

The Murder of Ishbosheth

2 Samuel 4

2 Samuel 4 - *"When Saul's son heard that Abner had died in Hebron, he lost heart, and all Israel was troubled. ² Now Saul's son had two men who were captains of troops. The name of one was Baanah and the name of the other Rechab, the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, of the children of Benjamin. (For Beeroth also was part of Benjamin, ³ because the Beerothites fled to Gittaim and have been sojourners there until this day.) ⁴ Jonathan, Saul's son, had a son who was lame in his feet. He was five years old when the news about Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel; and his nurse took him up and fled. And it happened, as she made haste to flee, that he fell and became lame. His name was Mephibosheth.*

⁵ Then the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, Rechab and Baanah, set out and came at about the heat of the day to the house of Ishbosheth, who was lying on his bed at noon. ⁶ And they came there, all the way into the house, as though to get wheat, and they stabbed him in the stomach. Then Rechab and Baanah his brother escaped. ⁷ For when they came into the house, he was lying on his bed in his bedroom; then they struck him and killed him, beheaded him and took his head, and were all night escaping through the plain. ⁸ And they brought the head of Ishbosheth to David at Hebron, and said to the king, "Here is the head of Ishbosheth, the son of Saul your enemy, who sought your life; and the LORD has avenged my lord the king this day of Saul and his descendants."

⁹ But David answered Rechab and Baanah his brother, the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, and said to them, "As the LORD lives, who has redeemed my life from all adversity, ¹⁰ when someone told me, saying, 'Look, Saul is dead,' thinking to have brought good news, I arrested him and had him executed in Ziklag—the one who thought I would give him a reward for his news. ¹¹ How much more, when wicked men have killed a righteous person in his own house on his bed? Therefore, shall I not now require his blood at your hand and remove you from the earth?" ¹² So David commanded his young men, and they executed them, cut off their hands and feet, and hanged them by the pool in Hebron. But they took the head of Ishbosheth and buried it in the tomb of Abner in Hebron."

Background Notes

In our study of the life and times of David, we have seen David at his strongest and David at his weakest. Think of David's strong and courageous faith as he went out and fought Goliath in the name and strength of the Lord. Think of David's refusal to kill King Saul on more than one occasion. He refused even though he had the perfect chances, and his men were urging him to do it, and even suggesting that the Lord had given him these golden opportunities! By faith, David would not lift up his hand against the Lord's anointed, and he would not take matters into his own hands to gain the kingdom. By faith he waited on God to give him the kingdom. Unfortunately, David was not always strong in faith and courage. We saw him go down to the Philistines for security without consulting the Lord or depending on the Lord - and he did this more than once.

When David became king, his ups and downs in faith continued. In the first two chapters of 2 Samuel David consulted the Lord about going to Hebron and becoming king over Judah, and he was content to wait on the Lord to give him the rest of the kingdom. But then in 2 Samuel 3, David made a deal with Abner (of all people!) to bring the rest of the kingdom under his authority. There is no record that David consulted the Lord about this matter. David certainly knew this agreement would involve the murder of Ishbosheth, but our hearts and consciences are insensitive when we're not walking with the Lord. And then, of course, we saw David's disobedience of God's Law in having several wives and concubines. But now in 2 Samuel 4, we see David doing the right thing once again. When Ishbosheth's two military commanders murdered their king and opened the door for David to immediately seize the kingdom, David showed restraint, and once again, by faith, he waited on the Lord and on God's timing.

Doctrinal Points

1. God will not break His own moral laws to accomplish His purposes.

When Rechab and Baanah brought Ishbosheth's head to David, they claimed that the Lord had led them to murder their king (v8). David knew that this could not be true because God will not break His own moral laws to accomplish His purposes. This was cold-blooded murder, conceived and carried out by these two evil men.

Now it's true (as we made clear in our talk on 1 Samuel 3) that God "makes the wrath of man to praise Him." Psalm 76:10 - *"Surely the wrath of man shall praise You; with the remainder of wrath You shall gird Yourself."* This means that God can work through all the mistakes of man, and even through mankind's evil actions to accomplish His purposes. There is no greater example of this than the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Listen to what Peter preached in his sermon on the day of Pentecost: *"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know—²³ Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death..."* (Acts 2:22-23). Godless men were responsible for putting Christ on the cross, but through all of their evil and sinful actions God was working out His predetermined plan for the salvation of mankind.

However, the fact that God can use the evil actions of mankind to work out His purposes does **not** mean that God is the **cause** of evil and sinful choices. God is not the source of evil, nor is he responsible for the evil. No. Man is totally responsible for the sinful choices he makes, because God will not break His own moral laws to accomplish His purposes. But God is sovereign, and He accomplishes His purposes in spite of man's evil ways.

We see that truth illustrated in this chapter. Rechab and Baanah assassinated their king in cold blood. This was not self-defense in a fight or battle. This was not like Ehud, in Judges 3, who killed the enemy King Eglon of the Moabites, who had invaded the land of Israel. No. This was the murder of a defenseless man lying in his bed, who was not guilty of any crime that was worthy of death. And Rechab and Baanah had the audacity to lie to David and say that the Lord had them

do it! No way! God doesn't commit murder to accomplish His purposes. God worked through this evil deed and brought David to the throne over all of Israel, but these two men were rightly held responsible and accountable for their evil actions. This was murder, and murder is sin, the breaking God's Law. And God doesn't break His own moral laws to accomplish His purposes.

This is still true today. Sometimes people (even Christians) try to blame God for their sins and sinful choices. Or sometimes they will try to excuse their wrongdoing because they say God is able to pick up the pieces and still accomplish His purposes. This is unbiblical thinking! It's only by God's sovereign grace that He picks up the pieces and overrules our wrong decisions and sin. We are totally responsible for our sin and breaking God's moral laws. God will never break His own moral laws to accomplish His purposes.

2. Capital punishment is not murder.

In verse 11, when David referred to Ishbosheth as "righteous" he didn't mean that Ishbosheth was sinless. He meant that Ishbosheth was not guilty of any crime or evil deed that was worthy of death. David had these men executed because they had committed murder, a sin requiring the death penalty. The death penalty was a requirement of the Mosaic Law, but also required under the Noahic covenant that God made with all of mankind back in Genesis 9:6 - "*Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man.*"

Advocating the death penalty is not taking a "low view" of the sanctity of life, as some people suggest. It actually upholds the highest view of life, because it protects the sanctity of life. How dare a person murder another human being? They do so with the cost of their own life. The death penalty is a proper and just penalty. Capital punishment is not murder.

Rechab and Baanah thought that they would receive a reward from David, but David said that he would reward them in the same way that he had rewarded the Amalekite who claimed he had killed King Saul (2 Samuel 1). Thus, they were executed for assassinating their king. This was capital punishment, and it was righteous judgment on David's part. Capital punishment is not murder.

Practical Application

Let your judgment be public.

The reason David had the executed rebels hung up in public with their hands and feet cut off was to make sure that everyone knew that judgment had taken place. The hands that were so quick to shed innocent blood, and the feet that traveled all night with their king's head would sin no longer. This public display was a vivid reminder and a warning to the people of Israel that law-breakers would be judged in David's kingdom.

Making your judgment public is not only a principle for government; it is a principle for church discipline as well. 1 Timothy 5:20 teaches, *“Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear.”* Making your judgment public is not only a warning to others, but it prevents false rumors from circulating about whether or not sinful behavior is being properly judged and discipline carried out. It is not a good situation when rumors are going around the church about lack of discipline or “secret” discipline for sinful behavior. Let your judgment be public.