

When Life Gets Messy
2 Samuel 2:1-4:12
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Tim Keller says, “People are messy, therefore relationships will be messy. So don’t be surprised when life gets messy.” Yet we often are. We seem to assume that as we sail away from shore, the wind and waters will always be calm. But that is seldom the case. Jim has had a good job for fifteen years, but another company offers what seems to be the posting of his dreams. He takes that job and six months later the new company folds, and Jim is unemployed. It was the happiest day of Sue’s life. Joe had asked her to marry him. The wedding is eight weeks away, but now Sue is not sure. Joe has been drinking a lot more the past couple of months. He is often so angry. What is she getting herself into? Bill and Jane have always been so proud of their daughter, Mary. She was the salutatorian of her high school class and has just graduated with her mechanical engineering degree. Bill and Jane have poured a lot of money into Mary’s education, but it’s been worth it. Yet this weekend, Mary announced to her parents that she doesn’t want to be an engineer. She wants to go back to school to become a Kindergarten teacher. She says she never wanted to be an engineer but chose that major just to please her dad. Bill feels angry, but he doesn’t know what to say.

Friends, when life gets messy, it is not always easy to know what to say or do. Yet, in all these situations, we need to trust the Lord and seek to honor Him. Often that involves having a great deal of patience. One person in the Bible who clearly understands life can be messy and that it often requires a lot of patience is David. This morning we will explore Second Samuel chapters two through four. Here we see how even when life gets really messy, as it did for David, God is still faithfully carrying out His purposes and plans for His glory and the good of His people. Let’s pause and pray the Lord will use His Word to encourage and challenge us this morning.

Samuel anointed David as the future king of Israel when he was only a boy—maybe 13 or 14 years old. What an incredible and exciting privilege. For the next 5 years or so, David gains invaluable experience: defeating Goliath, serving as a minstrel in Saul’s court, and building a deep friendship with Jonathan, the king’s son. At that

point, the sailing seemed pretty smooth. But then Saul becomes jealous of David, hates him, tries to kill him, and David spends ten-plus years on the run in exile. It seems unclear whether David will be alive the next day, much less the king of Israel, and then Saul is killed in battle. There is no more tension between reigning king and future king. It is now time for David to become king of Israel. But it’s not that simple and things get really messy. It is another seven and a half years before David is recognized as king of Israel. Our text, 2 Samuel chapters two through four, describe this period of time.

In chapter one, which we explored last week, David mourns the death of Saul and Jonathan and has a man who claimed to have killed the king executed. **2 Samuel 2:1—Some time later, David inquired of the Lord: “should I go to one of the towns of Judah?”** Saul was the king the people asked for, but he often failed to ask of the Lord. However, that is what David does, reflecting his godly character. The Lord tells him to go to Hebron, a city thought to be the place where Abraham was buried. The promises that the Lord made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be fulfilled through David. **2 Samuel 2:4—The men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah.** Though Israel was a united nation under Saul, each of the twelve tribes retained their identity. One commentary says they were more like the countries in the European Union than the fifty United States. Because David is part of the tribe of Judah, it is no surprise they are excited for him to become king. David then continues to show that he holds no grudge toward those loyal to Saul as he honors the men of Jabesh-gilead for burying the deceased king.

But then, apparently a few years later **2 Samuel 2:8-10—Abner son of Ner, commander of Saul’s army, took Saul’s son Ish-bosheth (meaning “Man of Shame”) and moved him to Mahanaim.** (A city of the tribe of Gad) **he made him king...over all Israel. Ish-bosheth was 40 years old when he became king over Israel; he reigned for 2 years. The house of Judah, however, followed David.** Abner knew David was God’s anointed, chosen king. He heard Saul acknowledge that in 1 Samuel 24 and 26, yet he

chose to oppose the true king of Israel and that choice hurts an awful lot of people. Abner is now the leader of Ish-bosheth's army and Joab is the leader of David's army. Abner suggests a contest between twelve men from each side. It apparently was not to be a lethal competition but more like a medieval joust. Yet, **2 Samuel 2:16—Each man grabbed his opponent by the head and thrust his sword into his opponent's side so that they all died together.**

This act of mutual betrayal leads to full-scale battle. David's soldiers, under Joab, defeat Abner's army. Joab's brother, Asahel, tries to capture Abner, but Abner reluctantly kills him. Joab then pursues Abner, but before he can capture him, the soldiers from the tribe of Benjamin come to Abner's rescue. **2 Samuel 2:26—Then Abner called out to Joab: "Must the sword devour forever? Don't you realize this will only end in bitterness? How long before you tell the troops to stop pursuing their brothers?"** Joab calls a truce, but the day had taken a heavy toll. Twenty of David's men had been killed including Joab's brother Asahel. 360 men in Abner's army were dead. Yet, it is just the beginning of this civil war. Israelites fight against Israelites. **2 Samuel 3:1—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.** And in that weakness, Abner, the general and leader of the army, seems to become more powerful than the king, Ish-bosheth. Attempting to bring Abner down, the king makes an accusation of sexual misconduct against Abner. We don't know whether there was truth to the accusation or not, but it doesn't stick. However, Abner is angry. He decides to switch sides and negotiate his own peace with David and bring all of Israel under David's rule. David agrees, with one condition (verses 13-14): he wants his wife, Michal, Saul's daughter who was taken from David years earlier.

Abner negotiates with the various tribes of Israel and gets them to agree to recognize David as king over the entire nation. He meets with David and says, "I will gather all Israel to my lord the king. They will make a covenant with you, and you will reign over all you desire." There finally seems to be peace in Israel. The people are finally recognizing David as the king whom God has chosen. But no, things are still pretty messy.

David's general, Joab, learns David has made a peace agreement with Abner, the general of the house of Saul. He still is bitter because Abner killed his brother and now he is jealous as well. He tries to convince David that Abner cannot be trusted. When that fails, he takes matters into his own hands. **2 Samuel 3:27—When Abner returned to Hebron, (David's headquarters) Joab pulled him aside to the middle of the city gate, as if to speak to him privately, and there Joab stabbed him in the stomach. So Abner died in revenge for the death of Asahel, Joab's brother.** When David hears of Abner's death, he mourns deeply and publicly: **2 Samuel 3:32—When they buried Abner in Hebron, the king wept aloud at Abner's tomb.** David likely felt genuine grief for Abner's death, but I suspect there is political calculation as well. **2 Samuel 3:37—On that day all the troops and all Israel were convinced that the king had no part in the killing of Abner son of Ner.** However, David and his general, Joab, are now estranged—now enemies.

Meanwhile, (chapter 4) learning that his general Abner and pretty much his entire army have defected to David, Ish-bosheth, the opposing king, gives up. Two of the leaders in his remaining army Baanah and Rechab, decide they, too, need to switch loyalties from Ish-bosheth to David. **2 Samuel 4:7-8—They entered the house while Ish-bosheth was lying on his bed in his bedroom and stabbed and killed him...They brought Ish-bosheth's head to David at Hebron and said to the king, "Here's the head of Ish-bosheth son of Saul, your enemy who intended to take your life. Today the Lord has granted vengeance to my lord the king against Saul and his offspring."** But, as we saw in chapter one, David is not real fond of assassins. He doesn't believe even Ish-bosheth deserves that fate. So David orders Rechab and Baanah executed and honors Ish-bosheth by burying his head in Abner's tomb.

Wow. Were you able to follow that? If so, congratulations, because it is a pretty messy situation. One way that is obvious is by taking a closer look at the four main characters in these chapters. First is Abner, a man who had been King Saul's faithful general for many years. Yet rather than being loyal to David, whom he knew to be God's choice as king, he tries to be a power broker, and becomes basically a warlord. He has good

qualities, but they are overshadowed by his thirst for power. Then there is Joab, David's general. He likely was considered a good man by many, yet his loyalty to his family ends up being stronger than his loyalty to David or to the Lord. Bitterness and jealousy end up being his downfall. Ish-bosheth is a rather pitiful figure. He is pretty much a pawn of Abner, and when he tries to get rid of Abner, he is unable to do so. When Abner goes over to David, Ish-bosheth simply gives up and is then assassinated.

And then there is David. Yes, in many ways he is the hero of the story and he certainly has plenty of good qualities, yet there are a couple of significant flaws. Though he orders those who killed Saul and Ish-bosheth executed, he does not punish Joab for murdering Abner. Though he condemns Joab's crime, David allows it to go unpunished, perhaps for political or maybe personal reasons.

An even messier aspect of David's life involves his marriages—polygamy. We mentioned that the one condition that David made in his negotiation with Abner was the return of Michal, Saul's daughter who was or had been his wife. During the conflict between Saul and David, Saul took Michal, who was then married to David, and gave her to another man, Paltiel. Though at one time (1 Samuel 18) Michal had loved David, that may no longer be the case. 2 Samuel 3:15-16 tells us that her new husband, Paltiel, mourned deeply when David took away his wife. David has a number of other wives, and his real interest may be in simply having a child with her to bring together the house of Saul and the house of David and unite the kingdom. David treats Michal as pretty much a political pawn. That was a common occurrence in the ancient world, but not an admirable quality on David's part. **2 Samuel 5:13—after he arrived from Hebron, David took more concubines and wives from Jerusalem.** That verb “took” reminds us of the warning the prophet Samuel had given to the people of Israel (1 Samuel 8): if you insist on a king, he will take your sons and your daughters. Yes, in many ways David was a good man, a man after God's own heart, but as we will see as we go through 2 Samuel, the way he treated women was a problem.

Okay, so what does this all have to do with us? Well, from these three rather messy chapters of 2 Samuel, I want to highlight two things: **#1 The true hero of this and every story is the Lord.**

Life is messy, people are flawed, and over time, every person you know will likely disappoint you in some way. Everyone, that is, except the Lord. In the Old Testament, God chose kings to rule over his people, Israel. Some of them, like Saul, were obvious disappointments. Others like David and his son, Solomon, the next king, had some wonderful qualities, but were still in various ways, a disappointment. What were the people supposed to learn from this? Do not put your trust in a human king. Put your trust in the Lord. Today, looking back we know that David and all the other kings from the tribe of Judah, were pointing us to one King from that line who would be more than a human king. Jesus the Messiah is a divine King, Son of God, and Son of Man, and the only person who is worthy of our total trust and loyalty. Political leaders certainly are not. Again it doesn't matter where you are on the political spectrum, whether you are a fan of Donald Trump or Barack Obama. If that is where you put your hope, you will be disappointed. Yes, some leaders are better than others. David was a better king than Saul. Yet, the words of **Psalm 146:3-5 (NLT)** should ring in our minds: **Don't put your confidence in princes; there is no help for you there. When they breathe their last, they return to the earth, and all their plans die with them. But joyful are those whose hope is in the Lord their God.**

Now, I think it is fine to have heroes as long as we remember they are flawed and fallible. Faces of Washington and Jefferson on Mount Rushmore are good, but yes, they were slaveholders. Abraham Lincoln was the great emancipator of the slaves, but he certainly didn't believe the races were equal, and Teddy Roosevelt had his share of issues. Don't put your confidence in the princes, presidents, or powerful people. Yet, it is not just political leaders we mistakenly trust more than we should. Pastors are people, too. Yes, Christians are called to submit to their spiritual leaders, but are also called to remember that those leaders are flawed and fallible. It is to the Lord that Christians must be loyal, not to a pastor or anyone else in the church. And when a pastor falls in some way—maybe sexual sin, maybe financial misconduct—that is not a reason to turn against the Lord. We should be disappointed but not shocked when a leader in the church confirms that he or she is indeed a flawed human being. They have never been anything else. They have never been worthy of our total trust. Love your pastor, yes. Admire

your pastor, sure. But put your total trust in him, no. Only the Lord is worthy.

Another group of people we are tempted to trust too much are family members. Yes, husbands and wives should trust each other. Children should trust their parents. But remember, every single person in your family is human and flawed. At some point, your spouse is likely to disappoint you, as well as your parent, your child, and second cousin three-times-removed. When these people disappoint, you should be ready to forgive, you should not stop loving. You certainly should not become bitter. But it is a good reminder that the only one worthy of your total trust is the Lord. I think it is wonderful when a child identifies her dad or his grandmother as a hero. It is great when people have a positive impact on our lives, and it is good to acknowledge. However, thought it is great to have Dad or Grandma as one of your heroes, they should never be *the* hero. That is a place that only the Lord should occupy. Only He is worthy of that position. Only He will never disappoint. The Lord alone is the hero of your story.

#2 In the midst of the messiness of life, the Lord is the one we need to look to for help. I mentioned earlier the disappointments we may have in jobs, romantic relationships, and family members. That is only the beginning. Sometimes there is a chronic health issue, for which doctors don't seem to have any answers. You may be on a baseball or soccer team this summer, and end up spending a lot of time sitting on the bench because the coach doesn't recognize your talent. Maybe just as frustrating is when your child is sitting on the bench because the coach doesn't recognize his or her talent. Perhaps you have applied to a graduate school of some type, but despite having pretty good grades, you just keep getting rejection letters. Or maybe you have a very good friend who you have always helped out in all sorts of different situations, but now this summer, when you could really use some help, that friend is suddenly too busy to help you.

And the list goes on, but in each and every situation, the Lord is there to help. We need to turn to Him. First, we need to trust in the Lord Jesus as our Savior. He will then forgive our sins, begin to free us from the power of that sin, give us the Holy Spirit, and promise us eternal life that begins now, and continues forever and ever. Then

we can ask for His help in whatever situation we face. Sometimes He will solve that problem—just take it away. All of a sudden our chronic health problem may disappear or the coach may put us in the starting lineup. Often however, the situation doesn't really change, but the Lord supplies the grace and strength to deal with that situation with joy and with hope.

Friends, I don't know if your life feels a bit messy right now. If not, it might certainly seem that way by next Sunday! In the fallen world in which we live, messy is almost the norm. The best way to find a remedy and relief in these situations is to turn to the Lord. He is the One, the only One, who can be trusted. To trust Him means trusting Him enough to follow His instructions, to obey His commands. When we do that, our situations may not change all that much. You may still dislike your job, not trust your fiancé, and think your family is nuts. But when you are trusting and following Jesus, your perspective and attitude will change, and even though things may not make sense, you will begin to see what really matters and what doesn't, and begin to see what it is that God wants from you in these kinds of messy situations. May the Lord enable each of us to trust and follow Him, even when life is messy.