

Joab: David's Weak Strongman



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Sam. 2:17–23, 3:23–27, 11:15–25, 20:7–11, 1 Kings 1.*

Memory Text: “All a man's ways seem right to him, but the Lord weighs the heart” (*Proverbs 21:2, NIV*).

Joab's story is a story of power politics, intrigue, misguided loyalties, jealousy, and stubbornness; Joab's time is a time during which survival is not guaranteed by a strong central administration and a comprehensive retirement plan. Strong people survive; weak people quickly seem to fade away. It is during Joab's tenure as David's strongman and caretaker that Israel truly becomes a nation. After the clan feuds and tribal rivalry that characterized the period of the judges, it is the figure of the king (beginning with Saul and later on, to a much stronger degree, with David and Solomon) that unites Israel, even though the Bible makes it clear that centuries of clan thinking will not be done away with in a matter of 30 or 40 years. Joab's life, as depicted in the Bible, is marred by wars, feuds, and even genocide.

Though we might not be involved in the kind of things that Joab was, we may come to face some uglier sides of our own character when we look at his story. It is here that, through the negative example of Joab—the weak strongman of David—we may be able to identify some of our own character faults and seek the only answer to them: Jesus.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 20.*

A Family Affair

Even though Joab, linked to David's family (*see 1 Chron. 2:13–17*), had the responsibility of being in charge of David's troops, we get a glimpse of his true character for the first time in 2 Samuel 2. Saul and Jonathan had been killed in battle. Judah readily appointed David as king. Joab's counterpart in King Saul's army was Abner, who somehow survived the battle in which Saul and his sons had fallen.

Abner and David had a history. It was Abner who had led Saul's troops on numerous manhunts for David. Abner was not about to accept as king the man he had been hunting. Accordingly, Abner puts Ishbosheth (*vss. 8, 9*), the fourth son of Saul, who was not in the battle, on the throne of Israel and starts a war against Judah and David. Although Israel was numerically stronger, David's kingdom went on from strength to strength.

Read 2 Samuel 2:17–23 and summarize what takes place.

During the skirmish Joab's younger brother unwisely chases Abner. Abner warns him off repeatedly, but the rash young man won't hear of it, and Abner kills him in self-defense. Joab never forgets this event.

After a while, Abner realizes that things are going nowhere under Ishbosheth, who is a very weak king. And so he defects to David and offers to bring over the other tribes (*2 Sam. 3:1–22*). Meanwhile, Joab has been away. On returning home, he learns of these new developments, which greatly unsettle him.

How does Joab cope with this change that he did not initiate? *2 Sam. 3:23–27*. Contrast what Joab says to David and the reason Joab ultimately kills Abner. *See also 2 Sam. 3:30*. How does Joab attempt to portray Abner's motives? What does this reveal about him?

Perhaps Joab truly believed he was acting in David's best interest when he killed Abner. This brings out an important point: think about your actions. What are the real reasons for some of the things you do, as opposed to reasons you use to justify them in your own mind? How can you learn to know the difference between the two when they are, indeed, different?

The Cost of Sin

It seems that David is not in a position to do anything about the murder of Abner at the time, even though he publicly mourns for Abner and rebukes Joab's actions (*see 2 Sam. 3:28–35*). To avoid future reprisals, Joab tries to ingratiate himself as closely as possible with David. He sets about to make himself indispensable. He is ready to do the dirty work for David. But striving to make oneself indispensable rather than focusing on doing the right thing often involves violating one's conscience. If that happens again and again, the voice of our conscience becomes duller and duller, until we are unable to stand up when it really counts.

Sin also breaks credibility. We see this principle repeated several times in the life of David. Because of his sin with Bathsheba and against Uriah, David, even though he has been forgiven, is unable to discipline his sons. When his oldest son rapes his half sister (*2 Samuel 13*) and his second son becomes a murderer (*2 Sam. 13:23–39*), David stands helplessly by, knowing that he is guilty of similar sins.

Read 2 Samuel 11:15–25. What does this passage tell us about Joab?

Joab has the same problem. Having the blood of Abner on his hands makes him unable to react appropriately and help save a good man's life. And so Joab adds to his list of crimes by becoming, in effect, Uriah's assassin. Notice in 2 Samuel 11:17 that Uriah is not the only victim. Joab sends some other men along on this foolhardy expedition in order to make the whole thing look more authentic. Although we know from the life of David that God is merciful and forgives us when we repent, the consequence of a ruined credibility and a lack of integrity is still something that we will have to carry with us.

In the previous example Joab obeyed David's orders. Now read 2 Samuel 18:5–15. What does his action here tell us about him? How might he have rationalized this deed, as well?

It is interesting to note that Joab follows David's orders even when they violate God's commands, but he has no trouble disobeying the king's express orders when he stands to gain personally. After all, had Absalom succeeded in his revolt, Joab probably would have been killed himself (*2 Sam. 19:5, 6*). Joab seems to be looking out for no one but himself.

How easy it is to fall into the same trap!

Joab the Politician

Second Samuel 13 tells the story of Absalom's premeditated murder of his half brother Amnon. Absalom flees the country and bides his time. David is once again in a difficult situation. Amnon was guilty of the rape of his half sister Tamar, Absalom's sister. It seems that David—paralyzed by the memory of his own sin—is unable to administer justice. By taking things into his own hands, Absalom avenges the rape of his sister and restores the family honor. (Honor and shame were two very important elements of the value system during the time of David.) Second, and as a nice benefit, once Amnon, David's oldest son, is dead, Absalom is now in line to inherit the throne. David's heart is torn between his grief for his dead son, his love for Absalom, and the keen knowledge that all of this mess is somehow rooted in his own sin.

Amid all this, Joab decides to become involved. However, since he does not see a direct way to put this item on the agenda of King David, he resorts to cunning and uses a wise woman of Tekoah.

Read 2 Samuel 14. What does the woman of Tekoah's story communicate about God's love and forgiveness? At the same time, what does this passage also tell us about Joab?

The story that Joab put into the mouth of the woman suggests that Joab knew about God's great love toward the sinner. His theology was correct. Unfortunately, for Joab this remained head knowledge only. His own life continued to be characterized by revenge and a lack of forgiveness. Joab had become immune to God's love in his own life. For him, everything, even religion, had a political end and could be used for self-promotion. Joab recognized Absalom's potential and wanted to begin to ingratiate himself with the future king. It seems, however, that Joab met his match in Absalom. Joab receives no Thank-you notes for his initiative in bringing Absalom home. Absalom simply wants to use him and quickly shows Joab that he can be every bit as cunning and dangerous as Joab can be. He did this by burning Joab's fields in order to force him to arrange a meeting with David (*2 Sam. 14:28–33*). The point is that thanks to Joab's interference, the stage was now being set for an awful rebellion that would lead to civil war.

How easy is it to let personal ambition, pride, and desire for self-supremacy motivate your actions? How can you learn to recognize these things in yourself? How can you, through God's grace, defeat them before they lead to your ruin?

Living by the Sword

Read 2 Samuel 20. What role do we find Joab in again? How was Joab's treachery justified?

Amasa and Joab were cousins (2 Sam. 17:25). Amasa was commander of Absalom's forces. After Joab disobeys David's orders in the case of Absalom (2 Sam. 18:5, 14), David wishes to rid himself of Joab and promises Amasa the high command of his army (2 Sam. 19:13). After all, it was Joab's scheming and planning that set the stage for the rebellion. Obviously, David's design is not motivated only by anger toward Joab (who had consciously disobeyed the king's order and killed his son). Amasa's appointment was also a political move that would signal reconciliation to the rest of the pro-Absalom forces.

What does 2 Samuel 20:1, 2 tell us about the political situation in Israel?

David ignores Joab, for he has promised the command to Amasa, and now he sends Amasa to round up the troops in order to deal with a new revolt. Amasa is not able to do this in time. David then sends for Abishai, the brother of Joab, and turns to him rather than to Joab in this time of crisis. Joab and Amasa finally meet, and, borrowing a leaf from Abner's assassination, Joab murders Amasa. The biblical writer emphasizes the total unexpectedness of the attack (2 Sam. 20:8–10). Joab coolly murders his cousin, simply because he has been passed over and is no longer number one.

One of Joab's men tries to legitimize Joab's actions by linking Joab to King David. The people are being led to believe that loyalty to David means loyalty to Joab (even though the king has explicitly distanced himself from Joab), and being loyal to Joab means that Joab's right to be judge, jury, and executioner in the case of Amasa cannot be questioned.

Look at Joab's duplicity in how he betrayed Amasa. How careful we need to be that we don't betray someone who trusts us, using that trust to do them dirty. How easily Matthew 7:12 should apply here.

Joab's Last Stand

The timing seems to be perfect. David is a very old man now, who cannot keep warm at night. A beautiful young woman is found who becomes King David's personal attendant. The biblical author specifically emphasizes the fact that David has no sexual relations with her (*1 Kings 1:1–4*), which further underlines the feeble state of the king. David does not “know”—not only young Abishag but also what's happening in his kingdom. Adonijah, as the oldest remaining son, now decides that it is time to arrange his coronation.

Read 1 Kings 1. What is Joab up to now? What more does this tell us about him?

First Kings 1:7 makes it clear that Joab is one of the key players in this coup attempt. Joab, as he has done several times before, simply goes ahead and acts, thinking that old King David will be powerless to do anything about it. However, this time David, with the help of Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan, does act. He foils Joab's and Adonijah's plans by publicly declaring Solomon as his co-regent.

Joab seems to take God completely out of the equation. While he may have all of the theological knowledge about God, God doesn't seem to have relevance in his life. Joab thinks that he always can live as he pleases and escape the consequences. He forgets that God is not David. God cannot be fooled; even though retribution may not come immediately, it will one day come—if not in this life, then in the final judgment. However, often at the end of the day in this life, even a very long day, “a man reaps what he sows” (*Gal. 6:7, NIV*).

Before final judgment, there always is mercy. Joab gets a last chance, in that Solomon does not punish him for his scheming with Adonijah and allows him to retain his position. However, Joab shows no remorse and makes no apology, and he is involved in a second coup attempt. When this does not work, Joab finally realizes the gravity of his situation. He flees to the sanctuary and takes hold of the horns of the altar. Joab forgets, however, that the altar provides asylum only for those who have killed unwittingly (*Exod. 21:14*). Joab's unconfessed past has finally caught up with him. The man who lived by the sword now dies by the sword (*1 Kings 2:28–35*).

However scheming, ambitious, and deceitful Joab was, everything he did could have been forgiven by the Lord had Joab come to God in faith, humility, and repentance. What about you and your defects? Forgiveness is there if you are willing to claim it for yourself.

Further Study: “We should not only take hold of the truth, but let it take hold of us; and thus have the truth in us and we in the truth. And if this is the case, our lives and characters will reveal the fact that the truth is accomplishing something for us; that it is sanctifying us, and is giving us a moral fitness for the society of heavenly angels in the kingdom of glory. The truth we hold is from heaven; and when that religion finds a lodgement in the heart, it commences its work of refining and purifying; for the religion of Jesus Christ never makes a man rough or rude; it never makes him careless, or hard-hearted; but the truth of heavenly origin, that which comes from God, elevates and sanctifies a man; it makes courteous, kind, affectionate, and pure; it takes away his hard heart, his selfishness and love of the world, and it purifies him from pride and ungodly ambition.”—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, May 9, 1878.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How far should we go in our expression of loyalty to our families, employers, and country? What are the limits to these important relationships?
- 2 Reread the Ellen White quote in Friday’s lesson study. What evidence can you see in your own life that the truth has taken hold of you? While it’s important to focus on Christ and not on ourselves, we also need to be honest with ourselves about where we stand in regard to the faith (*2 Cor. 13:5*).
- 3 Many evil acts have been done throughout history by those who said, “I was only following orders.” How are we as Christians to deal with situations in which we are ordered to do things that we know are wrong? More important, how can we develop the kind of faith we need to stand firm, even when it means defying orders, when it could be very costly to ourselves and to our loved ones?
- 4 Is it practical or even possible to forgive and forget when we have been hurt? What principles can we learn from this week’s study about forgiveness, lack of forgiveness, and the consequences of not forgiving?
- 5 Oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller used unscrupulous business practices in order to buy out competitors. He would justify his actions by telling competitors that they needed to sell their companies to him and let him take on the risks of the oil business for them. “Get into the ark,” he would tell them, making it sound as if he were doing something charitable for them when, in fact, he was swallowing them up. What lessons can we learn from this about how easy it is to justify immoral deeds?

Called Out

Bobby Issai sat on the wooden step of his simple home in a village in Papua New Guinea. He wrinkled his forehead trying to make sense of what he was reading. He had never questioned his church's teachings until a friend gave him a Bible. But as he read it, questions flooded his mind. *Why do we baptize by sprinkling when the Bible speaks of baptism by immersion? What is this Sabbath that's spoken of throughout the Bible?* Bobby became convinced that the Sabbath, not Sunday, was God's holy day, and that he must keep it. But how? He knew of no church that worshiped on Saturday.

Bobby determined to follow God, even if he was the only one who did. He shared his convictions with others, and a small group began meeting with him on Sabbath to study the Bible. The group grew to 20 people before villagers complained to local church leaders. Bobby was told to stop meeting, and when he refused he was forced to leave the village.

Bobby moved to another village and again shared his faith. Soon 30 people were meeting with him. Once more village leaders complained to the local religious leaders, who removed Bobby's name from the church membership. Bobby was relieved, for at last he was free to worship without restraint. But still the question gnawed at him: Where could he find a church that observed the Sabbath? How could he find a pastor to teach them?

Bobby got into his canoe and paddled down the river to the nearest city in search of a church that kept the Sabbath. He was directed to a nearby Seventh-day Adventist church. On Sabbath morning Bobby rejoiced as he entered the church and listened to the members singing hymns of praise to God.

After the worship service a young man introduced Bobby to the pastor. Bobby told the pastor about the little group of believers up the river, and the pastor agreed to return with Bobby to teach them.

The pastor spent three days with the believers, encouraging and teaching them. He returned often to teach the little group. Bobby continued studying with the little group, and two years later Bobby and his wife were among those baptized. The group swelled to almost 50, and they were assigned a regular pastor.

Although some have fallen away, Bobby and the faithful believers continue to share their faith and claim God's promises.

Almost a half million Seventh-day Adventists live in Papua New Guinea. Our mission offerings help train and supply lay workers such as Bobby to lead their fellow villagers to greater truths found in the Bible.