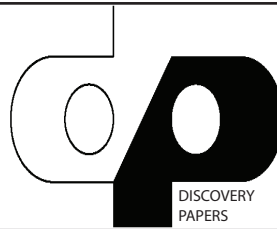


# FRENEMY OF THE KING

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



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Samuel 18:1–19:43  
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*2 Samuel 20:1–26*

I had an unlikely friend in middle school. It may not be much of a surprise that I wasn't among the most popular kids when I was in the sixth grade. Let's just say that I had a running debate with a few people about the precise difference between a geek and a nerd. That might tell you where I fit.

This might give you another clue: I was on the math team. Which was actually very fun and I highly recommend it. It also happens to be where my unlikely friendship developed. One of my "teammates" on the math team was also a jock. And the school bully. And a popular kid. Under normal circumstances, we would never be friends. But we had this connection: the math team. I'm pretty sure no one knew that he was on the math team, so it was even a secret connection.

The friendship had certain benefits. This "friend" of mine was rude. He was racist. He could be violent and demeaning. He took advantage of his size and position to intimidate other people. But I was somehow protected. I never experienced the harassment that some of my other friends were subject to.

I never really knew how to feel about this friendship. On the one, hand it was very useful. On the other hand, I knew there was something wrong with it. We weren't really friends. I didn't really want to be his friend. But there was one thing I was certain of: having him as a friend was better than having him as an enemy.

We are nearing the end of our journey through the life of David that we've called *A Life of Passion*. We've walked through many ups and downs. Along the way, we divided David's life into rough chapters. He started out as a shepherd. Then he was fugitive. Finally, he became king. Most recently we've seen David as father.

Today we move into the chapter that we've labeled "Elder." This is David at the end of his life. The concern of the story starts to shift to what will happen after David. His kingdom has faced the major turmoil of a failed rebellion attempt by his son Absalom. If not Absalom, we find ourselves wondering who the next king will be.

Our text this morning tells the story of a new character who thinks he can take over the kingdom. This new character takes advantage of the kingdom's current instability to launch his own campaign for the throne. In actuality, this new rebellion turns out to be a minor event. However, in the process of dealing with the uprising, a familiar character goes through a significant transition. That character is Joab. This morning's story is about him.

We've met a lot of interesting characters along the path of David's life. Samuel, Saul, Abigail, Jonathan, Bathsheba, Abasalom, just to name a few. David's story is not just about him. It's also about the people in his life.

The people around us tell us a lot about ourselves. Joab has turned up repeatedly throughout the last half of David's story. We have had mixed feelings about Joab. He can be very helpful to David. But he's also shown himself to be ruthless. Joab is a complicated character. We might call him a frenemy of the king.

We're going to take the opportunity this morning to think a little more deeply about Joab. We'll begin by working through 2 Samuel 20 and noticing how Joab begins in the story, what he does to change his circumstances, and where he ends up. Then we'll go back and do a short retrospective on Joab's life. We'll look at some of his highlights, some of his lowlights, and some of his most memorable quotes.

Then we'll consider our own lives.

Friendship is a funny thing. Sometimes you end up with friends that you'd never expect. And sometimes you end up with friends that you're not sure what to do with. We couldn't imagine going through life without some of our friends. But sometimes it drives us crazy to go through life with them.

At times we may feel like Bilbo Baggins from *The Lord of the Rings*. When he addresses his community, he famously says, "I don't know half of you half as well as I should like; and I like less than half of you half as well as you deserve."<sup>1</sup>

We're left scratching our heads. Because the truth is that a lot of our relationships are complicated. We come across all kinds of complicated characters. We have friends. We have people that we don't connect with. And there are people in between. Just like David, we have frenemies.

What do we do with those relationships? How do we manage them? How do we treat people who are useful, but not particularly good? What do we do when we can't seem to control who our friends are or what they do? How do we interact with complicated people?

Let's think about David and Joab and see what we can learn.

## The Story

Our story opens immediately after the failed rebellion by Absalom. David hasn't yet returned to his capital city of Jerusalem. Absalom is dead. David has been attempting to reunite the nation under his leadership. But things are still tense. This is when someone else steps in to try and take advantage of the instability.

### 2 Samuel 20:1-2:

**Now there happened to be there a worthless man, whose name was Sheba, the son of Bichri, a Benjaminite. And he blew the trumpet and said,**

**“We have no portion in David,  
and we have no inheritance in the son of  
Jesse;  
every man to his tents, O Israel!”**

**2 So all the men of Israel withdrew from David and followed Sheba the son of Bichri. But the men of Judah followed their king steadfastly from the Jordan to Jerusalem.**

Sheba is described as a worthless man. That's a very strong statement. The same word was used previously of Nabal, the husband of Abigail. He was a worthless fool. His wife saved him from David's anger and he died in humiliation. Now Sheba is trying to take the throne from David.

David faced plenty of enemies. Do we? A friend of mine recently posted a meme on my Facebook wall that read, *“You can't make everyone happy—you're not ice cream.”* Maybe we need to get used to the idea that we might face people that we can't seem to please.

When a king faces an enemy, he calls upon his general. Under normal circumstances, David would send Joab. But Joab has been demoted. You might remember that Joab killed David's son Absalom even after he was asked to go easy on him. In response, David takes away his job and gives it to the worst possible alternative: Amasa.

Amasa had been Absalom's general. He had fought against David. Now David calls on him to save the day.

### 2 Samuel 20:4

**Then the king said to Amasa, “Call the men of Judah together to me within three days, and be here yourself.”**

Joab is out. Amasa is in. But Amasa doesn't quite work out.

### 2 Samuel 20:5-6:

**So Amasa went to summon Judah, but he delayed beyond the set time that had been appointed him. 6 And David said to Abishai, “Now Sheba the son of Bichri will do us more harm than Absalom. Take your lord's servants and pursue him, lest he get himself to fortified cities and escape from us.”**

Amasa was David's first pick. That didn't work. But David doesn't go back to Joab. Instead, he chooses Joab's older brother Abishai, who has also been a faithful soldier. David sends him out to pursue Sheba and take care of this situation.

Sometimes we try very hard to manage our friendships. We attempt to spend time with certain people and protect ourselves from others. And sometimes it doesn't work. It's hard to manage our communities. We can't control people. We can't always determine the people that we end up spending time with.

That's what David is finding out. People do things we don't expect. So first, David tries to put Amasa in charge. That doesn't work, so he tries to go with Abishai. But what ends up happening is that Joab just won't go away.

### 2 Samuel 20:7-10:

**And there went out after him Joab's men and the Cherethites and the Pelethites, and all the mighty men. They went out from Jerusalem to pursue Sheba the son of Bichri. 8 When they**

were at the great stone that is in Gibeon, Amasa came to meet them. Now Joab was wearing a soldier's garment, and over it was a belt with a sword in its sheath fastened on his thigh, and as he went forward it fell out. 9 And Joab said to Amasa, "Is it well with you, my brother?" And Joab took Amasa by the beard with his right hand to kiss him. 10 But Amasa did not observe the sword that was in Joab's hand. So Joab struck him with it in the stomach and spilled his entrails to the ground without striking a second blow, and he died.

**Then Joab and Abishai his brother pursued Sheba the son of Bichri.**

From the beginning, it is Joab's men who go out. Not Abishai's men. Before pursuing the enemy, Joab has to deal with his rival. He meets up with Amasa, pretends to be a friend, and murders him in cold blood. The story describes Amasa bleeding on the ground while the soldiers file by. Joab pursues Sheba, with his brother Abishai following him. Joab is the one in charge here. There is no question.

After killing Amasa, Joab and his men proceed to hunt down Sheba. They trap him in a city by the name of Abel and lay siege against the city. As they work on destroying the defenses, a wise woman intervenes. This isn't the first time a woman in David's story has intervened to reduce the violence of men. This woman asks how she can save her city. Joab responds as they work out in a deal

**2 Samuel 20:21-22:**

**That is not true. But a man of the hill country of Ephraim, called Sheba the son of Bichri, has lifted up his hand against King David. Give up him alone, and I will withdraw from the city." And the woman said to Joab, "Behold, his head shall be thrown to you over the wall." 22 Then the woman went to all the people in her wisdom. And they cut off the head of Sheba the son of Bichri and threw it out to Joab. So he blew the trumpet, and they dispersed from the city, every man to his home. And Joab returned to Jerusalem to the king.**

Everyone wins. Joab claims another military victory, this time without much bloodshed. The wise woman manages to protect her city from destruction. David puts down the rebellion and remains the king.

Everyone wins except Sheba. The story makes it clear that Sheba's rebellion is practically insignificant. He was a nobody. Joab wasn't in a hurry to hunt him down. There wasn't even a battle. Sheba died at the hands of a woman after he trapped himself in an unfriendly city. Sheba is not the story here.

Joab is the real story. He started off as a demoted soldier. But when the story concludes with a summary of David's cabinet, read who is listed first

**2 Samuel 20:23:**

**Now Joab was in command of all the army of Israel; and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada was in command of the Cherethites and the Pelethites;**

There were two power struggles here. The one between David and Sheba was actually minor. It was the one that Joab fought which actually mattered. David tried to control him. He tried to demote him. He tried to work around him. But it just wouldn't stick. Joab wouldn't go away. So once again, David is king and Joab is his general. That's just the way it is.

## **The Character**

Let's use this story to lead us into some deeper reflection on Joab. Who was he? How is he portrayed? Is Joab a friend to David? Or is he just using him? We'll go back through some of Joab's appearances. Pay close attention to what Joab says, because in Hebrew narrative it is dialogue that usually forms the character.

We are introduced to Joab after the death of Saul. He is David's military leader when David is king over the southern portion of Israel. His first detailed scene is when he and the opposing general, Abner, face off in battle for their respective kings.

The other general makes an effort to talk his way out of battle. He's trying to limit the bloodshed and preserve life. In response, Joab seems grateful. He recognizes his tendency toward violence and seems to appreciate someone else calling it off.

**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."**

That's a mark for Joab – he listened to his enemy. Needless violence was avoided. However, Joab's brother is killed as part of that encounter.

Forgiveness doesn't seem to be one of Joab's character traits, so Joab takes the chance to get revenge later, when David becomes king over all Israel. When Abner, his brother's killer, arrives and David doesn't punish him, Joab says this:

**2 Samuel 3:24:**

**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?"**

Joab doesn't let the opportunity pass. He follows Abner and commits the first of his cold-blooded murders. He has avenged his brother. This is where David sees what kind of man Joab is. What do you do with a person like this?

David complains about Abner's murder, but doesn't bring Joab to justice.

The problem is that Joab is really, really good at what he does. He's a brilliant soldier and general. When David is looking to establish the headquarters of his new kingdom, he chooses a little town called Jerusalem. It's a city that wasn't part of either the north or the south, so it's ideal for bringing together his new unified kingdom.

David promises the job of general to whomever leads the capture of this city. Guess who wins? Joab. He's the best. True to his word, David rewards him by putting him in charge of all of Israel's armies. And he does an amazing job. Israel thrives with David as king and Joab as general. They are never recorded as losing a battle.

Joab is incredibly gifted. But don't forget that he isn't afraid to murder.

This propensity proves useful the next time we meet Joab. Instead of going out to war when kings are supposed to, David stays behind. That decision leads to David's sexual sin against Bathsheba. When David can't cover up his mistake, he decides to murder the husband. Who better to pull the trigger than Joab?

The message is sent. The deed is done. Joab sends a messenger back with the news.

**2 Samuel 11:21c:**

**"Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also."**

Joab and David are now linked. David has overlooked one murder and commissioned another. Together, these two have blood on their hands. This gives Joab great power in his relationship with David. He has something on David. He shares the secrets of the king.

Joab fights for David when David's son Absalom rebels against him. As the battle between their two armies begins, David asks his people to go easy on his son. When the soldiers find him hanging defenseless in a tree, no one wants to kill him. No one except Joab. He finds him and has no tolerance for mercy.

**2 Samuel 18:14:**

**Joab said, "I will not waste time like this with you." And he took three javelins in his hand and thrust them into the heart of Absalom while he was still alive in the oak.**

Then Joab plunges his spear through the heart of the king's son. Absalom is dead.

David mourns so deeply for the death of his son that all the people are confused. Joab is furious. He sees the king failing to lead his people. Joab is not afraid to stand up to David and confront him.

**2 Samuel 19:6a:**

**You love those who hate you and hate those who love you.**

Can you imagine speaking like this to the king? But Joab does and it snaps David out of his grief. Joab was able to see the needs of the nation above the personal needs of the king. Joab's words were what David needed to hear. Joab moves David into action.

Sometimes having a person who isn't afraid of you is just what a leader needs.

And sometimes you wish they were a little more afraid of you. That was the case in our story this morning, when Joab walks up to Amasa, whom David has installed as the general over Israel. Hiding a dagger in his left hand, Joab kisses him and asks,

**2 Samuel 20:9a:**

**"Is it well with you, my brother?"**

This, just before he murders another of his rivals.



So what do we make of Joab? Do we like him? Do we appreciate him? Would we want him on our team? I'm sure we don't want someone like this as an enemy. But is he much better as a friend?

To his credit, Joab is loyal to David and to the nation of Israel. He sees the big picture. He knows what is best for the people. Joab is able to remind David of that when he forgets. Joab doesn't seem to love violence. Several times, he responds to efforts to reduce violence.

But Joab isn't afraid of murder. He might not love violence, but he doesn't seem to mind it. He's willing to take back his job when it was taken from him. Joab was politically savvy and understood situations very well. No matter what happens, Joab comes out on top.

The best motto to describe Joab is "whatever it takes." He has a focus. His vision is clear. Joab is willing to do whatever it takes to get there. He'll be violent. He'll avoid violence. He'll be political. He'll kill. He'll stand up to the king. He'll follow orders. Whatever it takes. Joab will do it.

In short, Joab is a complicated character. At times, we're grateful for him. At times, we're terrified of him. Joab is a frenemy of the king—friend and enemy rolled into one.

## What About Us?

So what about the people around us? Our friends and family and coworkers and classmates? Do we have people like Joab in our lives?

There's a popular song now with the following lyrics.

*I hate you I love you // I hate that I love you //  
Don't want to, but I can't put // Nobody else above you<sup>2</sup>*

Think about the people in your life. Is there anyone like that? It's easy to respond to people who like us. We might have some simple relationships with people who are always there for us. But what about people who inspire us one second and lead us astray the next? What about people who build us up today but hurt us deeply tomorrow? What happens when our relationships aren't clear cut? When things aren't black and white?

One of our problems is that we want to put people into buckets. We want to know that this person is on our side. We want to conclude that this person is against us. Even though we know that people are more complex

than that, we want to simplify it. But how do you simplify a person like Joab? Can we really classify the people in our lives into one bucket or another?

We need to start by being realistic about the people in our lives.

G.K. Chesterton once said, "The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because they are generally the same people."<sup>3</sup>

The danger with putting people into buckets is that we don't evaluate specific situations. If we have someone in a "bad" bucket, nothing they can do is worthwhile. Every time we hear their name, we roll our eyes. What next? We are biased against them.

In the same way, if we have people in a "good" bucket, then they can do no wrong. We end up trusting them too much. We know they care about us and we like them. So we give them a pass when they do something we disagree with. We fail to hold them responsible.

Be realistic about people. No one has your back in every situation. No one is completely against you. Don't expect too much from people. It will get you in trouble.

It's easy to become tangled up with people when we put them into buckets. Our lives can be enmeshed. We lose perspective. We don't know how to think clearly about them. Sometimes we need their approval or attention so desperately that we find ourselves doing things we regret. Sometimes these people become so important to us because of what they can do for us that we overlook deep character flaws.

We fail to create boundaries. I think that's what happened with David and Joab. Joab was so valuable as a military leader that David didn't know how to separate himself from him. He never addressed the issues.

If we find ourselves in that place, we need to face it. We don't just move people from one bucket another. We work through the issue. We can be direct.

This is what David fails to do. He doesn't know what to do with Joab, so he tries various things. But he never directly addresses the situation. He never holds Joab accountable. David never deals with the fact that Joab is a murderer. So, David becomes enmeshed and unable to extract himself from an unhealthy relationship.

One of the most frustrating situations that I encounter in counseling is when people have problems with each other, but they refuse to talk directly about it. Maybe you've been hurt by a friend. Maybe you're angry. Maybe you're jealous and you know that is affecting your relationship. Don't just let it lie there. Do something about it. Address it.

Yesterday, a few of us went up to Oakland to attend a meeting of Transforming the Bay with the Christ, the Bay Area-wide movement that is uniting churches, non-profit leaders, and business people to see the Gospel take root in our area.

At the beginning of the meeting, someone called out the elephant in the room. One of the Oakland pastors asked, "Do you white guys from the South Bay think you're coming up to Oakland to save us?"

It was an important moment. The speaker wisely acknowledged that if we were going to find unity among churches, questions like this had to be asked. We had to trust enough in the relationship to have that conversation and come out on the other side of that conflict.

We can be realistic. We can be direct. And because our goal is relationship, we need to love. Be loving.

The question yesterday wasn't asked out of hatred. It was asked out of pain. It was asked in hope that there would be mutual understanding on the other side. Because we believe in love.

Love doesn't mean we let people control us. Love doesn't mean we overlook faults and whitewash hurtful actions. Love doesn't mean we look the other way. Love means we look realistically at people. It means we address the issues. Love means that we are honest about them and about us.

Sometimes love means that we establish boundaries. Sometimes it means that we don't save people from the consequences of their actions. Sometimes it means that we have to pull ourselves out of an enmeshed relationship for the health of everyone involved. Sometimes love means that we are willing to make people mad. Sometimes it means that we pull away. Sometimes it means that we come close.

There are no easy answers for complicated relationships. Love isn't easy. But we have the Spirit of the God who himself is love living within us. So we can navigate this. We can relate well to the complicated people in our lives.

We can be realistic. We can be direct. And we can learn to love.

## Conclusion

One more rebellion against David has failed and Joab is back at the top of the organizational chart. So now we start to wonder who will really take David's place on the throne. Will Joab make a move? What would happen if someone like Joab becomes king?

We want to know about the king who will follow David. We want to know that this kingdom will be taken care of. We want to know that we will be taken care of. And of course, the kings that followed David were a mixed bag. But a king would come who would bring something new. In time, the son of David, Jesus Christ would come to sit on David's throne.

Just like David, the son of David would have people like Joab in his life. Think about Peter. One moment he declared Jesus to be the son of God. The next, he was asking to be the second in command. Jesus praised Paul's insight and called him the devil.

Other disciples gave up everything to follow Jesus, but ran away when things got hard. They listened to his every word, but didn't seem to hear what he was saying. They loved Jesus, but held on to their prejudice and anger.

Jesus had a lot of frenemies. You could say that he surrounded himself with complicated characters. Liars. Tax collectors. Impulsive fisherman. Betrayers. Doubtters. People prone to fear and violence and greed. People who weren't afraid to break a few rules to get what they wanted.

Jesus still surrounds himself with people like that. People who are committed to getting what they want out of life. Sometimes doing whatever it takes to get there. People who love one moment and betray the next. People like you and me.

For most of this morning we've been putting ourselves in David's shoes. We've been trying to figure out how to interact with the complicated people in our lives. But maybe we need to turn things around. Maybe we're not David. Maybe we're Joab. Maybe we need to consider how the king of kings relates to us. Maybe we are the complicated characters.

A friend of mine in high school would regularly tell the same joke. “My father told me that there was always one weird person on the bus. But I rode the bus the other day and I couldn’t find him.”

Maybe you and I are a frenemy of the king. We want to be loyal to Jesus, but we keep finding our own agenda getting in the way. We’ve made mistakes in the past and we can’t seem to get past them. We think of ourselves as reasonable people. But if someone gets in our way, we have no time for them.

The good news is that God didn’t abandon us just because we were complicated. Romans 5:8 says, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:10 repeats that idea, “while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.”

We are complicated characters. But our God loves us just the same. He died to save us in our complications. God is not fooled by us. He is realistic. He knows we are image bearers. He knows we are fallen. God is direct with us. He does not overlook our sin. He does not walk away because he doesn’t want to deal with it.

God loves us. He sacrifices for us. He takes our pain upon himself. Our sin isn’t overlooked. It is forgiven. And we are embraced.

You and I are the frenemy of the king. He knows it and he sees it and he loves us just the same. May we learn to do likewise. May we love others as we have been loved.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, Assen / Maastricht, 1954), 242.

<sup>2</sup> Gnash and O’Brien, Olivia. “I hate you I love you.” 2016. EP

<sup>3</sup> “Gilbert K. Chesterton.” BrainyQuote.com. Xplore Inc, 2016. 20 May 2016. <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/g/gilbertkc136774.html>