



# WOUNDING THE KING OF PEACE

SERIES: ASCENDING THE THRONE

Catalog No. 1022

2 Samuel 3:22-39

Eighth Message

Brian Morgan

December 10th, 1995

I heard the bells on Christmas day,  
Their old familiar carols play,  
And wild and sweet the words repeat  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men.

I thought how, as the day had come,  
The belfries of all Christendom  
Had rolled along th'unbroken song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men,

And in despair I bowed my head:  
"There is no peace on earth," I said,  
"For hate is strong, and mocks the song,  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men."

*I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day*, which we sang this morning as a Christmas carol, was written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow after he received news of the death of his son in the Civil War. Christmas is indeed the time when we sing of the birth of the Prince of Peace. But, if we are honest, the harsh realities of life make us pause and wonder, "What peace?" Was peace really our Lord's mission? If it was, what went wrong? Perhaps we misunderstand what the Bible means by peace.

In our text today on the life of David, from the book of 2 Samuel, we get a preview into the heart of the King of Peace. What was his passion for peace all about? Here we will learn who the real enemies of peace are, and how King David responded when these enemies tore apart the delicate fabric of peace which he was seeking to establish, following his ascent to the throne of Israel.

Once again we pick up the story of David, now the powerful king of the land, as he is gathering all Israel under his rule. In our last study we learned that Abner, the leading general in the North and commander of the opposing army, defected, and opened up diplomatic relations with David, in Hebron. A peace treaty was signed, all Israel was promised to David, and Abner left in peace. This was a monumental moment in the history of Israel, as the first powerful military leader pledged to lay down his weapons and become a co-worker with the messianic king for peace. But, tragically, this peace would prove to be short-lived.

Our story has two movements. The first concerns a military general who tears apart the fabric of peace; the second centers on the king who works to repair the tattered fabric.

## I. The General: Tearing the Fabric of Peace

(3:22-27)

### (a) Peace Is Challenged (3:21-25)

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. And behold, the servants of David and Joab came from a raid and brought much spoil with them; but Abner was not with David in Hebron, for he had sent him away, and he had gone in peace. When Joab and all the army that was with him arrived, they told Joab, saying, "Abner the son of Ner came to the king, and he has sent him away, and he has gone in peace." Then Joab came to the king and said, "What have you done? Behold, Abner came to you; why then have you sent him away and he is already gone? You know Abner the son of Ner, that he came to deceive you and to know of your going out and coming in, and to know all that you are doing." (NASB)

While David, the king, was going about the business of peace, his general, Joab, had been carrying on the business of war. In this scene, Joab returns victorious from a raid, eager to deposit a wealth of plunder into the king's treasury. Upon his arrival at the royal palace he is horrified to learn what has occurred between Abner and David. Abner, his military arch-enemy, who killed his brother Asahel, had come to the royal residence and the king had let him go free. They had even signed a peace treaty together. Joab is so infuriated at this news, he sweeps through the palace doors, in breach of protocol, to confront David. His words are so bold, his manners so lacking, that he crosses the sacred line of respect. "How could Abner have come to you, and you let him go?" he rails. Joab can't even bear to mention the word peace, so horrified is he at the thought that Abner had been permitted to leave. Doubtless, had he been present, he would have killed his rival.

As soon as Joab's anger is spent, he insults David for his naiveté. "Don't you know anything?" he is saying to the king, in effect. The verb "know," used four times in verses 25-26, is the theme word that brackets this text. Joab says that Abner was merely a spy who was hiding behind the guise of peacemaker. Chastising David for his ignorance, Joab says that Abner has come "to know" the king's "going out and coming in" (a Hebrew expression of totality). Joab is a pragmatic realist. A determined cynic, a man of the world, he appraises people instantly. But his assessment of Abner is based on past history, coupled with the experience of his own heart. Good as it is, it blinds him to the wondrous workings of God. He lacks the faith to see any potential for the divine spark which can break into an Abner's life and transform him from without.

Strangely, David makes no response to Joab's charges. Was he unable to answer a word? Or was he silenced in fear, loath to rebuke Joab's anger in the privacy of his own office, just as Ish-bosheth, the puppet king of the North, was silenced by his general, Abner? Whatever the truth of the matter, it is obvious that the king's passion for peace

made no impact on Joab, for he leaves the royal office, fully charged for the task that he is about to undertake.

### (b) Peace Is Killed (3:26-27)

**When Joab came out from David, he sent messengers after Abner, and they brought him back from the well of Sirah; but David did not know it. So when Abner returned to Hebron, Joab took him aside into the middle of the gate to speak with him privately, and there he struck him in the belly so that he died on account of the blood of Asahel his brother.**

Joab departs the king's presence, fully determined to use this opportunity to achieve his own personal vendetta. Messengers are sent, and Abner is seized by the well of Sirah and brought back to Hebron. (Fokkelman translates "the well of Sirah" as "the well of turning aside"—another symbol of life turned red with blood.) At the king's capital, where Abner once enjoyed *shalom*, Abner is brought into the privacy (*sheli*) of the inner court, under the guise of intimacy and confidence. In that dark corridor of deception he becomes the victim of Joab's revenge in all its awful sweetness. Blood begets blood as a weapon is thrust into Abner's belly in revenge of Joab's dead brother, Asahel.

The difference, however, is that in Asahel's case, Abner was the reluctant killer. He was trying to reason with Asahel, out in the open, and was left with no option but to kill or be killed. Furthermore, Asahel's death occurred in the midst of battle. But Joab makes no attempt to reason with Abner. Instead, he works under the cover of darkness and deceit, and casts away reluctance for bloodthirsty revenge. Abner's death cannot be counted as a war casualty; it is murder during a time of peace.

The poignant irony is that the dastardly deed is accomplished in the royal capital, without David's *knowledge*. David knows nothing of Joab's "coming in and going out" (which probably indicates a serious estrangement between the two). The mirror of accusation that Joab foisted on Abner as a deceptive enemy of the king reflects back in his guilty face. Joab, who serves his own interests in David's kingdom, is, in fact, David's real enemy.

In the second scene we have David's reaction upon hearing of Abner's murder. This time the roles are reversed as David, the bearer of bad news, does all the talking and acting, while Joab's role is one of passive compliance. The events of this day so widen the breach in their relationship that the enmity between general and king will extend to David's death and beyond.

## II. The King: Restoring the Fabric of Peace (3:28-39)

### (a) The King's Pronouncement (3:28-30)

**And afterward when David heard it, he said, "I and my kingdom are innocent before the Lord forever of the blood of Abner the son of Ner. May it fall (lit. "go round") on the head of Joab and on all his father's house; and may there not fail from the house of Joab one who has a discharge, or who is a leper, or who takes hold of a distaff [an expression which indicates "the oppression of forced labor," Holloway], or who falls by the sword, or who lacks bread." So Joab and Abishai his brother killed Abner because he had put their brother Asahel to death in the battle at Gibeon.**

Receiving the news of Abner's murder, the king wastes no time in making a public pronouncement of his own innocence, thereby clearly separating himself and his kingdom from Joab. Then, in a fury that parallels Joab's earlier meeting with him, David pronounces a curse on Joab and his whole family, since family "justice" was the basis of Joab's revenge. This curse "makes up a special variation of *kareth*, of the premature death as punishment from God which goes with certain crimes. Not an 'extermination'... of the criminal, but may a never-ending stream of woe strike this family...With this series, David covers the most important predicaments in war and peace...[it] is a grievous curse."<sup>1</sup> The narrator concludes this section by summarizing the day of this brutal killing as payment in Joab's eyes for Asahel's death in "battle."

Next, we get the account of the funeral procession.

### (b) The King's Actions (3:31-37)

**Then David said to Joab and to all the people who were with him, "Tear your clothes and gird on sackcloth and lament before Abner." And King David walked behind the bier. Thus they buried Abner in Hebron; and the king lifted up his voice and wept at the grave of Abner, and all the people wept. And the king chanted a lament for Abner and said,**

**"Should Abner die as a fool dies?**

**Your hands were not bound, nor your feet put in fetters;**

**As one falls before the wicked, you have fallen."**

**And all the people wept again over him. (3:31-34)**

Throughout the text, at certain times the term "king" is used and at other times "David," but only here, in the centerpiece of the story, are the two terms united as "King David." This powerful emphasis demonstrates how Joab's actions had severely wounded the heart of the king and effectively destroyed David's efforts to establish peace in the land.

David carefully orchestrates Abner's state funeral to give a public rebuke to Joab—a rebuke which, unfortunately, he had failed to deliver in private. First, David forces the perpetrators of the crime to tear their garments in grief and publicly lead the procession of mourners. Joab and his men are followed by the stretcher carrying Abner's body, with the king following behind. The order is symbolic of Joab's guilt (he was first upon the scene of the crime), and David's innocence (he came upon the scene last, after the crime had already been accomplished). This spatial separation is David's way of distancing himself and his kingdom from the bloodthirsty Joab.

Next, the spotlight is focused on David as he stands by Abner's grave, alone in his grief. Then he is united with the rest of the people, who join in with their own tears for the fallen hero. Here we behold the king in his finest hour, *walking, weeping, and wailing* with his people.

This, too, is the ministry of the Messiah, the greater David. He does not remain distant from his grieving people. Elie Wiesel writes in one of his books about one mysterious Jew in the Auschwitz death camp. In the midst of the despair of that awful place, this "prophet" arose and uttered these amazing words: "We are sores on the body of Israel. This is true also for the Messiah. You relegate him to the heavens, but he is here among us. You imagine that

he is safe, sheltered from danger, but he has come here to be with the victims. Yes, even he, he better than anyone, knows the sorrows that consume you; he feels the fist that smashed into your faces. The darkness that engulfs us engulfs him also."<sup>2</sup>

David's lament is carefully worded both to renounce the treachery involved in Abner's death, and to condemn the criminal for his crime. "Should Abner die as a fool dies?" he laments. The word "fool" is the Hebrew word, *nabal*. It is reminiscent of the Abigail story, and her churlish husband who died in his wanton wealth. Should Abner, the military warrior, who just a day earlier turned statesman to work for peace, die the death of Nabal? The thought that he died the death of a fool, or worse yet, of a criminal unchained, is appalling to David. "The chained body is a visualization of the impotence of the criminal once he has been caught. He who was strong once must now, whether he wants to or not, surrender himself to what others are about to do with him, and it is this very kind of surrender which is so ignominious for such a free, and a strong... man...as Abner...It is as if the poet himself feels chained by the hard facts."<sup>3</sup>

Here we have a graphic picture of the king's passion for peace, and his pain that peace has been torn to shreds by the obsessive zeal of a "friend." David walks behind the body of Abner and weeps at his grave. Then he writes a poem to wail over this statesman victimized by the vice of treachery. In the process, Joab is publicly separated, humiliated and condemned.

Next, we have the response of the people. Verse 35:

**Then all the people came to persuade David to eat bread while it was still day; but David vowed, saying, "May God do so to me, and more also, if I taste bread or anything else before the sun goes down." Now all the people took note of it, and it pleased them, just as everything the king did pleased all the people. So all the people and all Israel knew that day that it had not been the will of the king to put Abner the son of Ner to death. (3:35-37)**

So moved are the people by David's personal involvement in the death of Abner, they bring him "the bread of comfort."<sup>4</sup> But David remains committed to fasting ("this is his personal contribution to the rites of mourning"<sup>5</sup>), and pronounces himself under a curse (an echo of Joab's curse) if he fails to fast until sunset. With these powerful public actions, all Israel comes to *know* (the theme word of our text) that it had not been the will of the king to put Abner to death. So the king, who at the opening of the story is accused of *not knowing* an enemy, and in fact did *not know* the ways of his own general, turns everything around so that by the end of the story, *everyone knows*, in no uncertain terms, that he is *innocent* of this death, and devastated that peace has been ravaged.

I have been looking through the Davidic Psalms to see if there is one particular psalm that might express how David's heart was shaped by this experience. I think that Psalm 26, where David speaks about his innocence and his being victimized by treachery, is a possibility. In the psalms, many of David's protestations about his innocence concern not his sinlessness, but his innocence in the matter of seizing the crown of Israel. Can we not see Jesus, throughout the history of the church, walking behind the

funerals of the innocent victims of the slaughtered in the name of righteousness? We think of the Crusades, the Inquisition, Cromwellian Ireland, the Holocaust, Bosnia. In all of these slaughters Jesus looks into the eyes of the mourners and says, "I am innocent. This was not of my kingdom."

Our text concludes at day's end with David's personal assessment of this historic day.

### (c) The King's Heart (3:38-39)

**Then the king said to his servants, "Do you not know that a prince and a great man has fallen this day in Israel? And I am weak today, though anointed king; and these men the sons of Zeruiah are too difficult for me. May the Lord repay the evildoer according to his evil."**

Many commentators question the sincerity of David's actions at this state funeral. Were his tears a genuine expression of pain, or were they merely a show—the state staging its own grief to effect diplomacy? What was really going on in the heart of the king? To answer that question, the narrator takes us backstage into the privacy of David's inner court, away from public view, into the arena where the man's real motives are revealed. Just as we saw Joab's true motives exposed in the privacy of the royal palace, so here we have a true reading of the king's heart as he gives his personal assessment of Abner, himself, his real enemies, and his trust.

David initiates the conversation with his servants by asking, "Do you not *know*?" This rhetorical question is actually saying, "you must become fully aware" (Fokkelman). "Do you not know that a prince and a great man has fallen this day in Israel?" asks David. The former military man, Abner, had turned his back on war and had become a statesman for peace. This ancient account has uncanny parallels to the murder of Yitzak Rabin. When Rabin, the former military general and hero, began to work for peace, that was when he made enemies, resulting at last in his assassination.

Thus we have David's assessment of Abner: "a prince and a great man." Unlike Joab, who could see Abner only through the lens of his past history, David saw wonderful potential for the kingdom through this former enemy now a co-worker for peace. What a tragic turn of events, the slaying of the new convert for peace.

Following David's assessment of Abner, we get one of those rare but coveted glimpses into the heart of the king, as David gives his assessment of himself. It is one of pained resignation: "And as for me, this day I am weak, thought anointed king. And these men the sons of Zeruiah are too difficult for me!" What an admission from the head of state! The word "weak" is better translated "soft, delicate, tender"—a perfect counterpoint to "hard," the attribute of the sons of Zeruiah. David is saying, "Here I am, the anointed king of all Israel, but when it comes to these tough family members, I am soft." "He now expresses the gap between his inner world, feelings of vulnerability and the very beginning of his divinely-willed kingship on the one hand and the harsh demands of politics and military matters...on the other. The innocence of the individual disappears into this gap."<sup>6</sup> David did not have a thick skin.

Unable to carry out the rebuke of Joab directly, David falls back on divine retribution, invoking God's personal

name to take the appropriate action. The word repay (*shalem*) is well chosen, and rounds out our story. It is same root as the word peace (*shalom*), used three times in the opening verses of the account. *Shalem* means "to repay, bring to a completion." Since Abner left David's presence in peace (*shalom*), but was betrayed, may God repay (*shalem*) the evildoer completely, is David's rebuke.

### III. The King of Peace and You

Our text draws us into the David story and leaves us with the question, Where do we line up with the King of Peace? If David had a passion for peace, how much more does the greater Son of David feel that passion? It was Jesus of whom the prophets wrote that in the last days, all nations would be drawn to Zion like a flood, and there be taught the Torah by the Messianic King. As a result they would turn their swords into plowshares: nations would no longer practice war, and each would sit under his fig tree with no one to make them afraid (Mic 4:1-4). The most powerful witness to the world that Jesus was indeed the Christ was his ability to reconcile former enemies: zealots with tax collectors, prostitutes with Pharisees, Jews with Gentiles. This is the work of the cross: not merely to reconcile men to God, but to create a community where people deeply love their former enemies. This is Christ's passion: peace on earth through the blood of the cross.

The great mystery in our text is the king's outspoken vulnerability in the process of peacemaking. "I am weak though anointed king," says David. He is not weak with those who openly oppose him, the strong Abners of life. They pose no threat to him. Rather, the threat comes from those who claim they work for his name, those to whom he has entrusted his rule, and who could so easily destroy that delicate fabric of peace: those who prefer judgment rather than grace on the immoral and decadent, who prefer dividing to gathering, lobbying to evangelizing, and judging to reconciling. Oftentimes they cross the sacred line and help the judgment along. And God permits it. But, by forcing his hand, they cause him to distance himself from them. Though some who claim to be his friends may pronounce victory, the King of Peace tears his gar-

ments and walks alongside his enemies. He weeps with them and writes them a poem, crying out in his pain, "I am innocent, I am innocent."

One of the most formidable enemies of Christianity was a Jewish zealot, Saul of Tarsus. Under his sanction and authority, the first Christian martyr, Stephen, was put to death. Yet for all his political power and obsessive zeal, Saul posed no threat to Christ. Just one appearance by Jesus and it was all over for this former enemy. He was even appointed an apostle! One wonders what would the sons of Zeruah have done with the conversion of Saul. Would they immediately appraise him in light of his past history? Would they be cynical, pressing caution to the point of exclusion? Would they see him as a threat to their office, and reap revenge for his part in shedding Christian blood? What a loss if Saul, the former militant now turned apostle of peace, had been assassinated by Peter or John! It took the eyes of Barnabas to look beyond flesh to see the King of Peace resident in Saul's life. Barnabas would bridge the gap between Saul and the apostles.

What joy the King of Peace must have felt when this former militant enemy, Saul, now the apostle Paul, was welcomed into the fold! Paul would become the classic peacemaker, bringing together, through the blood of the cross, two opposing groups never before united in history, Jew and Gentile. Let us, for our part, take to heart today his admonition, that we be "diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace." Amen.

- 1 J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, Vol. III, *Throne and City* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 106
2. Elie Wiesel, *Legends of Our Time* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 59.
3. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 112.
4. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 113.
5. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 113.
6. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 117.

© 1995 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino