



Studies in the Life of David

Text

Second Samuel 4:1-12

Topic

David is deeply distressed when two of Ishbosheth's captains murder him, decapitate him, and bring his head to David

Title

"Off to a Bad Head Start"

Introduction

Every four or eight years, when we elect a new president, there is a smooth transfer of power from one administration to the next. The outgoing gang might go so far as to remove all the 'W's' from the computer keyboards, but that's about it.

In our text a not-so-smooth change of administration was occurring in Israel. David was king over Judah in the south while Ishbosheth, Saul's heir, ruled the northern tribes. The commander of the northern forces, Abner, had defected to David, offering to help him unite Israel. Abner was then murdered by David's commander, Joab. Two of Ishbosheth's commanders next murdered him and brought his head to David.

Murders like these were the usual prerequisites to a change in administration in biblical times. The new king wanted to eliminate any heirs to the throne.

It was a big moment in David's administration. It provided an opportunity for him to show what kind of policies he would enforce.

In his reaction to Abner's murder in chapter three, and now to Ishbosheth's in chapter four, we see that David preferred mercy over murder - a thing unheard of in those days.

I'm going to suggest that 'those days' continue right up to our present time. I'll show you that the world in which we live is administrated by a murderer. It gives us opportunity to show mercy.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 The World In Which You Live Is Administrated By A Murderer, and #2 The Life Which You Are To Live Is Administrated By Mercy.

#1 The World In Which You Live Is Administered By A Murderer (v1-7)

I don't want to get too far off track talking about the devil but the Bible tells us that he is the ruler of this world (John 12:31, 14:31) and the god of this world (2Corinthians 4:4). Jesus once described him as "a murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44). He was probably referring to Satan's part in the first murder, when Cain is described as being "of the wicked one [Satan]" in the killing his brother, Abel (1John 3:12).

Or perhaps Jesus was referring to the fact that in tempting Adam and Eve to sin in the Garden of Eden Satan was ensuring the death of every human being born from them. He knew that the wages of sin is death. He's the world's first mass murderer.

Since the ruler and god of this world is a murderer, we can expect 'murder' to be one of his policies. Given the opportunity, we're talking actual murder, e.g., in Nazi Germany as Hitler and Himmler were deeply affected by satanic influences as they carried-out the Holocaust.

Even if he can't literally kill you, the devil still administrates by murder. It's still his philosophy. Look around and see how many lives his policies have destroyed, how many marriages have imploded, how much hatred and strife are sown in the world by those taken captive by him to do his will.

At first it might sound extreme, but it's true. The world in which we live is administrated by a murderer and it affects every one of us.

Verses one through eight of our text are a typical slice of life from a world characterized by murder.

2 Samuel 4:1 When Saul's son [Ishbosheth] heard that Abner had died in Hebron, he lost heart, and all Israel was troubled.

Ishbosheth never ought to have been king in the first place. Everyone in Israel knew that Samuel the prophet had anointed David to rule after Saul's death. Ishbosheth allowed Abner to pressure him into succeeding his father against God's will.

It was the way of the world, you see, to succeed your father. It's what all the kings and kingdoms did. But it wasn't God's way - not for Israel. Abner and Ishbosheth, in a philosophical sense, 'murdered' what God was wanting to do. Thus murder would play a big part in their reign over the north.

For example: A civil war had been raging for the past seven years and many good men on both sides had died.

The policies of murder would catch-up with Ishbosheth.

2 Samuel 4:2 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, 2 Samuel 4:3 because the Beerothites fled to Gittaim and have been sojourners there until this day.)

(Please skip to verse five for a moment).

2 Samuel 4:5 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.

2 Samuel 4:6 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.

2 Samuel 4:7 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.

There's a line of dialog in one of the *Godfather* movies that sums up this scene and the point I'm making. It goes like this: "If anything in this life is certain, if history has taught us anything, **it is that you can kill anyone.**"

That pretty much sums up human history!

Now let's look at verse four.

2 Samuel 4:4 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.

The writer inserts this history here because he's dealing with this whole idea of how kings succeeded one another by murder. Back when Saul fell on his sword and died, and Israel was defeated by the Philistines, it was reasonable for the nurse to fear that they would come and murder Saul's heirs. It was the common practice, the cultural norm, of that day. Mephibosheth's life was spared, but his nurse caused him to be crippled.

When murder is the policy, the underlying philosophy, lives are ruined and destroyed in many ways.

The Rolling Stones have a song, *Sympathy for the Devil*. It promotes the idea that Satan is, in fact, a murderer behind much of the world's suffering.

Here's a line from it:

*I stuck around St. Petersburg when I saw it was time for a change
Killed the czar and his ministers, Anastasia screamed in vain
I rode a tank, held a general's rank
When the blitzkrieg raged, and the bodies stank*

It's not theology but it shows a keen insight into human history.

But it isn't just history in the big, broad strokes. The policies of murder permeate our everyday lives and interactions. We wrestle not against flesh and blood, after all, but "against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). At home, at work, in school, even in the church, we as Christians will be confronted with those who prefer murder on some scale. We must reply in a way that is consistent with Christ.

John Wesley once said, "They that are bound for Heaven must be willing to swim against the stream, and must do, not as most do, but as the best do."

The best live by mercy.

#2 The Life Which You Are To Live
Is Administrated By Mercy
(v8-12)

David decided to swim against the stream.

2 Samuel 4:8 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."

Recently four bodies were thrown on a sidewalk along a service road of radiator shops and garages abutting the main highway leading from Mexico's capital through Cuernavaca to the south and on to Acapulco, the Pacific beach resort. One of the bodies was missing its head. Centuries may have passed since beheading was common but given the right circumstances we, as a race, default to it.

The truly sad thing about bringing Ishbosheth's head to David is the fact it was the norm. These guys thought David would richly reward them.

2 Samuel 4:9 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,

2 Samuel 4:10 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.

2 Samuel 4:11 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?"

David had already established a policy of mercy over murder when he had heard of Saul's death. But murder as a policy, as a philosophy, as a way of life, was so ingrained that these guys didn't understand mercy.

2 Samuel 4:12 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.

It may sound like a contradiction to ascribe to David mercy while he's having these guys executed and their bodies mutilated. Even where mercy is the rule, justice must be carried out. These guys were actual murderers. The penalty was death and the "eye for an eye" thing was still in force, still part of the Law of Moses that held sway.

David would not have killed Ishbosheth. We know that because in just a few chapters he will seek-out Mephibosheth, not to kill him, but to show him mercy. He will invite him to sit at his table. David will care for him all the days of his life. He will not give him what he deserved in their society.

You might think, "So what, he was a cripple and therefore no challenge." *Not true!* Ishbosheth was installed as king by Abner, who was the real power, simply because he was an heir. Someone could have used Mephibosheth as a figure head the same way to try to overthrow David.

History and culture and custom and, to a certain extent, even logic dictated that David send executioners to seek and destroy Mephibosheth. It would not have been unlawful. It was expected. To do anything less might even make David appear weak to those he was getting ready to rule over.

I mean, who wants a king who won't murder his rivals?

David had to have a lot of strength to swim upstream in this situation. But right from the beginning of his rule he established that mercy, not murder, would characterize his administration. It was David at his best.

Dog-eat-dog. It's a jungle out there. The rat race. Survival of the fittest. It's every man for himself.

We say things like that without even thinking about them. They represent life as if it were a life-and-death competition in which one person is going to not only defeat but also destroy the other.

Some of you intellectuals have heard of Niccolò Machiavelli. If you haven't heard of him, you've been confused if you've ever heard someone refer to something, especially in politics, as being "very Maciavellian."

He lived in the early 1500's. He's most famous for his book, *The Prince*. That book (and I quote),

... concentrates on the possibility of a "new prince," rather than the more traditional subject of an hereditary prince. To retain power, the hereditary prince must carefully maintain the socio-political institutions to which the people are accustomed; whereas a new prince has the more difficult task in ruling, since he must first stabilize his new-found power in order to build an enduring political structure. That requires the prince being concerned with reputation but also being willing to act immorally. As a political scientist, Machiavelli emphasizes the occasional need for the methodical exercise of brute force...

It's the devil's philosophy. Murder if you must, if you can.

David swam upstream. So can you and I. We are going to find ourselves in one of two positions:

1. Either we are the ones in charge of administrating,
2. Or we are serving under some administration.

Either way we are called upon to show mercy in the face of murder. In short, we are to act and react based upon the grace and mercy shown to us by the Lord, Jesus Christ.

One of the things that means, one of the ways we do that, is by not always demanding our rights. I heard a pastor say once in his sermon, “Jesus didn’t die for your rights. He died for your wrongs!” It was his way of focusing on the fact we who are saved were once in danger of perishing eternally. When we were yet sinners, the enemies of God, deserving of death and Hell, Jesus came and died for our sins. He set aside His rights to Heaven and submitted to His Father and came and was humiliated in order to purchase us out from death and sin.

If Jesus hadn’t, in a sense, given up His rights we would still all be in our wrongs - lost, dying, perishing.

I’ve said all this to make one very simple point. Your life exists in a context of murder. There are forces, elements, that want to destroy your life. At every turn you can join with that flow, or you can go against it by showing the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ.

I think we sometimes forget that biblical Christianity is lived-out in the context of small, everyday situations and circumstances that give us the opportunity to reveal Christ.

We need to get over thinking that things like love, grace, mercy, kindness, and patience show weakness. No, they show the incredible strength of the indwelling presence of Jesus Christ.

The world doesn’t need another Machiavelli. It needs to see its Messiah.

If you need some help, some encouragement, to go against the flow, you can find it in something David said in verse nine. He said, “As the Lord lives, who has redeemed my life from all adversity...” He’ll say this again towards the end of his life so that tells me it was a kind of philosophy he lived by.

His statement tells us to expect “adversity” as we travel the path of our lives. Sometimes it will be pretty serious, pretty severe, because the only way out is to be “redeemed,” which means *rescued* or *ransomed*. People who need rescuing or ransoming are in real trouble!

But we know that all things work together for the good for them that love the Lord and are called according to His purposes. We know that He who began a good work in us will complete it until the day we go to be with Jesus.

The first “adversity” the Lord redeems from is the wages of sin, which is death. He’s saved the human race by taking our place as a Substitute and dying as a once-for-all Sacrifice for sin.

Have you been redeemed? Are you saved?

If you are, He will also redeem your life from all adversity. It may be intense at times, but He will see you through it until He sees you face-to-face.

