

CHAPTER 2

David had paid due respect to the memory of Saul his prince and Jonathan his friend, and what he did was as much his praise as theirs; he is now considering what is to be done next. Saul is dead, now therefore David arise.

- I.** By direction from God he went up to Hebron, and was there anointed king (v. 1-4).
- II.** He returned thanks to the men of Jabesh-Gilead for burying Saul (v. 5-7).
- III.** Ishbosheth, the son of Saul, is set up in opposition to him (v. 8-11).
- IV.** A warm encounter happens between David's party and Ishbosheth's, in which,
 - 1.** Twelve of each side engaged hand to hand and were all slain (v. 12-16).
 - 2.** Saul's party was beaten (v. 17).
 - 3.** Asahel, on David's side, was slain by Abner (v. 18-23).
 - 4.** Joab, at Abner's request, sounds a retreat, (v. 24-28).
 - 5.** Abner makes the best of his way (v. 29), and the loss on both sides is computed (v. 30-32). So that here we have an account of a civil war in Israel, which, in process of time, ended in the complete settlement of David on the throne.

 2 SAMUEL 2:1-7

DAVID MADE KING IN HEBRON

When Saul and Jonathan were dead, though David knew himself anointed to be king, and now saw his way very clear, yet he did not immediately send messengers through all the coasts of Israel to summon all people to come in and swear allegiance to him, upon pain of death, but proceeded leisurely; for he that believeth doth not make haste, but waits God's time for the accomplishment of God's promises. Many had come in to his assistance from several tribes while he continued at Ziklag, as we find

(~~1312~~ 1 Chronicles 12:1-22), and with such a force he might have come in by conquest. But he that will rule with meekness will not rise with violence. Observe here,

I. The direction he sought and had from God in this critical juncture, v. 1. He doubted not of success, yet he used proper means, both divine and human. Assurance of hope in God's promise will be so far from slackening that it will quicken pious endeavours. If I be elected to the crown of life, it does not follow, Then I will do nothing; but, Then I will do all that he directs me, and follow the guidance of him who chose me. This good use David made of his election, and so will all whom God has chosen.

1. David, according to the precept, *acknowledged God in his way*. He enquired of the Lord by the breast-plate of judgment, which Abiathar brought to him. We must apply to God not only when we are in distress, but even when the world smiles upon us and second causes work in favour of us. His enquiry was, *Shall I go up to any of the cities of Judah?* Shall I stir hence? Though Ziklag be in ruins, he will not quit it without direction from God. "If I stir hence, *Shall I go to one of the cities of Judah?*" not limiting God to them (if God should so direct him, he would go to any of the cities of Israel), but thus expressing his prudence (in the cities of Judah he would find most friends), and his modesty — he would look no further at present than his own tribe. In all our motions and removals it is comfortable to see God going before us; and we may, if by faith and prayer we set him before us.

2. God, according to the promise, directed his path, bade him go up, told him whither, unto Hebron, a priest's city, one of the cities of refuge, so it was to David, and an intimation that God himself would be to him a little sanctuary. The sepulchres of the patriarchs, adjoining to Hebron, would remind him of the ancient promise, on which God had caused him to hope. God sent him not to Bethlehem, his own city, because that was *little among the thousands of Judah* (~~1313~~ Micah 5:2), but to Hebron, a more considerable place, and which perhaps was then as the county-town of that tribe.

II. The care he took of his family and friends in his removal to Hebron.

1. He took his wives with him (v. 2), that, as they had been companions with him in tribulation, they might be so in the kingdom. It does not appear

that as yet he had any children; his first was born in Hebron, ^{<1082>}2 Samuel 3:2.

2. He took his friends and followers with him, v. 3. They had accompanied him in his wanderings, and therefore, when he gained a settlement, they settled with him. Thus, if we *suffer with Christ, we shall reign with him*, ^{<812>}2 Timothy 2:12. Nay, Christ does more for his good soldiers than David could do for his; David found lodging for them — *They dwelt in the cities of Hebron, and adjacent towns*; but to those who *continue with Christ in his temptations he appoints a kingdom, and will feast them at his own table*, ^{<272>}Luke 22:29, 30.

III. The honour done him by the men of Judah: They *anointed him king over the house of Judah*, v. 4. The tribe of Judah had often stood by itself more than any other of the tribes. In Saul's time it was numbered by itself as a distinct body (^{<1954>}1 Samuel 15:4) and those of this tribe had been accustomed to act separately. They did so now; yet they did it for themselves only; they did not pretend to anoint him king *over all Israel* (as ^{<1032>}Judges 9:22), but only *over the house of Judah*. The rest of the tribes might do as they pleased, but, as for them and their house, they would be ruled by him whom God had chosen. See how David rose gradually; he was first anointed king *in reversion*, then *in possession* of one tribe only, and at last of all the tribes. Thus the kingdom of the Messiah, the Son of David, is set up by degrees; he is Lord of all by divine designation, but *we see not yet all things put under him*, ^{<818>}Hebrews 2:8. David's reigning at first over the house of Judah only was a tacit intimation of Providence that his kingdom would in a short time be reduced to that again, as it was when the ten tribes revolted from his grandson; and it would be an encouragement to the godly kings of Judah that David himself at first reigned over Judah only.

IV. The respectful message he sent to the men of Jabesh-Gilead, to return them thanks for their kindness to Saul. Still he studies to honour the memory of his predecessor, and thereby to show that he was far from aiming at the crown from any principle of ambition or enmity to Saul, but purely because he was called of God to it. It was told him that the men of Jabesh-Gilead buried Saul, perhaps by some that thought he would be displeased at them as over-officious. But he was far from that.

1. He commends them for it, v. 5. According as our obligations were to love and honour any while they lived, we ought to show respect to their remains (that is, their bodies, names, and families) when they are dead. “Saul was your lord,” says David, “and therefore you did well to show him this kindness and do him this honour.”

2. He prays to God to bless them for it, and to recompense it to them: *Blessed are you, and blessed may you be of the Lord, who will deal kindly with those in a particular manner that dealt kindly with the dead*, as it is in ~~BOOKS~~ Ruth 1:8. Due respect and affection shown to the bodies, names, and families of those that are dead, in conscience towards God, is a piece of charity which shall in no wise lose its reward: *The Lord show kindness and truth to you* (v. 6), that is, kindness according to the promise. What kindness God shows is in truth, what one may trust to.

3. He promises to make them amends for it: *I also will requite you*. He does not turn them over to God for a recompence that he may excuse himself from rewarding them. Good wishes are good things, and instances of gratitude, but they are too cheap to be rested in where there is an ability to do more.

4. He prudently takes this opportunity to gain them to his interest, v. 7. They had paid their last respects to Saul, and he would have them to be the last: “*The house of Judah have anointed me king, and it will be your wisdom to concur with them and in that to be valiant.*” We must not so dote on the dead, how much soever we have valued them, as to neglect or despise the blessings we have in those that survive, whom God has raised up to us in their stead.

~~BOOKS~~ 2 SAMUEL 2:8-17

A CIVIL WAR IN ISRAEL

Here is,

I. A rivalryship between two kings — David, whom God made king, and Ishbosheth, whom Abner made king. One would have thought, when Saul was slain, and all his sons that had sense and spirit enough to take the field with him, David would come to the throne without any opposition, since

all Israel knew, not only how he had signaled himself, but how manifestly God had designated him to it; but such a spirit of contradiction is there, in the devices of men, to the counsels of God, that such a weak and silly thing as Ishbosheth, who was not thought fit to go with his father to the battle, shall yet be thought fit to succeed him in the government, rather than David shall come peaceably to it. Herein David's kingdom was typical of the Messiah's, against which *the heathens rage* and *the rulers take counsel*, ~~OR1~~ Psalm 2:1, 2.

1. Abner was the person who set up Ishbosheth in competition with David, perhaps in his zeal for the lineal succession (since they must have a king like the nations, in *this* they must be like them, that the crown must descend from father to son), or rather in his affection to his own family and relations (for he was Saul's uncle), and because he had no other way to secure to himself the post of honour he was in, as captain of the host. See how much mischief the pride and ambition of one man may be the occasion of. Ishbosheth would never have set up himself if Abner had not set him up, and made a tool of him to serve his own purposes.

2. Mahanaim, the place where he first made his claim, was on the other side Jordan, where it was thought David had the least interest, and being at a distance from his forces they might have time to strengthen themselves. But having set up his standard there, the unthinking people of all the tribes of Israel (that is, the generality of them) submitted to him (v. 9), and Judah only was entirely for David. This was a further trial of the faith of David in the promise of God, and of his patience, whether he could wait God's time for the performance of that promise.

3. Some difficulty there is about the time of the continuance of this competition. David reigned about seven years over Judah only (v. 11), and yet (v. 10) Ishbosheth reigned over Israel but two years: before those two years, or after, or both, it was in general for the house of Saul (~~OR6~~ 2 Samuel 3:6), and not any particular person of that house, that Abner declared. Or these two years he reigned before the war broke out (v. 12), which continued long, even the remaining five years, ~~OR1~~ 2 Samuel 3:1.

II. An encounter between their two armies.

1. It does not appear that either side brought their whole force into the field, for the slaughter was but small, v. 30, 31. We may wonder,

(1.) That the men of Judah did not appear and act more vigorously for David, to reduce all the nation into obedience to him; but, it is likely, David would not suffer them to act offensively, choosing rather to wait till the thing would do itself or rather till God would do it for him, without the effusion of Israelitish blood; for to him, as a type of Christ, that was very precious, ^{<1974>}Psalms 72:14. Even those that were his adversaries he looked upon as his subjects, and would treat them accordingly.

(2.) That the men of Israel could in a manner stand neuter, and sit down tamely under Ishbosheth, for so many years, especially considering what characters many of the tribes displayed at this time (as we find, ^{<1323>}1 Chronicles 12:23, etc.): *Wise men, mighty men, men of valour, expert in war*, and not of double heart, and yet for seven years together, for aught that appears, most of them seemed indifferent in whose hand the public administration was. Divine Providence serves its own purposes by the stupidity of men at some times and the activity of the same persons at other times; they are unlike themselves, and yet the motions of Providence are uniform.

2. In this battle Abner was the aggressor. David sat still to see how the matter would fall, but the house of Saul, and Abner at the head of it, gave the challenge, and they went by the worst. Therefore *go not forth hastily to strive*, nor be forward to begin quarrels, *lest thou know not what to do in the end thereof*, ^{<1918>}Proverbs 25:8. A fool's lips and hands enter into contention.

3. The seat of the war was Gibeon. Abner chose it because it was in the lot of Benjamin, where Saul had the most friends; yet, since he offered battle, Joab, David's general, would not decline it, but there joined issue with him, and met him *by the pool of Gibeon*, v. 13. David's cause, being built upon God's promise, feared not the disadvantages of the ground. The pool between them gave both sides time to deliberate.

4. The engagement was at first proposed by Abner, and accepted by Joab, to be between twelve and twelve of a side.

(1.) It should seem this trial of skill began in sport. Abner made the motion (v. 14): *Let the young men arise and play before us*, as gladiators. Perhaps Saul had used his men to these barbarous pastimes, like a tyrant indeed, and Abner had learnt of him to make a jest of wounds and death and divert himself with the scenes of blood and horror. He meant, "Let them *fight*

before us,” when he said, “Let them *play* before us.” *Fools thus make a mock at sin.* but he is unworthy the name of a man that can be thus prodigal of human blood, that can thus *throw about firebrands, arrows, and death,* and say, *Am not I in sport?* ²¹⁸⁸ Proverbs 26:18, 19. Joab, having been bred up under David, had so much wisdom as not to make such a proposal, yet had not resolution enough to resist and gainsay it when another made it; for he stood upon a point of honour, and thought it a blemish to his reputation to refuse a challenge, and therefore said, *Let them arise;* not that he was fond of the sport, or expected that the duels would be decisive, but he would not be hectored by his antagonist. How many precious lives have thus been sacrificed to the caprices of proud men! Twelve of each side were accordingly called out as champions to enter the lists, a double jury of life and death, not of others', but their own; and the champions on Abner's side seem to have been most forward, for they took the field first (v. 15), having perhaps been bred up in a foolish ambition thus to serve the humour of their commander-in-chief. But,

(2.) However it began, it ended in blood (v. 16): They thrust *every man his sword into his fellow's side* (spurred on by honour, not by enmity); so they *fell down together,* that is, all the twenty-four were slain, such an equal match were they for one another, and so resolute, that neither side would either beg or give quarter; they did as it were by agreement (says *Josephus*) dispatch one another with mutual wounds. Those that strike at other men's lives often throw away their own and death only conquers and rides in triumph. The wonderful obstinacy of both sides was remembered in the name given to the place: *Heldath-hazzurim* — *the field of rocky men,* men that were not only strong in body, but of firm and unshaken constancy, that stirred not at the sight of death. Yet *the stout-hearted were spoiled, and slept their sleep,* ²¹⁸⁵ Psalm 76:5. Poor honour for men to purchase at so vast an expense! Those that lose their lives for Christ shall find them.

5. The whole army at length engaged, and Abner's forces were routed, v. 17. The former was a drawn battle, in which all were killed on both sides, and therefore they must put it upon another trial, in which (as it often happens) those that gave the challenge went away with loss. David had God on his side; his side therefore was victorious.

<1018> 2 SAMUEL 2:18-24

ASAHIEL SLAIN BY ABNER

We have here the contest between Abner and Asahel. Asahel, the brother of Joab and cousin-german to David, was one of the principal commanders of David's forces, and was famous for swiftness in running: he was *as light of foot as a wild roe* (v. 18); this he got the name of by swift pursuing, not swift flying. Yet, we may suppose, he was not comparable to Abner as a skilful experienced soldier; we must therefore observe,

I. How rash he was in aiming to make Abner his prisoner. He pursued after him, and no other, v. 19. Proud of his relation to David and Joab, his own swiftness, and the success of his party, no less a trophy of victory would now serve the young warrior than Abner himself, either slain or bound, which he thought would put an end to the war and effectually open David's way to the throne. This made him very eager in the pursuit, and careless of the opportunities he had of seizing others in his way, on his right hand and on his left; his eye was on Abner only. The design was brave, had he been *par negotio* — *equal to its accomplishment*: but let not the swift man glory in his swiftness, any more than the strong man in his strength; *magnis excidit ausis* — *he perished in an attempt too vast for him*.

II. How generous Abner was in giving him notice of the danger he exposed himself to, and advising him not to *meddle to his own hurt*, <14519> 2 Chronicles 25:19.

1. He bade him content himself with a less prey (v. 21): “*Lay hold of one of the young men, plunder him and make him thy prisoner, meddle with thy match, but pretend not to one who is so much superior to thee.*” It is wisdom in all contests to compare our own strength with that of our adversaries, and to take heed of being partial to ourselves in making the comparison, lest we prove in the issue *enemies to ourselves*, <21431> Luke 14:31.

2. He begged of him not to put him upon the necessity of slaying him in his own defence, which he was very loth to do, but must do rather than be slain by him, v. 22. Abner, it seems, either loved Joab or feared him; for he was very loth to incur his displeasure, which he would certainly do if he

slew Asahel. It is commendable for enemies to be thus respectful one to another. Abner's care how he should lift up his face to Joab gives cause to suspect that he really believed David would have the kingdom at last, according to the divine designation, and then, in opposing him, he acted against his conscience.

III. How fatal Asahel's rashness was to him. He refused to turn aside, thinking that Abner spoke so courteously because he feared him; but what came of it? Abner, as soon as he came up to him, gave him his death's wound with a back stroke (v. 23): *He smote him with the hinder end of his spear*, from which he feared no danger. This was a pass which Asahel was not acquainted with, nor had learned to stand upon his guard against; but Abner, perhaps, had formerly used it, and done execution with it; and here it did effectual execution. Asahel died immediately of the wound. See here, 1. How death often comes upon us by ways that we least suspect. Who would fear the hand of a flying enemy or the butt-end of a spear? yet from these Asahel receives his death's wound.

2. How we are often betrayed by the accomplishments we are proud of. Asahel's swiftness, which he presumed so much upon, did him no kindness, but forwarded his fate, and with it he ran upon his death, instead of running from it. Asahel's fall was not only Abner's security from him, but put a full stop to the conqueror's pursuit and gave Abner time to rally again; for all that came to the place stood still, only Joab and Abishai, instead of being disheartened, were exasperated by it, pursued Abner with so much the more fury (v. 24), and overtook him at last about sunset, when the approaching night would oblige them to retire.

~~1025~~ 2 SAMUEL 2:25-32

ASAHEL SLAIN BY ABNER

Here,

I. Abner, being conquered, meanly begs for a cessation of arms. He rallied the remains of his forces on the top of a hill (v. 25), as if he would have made head again, but becomes a humble supplicant to Joab for a little breathing-time, v. 26. He that was most forward to fight was the first that had enough of it. He that made a jest of bloodshed (*Let the young men*

arise and play before us, v. 14) is now shocked at it, when he finds himself on the losing side, and the sword he made so light of drawing threatening to touch himself. Observe how his note is changed. Then it was but playing with the sword; now, *Shall the sword devour for ever?* It had devoured but one day, yet to him it seemed forever, because it went against him; and very willing he is now that the sun should not go down upon the wrath. Now he can appeal to Joab himself concerning the miserable consequences of a civil war: *Knowest thou not that it will be bitterness in the latter end?* It will be reflected upon with regret when the account comes to be made up; for, whoever gets in a civil war, the community is sure to lose. Perhaps he refers to the bitterness that there was in the tribes of Israel, in the end of their war with Benjamin, when they wept sorely for the desolations which they themselves had made, ~~(v. 21)~~ Judges 21:2. Now he begs of Joab to sound a retreat, and pleads that they were brethren, who ought not thus to bite and devour one another. He that in the morning would have Joab bid the people fall upon their brethren now would have him bid them lay down their arms. See here,

1. How easy it is for men to use reason when it makes for them who would not use it if it made against them. If Abner had been the conqueror, we should not have had him complaining of the voraciousness of the sword and the miseries of a civil war, nor pleading that both sides were brethren; but, finding himself beaten, all these reasonings are mustered up and improved for the securing of his retreat and the saving of his scattered troops from being cut off.

2. How the issue of things alters men's minds. The same thing which looked pleasant in the morning at night looked dismal. Those that are forward to enter into contention will perhaps repent it before they have done with it, and therefore had better leave it off before it be meddled with, as Solomon advises. It is true of every sin (O that men would consider it in time!) that it will be *bitterness in the latter end. At the last it bites like a serpent* those on whom it fawned.

II. Joab, though a conqueror, generously grants it, and sounds a retreat, knowing very well his master's mind and how averse he was to the shedding of blood. He does indeed justly upbraid Abner with his forwardness to engage, and lays the blame upon him that there had been so much bloodshed as there was (v. 27): "*Unless thou hadst spoken,*" that is, "hadst given orders to fight, hadst bidden the young men arise and play

before us, none of us would have struck a stroke, nor drawn a sword against our brethren. Thou complainest that the sword devours, but who first unsheathed it? Who began? Now thou wouldst have the people parted, but remember who set them on to fight. We should have retired in the morning if thou hadst not given the challenge.” Those that are forward to make mischief are commonly the first to complain of it. This might have served to excuse Joab if he had pushed on his victory, and made a full end of Abner's forces; but like one that pitied the mistake of his adversaries, and scorned to make an army of Israelites pay dearly for the folly of their commander, he very honourably, by sound of trumpet, put a stop to the pursuit (v. 28) and suffered Abner to make an orderly retreat. It is good husbandry to be sparing of blood. As the soldiers were here very obsequious to the general's orders, so he, no doubt, observed the instructions of his prince, who sought the welfare of all Israel and therefore not the hurt of any.

III. The armies being separated, both retired to the places whence they came, and both marched in the night, Abner to Mahanaim, on the other side Jordan (v. 29), and Joab to Hebron, where David was, v. 32. The slain on both sides are computed. On David's side only nineteen men were missing, besides Asahel (v. 30), who was worth more than all; on Abner's side 360, v. 31. In civil wars formerly great slaughters had been made (as ~~1716~~Judges 12:6, 20, 44), in comparison with which this was nothing. It is to be hoped that they had grown wiser and more moderate. Asahel's funeral is here mentioned; the rest they buried in the field of battle, but he was carried to Bethlehem, and buried in the sepulchre of his father, v. 32. Thus are distinctions made between the dust of some and that of others; but in the resurrection no other difference will be made but that between godly and ungodly, which will remain for ever.