

# Joab and Abner

There is the story of the Greek athlete who wanted to excel in the public games, but there was another athlete whose performance was much better than his. This aroused within the first athlete that pain and resentment that a man might feel when the advantage falls to another. Further, it mortified him when his fellow citizens raised a statue to celebrate the victory of his rival. This recognition caused such envy that he went out every night looking for an opportunity to destroy that monument. After he had tried several times, and was unsuccessful, he finally attempted to move the statue from its pedestal. It fell. On him. And in its fall it crushed him to death.

So it is with envy.

This athlete made a bad choice.

James wrote,

James 1:13 Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. 14 But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. 15 Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.

The athlete allowed envy to become malice and then he permitted malice to lead to sin. That led in turn to his own death. It was a chain of choices.

Envy destroys the one who harbors it. As the wise man wrote in Proverbs,

Proverbs 14:30 A sound heart is the life of the flesh:  
but envy the rottenness of the bones." KJV.

Jealousy accomplishes the same thing. Experience shows that envy and jealousy are like brother and sister. And envy and coveting are much alike.

The Bible, in the book of 2 Samuel, tells us about Joab and Abner and how envy and jealousy destroyed them. These men made bad choices.

### **Joab.**

Joab was the son of Zeruah. He had two brothers: Asahel and Abishai. David was his uncle. (2 Sam. 2:18). How Joab had managed to bind himself to David—the future king of Israel—the Scriptures do not say, but we do know that Joab gave David his unquestioning loyalty.

No task was too burdensome. He would undertake anything for David. No shame was so base that he would not stoop to it, if he thought David's interests might be advanced by it. Joab had the kind of courage that comes from a complete disregard of consequences, and with his courage he had a fiery temper.

Joab aspired only to 2nd place in David's kingdom. He did not want supplant David. But 2nd place he guarded with grim jealousy. Joab was David's loyal lieutenant, capable of mighty love, but at the same time capable of an abiding hatred.

### **Abner.**

Abner was the son of Ner. Saul was his uncle. While Saul was king of Israel, Abner was the captain of Saul's army. He was the warrior who occupied the 2nd place in the kingdom of Saul. Abner held the same rank as Joab—in opposite armies. But Abner had much greater ambition than Joab. Abner was an opportunist whose only principle was expediency.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Interpreter's Bible p. 1056.

## **The death of Saul and Jonathan.**

The Bible in 1 Samuel 1:19 tells of the deaths of King Saul and Jonathan, his son. This was a turning point in the history of Israel. Their deaths removed David's rivals for the throne of Israel. King Saul was dead. Jonathan, his son and heir, was also dead. Moreover, Saul's death also greatly reduced Abner's opportunity to greatness.

## **David goes to Hebron.**

The Bible story continues by saying,

2 Samuel 2:1 It happened after this that David inquired of the LORD, saying, "Shall I go up to any of the cities of Judah?" And the LORD said to him, "Go up." David said, "Where shall I go up?" And He said, "To Hebron." 2 So David went up there, and his two wives also, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess, and Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite. 3 And David brought up the men who were with him, every man with his household. So they dwelt in the cities of Hebron. 4 Then the men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah.

When David became king, his lieutenant, Joab, also rose in power and prestige.

## **Abner and Ishbosheth.**

Abner could have accepted David as king. After all, David had been anointed by God's prophet. But Abner and the other followers of Saul were not willing to subordinate themselves to David. They did not just fade away either. This was their choice.

Abner, captain of Saul's host, took Ishbosheth, the son of Saul, and brought him to Mahanaim and made him king over Israel.

Mahanaim was the capital of Gilead. The reason for choosing Mahanaim as the capital of Ishbosheth's kingdom was that the Philistines still occupied the country to the west of the Jordan. But for the moment it appeared the Philistines were not the principal enemies of Abner. The men of Judah were, including David.

This incident shows the power and influence that Abner had. He was able to make Ishbosheth king. Ishbosheth was now David's rival. They were rival kings for the one throne.

### **The Field of Sharp Swords.**

After the elevation of Ishbosheth there followed the incident at the "Field of Sharp Swords."

2 Sam. 2:12 Now Abner the son of Ner, and the servants of Ishbosheth the son of Saul, went out from Mahanaim to Gibeon.<sup>13</sup> And Joab the son of Zeruiah, and the servants of David, went out and met them by the pool of Gibeon. So they sat down, one on one side of the pool and the other on the other side of the pool. <sup>14</sup> Then Abner said to Joab, "Let the young men now arise and compete before us." And Joab said, "Let them arise."

The two men posed the question, and then made their choice. Here begin the ages-old chain of events. The rising tensions between adversaries—be they individuals or nations. It is the same.

This was the incident (the *cause célèbre*, the choice to act) that overcomes the natural reluctance of the rank and file to kill their neighbors.

The story continues,

2:15 So they arose and went over by number, twelve from Benjamin, followers of Ishbosheth the son of Saul, and twelve from the servants of David. <sup>16</sup> And each one grasped his opponent by the head

and thrust his sword in his opponent's side; so they fell down together. Therefore that place was called the Field of Sharp Swords, which is in Gibeon.

That incident started the fight. Eventually, everyone on both sides got involved. The encounter quickly escalated.

Verse 17 says,

2:17 So there was a very fierce battle that day, and Abner and the men of Israel were beaten before the servants of David.

Joab and his forces were the apparent victors, but that was not the end of the story. Both of Joab's brothers were with him—Abishai, and Asahel.

The Scripture says,

2:18 ...And Asahel was as fleet of foot as a wild gazelle. 19 So Asahel pursued Abner, and in going he did not turn to the right hand or to the left from following Abner. 20 Then Abner looked behind him and said, "Are you Asahel?" He answered, "I am." 21 And Abner said to him, "Turn aside to your right hand or to your left, and lay hold on one of the young men and take his armor for yourself." .

So, Asahel had a choice. He could pursue a lesser warrior—so to test his mettle, or he could make an attempt at victory over the head of the army of Israel.

Asahel was no doubt a young man. He was the brother of Joab—the captain of David's army. Here was Abner, the captain of the opposing army in front of him. If Asahel could strike down Abner—and take his armor—he could make his name as a warrior. People would look up to him.

Ambition drove Asahel into a bad choice. Asahel was no match for Abner, but Abner had no desire to kill him. But Asahel would not turn aside from pursuing him.

The Bible says,

2:22 So Abner said again to Asahel, "Turn aside from following me. Why should I strike you to the ground? How then could I face your brother Joab?" 23 However, he refused to turn aside.

As it happened to Asahel, so it happens to others in their desire for what they cannot have. Sometimes, they pursue their own death.

Now Abner was carrying a spear—a bronze or iron head riveted to a wooden shaft.

Asahel would not leave him alone no matter how much Abner said to him. It was not that Abner was afraid of Asahel. Abner did not want a blood feud with his brother, Joab. Abner knew Joab. But Asahel was too ambitious to take the warning.

2 Sam. 2:23 ... Therefore Abner struck him in the stomach with the blunt end of the spear, so that the spear came out of his back; and he fell down there and died on the spot. So it was that as many as came to the place where Asahel fell down and died, stood still.

“Stood still” – from the horror of it. From the revulsion, shock and disgust. Asahel had been no match for Abner. God surely had better things in store for him had he made a different choice. But he made a bad choice, and his death caused a blood feud between Joab and Abner. And that feud remained a plague to David, and trouble in the kingdom for a generation.

2 Samuel says that,

2 Sam. 2:24 Joab and Abishai also pursued Abner.

On a hilltop Abner and his people took a stand.

2:26 Then Abner called to Joab and said, "Shall the sword devour forever? Do you not know that it will be bitter in the latter end? How long will it be then until you tell the people to return from pursuing their brethren?" 27 And Joab said, "As God lives, unless you had spoken, surely then by

morning all the people would have given up pursuing their brethren."

"We would have chased you all night!" says Joab. "We would not have rested until we had you!" In these words Joab reveals his character. When his blood is up he is utterly ruthless. Yet, he had enough common sense that Abner could appeal to him. Yet Joab did not abandon his blood lust.

It returns later.

2:28 So Joab blew a trumpet; and all the people stood still and did not pursue Israel anymore, nor did they fight anymore.

### **Abner's ambition.**

Abner led his men all that night through the Arabah, a deeply sunken valley that extends from the slopes of Mount Hermon to the Gulf of Akabah on the Red Sea. They crossed the Jordan, and marching the whole forenoon, came to Mahanaim.

2 Sam. 2:30 So Joab returned from pursuing Abner. And when he had gathered all the people together, there were missing of David's servants nineteen men and Asahel. 31 But the servants of David had struck down, of Benjamin and Abner's men, three hundred and sixty men who died. 32 Then they took up Asahel and buried him in his father's tomb, which was in Bethlehem. And Joab and his men went all night, and they came to Hebron at daybreak.

"There was a long war between the house of Saul, and the house of David. David grew stronger, while the house of Saul became weaker. Yet while the tribes under Ishbosheth—called the house of Saul—became weaker, Abner was strengthening himself within Israel. Or so he thought!

The Interpreter's Bible says of Abner that, "The tragedy of Abner is the tragedy of an opportunist whose only principle was that of expediency. Abner was an example of what might be called the losing quality of selfishness. One of the difficulties

with selfishness is simply that it does not pay off. Selfishness is blind even to its own best interest.”<sup>2</sup>

Then we read this of Abner in 2 Samuel 3,

3:6 Now it was so, while there was war between the house of Saul and the house of David, that Abner was strengthening his hold on the house of Saul. 7 And Saul had a concubine, whose name was Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah. So Ishbosheth said to Abner, "Why have you gone in to my father's concubine?"

Ishbosheth was legally right when he objected to Abner's taking of the concubine. It was the custom that a ruler's wives and concubines should be handed down to his successor. Ishbosheth had succeeded Saul, not Abner. Abner wanted something he could not legally have. And so he made the choice for lust and that led to his violation of the law.

2 Samuel 3:8 Then Abner became very angry at the words of Ishbosheth, and said, "Am I a dog's head that belongs to Judah? Today I show loyalty to the house of Saul your father, to his brothers, and to his friends, and have not delivered you into the hand of David; and you charge me today with a fault concerning this woman? 9 "May God do so to Abner, and more also, if I do not do for David as the LORD has sworn to him; 10 "to transfer the kingdom from the house of Saul, and set up the throne of David over Israel and over Judah, from Dan to Beersheba." 11 And he could not answer Abner another word, because he feared him.

The Interpreter's Bible says further, Abner had not the slightest concern for what the Lord had sworn; Otherwise, why did he support Ishbosheth over David?

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<sup>2</sup> The Interpreter's Bible, p1056.

Abner was for the house of Saul if it gave him strength and influence. He supported Ishbosheth for his own purpose. When that purpose led him to overstep the Law—and Ishbosheth reminded him of it—Abner suddenly became aware of the will of God. His taking of Rizpah, the concubine was an arrogant thing to do. He had assumed kingly power. Absalom did this and committed treason against his father David; Adonijah provoked Solomon's wrath when he asked for his father's concubine, Abishag." Indeed, Abner coveted something he could not lawfully have. He coveted the concubine, Rizpah. And he coveted power in David's kingdom.

These were bad choices for a man to make.

2 Samuel 3 says,

3:12 Then Abner sent messengers on his behalf to David, saying, "Whose is the land?" saying also, "Make your covenant with me, and indeed my hand shall be with you to bring all Israel to you."

13 And David said, "Good, I will make a covenant with you.

David probably felt that a compact with Abner would allow him to unite all of Israel under his leadership. Actually he did not need Abner's help to bring all Israel to his standard. He only needed to remove Abner as Ishbosheth's chief support. The people would then rally to David since there was no other king. Abner's ambition was to rise with David as he became king.

Israel which had been ruled by Saul was declining, but had the Israelites under Abner's leadership rallied to David, Abner would have proceeded to make himself strong in the house of David. This way Abner could have placed David under obligation to himself. But the situation between Abner and Joab would have become intolerable. David's throne might well have become the storm center of contending generals.

## **Rivalry and hatred bear fruit.**

2 Samuel 3:20 So Abner and twenty men with him came to David at Hebron. And David made a feast for Abner and the men who were with him. 21 Then Abner said to David, "I will arise and go, and gather all Israel to my lord the king, that they may make a covenant with you, and that you may reign over all that your heart desires." So David sent Abner away, and he went in peace.

Evidently, Joab was not expected to return until David and Abner had finished their talks.

Then we read in 2 Samuel 3:22,.

3:22 At that moment the servants of David and Joab came from a raid and brought much spoil with them. But Abner was not with David in Hebron, for he had sent him away, and he had gone in peace. 23 When Joab and all the troops that were with him had come, they told Joab, saying, "Abner the son of Ner came to the king, and he sent him away, and he has gone in peace."

That kindled the fire in Joab. Suddenly all the bitterness of Asahel's death came back to Joab. More than that—Joab saw a threat to his own place in David's kingdom. For here was his rival, Abner, another Number-Two-Man aspiring for the number-two place in David's kingdom. Here also we see the main difference between Abner and Joab: Joab aspired to his rightful place, while Abner aspired beyond his. Joab's emotion was jealousy. He jealously desired to keep his own place. Abner's emotion was envy, he desired for what he did not have.

Samuel wrote,

3:24 Then Joab came to the king and said, "What have you done? Look, Abner came to you; why is it that you sent him away, and he has already gone? 25 "Surely you realize that Abner the son of Ner came to deceive you, to know your going

out and your coming in, and to know all that you are doing." 26 And when Joab had gone from David's presence, he sent messengers after Abner, who brought him back from the well of Sirah. But David did not know it. 27 Now when Abner had returned to Hebron, Joab took him aside in the gate to speak with him privately, and there stabbed him in the stomach, so that he died for the blood of Asahel his brother.

The Bible says that "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." In this case, Joab harbored jealousy, revenge and murder in his heart until he committed the act. Prov. 23:7.

2 Samuel 3:28 Afterward, when David heard it, he said, "My kingdom and I are guiltless before the LORD forever of the blood of Abner the son of Ner. 29 "Let it rest on the head of Joab and on all his father's house; and let there never fail to be in the house of Joab one who has a discharge or is a leper, who leans on a staff or falls by the sword, or who lacks bread." 30 So Joab and Abishai his brother killed Abner, because he had killed their brother Asahel at Gibeon in the battle.

These are the fruits of jealousy and envy. Hatred, revenge and murder harbored and nurtured in the heart bear bitter fruit. One cannot make the choice for either of them with impunity.

David said,

2 Samuel 3:33 ... "Should Abner die as a fool dies? 34 Your hands were not bound Nor your feet put into fetters; As a man falls before wicked men, so you fell."

Indeed, Abner died as a fool dies—because he lived as a fool lives. The fool does not believe in any other purpose larger than his own advancement in life. The fool serves no cause greater than his own prestige. The fool is an atheist because he does not really believe in God—God whose sovereign purpose demands

obedience of him. The fool believes only in a purpose that serves his own interest. And so his choices are made.

The admonition of Paul is so true,

Gal. 6:7 Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.

In the days of the Lord's sojourn on earth...

The Jewish rabbis thought that they were the custodians and protectors of the Law of Moses. They thought that only they could interpret the Law—authoritatively; only they could teach its precepts. Only they could appoint others to teach the Law. It was as Edersheim says,

“... there was no principle more firmly established by universal consent than that authoritative teaching required previous authorisation.”

This is why we read of Jesus in Matthew 21,

21:23 When He entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him while He was teaching, and said, “By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?”

The Rabbis jealously guarded their authority. This is also why we read in John Chapter 11,

John 11:47 Therefore the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council, and were saying, “What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs. 48 “If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”

Their attitude rested on jealousy, envy and hatred. It is like Mark wrote in Chapter 15 of his gospel,

Mark 15:6 Now at the feast he used to release for them any one prisoner whom they requested. 7 The man named Barabbas had been imprisoned with the insurrectionists who had committed

murder in the insurrection. 8 The crowd went up and began asking him to do as he had been accustomed to do for them. 9 Pilate answered them, saying, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" 10 For he was aware that the chief priests had handed Him over because of envy. 11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to ask him to release Barabbas for them instead. 12 Answering again, Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Him whom you call the King of the Jews?" 13 They shouted back, "Crucify Him!" 14 But Pilate said to them, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify Him!"

The chief priests had handed Jesus over because of envy. They were guilty of envy, jealousy and hatred. And they used the authority of Rome to commit their murder of the innocent.

They had two choices: Barabbas, a murderer, or Christ, the Prince of Life. They chose Barabbas. And in the end they lost their place and their nation to the Romans, anyway.

Nevertheless, on the cross Jesus said, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." Luke 23:34.

He is not jealous.

He is not envious.

He bears no malice or hatred.

His forgiveness is yours today.

If you will have it.