

Joab's Revenge

2 Samuel 2:17-23, 3:20-30

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During our lives we inevitably get hurt by others, and the best way to get over that hurt is to forgive. However, forgiveness is often the hardest thing for us to do in these situations, even harder than suffering the offense in the first place. But failure to forgive can be damaging for our relationship with God (Matthew 5:23-24).

In today's passage we see that Joab, one of the main supporting characters in the story of David, failed to forgive a deep transgression, the killing of his brother Asahel by Abner. Joab and Abner are similar in many ways, which perhaps exacerbated their relationship. Both were related to the king. Joab was David's nephew and Abner was Saul's cousin. Both were great generals. Joab was the commander of David's army, and Abner was the general of Saul's. Both were fiercely loyal to their king. Joab was David's enforcer, ruthlessly eliminating David's enemies, even in contradiction to David's commands, as in the case of the killing of David's rebellious son, Absalom. Abner was Saul's closest advisor and body guard. Joab commanded the loyalty of David's army such that they would only move when he said so. He also supported Adonijah to succeed David rather than Solomon. Likewise Abner started a civil war between Judah and the other 11 tribes by supporting Saul's son, Ish-Bosheth, instead of David as king of Israel after Saul's death. We learn in 2 Samuel 2 that at the battle of Gibeon, Abner's forces were defeated. As Abner fled, Joab's brother Asahel pursued him. Abner warned the less experienced Asahel that he wouldn't win if they fought, but Asahel didn't relent. So Abner held out the blunt end of the spear and Asahel ran into it and died. Joab and his other brother Abishai pursued Abner until sundown. Then, exhausted, they agreed to go their own way. But Joab never let go of the grudge.

In 2 Samuel 3, Ish-Bosheth hears a rumor that Abner slept with Saul's concubine, which in those days was equivalent to seizing the throne. Abner is so indignant at this accusation that he decides to switch sides and support David. Despite Abner's previous loyalty to Ish-Bosheth, David welcomes Abner because he could bring the support of the other 11 tribes of Israel. Joab then confronts David about Abner. He doesn't even mention the death of Asahel, but rather objects on the pretense of being loyal (vv. 24-25). In reality, his objection has everything to do with his inability to forgive. This grudge fed his pride so that he thought he was so much better

than Abner. He questioned Abner's motives and accused him of being deceptive. Abner was experienced and could have made a good general, but because of Joab's pride he saw Abner as unfit. Holding on to grudges often leads to a superiority complex. In World War I and World War II propaganda we often see this effect, where the enemy is dehumanized. It's so natural for us to treat those who sin against us as less than human.

Not only did Joab's grudge feed his pride, but it also fed his selfishness. He claimed to be loyal to David, but time and time again he disobeyed David and justified his actions as being in David's best interest. But in fact Joab was only serving himself. Here in addition to the need to avenge Asahel's death, Joab feels threatened that Abner will surpass or replace Joab, so he kills him. We know this is one of Joab's motives because later he even kills his own cousin, Amasa, because he feels that his position is threatened. Joab's grudge gave him the excuse to act selfishly and pridefully. It led him to murder Abner, which was not lawful retribution because Asahel died in battle. Forgiveness means refusing to visit the hurt that someone else caused back upon them. Joab couldn't do this because his anger fed into his selfish pride and he didn't resist it.

So this leads to another ramification of an unforgiving heart, which is that it's contagious. David's curse in vv. 28-29 applies to Joab's whole family. And we know from other passages that Abishai is also implicated in Abner's death. This kind of hatred influences all those around, which is why we see feuds that last for decades and centuries.

Finally, an unforgiving heart brings God's justice upon you. In 1 Kings 2, David tells Solomon to execute Joab for murdering Abner and Amasa. When Solomon defeated Adonijah, Joab sought sanctuary in the Tabernacle, but Solomon had him killed anyway without fear of God's wrath. God allowed this to happen to show his harsh attitude towards the unforgiving. Matthew 6:14-15 says that those who don't forgive won't be forgiven. Romans 12:19 says that vengeance is God's alone. When we take vengeance, we are putting ourselves in God's place. When we demand judgment for others, God will judge us too, because He isn't partial. Those who seek vengeance don't know God's character. When Peter asks how many times we must forgive, Jesus says 77 times, which is a reference to Genesis 4, when Lamech says, after murdering someone for wounding him, that he will be avenged 77 times if anyone should harm him. This infinitely vengeful attitude of mankind is contrasted with God's infinitely forgiving heart.

So how can we forgive as God wants us to? First, trust in God's justice and let it free you from your hatred. God will take care of it; don't take things into your own hands. Second, understand just how much God forgave you. We all put Jesus on the cross, yet it was then that He asked God to forgive us, for we don't know what we do. Having been forgiven of all our sins, how can we not forgive other's sins against us?