



# STOPPED DEAD IN YOUR TRACKS

SERIES: ASCENDING THE THRONE

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2 Samuel 2:12-32

Sixth Message

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As I have immersed myself in the David story, I have become more and more impressed by how these Old Testament texts shaped Jesus, the Greater Son of David. These very passages that we are studying in this series taught Jesus the essential lessons he would need to pass on to his disciples in order to bring about the kingdom of heaven to earth.

We must never think that Jesus was exempt from the learning process. Being fully human, he had to formulate his thinking, just like we do, by carefully studying and rigorously reflecting on the ancient texts. It is my opinion that the text to which we come today might well have provided Jesus with a clue as to what would be the most dangerous temptation his disciples would succumb to, the one thing above all others that he would have to transform in their character so that they might be effective ministers of the gospel. That temptation is misdirected zeal: serving the right king, but doing it the wrong way. Misdirected zeal probably has caused more damage in the church than anything else.

When we last left David he was in Hebron, gathering all under his rule with tremendous spiritual force. The atmosphere was one of peaceful unity from within, and gracious hospitality toward those from without. No one was coerced to submit to the rule of the new king of Israel. In our text today, however, the mood dramatically shifts to tense confrontation, mistrust, and bloody violence. Surprisingly, David is absent from the text. Absent, too, is any mention of God. Instead, the spotlight shifts to the two generals of the opposing armies.

What happens when the king is absent and his leaders are left to themselves to implement his rule? How will they react to confrontation? Sadly, as we will see, they revert back to playing the game the way they know best: if people will not join in the cause, they must be killed—with holy zeal, of course! This is war, with all its disastrous consequences. War is always grievous, but it is appalling when it involves brother against brother, and blasphemous when it is carried out in the name of King of the Peace.

Our text, then, in all likelihood answers the question that Jesus would be forced to deeply consider in the gospel stories, What would it take to break his disciples from misdirected zeal?

## I. War Among Brothers: 12 + 12 = 0! (2:12-17)

**Now Abner the son of Ner, went out from Mahanaim to Gibeon with the servants of Ish-bosheth the son of Saul. And Joab the son of Zeruiah and the servants of David went out and met them by the pool of Gibeon;**

**and they sat down, one on the one side of the pool and the other on the other side of the pool. Then Abner said to Joab, "Now let the young men arise and hold a contest before us." And Joab said, "Let them arise." So they arose and went over by count, twelve for Benjamin and Ish-bosheth the son of Saul, and twelve of the servants of David. And each one of them seized his opponent by the head, and thrust his sword in his opponent's side; so they fell down together. Therefore that place was called Helkath-hazzurim ["field of the stone knives"], which is in Gibeon. And that day the battle was very severe, and Abner and the men of Israel were beaten before the servants of David. (NASB)**

A country with two kings is a land destined for strife. Here we learn that Abner takes the initiative and heads to the southernmost part of his territory in Benjamin, within striking distance of the Judean border; while Joab, for his part, heads off Abner's advance, just beyond the border, at the pool of Gibeon. We can imagine the tense atmosphere as both sides set up camp on either side of the pool.

"The pool separates and unites the sides who both need a lot of water. Motionless, available and centrally situated, the pool reflects the great stir on all sides."<sup>1</sup> Whether they came together to negotiate or engage in a military conflict we don't know. It is noteworthy that neither side attacks the other; perhaps they do not want a large-scale conflict. Finally, the tension is broken by the voice of Abner, who invites Joab to allow "the young men...to rise up...and make sport before us." Sounds deceptively like a touch football game. A contest, for the amusement of the generals; no harm, no foul, merely a little fun to break the tension. Fokkelman calls this language "part of military jargon from time immemorial, full of euphemisms which denote the most terrible things, but avoid adding more pain to the soft heart hidden behind a soldier's rough exterior. Euphemisms attempt to reduce hard facts to manageable proportions."<sup>2</sup>

Twelve men from each side are selected for the contest. No doubt there were negotiations on the selection process, but we are not allowed to listen in on the bargaining. Twelve men from each side: a sacred number, perhaps symbolizing that each side is laying claim to being the true Israel. "Something hair-raising clings to the use of the sacred number in an arena to run red with blood."<sup>3</sup> The language of the battle betrays the reality, however. The word that is twice translated as "opponent" is the Hebrew word *re'a*, which really means "intimate friend" or "close associate." A *re'a* is someone for whom you feel a vigorous affection, someone you delight in. The Hebrew synonym for the term is "brother."

But, to our horror, these “intimate friends” now face each other in death: “Each man seized the head of his ‘close associate’ and [thrust] his sword into the side of his ‘friend’.” The two neatly arrayed lines of friends engage in a battle of precision, and each man is described as the victor. The reality, however, is that all of them are killed. In this “game,” twelve plus twelve equals zero. Twenty-four dead men, each killed by the sword of his brother. The language attempts to cover over the horror with victory symbols (“each man was the winner”), but no verbs are given to describe the death blows inflicted upon the losers.

Such language prostituted in the service of political aims is reminiscent of how the Third Reich tried to cover up its atrocities with its sanitized metaphor of victory, “The Final Solution”—a euphemism of horror. Decades later, we know how the attempts to wipe out an entire race demanded voices to rise out of hell’s frozen silence to shatter illusions with naked realities that defied description. In the same way, the current label “Pro Choice,” tries to draw a respected political veil of freedom over millions of dead fetuses, whose sacred sinews are torn apart by abortion. Something terrible happens to us when language is prostituted to serve the cause of evil.

In the end, the battle site is given a new name, Helkath-hazzurim, the “field of the stone knives.” What a contrast to this pool “with its living water and the rocky quality of the blood-soaked field turned cemetery.”<sup>4</sup> Now that the “sport” is over, the deadlock gives way to real conflict, and the escalation knows no bounds. As the sun sets, the narrator uses but one word to describe this day of blood: “the battle was *severe*.” Severe: a word out of the “nerve of sacred memory” (Paul Celan), a word that evokes David’s painful lament for the dead on Gilboa and the tears that ensued (2 Sam 1:17). But the grief of this day is even more pronounced, because it results from a battle between brothers—the children of Abraham killing their own seed. Who won? Abner is described as the loser, but no victor is listed. In a civil war, there are no winners.

After the summary statement of the battle, the narrator recalls an incident that occurred on the battlefield that day.

## II. What Will Stop the Killing? (2:18-28)

### (a) The Deadly Pursuit of One (2:18-23)

Now the three sons of Zeruiah were there, Joab and Abishai and Asahel; and Asahel was as swift-footed as one of the gazelles which is in the field. And Asahel pursued Abner and did not turn to the right or to the left from following Abner. Then Abner looked behind him and said, “Is that you, Asahel?” And he answered, “It is I.” So Abner said to him, “Turn to your right or to your left, and take hold of one of the young men for yourself, and take for yourself his spoil.” But Asahel was not willing to turn aside from following him. And Abner repeated again to Asahel, “Turn aside from following me. Why should I strike you to the ground? How then could I lift up my face to your brother Joab?” However, he refused to turn aside; therefore Abner struck him in the belly with the butt end of the spear, so that the spear came out at his back. And he

**fell there and died on the spot. And it came about that all who came to the place where Asahel had fallen and died, stood still.**

Here we are introduced to the three sons of Zeruiah again, those macho men whose fiery passions are quick to court danger and deny obstacles. These were the sons who were so eager for David to slay Saul in the cave of Engedi, sons who would use theology in the service of their private war. It took a severe rebuke from David to keep their zeal in check. Now they appear again. Asahel, the third son, is described as “swift footed as a gazelle.” The word “gazelle” (*ha-tzevi*) resonates with a painful verbal echo from David’s lament over Jonathan—a forbidding omen.

Jonathan was swifter than an eagle and stronger than a lion. Asahel, like Jonathan, has speed, and he uses it to pursue Abner. But, unlike Jonathan, Asahel does not have the strength to match the lion. Abner tries to reason with him to get him to turn aside, but Asahel will not be turned away. He is a man whose zeal gives him singular focus, and a passion that takes him beyond reason.

Here we see how unrestrained zeal can blind us from being able to assess reality. Unwilling to turn from his fixation, “Asahel gets the butt end of Abner’s spear, which penetrates with such force that it comes out his back. With a surprising reverse impact, Asahel is dead on the spot” (Fokkelman). The blazing speed of the text is brought to an abrupt halt, and all are forced to stop and feel the shocking blow to the belly. Misdirected zeal blinds and kills; it doesn’t matter whose side you are on.

But the chase does not end. Asahel’s brothers, fueled by the desire for revenge, now take up the pursuit and close in on Abner.

### (b) The Shophar’s Piercing Ring (2:24-28)

**But Joab and Abishai pursued Abner, and when the sun was going down, they came to the hill of Ammah, which is in front of Giah by the way of the wilderness of Gibeon. And the sons of Benjamin gathered together behind Abner and became one band, and they stood on the top of a certain hill. Then Abner called to Joab and said, “Shall the sword devour forever? Do you not know that it will be bitter in the end? How long will you refrain from telling the people to turn back from following their brothers?” And Joab said, “As God lives, if you had not spoken, surely then the people would have gone away in the morning, each from following his brother.” So Joab blew the trumpet; and all the people halted and pursued Israel no longer, nor did they continue to fight anymore.**

The chase continues through the day, until evening. Abner arrives at the last hill before the desert wilderness opens up to them on his escape home. The high ground afforded by the hill would be his final chance to make a stand before the pursuing army. There he is met by the scattered ranks from Benjamin, who converge behind their leader as “one” (the key word which drives the text is filled with poignant irony.) After a “severe” day of bloodshed, the cold, calculating Abner counts his cards and figures it is time to negotiate. In his mind he is no match for the mighty Joab, especially when he has just killed Joab’s

brother. So Abner calls on Joab to negotiate, but what follows turns out to be a war of words.

Abner speaks to Joab as a shrewd statesman, playing the role of grieving victim crying out in despair “before a receding horizon” (Fokkelman). He asks, “Will the sword devour forever?” In reality, it was he who initiated the conflict, and it is Asahel’s brothers who are grieving. The words, “Don’t you know it will be bitter in the end?” suggest stupidity on Joab’s part. Then, still on the offensive, Abner places the blame on Joab for escalating the conflict: “How long will you refrain from telling the people to turn back from following their brothers?”

But Joab will not take this lying down. He invokes an oath before God to place the blame squarely at Abner’s feet: “As God lives, if you had not spoken (i.e. initiated this conflict by invitation), surely then the people would have gone away in the morning.” He invites no response, since he has already condemned Abner with a verdict of guilty. Though Abner is at fault, he will gladly be a gentleman and take the initiative for peace. Joab lifts the ram’s horn (shophar) and its piercing cry brings a quick halt to the fighting. Finally, brother ceases to pursue brother.

Here we have the account of back to back scenes of Abner being pursued by two different sons of Zeruah. In the first, Abner is pursued by the flighty Asahel. Asahel is governed by his speed, which overtakes his logic. He refuses to listen to Abner’s reasoning, and the chase is abruptly halted as he is impaled by the butt end of Abner’s spear. He dies on the spot, and all Joab’s men stop in their tracks to gaze on his dead body. In the second scene, Abner is pursued by the strong man, Joab. As Joab overtakes him, Abner tries to convince him to listen to reason: in a civil war there are no winners. Joab, unlike Asahel, is able to let go and listen to reason. He blows the shophar, and all the army halts from the pursuit, thus ending the fight. In both cases something extraordinary has to break in from without to cause brothers to give up the chase and let go of their zeal. In the first instance, it was the shocking death of one whose misdirected zeal consumed him; in the second, it was the penetrating drones of the shophar, beckoning to all under the name of “brother.”

In the first scene the negotiations between generals is full of ease and agreement, but the outcome is a horrific, bloody annihilation. In the second scene their speech is heated, passionate, and contentious, but the outcome is one of separation and peace. Joab cuts through Abner’s questions and wins the war of words. The killing is over, at least for now.

The story concludes with the homeward march of the two armies.

### III. Epilogue: Separation and Return (2:29-32)

**Abner and his men then went through the Arabah all that night; so they crossed the Jordan, walked all morning (or “the whole length of the cleft”), and came to Mahanaim.**

**Then Joab returned from following Abner; when he had gathered all the people together, nineteen of David’s servants besides Asahel were missing. But the**

**servants of David had struck down many of Benjamin and Abner’s men, so that three hundred and sixty men died. And they took up Asahel and buried him in his father’s tomb which was in Bethlehem. Then Joab and his men went all night until the day dawned at Hebron.**

The contrasting images give a clue as to the respective destinies of the two armies. First, we see Abner and his men, retreating through the desert all night, then crossing the Jordan and walking the whole length of the entire cleft.<sup>5</sup> (The June 1995 edition of *National Geographic Magazine* has a satellite photo revealing this deep canyon of some 1700 feet.) “The march, twice as wearisome after an exhausting day of war, takes the soldiers to Mahanaim. The picture is one of ‘two camps with a (great) chasm in between them.’<sup>6</sup> While both sides walk through an entire night to make their return, only Joab’s, the winning side, is greeted by sunrise: “Light broke upon them in Hebron.” This rising sun stands symbolically for David’s continued rise to power.

Sandwiched between the return of the two armies is the body count. For every Judean killed, there are eighteen killed on the other side. “Asahel is buried in his father’s grave, in Bethlehem, about half the distance of the journey to Hebron. It is not the darkness of the grave that has the last word, however, but the light of day dawning upon the survivors at Hebron” (Fokkelman). Yes, they are the victors, but, we have to ask, at what price? Earlier in our story, David was gathering all Israel around him in life; now all Israel is gathered around a body count. Though the count is almost twenty to one, what compensation is that when the one is your brother? And what good is victory, when the twenty losers are your brothers as well? Don’t ever forget the body count! Ray Stedman had a gift for asking penetrating questions of Christians who justified the use of manipulative market techniques to spread the gospel because of the positive results of such practices. He would graciously give credit for those won to Christ, and then ask the all too often forgotten question, “But how many did you turn off?” Evangelism at what price? What was the “body count”?

Who wins when there is a war among brothers? Who wins when two brothers sue each other in court? Who wins when two Christians divorce? Who wins the theological war when we lacerate brothers with our words? In this story we learn, rather painfully, that while there may be a right side and a wrong side, there are no ultimate winners, only losers. In this accounting, twelve plus twelve still equals zero. We may desire to serve the right king, but serving in the wrong way is as hellish as serving the wrong king. Both sides become pawns of demons, and it is always “bitter in the end.” Instead of bringing reconciliation, we create massive divides that confine our rivals to disappear in the darkness. Hell is served, and we call it “sport.”

What drives these conflicts is a misdirected zeal that blinds our hearts so that our opponent is no longer recognizable across the chasm. No longer are we able to see him for who he is, a brother. We see him instead by what he evokes in us, a fear that threatens us. Our story does not

underestimate this zeal, but sees it as powerful, and consuming to the point of obsession. Breaking it, according to the narrator, requires an extraordinary occurrence from without. Sometimes that event is as painful as death itself, which grinds our obsessions into the dust. At other times it is the penetrating cry of the shophar, God's shout from heaven, a cry that pierces bone and marrow, heard through the voice of our brother.

#### IV. The Sons of Zeruiah and the Sons of Thunder

As we reflect on these texts of the David story we can see how powerfully they shaped the Jesus story. Jesus, too, came to an Israel fragmented and divided into a myriad of camps, all claiming to be the true way. Jesus was not timid about entering into the controversy. "I am the way," he claimed. And picking up Isaiah's metaphor of Israel (Isaiah 5), he boldly proclaimed, "I am the vine, the true one." Then he appointed twelve apostles, as if to say, "I am not only the true Israel, I represent the 'exclusive' Israel, 'all Israel.'" Just as was the case in David's time, Jesus' words were such a threat to those in power, they provoked many confrontations. The most difficult question Jesus had to face, however, was how would his disciples react when confronted by the opposition. Would they turn pools of living water into stony graveyards?

Peter, James and John would seem to be the New Testament counterparts of the sons of Zeruiah. Perfect type casts, they were impetuous, passionate, bold, vengeful, quick to draw blood. When they were not received at a Samaritan village, James and John asked the Lord whether he wanted them to "call fire down from heaven," and Jesus had to rebuke them. They even created controversy within their own circle by their ambition to be "first." Rightly did Jesus label them the "sons of thunder." And when the climactic confrontation was at hand, not by a pool this time, but in a garden, Peter, obsessed with his desire for action, took a sword and drew blood. Yes, these were men possessed by zeal.

But what would happen to this blind zeal? Were not these the very apostles who instructed followers of Christ to be slow to speak, and slow to anger, for the anger of man cannot work out the righteousness of God? And to rejoice when we suffer, for if we suffer for doing what is right, we are blessed. Wasn't it one of the sons of thunder who said that he who loves his brother abides in the light, and he who hates his brother is in darkness?

What happened? What stopped them and broke their blinding obsession to fight for the right King in the wrong way? It was a dead gazelle, a crucified Lamb. This was the Lamb who took the place of Barabbas, the revolutionary zealot. Jesus took the place of the zealot, and received the butt end of the spear for Israel. When Peter, James and John saw the crucified Christ, they stopped dead in their tracks, their zeal transformed forever. With these men there was no "bitter end." They loved Christ to the end, and they were happy to be crucified in his service.

And so they say to us today, "Look, look, at the unblemished Lamb impaled by my spear, with wounds so deep, yet draws me near." Let the shophar's ringing cry pierce our breast and cause us to stop our obsessive running in the right cause, but the wrong way. It took the death of the Redeemer to break misplaced zeal. As the prophet Zechariah said,

*"I will pour out on the house of David...the Spirit of grace... so that they will look on Me whom they pierced."*  
(Zech 12:10).

1. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. III, Throne and City* (Assen: Van Gorcum 1986), 42-43.

2. Fokkelman, 44.

3. Fokkelman, 44.

4. Fokkelman, 46.

5. Some translations translate this as walked all "morning," but it is better understood as "cleft." BDB translates it as "cleft" or "ravine." It is used on Song of Songs 8:14, cleft mountains.

6. Fokkelman, 61.

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