! History records that at one time there were two popes in the Catholic church. One reigned in France, the other in Rome, and each excommunicated his rival. Then a third pope appeared to put an end to the rivalry, excommunicating the other two. This confusion and rivalry ultimately paved the way for the Reformation. So

Ish-bosheth is enthroned at Mahanaim, to the east of the Jordan, out of range of the Philistine threat (near or on the Jabbok, where Jacob met the angels and named it "two camps," Gen 32:2).

This third movement is set in stark contrast to the first so as to illustrate two competing ways of power. In the first movement, David initiates his rule by "asking," and he receives divine sanction. But, in contrast, Abner does not ask; he takes. David goes up in obedience, while Ish-bosheth is "brought over" and appointed king, with no anointing. David governs by mutual consent of the governed who recognize a spiritual authority emanating from within him. This spiritual authority gathers all, beginning with himself, then his family, his men, and finally a whole community. Ish-bosheth, on the other hand, rules by the purely arbitrary decrees of a strong man. Acceptance of his rule is dictated from without. And although he rules over a vast amount of territory, his authority derives solely from past loyalties; it has nothing to do with his own character or reputation. David rules but one tribe, which is loyal to him. But the king who has much territory has little time (a mere two years before his rule comes to a drastic end), while the other king has little territory, but all the time in the world. The point is that when David is faced with political maneuvering by the opposition, he does nothing but wait, for time is his ally.

IV. How the David Story Shaped the Son of David

How does this story impact us today? As I reflect on the significance of these texts, I am immediately struck by how they shaped Jesus' understanding of the kingdom of heaven. The power of the story is found, first, in how it shapes the Jesus story, and how it shapes our own stories. And the significance of these texts is discovered when we view them, not just through David's eyes, but through the eyes of Jesus. It is he whom we see in these ancient accounts. As the apostle Paul wrote, "But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18). True change is not brought about by ethical admonitions. What changes us is when we see Christ, by the Holy Spirit. His story transforms us and his story becomes our story. As Paul put it in another place, "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

Like David, we behold the Greater David praying before initiating his rule on earth. There is a cave hewn out of the rock that overlooks the Sea of Galilee, called Eremos. Jesus would often retreat there in the morning to be alone and pray. When I visited that spot I looked out over the sea and pictured Jesus in prayer all through the night, seeking God's guidance on who would form the twelve, the founders of the new Israel. Because of Jesus' relationship with his Father, he was able to gather into one twelve Jews, so different, so independent, so proud, so factious. Who else but Jesus

would place a tax collector and a zealot together in the same family? So Jesus coveted for his disciples this relationship that he had with his Father. Imagine his elation when the disciples finally asked him, after observing him for so long, to teach them to pray? After the cross and resurrection, we find these men united with the seventy, in the Upper Room, waiting and praying for that coming of the Holy Spirit that would anoint them all, at Pentecost. And, once anointed, they, like Jesus, would be the ones who gathered and unified, until all things in heaven and earth are united under the Messiah.

Then I think of how Jesus was careful to teach his disciples to boldly reach out into enemy territory as ministers of reconciliation, not as self-righteous combatants. How stunned they must have been when Jesus wanted to pass through hated Samaria, not around it, to return to Galilee. How shocked they appeared when they found him offering the invitation of eternal life to a seedy Samaritan woman at the well.

Here is the Christ way: Identify with outsiders in the midst of their pain, and then boldly use that stage as a invitation to them to accept the rule of the Messiah.

In the David story that invitation was left hanging, but in the Jesus story, amazingly, the invitation is accepted and a whole city repents. As believers, the best place for us to be as far as the gospel is concerned, is meeting the world in the center of its grief. It is there we can identify with them and grieve with them. Let us not be tempted to stand apart from them, waving placards and shouting at them in self-righteous simplicity. Let us go to where they live and weep with them, and then invite them to the feast.

Finally, I think of how, when the opposition mounted against Jesus, and his enemies began to plot his downfall, he never panicked. He never launched a counter-

offensive to protect himself, but rather allowed events to run their natural course. Even when the one in his midst betrayed him, he allowed it to happen, because he knew that time was on his side. That was why he told Judas that he must act quickly, because Judas did not have much time. But Jesus had all the time in the world. God had installed him as King on Zion, and on Zion he will reign (Psalm 2).

How we need this vision of Christ, which is so little understood today. We are so prone to act before we pray, to combat our enemies instead of loving them, to launch worldly counterattacks of self-protection instead of quietly trusting the Sovereign Lord to allow time to run its course. The questions the text leaves us with are these:

Will you take the Christ way and pray?

Will you take the Christ way and weep with your enemies and invite them to the feast?

Will you take the Christ way and quietly wait on God while your enemies plot your downfall?

Let us remember that Jesus warned, "He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters" (Matt 12:30).

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1 Joyce Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel*, Tyndale O.T. Commentaries (Downers Grove: IVP, 1988), 183.

2 For many of my observations on this story I have depended on J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. III, Throne and City* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 25-40.

3 According to 1 Chronicles 8:33, his real name was Ishbaal "Lord's man," but his probably was changed to Ish-bosheth, "man of shame," since *baal* originally meant *lord*, but later became the epitaph for the Canaanite deity Baal.