

## A Kingdom in Conflict

2Samuel 2:12-32

How many people here this morning have one or more brothers and/or sisters?

How many people have ever had a fight with them when you were growing up?

I think we would be pretty hard pressed to find brothers and sisters who got along perfectly as children.

I know my brother and I fought on a regular basis.

He is three years older than I am and to say that I was a terrible little brother is likely understating things by a significant amount.

I really loved to push his buttons and start a fight, which wasn't very smart at all considering his size and strength advantage.

I got beat up more times than I can remember, but I deserved it every time.

I would sit right beside him when there was lots of room to sit somewhere else and put my finger an inch away from his face and just hold it there and say, "I'm not touching you."

I would say his name repeatedly and he did his best to ignore me because he knew what I was going to do, but I would persist until he responded and then say, "Shut up!"

I whipped him in the back one time with a short piece of hose.

I was moderately concerned for my life on that one.

Another time I singed his arm with a lighter. I'm not sure if he broke my nose that time but there was a lot of blood and sneezing for the next month or so was really painful.

I was awful and it made for a tonne of fighting with my brother growing up.

When I think back on those days, it is amazing I survived it.

Can anybody relate to that?

I wish I could say that fighting with other people was something that only happens when we are children, but I think we all know that conflict is a regular part of being a grown up too.

It usually takes on different forms. There are fewer fists involved, but it still happens.

It can happen in our families, at school, at work, and I'm sorry to say it happens in the church.

[Conflict happens and therefore it is something that we should think through as believers. That is what our text this morning **2Samuel 2:12-32** gives us an opportunity to do. In this text we

find the nation of Israel at the beginning of a civil war. While the conflicts that we most often deal with don't involve soldiers and battles, there are still some important lessons that we can apply to our lives when it comes to dealing with conflict. The first lesson shows us where conflict comes from. The first lesson is that...]

**Point #1 – Resisting what God wants results in conflict. (Verses 12-16)**

Every war, every battle, every fight is the result of people going against what the LORD commands for life.

Verses 12-13 give us the main actors in the conflict.

On one side there is Abner whose name means “my father is a lamp”. That is an ironic name considering what he is up to.

It is ironic because a lamp is a source of light and is used to help people see the right way to go, which is a very good thing.

Abner, however, is doing the opposite here.

He has ignored all that God has done to show that David is the one who should take the throne of Israel and he is trying to make Saul's son Ish-bosheth (man of shame) king instead.

He does this in a place called Mahanaim which means two camps. One camp being God's camp and the other being the camp of man.

Here the two camps are opposed to each other because Abner is working against what the Lord has said.

Knowing that David has been anointed king in Hebron, Abner leaves Mahanaim with 'the servants of Ish-boseth' they are the fighting men under his command, and goes to Gibeon.

Again it is fascinating that they travel to Gibeon because Gibeon was the home to a people group that had deceived Joshua and the Israelites early on in their taking possession of the Promised Land.

Just like Joshua and the elders of his day had failed to ‘inquire of the Lord’, here there is no mention of desiring to know what God wants.

That sets the stage for conflict.

Joab is the son of David's sister Zeruihah and he takes the servants of David to meet Abner and his soldiers at the pool of Gibeon and they end up in sort of a standoff with a group of soldiers on each side of the pool.

After some time, we are not told how long, this happens **(Verses 14-16).**

Twelve men from each side are selected to fight one another.

According to commentators, twelve are likely chosen because there are twelve tribes in the nation of Israel and this contest is intended to see which side should prevail in establishing the next ruler of the nation.

Maybe he is thinking this contest could prevent a larger conflict, but I doubt very much that any outcome would have done that because the heart of the problem here is that Abner knows what God has said and is acting against it.

The contest resolves nothing and each opponent takes the life of the other and 24 Israelites are lying lifeless between the two armies and so they name that place 'Helkath-hazzurim' which means 'field of swords'.

This is just the start but it is enough to show us that opposing what God wants leads to conflict.

[This has been true right from the very beginning. Before Adam rebelled against God he and Eve lived in perfect unity. He opposes what God wants and right out of the gate he blames his wife and blames God for giving him his wife. It gets way worse with their son Cain. He kills his brother Abel because Abel did what was right and Cain didn't want the same.]

That is the way it has to be. When we oppose what God wants for our lives it is going to lead to conflict which often leads to suffering, pain, and death.

That can show up in a few different ways. You can have people on the wrong side and you can have people on the right side, which is the scenario here in this chapter of the bible.

I've seen this happen in the church. People want things opposed to the will of God and men and women who love Jesus stand opposed to what they want.

I have noticed in those situations that often those standing for what God teaches in His Word are often blamed for the conflict by those desiring the opposite of what the LORD wants.

That is a lie. We should never give ground to evil for the sake of maintaining some kind of illusion of peace.

We should always in humble confidence and out of a loving heart stand for what is right in the eyes of the LORD.

It is also possible to have multiple groups of people on the wrong side opposing God and one another.

It is not always right verses wrong that causes conflict it is also wrong verses wrong that does the same.

I would suggest to you that this is more often where we land with our husbands, wives, family members, fellow Christians, and everyone else we fight with.

Just take a moment sometime and run through as many fights with people you can.

In those fights, how many times was your greatest concern what is right and good in the eyes of God and how many times was your highest concern what you wanted regardless of what the LORD says?

[James asks a very good question in chapter 4 of his letter. He asks, “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?” That is another way of saying you want what you want rather than what God wants. It is impossible for that to be the case and have peace. Here is a second lesson from this text, that...]

**Point #2 – People can be on the right side of conflict with wrong motives. (Verses 17-23)**

It is possible to be working for what the Lord wants in the world and be doing it for the wrong reasons.

*With nothing resolved by the twenty four soldiers, we read this in verse 17.*

While there is no mention of anyone here seeking out what the LORD wants in these verses, we can see the providence of God at work.

Providence is a term that means that God is governing everything in the world to bring about His plans and purposes.

The fact that God does that is the reason you and I can trust every promise in the Bible.

Here we already know from earlier on in David’s story that he is the man of God’s choosing and so we should see this military victory by David’s men as the Lord working that out.

Abner, knows the day is lost and so he retreats likely signalling his men to do the same.

At his retreat we are told this in **verses 18-22.**

*The sons of Zeruiah (David’s sister according to 1Chronicles 2:16) were named Joab (Yahweh is Father), Abishai (My father is Jesse), and Asahel (God made).*

These nephews of David were prominent warriors among those who swore allegiance to David.

They had chosen the right side as David is indeed the man of God’s choosing, but just because they were on the right side doesn’t mean they always do the right things and it doesn’t mean they always do things for the right reasons.

Verse 18 tells us something important about Asahel, it tells us that he ‘was as swift of foot as a wild gazelle.’

That means he could run really fast.

He sees Abner’s retreat and he gives chase.

The phrase in verse 19 that “*he turned neither to the right hand nor to the left from following Abner*” is intended to show us a relentless and focused man.

He has the goal of killing or at least capturing Abner in his mind and nothing is going to take him off that track.

*I admit the text here says nothing about the motives of Asahel, but it seems reasonable to infer some things from what is said.*

Given that his name comes last in the list of his brothers, he is probably the youngest.

Is it possible that being the youngest he feels the need to prove his greatness and that is why he gives chase in such a relentless way?

We know from chapter 23 that he was among David’s top thirty warriors and being the one to take out Abner would certainly be good for his standing.

At the very least we can see in Asahel a measure of pride.

When Abner gives him the second warning to turn aside he expresses concern about how he will face Joab if Asahel continues to pursue and he is forced to kill the younger man.

*No doubt Abner and Joab has fought on the same side in the past and likely have a history of friendship, but that would be gone if he kills Joab’s younger brother.*

The only logical reason Asahel would ignore that warning is if he believed himself to be the better warrior and would win the fight.

Again we see no mention of turning to the LORD or trusting in God, we can only see Asahel acting on his own assessment of the situation.

Even though he is on the right side, the impression here is that he is thinking more about himself than the will of the LORD.

*This is where his overconfidence leads (Verse 23).*

He fails to anticipate the move of the more experienced soldier and he loses his life because of it.

Clearly this is a shock to everyone who comes across the scene because they just stand still at the sight.

Here is one of David’s greatest warriors lying lifeless because he refused to turn aside from his relentless pursuit.

It seems to me the best explanation for his actions are ambition and pride.

He was on the right side but his motives were wrong.

[Imagine a child who doesn't usually help out around the house unless he is forced into it. Imagine he all of the sudden one day vacuums the house, does the dishes, cuts the grass, and makes dinner. What do you think his mom is going to say when she sees all of this? I think she might ask, "What do you want?" Why would she ask that? Because she doesn't like all the things the boy did? Not at all, all of those things are good. She is asking the question because she knows her son can do the right thing for the wrong reasons.]

Most of us have likely fallen into that trap on occasion, I know I have.

I've debated unbelievers trying to show the bible is true more concerned about winning the argument then about the glory of God and the good of others.

It is right to defend the bible, but we can do it for the wrong reasons.

I've done good things for people wondering what I would get in return.

It is good to do good things for people but not for selfish gain.

It is possible to be on the right side of an issue and be motivated by anger, fear, and pride.

That comes out in our tone of voice and body language and it usually doesn't help resolve a conflict.

[As long as we live in this fallen world there is going to be conflict. Just like in this text there are two kingdoms at war. The Kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of darkness. Being on the right side of that conflict is good, but following Jesus need to be about much more than being right, it is about doing the right things for the right reasons because we have a heart that is transformed by the Holy Spirit. That brings us to a third lesson from this text. I'm particularly thankful for this lesson because it is a reminder of how gracious the LORD is towards His people. Here is the lesson, that...]

**Point #3 – God often gives us the chance to reconsider our role in conflict. (Verses 24-32)**

When people set their will against the Lord He typically provides numerous opportunities to change course.

*This lesson is a theme that runs through these verses. When the two groups of soldiers are sitting across from each other at the pool of Gibeon there is a chance to rethink things.*

Asahel is given the opportunity to make a different decision at least twice and now as his brothers Joab and Abishai continue chasing Abner we see yet another moment of pause.

**Verses 24-25** set the scene for us.

At this point in the fight it seems clear that David's side is winning the battle and Ish-bosheth's side is in retreat.

Abner though being an experienced soldier takes the opportunity to gather his remaining forces at the top of a hill which would have given them a bit of an advantage from a fighting perspective.

Have you ever heard the phrase it is an "uphill battle"?

It is a way of saying things are hard. That is a saying because fighting a battle going uphill is the harder position.

Once his forces are assembled on the high ground we read this in **verses 26-27.**

Even though Abner is on the wrong side of the conflict what he says here is true.

What is happening here should not be happening.

The men on both sides are Israelites, they are all supposed to belong to the LORD, they are supposed to be brothers, and here they are fighting.

Several have already died and many more will follow if they keep pressing forward.

He is right to say that "the end will be bitter."

It is a good thing that he offers an off ramp here and it is a good thing that Joab listens.

This is the result **verses 28-32.**

The immediate fighting stops and the losses are assessed.

Even though David's side statistically won, they still suffered loss and the nation as a whole suffers loss.

Abner returns to his home base and after burying their brother in their hometown of Bethlehem Joab, Abishai, and their men return to David in Hebron.

It is an interesting note that both groups march through the night and arrive at their destination in the morning.

It is really specific for the men arriving at Hebron in verse 32. It says they arrive "and the day broke upon them."

The transition from night to day is sometimes used as an illustration of going from hopelessness to hope.

There is an opportunity here to stop opposing what the LORD wants and embrace it.

Sadly, that doesn't happen right away as we will see in the next chapter, but that doesn't change the fact that the opportunity is given.

[Recently I was working on my motorcycle. I had to change a fuel line and while I had the gas tank off I thought I would change the spark plug wires. The rule for changing spark plugs is do one at a time so you don't get the wires confused. After I got the plugs changed it was a few weeks before I got the fuel line changed. When I put it all back together and started it up it was running really badly. I assumed I had done the plug wires properly so I kept trying different things but it just wouldn't run properly. Every time I shut it down it was an opportunity to consider that I confused the wires. Sure enough when I stopped assuming I was right and checked the diagram I had reversed two of the spark plug wires. Thankfully, nothing bad happened but it could have. Here is the thing. You never know how many chances you get before the engine blows up.]

That is true in our lives when it comes to conflict.

I am fully convinced that the greatest threat to the church does not come from outside the church.

Yes there is persecution and opposition from the world, but if we remain together in the truth of the gospel the forces of hell will not prevail.

The greatest threat is when we do what we want instead of what God wants.

That is a certain recipe for conflict.

*I've been around a few church blow ups over the years.*

I've been around to see friendships and marriages destroyed because of conflict.

Every single time stuff like that happens, it is absolutely heart breaking.

I hate it and one thing that I have observed over and over again is that the LORD graciously gives people many off ramps before they get to the point of blowing things up.

That is the nature of the gospel message.

*Just think of what God offers us in Christ.*

He offers us complete forgiveness for every act of rebellion that we have committed against Him.

When we put our faith and trust in the perfect life, the atoning death, and glorious resurrection of Jesus we go from being God's enemies to being His children.

We go from being objects of His eternal wrath to objects of His eternal love.



Through faith in Christ all of His goodness and perfection covers all of our sin and shame.

How many opportunities does He give to repent and believe?

How many chances does He give us to stop fighting Him and start serving Him?

Far more than we realize I'm guessing.

*If we realize this, we must apply it to our lives.*

To our marriages, to our homes, to our church, to our workplaces, to our whole life.

Listen, conflict is going to happen in this world as long as people do what they want instead of what God wants.

Let's want what God wants. Yes that will mean standing firm against evil, but let's not be the cause of conflict.

Let's be concerned about more than just being right. Let's also be concerned with right motives.

Let's make sure that appreciate the grace of God and humbly consider what role we play in the conflicts that we have and be wise enough to take to off ramps that the LORD offers.

*If we do those things we will be working and living for the glory of God.*

Do you know what that means? It means that we will be trusting in Him.

Do you know what that brings? It bring a peace that passes all understanding according to Philippians 4 even when there is conflict all around us.

Why is that? Because the LORD will prevail in all things and if we are on His side He will keep us through everything.

That is an amazing way to live. May God be gracious and do these things in our hearts so that we have peace in our homes and in our church and the world might know that our God reigns.