

POWER STRUGGLE

**SERIES: A LIFE OF PASSION:
THE STORY OF DAVID.**



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2 Samuel 2:1-32
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What would life be like if the United States and the Allied forces had lost World War II? How would our lives be different if North America were the playing field in which Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan struggled to establish total control? How would a resistance movement survive in the midst of two ruthless powers? Can you imagine such a world?

That is the premise of a novel that has been turned into an Amazon TV series called *The Man in the High Castle*. It explores life in the United States as Germany and Japan maneuver to establish their dominance on American soil. It's a fascinating speculation of what life could be like if history had turned out differently.

I think that the reason this concept is so intriguing is that it combines two things we are afraid of. First, none of us likes to lose. As a country, we have a strong identity of being a winner. The idea of losing a major war like that is unthinkable to us. We don't want to imagine what it would have been like to lose.

Secondly, we are constantly involved in some kind of power struggle. We compete for position. We campaign for popularity. We strive to succeed. We are always fighting a battle. The struggle for power defines our culture.

Today we're continuing our preaching series on the life of David that we've called *A Life of Passion*. For most of the fall, we covered the last half of 1 Samuel, where David was discovered, anointed as king, and then ran as a fugitive from the current king over Israel, Saul.

Just before Christmas, we read of the death of Saul. The man who had pursued David and threatened his life was finally gone. But last week we saw David's response. Not celebration or gloating, but deep and meaningful grief. Our guest speaker, Brian Morgan, ushered us into the powerful process of biblical grief through the story of David's grief and his own experience.

This week, we pick up in 2 Samuel 2. The period of mourning has passed and it's time for David to move on. David had been anointed as king years earlier. Saul is gone. Could this be the moment that we have waited for through so many trials? Could David finally be crowned king?

Not exactly. It turns out there is a new challenge for David. Saul is gone, but there is another complication. Instead of becoming king, David faces a new power struggle. Today we enter into David's power struggle.

For the past several years of David's story, we've seen his incredible patience as he waits for God's promise to him to come true. We've seen him honor Saul as king even when Saul didn't act at all kingly. We've seen his steady trust in the face of persecution and oppression. Now we get to see how David responds when the kingship is so close at hand, but something else gets in his way.

First we'll see how David proceeds after Saul's death. He will be anointed over only one tribe of Israel. We'll learn something from his actions along the way. Then we'll see a rival appear. This king will eventually win, gaining control over most of Israel. But his path to the throne will also show us something important. Finally, we'll see what happens when these two powers clash and how each handles the ensuing power struggle.

It's a helpful story because these kinds of situations happen to us all the time. We think everything is going to work out our way and then something else happens. We butt heads with our bosses or our parents or our children or our friends. Little decisions become grand power struggles.

And, things like this can bring out the worse in us. How do we face into competition and challenge? How do we find God when losing seems like it might threaten our very identity? How do we trust in the midst of power struggles?

Let's see what we can learn from David.

David Becomes King Over Judah

Our story begins at an important moment in the life of Israel. The king (Saul) and most of his sons are dead. There is a power vacuum. As readers, we know that David is supposed to be the next king. We are rooting for him. The opening scene contains his response to the situation. He starts by asking for wisdom from God.

2 Samuel 2:1-4a:

After this David inquired of the LORD, “Shall I go up into any of the cities of Judah?” And the LORD said to him, “Go up.” David said, “To which shall I go up?” And he said, “To Hebron.” 2 So David went up there, and his two wives also, Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail the widow of Nabal of Carmel. 3 And David brought up his men who were with him, everyone with his household, and they lived in the towns of Hebron. 4 And the men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah.

David had been living among the Philistines in the city of Ziklag. He begins by asking God if now is the time where he should go back into Israel from his hiding place. The text says that he “inquired of the LORD.” That probably means he was asking questions of God and receiving yes or no answers.

God allowed him to move toward the center of the Promised Land to live in Hebron. He didn't pick this town by accident. This is a significant town in Israel's history. Hebron was the first place that Abram settled (Genesis 13:18). Abraham's wife Sarah (Genesis 23:2) and son Isaac (Genesis 35:27-29) both died there. It was given to Caleb as his possession when Israel finally settled the Promised Land (Joshua 14:13) and drove out the Canaanites. Hebron was a city with history.

Notice how aware David is of God's presence in his story. He begins by asking God's direction. And his actions show this deep connection to the story that came before him. David is part of God's story that began with Abraham and Isaac and went through Caleb so many generations ago. He realizes that the story of his kingship begins with God and the patriarchs. It follows through all that God has done in the nation and in David's life to get him to this place.

This awareness of his story as part of God's story informs his decisions and gives him direction. That becomes even clearer in David's first act as king.

2 Samuel 2:4b-7:

When they told David, “It was the men of Jabesh-gilead who buried Saul,” 5 David sent messengers to the men of Jabesh-gilead and said to them, “May you be blessed by the LORD, because you showed this loyalty to Saul your lord and buried him. 6 Now may the LORD show steadfast love and faithfulness to you. And I will do good to you because you have done this thing. 7 Now therefore let your hands be strong, and be valiant, for Saul your lord is dead, and the house of Judah has anointed me king over them.”

David discovers that the men of this particular city, Jabesh-Gilead, had honored Saul at his death. This was another town with history. Saul's first great act after he had been anointed king was to save this city from a raid by the Ammonites. That was one of the few highlights of Saul's reign—one of his great kingly acts. So it makes sense that the men feel a close connection to the fallen king.

David's first act as king is to reach out to these people of Jabesh-Gilead To let them know that he appreciates their treatment of Saul. And to include them in the news that he has been anointed king over Judah. David gently invites them to be part of the new history that God is writing with him as king.

It's a brilliant move by David. This is the ancient equivalent to “reaching across the aisle.” David is trying to consolidate his rule and build consensus among the people of God. He wants to win over Saul's biggest fans. This would give him a strong base from which to expand his kingship over the rest of Israel. This is savvy politics.

But his actions are also real and authentic. David isn't pretending. He's not trying to look like he cares about Saul and Jonathan for the sake of political advantage. He really does. We saw that last week as he wept over Saul and Jonathan. David is the real deal.

Here we see what has impressed us at various points along David's story: his incredible patience. He reaches out to these people because he is real in his concern for their grief. Informing them that he has been anointed king is an invitation, but nothing more. Even now, David is patient to see how all of this is going to play out.

David is connected to God's story that came before him. And he is patient to see that story play out in his life. What about you? Are you patient with God's story?

David had been anointed as king. He had been running for his life from Saul. Now Saul was dead. Now was his chance. But instead of charging ahead, David did everything right. He didn't just see what was before him. He didn't just see his own life and whatever circumstances he faced. He saw the breadth of what God was doing in the world. And he was aware that his part would play out however God wanted it to.

This prospective is one of the most disconcerting and disorienting things about living in the culture that we live in. We've lost the sense that we're part of a bigger story. We think that our story is the only one that is out there. We don't see any meaning in our suffering or beauty in our joy. Everything is just pleasure or pain because we're disconnected from what God is doing in the world.

Our lives are part of a larger story because of the people that came before us. We come into this world with a history. The church itself has a history. For two thousand years people have been following Jesus and seeing God work in the world. They have prayed and suffered and questioned and celebrated and wept. Some of that history is glorious. Some of it is appalling. But all of it is our story.

I've recently started reading a daily devotional called *Awakening Faith* that contains writings from the Church Fathers who wrote between the 1st and 9th centuries. I'm excited about it because I don't just want to know what following Jesus looks like in my life here and now. I want to know how I'm connected to the history of faithful men and women trying to follow Jesus throughout history.

PBC has its own history. Recently the elders and pastors gathered for a retreat, and this connection to the past was part of the question that we were considering. How do we honor the story that God has written in the past and look forward to who God is calling us to be in the future? What does it look like to be diligent in that, but patient with God's timing as well?

David is patient with God's story. But it doesn't take long for that patience to be tested. Soon, someone else comes around who mounts a power struggle against him. Let's see how that plays out.

Ish-bosheth Becomes King Over Israel

Remember that at this point only the tribe of Judah has anointed David as their king. David has tried to consolidate the kingdom under his reign by reaching out to Jabesh-Gilead. But he ends up being unsuccessful. There are other power dynamics at work among the remnants of Saul's court.

2 Samuel 2:8-11:

But Abner the son of Ner, commander of Saul's army, took Ish-bosheth the son of Saul and brought him over to Mahanaim, 9 and he made him king over Gilead and the Ashurites and Jezreel and Ephraim and Benjamin and all Israel. 10 Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, was forty years old when he began to reign over Israel, and he reigned two years. But the house of Judah followed David. 11 And the time that David was king in Hebron over the house of Judah was seven years and six months.

Abner was one of the commanders of Saul. Just as David takes action to respond to the power vacuum of Saul's death, Abner has the same idea. He installs Ish-bosheth as king, but this rival king is really just a puppet. Abner is the one who takes all of the action: he "takes" Ish-bosheth, "brings" him to Mahanaim, and "makes" him king. The story is about Abner, not Ish-bosheth.

The passage probably describes a progressive building of power. First Gilead, then the Ashurites, and eventually all of Israel. That process probably took about five years. This explains why Ish-bosheth's rule is only listed as lasting two years, while David's reign over Judah was over seven years. Abner is successful where David wasn't. Abner expands the rule of Ish-bosheth over most of the nation.

Abner chooses the city of Mahanaim as the capital for this new king. It's on the Eastern side of the Jordan River. Mahanaim wasn't originally part of the Promised Land. It was only added as a concession to a few tribes. Abner is taking God's people away from their history. His actions are completely separated from the storyline of God's work. He is acting on his own.

These two stories are meant to compare David and Ish-bosheth. But we can't even compare the two kings because Ish-bosheth is practically a non-character. The real comparison is between David and Abner.

David asked God what he should do. Abner charged ahead. David acted in line with the overall story of God. Abner was all about the moment. David showed sensitivity and grief to those who might have been rivals. Abner finds a puppet to act as king so that he can be the real power. He moves the capital far away and he ignores the overall plan of God. Abner was completely disconnected from the story of God.

David's story was part of God's story. Abner acted on his own. David was patient for the story of God to play out. Abner imposed his will on everyone around him. Who are you more like? Do you sometimes act like Abner? Do you act on your own?

To be fair, this is the way we are taught to act. We are trained in our culture to seize the moment. To look at what is happening right now and make the best decision to maximize whatever it is we want to get.

We are told that what we can see in front of us is the most important thing. I need to figure out my identity. I won't be satisfied unless I'm fulfilled in my career. I want to do things my way. It is my job to make my own happiness. It's all up to me. Abner is a model of this kind of thinking and behavior. He is a "live in the moment" kind of guy.

I remember one particular meeting that I attended when I was working in software development. It was between two teams and I wasn't aware of the tension between our two teams' directors. I had an idea that I was excited about. If you know me well, you know that I often get excited about ideas. I had sent out an email explaining my idea, but had received a critical and discouraging email from the other team's director.

I went into the meeting ready for conflict. I remember feeling like my whole life was on the line. I didn't know why my idea hadn't been more readily accepted. I was naïve to all the other politics in play. But I wanted to see things happen my way. Everything was at stake based on the outcome of this meeting.

I think this is what Abner was like. He was focused on his agenda. He wanted power. Things had to turn out his way.

David and Abner had very different approaches to the power vacuum left by Saul's death. Now there are two kings in Israel. But kings don't share well. A conflict is inevitable. As the story continues, we see how Abner's decision creates an unavoidable power struggle.

The Struggle for Power

Abner and his puppet, King Ish-bosheth, were progressively trying to expand their control over all of Israel. Eventually that would put David and his reign over the tribe of Judah in their sights. That's the next part of the story. Abner marches against David's men.

2 Samuel 2:12-17:

Abner the son of Ner, and the servants of Ish-bosheth 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 at the pool of Gibeon. And they sat down, the one on the one side of the pool, and the other on the other side of the pool. 14 And Abner said to Joab, "Let the young men arise and compete before us." And Joab said, "Let them arise." 15 Then they arose and passed over by number, twelve for Benjamin and Ish-bosheth the son of Saul, and twelve of the servants of David. 16 And each caught his opponent by the head and thrust his sword in his opponent's side, so they fell down together. Therefore that place was called Helkath-hazzurim, which is at Gibeon. 17 And the battle was very fierce that day. And Abner and the men of Israel were beaten before the servants of David.

The forces of Abner represent Ish-bosheth. Joab represents David. These two armies meet up at Gibeon. They are going to battle it out. But first, Abner's idea is to limit the bloodshed by choosing representatives to fight instead of the whole army. It's similar to what happened in the story of David and Goliath. But it fails: all 24 of these warriors die.

The subtext of the battle is an effort for unity. Twelve warriors for twelve tribes. One nation under one ruler. But it fails. Instead of unity, the result is violence and death. As the story continues, what happened on a large scale is then enacted on a personal level.

2 Samuel 2:18-23:

And the three sons of Zeruiah were there, Joab, Abishai, and Asahel. Now Asahel was as swift of foot as a wild gazelle. 19 And Asahel pursued Abner, and as he went, he turned neither to the right hand nor to the left from following Abner. 20 Then Abner looked behind him and said, "Is it you, Asahel?" And he answered, "It is I." 21 Abner said to him, "Turn aside to your right hand or to your left, and seize one of the young men and take his spoil." But Asahel would not turn aside from following him. 22 And Abner said again to Asahel, "Turn aside from following me. Why

should I strike you to the ground? How then could I lift up my face to your brother Joab?” 23 But he refused to turn aside. Therefore Abner struck him in the stomach with the butt of his spear, so that the spear came out at his back. And he fell there and died where he was. And all who came to the place where Asahel had fallen and died, stood still.

Asahel is the youngest brother of Joab. He is fast, but inexperienced as a warrior. He thinks he can chase down Abner and kill him. This would be a huge feat for the servants of David.

Abner, to his credit, knows that Asahel is no match for him. He tries to talk him out of fighting, but Asahel is determined. So Abner has no choice but to defend himself and kill Asahel. He uses an old military trick in which he stops in his tracks and uses the rear of his spear. Asahel's speed works against him and he impales himself and dies.

Abner knew that if he killed Asahel, his brother Joab would try to get revenge. That's exactly what happens next.

2 Samuel 2:24-28:

But Joab and Abishai pursued Abner. And as the sun was going down they came to the hill of Ammah, which lies before Giah on the way to the wilderness of Gibeon. 25 And the people of Benjamin gathered themselves together behind Abner and became one group and took their stand on the top of a hill. 26 Then Abner called to Joab, “Shall the sword devour forever? Do you not know that the end will be bitter? How long will it be before you tell your people to turn from the pursuit of their brothers?” 27 And Joab said, “As God lives, if you had not spoken, surely the men would not have given up the pursuit of their brothers until the morning.” 28 So Joab blew the trumpet, and all the men stopped and pursued Israel no more, nor did they fight anymore.

The brothers of Asahel try to avenge his death. They pursue Abner and his men, but Abner manages to find some high ground. He calls out, once again trying to limit the bloodshed. This time Abner succeeds. Joab realizes that a lot of people will die if he continues this chase. So he relents and turns away.

Each side returns to their home base.

2 Samuel 2:29-32:

And Abner and his men went all that night through the Arabah. They crossed the Jordan, and marching the whole morning, they came to Mahanaim. 30 Joab returned from the pursuit of Abner. And when he had gathered all the people together, there were missing from David's servants nineteen men besides Asahel. 31 But the servants of David had struck down of Benjamin 360 of Abner's men. 32 And they took up Asahel and buried him in the tomb of his father, which was at Bethlehem. And Joab and his men marched all night, and the day broke upon them at Hebron.

Abner goes back to Mahanaim. Joab and his men return to Hebron, but not before stopping at Bethlehem to bury Asahel. Overall, the servants of David won this battle—losing only 20 people to Abner's loss of 360. But the war isn't over. The death of Asahel hasn't been avenged. The battle between David and Ish-bosheth hasn't been decided. This rivalry has paused for the moment, but it hasn't stopped.

Think for a moment about how Abner is portrayed. He isn't the good guy here but we are sympathetic to him. Three times he does something to try and limit the bloodshed of battle. First Abner suggests the 12 young men fight as representatives. Then he tries to talk Asahel out of pursuing him. Finally he convinces Joab to discontinue the fight. Abner is constantly trying to reduce the casualties of this civil war.

But at the same time, Abner was the one who caused the war. He is the one who installed Ish-bosheth. He is the one that must have led the campaigns to consolidate the rest of Israel under his leadership. He is the one who initiates the battle with David's men.

Abner is a tragic character. He wants to reduce violence and destruction, but he is trapped by his own decisions. You can't be ignorant of the story of God; take things into your own hands; pursue your own agenda for the sake of gaining power, and then try to do it in the nicest possible way. That just doesn't work.

Abner wants to minimize his power struggle but he can't escape it. What about you? How do you handle a power struggle?

Ish-bosheth is absent from the power struggle. He's not even there. But that's only because he has no real power. Are you like that? Do you let other people do

all the leading and struggling? Do you avoid any power struggle because it's too complicated and messy to get involved with?

Or maybe you're like Abner. Maybe you like to charge right into it. Maybe you need to win. Everything has to go according to your plan. Often you are successful. People follow you. You lead well and you try to limit damage and hurt. But are you really going in the right direction?

David shows us a third option. He is patient with God's story. He doesn't act on his own. Something gives him the freedom not to engage. Not because he is afraid or uninvolved, but because he is safe.

It's the same way that the son of David would react one thousand years later. Read the dialog between Jesus of Nazareth and Pontius Pilate, the man who eventually ordered Jesus' execution in John 19:10-11. Pilate had asked Jesus where he was from and Jesus stayed silent.

So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?"
11 Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."

Jesus knew he was part of God's story. He didn't have to engage in a power struggle to prove it. All of Pilate's power came from his father anyway. He followed in the line of his ancestor, David. And Pilate saw that Jesus was a king. So that when he reluctantly gave the execution order, he also printed "Jesus, King of the Jews" above the cross. Pilate could see that Jesus was a king.

We want to be like David. We want to be patient. We want to be mature. We want to understand our place in God's story. We want to be confident that God is at work and wait for him. But sometimes we act more like Abner. Sometimes we charge forward. Sometimes there are consequences.

Where do we turn when our friendships turn into rivalries? How do we redeem a marriage that has turned into a fight for control? What happens when our family is a battle-ground? Parents, children, and siblings in a constant power struggle.

We turn to Jesus, the king of the Jews who redeems our need to win. Jesus gives us another option. With Jesus at the center of our lives, we don't have to engage

in the struggle for power. We are free. Make Jesus the center of your story.

This is what our world desperately needs. The people all around us have lost their sense of story. Our world is full of people like Abner. They are doing their best. They aren't evil people. But they aren't connected to the right story. They have to act on their own because they don't know about anyone else to act for them. Our world is locked in a power struggle and they don't realize that in that kind of a struggle everyone loses.

But when you follow Jesus—when he is the center of your life—then there is no power struggle. You are free. That's the message of the Gospel: Jesus Christ is Lord. It means you don't have to be. And as much as we think we want to be lord over our own lives, we really don't want that responsibility. It is such good news—such Gospel—to hear that Jesus is Lord.

It makes us free from the power struggle. Our God has won. Our identity is in him. His victory is our victory. And when we live like this, our lives are demonstrations of the truth of the Gospel. We look different. People wonder why we don't get caught up in all the power struggles of the world. People see freedom and they want to know where it comes from.

Do people see this in us? Is Jesus the center of our lives? Can we rest in the story that God is telling? Are we free from the power struggle?

Conclusion

There is a battle going on in our world today. It's actually not that different from Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan fighting for control on our territory. Our very lives are battlegrounds. But it's not a battle that we can win. There are only losers in that kind of war.

The only way to win is to live out faith in Jesus. With Jesus at the center, we don't have to struggle for power. We don't have to face the consequence of death, revenge, and division that followed Abner and that comes as a result for us when we go our own way. We are free. The Gospel of Jesus Christ frees us from the struggle for power.

Be encouraged by David in our story this morning. Recognize the story God has told before you. Be patient with finding your part in it. Rest in the knowledge that the victory is his. Make Jesus the center of your life and escape the struggle for power.