

1 Kings 2:26b–34

Abiathar, Joab, and the Peace of the Throne

Scripture Reading: 1 Kings 2:26b–34

“And unto Abiathar the priest said the king, Get thee to Anathoth, unto thine own fields, for thou art worthy of death. But I will not at this time put thee to death, because thou bearest the ark of the Lord God before David my father, and because thou hast been afflicted in all wherein my father was afflicted. So Solomon thrust out Abiathar from being priest unto the Lord, that he might fulfil the word of the Lord which he spake concerning the house of Eli in Shiloh.

Then tidings came to Joab, for Joab had turned after Adonijah, though he turned not after Absalom. And Joab fled unto the tabernacle of the Lord, and caught hold on the horns of the altar. And it was told king Solomon that Joab was fled unto the tabernacle of the Lord, and, behold, he is by the altar. Then Solomon sent Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, saying, Go, fall upon him. And Benaiah came to the tabernacle of the Lord, and said unto him, Thus saith the king, Come forth. And he said, Nay, but I will die here.

And Benaiah brought the king word again, saying, Thus said Joab, and thus he answered me. And the king said unto him, Do as he hath said, and fall upon him, and bury him, that thou mayest take away the innocent blood which Joab shed from me and from the house of my father. And the Lord shall return his blood upon his own head, who fell upon two men more righteous and better than he, and slew them with the sword, my father David not knowing thereof, to wit, Abner the son of Ner, the captain of the host of Israel, and Amasa the son of Jether, captain of the host of Judah.

Their blood shall therefore return upon the head of Joab, and upon the head of his seed for ever. But upon David, and upon his seat, and upon his house, and upon his throne, shall there be peace for ever from the Lord. So Benaiah the son of Jehoiada went up, and fell upon him, and slew him. And he was buried in his own house in the wilderness.”

Abiathar — Worthy of Death, Yet Preserved

Abiathar the priest was the sole survivor of the massacre at Nob — all his relatives were slain by Doeg the Edomite in the days of King Saul. When he escaped, he fled to David before David was king. David said to him: “Abide thou with me, fear not, for he that seeketh my life seeketh thy life; for with me thou shalt be in safeguard.” So it was in cleaving to David, in staying with him, that Abiathar found his safety.

Solomon in his wisdom tells him: “Thou art worthy of death.” That had been, in a sense, true of him all along — King Saul had thought so too. But as long as Abiathar was with David, he was safe. And the second part of what Solomon says is this: “because thou hast been afflicted in all wherein my father was afflicted.” This is somehow reminiscent of what David himself had said — “with me thou shalt be in safeguard.” His life was preserved on the grounds that he had been with David. All that David was afflicted with, this man was afflicted also.

But he fell away with Adonijah. A fatal mistake — fatal not in the sense of his life, for he was thrust out rather than slain, but thrust out from being priest unto the Lord. Verse 27 notes that this was to fulfil the word of the Lord concerning the house of Eli in Shiloh. The house of Eli was not from the line of Phinehas. God had made known his choice back in the Pentateuch — his covenant with Phinehas, that the priesthood was to run through that line. Meanwhile the line of Ithamar had come in, of which was the house of Eli, and God had pronounced judgment upon Eli. Now this was coming to its correction point under this great

type of Solomon as the prince of peace.

The word of God's government on the house of Eli took a long time to be fulfilled, but it was sure, and finally came. No matter how ever so long, so it will be with all the ancient prophecies. Everything will be brought to a head under Christ when his time comes. And if Zadok the priest had had any ambition to be high priest and replace Abiathar, there is not a hint of it in Scripture. It is a picture of quietly going on, waiting for God to set all things right.

The Pattern — First Man Fails, Christ Makes Good

There is a pattern running through all of Scripture that is really its warp and woof. God shows his mind about some particular blessing. It gets into the hands of the first man, and he fails. Then Christ takes it up and makes it good. Even in the types, this comes out before the final fulfillment. The order is established here in type — Zadok is put in Abiathar's place — pointing to what will be made good in fact when the Lord is on the throne. For Ezekiel 40–48 says three times that the sons of Zadok shall minister before Jehovah in the millennium. This Zadok must be of the line of Phinehas, so that the covenant of the everlasting priesthood is made good to Phinehas for his faithfulness in the matter of Cozbi and Zimri.

When we become conscious of this pattern, we see more and more of the unfolding of God's ways with man throughout Scripture. And it calls for patience. The general subject of chapter 2 is the government of God in the hands of Solomon. And in connection with the government of God there is always the testing — the opportunity for the display of patience, waiting for God to do his perfect work.

To give some weight to this: in the roughly four hundred years between the close of the Old Testament writing and the Lord's coming into the world, there were men who sought and obtained the position of high priest in Israel by some of the

ugliest political maneuvering and fleshly corruption in Israel's history. The high priest, at the beginning when God set it up, held his office for life. But alternating high priests had come in under foreign power — man's expedience instead of God's will. Consider what that would do to the manslayer who had gone to the city of refuge and was to remain there until the death of the high priest: instead of one high priest, there were two alternating. What confusion in his circumstances. That has the same kind of flavor as the cart the Ark was carried on — man's expedience instead of God's appointed order.

Joab and the Horns of the Altar

It is hard to know what Joab had in mind in laying hold of the horns of the altar. Some pretension to innocence, perhaps. But in Exodus 21:14 there was already a clear word from the Lord on precisely this matter: "But if a man come presumptuously upon his neighbor to slay him with guile, thou shalt take him from mine altar, that he may die." Is that not Joab? Did he not come with one hand to Amasa as if to embrace him, while the sword was in his other hand — and Amasa took no heed? That scripture in Exodus looks forward to the case of Joab with a very accurate precision. God's Word anticipates everything. As Jeremiah said, it is the Lord alone who can know the depths of the heart; he tries the reins.

God certainly was not going to have his altar used for the protection of a murderer. No matter what ploy is adopted, it does not change the outcome. Remember Agag, who came gingerly to Samuel, thinking that surely the bitterness of death had passed. Samuel hewed him in pieces before the Lord that day. So here, Solomon is not moved by the fact that Joab laid hold of the horns of the altar. All the worse for him, in fact — for what the altar speaks of and what Joab stands for are diametrically opposed to one another. There were two altars in the tabernacle — the altar of burnt offering and the altar of incense. If one thinks of either of those two altars, and Joab's hands, and the blood on those

hands from the murders he committed, and those hands laid upon either altar, the soul recoils from imagining such a thing.

Benaiah — The Obedient Servant

Benaiah had an important post: he was over the Cherethites and the Pelethites, the king's bodyguard, carrying out the king's business very directly. And yet there was a much better-known position, the one that Joab held, which Benaiah was now going to come into. The king made use of him — one of David's chief men. And he displayed a notable characteristic of obedience: when Joab refused to come forth, Benaiah went back to consult the king. He asked for instruction and guidance when he did not know what to do. He did not act presumptuously; he asked. And he carried it out.

The king had authority in this matter. The priesthood came under the authority of the king when God's king was brought forth by God; it was not left to some priest to decide on the fate of Joab. There was in the law that the priest was to walk before the Lord's anointed, pointing forward to the combination of those two offices in the person of Christ himself, which will be true in the millennium, when he will be both the priest and the king. The throne of God is both the throne of God and of the Lamb.

Blood Upon Joab's Head; Peace Upon David's Throne

In 2 Samuel 3:28, when David heard of the murder of Abner, he said: "I and my kingdom are guiltless before the Lord forever from the blood of Abner the son of Ner. Let it rest on the head of Joab, and on all his father's house." So in Solomon's words here — "upon the head of Joab, and upon the head of his seed for ever" — he said no more than what David had said. It is another incident that shows the unity of purpose and will and judgment between David and Solomon. They were not contrary in their thoughts about Joab.

There is an implication in Solomon's judgment worth noticing: had Solomon not carried out the government of God on Joab, that guilt would have come on his own head. This is the weight of bearing governmental authority — every time something unrighteous is done, or left undone when it ought to have been judged, there is another mark for which account must be given. Romans says that rulers do not bear the sword in vain. The way to put the guilt of evil where it belongs is to judge it.

Verse 33 is one of those lovely verses that links Solomon to peace. We think of Solomon's reign as a reign of peace in Israel, and here is a pronouncement of it: "upon David, and upon his seat, and upon his house, and upon his throne, shall there be peace for ever from the Lord." The throne of David was eventually set aside due to failure — yet this passage looks on to when Christ will reign, and that is when this will be fulfilled in substance. Man's failure will not set this word aside; for everything where man fails, Christ takes it up and makes it good to God's glory.

Joab's House in the Wilderness

It is noted that Joab had a house in the wilderness (verse 34) — not in Jerusalem, the city that God had chosen to put his name. Many of the Psalms speak of Jerusalem in such elevated terms, of how excellent a thing it would be to have one's house there. But Joab's house was in the wilderness. This fits well the barrenness of his own soul toward anything spiritual. And we know from Scripture — from when Absalom said, "Set Joab's field of barley on fire, next to mine" — that Absalom also lived there. Joab and Absalom, neighbors in the barren land.

Revenge and ambition were the passions that moved Joab and determined what kind of man he was. He had been very crafty; he had not even fallen away with Absalom as noted in verse 28, and had gotten through that. And finally the day of

reckoning came. Men of that character rarely anticipate it; they go on as if they will have their way forever. But the day comes. “Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” It is not that there is no mercy with the Lord — that is another matter. But that is the law of human conduct, and Joab is a clear case of it.

Patience and Justice

The one who has been waiting the longest for justice is the Lord Jesus. When one thinks that he was God — very God, come into this world — and what was done to him: justice has not yet been done with respect to that thing. And look how long it has been taking. There is something within us that looks for justice — it is a natural thought. And yet we are here as Christians following one who has been cast out, upon whom the worst crime the world has ever seen was perpetrated. We are to pray for our enemies and those who spitefully use us — which goes against something within us. But that is what Scripture calls us to as followers of the Lord Jesus, knowing, however, that the terror of the Lord is real, and that the time of justice is certainly going to come. And so we read that “knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men” — we prefer to see them saved.

*“Worthy of death, O Lord, were we, And vengeance was our due; In
grace Thy spotless Lamb did bear Himself our sin and guilt and shame —
Justice, our Surety, slew. With Him, our Surety, we have died; With Him
we there were crucified.”*

Solomon told Abiathar: “Thou art worthy of death.” And we read that tonight. The language of that hymn takes those very words and turns them into an acknowledgment of what we ourselves deserved — and what our Surety bore on our behalf.

Worthy of death, O Lord, were we — and vengeance was our due.