

14 February 2021

God of Covenant

2 Samuel 2-9

With King Saul dead, David had no further reason to hide in the desert. He consulted the priest, Abiathar, asking for God's direction, and Abiathar told him to go to the town of Hebron, in Judah. David had no real idea what he was going to do there, other than live somewhere closer to food and water, but shortly after he arrived, the elders of the tribe of Judah approached him. "David," they asked, "we'd like you to be our king."

"Who is *we*?" he asked carefully.

"Just the tribe of Judah," they replied.

You see, Israel didn't really know what to do with a royal succession. Saul had been their first king. In other kingdoms, the king's oldest son would step in, but since the Exodus, Israel had always been led by whoever God called, not by whoever was up next. Besides, Saul's oldest son Jonathan had died in battle with his father, and the only son Saul had left was a fellow named Ish-bosheth who was . . . well, he was no Jonathan. He wasn't even a Saul. Ish-bosheth was whiny, selfish, belligerent, sneaky, and weak. In the end, the rest of Israel went with Ish-bosheth anyway, but the tribe of Judah wanted nothing to do with the weasel. So they asked David to be their king.

Thus, for seven years, Israel had two kings. David ruled Judah from Hebron, and Ish-bosheth ruled the other eleven tribes, with his father's old commander Abner backing him up to give him legitimacy. David, for his part, appointed as his military commander his nephew Joab. Almost at once there were skirmishes between the tribe of Judah and Saul's tribe, Benjamin, which shared a border, so the two generals, Abner and Joab, met for a council of peace, each with a small honor guard. Now the text isn't 100% clear who started it, but during the meeting, somebody attacked somebody else, and the whole thing exploded in pitched battle. Joab's men from Judah came out on top – which may indicate who started it – and Abner had to run for his life. He had almost gotten away when one young soldier from Judah caught up with him.

"Stop, Abner! Turn and fight!"

Abner turned. "You're Asahel, aren't you? Joab's youngest brother?"

"Yes, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that I'm the man who's going to kill you!"

"Go away, Asahel. I don't want trouble."

Asahel attacked anyway, and Abner killed him.

Tensions grew worse, and Ish-bosheth, who, like other weak leaders, got most shrill and demanding when he was afraid, began to alienate even his few remaining loyalists. He even accused Abner of disloyalty, despite the fact that Abner's support was all that was propping him up. Abner gave up on Ish-bosheth and went to see David. "O king," he said, "the nation will never defeat the Philistines until you are king of all Israel. This worm Ish-bosheth isn't worth a spit. I've come to offer you my allegiance."

David thought for a moment. "You'll have to prove your loyalty."

"How, sire?"

"Bring me my wife, Michal." You see, Saul's daughter Michal, whom David had married just before he had to flee the court, had stayed with her father all those years of David's exile. In fact, Saul had given her as wife to another man.

"You know she's married to someone else now, don't you?" Abner said.

"So am I," David said. Which was true. David had several wives by this time: Ahinoam, Abigail, Maacah, and some others. But, it's worth noting, none of them were the daughter of the former king. "It doesn't matter. I still want Michal."

So Abner returned to Benjamin and took Michal from her home by force and delivered her to David. No, nobody consulted Michal, or her new husband for that matter. Then Abner began traveling around Israel, talking to the leaders of the tribes about switching their loyalty to David.

Abner had forgotten about Joab; but Joab, he never forgot anything. When Joab heard that David was working with Abner, he was furious. "You can't trust him, David!"

"You know better than that, Joab. Abner's always kept his word. He's a man of honor."

"Maybe so," Joab said. "But I have my own honor." Joab sent word to Abner that David wanted the two of them to meet. When Abner arrived, Joab took his hand. "Abner."

"Joab. I've been wanting to tell you, I'm sorry about Asahel. I told him to go back, but he attacked me anyway. I had no choice."

"I believe you, Abner," Joab said. "Sounds just like Asahel. He always had more courage than brains. The thing is, though, he was family." Then Joab drove a long knife into Abner's stomach and left him to die.

When David heard he called Joab to him, "Joab, you son of a – ! This is not how we intend to rule our kingdom, by means of personal vendetta!"

"Then it's a good thing I'm not king, isn't it?" Joab said. "I *care* about family."

"Here's what I'm going to do," David said. "I'm going to hold a state funeral for Abner and call for the whole nation to mourn for a great man who deserved better than to die like a dog. And you're going to lead the funeral procession." And that's what happened; Joab could only grit his teeth and fume.

Meanwhile, the walls were closing in on Ish-bosheth. When he heard that Abner was dead he went pale, then took to his bed. Without Abner behind him, he had no authority at all. Sure enough, two of his captains came in and murdered him in his sleep. A few days later those soldiers appeared at Hebron, asking to speak to David. "O king, there is no longer anything between you and the throne of all Israel!"

"What do you mean?"

"In this bag, we have brought you the head of Ish-bosheth!" they said proudly.

David didn't speak for a long time. At last he said, "Why do people keep expecting me to reward murder?"

"My lord?" they asked.

"When Saul died, a man brought me his crown and me he had killed the wounded king. He wanted a reward from me."

"What reward did you give him?"

"The same that you will receive," David said quietly. "Guards!"

Nevertheless, Ish-bosheth's death did exactly what the two murderers had said it would. The elders of the rest of Israel gave up on the house of Saul and went to David, asking him to once again unite the twelve tribes and lead all Israel. And so, as old Samuel had foretold when he anointed the musician-shepherd of Bethlehem, as Saul had feared, and as Jonathan had predicted, David, the sweet singer of Israel, now became its king. He was just thirty years old.

But David had a task before him. The years of constant, low-level warfare between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin had led to a rift between the tribes. "Joab, are there any cities that lie right on the border between Judah and Benjamin?"

Joab thought about it. "Well, there's one. But it isn't ours. It's called Jebus, and it's one of the cities that Israel never did conquer."

David nodded. "Better and better. That's going to be our new capital. Can you take it?"

Joab grinned. "Anything you want, Your Highness." You have to give Joab his due. Whatever else he was, he was a great general. He marched to Jebus, set a siege, then led a sneak attack up the city's water shaft. Soon, David was marching in triumph into the city. "This shall be our capital, and it shall no longer be called Jebus. From this day, we shall call it 'Jerusalem.'"

From this new fortress capital, built atop Mount Zion, David set about bringing peace to Israel. First he drove out the Philistines. With David and Joab leading the armies, it seemed Israel couldn't lose. They defeated the Philistines at Baal-Perizim, at Geba, at Rephaim, at Gezer. And when the Philistines had retreated to their own cities on the coast, David turned to the east and conquered Moab. Then he marched north toward the Ammonites. David was on his way to establishing not just a kingdom, but an empire.

But in all his success, David did not forget his promises. One day he called Joab. "Joab, are there any descendants of Jonathan left alive?"

"Good thought, Your Highness," Joab said. "They could be a threat. Want me to take care of them?"

"You really don't get me, do you?"

"Sometimes, no," Joab admitted. "But this time you make sense."

"I don't want you to kill the rest of Saul's family. I want to take them into my court and set them up in a place of honor and protect them."

"Oh," said Joab. "Then, no, I don't get you at all."

“I made a promise to Jonathan,” David explained.

A search turned up one son of Jonathan still alive, a lame youth named Mephibosheth. David took him in, and he lived the rest of his life at court.

Neither did David forget the Lord, who had protected him in his lean years. He sent his priest Abiathar to the tabernacle with instructions to bring the Ark of God into Jerusalem, and when the priests bore Israel’s holiest object through the gates of the city, David was overcome with joy. Throwing off his royal robes, he joined the throng of worshipers, dancing and singing in the streets, welcoming the presence of God to the new capital. His wife Michal, watching from an upper window, was not impressed with a king who would frolic among the commoners, but David didn’t care. To David, it wasn’t about him. It was about the Lord, and before God, all were equal.

That night, as David surveyed his kingdom, he knew that everything he had, he owed to God. He sent word summoning Nathan to him. Now, we’ve not met this Nathan before, but he’s worth remembering. Nathan was David’s official court prophet. This wasn’t unusual in the ancient Near East. Many kings had official prophets, whose job was primarily to reassure the king that the gods were with them. Anyway, David sent for Nathan.

“Nathan, I’ve been thinking. I’ve started building myself a great palace in Jerusalem, but God still dwells in a tent. I want to build a magnificent temple to honor the Lord.”

Nathan nodded, pleased to serve a king who thought that way. “Do it, then,” he said.

But a few hours later, Nathan was back in David’s bedroom. He looked shaken. “My lord? I have a message for you from God.”

“What is it?”

“Don’t build a temple.” David stared at him, and Nathan went on, “Thus says the Lord: In all the years since I brought Israel out of Egypt, have I ever asked for a temple? Have I asked for a house of brick and stone? Never. Temples are for gods who stay in one place, and I don’t. Temples are for people who want to confine their gods to one spot, but I will not be confined. I can be found wherever you seek. My home is in the desert, in the storm, in the gentle spring rain, in the tent of the tabernacle and the tent of the lowest shepherd. I am too big for anything you can build, and if you think to hold me in, I will burst every wall. I am the Lord.

“But here’s what I will do, my son David. Because you wished to honor me, I will honor you. Because you wanted to build me a house, I will build you a house. Here is my covenant with you: from you will come a royal line that will never end. You are my messiah, my anointed one today, and from your lineage will come one who be anointed unto all ages. This is my pledge. This is my covenant. This is the word of the Lord.”

David fell on his face. “My lord, I don’t deserve any of this.”

“No, you don’t,” Nathan agreed. “But I don’t think it’s a gift to you. I think it’s a gift that God was waiting to give, and he has chosen you to be its bearer.”

And David sang God’s praise.

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Scripture says that God did not permit David to build a temple, but eventually a temple was built, and the superscription to Psalm 30 notes that this psalm of David was used at the temple's dedication. We read that psalm now in its entirety.

A Psalm. A Song at the dedication of the temple. Of David.

¹ I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up,
and did not let my foes rejoice over me.

² O Lord my God, I cried to you for help,
and you have healed me.

³ O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol,
restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.

⁴ Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones,
and give thanks to his holy name.

⁵ For his anger is but for a moment;
his favor is for a lifetime.

Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.

⁶ As for me, I said in my prosperity,
'I shall never be moved.'

⁷ By your favor, O Lord,
you had established me as a strong mountain;
you hid your face;
I was dismayed.

⁸ To you, O Lord, I cried,
and to the Lord I made supplication:

⁹ 'What profit is there in my death,
if I go down to the Pit?

Will the dust praise you?
Will it tell of your faithfulness?

¹⁰ Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me!
O Lord, be my helper!'

¹¹ You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy,

¹² so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.