

2 Samuel 20:1-26

Another Revolt Against David

This is a story that few sermons are based on, and it's an incident you probably haven't ever heard of.

There was still something yet unfulfilled in the prophecy against David's house.

2 Samuel 20:1-2 - "And there happened to be there a man of Belial, whose name was Sheba, the son of Bichri, a Benjamite: and he blew a trumpet, and said, We have no part in David, neither have we inheritance in the son of Jesse: every man to his tents, O Israel. So every man of Israel went up from after David, and followed Sheba the son of Bichri: but the men of Judah clave unto their king, from Jordan even to Jerusalem."

As a Benjamite, Sheba might still feel animosity against David because of loyalty to the house of Saul.

Such a quick change of loyalty is not strange. Consider Jesus' last days in Jerusalem, when "Hosanna to the Son of David" was soon changed to "Crucify him, crucify him?"

Besides depicting the continuing jealousy and unrest that David had to confront to recover his kingdom, this chapter offers another picture of our own revolt against Christ. The 10 tribes of Israel again feel they have no part or inheritance in David. They feel slighted and victimized by David's previous deal with Judah. Later this root of estrangement will result in a break in the kingdom into north and south.

It caused the 10 tribes to challenge David's sovereignty. And by calling him the son of Jesse, Sheba reminded them of David's low origins, questioning his worthiness to lead. "Every man to his tents" encouraged them to decide for themselves their direction, recalling the troubled time before Israel had a king: "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (**Judges 21:25**).

The rabbis explain that with a slight change of vowel points, "every man to his tents" would read "every man to his gods."

Belial

Within our own hearts is a "man of Belial" urging us to both feel victimized and find someone to blame to justify ourselves. Accusation is always the response of the victim. These voices urge us to go our own way and shake off the Lordship of Christ. In the process we "bite and devour one another" (**Galatians 5:15-17**).

"Belial" comes from two common words: *beli-* (בְּלִי "without-") and *ya'al* (יַעַל "to be of value") or "worthless" and therefore can also mean "ruin" or "destruction" indicating this person's final end and where his counsel leads.

By the time of Paul, Belial was equated with Satan:

- **2 Corinthians 6:14-16** - "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership can righteousness have with wickedness? Or what fellowship does light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement can exist between the temple of God and idols?"

A "son of Belial" is a man worthless to God. Belial is usually associated with idolatry. To have a heart of Belial is to be selfish and wicked, "without a yoke" i.e. without the yoke of heaven or the Law, lawless.

For instance, "the sons of Eli were sons of Belial" (**1 Samuel 2:12**) i.e. ruled by the evil inclination.

- **Deuteronomy 13:13** - "Certain men, the children of Belial, are gone out from among you, and have withdrawn the inhabitants of their city, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which ye have not known"

This is exactly what happened later when Jeroboam revolted against Solomon's son Rehoboam, formed a separate kingdom with the 10 tribes and set up golden calf idols at Bethel and Dan as rivals to Jerusalem. Israel was the northern kingdom and Judah was the southern.

This attitude causes divisions in the church, too.

- **Ephesians 4:1-3** - "I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

The Sad Plight of the Concubines

2 Samuel 20:3 - "And David came to his house at Jerusalem; and the king took the ten women his concubines, whom he had left to keep the house, and put them in ward, and fed them, but went not in unto them. So they were shut up unto the day of their death, living in widowhood."

Politically - in ancient Near Eastern society - the concubines were now radioactive. They had basically been publicly raped by Absalom, through no fault of their own. But they were also symbols of David's political failure, having been defiled by a rebellious pretender to the throne. They couldn't return to the royal bed. To send them away or marry them off to others would be seen as a danger to the state. The alternative was to keep them at the palace, but set aside as widows.

The Targum says this lasted only during David's lifetime, its rendering being, "in widowhood while their husband was alive."

Absalom's story began when he murdered his half-brother Amnon for raping his sister Tamar. It ended after he raped his own father's concubines.

This was another aspect of the ongoing tragedy that David had set in motion by his sin. Their violation was specifically prophesied by Nathan (**2 Samuel 12**).

David's Response to Sheba

2 Samuel 20:4-5 - "Then said the king to Amasa, Assemble me the men of Judah within three days, and be thou here present. So Amasa went to assemble the men of Judah: but he tarried longer than the set time which he had appointed him."

Apparently it was taking longer than usual to enlist the tribe of Judah to follow the new general who had recently led Absalom's troops. David's choice was proving to be a mistake.

2 Samuel 20:6-7 - "And David said to Abishai, Now shall Sheba the son of Bichri do us more harm than did Absalom: take thou thy lord's servants, and pursue after him, lest he get him fenced cities, and escape us. And there went out after him Joab's men, and the Cherethites, and the Pelethites, and all the mighty men: and they went out of Jerusalem, to pursue after Sheba the son of Bichri."

Without waiting for more men from Judah, David's guard as well as Joab's choice troops pursued Sheba - about 600 according to Josephus - led by Abishai.

Apparently Amasa caught up with them with some troops he had managed to gather and took the lead.

2 Samuel 20:8 - "When they were at the great stone which is in Gibeon, Amasa went before them. And Joab's garment that he had put on was girded unto him, and upon it a girdle with a sword fastened upon his loins in the sheath thereof; and as he went forth it fell out."

This is confusing. Amasa didn't put on Joab's garment. What is meant is that Joab had arranged to have sort of a trick sheath for his sword, secured horizontally instead of vertically, which he could tip to release his sword "accidentally." He picked it up with his left hand, unnoticed by Amasa, used his right hand to grab Amasa's beard (a sign of friendly welcome) and stabbed him as he kissed his cheek.

Apparently Joab was still pretty mad about being replaced as general. But he also may have suspected that Amasa, the former rebel, wasn't genuinely loyal to David. (Also remember that Amasa is Joab's cousin!)

2 Samuel 20:9-10 - "And Joab said to Amasa, Art thou in health, my brother? And Joab took Amasa by the beard with the right hand to kiss him. But Amasa took no heed to the sword that was in Joab's hand: so he smote him therewith in the fifth rib, and shed out

his bowels to the ground, and struck him not again; and he died. So Joab and Abishai his brother pursued after Sheba the son of Bichri."

This mirrors another betrayal preceded by a kiss (of Judas) and then a death stroke under the fifth rib (in the same place where Abner smote Asahel, and Joab struck Abner) and where the lance stabbed Jesus on the cross (**John 19:34**).

The Shocking Death Throes of Amasa

2 Samuel 20:11-13 - "And one of Joab's men stood by him, and said, He that favoureth Joab, and he that is for David, let him go after Joab. And Amasa wallowed in blood in the midst of the highway. And when the man saw that all the people stood still, he removed Amasa out of the highway into the field, and cast a cloth upon him, when he saw that every one that came by him stood still. When he was removed out of the highway, all the people went on after Joab, to pursue after Sheba the son of Bichri."

'Nothing to See Here...Move Along'

The men of Judah who had been recruited by Amasa were understandably disconcerted by seeing his body writhing in death and covered in blood. One of Joab's men remained to tell them to keep moving, and then cover up the body.

Amasa - though pardoned by David for his rebellion - couldn't escape punishment for trying to overthrow his uncle. This too was a continuation of the prophecy about the sword piercing David's house, part of the cascading consequences of David's sin.

2 Samuel 20:14-15 - "And he went through all the tribes of Israel unto Abel, and to Bethmaachah, and all the Berites: and they were gathered together, and went also after him. And they came and besieged him in Abel of Bethmaachah, and they cast up a bank against the city, and it stood in the trench: and all the people that were with Joab battered the wall, to throw it down."

Joab chased Sheba through all the tribal territories north until he took refuge in the city of Abel in Bethmaachah, near what later would be Caesarea Philippi (also called Panias) at the foot of Mount Hermon.

Strikingly, this is where numerous pagan grottoes and temples were maintained, marking a spring and a seemingly bottomless chasm related later to the god Pan.

Rabbinic tradition considers Panias as the ultimate source of "lower waters" (b. B. Bat. 74b) associated with Sheol-Hades:

"Have you entered into the springs of the sea? Or have you walked in the recesses of the depth? Have the gates of death been opened to you? Or have you seen the doors of deepest darkness" (**Job 38:16–17**).

"How many dwellings are in the heart of the sea, or how many springs ["streams,"

venae in Latin] are at the source of the deep [*principio abyss*], or how many ways ["streams" in Latin] are above the firmament, or which are the exits of Hell, or which are the entrances of Paradise?" (4 Ezra 4:7)

This area was considered a sort of *axis mundi*, a meeting point between heaven, the gates of hell and our world.

This is where tradition said the fallen angels landed and began their corruption of the earth's inhabitants. It is also where Jesus had his Transfiguration, and told Peter...

- **Matthew 16:18** - "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

This is also now where we see Sheba's rebellion end. A victory for David at the Gates of Hell.

A Wise Woman

2 Samuel 20:16-18 - "Then cried a wise woman out of the city, Hear, hear; say, I pray you, unto Joab, Come near hither, that I may speak with thee. And when he was come near unto her, the woman said, Art thou Joab? And he answered, I am he. Then she said unto him, Hear the words of thine handmaid. And he answered, I do hear. Then she spake, saying, They were wont to speak in old time, saying, 'They shall surely ask counsel at Abel: and so they ended the matter.'"

Apparently Abel was famous as a city of wise counsel, so that a proverb arose: "Let us go to Abel, and take advice there, and leave it to their arbitration"

2 Samuel 20:19-22 - "I am one of them that are peaceable and faithful in Israel: thou seekest to destroy a city and a mother in Israel: why wilt thou swallow up the inheritance of the LORD? And Joab answered and said, Far be it, far be it from me, that I should swallow up or destroy. The matter is not so: but a man of mount Ephraim, Sheba the son of Bichri by name, hath lifted up his hand against the king, even against David: deliver him only, and I will depart from the city. And the woman said unto Joab, Behold, his head shall be thrown to thee over the wall. Then the woman went unto all the people in her wisdom. And they cut off the head of Sheba the son of Bichri, and cast it out to Joab. And he blew a trumpet, and they retired from the city, every man to his tent. And Joab returned to Jerusalem unto the king."

This is another reflection of the imagery from **Genesis 3:15** - "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel."

Sheba earlier had claimed no inheritance in the son of Jesse. Now the wise woman also mentions the heritage of the Lord. Sheba wanted to deny it. She wanted to not lose it. The heritage would be their share of the Promised Land, but also the promise of Messiah. We should all treasure it as she did!

Sheba's head was cut off and his rebellion quashed, just as Jesus was bitten on his heel with a nail thrust through on the cross, the serpent's venom brought him to the grave, but he rose again from death, and crushed the head of the serpent, the old enemy Satan, and led captivity captive.

"Every man's breast is a city enclosed. Every sin is a traitor that lurketh within those walls. God calleth for Sheba's head, neither hath he any quarrel to us for our person, but for our sin. If we love the head of our traitor above the life of our soul, we shall justly perish in the vengeance." (John Trapp 1601–1669 - "A Commentary on the Old and New Testaments" Volume 1)

See https://www.blueletterbible.org/comm/guzik_david/study-guide/2-samuel/2-samuel-20.cfm

The lesson for us is that when rebellion in our heart urges us to challenge Christ's Lordship, those thoughts need to be brought into the captivity of Christ. Revenge the disobedience, Paul says, by reckoning yourself as dead.

It's also another example of a righteous woman saving the day for Israel.

Finally, Joab sounds the shofar to signal victory and that the siege is over.

Joab Reinstated

The chapter ends with a listing of the administration of David's kingdom at the beginning of this new phase, with Joab back in charge of the troops (see **2 Samuel 8:16-18**).

Once before, David had confessed his inability to deal with Joab after he killed Abner.

- **2 Samuel 3:38-39** - "And the king said unto his servants, Know ye not that there is a prince and a great man fallen this day in Israel? And I am this day weak, though anointed king; and these men the sons of Zeruiah be too hard for me: the LORD shall reward the doer of evil according to his wickedness."

Joab was so successful in putting down Sheba's rebellion that David had little choice but to reappoint him general. But on his deathbed, David instructed his son Solomon to punish Joab for his brutal acts (**1 Kings 2:5-6**).

2 Samuel 20:23-26 - "Now Joab was over all the host of Israel: and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada was over the Cherethites and over the Pelethites: And Adoram was over the tribute: and Jehoshaphat the son of Ahilud was recorder: And Sheva was scribe: and Zadok and Abiathar were the priests: And Ira also the Jairite was a chief ruler about David."

Like most of the people in the story of David, the characters all have a mix of good and bad qualities. This is why these histories ring true.

Joab was a bold, no-nonsense, hard man who wasn't afraid to tell David where he was wrong. But he was also disobedient to the king, jealous and revengeful, capable of murder several times over. Unlike in a morality play like Esther, where things are black and white, we need to recognize both the good and bad qualities we read about here, and exhort and encourage one another in the Lord accordingly.