**David becomes king of Judah** 9/4/23 dkm

Read: 2Samuel 2, Romans 8:18-30

Text: 2Samuel 2

Psalms: 101,18:23-32, 71:19-24, 117

Saul, the first king of Israel, was killed in battle against the Philistines. He was wounded by a Philistine arrow and then fell on his own sword (1Sam 31:4). Saul had been anointed by Samuel but was later rejected by the Lord, who told Samuel to anoint David (1Sam 16:13). David was good warrior and was popular with the people, but he refused to move against Saul, against the Lord’s anointed. Saul provoked him to do so by trying for some years to capture and kill David. David lived in caves and desert strongholds, refusing to kill Saul even when he had the opportunity to do so. David was a man who feared the Lord and obeyed his word, a man after God’s own heart. He was a man of prayer who sought the Lord’s guidance in all that he did.

David was sincerely sorry to hear of Saul’s death, and especially the death of his ‘brother’ Jonathan. Even so, he must have been relieved to be free of Saul’s murderous pursuit of him. He must have realised that the way was now open for him to become king. But we soon learn that although three of Saul’s sons died with him on Mt Gilboa, one son remained (1Chron 8:33). We will now look at chapter 2 under the subheadings: ‘David, king of Judah’, ‘Saul’s son, king of Israel’, and ‘The general’s clash’.

**1. David, king of Judah**

David and his followers were in the Philistine town of Ziklag when he got news of Saul’s death. He felt it was now safe to return to the land of Israel. But David was not a man to make decisions based on feelings. David was a man who went where the Lord wanted him to go, and did what the Lord wanted him to do. The priest, Abiathar, was with David; he carried the ephod containing the Urim and the Thummim (1Sam 23, 30:7). There is no specific mention of the priest or the ephod here in this chapter, but we do read of David inquiring of the Lord about returning to his homeland of Judah. The Lord’s answer was ‘yes’, and upon further inquiry he was told to go to Hebron (2:1). Hebron was a major town in the territory of Judah and not far from David’s home town of Bethlehem. So David moved to Hebron along with his family, and all his followers and their families.

The prophet Samuel had anointed David as Saul’s successor some years before this time. This was no secret; people knew about David’s anointing. Moreover, he had proved himself worthy of this anointing during his years of exile. So when he moved to Hebron the men of Judah anointed David as their king, king over the house of Judah, the largest of the tribes. When the Philistines defeated Saul and his army on Mt Gilboa they would have taken control of Israel but there is no mention of them controlling Hebron. Some Philistines saw David as an ally anyway.

As David settled into being king of Judah, he wondered what had happened to the body of Saul. He was told that the men of Jabesh Gilead had buried Saul (2:4). Now Jabesh Gilead was way up north and across the Jordan. The men of this city risked their lives in taking the bodies of Saul and his sons from the wall in Beth Shan, where the Philistines had hung them (1Sam 31:12). When David heard of this heroic deed, he sent messengers to Jabesh Gilead to thank them for giving Saul an honourable burial. He prayed the Lord to bless them, and himself promised to repay them for their kindness (2:6).

Was David being diplomatic in sending this message to the men of Jabesh Gilead, or was he being sincere in his prayer for them and promise to them? Maybe there was an element of both, of sincerity and of diplomacy. It is interesting that he refers to Saul as their ‘master’ rather than ‘king’, and that he refers to his own anointing as king of Judah (2:7). The men of Jabesh Gilead were from a different tribe, and they had great affection for Saul because he had saved them from brutal humiliation at the hands of the Ammonites (1Sam 11). Besides, Saul’s son will soon be made king not far from their town, in a place called Mahanaim (2:8).

A kind and encouraging message from David, king of Judah, would promote peace between David and the followers of Saul. David was not a man to lord it over others even if he was their anointed king. He sought to draw people into his kingdom through love and kind deeds. This reminds us, does it not, of the greater Son of David? Jesus went about preaching the kingdom, and healing every sickness and disease among the people, and he tells us not to lord it over others (Mat 9:35, 20:25). To share the gospel and help people, and still see no response in terms of following Jesus, can be frustrating and disappointing but this is the way of Christian ministry.

In India, Hindus refer to ‘rice Christians’, and offer money and things to converts to entice them back to Hinduism. But as you and I know, true Christians cannot be bought, or be forced to believe in Jesus. It was disturbing to read of the split in the Wesleyan church in Tonga in 1886 and the attempts to force people to change churches. This, of course, does not mean that children should be allowed to choose about coming to worship or not; children are commanded to obey their parents in the Lord (Eph 6:1).

**2. Saul’s son, king of Israel**

Saul, and his sons, three of them, were killed on Mt Gilboa. Abner, Saul’s general, somehow escaped death at the hands of the Philistines, as did one of Saul’s sons, a man call Ishbosheth (2:8). This son is listed with the other three in 1Chronicles 8:33, but there is called Esh-baal. Although ‘baal’ simply means ‘lord’, it was the name given to a Canaanite god, so hardly suitable for an Israelite. So this son is called Ishbosheth or ‘man of shame’ here in 2Samuel.

This surviving son of Saul was taken by General Abner to Mahanaim and installed as king of Israel- eventually. It seems that it took time to win over various groups in the land- the people of Gilead, the Asherites, along with the people of Jezreel, Ephraim, and Benjamin. Benjamin was Saul’s territory and also the territory of Abner. We should remember that the Philistines were in control after defeating Israel, so installing another king took time, and was done well away from Philistine territory. Ishbosheth was forty years old when he began to reign over Israel, all Israel apart from Judah, and he reigned just two years. David had been reigning over Judah for seven and a half years (2:10.11). It appears that it was some years before Ishbosheth could be regarded as reigning over all Israel.

Abner, like David’s general Joab, was a powerful man. He was not up to staging a *coup d‘etat* but he was manipulating the monarch. Ishbosheth appears as a rather weak character, especially in light of his later questioning of Abner’s actions (3:7). With Ishbosheth established as king of Israel in the north, and David king over Judah in Hebron, and indeed the anointed of the Lord, conflict could not be far away. Their ambitious and powerful generals would make sure of this!

**3. The general’s clash**

Abner and his men, here in verse 12 called ‘the servants of Ishbosheth’, went across the Jordan to Gibeon, a town in the territory of Benjamin, a little way north of Jerusalem. Just who arranged this meeting with Joab and the servants of David we are not told, but we read of Abner and Joab meeting at the pool of Gibeon, one each side of the pool (2:13). The fight that followed was brutal and deadly. These generals thought it right to sacrifice some twenty-four young men for their cause - not unlike what we read of poorly trained Russian recruits being used as ‘cannon fodder’ in Ukraine. Life becomes cheap in war! These generals would have argued that it was better for a few young men to die in a representative battle than to engage in all-out war. As it turned out, their effort to avoid all-out war failed.

Twelve young men from each army stepped forward to engage in hand-to-hand combat (2:15). If it had simply been wrestling, the outcome would not have been so bloody! But each man had a dagger, and as they grabbed their opponent they stabbed him in the side. They were such skilled fighters that each of them killed his opponent: ‘So they fell down together’ (2:16). If one man had survived then, presumably, his king would have been proclaimed victorious, like in the David and Goliath fight. But this did not happen, so a fierce battle broke out; it was civil war. Joab and his men, including brothers Abishai and Asahel, prevailed.

Abner and his men fled before Joab and his men. Before a truce was called, three hundred and sixty of Abner’s men were dead and just nineteen of David’s servants (2:30, 31). But among the dead on David’s side was Asahel, the brother of General Joab. Asahel was young and a fast runner. As Joab’s men chased Abner and his men, Asahel fixed his sights on Abner himself. Abner saw him coming and warned him not to continue chasing him but to chase some other young soldier. It appears that Asahel was not armed (2:21), so would soon catch up to Abner. He did not listen to Abner’s warning, or a second warning. Abner knew Asahel was Joab’s brother and did not want to make Joab an ‘avenger of blood’; he did not want personal revenge entering onto his conflict with Joab, David’s general (2:22).

As Asahel got near to Abner, Abner struck him in the stomach with the blunt end of his spear. The blunt end was not entirely blunt because it pierced Asahel right through, and he fell down dead (2:23). As his fellow soldiers passed by they recognised Asahel’s dead body and stopped to ponder the consequences of his pointless death. Joab, it appears, was not among those who saw his slain brother. He and Abishai kept chasing Abner until he took his men onto a hill. It was getting dark when Abner called out to Joab, ‘Shall the sword devour forever?’ (2:26). Joab agreed to a truce. He blew a trumpet to stop his men pursuing their fellow Israelites any further. Abner went home to Mahanaim and Joab set out for Hebron, but not before gathering his men for a head count. Just nineteen were missing, ‘and Asahel’ his brother (2:30). They took Asahel’s body and buried him in the family tomb at Bethlehem.

The civil war between the house of Saul and the house of David would continue for some time. How will it end? We know that David was the Lord’s anointed and will eventually rule over Israel. But the Lord works through the lives of people, godly and ungodly, and through events in this fallen world. David reached out to the people of Jabesh Gilead, but ambitious Abner took Saul’s son and made him king of Israel. Abner and Ishbosheth stood in the way of David ruling over all Israel. But the tragic death of Asahel would prove fateful for Abner; the ‘avenger of blood’ would get him sooner or later. And Ishbosheth was lost without Abner.

The Lord was working to bring down one and raise up another (Dan 2:21). He was working all things together for good to those who love him and are called according to his purpose (Rom 8:28). Let us remember that, ‘If God is for us, who can be against us’ (Rom 8:31). Do you see the Lord working all things together for good in your life, where ‘good’ means glorifying God and enjoying him forever?