

POWER

“. . . the gospel . . . is the power of God unto salvation . . .” (Romans 1:16)

JOAB: DAVID'S MILITARY CAPTAIN WHO HAD HIS OWN AGENDA (PART 2)

by B. J. Clarke

In the last installment of our study, we introduced Joab and noted his military accomplishments. Furthermore, we began noticing Joab's main agenda. We noticed the agenda that he had in the murder of Abner, the agenda that he had as an accomplice in the murder of Uriah the Hittite, and the agenda that he had in the murder of Absalom. It is with the murder of Absalom that we pick up our study.

David gave in to Joab's tactics, although what his son Absalom had done to Amnon was not really parallel with the woman's story about her two sons. In her story the death of her son was not premeditated (2 Sam. 14). Absalom most certainly premeditated the murder of his brother Amnon. Although his servants actually killed Amnon it was because Absalom had commanded them to do so. It was first degree murder! Nevertheless, “the king said unto Joab, Behold now, I have done this thing; go therefore, bring the young man Absalom again” (2 Sam. 14:21).

Joab's response evidences the fact that his main agenda in doing all of this was to once again feel the warmth of the king's favor. The record reveals that “Joab fell to the ground on his face, and bowed himself, and thanked the king; and Joab said, Today thy servant knoweth that I have found grace in thy sight, my lord, O king, in that the king hath fulfilled the request of his servant. So Joab arose and went to Geshur, and brought Absalom to Jerusalem” (2 Sam. 14:22-23).

Although Absalom returned to Jerusalem he did not see his father's face for two full years (2 Sam. 14:28). When Absalom sent for Joab to come to him, Joab refused to come. He sent for Joab a second time but again “he would not come” (2 Sam. 14:29). Joab's refusal to come to Absalom seems to strengthen the idea that he wasn't nearly as concerned about Absalom as he had pretended to be before Absalom came back to Jerusalem. At this point in time he was more concerned about David who was in

power than in Absalom who had not yet ascended to power.

Nevertheless, Absalom found a way to get Joab's attention he set his fields on fire. This motivated Joab to have a meeting with Absalom during which Absalom pressed Joab to arrange a face to face meeting with his father David. After five long years of separation Absalom finally “came to the king, and bowed himself on his face to the ground before the king; and the king kissed Absalom” (2 Sam. 14:33). Sadly, Absalom's apparent humility before the king masked a hidden agenda of his own, namely that of stealing away the hearts of the men of Israel away from his father David (2 Sam. 15:1-6). Absalom sent spies throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, “As soon as ye hear the sound of the trumpet, then ye shall say, Absalom reigneth in Hebron” (2 Sam. 15:10). Absalom's actions forced David to flee the city and to dwell “in a place that was far off” (2 Sam. 15:17).

Absalom chose Amasa, another nephew of David and cousin to Joab (2 Sam. 17:25; 1 Chron. 2:17), to be his military captain instead of Joab. In the meantime, David divided the men that were with him into thirds, with a third under Joab, a third under Abishai, and a third under Ittai, the Gittite (2 Sam. 18:2). Anticipating the battle to come, David had some very special instructions for Joab and Abishai and Ittai. In the presence of all the people, he ordered them, “Deal gently for my sake with the young man, even with Absalom” (2 Sam. 18:5).

The battle commenced and “there was a great slaughter that day of twenty thousand men” with David's servants gaining the upper hand (2 Sam. 18:6-7). Incredibly, as Absalom rode upon a mule, his head became caught in the thick branches of a great oak. Perhaps it was that famously thick hair of his (2 Sam. 14:26) that got entangled in the branches. Josephus affirmed that it was, and it is not hard to imagine, but however he was caught, he was unable to extricate himself. The mule upon which he had been riding kept going and left

Absalom hanging in the branches, suspended “between heaven and earth” (2 Sam. 18:9).

A certain man who came upon Absalom in this helpless condition informed Joab of what he had seen. Joab replied, “And behold, thou sawest him, and why didst thou not smite him there to the ground? And I would have given thee ten shekels of silver, and a girdle” (2 Sam. 18:11). Joab's words clearly reveal that he was still more interested in accomplishing his agenda than that of the king. The man responded to Joab by saying that he wouldn't harm Absalom for a thousand shekels of silver “for in our hearing the king charged thee and Abishai and Ittai, saying, Beware that none touch the young man Absalom” (2 Sam. 18:12). If only Joab had possessed a respect for authority as this man did! In Joab's actions we see that **those who have a personal agenda can progress (or should we say digress) to the point that they publicize their lack of respect for authority.** Joab was aware that David's orders regarding Absalom had been made in public, but Joab did not care! He was going to do what he wanted to do, no matter what!

Joab dismissed his informant as unworthy of any more of his time and then “took three darts in his hand, and thrust them through the heart of Absalom, while he was yet alive in the midst of the oak. And ten young men that bare Joab's armour compassed about and smote Absalom, and slew him” (2 Sam. 18:14-15). There was nothing “gentle” about the way that Absalom died. It's almost as if Joab went out of his way to do the opposite of what David had said. David did not say “Deal cruelly” with Absalom, but that is precisely what Joab did. Essentially, he tortured Absalom. From his actions **we observe that those who have a personal agenda are often cruel in the accomplishment thereof.** They don't care who they hurt (or how much they hurt others) as long as they achieve their personal goals. Their sense of ambition overrides any sense of compassion!

JOAB: DAVID'S MILITARY CAPTAIN WHO HAD HIS OWN AGENDA Continued from page 1

We also learn from Joab's actions that **those who have a personal agenda are not bashful about recruiting others to help them carry it out.** Not content to flout the authority of the king by himself, Joab influenced the ten young men with him also to violate the king's orders. These ten men did not "deal gently" with Absalom when they "ganged up" on a wounded, defenseless man and smote him to death. Admittedly, Absalom was not an innocent man, but they could have brought him to the one in authority, King David, and allowed

him to decide his punishment. But that would not have satisfied Joab, and in Joab's world that was all that really mattered his personal self-promotion and self-satisfaction.

With Absalom now dead, Joab blew the trumpet to call an end to the hostilities (2 Sam. 18:16). Ahimaaz, the son of Zadok, requested permission from Joab to run and tell David the great news of victory over the opposition. Based upon Joab's response, it appears that Ahimaaz was usually commissioned as a messenger when there was good news to bear. The military victory was good news but Joab knew that David would be most interested in what happened to Absalom. He also knew that David had sometimes put to death messengers who brought him news that they thought he would celebrate, only to find that he was no so impressed. Perhaps because he did not want to risk losing Ahimaaz, Joab instructed Cush (probably an Ethiopian and possibly Joab's slave) to run and inform the king. Imagine being the one who had to tell David about what had happened to his son! And who put Cush in the position of having to bear such news? It was Joab's fault! Thus we learn that **those who have an agenda create unnecessary burdens that other people have to bear!**

After Cush bowed himself to Joab and began running to bear the tidings of the day, Ahimaaz requested permission to run after him. Joab tried to dissuade Ahimaaz from going but he said to Joab "let me run" (2 Sam. 18:23). Perhaps because he thought that Cush had enough of a head start, Joab granted Ahimaaz's petition and he took off. Running on level land, he actually overtook Cush.

As David waited anxiously for news, the watchman announced that he saw two men running toward the city. The first man, he said, ran like Ahimaaz. Hearing this gave David hope that the news was good (2 Sam. 18:27). Ahimaaz informed David of the victory and then David asked, "Is the young man Absalom safe?" (2 Sam. 18:29). Ahimaaz either did not know the answer, or deliberately evaded answering David's question. When Cush arrived, David asked him the same question regarding Absalom. Cush responded, "The enemies of my lord the king, and all that rise against thee to do thee hurt, be as that young man is" (2 Sam. 18:32). Upon hearing this, "the king was much

moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept: and as he went, thus he said, O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Sam. 18:33).

When Joab returned it was told him, "Behold, the king weepeth and mourneth for Absalom" (2 Sam. 19:1). Moreover, Joab saw that "the victory? that day was turned into mourning unto all the people: for the people heard say that day how the king was grieved for his son" (2 Sam. 19:2). In the midst of David's cries of grief, "Joab came into the house to the king, and said, Thou hast shamed this day the faces of all thy servants, which this day have saved thy life, and the lives of thy sons and of thy daughters, and the lives of thy wives, and the lives of thy concubines;" (2 Sam. 19:5). As if these words weren't stinging enough, Joab went on to say, "In that thou lovest thine enemies, and hatest thy friends. For thou hast declared this day, that thou regardest neither princes nor servants: for this day I perceive, that if Absalom had lived, and all we had died this day, then it had pleased thee well" (2 Sam. 19:6).

A number of commentators praise Joab for this "pep talk" to David but this author is not so impressed. Just because Joab was a cold-hearted, compassionless, "I'm only in it for me" kind of guy doesn't mean that David had to be. The fact that David was mourning the loss of his son does not mean that he was unappreciative of the soldiers who had fought to protect him and the rest of his family. Should David have been thankful that his family and his kingdom were spared? Absolutely, and there is no proof that he wasn't thankful. It was completely unfair for Joab to accuse David of loving his enemies and hating his friends merely because David was anguished over the loss of his son. How hypocritical for Joab, the very one who precipitated David's tears by his murder of Absalom, to start hurling accusations at the one against whom he had rebelled! It wasn't David's fault that Absalom had been tortured to death! Indeed, **those who have an agenda are very quick to blame and accuse others for problems they themselves have caused.**

The text does not record what David said in response to Joab, if he said anything at all. He did recognize that Joab was right about one thing, namely, the people's need to know that

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the nation was not without leadership. Hence, David appeared before the people and reassured them of his presence as their leader (2 Sam. 19:8-9).

4. The Murder of Amasa. In the aftermath of Absalom's murder and David's reappearance among the people, Joab probably thought that his plan had worked and that his position as David's military commander was secure. He was in for a rude awakening! David told Zadok and Abiathar, his priests, to relay a message to his nephew Amasa. They were to tell him that David said, "Art thou not of my bone, and of my flesh? God do so to me, and more also, if thou be not captain of the host before me continually in the room of Joab" (2 Sam. 19:13). No reason is stated explicitly in the text as to David's reason for this decision but it isn't hard to imagine why. Perhaps David thought that appointing someone from among the men of Judah would help to heal the rift that had developed between David and the men who had followed after Absalom. Moreover, Joab's tirade of false accusations against David and his total lack of compassion may have brought David near the breaking point. Last, but certainly not least, it is possible that David had learned by this time of Joab's involvement in the murder of Absalom. Whatever the reason(s), David had had it with Joab!

A new conspiracy arose against David and his throne and this time the culprit was a man named Sheba. David saw this as a serious threat, one that needed to be stopped right away. However, David did not call for Joab to quell the uprising. He called for his new commander, Amasa, instructing him to gather the troops together and to report back within three days (2 Sam. 20:4). When Amasa did not arrive at the appointed time, David decided to proceed without him. Yet, again he did not call for Joab. He called for Abishai, the brother of Joab, and commanded him to take care of the problem with Sheba. Somehow, perhaps by his brother Abishai, Joab became aware of the conflict and he and his men joined in the search for Sheba.

On their journey they happened to meet Amasa at Gibeon, five miles north of Jerusalem. As Joab came to greet Amasa his

sword fell out of its sheath. Although Joab apparently had planned this, it must have looked like an accident to Amasa. Besides, Joab was his cousin (1 Chron. 2:16-17), someone he need not fear! Joab appeared to show warmth and affection when he said to Amasa, "Art thou in health, my brother? And Joab took Amasa by the beard with the right hand to kiss him" (2 Sam. 20:9). Amasa never saw it coming, but Joab took the sword in his other hand and with one swift well-aimed stroke "smote him therewith in the fifth rib, and shed out his bowels to the ground, and struck him not again; and he died" (2 Sam. 20:10).

It is amazing to read numerous commentators who attempt to justify Joab's actions in killing Amasa. Some suggest that he only did this to punish Amasa for not showing up on time to lead the troops. Still others have commented that David was unwise to replace a veteran commander like Joab with an inefficient Amasa in the first place, and thus Joab was only doing what was best for the nation. The truth of the matter is that Joab did what he did, not for noble purposes but for the purpose of benefitting Joab. Although he was a brilliant military commander, and probably a much better one than Amasa, Joab did not kill Amasa for the good of the nation as much as he did for the good of Joab. Amasa had the position Joab had formerly held, and the position that Joab still wanted, and thus Amasa had to go. Joab's willingness to kill his own cousin shows us that **those who have a personal agenda will go so far as to turn on their own relatives to achieve their personal goals.**

With Amasa soaking in his own blood, Joab took charge of the military as if he had never been demoted. One of Joab's men drew a line in the sand and insisted that anyone loyal to David would also be loyal to Joab, and vice versa (2 Sam. 20:11). The error of his words is obvious enough. David had removed Joab from being commander and thus to be truly loyal to David would have included a rejection of Joab as military commander. The suggestion that loyalty to David necessitated loyalty to Joab was thus untrue, but it was an effective way to put pressure on those who wanted to be loyal to David to also feel the

necessity of following after Joab in order to do so. Thus, we should not be surprised that **those who seek to promote a particular agenda will often recruit their supporters by implying that faithfulness to God necessitates embracing their personal agenda.**

Once they removed Amasa's blood-soaked body out of the way, the men did follow Joab and Abishai. They located Sheba in Abel of Bethmaachah and began battering down the walls of the city. A wise woman from inside the city knew that something had to be done. She called out to Joab and asked him to please listen to what she had to say (2 Sam. 20:14-16). She had determined that it would be better for the residents of the city to behead Sheba and throw his head over the wall then to harbor him as a fugitive and get caught up in the conflict. Thus she pleaded for peace and asked Joab not to swallow up the city (2 Sam. 20:17-19).

Joab's response to her is remarkable. He said, "Far be it, far be it from me, that I should swallow up or destroy" (2 Sam. 20:20). While it is true that Joab may have had no intention of swallowing up and destroying the city of Bethmaachah, his statement leaves the impression that "swallowing up and destroying" just wasn't in his character. Having studied the life of Joab we know that it is not far-fetched to imagine him swallowing up and destroying human life. He certainly swallowed up and destroyed the lives of Abner, Uriah the Hittite, Absalom and Amasa! Yet, Joab has the audacity to say, "Far be it, far be it from me, that I should swallow up or destroy." How ironic that the thing Joab said was far from him is the very thing for which he is remembered the most! This just goes to show that **those who have a personal agenda are often self-deceived and do not see themselves as they really are.**

After the residents of the city cut off the head of Sheba and cast it out to Joab, "he blew a trumpet, and they retired from the city, every man to his tent. And Joab returned to Jerusalem unto the king" (2 Sam. 20:22). What an interesting meeting this must have been between David and Joab. David was no doubt glad to hear that Sheba no longer posed a

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JOAB: DAVID'S MILITARY CAPTAIN WHO HAD HIS OWN AGENDA

Continued from page 3

threat to the unity of the kingdom, but he must have allowed Joab to continue as military commander with a great degree of reluctance. The next verse tells us that "Joab was over all the host of Israel: and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada was over the Cherethites and over the Pelethites:" (2 Sam. 20:23).

In view of the many times when Joab ignored David's agenda to advance his own, one wonders why David would allow Joab to have anything at all to do with commanding his armies. Perhaps it was because for all of Joab's faults he was an effective and experienced military leader. With Amasa now gone, David needed someone to lead his military, someone with knowledge and experience. Furthermore, Joab was David's nephew and it is very possible that David allowed this family connection to impair his judgment. Finally, Joab possessed some very damaging information about David's involvement in the murder of Uriah the Hittite. Although Nathan had confronted David with his sins we are not informed as to how widely known the whole sordid tale was to the general public. Furthermore, even if the full extent of David's sins had become well known by this time, Joab may have constantly reminded David of how much he owed him for keeping it from being known even sooner. Whatever the reasons, David allowed Joab to resume his role as military commander, although it is interesting to note that he appointed Benaiah to command the Cherethites and the Pelethites (2 Sam. 20:23). Perhaps he was grooming Benaiah for the job of military commander the next time Joab did something outrageous and rebellious.

Joab continued to serve in King David's administration for the rest of David's days and we even find him in the unusual position of giving good counsel to David concerning whether they should number the people from Dan to Beersheba (2 Sam. 24:2). Joab must have known that something about David's motive or manner of carrying out the census was contrary to God's will

for he tried to persuade David not to follow through with it (2 Sam. 24:3; 1 Chron. 21:3).

What motivated Joab to suddenly stand up for the right instead of doing the wrong? We would love to say that finally he had been converted to respecting the Word of God in all things. However, a couple of other possibilities must be considered. Some people are doctrinally sound in one or more areas but liberal in other areas. Some are doctrinally sound in what they believe academically, but morally reprobate in how they live. Perhaps Joab was just being inconsistent.

Knowing Joab's tendency to be self-centered, there is another possibility. It is not inconceivable that Joab's reasons for objecting to the census were more self-serving than spiritual. Joab was well aware that God's anger against Israel for David's census might very well come in the form of defeat on the battlefield (Josh. 7:1-16; 2 Sam. 24:13), a matter which would affect him personally. Furthermore, if God's anger against David cost David the kingdom this would also affect Joab personally. Maybe this is the reason for Joab's opposition to David's plan to number the people. Whatever the case, we learn another valuable lesson. **Those who have a reputation for advancing their own personal agenda cause people to wonder what their motives are even when they promote what is right.**

Irrespective of Joab's motives for opposing David, "notwithstanding, the king's word prevailed against Joab, and against the captains of the host. And Joab and the captains of the host went out from the presence of the king, to number the people of Israel" (2 Sam. 24:4). It is somewhat ironic to consider the many occasions in the past when Joab did not verbally disagree with the king's agenda but went out and deliberately disobeyed David's orders. Yet, on this occasion, Joab justifiably disagreed with David's plans but went out and obeyed his orders, at least for awhile. He did refuse to count Levi and Benjamin "for the king's word was abominable unto Joab" (1 Chron. 21:6).

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