

Sermon VI - From Friday, the fifth day of June, 1562
II Samuel, Chapter 2

Now Zeruiah had three sons, Joab and Abishai and Asahel. Asahel was as light of foot as a roe or a wild goat. And Asahel pursued Abner and turned not to the right hand or to the left but followed only Abner. Abner looked behind him, and said: Are you not Asahel? And he said: I am. And Abner said to him: Turn aside one way or the other and lay hold of one of these young men and take his armour, etc., unto the end of the chapter.

Scripture tells this story here, to explain why afterwards we see a most wicked act which was committed by Joab against Abner. The event is described here in which Abner had killed the brother of Joab. Well, here are the details. The young man Asahel, being light and agile of body, was pursuing Abner. Abner did not want to kill him, but this young man kept on following until he did turn round and kill him. That is the first point. Well, afterwards they talked about the details of the defeat and the retreat of the two armies.

The first detail we must notice concerning death of Asahel is: he was swift in running. This is intended to show that those who have some strong point always presume on it more than they should. That is what caused the death of Asahel. He trusted too much in his own agility. He pushed himself in running, and he thought it was great to have pursued and caught his enemy. He gave no thought to their encounter, and felt he was valiant enough to fight against Abner. He thought he had done enough in merely stopping him. Well he showed in that a blind feeling. Let us learn therefore, when God gives us some strength, to be so temperate that we will in no way abuse it, and let us remember this example.

Moreover, when Abner told Asahel to go back and seek someone else, he spoke out of pride and mockery, as though he were saying: Follow someone who is your equal. How dare you come after me? There is no doubt that Abner disdained encountering this young man, seeing that he was giddy-headed and of small consideration and that he was driven only to this foolish glory which he wanted to display -- namely, how fast he was. That is one point.

However, it is possible to see that he was in hopes of gaining promotion, and that he wished to show that he was well disposed towards the house of Saul. It is true that he had not usurped the crown, but that he had put Ishboseth on the throne. Nevertheless there were always two motives in his actions. He thought if something bad should happen, he might be appointed himself. That could not be done without betraying his master, but that is the way with such people. We have already seen that he could have been led only by a certain malice, in that he was not ignorant of the promise and unction given to David. Therefore he was resisting God in wanting to name a successor to the crown instead of the one whom God had ordained. He was not really seeking the wellbeing of the house of Saul, since he wanted to be looked up to and to rule.

For however much Isboseth had the name and title of king, it was Abner who had all the power and used Isboseth as an idol. In brief, he cared only for himself, just as worldly people always tend to do (however they may cover it up), for each one is addicted to himself. That, I say, is what motivated Abner when he divided the people and made of them two bodies, so to speak.

Now he says: How could I dare look in the face of your brother, Joab? And why should he care about that? He was his mortal enemy. Instead he should have been seeking his destruction. Yes, but by this we are shown that when he saw himself conquered, he is prepared to make peace with and have the house of David favourable to him. He is willing to desert his master, and finally he does so.

Let us learn therefore that when men do not have a good foundation, they will involve themselves in all sorts of iniquities and will go from bad to worse. And however much they may protest surprise, still they will not cease to add sin to sin, until they reach full measure, when he puts a harness on their neck. Now that should teach us to do nothing against our conscience. For when we begin to do some evil, even though we think it will all be over soon and will not last long, yet we are voluntarily throwing ourselves into the snares of the devil, God will pay us the wages we have earned. One evil will cause another and we will spin a long thread. It will be like a chain which has many links, in that offences will attach themselves one to another with no end and cessation. Therefore let us learn to keep ourselves strictly under the control of the fear of God, that we may never permit ourselves, when we have started some evil, to go on and do still worse.

Furthermore, let us recognize that among all other virtues, well-rounded balance should be recommended to us. Abner was praiseworthy in many things; however we see that he was disloyal. Therefore all his excellence was soiled and was nothing less than putrid. For we also know that when God regulates our life, that he gives us such a beginning that we will in no way be double minded. There will be no put-on in us. We will conduct ourselves in integrity to such a degree that even in our dealing with the children of this world, whatever malice, disloyalty and fraud there may be; still we will not fail to be simple always. Our simplicity will be united to a prudence which is both good and right, but is without any cunning.

Moreover, when we see that Asahel was killed, on the one hand we must note that when swords are unsheathed there will be no more freedom; and even those who wish to keep from evil-doing, will not be able. Abner, however perverse and rebellious against God as he may have been, still wished to spare Asahel. But in the heat of battle he could not, for Asahel would have gotten him. All the more should we avoid getting into that necessity, seeing how war brings so much confusion.

But on the other hand let us notice also that the excessive boldness of Asahel was the cause of his death, as we have already said, for he confided too much in the lightness and swiftness which had been given to him. And there is not the slightest doubt that he desired to be seen, and wanted to do a memorable deed in getting his enemy. Well,

that cost him very dearly. Hence let us learn to be brave according to rule, and not according to rashness. So much then for this particular story.

Now for this act one cannot condemn Abner. For since war was going on and since Asahel attacked him and refused to turn from him in spite of warnings to the contrary, what else could Abner have done? Even if he had not been such a great enemy, what he did would still have been excusable. Now we will see soon afterwards that Joab took vengeance on him by treason and trickery. But that will be discussed in its place. Now scripture briefly mentions it here to show us the reason for which this story is included.

Now to show that this young man Asahel was well known, it is stated that, when they came to the place where he had fallen dead, everyone stopped. That was a sign that he was held in higher esteem than all the others, for there were several others dead, indeed nineteen; and yet they were ignored while everyone stopped at Asahel. We must also carefully note that Joab took such vengeance for the death of Asahel, because he considered him so well favoured, since people had loved and esteemed his brother. But that did not justify him before God, as will be stated more fully in the appropriate place. But we see here that one man oftentimes will carry away more than a hundred or a thousand, for all stopped at Asahel. We must also carefully note that Joab took such vengeance for the death of Asahel, because he considered him so well favoured, since people had loved and esteemed his brother. But that did not justify him before God, as will be stated more fully in the appropriate place. But we see here that one man oftentimes will carry away more than a hundred or a thousand, for all stopped at Asahel, which frightened them. When there has been a great defeat, one is not astonished by it, and yet when one sees a single man dead, everyone is shocked. Now that is how battles are often broken up and an army put to flight by the death of a captain or a leader, for it will seem that everything is lost and scattered when there is to be no more control. Therefore insofar as Asahel was of famous reputation, he thus retarded the army of Joab--so much so that it turned the tide for the enemy and worked to their advantage, so that instead of the men of David winning, in the end they were vanquished.

Now let us come to what scripture adds concerning this defeat. It says in the first place that Abner exhorted Joab to stop. How long (he said) will the sword devour? Do you not know that there will be bitterness in the end? Why do you not call back the people from following their brothers? Here Abner changes language. Formerly it had been a game to him to make men kill each other. Now the game pleases him no longer, since it had to get worse. Hence he begins to exhort Joab to pursue it no more, in that it will be a great cruelty for brothers to kill each other this way.

Now in the first place we see how God broke down his foolish arrogance with which he was puffed up, when he said: Let our people arise and enjoy themselves. (II Sm. 2:14) He sported about shedding human blood; it was all mockery to him. But now he knows the outcome was not what he had imagined in his head. Let us learn thus that God

will punish that pride with which our cruel passions are fortified, so that they have no pity on men, but expose them to butchery as though they were calves or sheep. Now that is an enormous vice to which we must give serious consideration. I speak to those who have power of some sort. For one sees how earthly princes only rejoice when they fill the fields with dead bodies. There will be many poor widows and orphans as victims of their greed. That to them is only a pastime; it is of no more concern than wiping their mouths. Well since God has declared a manifest judgment on them, they will in no way escape giving an account for such cruelty.

Yet let us notice this example of Abner, who now no longer speaks with his customary haughtiness and pride in saying: "Let them play," or "let them enjoy themselves," but: "How long will the sword keep devouring?" He is horrified, it seems, in seeing these murders, and yet he has gotten joy and entertainment out of it. He has changed, however, only because he sees that this pursuit is being carried on at his expense, and is doing him damage.

That, therefore, is why the cruel make a pretense of being moved and touched with compassion when they failed to get what they desired and sought for. Often one sees that those who have been the most addicted to tyranny and cruelty become religious hypocrites and use beautiful rhetoric when they realize they can do nothing more. If necessary they are ready to seek peace. When they have the upper hand it is certain that they do not care how much confusion they cause. But when they see that they have been frustrated in their designs, then they begin to preach peace and concord, and want to make people believe that they are doing this out of pity. But this hypocrisy is too heavy a load to bear, and so the impudence of such people is soon seen when one notices them lose their tempers and seek again only to kill and wipe out everything. But even in doing that, they will put on a good appearance of wishing to set right what has been wrongly done. One knows, I say, that there is nothing but impudence in them.

Indeed we should note this example to our profit, for such things do happen, as in fact we have seen. This kind of experience is only too frequent. This reason must be noted above all, when he says: How long will everyone pursue his brother? For in fact it was a horrible spectacle which the children of Abraham were carrying on with those to whom they were united by virtue of the call that God had given them to be his heritage. There should have been therefore that simple union which is spoken of in the Psalm; they should have "dwelt together in holy and cheerful brotherhood" before God, "which is like the ointment that anointed Aaron which flowed down upon his garments, and like the dew that fell on the hill of Hermon" in the plain. Hence they should have been united in this way, which indeed would have been God's principal blessing upon them. But when they kill each other like dogs and cats, is it not as though they wanted to throw God out of the country, so to speak? For they went against everything that God had established among them.

Well, while superficially the statement of Abner is holy indeed, yet nevertheless his motive is insincere; for it was he who started

everyone in this tumult and fury, as Joab later reproaches him. But he adds a threat: Do you not know that there will be bitterness at the end? as if he were saying that when it was to his advantage, he could repent and at the same time, cause people to be in despair by sharpening their rage so they could not control themselves. That in sum is what Abner practiced: Now you are pursuing me, but be careful, for if you keep on and you get paid back equally or doubly, the whole people will be exterminated. There will be only a very small number left of either you or our people.

That, in brief, is how Abner remonstrates with Joab that if he does not moderate his position and put a stop to his pursuit, that the others might return, seeing there is no other way, and that then there will be a greater defeat than ever. All of this is certainly true, but one sees that Abner is acting like a sly fox when he sees that he can no longer exercise his cruelty and realizes that he is vanquished.

For it would not have mattered to him; if he could have won the victory, he would have gladly destroyed the entire tribe of Judah. He would hardly have been warmed by this fraternity in that case. But now look at the holy man seeking the union of the people. He foresees dangers, true enough; but as we have said, this is an example to make us be careful of those who have neither principle nor law. But in warning us of them (whatever the situation may be), let us always listen to reason. For if we put not faith in what they say, still that does not mean we must attack head-on without good counsel, even though it is not legitimate to accept everything they say. We must always listen to reason and truth as proceeding from God (no matter what its source), even though we do not respect the wicked who speak it, as teachers and doctors.

Now for the rest of the matter, it says that Joab replied to him, that had it not been for him there would have been no pursuit, and that in the morning everyone returned from the pursuit. Joab meant that Abner had started it, and that the swords were unsheathed by his advice and message, and that the killing came from that. Indeed he shows that he detested the accusation that Abner was making. In sum, Joab condemned his adversary, excused himself, and rightly so.

His speech is as though he were calling God as witness, so Abner would be all the more convicted. Now we know that hypocrites always have new subterfuges. One thing we can never do is to win them over, for truth does not matter to them. They will argue to the very end, and will still have some kind of reply. That therefore is why Joab swears by the living God that if Abner had not first started it, that everyone would have gone away and would have ceased pursuing their brethren.

Now from this response we must gather that when we are accused by the wicked who have caused some evil, that we may protest that the evil displeased us and that we did not seek it. We may add that we did not start it. We must, I say, state this protest; but it can be stated before God. For what have we gained when we have washed our hands before men and have made them believe that we are innocent, and yet our conscience condemns us both before God and his angels? Let us therefore

look within ourselves when we have reason to protest our integrity, to purge ourselves from calammies which are imposed upon us, and to rid ourselves of defamation. Let us do this as in the presence of God, and let him be our witness, our judge and defender. Now that is what we must remember from this passage.

Furthermore, let us note also that we have to use preventative medicine to avoid evil. For once we have begun, it will not be easy to stop. That is why Joab says, in the morning, if Abner had not begun, his brothers would have ceased killing one another. When he says, "in the morning," he signifies that he did not start it. Therefore as far as we can, let us prevent all contentions, for when the fire is lighted it is difficult to put out. So let us resist as much as we can every beginning, and when the devil tries to incite us to contentions and debates, let us be prepared ahead of time not to give him an opening. For when he gets in, it is very hard to run him out. That, therefore, we must also remember from this passage concerning the protestion of Joab.

Well the text then says that it was discovered that there were three hundred dead men on the side of Abner, and sixty from David's band.^{1*} Earlier it was stated that the battle was hard and grievous. Now this does not seem to agree with that. For one would not judge it a great defeat if three hundred men on one side and sixty* on the other are dead; and on the other hand that there are only twenty. This seems to be a contradiction. But it shows even more how horrified we should be over shed blood of the faithful and of those who are joined to us in the name of God. In general one cannot kill a man without the image of God being violated. And that is why Scripture says that a man, being created in the image of God, cannot be killed without the offense being against God himself, who has stamped his image in our nature. It is a crime also because everyone should see himself in his neighbour. We are worse than savage beasts when we are thus burning to destroy one another. And there is in particular a sacred bond among those who claim to be the people of God -- as it was formerly among the whole family of Abraham, so it is today in the church. That is why, therefore, even though there were only three hundred and eighty men killed among all who were defeated, it is still said that the battle was hard.

That is for our instruction. Thus when we see that in Christendom people are tearing one another up, let us realize that this is being taken account of by God, and even if men harden themselves, nevertheless God does not change his mind. We have already seen battles for such a long time. There is no end to them. And even apart from battles we have seen how many people have been killed by wars. This has not been the case merely in one place and in a single army, but it has gone on among princes who claim to be Christians and Catholics--and yet they are killing an infinite number of people. And then has the war gone through one country? It was a storm. One sees poor people dead among the bushes, and others who are left, have to endure hunger and thirst, and

^{1*} Supp. Calv. p. 49, suggests that the meaning is: "that there were three hundred and sixty men dead on Abner's side, and twenty from the band of David." There is an obvious error in the copyist's text.

heat and cold, and many deprivations--to such a degree that if you cut their throat, you would do them a favour. For they are languishing and will die ten times, so to speak, before death strikes the final blow.

Now that is nothing to us because we have become too used to it. But be that as it may, the whole affair will be brought into account before God. For what is written here, that the battles are grievous and hard even when only a small number of people die, is an expression full of vigour and truth when we consider that it is those who claim the name of God and profess to be his people and church, who are involved.

Not only is it those who attack one another in a diabolical rage, but also the adherents of Christianity are thus embittered against one another. Notice the extremity of the situation, that the bond (as I have said) of our union consists in the call that God has given to us to be his people; and yet we come to the point of breaking and dismembering it. Well, under the shadow of the name of God, under the shadow of the pure religion which ought to keep us united in one body, under the shadow of our Lord Jesus Christ who is our head, if we are in strife and contentions, what will be the outcome?

Now there is a double war in the church because of religion; for oftentimes swords are not unsheathed, and still they manage to have a battle. For if there are heresies and errors, it is legitimate to kill one another; for poison, when it is widespread, does far more evil than the sword. Now this is a type of mortal combat, when people are banded against one another in sects and when there are heresies in the church, in which eventually one reaches the point of action and swords. After one has waged a verbal debate and has grown even more obstinate and then takes even more license, it is necessary to remedy the situation with arms.

Well, be that as it may, these things must still happen, as St. Paul says: "It is necessary that there be heresies," so that all who are solid and have true zeal might be approved by God, who thereby gives them a mark by which people can recognize that there was no hypocrisy when they declared themselves to be Christians. It is also necessary that from time to time there be controversies and debates, even to the point of killing one another, as we see in the statement of St. Paul when he says that he will carry on amid seditions. When he speaks of debates and strife, he holds that up as a mirror to us of the universal condition of all Christians. He says that he was not able to avoid seditions and quarrels. Now that is a terrible word, and we should detest it--not without cause. Even so it was still necessary that St. Paul who was of a docile and patient spirit, should experience that. Why? Because the devil never ceases to incite and inflame all his followers to do battle; so much so that the Gospel cannot be preached without fires being started, without troubles, battles, wars, and many calamities among those who claim to be the very people of God, as was the case in olden days.

Let us not be astonished therefore if this takes place in our own times. For however horrible a thing it is to hear that only three hundred faithful men are dead and that they bear the name of God, still

we must not conclude that Joab did wrong in fighting against Abner and his army. It is true that he did wrong when he consented to this ridiculous game, but still it was right for him to take up arms. And why? The fight was good and just and approved by God. It would have been by no means proper for David to give up his right to the crown and to fail to go forward when God had given him his hand. Now then are we to condemn those who fight not merely under a mortal man, but for the truth of God, for his service, for the pure religion, for the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ?

Therefore, let us note well when there are wars inside the church, that even if the matter is wrong in itself, still that does not mean that one should judge confusedly by considering both parties in the same class or as wrapped up together in the same bundle. That would be a failure to discern properly. And even when there are two opposing camps in the church, if one is opposing the truth of God in order to overthrow it and the other holds to the good so that it may always follow what is commanded; it is certain that whoever is neutral will be a traitor and disloyal. For it is not a matter of pursuing a compromising position when we see one side fight for the name of God and indeed for the cause of our salvation, and yet we keep our arms crossed. Nor are we to be in the position of knowing how to use our tongue to speak evil and yet not daring to utter a word to maintain the honour of God. So today there are many who would like to be neutral in the midst of all these troubles. They think: Very well, I do not want to be involved on one side or the other. I will wait and see who is going to be the strongest and is more likely to win. So it is a matter (for believers) of becoming as deeply involved as possible. Therefore be it far from us to condemn those who follow the good party. So much then for this exhortation.

Nonetheless, let us try to carry on peaceably as far as we can and to pursue brotherhood insofar as possible. For the love of Joab is shown here to be worthy of praise, when he had compassion on his poor brethren. Even though those people of old with the exception of the tribe of Judah were his enemies, nevertheless he treats them kindly, keeping in mind the fact that God had chosen them to be his heritage along with the others. When therefore he took that into consideration, he was moved with pity towards them. And hence even when we do battle for the cause of God, still let us seek every good and essential reconciliation, but not these hollow reconciliations. For it would be much better for everything to be lost than to act falsely in any way whatsoever, so that the service of God above all might retain wholeness as the pure religion. This is better even than sparing the lives of men, and indeed the whole world. And when things are going against us, still the service of God must be put first so that it may retain its wholeness and not be diminished in the least.

But when we see poor folk scattered, let us not fail to pray to the Lord that he will be pleased to build up his flock; in other words, that he would inspire those who today are given over to evil and who nevertheless belong to him because of his secret decree and are to serve him along with us. Let us pray that they will be made ready for this sacred union with us, and be dedicated to the name of his son our Lord Jesus Christ; that they will be joint soldiers with us in his defense,

and that nevertheless human blood will be spared. Now that is what we must remember from this story of the killing of three hundred and eighty men who were destroyed from the family of Israel. That is why it was called a great and grievous defeat, because they were descendants of the line of Abraham, and because God had given them the mark of his adoption.

Well, finally it states that Joab returned to David, and Abner went to him whom he called and ordained to be his master--Ishboseth in Gibeon. Now this shows us that Abner admitted he was beaten. For when he retreats with a much larger army than Joab, and slinks away like a dog with his tail between his legs; that, I say, is a confession which shows how much he realized he was defeated. But even so, he still does not return to and subject himself to David. He always seeks to retreat only in order to go forward even more. Hence we see that hypocrites, even when they are beaten down in themselves, will never fail at any time to throw up their pride and to be obstinate in their malice. Thus they will not change under any conditions, in spite of any good appearance they may put on, as long as this rancor is eating them up.

Now the wicked can certainly tremble, and especially when God pursues them. In that case even if they have no enemies here below, their own shadow can frighten them and then they see how God is pressing in on them and thus do not know which way to turn. And yet does that mean they will return to the right way? Not at all. But they are always there in their hole and caves, filled with treason. When they remain hidden, it is to cover up their venom and to do this and that according to their own desire and wicked intention, and to cause fires which afterwards will declare and demonstrate their presence. Now that is how all those behave once they have joined themselves together against God. And even when they are overcome by force, that does not mean they will remain peaceable, nor that they will want to submit themselves, nor lay down their arms. Indeed they will do worse than ever if they can.

Concerning Joab, it was a praiseworthy thing that he returned to Hebron with David. For that was to see if there were any way David could reign, as God had decreed. It showed he had no regard to the matter of personal benefit or profit in who should reign, but he was concerned with the mutual benefit of the whole people--that they would not be harmed. That is why Joab is to be praised.

Therefore, let us note that however much the wicked will never cease to be enemies against God; still if we seek the reign of our Lord Jesus Christ--that all people should be given over to his obedience; God will bless that. For we cannot exterminate all the wicked from this world. It is impossible, and indeed what would it accomplish? Then let us attempt to reform all those who are not totally incorrigible, and at the same time leave the others to the judgment of God. For all punishments cannot be given now. It is true that those who are in charge of justice ought to punish those who inhabit their land and country. Nevertheless when one has done all one's duty, one must realize that there will be wicked who remain among the good; so that the church of God will always have to fight either with weapons or verbal disputations.

Let us therefore endeavour, as far as possible, to put far away from us all that could corrupt us, and let us concentrate all our thoughts and energy on our Lord Jesus Christ having his authority. Let our aim be that everyone would do him homage and recognize him as sovereign; that everyone would submit to him. While we are confessing our worthiness of eternal death, nevertheless we will not be so horrified by it that we will despair and flee from his presence. Rather in true repentance we can avoid the dangers to which we have been exposed, and instead embrace his mercy as he is pleased to offer it to us by his word. Now it is certain that we would be traitors if we did not fight both for his name and for our salvation, as I have already said, with those whom he has taken under his banner. But I am speaking now in general, that we should flee combats as far as possible, and follow the example of Joab which is set before us here. Even so, we have no other refuge than our king, the son of the living God, for whom we should hold back nothing, whether it be goods or our lives and everything that God has given us.

Now we must carefully note this point that Joab came to Hebron to have fellowship with David. Well the papists and enemies of God would certainly like to make peace with us in such a way that they would then be able to dissipate us, so we would no longer know what it means to be on David's side, nor what the pure religion is. That is what they are attempting. Well, we must withstand such malice in all cases, and above all have no concord nor understanding with them. We must not listen to them nor even regard their practices as far as consenting to them is concerned. But when we have made a judgment concerning them in accordance with what the word of God teaches us, let us make use of this judgment as we have been taught, so that we will always hold fast to our Lord Jesus, our captain and our head. That is to say, let us hold on to the doctrine of his Gospel that he may govern with all authority, and exercise his sovereign empire upon his church, so as to maintain it and that he may govern us by his word.

When we have done that, I say, if there are some who wish to perish, then let them perish. But be that as it may, at least on our part let us not perish because of our own cowardice. Instead let us embrace his promises so we can be firmly grounded on them. And when we see that we will be attacked from every side and that he will find no way by which to rescue us, when it seems that heaven and earth are against us, nevertheless let us be assured of our good cause, let us bravely follow David--not the one who was a temporal king but our Lord Jesus Christ, the sovereign king. He has taken us under his protection and to him all power is given by God his Father, with the result that when we are his obedient people, as the Psalm says, he will distribute to us our necessary and sufficient portion. He will do this even as we place our neck beneath his yoke, in order to say: Here am I, O Lord! everytime and always when he calls us to his service.

Now let us prostrate ourselves before the majesty of our good God, recognizing all our faults, praying that he will make us feel them so much that it will cause us more and more to be displeased with ourselves. Let us pray that in our afflictions and in all battles he will give us an invincible constancy, so we may walk the narrow path

according to his word and rest ourselves totally on him, and make no compromise with the wicked when we are aware of their cruelty and craft. At the same time may we have pity upon them without deviating from what is taught us by our Lord. Thus may we always be at his disposal and totally dedicated to his glory, so we will never deviate nor turn from our vocation, in any way.

And may he show this grace not only to us, etc.