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A Glimmer of Light in Grim Days

2 Samuel 4:1–12

The Fourth Sermon on Second Samuel

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As we read our Old Testaments, it's always helpful to remember how it relates to our New Testaments. The Old Testament is like midnight to 6am. As those hours of darkness roll on from night until morning, eventually on the distant horizon there are the first glimmers of light. If you've ever seen that it's amazing. First there's one ray of light, then another, then another until a burst of what looks like fire. That's the sunrise; that's the coming of Jesus Christ. So we're reading today a story that takes place in the darkness of the Old Testament, but in the darkness there are glimmers of the light of Jesus Christ.

As we look at this story, notice that it's structured in what scholars call an *inclusio*, that means, a beginning and an end that includes everything within it. Notice that verse 1 mentions Ish-boseheth—Saul's son—Abner—the captain of Saul's army—Hebron—the ancient city where the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were buried—and that Ish-bosheth's **courage failed**, literally, that his “hands dropped,” and then in verse 12 we read again of Ish-bosheth, Abner, Hebron, and the hands of the two murderers. And within this structure is found another story of there being *A Glimmer of Light in Grim Days*.

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1. *The Grimness of Murder—Again*
2. *The Grimness of Desire—Again*
3. *The Glimmer of Justice—and Mercy*

May the Holy Spirit leads us into the truth of his Word today.

The Grimness of Murder—Again

There is a famous saying that goes like this: the more things change, the more they stay the same. And that's certainly the case with our story, and the first two points in particular. Notice first *the grimness of murder—again*.

It all starts **when Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, heard that Abner had died at Hebron** and because of that Ish-bosheth's **courage failed and all Israel was dismayed** (v. 1). As I mentioned, literally his "hands dropped." This is just another example of how the narrator is highlighting for us the impotence of Saul's household clinging onto the kingship when the Lord had other plans. In fact, so impotent was Ish-bosheth's power that he couldn't even control his own men.

Enter two new characters in verse 2. Ish-bosheth **had two men who were captains of raiding bands**. This means men whose task it was to raid the countryside or roads in the wilderness as trading caravans would pass through. And they were empowered to do this by their king. The modern equivalent would be the authorized bureaucrat who's always looking for ways to extract money from hard workers! These two bandits were named **Baanah and Rechab** (v. 2). Now notice something significant to the text, but no doubt insignificant to us. These

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men were **sons of Rimmon a man of Benjamin**—that’s the same tribe as Saul—**from Beeroth (for Beeroth also is counted part of Benjamin; the Beerothites fled to Gittaim and have been sojourners there to this day)** (vv. 2–3). Why did they flee? We didn’t see the reason back in 1 Samuel, but later in 2 Samuel 21 we read that during a famine, David asks the Lord why there was a famine, and the Lord says it was because Saul had attacked the Gibeonites, the very people and place our text speaks of. In fact, in 2 Samuel 21:5 they described Saul as “the man who consumed us and planned to destroy us.” Do you see what this means? Rechab and Baanah were seeking for a weak spot in the kingdom to exact revenge upon Saul’s house, and that weak spot was about to reveal itself.

It was a hot day and Ish-bosheth **was taking his noonday rest** (v. 5). Verse 6 tells us that Rechab and Baanah disguised themselves, **came into the midst of the house as if to get wheat**, and then **stabbed [Ish-bosheth] in the stomach**. As verse 7 adds, they did this **as he lay on his bed in his bedroom** and then they also **beheaded him**. The more things change, the more they stay the same. Like King Saul, Joab, and Abner, King Ish-bosheth died from a stomach wound. Like King Saul, King Ish-bosheth was then beheaded. Now, the text does say that this was done in unrighteousness, but the Lord uses the unrighteous deeds of men to further his kingdom plan. What do I mean? Why is beheading so significant? Because just like when David beheaded Goliath, when Saul and Ish-bosheth were beheaded, the Lord was keeping his promise all the way back in Genesis 3:15 to deal the serpent a fatal head-wound so that the true Savior would come.

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The Grimness of Desire—Again

Of course, they didn't know as they beheaded Ish-bosheth that they were doing this, as they had another purpose: *the grimness of desire—again*. Let me pause and just say something that I hope you are all thinking anyway. Over the past many months in first and now second Samuel, we've read a lot of violent stories. Oftentimes it's downright depressing. Children, as you get older you are going to realize that most people do not believe the Bible is the Word of God and that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. In fact, many people say things like, "How can the Bible be from God when it's so full of violence and killing?" When it comes to a story like this, what I want to say to you is that the fact that this story is in the Bible is evidence that it is the Word of God. What? Yes! God describes for us in his Word not fairy tales, but the grim reality of life in a world fallen into sin. And it's from this grim world that he saves us. The fact that God does not clean up the stories for us shows us that it is from God, because it's honest. And because it is honest, you can honestly trust your God's word for all it says.

So after Baanah and Rechab fled from Ish-bosheth's house, we read that **they took his head and went by the way of the Arabah all night, and brought the head of Ish-bosheth to David at Hebron** (vv. 7–8). Why? Again, the story shows us the sinful desires of sinful people. Just like the Amalekite in chapter 1 who beheaded Saul *postmortem* with desires of a posh position in David's new kingdom, so too with these two raiders—and isn't it ironic that they're called "raiders" here? Too bad they're not from L.A. or Oakland!

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So they grimly bring the head of Ish-bosheth to David. What a gift! **“Here is the head of Ish-bosheth, the son of Saul, your enemy, who sought your life. The LORD has avenged my lord the king this day on Saul and on his offspring”** (v. 8). They had the desire for position and power in David’s kingdom. This is a warning to us, brothers and sisters, not to climb the ladder through sinful means. Cheating, lying, deceiving, and cozying up to unbelievers all in the desire to get ahead is unbecoming of God’s children, of the citizens of God’s kingdom.

The Glimmer of Justice—and Mercy

So once again we have a story so full of the grim realities of sin. This is not light devotional reading. But in the midst of grimness there is *the glimmer of justice—and mercy*. In the midst of the darkness of men’s sins, the light of Christ’s eternal kingdom shines just enough light to give the ancient people hope of a better day.

Notice the justice of David’s kingdom, and behind that, of the eternal kingdom of Christ that David foreshadows. After receiving this gift of a head, David tells these two men who invoked the Lord’s name, **“As the LORD lives, who has redeemed my life out of every adversity”** (v. 10). David is saying that he doesn’t need their vengeance because he is and has been under the protection of the Almighty at every twist and at every turn of his public life. Then look at how he links what these men did with what the Amalekite did to Saul: **“when one told me, ‘Behold, Saul is dead,’ and thought he was bringing good news, I seized**

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him and killed him at Ziklag, which was the reward I gave him for his news” (v. 10). A gift given in unrighteousness received the reward of justice! And then to these two David says, **“How much more, when wicked men have killed a righteous man in his own house on his bed, shall I not now require his blood at your hand and destroy you from the earth?”** (v. 11) Keep in mind that Ish-bosheth was opposed to David, and therefore to the Lord himself by assuming the throne of Saul. So how could David call him **a righteous man**? David is comparing Ish-bosheth, who lay “innocently” asleep, to these two assassins. Ultimately, Ish-bosheth was an antichrist, but in this instance, he did nothing to deserve such treatment. Finally, we read that **David commanded his young men, and they killed them and cut off their hands and feet and hanged them beside the pool at Hebron** (v. 12). Justice!

King David’s just kingdom foreshadows the just kingdom of King Jesus. Justice in Scripture is not merely putting the wicked to death; it is setting things right. Psalm 72 sang of King Solomon, and through him, of King Jesus:

Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to the royal son!
May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice!
Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness!
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the children of the needy,
and crush the oppressor! (vv. 1-4)

The prophet Isaiah saw the kingdom of Christ when he said,

Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,

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on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore. (Isa. 9:7)

And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide disputes by what his ears hear,
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist,
and faithfulness the belt of his loins. (Isa. 11:3-5)

The light of that day has begun to shine. And in us as a community of citizens of that kingdom, justice needs to be evident in us and through us, brothers and sisters.

Notice also here the mercy of David's kingdom, and through him, of Christ's. In the midst of our story there is the awkward insertion of Mephibosheth in verse 4: **Jonathan, the son of Saul, had a son who was crippled in his feet. He was five years old when the news about Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel—which means he is now roughly twelve—and his nurse took him up and fled, and as she fled in her haste, he fell and became lame. And his name was Mephibosheth.** Why is this here? As I've mentioned before, when we have something like this that seems to be out of place, the critical scholars jump all over it and say it's just another evidence of the Bible not being the Word of God. But this is a literary review and preview. Mephibosheth is mentioned here in review of what David said to Jonathan in 1 Samuel 20—that David would show *hesed*, covenant faithfulness, to Jonathan's house even as he would show justice to

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Saul's. And this is a preview of that same faithfulness in 2 Samuel 9, where David spares Mephibosheth but gives the rest of Saul's house to the Gibeonites to execute in justice.

This justice and this mercy is the glimmer of light in these grim days. The eternal kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ is shining in these ancient days. And that kingdom has come in the person of Jesus. Yet, he is also not here with us as he was with his disciples. And so the principles of Christ's justice and mercy are given to us to apply and live out. They are also the objects of our longing, as we look for his coming again to set all things right, to remove sin, to exalt the lowly, and to pour out mercy on the penitent. Amen.