

LESSON 3

David Made King of Judah; War with Ish-Bosheth

2 Samuel 2:1-3:39

During the long war between the house of Saul and the house of David, David was growing stronger and the house of Saul was becoming weaker, 2 Samuel 3:1.

Class Overview: In this lesson, we follow David as he is anointed king of Judah while Abner sets up Ish-bosheth over Israel. The nation becomes divided, and civil war breaks out, leading to the tragic death of Asahel and deepening hostilities between Joab and Abner. Eventually, Abner turns to support David, recognizing God's will, but his murder at the hands of Joab shows the destructive power of revenge. Through it all, David models patience, reliance on God's direction, and a desire for peace, reminding us of the importance of waiting on the Lord, resisting division, and submitting to God's chosen King.

Class Objectives:

By the end of this class, you should be able to:

1. **Explain** why David's second anointing at Hebron was significant and how it showed his reliance on God.
2. **Describe** how Abner's actions in propping up Ish-bosheth resisted God's will and created division in Israel.
3. **Identify** the consequences of civil war and how internal conflict weakens God's people.
4. **Recognize** the danger of bitterness and revenge in Joab's actions against Abner.
5. **Apply** the lessons of patience, unity, and submission by choosing to follow Christ as God's true King in their own lives.

Introduction

The death of Saul left Israel in a fragile state. For years, David had been anointed but not enthroned. Now, with Saul gone, the moment had finally come for David to step into the role God had promised. But the path to the throne was not smooth or immediate. Instead of uniting under God's chosen king, the nation split. Judah anointed David in Hebron, while Abner, Saul's powerful cousin and commander, propped up Saul's son Ish-bosheth as king over the northern tribes. The stage was set for years of conflict.

This story shows us something important: God's promises are certain, but His timing often stretches our patience. David had to wait seven and a half years in Hebron before being crowned king over all Israel. During that time, he chose faithfulness over ambition. He did not force his way to power, even though

he could have. His example reminds us that walking with God means trusting His timing rather than rushing ahead.

But the text also reveals the tragedy of division. Instead of fighting their true enemy, God's people fought each other. Brothers turned against brothers. Abner and Joab, two of Israel's most capable leaders, spent their strength in civil war. Asahel's death, Joab's bitterness, and Abner's eventual betrayal of Ish-bosheth remind us how pride and vengeance can tear God's people apart.

At the heart of this lesson is a question: will God's people recognize and submit to His chosen King? Israel struggled with that question, and so do we. David's slow rise to power foreshadows the greater Son of David, Jesus Christ, who was also rejected by many in His own nation. Just as Israel had to decide whether to follow David or Ish-bosheth, we must decide whether to follow Christ or cling to our own ways.

David's Second Anointing (2:1-7)

The first thing we notice is David's posture toward God. Instead of rushing into action after Saul's death, he "inquired of the Lord" (2:1). He did not presume that the throne was automatically his, even though Samuel had anointed him years earlier. David sought God's direction step by step ... should he return to Judah? Should he go to a particular city? God guided him specifically to Hebron. This stands in sharp contrast to Saul, who once sought the Lord but found no answer (1 Samuel 28:6). Where Saul had been cut off, David found direction because his heart was open and submissive.

Hebron was not a random choice. It was one of the oldest and most sacred places in Israel's history. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had lived there. It was a city of refuge, and it held a strong central position in Judah. By starting there, David was planting his kingship in a place that carried deep covenant memory. God was establishing David's rule not by chance but by design.

The tribe of Judah responded to God's choice by anointing David as their king (2:4). This was David's second anointing; the first being private with Samuel (1 Samuel 16), now a public recognition by the people. This moment mattered because it showed that David's authority was not only divine but also acknowledged by men. God's promises were unfolding in visible ways, even though the larger fulfillment was still ahead.

David's first royal act was not to consolidate power but to show kindness. He sent a message to the men of Jabesh-gilead, who had risked their lives to bury Saul's body with honor (2:5-7). David blessed them in the name of the Lord and promised to deal kindly with them. Notice the wisdom here: David respected Saul's memory rather than erasing it. He honored those who had been loyal to the former king, seeking to win their hearts rather than force their allegiance.

This section shows us that true leadership begins with submission to God, reverence for His people, and a heart of kindness. David didn't grasp for the crown: he waited, asked, and trusted. His first steps as king were not toward vengeance but toward unity and blessing.

Ish-bosheth Crowned King (2:8-11)

While David was quietly and faithfully beginning his reign in Judah, Abner was busy securing his own power. Abner was Saul's cousin and the commander of his army. Instead of acknowledging God's choice of David, he set up Saul's surviving son, Ish-bosheth, as king over the northern tribes. Ish-bosheth's very name, meaning "man of shame," hints at the weakness of his character. He was forty years old, yet it was clear he was only a puppet for Abner.

Abner established Ish-bosheth's throne at Mahanaim, east of the Jordan River. This location was far from Philistine control and symbolized a retreat rather than a bold future. From there, Abner expanded Ish-bosheth's rule to cover much of Israel. But while the northern tribes followed Saul's son, the tribe of Judah remained loyal to David. The kingdom of God's people was now divided.

This division wasn't just political; it was spiritual. God had made His will known through Samuel's anointing of David. Even Saul had admitted that David was destined to be king. Abner's move to prop up Ish-bosheth was not only a power play but also open rebellion against God's revealed plan. When people resist God's choice, they always create conflict, confusion, and delay.

For David, this must have been another test of patience. He had the promise, the anointing, and the support of Judah, but not the full kingdom. He waited in Hebron for seven and a half years while Ish-bosheth ruled for two. David did not force the issue; he trusted God to bring the rest of the kingdom to him in due time.

Here we see two very different pictures of leadership. Abner relied on politics, manipulation, and human power. David relied on God's word and timing. One was fragile and temporary. The other was steady and secure. In the end, Ish-bosheth's reign would collapse, while David's house would grow stronger.

Civil War Begins

The tension between David's forces and Ish-bosheth's finally broke into open conflict. Abner led Ish-bosheth's men from Mahanaim to Gibeon, while Joab, David's nephew and commander, brought David's troops to meet them. Both armies camped by the pool of Gibeon, staring at one another across the water. Neither side wanted to make the first move, but the hostility was inescapable.

Abner proposed a contest. Twelve men from each side would fight as representatives (2:14). What might have been meant as a limited duel turned bloody, as all twenty-four died. The contest solved nothing and only fueled the conflict. A full battle erupted, and David's men prevailed. Abner's army was routed, but not before blood was shed on both sides.

One detail stands out in this chapter: Asahel, the youngest brother of Joab and Abishai. He was known for his speed, as swift as a gazelle, and during the battle he chased after Abner. Abner warned him repeatedly to turn aside, not wanting to kill a younger, less experienced soldier — especially one from Joab's family. But Asahel refused to stop. At last, Abner thrust backward with the butt of his spear, and Asahel was killed instantly (2:23). His death became a turning point, planting seeds of bitterness and revenge that would later drive Joab to treachery.

The pursuit continued until Abner's men rallied with the Benjaminites on a hill. From there, Abner cried out to Joab: "Must the sword devour forever? Don't you realize this will end in bitterness?" (2:26). Joab

agreed, and the trumpet was blown to call off the fight. By the end of the day, Abner's side had lost 360 men, while David's side lost only 20, including Asahel (2:30-31). Asahel was buried in Bethlehem, and David's men returned to Hebron.

This first clash between the houses of Saul and David shows the tragedy of civil war. God's people were fighting one another instead of their true enemies. The nation's strength was wasted in division. And personal pride — Joab's thirst for vengeance, Abner's resistance to David — made reconciliation even harder. It is a sobering reminder of what happens when God's people turn their weapons inward.

Abner Turns to David (3:1-21)

The writer sums up the situation this way: "The war between the house of Saul and the house of David lasted a long time. David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker" (3:1). Even though David did not force the issue, God's hand was steadily moving events toward His chosen king. Ish-bosheth's reign was fragile; David's house was multiplying and gaining strength.

Eventually, the cracks in Saul's house appeared. The immediate cause was a quarrel between Abner and Ish-bosheth. Abner had taken Rizpah, one of Saul's concubines. In that culture, taking a king's concubine was a claim to royal power. When Ish-bosheth confronted him, Abner exploded in anger. He reminded Ish-bosheth that he himself was the one who had placed him on the throne, and then he vowed to transfer the kingdom to David (3:9-10).

Abner quickly acted on his words. He opened negotiations with David, offering to bring the northern tribes under his rule. David agreed, but only on one condition: Abner must restore Michal, Saul's daughter, who had been David's wife before Saul took her away and gave her to another man. This was both personal and political. Personally, Michal was David's rightful wife; politically, she tied David to Saul's house and strengthened his claim to rule over all Israel. Ish-bosheth had no choice but to comply.

Abner then met with Israel's elders and reminded them of God's promise: the Lord had said He would deliver His people through David (3:17-18). Even Abner, who had resisted David for years, now admitted that God's hand was with him. He went to Hebron with representatives of Israel and a feast was held with David. Abner pledged to gather all Israel to David so that he would be king over the whole nation. David dismissed him "in peace" (3:21).

This section is striking for two reasons. First, it shows that God's promises will stand, even when powerful men resist them. Abner fought against David for years, but in the end he was forced to acknowledge that David was God's chosen king. Second, it highlights David's patience and grace. He could have held Abner's rebellion against him, but instead he welcomed him as a partner in bringing unity to Israel. David's aim was not revenge but reconciliation.

Joab's Revenge (3:22-30)

Just when it seemed the conflict was coming to a close, tragedy struck again. Abner had left Hebron in peace after making an agreement with David. But Joab was not ready to forgive. He had never forgotten

the death of his brother Asahel, even though Abner had tried to avoid the fight and killed him only in self-defense. To Joab, this was a matter of blood vengeance.

When Joab returned from a raid and learned that David had received Abner, he was furious. He accused David of being deceived, insisting that Abner had only come to spy (3:25). But this was not true; Joab was twisting the situation to justify what he wanted to do. Without David's knowledge, Joab sent messengers to bring Abner back, pretending it was on David's orders.

At Hebron, a city of refuge where men were supposed to be safe, Joab met Abner privately in the gate and stabbed him in the stomach, killing him (3:27). It was an act of treachery. Abner had come in peace, trusting David's word. Joab's murder not only violated the principles of justice, it also undermined David's efforts to unify the kingdom.

David's response was immediate and public. He declared himself and his kingdom innocent of Abner's blood (3:28). He even pronounced a curse on Joab's house, asking the Lord to bring judgment on his descendants (3:29). Then David ordered mourning for Abner. He led the funeral procession, wept at the grave, and even wrote a lament for him: "Should Abner die as a fool dies? Your hands were not bound, your feet not placed in bronze shackles. You fell like one who falls victim to criminals" (3:33-34).

The people could see that David had no part in Abner's death. In fact, his grief won him even greater respect across Israel (3:36-37). But David also admitted something troubling: "I am weak today, though anointed king; and these men, the sons of Zeruiah, are too harsh for me. May the Lord repay the evildoer according to his evil" (3:39). Joab was too powerful for David to confront directly. This failure to deal with Joab would haunt David for years to come.

This episode reminds us of how dangerous unchecked bitterness can be. Joab's refusal to let go of revenge not only destroyed a man who could have united Israel, it damaged the credibility of David's reign. Where David sought peace, Joab sowed division. Revenge always multiplies pain and never brings the healing people think it will.

Practical Application

1. **Inquire of the Lord:** David sought God's will before acting. We, too, must pray and search Scripture before making choices.
2. **Wait on God's timing:** David waited years for the throne. God's promises are sure, but His timetable is often slower than ours.
3. **Honor even those who oppose you:** David showed kindness to Saul's supporters. Respect and grace open doors that anger cannot.
4. **Guard against division:** Israel's civil war weakened the nation. Churches today must resist infighting and stay focused on God's mission.
5. **Reject bitterness and revenge:** Joab's vengeance stained David's reign. Unforgiveness destroys relationships and blinds us to God's work.

6. **Follow God's chosen King:** Israel had to decide between David and Ish-bosheth. We must decide whether we will follow Christ as Lord or cling to self-rule.

Conclusion

The story of David's rise in Hebron and the conflict with Ish-bosheth teaches us that God's promises never fail, but His people often complicate the path by resisting His will. David trusted God's timing, sought His guidance, and acted with mercy — even toward those who had opposed him. In contrast, Abner delayed God's plan by propping up Ish-bosheth, Joab marred David's efforts by seeking vengeance, and the people of Israel suffered needless bloodshed because of division.

Through it all, David's faith and patience stand out. He waited on God rather than grasping for power. He welcomed reconciliation rather than demanding retribution. Yet the tragedy of Joab's revenge shows the ongoing cost of bitterness and disobedience.

This chapter asks us to examine our own hearts. Do we trust God enough to wait for His timing? Do we seek His will before we act? Do we work for unity instead of feeding division? Do we let go of grudges instead of plotting revenge? Like Israel, we must decide whether we will follow the King God has chosen — Jesus Christ — or cling to our own ways. Only when we submit to God's chosen King do we find peace, unity, and the fulfillment of His promises.

For Discussion

1. Why was it important that David inquired of the Lord before moving to Hebron (2:1)? What does this teach us about decision making in our lives?

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2. David had been promised the throne years before. How do we see his patience in this passage? What challenges do we face in waiting on God's timing instead of forcing our own way?

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3. What damage did the division between Judah and Israel cause? What are some ways division weakens the church today?

4. Joab's bitterness toward Abner led to treachery. Why is revenge such a dangerous path? How can we overcome the temptation to hold grudges?

5. The people of Israel had to choose between David and Ish-bosheth. What parallels do you see with our need to choose Christ today? What does it look like in practical terms to fully submit to Jesus as King in your daily life?
