

Joab Murders Abner

Second Samuel 3: 22-39

DIG: Why didn't Joab trust Abner, while David did? What was the public reason that Joab murdered Abner? What was the private reason? Why wasn't Abner more suspicious of Joab? Why did David feel the need to declare his innocence? What surprises you about David's reaction to Abner's death? What impact does David's sincerity have on both Y'hudah and Y'sra'el? Why do you think David declined to punish Joab at that time but commanded Solomon to kill him later on (First Kings 2:5-6)?

REFLECT: When it comes to trusting others are you more like Joab or David? Why? Like Joab, where are you tempted to go against the wishes of those in authority over you? Like Joab, when have you been tempted to act in a cunning or deceitful way to gratify your need for revenge? Like David, where are you showing your sincere forgiveness of those who once opposed you? Why do we instinctively admire sincerity (as seen in David) and despise deceit (as seen Joab)?

1010 to 1003 BC

Everything was settled between David, Abner and Isra'el. A fourth factor, however, had entered the drama. It was Joab (Second Samuel 2:18). Joab was tough, hard, and utterly loyal to David. However, he was jealous of his own role as the general of David's army. In this scene, Joab had just come back from a raid for plunder, apparently continuing David's earlier practice (First Samuel 27:8-12). He was a man who didn't overthink things. He was a man of action and wasn't much inclined to plan, bargain or negotiate. He was a man of the sword who believed that a little well-placed killing would go further than a lot of words.

Joab's Argument with David: Just then, Joab returned from a raid and brought with them a great deal of plunder. But Abner was no longer with David in Hebron, because David had sent him away, and he had gone in peace with David's blessing. When Joab and all the soldiers with him arrived, he was told (who whom we don't know) that Abner had come to the king and that the king had sent him away and that he had gone in peace. Joab, however, did not want peace. Joab wanted Abner destroyed, not welcomed like a partner. Eliminated, not welcomed into the government in Hebron. Joab believed that his and David's interests were the same. And moreover, he believed David didn't need Abner.²³¹

Livid, Joab went to the king and demanded: **What have you done? Look, Abner came to you. Why did you let him go? Why wasn't he executed? Now he is gone!** Joab was nervous when he saw David become "soft" and prepared to negotiate. The **public** reason for Joab's fury was that it was his job to protect the king and he didn't trust Abner. Therefore, he proceeded to tell David what he thought Abner's true motivation was: **You should have known Abner came to deceive you and observe your movements and find out everything you are doing (Second Samuel 3:22-25).** So Joab accused Abner of not really coming to make peace with David, or to make David king over all Isra'el, but rather, the only reason he came was to discover the weaknesses of Jerusalem so he could plan his attack.

Remarkably, David did not answer. Joab had never been easy to deal with (**Second Samuel 3:39**), and the fact that he was a relative made the situation even more difficult. The dynamics of David's family - the multiple wives, the many children, and the various relatives in places of authority - created endless problems for the king, and they weren't easy to solve. David's silence wasn't that of agreement, because he didn't agree with his general; it was the silence of restraint and the evidence of a deep desire to put the nation back together again. David wasn't promoting "peace at any price," because he was a man of integrity; but he wasn't prepared to let his impetuous general conduct a personal vendetta in his name. The sentiment of **Psalm 120** could certainly apply to David's situation.²³²

Joab's Murder of Abner: Joab acted with speed. He left David and sent messengers after Abner (probably in the name of the king, or Abner would have been more cautious), and they brought him back from the cistern at Sirah. Three times David had dismissed Abner in peace and had promised him immunity. Why should he be suspicious? So when Abner returned to Hebron, Joab met him at the gate and took him aside into an inner chamber, as if to speak with him privately. And there, to avenge the blood of his brother Asahel, Joab stabbed Abner (Hebrew: *chomesh*) under the fifth rib, ironically in the same place he had stabbed Asahel. Abner never saw Joab's dagger until it was too late - it had been hidden behind David's promise. And he died. Hence, Joab committed the most sinister form of treachery (**2 Sam 3:26-27**).²³³ David was unaware of the entire ugly mess.

Everything about Abner's death was wrong. Abner had defended himself against Asahel in the heat of battle, but Joab violated the Torah and used deception to murder Abner (see the commentary on **Exodus Dp - You Shall Not Murder**). Hebron was a sanctuary city (**Numbers 35:6-7** and **Joshua 20:7-8**), where an accused murderer could get a fair trial, but Abner never gave the elders in Hebron a chance to hear Abner's case. Asahel's death (see **Cg - War Between the Houses of David and Sha'ul: The Death of Asahel**) occurred in broad daylight where everybody could witness what happened; however, Abner was deceived and led into the shadows.²³⁴

Joab had a **public** and a **private** reason for murdering Abner. The **public** reason was that this was just not any "Abner." He was Abner the son of Ner, a cousin of Sha'ul, who must therefore be an opponent of David. The reasoning was that Abner had doubtless come to Hebron for the sole purpose of learning everything that might well prove useful in a future attack by Ish-Bosheth.²³⁵ But in **Second Samuel 3:30** we see the **private** reason for Abner's assassination was that Joab and his brother Abishai murdered him because he had killed their brother Asahel in the battle at Gibeon.

David's first response to the killing was to assert his own innocence: **My kingdom and I are forever innocent before ADONAI concerning the blood of Abner.** The only serious threat to David's Kingdom was bloodguilt. David could defeat external enemies, for he could manage such enemies. His danger was from bloodguilt, which was not so manageable. It was possible for blood to cry out for vengeance until it was satisfied (see the commentary on **Genesis Bj - Your Brother's Blood Cries Out to Me from the Ground**). He had carefully, but not easily, avoided bloodguilt with Sha'ul twice (**First Samuel 24:12** and **First Samuel 26:18**), and with Nabal (**First Samuel 25:33**). David didn't want any part of such guilt.²³⁶

This was a public denial that he had any involvement in the murder, which is the real point of the narrative. It was necessary because Joab was the general of David's army and it might have been assumed that he acted under David's orders. Then as he wove the tapestry of his curse against Joab, David's affinity for colorful language is clearly seen: **May his blood fall on the head of Joab and on his whole family! May Joab's family never be without someone who has a bodily discharge.**²³⁷ Such a person would be perpetually unclean and therefore barred from worship (**Leviticus 15:2**), as would a person with leprosy. **One who leans on a crutch** implies disability, **or who falls by the sword or who lacks food** (**Second Samuel 3:28-29**). These five afflictions would be signs of the LORD's righteous judgment on Joab's action, and future generations would note how the curse was fulfilled.²³⁸

David's Lament over Abner: Then David said to Joab and all the men in his army, "Tear your clothes and put on sackcloth and walk in mourning in front of Abner." Joab himself is forced to follow all of the mourning procedures. **This must have been a bitter pill for the proud Joab to swallow.** Because Joab and Abishai were among the official mourners, it's likely that many of the people didn't know that they were the murderers. David didn't call them to trial, and it's likely that his curse against Joab was spoken privately to his inner council. He tried to shield them as much as possible, even though they didn't deserve it.²³⁹ This was a form of discipline on David's part, but he did not go far enough and remove Joab as general of his army. This failure will cause David more grief later on in his rule. **King David himself walked behind Abner's casket.** This showed everyone how he viewed Abner and his death. David further honored Abner by burying him in the royal city of

Hebron and not taking him back to Benjamin. And the king wept aloud at Abner's tomb. All the people wept also (Second Samuel 3:31-32).

The king sang this lament for Abner in his sorrow: Should Abner have died as criminals die? The answer was "No," Abner died a death he did not deserve. Your hands were not bound and your feet were not fettered. Abner was not bound like a criminal, nor did he die a criminal's death. You fell as one falls before the wicked. This was a direct reference to Joab, yet refrained from calling him a murderer. David said just enough to convey his own regret and to express public grief without incriminating anyone in a capital crime.²⁴⁰ And all the people wept over Abner again. Then they all came and urged David to eat something while it was still day; but David took an oath, saying: May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if I taste bread or anything else before the sun sets (Second Samuel 3:33-35). By the sincerity of his grief, David cleared himself of all suspicion of his involvement in the murder, not only in the eyes of the people of Judah, but also in the eyes of the people of the northern Kingdom.

All the people took note and were pleased; indeed, everything the king did pleased them. So on that day all the people in Judah and all the people in Isra'el knew that the king had no part in the murder of Abner. But leaving nothing to chance, the words to his servants were no doubt meant for mass consumption and quotation: Do you not realize that a commander and a great man has fallen in Isra'el this day." And today, although I am the anointed king, I am weak (Second Samuel 3:36-39a). The word weak (Hebrew: *rak* meaning *tender*) doesn't suggest that David wasn't strong enough to be king, but that he was restrained and gentle in contrast to the harsh approach of his nephews. David had experienced God's gentleness (Second Samuel 22:36), and he tried to deal with others as YHVH had dealt with him.

This explains why David did not punish Joab for his crime. Like Abner, Joab was the general of the army and powerful in his own right. But this was a lack of leadership on David's part and would foreshadow problems to come. For all his discipline as a military commander David was undisciplined in his sex life (see Dd - David and Bathsheba), which he unfortunately passed on to his son Solomon (Deuteronomy 17:17), and in addition, he did not discipline his children (see Cf - Son's Were Born to David in Hebron), which would cause him and his family no end of trouble. And these sons of Zeruiah (Joab and his brother Abishai) are too strong for me. These relatives of his took too much upon themselves, acting without the king's authorization and against his wishes. But as he had done with Sha'ul, David looked to ADONAI to work out His justice in the matter. May ADONAI repay the evildoer according to his evil deeds (Second Samuel 3:39b).