
THE BOOK OF 2 SAMUEL

ONE KING TOO MANY

(2 SAMUEL 2:1-11)

I grew up in the 1980's. And like many kids during that decade I was introduced to the video game *Super Mario Bros*. If you recall playing that game you might remember something that especially frustrated me as a six or seven year old. Each time you got past a series of adventures in a given "world", you had to battle Bowser, the main villain of the game, in order to rescue the princess. That was the point of the original escapade: Princess Peach had been kidnapped by the reptilian villain, Bowser, and you had to rescue her. To your continuous dismay what you became accustomed to reading on the screen after defeating Bowser in each respective world's castle was "THANK YOU, MARIO! BUT OUR PRINCESS IS IN ANOTHER CASTLE!" Just when you thought, "Mission accomplished"... a new mission began. It was kind of like that for David.

The long marathon of life-on-the run-from-Saul was over but a new marathon was about to begin. If you didn't know the story, after reading 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel 1 you would probably think that the time had come for David to become king over Israel. Saul was dead and just about all of Israel knew the plans that God had for David. But just because God's will had been broadcast among the twelve tribes didn't mean it was going to be embraced and obeyed. Opposition to God and his anointed was about to pave the way for another 'cross country' marathon.

It's not only a good reminder to us that the Christian life is not a 100-yard dash but it is also a good reminder that sometimes the Christian life can feel like a *series* of marathons. And that's okay, because just as Jacob had to work an additional seven years as part of his marital arrangement for Rachel, after having already worked for seven years before being tricked by Laban, those seven years felt like a few days because he loved Rachel (Gen. 29:20); and likewise a Spirit-granted love for God can make the marathons of life feel, at least at times, like minutes.

David's new marathon begins in 2 Samuel 2 verse 1 where we read...

Verse 1

¹ It happened after this that David inquired of the LORD, saying, "Shall I go up to any of the cities of Judah?" And the LORD said to him, "Go up." David said, "Where shall I go up?" And He said, "To Hebron."

Practicing Dependence on God

An Israelite king and a New Testament Christian have something very important in common: both are dependent and neither is autonomous, at least as it relates to Yahweh. David acted the part of the king in this opening verse. Though he had clarity concerning his calling to be king, and though traveling to one of the cities of Judah seemed, at face value, like the most logical next step [don't forget David had been in contact with the elders of Judah, cf. 1 Sam. 30:26], David didn't let clarity put God in obscurity. He was dependent upon the Lord's guidance; so he **inquired of the LORD** (likely through Abiathar the priest using the Urim and the Thummin) to see whether or not he should go up to the cities of Judah, and, if so, then where. In both cases God gave him clear direction: “**Go up**” and “**to Hebron**”.¹

Now don't make the mistake of thinking this is a Christian norm. If God spoke to David via an audible voice, those events weren't even commonplace during the Old Testament; and if God spoke to David via Abiathar the priest, you and I don't have access to Abiathar or the Urim and Thummin. And that's fine. God has spoken to us in these last days via His Son (Heb. 1:1), a revelation even holy prophets desired to look into (1 Pet. 1:12). So making this an everyday expectation for the Christian life will likely either leave you in a state of paralysis or pretending. Neither is good and both are needless because God has given His saints direction via the lamp and light that is His Word, along with the promise of His presence and providential guidance.

But don't miss the point— even in clarity David exercised dependence. The king of Israel was never intended to be an autonomous monarch but a vice regent, faithfully serving under the leadership and guidance of Yahweh. Even the Son of God, the one who is the King of kings and the Lord of Lords said, “the Son can do nothing of His own accord, but only what He sees the Father doing” (Jn. 5:19 ESV); or “I can of Myself do nothing” (5:30a), or “I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (6:38). Even the Son of God lived in a state of complete dependence on His Father. You might say, then, that one of the marks that testified to David's readiness to be the king of the people of Judah (and eventually Israel) was his reliance on Yahweh. It could well be argued that more important than ‘practicing the presence of God’ is practicing dependence on God, with prayer as a first reflex and not a last resort.

This inquiry set the stage for David's ascension to the throne, at least in Judah. So from Ziklag, remember that's where David was at this point in time, David was directed to go up to **Hebron**. *Why Hebron?* It was the ancestral home of the Hebrews; the burial place of the patriarchs; a central city of the tribe of Judah; and a place where David had sent Amalekite spoil. *Why up?* Because geographically it was a high city about 3,000 feet above sea level.

We see that journey begin in verses two and three.

¹ This is contrasted with Saul in more ways than one. First, we remember that God did not answer Saul's inquiry in 1 Samuel 28 but we see again how readily the LORD answered David. Secondly, whereas Saul did not really seem interested in Yahweh's responses (cf. 1 Sam. 14:36-37), David was.

Verses 2 & 3

²So David went up there, and his two wives also, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess, and Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite. ³And David brought up the men who were with him, every man with his household. So they dwelt in the cities of Hebron.

Here we are given a short summary of the long list of people who went with David up to Hebron. It seems there was a mass exodus from the Philistine territory of Ziklag. It's as though the inspired narrator was making it perfectly clear for us – *David's stay in the land of Philistia, along with his wives, his men, and their households, was finished.* Going forward – **they dwelt in the cities of Hebron.**

You might say that, in a certain, limited sense, this was an Old Testament shadow of a New Testament reality. Those who endured affliction with David would reign with him. Likewise, and more so, every Christian who endures shall reign with Christ (cf. 2 Tim 2:12). The New Testament is not shy about making a repeated connection between enduring affliction in the present and reigning with Christ in the future. Jesus said, “He who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations – ‘He shall rule them with a rod of iron; they shall be dashed to pieces like potters vessels’ – as I also have received from My Father” (Rev. 2:26-27). And again, “To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (Rev. 3:21). The Christian life may be a series of marathons, some of which may be incredibly difficult to bear, but our Savior holds out to us a fixed hope that must not be forfeited – endure in present and reign alongside the Savior in the future.

But while Jesus holds out to us the incentive of awaited glory we must not forget that He also gave us dire warnings to encourage our perseverance as well. “Whoever denies Me before men, I also will deny him before My Father who is in Heaven” (Mt. 10:33 ESV). Or, “Whoever would save his life will lose it” (Mt. 16:25a ESV). Along these lines, Spurgeon once told a story about a man named Richard Denton, a once zealous ‘Lollard’² who had been the means of conversion in the life of an eminent saint (though he didn’t name who that saint was), who, when brought to the stake at which he was to be burned, renounced the precious Gospel truths he once proclaimed in order to save his life and, subsequently, he went into the Church of Rome. Spurgeon went on to say:

A short time after, his own house took fire, and going into it to save some of his money, he perished miserably, being utterly consumed by that fire which he had denied Christ in order to escape.³

² The Lollards were men who became followers of John Wycliffe, one of the ‘morning stars of the Reformation’, who began to identify the Bible and not the pope as the ultimate source of spiritual authority. Wycliffe saw the papacy as a human invention; he rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation, espoused the primacy of preaching, and organized a translation of the Latin Vulgate into English because he believed the Word of God should be accessible by everyone. Because reading the Bible was illegal, his followers would assemble to read the Bible in secret and became known as ‘Lollards’, a term that probably meant ‘mumblers’. (Michael Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame* (Nashville, TN; InterVarsity Press, 2009), 29,30.

³ Charles Spurgeon, *Suffering and Reigning with Jesus*, A Sermon Delivered on Sunday Morning January 3, 1864, by C. H. Spurgeon, at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington.

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Sadly, this man illustrated the far-reaching spiritual truth of Jesus' statement – "Whoever would save his life will lose it." By the grace of God, his end must not be our end. Through the perseverance granted by the Spirit of God we must endure identification with Christ, His Gospel, and the truth that is inseparable to it, knowing the promise is true – those who endure and suffer with Him will likewise reign with Him (1 Tim. 2:12a).

For David, his earthly reign was about to begin and those who endured with him would, in some sense, be alongside of him.

Verses 4a

4^a Then the men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah.

So with all David's men and family present the men of Judah anointed David to be **king over the house of Judah**. This, you might recall, is the second time that David was anointed. We should not think that this suggested the people disregarded Samuel's previous, private anointing of David (1 Sam. 16:13); rather, it should be seen as a kind of confirmation of that anointing. Samuel anointed David under the direction of God; the men of Judah anointed David to demonstrate the agreement of the people. The house of Judah was, if you will, in agreement with the will of God and they publicly pledged their loyalty to Yahweh's anointed.

In verse one we saw David's sensitivity to the LORD's guidance and here we see his passivity in exaltation. The tone of verse four is that the men of Judah are the ones who took an active role in anointing David king over Judah. "**The men of Judah came and... they anointed David**" (vs.4a). David didn't show up in Hebron saying, "Okay everyone, I'm here, let's get down to business." He waited on God this long and he didn't seem to be in a rush to compel God to bring him where He promised He would take him.

Besides anointing David, the men of Judah shared some important pieces of information with him.

Verses 4b through 7

4^b And they told David, saying, "The men of Jabesh Gilead were the ones who buried Saul." 5 So David sent messengers to the men of Jabesh Gilead, and said to them, "You are blessed of the Lord, for you have shown this kindness to your lord, to Saul, and have buried him. 6 And now may the Lord show kindness and truth to you. I also will repay you this kindness, because you have done this thing. 7 Now therefore, let your hands be strengthened, and be valiant; for your master Saul is dead, and also the house of Judah has anointed me king over them."

The men of Judah told David that **the men of Jabesh Gilead were the ones who buried Saul** (vs.4b). Perhaps David had inquired about Saul's burial prior to receiving that information. Be that as it may, upon hearing that, David sent messengers to the men of Jabesh Gilead, commending them for the kindness that they showed to their former king.

You also get the sense that he was being sensitive to the loyalty they had for Saul. After all, he said, "**You are blessed of the Lord, for you have shown this kindness to your lord, to Saul...**" (vs.5b). Now I probably wouldn't think much of that if the following two verses didn't

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come right after. Not only did David say “**your lord**” (vs.5b) when making reference to Saul but he also told them, “**for your master Saul is dead**” (vs.7b *emphasis added*).

Saul had been used by God to deliver the people of Jabesh Gilead from Nahash the Ammonite and they hadn’t forgotten. And in case you may not recall what they couldn’t forget - Nahash was the Ammonite conqueror whose response to a “peace treaty” from the men of Jabesh Gilead was, “On this condition I will make a covenant with you, that I may put out all your right eyes, and bring reproach on Israel” (11:2). Nice right? He wasn’t exactly a “salt-of-the earth” kind of guy; he was more like a character found in the worst of nightmares; and Saul was used by God to lead an army of about 330,000 to thoroughly thwart his Ammonite threat (cf. 1 Sam. 11:5-11). You can see why the men of Jabesh Gilead would risk their lives to save Saul and his sons from even further disgrace after death – their previous deliverance was etched in their memory banks.

Politics and Peacemaking

Knowing their proclivity to loyalty (at least in the case of Saul) David extended to them his own commitment. He pronounced a benediction upon them (vs.6a, 7a), committed to repay them for the kindness they showed to Saul (vs.6b), and he encouraged them to be valiant, standing with strengthened hands (vs.7a), presumably because the house of Judah made him to be king over them (vs.7b). After all, with the nation of Israel in the weakened state that it was, Jabesh Gilead was likely vulnerable to Philistine and perhaps even Ammonite threats. Yes, David may have been playing the role of a prudent politician but he also practiced peacemaking in a sincere and winsome way.

The men of Jabesh Gilead might have anticipated conflict, being that they were such staunch supporters of Saul, but David offered them quite the opposite. Instead of aggression he offered friendship. That is, in a sense, one of the most precious dynamics of the Gospel. Though men and women are by nature sympathetic and willingly disposed to the kingdom of darkness, Jesus extends His nailed scarred hands as a witness of His desire and the Father’s desire for reconciliation. If you see Jesus with some measure of clarity you would call out like Peter, “Depart from me for I am sinful man” (Lk. 5:8), but if you see Jesus with true Gospel-clarity you would be amazed that although He should depart from you and I, sinful men and women, He extends His nail-scarred hands to all who deny their allegiance to the kingdom of self and darkness, and believe on Him and His work alone for eternal amnesty in His kingdom.

Interestingly, we’re not told how the men of Jabesh Gilead responded to David. We simply find out that not everyone had God’s will in mind for the direction of the nation.

Verses 8 & 9

⁸But Abner the son of Ner, commander of Saul’s army, took Ishbosheth the son of Saul and brought him over to Mahanaim; ⁹and he made him king over Gilead, over the Ashurites, over Jezreel, over Ephraim, over Benjamin, and over all Israel.

Playing King Maker

When you read the words of verses 4 through 7, verses that speak of David’s conciliatory bridge building, and then you notice that verse 8 begins with, “**But Abner...**” you know something is wrong. What looked like an open road to the throne of a united Israel just got road blocked because Abner, the cousin of Saul, decided to play “king-maker” in Mahanaim.⁴ He’s not the king but he appears to be the puppet master pulling the strings on this political event. Ishbosheth, Saul’s sole surviving son, was merely a tool in his hand.⁵ The text bears that out pretty clearly:

But Abner the son of Ner, commander of Saul’s army, *took* Ishbosheth the son of Saul and *brought him* over to Mahanaim; and he *made him king* over Gilead (vs.8-9a *emphasis added*)

Abner is the one who “**took**” and “**brought**” Ishbosheth to Mahanaim, and “**made**” him king over all Israel. As Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown note,

Here was the establishment of a rival kingdom, which, however, would probably have had no existence but for Abner.⁶

When you don’t want God’s king to reign over you, you inevitably select a substitute. And the substitute is usually yourself in different garb or a different mask so as to trick yourself and others. But the fundamental reality is the same – you pull the strings, carve out the path, take charge and say, “Nevertheless, not Your will but *my* will be done.” And when you do that you join the infamous company of men like Abner.

It wasn’t that Abner was sympathetic to the house of Saul and unaware of the divine calling on David’s life so he chose to oppose David instead of follow him; rather, it becomes clear later on that Abner knew that David was God’s anointed king! In fact, he said that the LORD promised David the throne via an oath (2 Sam. 3:9). Abner simply didn’t want God’s king to rule over him so he established a rival kingdom.

We’re giving a lot of attention to Abner, and appropriately so, but what about Israel? Abner made Ishbosheth king **over Gilead, over the Ashurites, over Jezreel, over Ephraim, over Benjamin, and over all Israel.** Abner played king maker and people in essence said “thank you.” Interesting right? When faced with the choice of Ishbosheth or David the overwhelming majority chose Ishbosheth! I think A.W. Pink’s parallel is worth pondering, he wrote,

In type it was Israel preferring Barabbas to Jesus Christ. Abner prevailed till he got all the tribes of Israel, save Judah, to own Ishbosheth as their king.⁷

⁴ The place revered during the time of Jacob due to the LORD’s manifestation of His presence (Gen 32:2); about 16 miles South of Jabesh Gilead.

⁵ Ishbosheth (“man of shame”, with his real name “man of Baal”. See 8:33; 9:39) Interestingly, as Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown note, “The Hebrews changed names ending with Baal into Bosheth [”shame”].” The example of Gideon is a witness to that (Jdg. 9:53).

⁶ Robert Jamieson and A.R. Fausset and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments, Vol 1* (Edinburgh, London; William Collins, Queen’s Printer, 1863), 192.

Why did Abner do what he did? Loyalty to the house of Saul? He was Saul's first cousin. Hatred for David? David did goad him in 1 Samuel 26. The exaltation of self? Perhaps he thought it was the best decision for him. We're not told exactly but here is what we do know: he thought he knew better than God. He is one of the Old Testament 'founding fathers' of all who would say – I know God's Word says *this* but I think it's better if I do *that*. All who trade God's divine decrees for self's opinions walk in the footsteps of Abner. Every person who forsakes the assembly of the saints, rejects the authority of church leadership, refuses to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, denies the Biblical roles of leadership for the husband and submission for the wife, justifies their unequally-yoked relationship, and so on, has joined Abner with actions that speak louder than words saying – I actually know better than God. Those who claim to live in Christ must not walk as Abner walked (cf. 1 Jn. 2:6).

The passage ends with a summary of the years ahead.

Verses 10 & 11

¹⁰Ishbosheth, Saul's son, was forty years old when he began to reign over Israel, and he reigned two years. Only the house of Judah followed David. ¹¹And the time that David was king in Hebron over the house of Judah was seven years and six months.

Manipulation versus Divine Placement

God always has a remnant. You might have said that before. We see that reality throughout the Scriptures and here the remnant was the house of Judah. "**Only the house of Judah followed David**" (vs.10b). And even though Ishbosheth would only reign for two years (vs.10a), it would be over seven years before David reigned over a united Israel. So David still had to wait.

Why do you think David offered no resistance? In 1 Samuel 24:21,22 he made a commitment to Saul that he would not cut off Saul's descendants and he was going to keep it. Furthermore, he was not going to go down the path of Abner. When he weighed the options of manipulation versus divine placement there was no decision to be made. This was Yahweh's kingdom; He would establish it in His time and His way; and David would have to be faithful and helpful right where he was. In the end nothing could stop the kingdom of God. Yes, it is like a mustard seed; and, yes, sometimes we would like to hasten its arrival; but when the King has offered up His Son with you, and when the King has promised you a place in His kingdom and a seat at the table as a son or daughter, you don't mind as much when He providentially reminds you that He establishes His kingdom in His time and His way.

So what do you do when your season of waiting gets renewed for another season? Like David, you pursue being faithful and helpful while you wait. Faithful to the commitments you've made and helpful to the people God has put around you.

⁷ A.W. Pink, *The Life of David*, See http://www.pbministries.org/books/pink/David/Vol1/david1_30.htm