

2 Samuel 4:1-12

SI: When King Saul was killed in battle, that should have opened the door for David to assume the kingship over all Israel. But it didn't, because Saul's general, a man named Abner, wanted to retain power.

So he installed Saul's son Ishbosheth as a puppet and there was a civil war between tribes in the north and tribes in the south.

Eventually Abner was killed and that left Ishbosheth completely vulnerable.

INTRO: I called my grandmother on my mother's side Mama Fay. She lived for about 40 years in Atlanta.

The first neighborhood she lived in declined and had a lot of crime.

She moved and the same thing started happening her second neighborhood, so she moved again.

When I would call her to talk, more than once the conversation started like this.

I said: Hey, Mama Fay, this is Andrew. How are things in Atlanta?

She would reply: Just a bunch of rapin' and killin'.

One time I said: Hey, Mama Fay, this is Andrew. What are you up to?

Just watching the news about another liquor store robbery.

I mentioned in a sermon a few weeks ago how at her graveside service my cousin's car was broken into at the cemetery and her purse was stolen.

I could imagine Mama Fay shaking her head and saying, that's Atlanta.

That also sounds like a good summary of this chapter.

It's more of the same that's been going on for the past two chapters.

Scheming and violence, murder and mutilation.

The third person in three chapters is killed by being stabbed in the stomach.

Where is God in this text? What is God doing?

It's interesting that the Lord speaks to David at the beginning of chapter 2 when David asks what town he should choose to live in a reign from.

The Lord answers him and says Hebron. Go to Hebron.

But for the next seven and a half years, the time covered in chapters 2, 3, and 4, there is no record of the Lord speaking. It's as if God is silent.

Instead there is this cycle of violence and revenge.

What was God doing during that time?

Was God absent during those seven and a half years?

No, God wasn't absent. He was at work.

But it takes eyes of faith to see God at work in a violent world.

This chapter helps us do that.

Behind the very visible and loud actions of men,

the Lord is still doing things. He's silent, he's unseen, but he's acting.

What's he doing? Three things. For you note-takers I'll mention them.

In a violent world the Lord sees the weak,

he uses the wicked,

and he guides the wise.

Let's look at each.

MP#1 In a violent world the Lord sees the weak

The people who drive the action in these three chapters and who make things happen are all strong men. Some are good, some are bad, some are a mix. But they're all strong in body, strong in courage, strong in determination.

David is strong Even though he refused to participate in actively fighting against his fellow Israelites during the civil war, nobody doubted his courage or strength. Abner is another strong man. Physically strong, able to kill a man with his back turned, using the blunt end of his spear, as he did to Asahel, Joab's brother. Daring, confident. He set Ishbosheth up as a puppet king, when that didn't work he boldly switched sides and tried to become David's new general. His plan didn't work because there was another strong man in the picture. Joab along with his brother Abishai.

These men would not take no for an answer. If you hurt them, they got revenge. If you tried to push them out, they took you out. In this chapter there are two more strong men, also brothers, Recab and Baanah. These are the people who everybody is talking about. They push history along.

Right in the middle of these strong men are two weak men.

Ishbosheth, Saul's remaining son. And Mephibosheth, Saul's grandson. Ishbosheth was a passive person, easily backed down, not forceful.

He didn't have the strength of nerve to be king.

Abner made him king but Abner made it clear who was in charge.

When Ishbosheth finally tried to confront Abner about something,

Abner exploded in anger and Ishbosheth was afraid to say anything else to him. But when he heard Abner had been killed it says he lost courage.

Literal Hebrew expression is that his hands hung down.

Ultimately, Ishbosheth was unable to fight and defend himself.

A grandson of Saul is also mentioned, Mephibosheth. This is sort of foreshadowing, because he's going to reappear later in David's reign.

But the point here is that he's crippled from an accident when he was five.

And as a physically weak person, he would never be considered kingly material.

So Saul's house consists of two weak men.

Neither one of them does anything to move history along.

They are just pawns who are used by powerful people.

They are at the mercy of circumstances.

What usually happens to people like this? They die and are forgotten. Most of them don't get justice for the wrongs committed against them.

Many of them are not lifted out of their circumstances.

But what happens to Ishbosheth and Mephibosheth?

First of all, their names are recorded in the Bible. They are not forgotten.

Here we are 3,000 years later on other side of world talking about them.

Also, Ishbosheth's murderers were brought to justice by David.

His decapitated head was treated with respect, buried in Abner's tomb.

And later, we will see, Mephibosheth will be lifted out of his poverty by David and given a place of honor at his table.

This is intended to remind us that God sees the weak, he sees the downtrodden.

The Lord takes note of injustice.

And even when it seems like God doesn't notice or care, because the strong are rolling over the weak, using them for their own purpose—God sees.

And he is taking note, and one day there will be justice. Psalm 146:9 says:

The LORD watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

The Lord watches over the weak and downtrodden, the alien, fatherless, widow.

And one day through David's Son, through Jesus Christ, there will be justice.

Two applications: If you are being abused by someone right now, verbally, physically, or sexually, and you, like Ishbosheth are fearful as he was of Abner, you are not alone. God sees you. He sees what is happening to you.

He will give you justice one day.

But in the meantime, there are people who want to be a David in your life.

In this church, there are brave and strong people who will believe you and stand with you. You have to tell them. Tell someone you trust.

Then trust that person to make good judgments about who else to get involved.

Maybe saddest detail is that Ishbosheth was all alone and unguarded in bedroom.

That happens in the world. It shouldn't happen in the church of God.

Second, application. You may not have suffered violence at the hands of the strong, but perhaps at times you're bothered about your life, and how little it seems.

Maybe you feel like you are overshadowed by your sister or brother, or by successful people in circles.

Maybe you expected to be in a different place at this stage in life, and now you realize this is your life. It's not going to change.

God sees you. Jesus Christ values your life and your story. Believe that.

Even when it doesn't seem like God is doing anything, he sees the weak.

MP#2 In a violent world the Lord uses the wicked

He uses their evil, selfish schemes and crimes to accomplish his holy purposes. The main action in this passage is Recab and Baanah murdering Ishbosheth. They realized Ishbosheth's kingdom was falling apart.

And now with Abner dead, it was definitely time to jump ship. But instead of just deserting to David and taking a place with his enlisted men, they wanted to be given rank immediately.

So they murdered Ishbosheth and took his head as a present to David.

They even had a speech prepared with some religious wording thrown in.

This day the LORD (Yahweh) has avenged my lord the king against Saul and his offspring. David didn't reward them, he had them executed.

But this evil deed removed final obstacle for David to assume throne of all Israel. Almost 20 years earlier, God had sent Samuel to the little town of Bethlehem to anoint Jesse's youngest son David as king of Israel.

God wanted a king for Israel who was a man after his own heart.

He chose the teenager David who was shepherding his father's sheep.

The people had wanted someone tall and impressive.

They chose Saul and God let them have what they wanted.

Sometimes God does that. He lets us have foolish things we want to humble us. Saul was a bad choice. Showed early promise but he turned away from the Lord.

When David was anointed, Saul was still on the throne and he became homicidally jealous of David. For twelve years David was on the run.

Finally, Saul was killed in battle with the Philistines and his three oldest sons were killed with him. It seemed like the path was cleared for David.

But it wasn't. Saul's son Ishbosheth was set up as a puppet king by Abner and the northern tribes who were loyal to Saul's house followed him.

So once again, there was an obstacle to David's reign.

David believed wrong to kill fellow Israelites. Sat on sidelines in civil war, 7 ½ yrs.

But what if Ishbosheth had not been killed? How many more years would it have

been before David king? 12 years running from Saul, 7 ½ war, basically 20 years.

Would David have maybe become impatient and taken the northern tribes of Israel by force? It would have caused distrust and animosity with his subjects.

It would have been a permanent shadow over his kingship.

But with Ishbosheth's death at someone else's hand, all political pieces fell in place

As we'll see next week, the northern tribes respected David so much because he

himself had not killed Ishbosheth that they called him king and shepherd.

They trusted him and in the blink of an eye, the nation was united again.

So God used an evil deed by violent men to accomplish his plan,
and to bring about a unity in Israel that even David could not have imagined.
Now there's some deep theology here that we need to use very carefully.

If we aren't careful, we can do some damage.

First, we need to be careful not ever to imply that God is in some way morally
complicit in evil. God was not complicit in the murder of Ishbosheth.

Murder is against God's revealed will. It's a violation of his moral law.

Recab and Baanah went against God's will.

We should never flippantly say that some evil deed is God's will.

Well, I guess that murder was God's will. Don't say that without great care.

Of course God has a secret will that includes all things.

Of course God's eternal decrees included Ishbosheth's murder and every other
evil thing that people have done, including the crucifixion of the Son of God

But the Bible also affirms that God is completely pure.

He's completely untouched and unpolluted by sin.

God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.

The phrase theologians use is that God is not the author of sin,

but at the same time, God is able to use sin sinlessly to accomplish his purposes.

There's mystery here, so we need to take off our shoes and tread carefully.

Second, if someone has suffered violence or suffered evil, be very, very cautious
about telling them this is God's plan and God's going to use this evil you've
suffered to do such and such good thing your life.

Your child's been murdered but God's going to use that to bring lots of people
to saving faith in Christ. That's an extreme example, but you understand.

People who have suffered evil need a different comfort.

You probably need to focus on first truth we studied. God sees you.

God cares about the justice of your cause. Your suffering won't be forgotten.

In time God will perhaps let them see how he is using this evil to accomplish good.

Joseph got to see that. His brothers sold him into slavery.

When he saw them again, he could see God's hand. He said:

You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good, for saving many lives.

But guess what? That was 22 years after the event.

We might affirm the theological truth of God's sovereignty over evil right away.

But it might take years before we see how he uses it. It might take till heaven.

In a violent world God sees the weak, he uses the wicked, and

MP#3 He guides the wise

In the Old Testament, wise is basically a synonym for believer.

A wise person is someone who knows the Lord, who trusts the Lord.

That doesn't mean believers don't do foolish things. Of course we do.

David himself does some very foolish things in his life.

But he is ultimately a wise man because he loved God, feared God, wanted to please God for the grace that had been given to him.

So that's your identity too, if you are a follower of Jesus Christ.

You're a wise person and if you listen, God will guide you and use you.

And we're focusing particularly on how he guides you

in the midst of violence and evil. Let's look again at the story.

These two men came to David with Ishbosheth's head.

They gave their religious speech and David says to them:

Didn't you hear what I did to the man who came and told me

that King Saul was dead? I put him to death.

How much more should I rid the earth of you

for murdering an innocent man in his own bed.

And David has them put to death and symbolically mutilated.

Their hands and feet are cut off and their bodies hung in a public place, as a way of signifying the wickedness of their deed.

And then one more thing, Ishbosheth's head is treated with respect and buried.

This scene is so foreign to us, it's hard to see how it applies.

But I think it helps when you realize that the way most people in David's position would have responded is exactly the opposite from what he did.

They would have heaped honors and rewards on Recab and Baanah,

and they would have put Ishbosheth's head on a pike as trophy.

That's exactly what Recab and Baanah expected would happen because

that's the way all people in power did things back then.

David lived in that culture. He must have felt those values and pressures.

But David broke the mold. David went in a completely countercultural direction when it came to responding to violence and injustice.

I think there's a faith lesson for us here.

Both within American secular culture and within American Christian culture there are expectations for how we are to respond to violence and injustice.

We see God at work is when he guides the wise in a different path.

If you followed the court case of Larry Nasser, the team USA gymnastics physician

who was convicted of child molestation, you may have heard about or read the victim impact statement from Rachael Denhollander.

She was his first accuser. She's a Christian. Let me read you part of her statement.

There are two major purposes in our criminal justice system, your Honor: the pursuit of justice and the protection of the innocent. Neither of these purposes can be met if anything less than the maximum available sentence under the plea agreement is imposed upon Larry for his crimes. Not because the federal sentence he will already serve is lacking, but because the sentence rendered today will send a message across this country, a message to every victim and a message to every perpetrator.

And then after this she gives a detailed summary of his crimes and demolishes his defense and indicts a number of powerful people who defended him.

So she's a Christian urging the judge to throw the book at this man.

Rachael Denhollander got criticism from some Christian circles for this.

This was criticized as not loving, not forgiving, not what Jesus would do.

Jesus wouldn't ask a judge lock someone up and throw away the key.

But let me now read you what she said toward the end of her statement.

She addressed Larry Nassar directly. (So you know, he carried a Bible in court.)

Larry, if you have read the Bible you carry, you know forgiveness does not come from doing good things, as if good deeds can erase what you have done. It comes from repentance which requires facing and acknowledging the truth about what you have done in all of its utter depravity and horror without mitigation, without excuse, without acting as if good deeds can erase what you have seen this courtroom today. If the Bible you carry says it is better for a stone to be thrown [tied?] around your neck and you throw into a lake than for you to make even one child stumble. And you have damaged hundreds. The Bible you speak carries a final judgment where all of God's wrath and eternal terror is poured out on men like you. Should you ever reach the point of truly facing what you have done, the guilt will be crushing. And that is what makes the gospel of Christ so sweet. Because it extends grace and hope and mercy where none should be found. And it will be there for you. I pray you experience the soul crushing weight of guilt so you may someday experience true repentance and true forgiveness from God, which you need far more than forgiveness from me—though I extend that to you as well.

Rachael Denhollander got criticism from some secular voices for this.

She should have stopped with the first part of her speech.

God, judgment, grace, extending forgiveness—that has no place in the courtroom.

It really irked some people. They wanted to say: Yeah, stick it to the child molesters, and feel good about themselves and she's talking about final judgment.

Where do we see God in a violent world? We see him as he guides the wise.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Let's humbly ask God to give us wisdom.