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War Between the Houses of David and Sha'ul Second Samuel 2:8 to 3:1

War Between the Houses of David and Sha'ul DIG: Who was Abner and why did he reject David's kingship? Who else was he rebelling against? To know God's will and to choose to go your own way as Abner did is a very serious sin. Can you think of any other examples in Scripture? Why did Asahel refuse to give up the pursuit of Abner? Was he brave or was he a fool? Who was responsible for Asahel's death? Does the narrative fault Abner? Why did Joab give up the pursuit of Abner? How did Joab's men respond to Asahel's death?

REFLECT: Must we forgive? If so, when? How often? What does forgiveness look like? What are the benefits of forgiveness, if any? Does forgiving mean we condone the sin? What is the personal consequence of bitterness? How can we overcome the bitterness that is eating us alive? If/when you forgive, what happens to your spirit? Is there anything that we are to hate? If so, what is it?

1010 to 1003 BC

Ish-Bosheth, the only surviving son of **Sha'ul**, along with **Abner**, his general, liberated the remainder of the Western territory from the Philistines over a **two-year** period. Then **he** was declared **king over the** northern kingdom of **Isra'el**. When **Abner** killed **Asahel at Gibeon** (see below), it began five years of war with **David**. Finally, after five years of fighting, the murder of **Ish-Bosheth** and **Abner** removed any opposition to **David** becoming king over both the northern kingdom of **Y'sra'el** and the southern kingdom of **Y'hudah**.

The Reign of Ish-Bosheth: The reason why the city of **Jabesh Gilead** was in no position to give active support to **David** now becomes clear (**to see link click Ce - David Anointed King Over Y'hudah: David Blesses the Men of Jabesh Gilead**). **Jabesh Gilead** already had a king. Meanwhile, **Abner**, the commander of **Sha'ul's** army, had taken **Ish-Bosheth** (his throne name, meaning: *man of shame*) **the son of Sha'ul**, brought him over to **Mahanaim**, a Levitical city of refuge where **he** would be safe, and made him king over **Gilead** (the Trans Jordanian north side), and **Ashuri** (Upper Galilee and out of Philistine control), **Jezreel** (Lower Galilee), and also over **Ephraim, Benjamin** (Northern

side of the hill country of Judah) **and all Isra'el for only two of David's seven-and-a-half years.** The Philistines controlled the west side of the Jordan, so **he** could only control the east side.

Ish-Bosheth's personal name was **Eshaba'al**, which means *the fire of Ba'al* (**First Chronicles 8:33** and **9:39**). People that had the god **Ba'al** in their name were called **Bosheth** because it was *shameful* to have *Ba'al* in their name (**Jeremiah 3:24; Hosea 9:10**). This is one example, where **Eshaba'al** became **Ish-Bosheth**; *the fire of Ba'al* became *the man of shame*. But there are other examples: **Jerubba'al** (**Judges 8:35**) name became **Jerubosheth** (**Judges 11:21**); and **Meriba'al** (**First Chronicles 8:34**) was changed to **Mephibosheth** (**Second Samuel 9:3-13**). At any rate, **Ish-Bosheth was forty years old when he began to rule over Isra'el. But the house of Judah followed David and he was king in Hebron over the house of Y'hudah for seven years and six months (Second Samuel 2:8-11).**²¹⁹

How could **David** rule for **seven-and-a half years** over **Judah** and **Ish-Bosheth** rule only **two years** over **Isra'el**? **Ish-Bosheth** was anointed **king** shortly after **Sha'ul's** death, but **he** only reigned over part of **Isra'el**. It took five-and-a-half years for **Abner** to conquer the other regions of the northern Kingdom. So **he** reigned **for only two years** over **all of Isra'el**.

The people of **Judah** obeyed **God's** will and anointed **David** as **their king**, but **Abner** disobeyed **YHVH** and made **Ish-Bosheth king** over **all of Isra'el**. **Abner** knew that **David** was **the LORD's** choice, a gifted leader, and a brave soldier, but **he** deliberately rebelled against **Ha'Shem** and appointed **Ish-Bosheth** instead. In doing so, **Abner** joined **his** collaborators in **Psalm 2:2-3**, **Herod** and **Pontius Pilate** (**Acts 4:27-28**) in saying: **We don't want this man to be our king** (**Luke 19:14**). Knowing that **he** and **his** other three sons would die in battle, **Sha'ul** may have arranged to make **his** fourth **son king**. Though **Abner** crowned **Ish-Bosheth**, **God** never anointed **him**.

The Battle at the Pool: When **Abner** made **Ish-Bosheth king**, **he** was actually declaring war on **David** . . . and **he** knew it. By then **Abner** had all the tribes except **Judah** under **his** control, and **he** felt **he** could easily defeat **David** in battle and take over the entire Kingdom. Confident of victory, **Abner** called for a contest somewhat like the challenge Goliath issued when he called for one of **Sha'ul's** soldiers to fight him. The difference was that **Abner** was rebelling against **the LORD's** anointed, while **David** was **God's** chosen leader.²²⁰

Only one of the skirmishes between the house of Sha'ul and the house of David is described in detail, no doubt because of its sequel in the death of Asahel and its

bearing on the assassination of Abner. Abner, together with the men of Ish-Bosheth's army, left Mahanaim, east of the Jordan, and went to Gibeon, west of the Jordan and in the northern part of Judah's territory. This might have been Abner's attempt to subjugate Judah and bring it under Ish-Bosheth's control. Thus began war between Isra'el and Judah (see Second Samuel 3:1 below). Joab, who became the commander-and-chief of David's army, and David's men went out and met them at the pool of Gibeon.

Even today there are two water systems from the Iron Age onwards, which provided access to spring water during times of siege. One of these, a cylindrical hole in the rock, about 37 feet (over 11 meters) in diameter and over twice as deep, led by means of a staircase cut around the side of the pit and down into the rock below the spring, which evidently at times filled the cavernous hole almost to the top. This, or the spring below, must have been **the pool** referred to here.²²¹ **One group sat down on one side of the pool and one group on the other side (Second Samuel 2:12-13). This is Joab's first appearance on the scene as David's masterful general who, next to the king himself, was the most prominent personality in the history of David's reign. He was David's nephew (First Chronicles 2:16).**

Then Abner said to Joab, "Let's have some of the young men get up and fight in front of us." The Hebrew word for **fight** here is *sachaq*, from which the name Isaac (*laughter*) is derived, means *sport*, and in this context meant to *wrestle hand to hand*. But what started as a competitive skirmish ended up as a battle to the death. **"All right, let them do it," Joab said. So they stood up and were counted off - twelve men for Benjamin and Ish-Bosheth, and twelve for David (Second Samuel 2:14-15).** Tempers got out of control, **daggers** were drawn and fatal wounds were inflicted.

Then each man grabbed his opponent by the head and simultaneously thrust his dagger into his opponent's side, and they fell down together. As each one of their comrades was killed, **their** anger grew. All twenty-four **men** died. **So that place in Gibeon was called Helkath Hazzurim**, which means *the field of sharp swords*. Because the battle **at the pool of Gibeon** ended in a stalemate, their only solution was to have the two larger armies fight each other. **The battle that day was very fierce, and David's men defeated Abner and the Israelites (Second Samuel 2:16-17).** Thus this verse, the middle verse in the chapter, not only looks back to the standoff, but also to the future overwhelming defeat of **the men of Isra'el** (see **Second Samuel 2:30-31** below).

The Death of Asahel: The three sons of Zeruiah, David's sister, were there: Joab (the

commander-in-chief of **David's** army), **Abishai** (previously went down into **Sha'ul's** camp with **David** and wanted to kill **the king** with **his** own spear) and **Asahel**. These **three** were ruthless supporters of **David** who were always out for blood (**First Samuel 26:6-9; Second Samuel 3:39** and **16:9**). **Asahel** receives particular attention in the narrative. We are only told one detail about **him**. **He** is fast. **Now Asahel was as fleet-footed as a wild gazelle. He used his** uncommon speed to **pursue Abner, turning neither to the right nor to the left as he ran after him (Second Samuel 2:18-19a).**

The deep-seated tension between **them** is evident in the face-to-face encounter: **Is that you, Asahel? "It is," he answered.** The biblical record is clear that **Abner** had no desire to kill **Asahel**, but **the young man** was impulsive and foolish - a bad combination. **Abner** understands that **Asahel** wanted **blood**, so **Abner** offered **him** some blood, saying: **Turn aside to the right or to the left; take on one of the young men and strip him of his weapons** as a trophy of victory after you've killed **him**. **But the hothead** only wanted **Abner**, no substitute would do. **He would not stop chasing him.** Next, **Abner warned Asahel, "Stop chasing me!** **Abner** was confident. **He** didn't doubt that **he** could kill **Asahel** if the issue was forced, but **Abner** didn't want the issue forced. **It was not only the chivalrous regard of an experienced warrior over a younger opponent that restrained him, but Abner was also concerned about the bloodbath that he assumed would follow. Why should I strike you down? How could I look your brother Joab in the face."** **But Asahel refused to give up the pursuit. The two** were hopelessly enmeshed. **Abner** was no coward and would not yield, and **Asahel** was a fool who charged forward. **So Abner** had no choice but to defend **himself** and **thrust the butt of his spear** (which was also sharpened so **the spear** could be thrust into the ground and be ready for action) **into Asahel's stomach, and came through his back.** With **his** speed, **Asahel** probably propelled **himself** right into the end of **the spear. He fell there and died on the spot. And most of the men stopped when they came to the place where Asahel had fallen and died (Second Samuel 2:19b-23).** The dread of **Abner** was thick at that moment. Most were no longer interested in continuing the pursuit.

The Pursuit of Abner: **But Asahel's** brothers, **Joab** and **Abishai** pursued **Abner** accompanied by the remainder of **the men** who had not **stopped** to honor **Asahel's** dead body. **As the sun was setting, they came to the hill of Ammah, near Giah on the way to the wasteland of Gibeon.** Slowly **Abner** retreated toward **Mahanaim. Then the men of Benjamin, Sha'ul's** tribe, **rallied behind Abner** ready to make a last stand. **They formed themselves into a group and took their stand on the hill (Second Samuel 2:24-25).**

Then Abner called out to Joab, “Must the sword go on devouring forever? Don’t you know that in the end it can produce only **bitterness**? How long will it be, then, before you tell the people to quit pursuing their brothers?” It was a plea for Joab to call off the pursuit. Joab knew David’s heart, that he wanted unity and peace, not division and war. Joab seized the opening and said: **God only knows what would have happened if you hadn’t spoken, for we would have chased you all night if necessary (NLT).** Joab needed to make sure that he didn’t appear weak or intimidated. But at the request of Abner, called off the attack.²²² **Then Joab sounded the shofar and they stopped pursuing Isra’el, stopped fighting** for the time being, and went home. **All that night Abner and his men marched through the Arabah (the Jordan Valley). They crossed the Jordan, continued through the morning hours and came to Mahanaim (Second Samuel 2:26-29).**



The Conclusion of the Battle: Then Joab stopped pursuing Abner and assembled the whole army. Besides Asahel, nineteen of David’s men were found missing. But David’s men had killed three hundred and sixty Benjamites who were with Abner. We must remember that it was Abner who was the aggressor who began the conflict when he aggressively left Mahanaim and brought his soldiers to Judah’s border at Gibeon. They took Asahel and buried him in his father’s tomb at Beit-Lehem as they traveled from Gibeon back to Hebron. Then after burying Asahel, Joab and his men marched all night and arrived at Hebron by daybreak (Second Samuel 2:30-32).

The war between the house of Sha’ul (meaning Ish-Bosheth) and the house of David lasted for seven-and-a-half years. David grew stronger and stronger, while Ish-Bosheth grew weaker and weaker (Second Samuel 3:1). This is a summary statement including occasional battle, including the one above, not one long battle after another.

How do you deal with **bitterness**? Do you swallow the pill of **bitterness** hoping to kill your enemy? **How long will it be, then, before you** take some positive steps to overcome your **bitterness and stop pursuing your enemy? Here are three steps to overcoming bitterness that will lead to a new freedom:**

1. **Recognize**, your bitterness and take responsibility for it.
2. **Repent** of your bitterness and renounce any retribution against the object of your bitterness.
3. **Remove** any obstacles that might hinder your recovery and resist the temptation to fall back into your pit of bitterness. Then rejoice in your new freedom and be restored to your old self.