

Conflict

Once there were two men who lived in a small village. They ended up in a long and terrible conflict that they could not resolve. They decided they would turn to the town sage, who was known for his great wisdom in solving conflicts.

The first man went alone to the sage's house and told his version of what happened. When he finished, the sage said, "You're absolutely right." He walked out with a broad grin, glad that he had been vindicated.

The next night, the second man went to the sage's home and told his version of events. The sage listened, nodded, and said, "You're absolutely right." The man went out, grinning, glad that he had been vindicated.

Once he was gone, the sage's wife came in and scolded her husband. "Those men told you two different stories and you told them they were absolutely right. That's impossible -- they can't both be absolutely right." The sage turned to his wife and said, "You're absolutely right."

We would probably doubt that such a man is a sage, except at making himself popular. Because in a fallen world, with so many kinds of people, conflict is inevitable. No one can escape disagreements and even some level of conflict. People want different things, or have different ideas, or hold different priorities, and these clash. There is no marriage, no family, no church, no business, no society, and no country without some kind of conflict and difficulty.

Christians are not immune from this. We face our fair share, and sometimes create our fair share. To be Christian does not mean to avoid conflict or disagreement at all costs. Jesus said that ³⁴ "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. (Matt. 10:34)

We don't live in a different world, but we do have a totally different approach to conflict. Christians are neither to be milksops who play dead at the first sign of trouble, nor wide-eyed hooligans on speed looking for a fight. We are living in a world of sinful conflict, and it is our task to bring the gospel that will all at once increase some conflict, while bringing lasting peace. It is our job to contend earnestly for the faith, without becoming contentious. We are to fight to good fight while being peacemakers. We are to take up the whole armour of God, but as much as it lies within us to live peaceably with all men.

The world follows the satanic view of life: throw more power at the problem, overwhelm others with your strength, and then take what you want. The Christlike view of life is the opposite: don't cling to your rights or ambitions, give yourself in service to others, and the love of God will overcome. It's Romans 12:21 ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

If this sounds impossible, it is only because we do not often see the power of the gospel, and the power of Christ to solve conflict in this unexpected, unusual way.

In 2 Samuel chapters 2, 3, and 4, we enter a sad scene played out thousands of times in human history: a power struggle filled with sinful conflict. The Bible doesn't spare us the ugly details of the corruption and betrayal and backstabbing and bribery because as the saying goes, even the best of men are men at best. David may have been the best human king of Israel, but he was at best, a human king. Having said that, David's behaviour in these chapters, for the most part stands in contrast to the wicked behaviour of those around him.

These three chapters explain how David goes from outcast general to king of all Israel in the space of seven years.

To understand these chapters, we have to know the cast of characters, and there are four main ones. The easiest way to remember them is to remember that there were two kings and two generals. The two kings are David, who is king only over Judah, and Ishbosheth, the youngest son of Saul, who reigns over the other tribes. We know David well already, but we only come to learn about Ishbosheth in these chapters. He turns out to be a weak, cowardly man, unfit to rule, and easily manipulated or intimidated.

The two generals are Joab and Abner, both of whom are related to the kings they serve. Joab is actually David's nephew, and he fights for David, while Abner is Ishbosheth's uncle and he supports him. Both Joab and Abner are powerful strongmen, who are willing to do evil so as to win. In fact, both of them are the kind of man that you wish you could fire, but they know too much and do too much and control too much to be able to let them go.

Warren Wiersbe said, "We have weak people like Ish-Bosheth, who get where they are because they have "connections." We have strong, selfish people like Joab and Abner, who know how to manipulate others for their own personal profit. We also have people of God like David who are called, anointed, and equipped but must wait for God's time before they can serve."

As we walk through these three chapters, you could call this "An Anatomy of Sinful Conflict". Through five major events, we can see how sinful conflict takes shape, while seeing how David provides the godly alternative.

I. Promotion

2 Samuel 2:1 And it came to pass after this, that David enquired of the LORD, saying, Shall I go up into any of the cities of Judah? And the LORD said unto him, Go up. And David said, Whither shall I go up? And he said, Unto Hebron. ² So David went up thither, and his two wives also, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess, and Abigail Nabal's wife the Carmelite. ³ And his men that were with him did David bring up, every man with his household: and they dwelt in the cities of Hebron. ⁴ And the men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah. (2 Sam. 2:1-4)

After hearing of the death of Saul, David knows he can emerge from living in Philistine cities and come out of hiding. But notice, he doesn't make a mad dash for where Saul was reigning. Instead, he humbly asks God for direction, undoubtedly using the Urim and Thummim that Abiathar the priest carried. David is not propelled by selfish ambition, but by a desire to fulfill God's will for his life.

God directs David to go to Hebron, one of the most prominent cities in the tribe of Judah, where Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are buried. There David is anointed by the elders of Judah. This is David's second anointing. He was anointed by Samuel 15 years earlier.

Right now, only Judah accepts him as king, and he is king over Judah for seven years. Overall David will reign for 40 years: 7, over Judah, the remaining 33 over all Israel.

Once on the throne, and to extend the olive leaf to all, he sends messages of commendation to those men of Jabesh-Gilead who rescued the bodies of Saul and his sons.

In the meantime, someone else is anointed king by someone else.

⁸ But Abner the son of Ner, captain of Saul's host, took Ishbosheth the son of Saul, and brought him over to Mahanaim; ⁹ And made him king over Gilead, and over the Ashurites, and over Jezreel, and over Ephraim, and over Benjamin, and over all Israel. (2 Sam. 2:8-9)

Whereas David is told by the Lord to go to Hebron, and there anointed, Ishbosheth is told by another man that he must be king. Abner, his uncle, takes Ishbosheth, and anoints him king over the rest of Israel.

Contrast these two anointings, and forecast which one is going to succeed. ⁶ For exaltation comes neither from the east nor from the west nor from the south. ⁷ But God is the Judge: He puts down one, And exalts another. (Ps. 75:6-7)

But promotion of one is a seed-bed for envy in another. And at the root of so much conflict is envy.

¹⁶ For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. (Jas. 3:16)

II. Selfish Ambition

¹² Now Abner the son of Ner, and the servants of Ishbosheth the son of Saul, went out from Mahanaim to Gibeon. ¹³ 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.

¹⁴ Then Abner said to Joab, "Let the young men now arise and compete before us." And Joab said, "Let them arise." 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ So there was a very fierce battle that day, and Abner and the men of Israel were beaten before the servants of David. (2 Sam. 2:12-17)

On an appointed day, Joab with men from David's army, meet up with Abner and men from Ishbosheth's army. They meet at the pool of Gibeon, which is still there to this day. Abner then challenges Joab to a kind of representative warfare, rather like when David and Goliath represented their armies. Twelve men from each army will face off, and at the given signal, each pair grabs at the other, and no surprise, all 24 are killed at once. Even in fairly modern warfare, some craziness like this took place. Some battles in the 19th century would have the opposing armies line up opposite each other, and when the command was given, each fired at his opponent across the way, and both front lines were killed.

Well after this senseless death match, Abner's forces retreat, while Joab's forces pursue them. One of Joab's brothers, Asahel sees general Abner running away, and decides to pursue him. Abner wants Asahel to stop pursuing him, and warns him to stop but he doesn't. Finally Abner makes a kind of dead-stop, and with the other side of his spear, thrusts it backwards. Asahel runs right into it, and it goes through him. Joab probably sees and runs past the dead body of his brother and keeps pursuing Abner. Finally, at nightfall, Abner and his men make a stand on a hill. There Abner calls out to Joab to call off the pursuit. Joab agrees, and a day's senseless violence is over. Nineteen of David's men are killed; 360 of Abner's men.

But that's just the beginning of a civil war fought over the next two years, where the kingdom is divided. In fact, David will face another civil war later in life, when his son Absalom rebels.

But who is noticeably absent in these events? David, and Ishbosheth. The ones causing the conflict are two very ambitious men – their generals. Joab is betting on his uncle David, and Abner is betting on his nephew Ishbosheth. These are the men whose ambitions stir the pot, and urge the men they say they serve into war. Sinful conflict always requires the presence of sinful people. Those sinful people simply have to have a cause, and the fight will go on.

Pro 13:10 By pride comes nothing but strife, But with the well-advised is wisdom.

James 4:1 Where do wars and fights *come* from among you? Do *they* not *come* from your *desires for* pleasure that war in your members? ² You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. (Jas. 4:1-2)

James tells us that the source of conflict is not the supposed issue we say we're fighting about. The source of conflict is not the problem we say we're trying to solve. The real source of conflict are our dark and sinful desires. We want something, and our pride magnifies our wants. We go from desiring to win or be in control, or be right, or not be blamed, and we turn a desire into a need (or a "right"), and from there into a demand. Once we make our demand, we must quarrel with others who won't give us what we demand. But the conflict doesn't come from the external problem: it comes from sinful lust to have my own way.

The Bible is clear, at the heart of sinful conflict is pride: proud demands that my wishes be honoured. Selfish ambition to be first, to be right, to be vindicated, to be in control, to be thanked, to be admired. Once selfish ambition is in play, sinful conflict is inevitable.

Of course, when sinful pride is dominating, it will soon grow, develop, and often turn on the ones it claims it was serving.

III. Defection

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?" 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. 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." (2 Sam. 3:7-12)

In chapter 3, David gets stronger, while *Ishbosheth* grows weaker. David sadly copies Oriental kings and takes multiple wives, so as to forge alliances and show forth his strength. But this is something God expressly told Israelite kings not to do in Deuteronomy 17.

We do not know if Abner did what *Ishbosheth* accused him of. In Oriental culture, if someone took a wife or a concubine from a dead or a deposed king, it was a way of inserting yourself as king. Years later, David's son Adonijah asks for his father's concubine as a wife, and Solomon realises that he is trying to sneak onto the throne. We don't know if Abner did this. It could be that he saw how weak *Ishbosheth* was, and saw the kingdom slipping away, and thought to make himself king, or it could be that he was falsely accused. Verse 6 says he was tightening his hold on the house of Saul.

Regardless of whether or not it was true, when *Ishbosheth* makes the accusation, Abner is furious, and threatens to now support David instead. He does just that: he defects to David's side, offering to now campaign on David's behalf. Here is a man who has been fighting a civil war against David, and after one argument, is now willing to switch sides.

In the rest of the verses of the chapter, we read that David agrees to Abner's offer, but makes one condition. His first wife, Michal, must be returned to him. Why did David want this? First, it was a public humiliation and disgrace that Saul had given her to another man once David had already married her. Perhaps David still loved her. And politically, it would be a way of asserting power

over the house of Saul, just as Abner may have been trying to do.

Amazingly, Ishbosheth, who is Michal's brother agrees to this, and sends her off to David, with her second husband Paltiel walking behind her weeping.

Once this is done, Abner and twenty men join David for a feast, and there Abner makes this promise:

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. (2 Sam. 3:21)

Abner begins campaigning for David.

Here is the takeaway: when people are controlled by selfish ambition, you can expect their loyalty to be as corrupt as their ambitions.

1Co 3:3 for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?

Sin doesn't just taint one thing; when sin enters the picture, it taints everything. The person who claims to be crusading for some righteous cause and splits the church he is in, inevitably has a falling out with his own group, and more splits follow. The person who leaves one church disgruntled finds that he brought one thing with him to his next church: his sinful heart, and soon the same problems begin manifesting. The spouse who feels justified in betraying their spouse finds themselves in a new marriage and soon, the temptation to betray this one is there again – only this time it seems easier to do.

The person who claims everyone has been against her, and everyone has persecuted her, and everyone has misunderstood her finds solace in the arms of a boyfriend with a Messiah-Therapist complex. But when they are married, he finds to his horror that that spiral of people she blames closes in, and now he is the source of all her problems, he is the one who ruined her life.

Unless sin is dealt with, it just finds another target, another host, another one to blame. Unless you deal with the pride in your own heart, you will just take that with you to the next person, the next relationship, the next church you are in.

Pro 26:21 As charcoal is to burning coals, and wood to fire, So is a contentious man to kindle strife.

¹⁰ Cast out the scoffer, and contention will leave; Yes, strife and reproach will cease. (Prov. 22:10)

Selfish ambition, defection now develops further with Joab.

IV. Deception

At the time of the feast, Joab was apparently away on some raid. When he comes back, he hears that David has hosted Abner. Joab cannot believe that Abner is actually now loyal to David, and he still wants revenge for the death of his brother. He rebukes David for hosting Abner, claims he is really spying on David. He secretly sends messengers after Abner to bring him back to Hebron.

Possibly Joab not only wants revenge, but is afraid David might choose Abner over him as his general, and that he will lose his job. So Joab, by stealth, deception, and treachery, gets Abner back to Hebron.

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.

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. (2 Sam. 3:27-30)

David immediately distances himself from this. He pronounces a curse on Joab's house. He then tears his clothes, mourned Abner, and led the funeral, where he made a public lament over Abner, like he had done for Saul.

He also refuses to eat, and fasts that day. The result is that people understand that this treachery was not David's doing.

³⁶ Now all the people took note *of it*, and it pleased them, since whatever the king did pleased all the people.

³⁷ For all the people and all Israel understood that day that it had not been the king's *intent* to kill Abner the son of Ner. ³⁸ Then the king said to his servants, "Do you not know that a prince and a great man has fallen this day in Israel? ³⁹ "And I *am* weak today, though anointed king; and these men, the sons of Zeruah, *are* too harsh for me. The LORD shall repay the evildoer according to his wickedness."

(2 Sam. 3:36-39)

What does David mean by these last lines? It is not that he is too weak for Joab. It is that he finds himself as a believer dwelling among unbelievers. He has to work with them. Once you hire a thug, it's difficult to do business with him, but it's also difficult to do business without him. David needs someone to lead the army. In fact, he fires Joab twice, this is the first time, and years later he replaces him with Amasa (whom Joab promptly murders as well). David by his words, his actions is distancing himself from the pride and selfish ambition of Joab.

David's psalms often sing of how he feels like a dove wanting to fly away from oppressors, how the wicked seem like prowling dogs to him. As a believer, he has been given a gentleness of heart, a meekness that is not weakness, but a desire to make peace, and avoid selfish ambition with all its striving.

Your family, your career, and even your church might sometimes have to deal with the ugliness of how unbelievers behave: lies, betrayal, treachery, backstabbing, predation. But always the believer must distance himself from this in heart, and attitude. Always and without fail we must say: we will be as gentle as doves and as wise as serpents. We will contend for the faith, we will fight the good fight, we will defend what must be defended, but we cannot become what unbelievers become. We disdain and disown the way they act.

Someone once said, "Never wrestle with a pig. You'll both get dirty, and besides, the pig enjoys it."

Paul expects a different standard from believers: ³ for you are still carnal. For where *there are* envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like *mere* men? (1 Cor. 3:3)

2Co 12:20 For I fear lest, when I come... there be contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, whisperings, conceits, tumults;

In fact, James tells us what the origin is of relationships like that:

¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. ¹⁵ This wisdom does not descend from above, but *is* earthly, sensual, demonic.

But there is one more sad part of this sordid tale.

V. Destruction

2 Samuel 4:1 When Saul's son heard that Abner had died in Hebron, he lost heart, and all Israel was troubled. ² Now Saul's son *had* two men *who were* captains of troops. The name of one was Baanah and the name of the other Rechab, the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, of the children of Benjamin. (2 Sam. 4:1-2)

⁵ Then the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, Rechab and Baanah, set out and came at about the heat of the day to the house of Ishbosheth, who was lying on his bed at noon. ⁶ And they came there, all the way into the house, *as though* to get wheat, and they stabbed him in the stomach. Then Rechab and Baanah his brother escaped.

⁷ For when they came into the house, he was lying on his bed in his bedroom; then they struck him and killed him, beheaded him and took his head, and were all night escaping through the plain. (2 Sam. 4:5-7)

Two of Abner's captains in Saul's army were named Rechab and Baanah. Once they hear that their general is dead, they think they can secure jobs for themselves in David's army by killing Ishbosheth. Ishbosheth by this time has basically given up; he is too weak to even go on. Likely he would have simply conceded to David, had he been given time.

But these two men sneak into Ishbosheth's house during the heat of the day, and kill him while he is sleeping. They behead him, and then travel all the way down to David with his head, thinking that David will rejoice and reward them.

Here is the awful fruit of sowing to the flesh: reaping corruption and death. Keep sowing more and more sin, and the harvest becomes worse and worse. Here, it culminates in more murder and barbarism.

Paul gives us an obvious cause-and-effect of sin and sinful conflict: ¹⁵ But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another! (Gal. 5:15)

Quite simply: keep sinning against others in sinful conflict, then don't be surprised if the conflict ends up taking you down, and you succumb to your wounds. I've sometimes had to say to warring people in a counseling session: do you understand that if you get your way in this conflict, all you will have is destruction on both sides. Is that what you want? Is it so important to you to win, that you can't see you are losing in the process? You are cutting off your nose to spite your face.

If the taste in your mouth in your marriage, in your workplace, in your home is bitter, perhaps you are adding more fleshliness, more selfishness, more pride. Only repentance and Christlikeness can bring the difference. David again distances himself from this and punishes their evil.

⁹ But David answered Rechab and Baanah his brother, the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, and said to them, "As the LORD lives, who has redeemed my life from all adversity,

¹⁰ "when someone told me, saying, 'Look, Saul is dead,' thinking to have brought good news, I arrested him and had him executed in Ziklag-- the one who *thought* I would give him a reward for *his* news.

¹¹ "How much more, when wicked men have killed a righteous person in his own house on his bed? Therefore, shall I not now require his blood at your hand and remove you from the earth?"

¹² So David commanded his young men, and they executed them, cut off their hands and feet, and hanged *them* by the pool in Hebron. But they took the head of Ishbosheth and buried *it* in the tomb of Abner in Hebron. (2 Sam. 4:9-12)

Joab and Abner were characterised by selfish ambition, deception, desertion, treachery, revenge, brutality. In these chapters, David surrendered his ambitions to the Lord, had no part in the feuding generals' actions, was willing to shake hands with his adversary, abhorred the murderous and

treacherous behaviour of both Joab and Rechab and Rimmon. David looks more like His descendant the Lord Jesus, who laid down His right to be worshipped and honoured so as to die for our sins. He did not cling to His honour, but emptied Himself, and taking the form of a bondservant, *and* coming in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of* death, even the death of the cross. (Phil. 2:7-8)

As you think about your life and your relationships, ask yourself, which does mine resemble more? Does it sound like Joab and Abner – selfish ambition, striving, deception, rivalry, anger, revenge? Or is it more like the Lord Jesus, and his human ancestor, David: trusting in God's will, refusing revenge, seeking peace, honouring fallen enemies, disdaining all treachery, malice and backstabbing, i.e. being as gentle as doves and as wise as serpents?