
The King's Pardoning Return

2 Samuel 18:31- 19:23¹⁹

Russ Kennedy

How do we tend to win?

Political wins...

Sports wins...

Business wins...

How do the humbled lead after victory?

What does victory look like?

In the next few narratives we will see the beginning of the restoration of the kingdom. Civil wars are not swiftly ended nor easily mended.

The difficulties of the aftermath, the confusion and chaos that accompanies the cessation of hostilities and the return of the rightful government will take time to sort and settle.

The deep divisions needed to be addressed so that there could be unity again. The seeds of the eventual division of the kingdom after the death of Solomon were sown during this time.

The discontents that made the winning of the hearts of the Israelites were still present. There were lasting resentments against David for his ascendancy to the throne in the stead of Saul and his household.

The fierce loyalties to Absalom were not going to be easily overcome nor quickly forgiven. Families had been torn apart. In one battle twenty thousand of Israel's men had died. We don't know how many wounded and maimed were slowly making their way to their homes.

The bitterness and hatred that often comes after the loss of public hopes and personal gains gripped people. There was the pride that had been stricken down. There was the public humiliation of having chosen the wrong side. There was shame that accompanied guilt for rebelling against the rightful king. There was the need for humility to seek forgiveness and reconciliation.

¹⁹ Unless otherwise designated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

How David goes about his return will go a long way to reconcile, restore and heal the terrible wounds the rebellion had left. What he does on his journey home and upon his arrival will go far to affect that noble cause – to unify the people and the kingdom again.

But it first must begin with David himself.

The Restoration of David (v. 1–7)

We are reminded of David's inconsolable sorrow over Absalom's death.

And the Cushite answered, "May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up against you for evil be like that young man." ³³ And the king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

David's Anguish (v. 1–4)

Joab is told of the condition of the king.

¹ It was told Joab, "Behold, the king is weeping and mourning for Absalom." ² So the victory that day was turned into mourning for all the people, for the people heard that day, "The king is grieving for his son." ³ And the people stole into the city that day as people steal in who are ashamed when they flee in battle. ⁴ The king covered his face, and the king cried with a loud voice, "O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

What should have been a victory parade has now been turned into a funeral procession. The people honored their king and respected his grief. But the news of David's grief made them ashamed. Our narrator says that they crept quietly into the city like people who come home from a defeat. David is totally oblivious to the effect he is having. Even as his victorious army sadly tip-toes into the city with their heads down, he pulls his cloak up over his head and weeps even more loudly.

Joab's Rebuke (v. 5–7)

Joab has had enough. It is bad enough what David is doing, but the shaming of the victorious army is too much for this general to bear.

⁵ Then Joab came into the house to the king and said, "You have today covered with shame the faces of all your servants, who have this day saved your life and the lives of your sons and your daughters and the lives of your wives and your concubines, ⁶ because you love those who hate you and hate those who love you. For you have made it clear today that commanders and servants are nothing to you, for today I know that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased. ⁷ Now therefore arise, go out and speak kindly to your servants, for I swear by the Lord, if you do not go, not a man will stay with you this night, and this will be worse for you than all the evil that has come upon you from your youth until now."

I love the way Gordon Keddie describes this paragraph:

Again the rough-and-ready Joab, who had wisely, if irregularly, put Absalom to death against the king's orders, came to the rescue of his royal master and, also wisely if irregularly, roundly rebuked him and told him to pull himself together and go out to greet his victorious army. Quite rightly, Joab told David that his self-pity was as good as saying that he would have been happier had Absalom lived and they died, and predicted that any unwillingness to honour his soldiers' efforts would lead to revolt and desertion. [Keddie, p. 172]

Joab charges him that he seems to love those who hate him and hate those who love him! He warns David that his troops will desert him unless he congratulates them for winning the battle. These men have stayed loyal to David against the enticing rebellion led by his wicked son. They have fought and risked all to support their king. Their moment of exhilaration has been ruined by the self-focused, indulgent outpouring of the king.

Joab warns David that the way he is responding to the death of his son may well incite a desertion from the army and another rebellion against the throne. In all of this Joab is totally correct. His assessment of David's grief, his understanding of the people who make up the army and his wisdom to know what may happen all bring him to courageously, if not brashly, rebuke David. David may be the king, but he is in dire need of this rebuke.

Notice the varied way that God brings people in to challenge and to correct David. Nathan comes as the prophet – the voice of the Lord who uses a story to penetrate an unrepentant heart. God brings Joab as the soldier – the voice of concern for the people who simply speaks directly with strong words of rebuke. Through different men using different approaches, God grants grace to David. This is part of the varieties of God's grace. God's transforming grace is itself diverse. And the means by which God grants that grace is also variegated.

David's Response (v. 8)

So, God uses the rebuke to change David.

⁸ Then the king arose and took his seat in the gate. And the people were all told, "Behold, the king is sitting in the gate." And all the people came before the king.

David responds by going to sit at the gate. He is effectively setting up a kingly session. He can review the people and they will come before him for their commendations. The word that he has turned from his excessive grief to meet with his people spreads like wildfire. All the people begin to gather on the plains before the city. They are there to comfort their king. They are there to be commended for their work. They are there to hope for a future. They are there to see what steps will now be taken to return the king to his city and to his throne.

The Return of David (v. 8–15)

David begins his long trip back to Jerusalem. But first he must wait until the all the tribes are ready to bring him back.

The Argument (v. 8–10)

The people of Israel argue over whether David should return.

Now Israel had fled every man to his own home. ⁹ And all the people were arguing throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, “The king delivered us from the hand of our enemies and saved us from the hand of the Philistines, and now he has fled out of the land from Absalom. ¹⁰ But Absalom, whom we anointed over us, is dead in battle. Now therefore why do you say nothing about bringing the king back?”

The argument that is raging here is whether or not the king should be returned. Some argue that of course he should, he has delivered us from our external enemies and (by implication, our internal ones as well. But others were saying no because he fled from the city instead of fighting for the city. He abdicated the throne when he left. We, the people, appointed Absalom in his place, we can decide to bring him back or not. This last sentence is particularly aimed at the men of Judah.

The Appeal (v. 11–12)

One of the great tragedies of this civil war is that David’s own tribe seemed to be reluctant to bring him back. Therefore, David personally appeals to the leaders of Judah, asking them to support his return.

¹¹ And King David sent this message to Zadok and Abiathar the priests: “Say to the elders of Judah, ‘Why should you be the last to bring the king back to his house, when the word of all Israel has come to the king? ¹² You are my brothers; you are my bone and my flesh. Why then should you be the last to bring back the king?’

Through the priests who had served David in Jerusalem, the king sends an appeal. This message basically shames Judah, his own tribe and the tribe of all the future kings into taking the lead to bring him back rather than lag behind and be the last. This is a bit of political theater. How will it look if all of Israel welcomes the king back to his throne, but his own tribe resists or outright refuses?

While not present here in this text, other narratives indicate that the southern tribes felt pressured into doing this. They resented that the 10 northern tribes (Israel) had welcomed David back. Now they have to be chided for lagging behind.

David now is attempting to unite the tribes once again. Let there be no north south division. Let all the tribes bring the king back. Let all the peoples rejoice that king David is safe and now is going to rule over all. This is one step one in the healing, reunification.

The Appointment (v. 13)

The second step in reunification is a surprising one. David's message to the priest continues with this next instruction...

¹³ And say to Amasa, 'Are you not my bone and my flesh? God do so to me and more also, if you are not commander of my army from now on in place of Joab.' "

Amasa was the commander of the rebel forces under Absalom. The king promises to appoint Amasa as commander in the place of Joab. This would be like Abraham Lincoln appointing the southern general, Robert E Lee, to command the United States Army at the end of the American civil war. You have to ask yourself, why would David do this? The text does not tell us directly but there seems to be a personal and a strategic reason.

Amasa is related to David by marriage to Abigail. Yet he appeals to him in relational language most often reserved to marriage. But it may also be a dig at Joab – for Amasa is the cousin of Joab.

David may be punishing Joab for the killing of Absalom. Nothing is said of that directly but at the personal level it would sure be easy to understand.

Strategically, uniting the national army under a now repentant former commander of the rebel army would display a trust that Amasa would not lead another revolt. This is both an enormous risk and an enormous kindness. It would serve to placate the opposition and reassure them that David was not going to unleash his elite troops to wreck vengeance on the rebels.

Sadly, Joab does not take this very well as we will soon find out in chapter 20.

The Agreement (v. 14-15)

All of Judah agrees to support David's return.

¹⁴ And he swayed the heart of all the men of Judah as one man, so that they sent word to the king, "Return, both you and all your servants." ¹⁵ So the king came back to the Jordan, and Judah came to Gilgal to meet the king and to bring the king over the Jordan.

David has won his fellow tribesmen. They are now in full support of his return. And now that all of the tribes are welcoming him back, he leaves the fastness of Mahanaim and heads toward Gilgal to launch his return. In a great throng of people, they gather at the fords of the Jordan to bring their king home.

I am indebted to Keddie for his insightful notes on why the choice of Gilgal:

The choice of Gilgal was heavy with spiritual significance for God's people. Here, centuries before, God's covenant with his people had been renewed after the Sinai wanderings and in the mass circumcision that day, had 'rolled away the reproach' (Joshua 5:2-9). The kingdom had been renewed there in Samuel's day (1 Samuel 11:14). Gilgal symbolized God's free grace towards his people and, like all the formal events in Israel's national life, David's return was to be a theological event,

attended by the overtones of forgiveness of sin, reconciliation and revival for the people of God. If in practice it fell somewhat short of these lofty motifs, it nevertheless did mark something of a national healing after the schism of the rebellion. [Keddie, p.178-179]

The Repentance of Shimei (v. 16–23)

David's return not only retraces his path back to Jerusalem but also meeting with three people along the way. Our narrator has placed two important acts of forgiveness together. There has been national forgiveness leading to a restoration of the king to the kingdom. Now there will be a personal act of forgiveness that will model what is needed throughout the nation.

Shimei's Humbled Fear (v. 16–20)

¹⁶ And Shimei the son of Gera, the Benjaminite, from Bahurim, hurried to come down with the men of Judah to meet King David. ¹⁷ And with him were a thousand men from Benjamin. And Ziba the servant of the house of Saul, with his fifteen sons and his twenty servants, rushed down to the Jordan before the king, ¹⁸ and they crossed the ford to bring over the king's household and to do his pleasure. And Shimei the son of Gera fell down before the king, as he was about to cross the Jordan, ¹⁹ and said to the king, "Let not my lord hold me guilty or remember how your servant did wrong on the day my lord the king left Jerusalem. Do not let the king take it to heart. ²⁰ For your servant knows that I have sinned. Therefore, behold, I have come this day, the first of all the house of Joseph to come down to meet my lord the king."

We remember Shimei, yes? Our writer highlighted his bitter hatred of David. He had cursed David and followed the fleeing king along the ridgeline and pelted him with stones. Now, he who had cursed David in his flight, meets the king at the Jordan River and to plead for mercy. HE is accompanied by a thousand men from the tribe of Benjamin.

And we meet Ziba who is rushing to meet the king on his return. He has now his fifteen sons and twenty servants. He had deceitfully helped provision the flight; but now, he is fearful that the returning king will find out the truth.

Shimei however seeks the king's pardon. He is guilty. But he has not waited for the king to hunt him down. He does not want to live with the guilt and dishonor and shame. So he runs to the king. He fall down before him. He confesses his sin and guilt. He acknowledges that the king has the right to punish. But he asks for pardon. He seeks forgiveness. He has come ahead of all the men in his tribe to be the first seek the king's mercy.

David's Gracious Forgiveness (v. 21-23)

Justice and mercy will meet Shimei. And the mercy of the true king will prevail.

²¹ Abishai the son of Zeruiah answered, "Shall not Shimei be put to death for this, because he cursed the Lord's anointed?" ²² But David said, "What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah, that you should this day be as an adversary to me? Shall anyone be put to death in Israel this day? For do I not know that I am this day king over Israel?" ²³ And the king said to Shimei, "You shall not die." And the king gave him his oath.

Abishai is the Law. He wants to execute Shimei for his sins and crimes. Shimei deserves to die. He has cursed the anointed one. He has defamed and denied and disregarded that he is the anointed king. This is the Law. This is its condemnation, its sword of unrelenting justice.

The king answers the Shimei. His answer reminds Abishai of his heritage and his focus. But that is not the king's focus on this day of reconciliation and restoration. The demands of the Law are in the king's hands. He is the king. He will decide.

The king grants him mercy and assures him that his life will be spared. The king's mercy and grace meets the demands of the Law and makes a way for forgiveness. That forgiveness is granted through a promise. The king promises that Shimei's life will be spared so that he is forgiven.

There is faith to believe the king's promise and live in all that the promise of forgiveness entails.

There is no more need to fear the wrath of the king or such as Abishai and what he represents.

There is no more guilt for the king no longer holds the offense and sin against him.

There is freedom to enter the restored kingdom and enjoy the king's protection and provision.

Reflect and Respond

The God who 'does not leave the guilty unpunished' is 'compassionate and gracious ... slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness' and maintains 'love to thousands ... forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin' (Exodus 34:6-7). There is hope.

This is the story of our lives:

We have rebelled against the rightful king, desiring to be king ourselves or to have the world as king. We are aligned by birth and by choice, by attitude and action with the rebellion against the True King.

We have struck out at the true king with our words and deeds. Our rebellion manifests itself some of which are actually done against the King himself.

We are under the sentence of death for our rebellion. The wrath of God is against the unrepentant rebel. We are fugitives from the King. We do not know when we will be caught and receive the punishment we deserve.

The penalties for rebellion must be paid. But we have no coin to pay them and no standing before the King to ensure them.

We are brought to the place of seeking the King's favor and forgiveness. We humble ourselves before the King, confess our sinfulness and our need of his mercy and grace. We ask for His forgiveness offering nothing of our own to satisfy Him or to accomplish reconciliation.

The King forgives us. Out of sheer grace and mercy, having satisfied the demands and the penalties of the Law, He no longer holds our sin to our charge.

The King has given His promise, His oath, His covenant of forgiveness. Therefore we can believe His promise and receive the assurance that comes from resting on the King's Word.

So have you been reconciled to the True King, the Lord Jesus? Humble yourself before Him. Confess your sin of rebellion. Hear His word of forgiveness. Rest in the His promises.