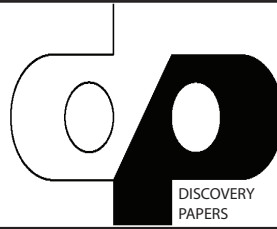


STRONG AND GENTLE KING

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



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Samuel 2:1-32
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2 Samuel 3:1-39

In one sense, for many of us, there are two spheres of life: a relational sphere and a vocational sphere, a home life and an outside-the-home life, a private life and a public life.

I'm aware of this each morning as I leave home for work and each evening as I leave work for home. I'm also conscious that different aspects of me are required in the different spheres. For example, conversing with Greek and Hebrew texts at work is not the same as conversing with my twelve- and nine-year-old daughters at home. I'd like to do all things well, but I don't, and neither, probably, do you. Even if we excel in one sphere, it's hard to excel in all spheres. For sure, no one is a superstar in every sphere.

David fell short relationally, and he met his match vocationally. In 2 Samuel 3, he opens up about his vocational struggles. (It will take until 2 Samuel 12 for him to open up about his relational struggles.) What can we learn from David when we fall short relationally and when we meet our match vocationally?

David grows stronger

2 Samuel 3:1-5:

There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David. And David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul became weaker and weaker.

2 And sons were born to David at Hebron: his firstborn was Amnon, of Ahinoam of Jezreel; 3 and his second, Chileab, of Abigail the widow of Nabal of Carmel; and the third, Absalom the son of Maacah the daughter of Talmai king of Geshur; 4 and the fourth, Adonijah the son of Haggith; and the fifth, Shephatiah the son of Abital; 5 and the sixth, Ithream, of Eglah, David's wife. These were born to David in Hebron.

David hails from the tribe of Judah, in the south. Saul hailed from the tribe of Benjamin, in the north. Saul ruled over all Israel, however ineptly, but after his death, Judah chose David as king. However, Abner, a general from the north, propped up Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, to rule over the northern tribes. Thus, a war between north and south commenced, with David and the south eventually gaining the upper hand.

At this point, the narrator turns his attention to domestic concerns. Why? On the one hand, David's wives and sons indicate his growing strength, especially in contrast to Ish-bosheth, the king of the north (1 Samuel 3:6-11). On the other hand, the LORD warned against a king's acquiring "many wives for himself" and commanded him to observe the law so that "he may continue long his kingdom, he and his children" (Deuteronomy 17:17-20). Three sons mentioned here, Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah, will wreak havoc in the kingdom. Yes, the house of David grew stronger and stronger, but because of David's domestic failures, it will grow weaker and weaker.

Abner makes himself strong

2 Samuel 3:6-11:

While there was war between the house of Saul and the house of David, Abner was making himself strong in the house of Saul. 7 Now Saul had a concubine whose name was Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah. And Ish-bosheth said to Abner, "Why have you gone in to my father's concubine?" 8 Then Abner was very angry over the words of Ish-bosheth and said, "Am I a dog's head of Judah? To this day I keep showing steadfast love to the house of Saul your father, to his brothers, and to his friends, and have not given you into the hand of David. And yet you charge me today with a fault concerning a woman. 9 God do so to Abner and more also, if I do not accomplish for David what 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 Ish-bosheth could not answer Abner another word, because he feared him.

While David, the king of the south, “grew stronger and stronger,” Abner was “making himself strong” in the north. Again, the narrator turns his attention to domestic concerns. David has legitimate sons, while Abner has illicit sex. In David’s case, the sons born to him by the women he had married were an indication of his strength. In Abner’s case, the brazen taking of Saul’s concubine was an indication of his strength. Abner, by taking Rizpah, is saying to Ish-bosheth, the puppet ruler, “I’m in charge here.”

Ish-bosheth protests, and Abner lets him have it, promising to make David king over all Israel, both north and south. Ish-bosheth’s protest can’t be the reason for Abner’s change of heart. If we listen to Abner’s words, we can hear a man who’s tired of propping up a losing cause. Ish-bosheth’s protest, which to Abner represents a lack of appreciation for his faithfulness, is the proverbial last straw. Abner promises to accomplish “what the LORD had sworn” to David, but if he was so concerned with the LORD’s will, why has he been fighting for the house of Saul and against the house of David? Abner is a political opportunist: he figures his fortunes are better with David.

Abner’s overture

2 Samuel 3:12-16:

And Abner sent messengers to David on his behalf,[a] saying, “To whom does the land belong? Make your covenant with me, and behold, my hand shall be with you to bring over all Israel to you.” 13 And he said, “Good; I will make a covenant with you. But one thing I require of you; that is, you shall not see my face unless you first bring Michal, Saul’s daughter, when you come to see my face.” 14 Then David sent messengers to Ish-bosheth, Saul’s son, saying, “Give me my wife Michal, for whom I paid the bridal price of a hundred foreskins of the Philistines.” 15 And Ish-bosheth sent and took her from her husband Paltiel the son of Laish. 16 But her husband went with her, weeping after her all the way to Bahurim. Then Abner said to him, “Go, return.” And he returned.

David is receptive to Abner’s overture but tests the seriousness of the proposal by demanding the return of Michal, his wife. David had won her hand by defeating the Philistines, but Saul, her father, later gave her to Paltiel (1 Samuel 18:20-29, 25:44). If Saul’s daughter comes back to David, his chances improve for bringing the north under his rule. Michal’s return is perhaps just, but where is the humanity in this? David demands, “Give me my wife Michal . . .” Ish-bosheth takes her from Paltiel, her current husband, who follows her on her way to David, weeping all the way, until Abner curtly commands, “Go, return.”

David at this point may be the better man than Abner, but he too plays the game of sexual politics. In this game, women are little more than pawns. David, without knowing it, is setting himself up for his greatest fall—and for the fall of his kingdom. In the case of Michal, he can justify taking a woman from her husband because he was her first husband. In the case of Bathsheba, he will be unable to justify taking a woman from her husband and then arranging for his death (2 Samuel 11). In 2 Samuel 3, David cracks open a door that he will swing wide open in 2 Samuel 11.

It’s a deal

2 Samuel 3:17-21:

And Abner conferred with the elders of Israel, saying, “For some time past you have been seeking David as king over you. 18 Now then bring it about, for the Lord has promised David, saying, ‘By the hand of my servant David I will save my people Israel from the hand of the Philistines, and from the hand of all their enemies.’” 19 Abner also spoke to Benjamin. And then Abner went to tell David at Hebron all that Israel and the whole house of Benjamin thought good to do.

20 When Abner came with twenty men to David at Hebron, David made a feast for Abner and the men who were with him. 21 And Abner said to David, “I will arise and go and will 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.

Abner knows how to make a deal. In offering David to the leaders of the north, he tells them that he's giving them something that they in actuality have wanted for some time, that it's the LORD's will, and that it's for their good, in that the new king will save them from the Philistines, their longtime enemies, whom Saul couldn't defeat. If it is God's will that David reign over all Israel, it should not be lost on us that only recently has Abner become interested in God's will—and only when it served his purposes. It looks as if the leaders in the north were willing to submit to David before Abner was but weren't willing or able to do so until Abner was on board. Abner also makes a special effort to court the tribe of Benjamin, from which Saul hailed.

The northern tribes, including Benjamin, agree, and Abner tells David it's a deal. After making the deal with David in Hebron, Abner departs "in peace." His peace, though, will be short-lived.

Publicly strong, privately weak

It is quite possible to grow stronger and stronger publicly while growing weaker and weaker privately. Many people, driven to succeed, invest heavily in their education and their careers but give scant attention to domestic affairs. Their kingdoms advance, but their relationships suffer. If they have families, they can rationalize their inattentiveness by emphasizing their roles as providers. Moreover, for many people, it's easier to make their way at the office than at home. They learn quickly how to move through the chairs, but when it comes to moving toward a person, that's another matter. A marriage, for example, calls for humility and openness and vulnerability, attributes that the marketplace doesn't necessarily value.

Larry Crabb writes of a husband who came home one day and was greeted by his wife with "a question that millions of wives ask their husbands every day":

It was a simple question requiring only a simple answer. Why did it make him angry? She wasn't asking for something he could not give, like an answer to a complex math problem. She was asking for something he could give—but he guarded it the way a wild-eyed pirate protects his most secret treasure. She asked the question, "How was your day?"¹

The man answered "fine" and walked away. He was up for whatever he faced at work that day, but he wasn't up for answering a simple question at home. He didn't understand why the question made him angry. But many of us understand. To truly answer the question requires a certain openness that makes us feel vulnerable.

We sometimes fall short relationally. How about vocationally?

Joab kills Abner

2 Samuel 3:22-30:

Just then the servants of David arrived with Joab from a raid, bringing much spoil with them. But Abner was not with David at Hebron, for he had sent him away, and he had gone in peace. 23 When Joab and all the army that was with him came, it was told Joab, "Abner the son of Ner came to the king, and he has let him go, and he has gone in peace." 24 Then Joab went to the king and said, "What have you done? Behold, Abner came to you. Why is it that you have sent him away, so that he is gone? 25 You know that Abner the son of Ner came to deceive you and to know your going out and your coming in, and to know all that you are doing."

26 When Joab came out from David's presence, he sent messengers after Abner, and they brought him back from the cistern of Sirah. But David did not know about it. 27 And when Abner returned to Hebron, Joab took him aside into the midst of the gate to speak with him privately, and there he struck him in the stomach, so that he died, for the blood of Asahel his brother. 28 Afterward, when David heard of it, he said, "I and my kingdom are forever guiltless before the Lord for the blood of Abner the son of Ner. 29 May it fall upon the head of Joab and upon all his father's house, and may the house of Joab never be without one who has a discharge or who is leprous or who holds a spindle or who falls by the sword or who lacks bread!" 30 So Joab and Abishai his brother killed Abner, because he had put their brother Asahel to death in the battle at Gibeon.

Joab, Abner's counterpart in the south, gets wind of David's deal with Abner and is appalled. Joab doesn't trust Abner, and he thinks David is a fool for trusting him. Joab is especially appalled because Abner killed his brother, Asahel, in the aftermath of a battle between north and south. After the battle, Asahel pursued Abner, who killed him, but only reluctantly, after having warned Asahel to turn aside. Joab thinks David has gone soft. Twice more the narrator observes that Abner had departed in peace. Joab, on the other hand, wants nothing to do with peace.

As if it weren't enough of a challenge to rule a kingdom, David has to deal with people in his own court who think they're helping him but are, in fact, damaging his cause. How does David respond to his uppity general? He doesn't. Joab says to David that he should "know" that Abner came as a spy. David, on the other hand, should know that the hotheaded Joab would seek revenge. When Joab sends for Abner, David does not "know" about it—but he should have known about it. Just as Ish-bosheth shrunk before Abner, David shrinks before Joab.

Joab kills Abner by striking him the stomach, because Abner killed Asahel by striking him in the stomach (2 Samuel 2:23). For Joab, it's an eye for an eye—or a blow to the stomach for a blow to the stomach. Abner reluctantly killed Asahel when the north and south were at war; Joab willfully kills Abner when the north and south are at peace.

David, whose dreams of a unified kingdom have been shaken, is beside himself. He proclaims his innocence and pronounces a curse on Joab and his family, hoping that the northern tribes won't hold him responsible for Abner's death. If he had ordered Joab's death, instead of simply invoking a curse, he may have won more friends in the north, but he also may have alienated people in the south. Plus, he would lose Joab, his thug, who does his dirty work for him. David has to walk a political tightrope.

David mourns for Abner

2 Samuel 3:31-34:

Then David said to Joab and to all the people who were with him, "Tear your clothes and put on sackcloth and mourn before Abner." And King David followed the bier. 32 They buried Abner at Hebron. And the king lifted up his voice and wept at the grave of Abner, and all the people wept. 33 And the king lamented for Abner, saying,

"Should Abner die as a fool dies?

**34 Your hands were not bound;
your feet were not fettered;
as one falls before the wicked
you have fallen."**

And all the people wept again over him.

David humiliates Joab by making him mourn for Abner, the one he murdered. David also orders the people with Joab to mourn, and they do so—and they even weep. David, who for the first time in the narrative is called "King David," also mourns and weeps. This is what the king of all Israel should do: weep for the death of an enemy-turned-peacemaker. No doubt David hopes the northern tribes will be assuaged by all this mourning and weeping for one of their own. "All the people" weep, both those in the north and those in the south.

This is the second time we have seen tears in 1 Samuel 3. When Michal was ripped from Paltiel, Paltiel "went with her, weeping after her." Now David follows Abner's corpse and weeps at his grave. David weeps for Abner, but where are the tears for Paltiel, whose marriage David has killed? Perhaps the politics of the day dictate that the king weep for Abner and not for Paltiel, but as readers, we might hope for another day.

Too gentle for severe sons

2 Samuel 3:35-39:

Then all the people came to persuade David to eat bread while it was yet day. But David swore, saying, "God do so to me and more also, if I taste bread or anything else till the sun goes down!" 36 And all the people took notice of it, and it pleased them, as everything that the king did pleased all the people. 37 So all the people and all Israel understood that day that it had not been the king's will to put to death Abner the son of Ner. 38 And 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 was gentle today, though anointed king. These men, the sons of Zeruiah, are more severe than I. The Lord repay the evildoer according to his wickedness!"

David, as part of his mourning for Abner, and against the urging of "all the people," refuses to eat until sunset. He takes an oath, using the same words that Abner used when he promised to establish David as king over all Israel (2 Samuel 3:9-10). Oaths are taken for the sake of uniting the kingdom but not for the sake of people who are exploited in the kingdom. David's refusal to eat actually serves the purpose of the establishment of his kingdom, for "all the people"—the people who urged him to eat, by the way—can see that he had nothing to do with the death of Abner. By mourning for Abner, David wins over "all Israel"—meaning, the people in the north are becoming more comfortable with David.

Joab accused David of not knowing what Abner was up to; David did not know what Joab was up to. Joab was wrong about Abner's intentions; David was ignorant of Joab's intentions. Finally, intentions are correctly discerned: all Israel knows that David did not will the death of Abner. (The word translated "understood" in verse 37 would be literally translated "knew.") David himself uses the word "know" when speaking of Abner to his servants: "Do you not know that a prince and a great man has fallen this day in Israel?"

David opens up to his servants. He says he was "gentle" today, in contrast to Joab and his brother, who are "more severe" than he. Joab kills Abner, but David weeps over Abner. David can't bring himself to order the execution of Joab, so he hands him over to the LORD.

At the outset of 2 Samuel 3, the narrator noted that the house of David was growing stronger and that the house of Saul was growing weaker. Now, with death of Abner, the house of Saul has grown weaker still. But has the house of David grown stronger? In one sense, yes: a strongman who propped up a puppet king in the north is out of the way. But how about the leader of the house of David? He calls himself "gentle," and he can't control the "severe" people in his house.

There's a gap between the harsh demands of political leadership and the inner feelings of the political leader. The sons of Zeruiah are wearing David out. Later, his own sons would wear him out.

Impossible tightrope

Domestically, David has cracked open a dangerous door. Publicly, he's been brilliant, growing stronger and stronger, but now he has no answer for Joab. Even if you figure out how to succeed publicly, sooner or later you're likely to come up against a "severe" person like Joab, who makes you walk an impossible tightrope. Joab is in the story. Joab is in your story. Many Joabs, perhaps, show up in your story. They make your life miserable, and no matter what tactics you use, you can't influence them, and you can't win. They may even be on your team, as Joab was on David's team. They make you throw up your hands like David.

Before I came to PBC, I somehow got on the wrong side of a coworker in a ministry. I couldn't understand what he thought I did wrong or why he didn't like me, even though I asked him about it. I tried to be conciliatory, I tried being friendly, I tried pretending that nothing was wrong, and I tried backing away, but nothing worked. I was walking next to him one day,

trying to make conversation, and out of the blue he said, "Yeah, I wouldn't follow you into battle," and he walked away. He was "more severe than I." I threw up my hands.

Strong and gentle king

Like David, we fall short relationally and domestically, and we meet our match publicly and vocationally. What to do?

First of all, the narrative makes us long for a more mature kingdom, where powerful men don't take advantage of vulnerable women, and for a more mature king, who doesn't uncaringly rip a wife from her husband, even if he had her first. The New Testament heralds such a kingdom and such a king.

If David grew stronger and stronger, Luke could speak of a child, Jesus of Nazareth, a descendant of David, who "grew and became strong, filled with wisdom" (Luke 2:40). If Abner could offer David "all Israel," Satan could offer Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world" (Luke 5:5-7). David made a deal with Abner, but Jesus made no deals with the devil. On the one hand, David turned a blind eye to the Joab and Abishai, the sons of Zeruiah, and gave them a slap on the wrist after they killed Abner. On the other hand, Jesus was fully aware of James and John, the sons of Thunder, and rebuked them before they did anything like calling down fire from heaven to consume a Samaritan village (Luke 9:54).

Jesus proclaimed, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand"—that is, the kingdom has arrived, and it will come in full, because the king has come, Jesus Christ, the Son of David and the Son of God (Mark 1:15).

Does Jesus, the king of the kingdom of God, the most powerful man of all, take advantage of vulnerable women? Far from it! Read the gospels. Check the record: Simon's mother-in-law, the woman with a discharge, the Syrophenician woman, the poor widow with her coin, Mary Magdalene, the widow of Nain, the woman who anointed Jesus with oil, Martha, Mary of Bethany, the weeping daughters of Jerusalem, Mary the mother of Jesus, the woman at the well, the woman caught in adultery. Far from taking advantage of them, Jesus lifts them up!

Does Jesus, the king of the kingdom of God, uncaringly rip a wife from her husband? Far from it! He says, "What therefore God has joined together, let man not separate" (Mark 10:9). Among other things, Jesus' teaching on marriage protected women from capricious divorce.

King David took multiple wives, and later, we hear that he also took concubines. Does King Jesus take a bride? No! Yes! What? No, Jesus never married. Yes, all those who believe in him constitute his bride (Ephesians 5:25-27, Revelation 19:7-10). How does he win her (us)? By killing a hundred Philistines? No, by laying down his life for us.

King David was strong, but he was also gentle. In his strength, he ripped a woman from her husband, and in his gentleness, he could not deal with the sons of Zeruiah. The prophet Isaiah anticipated not only the return from exile but also the coming of King Jesus:

Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.
(Isaiah 40:10-11)

King Jesus is strong (he comes with might, with his arm ruling for him), but he is also gentle (he carries lambs in his bosom, he gently leads sheep with young). He is sublimely strong and sublimely gentle. No one is too severe for him to stand up to; no one is too lowly for him to cradle. Jesus is our king!

Come to Jesus

We fall short relationally and domestically, and we meet our match publicly and vocationally. Your spouse wears you out. Your family wears you out. Your work wears you out. Your school wears you out. What do you do when there's a gap between your inner feelings and the demands of your position? You'd like to believe you could find a solution, but sometimes there's no solution: you can't win.

You don't have to hide your feelings, as if you should be embarrassed by them. First, if David shared his feelings with his servants, you can share your feelings with some trusted confidantes. Second, is there a more trusted confidante than Jesus? He is the sublimely strong and gentle king. He will be exactly what you need him to be, and if you come to him, that's a win.

Yes, redefine victory. Victory is not prevailing relationally or vocationally. Victory is not walking an impossible tightrope flawlessly. Victory is not spanning the gap between your feelings and the demands of your position. Victory is coming to Jesus and sharing your feelings with him.

Come to Jesus, the sublimely strong and gentle king.

Endnotes

¹Crabb, Larry *The Silence of Adam: Becoming Men of Courage in a World of Chaos* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 88.