

War Between the Houses of David and Sha'ul

Second Samuel 2:8 to 3:1

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 (see **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) 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 (see [Ce - David Anointed King Over Y'hudah](#)), 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 to be seen which from the Iron Age onwards, 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 Israel (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.