

Murder Most Foul!

2 Samuel 4:1-12

By [Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas](#)

Turn with me to 2 Samuel chapter 4. 2 Samuel chapter 4 — we're going to read about Ish-bosheth, the only remaining son of Saul who's been put on the throne in the northern kingdom, but as we shall see, his reign is short lived.

Before we read the passage together, let's look to God in prayer.

Father, we thank You for the Scriptures. They are able to make us wise unto salvation through faith which is in Jesus Christ our Lord. We ask now for Your blessing, the outpouring of Your Spirit. We pray that we might be enabled to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest, and all for Jesus' sake. Amen.

This is God's holy and inerrant Word:

When Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, heard that Abner had died at Hebron, his courage failed, and all Israel was dismayed. Now Saul's son had two men who were captains of raiding bands; the name of the one was Baanah, and the name of the other Rechab, sons of Rimmon a man of Benjamin from Beeroth (for Beeroth also is counted part of Benjamin; the Beerothites fled to Gittaim and have been sojourners there to this day).

Jonathan, the son of Saul, had a son who was crippled in his feet. He was five years old when the news about Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel, and his nurse took him up and fled, and as she fled in her haste, he fell and became lame. And his name was Mephilbosheth.

Now the sons of Rimmon the Berrothite, Rechab and Baanah, set out, and about the heat of the day they came to the house of Ish-bosheth as he was taking his noonday rest. And they came into the midst of the house as if to get wheat, and they stabbed him in the stomach. Then Rechab and Baanah his brother escaped. When they came into the house, as he lay on his bed in his bedroom, they struck him and put him to death and beheaded him. They took his head and went by the way of Arabah all night, and brought the head of Ish-bosheth to David at Hebron. And they said to the king, "Here is the head of Ish-bosheth, the son of Saul, your enemy, who sought your life. The Lord has avenged my lord the king this day on Saul and on his offspring." But David answered Rachab and

Baanah his brother, the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, "As the Lord lives, who has redeemed my life out of every adversity, when one told me, 'Behold, Saul is dead,' and thought he was bringing good news, I seized him and killed him at Ziklag, which was the reward I gave him for his news. How much more, when wicked men have killed a righteous man in his own house on his bed, shall I not now require his blood at your hand and destroy you from the earth?" And David commanded his young men, and they killed them and cut off their hands and feet and hanged them beside the pool at Hebron. But they took the head of Ish-bosheth and buried it in the tomb of Abner at Hebron.

Well, thus far, God's holy, inerrant Word. What a pleasant story!

You know, as I was thinking about this passage — and you've got to believe I was thinking about it most of this week — having the heebie-jeebies when I saw the first and second grade choirs singing in the evening service. Where is Jesus in this text? Indeed, where is Jesus in this text? And I think that perhaps this is another occasion where the better question might be, "What is Jesus teaching us in this text?"

Let us not forget this is part of Jesus' story. This is part of the fulfillment of a promise that the Son of David will one day come and rule and reign. Didn't I hear the little angels sing, "Jesus shall reign" just a few minutes ago? Well, the lineage of that Jesus lies here in this gruesome, awful tale. I want to look at it tonight from two perspectives, from, first of all, the perspective of the north — that is, Ish-bosheth and Israel — and secondly from the perspective of David at Hebron in the south.

Ish-bosheth — I have to say I was reminded, just briefly, of Thomas Gray's poem that I once was forced to learn in school, "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" — not one of your favorite poems, I'm sure. It's about a man contemplating as the sun goes down. He's in a country churchyard and he's contemplating the graves and the names of those written on the graves and they are nobodies. Who knows who they are? Nobody remembers them. They're not some of the great and notorious people of history; they're just forgotten. And that's Ish-bosheth. He's been made king, do you see, by Abner. Saul and his three sons were killed on Mount Gilboa fighting the Philistines and after probably a period of about three years, Abner, the general of Saul's army in the north, put the remaining son, Ish-bosheth, on the throne. He made him king and then he went and unmade him king. Ish-bosheth had the temerity to accuse Abner of a little incident with a certain concubine, and Abner, in a fit of rage, told Ish-bosheth — you remember a couple of weeks ago? We were looking at the previous passages. Abner told Ish-bosheth that just as he had made him king, so surely he would unmake him king.

You remember Abner had inadvertently killed Joab's brother, Asahel with a blunt

end of his spear. It was probably accidental. It wasn't murder with intent. But Joab, Asahel's brother — Joab is one of the chief men in David's camp — had been angry with David for receiving Abner, and remember, had asked Abner to come to the city gates of Hebron — a protected city, a city of refuge, a city where anyone fleeing from his avenger could get justice. And Joab had killed him. So Saul is dead, Jonathan is dead, his two brothers are dead, Abner is now dead, and we read in the first verse of chapter 4 — “When Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, heard that Abner had died at Hebron, his courage failed him.” Literally, his hands dropped. His courage failed him. He never wanted to be king. He was ill-equipped to be king. He was never meant to be king. He didn't want the job. He couldn't do the job.

Sometimes life isn't fair. Sometimes life isn't fair. He's a puppet-king. He's put in power by others. He doesn't want to be in this situation and life isn't fair. He's not Oliver Cromwell. He's Richard Cromwell. Richard Cromwell, Oliver Cromwell's son, lasted nine months. He was so bad, England went back to monarchy. His courage failed him. You feel sorry for

Ish-bosheth. You know, you wouldn't even know about him if he wasn't here in this chapter. You know, nobody's saying here tonight, “You know, you're saying, I want to be like David.” Some of you military types are enamored of the figures of Joab and Abner. You know, they're men. They're real men. They're soldiers, anywhere there was to fight. But no one's saying here, “I want to be Ish-bosheth. You know I really want to be Ish-bosheth.” No, you feel sorry for him. He's the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time. He's weak. He's weak. He's a patsy. He's a man under the control of others.

And now two would-be young pretenders, who can probably read what's going to happen — the downfall of the northern kingdom — thinking that they might ingratiate themselves to David and have plum government jobs with a pension and health benefits, they kill him. Oh, brave young men, they kill him while he's asleep in his bed, like Duncan in *Macbeth*, only not quite so dramatic. Life isn't fair. You know, he's in the wrong place at the wrong time, and he's killed. He's murdered - murder most foul. You know, there's something you want to say when you read this. You know, whatever Ish-bosheth was, he didn't deserve that. You know, he didn't deserve that. He's an innocent victim of ambitious and unscrupulous men.

Can you identify a little with him, perhaps? Life isn't fair. Your husband is cheating on you. You don't deserve that. Life isn't fair. You have ambitions for your children — some of you have too many ambitions for your children; ambitions that are not good for you or them. But perhaps for some of you, you look at your children and you think, “Why can't I have other people's children?” Life isn't fair. Some of you know all too well what it is to be stabbed in the back by someone at work who's climbing the corporate ladder and you thought they were friends. And when the moment of opportunity came, they stabbed you in the

back. Life isn't fair. "I'm doing my job. I'm trying my best." That's what I think about Ish-bosheth and life isn't fair. There's no one, there's no one here tonight who's saying, "I want to be like

Ish-bosheth." He's dead. He's murdered. He's beheaded by two young pretenders who take his head down to Hebron to David.

Now, let's move away from that grizzly story. Let's go south. Let's go to David's camp —probably a two day journey. Rechab and Baanah — now notice in verse 8, notice that when you think you want something you can put theological language to justify it. So they come to David and they're holding the head of Ish-bosheth, two days now, decomposing in their hands — "The son of Saul, your enemy, who sought your life. The Lord" - now notice this theological, heavyweight explanation of what it is that they've done —"The Lord has avenged my lord the king this day on Saul and on his offspring."

Well, let's think about that for a minute, this piece of theological self-justification — what they were doing was avenging the attempts of Saul to kill David. I mean, hadn't God promised that David would rule over a united kingdom? Yes, He had. Hadn't God promised that David would rule at the downfall of Saul's kingdom? Yes, He had.

So, doesn't the end justify the means? I mean, this brought about the end of Saul's kingdom. There was only one other left, Mephibosheth, and he was a cripple. His nurse had dropped him, fleeing when she heard of the death of his father, Jonathan. The northern kingdom is over. David is now going to be the united king of a united north and south, and they had just accomplished the wiping out of every obstacle in that path to glory. Doesn't the end justify the means? It's called in ethics, consequentialism.

I was in Atlanta airport, as I often am, a couple of weeks ago, a couple of Saturdays ago, and I began a conversation with a lady — we had just flow to Meridian and then flown back again; some mechanical problem which was never explained — and I was explaining to her what Delta actually meant: Delays Expected When Leaving Through Atlanta. (laughter) This lady traveled the world. She went all over the world — something to do with heart transplant technology. It was way above my understanding. And she began to talk about stem-cell research and what great advances were being made in China. I listened with great interest. The end justifying the means. At what cost was this great expertise in stem-cell research being done? At the death of thousands, no, hundreds of thousands, no, millions of unborn children. Does the end justify the means?

That's what these two are saying to David. "Look, we've advanced the kingdom of God. It was an opportunity. It was a providence. The door was open and God had given the promise. We're helping you, David!" Except that David didn't see it that way. They obviously did not know what David had done to the Amalekite,

you remember, who came running to David in chapter 1 of 2 Samuel with the king Saul's crown and amulets, suggesting to David that he in fact had killed him for David. And what had David done to the Amalekite? He told his young men to kill him because he had killed, at least he had confessed to have killed, the Lord's anointed. It was justice.

Now, David has his young men take these two young want-a-be pretenders, their hands and feet are severed, and they're hung like an advertisement from a billboard on I-55, only it's Hebron. And, you might say, "Praise God we live in more enlightened times." And maybe you're right.

But you see, the question I want to ask tonight is this — what kind of kingdom, what kind of kingdom does David want to bring in? What kind of kingdom will David rule over? Will it be a kingdom governed by the ethics of consequentialism, that the end justifies the means?

No.

It will be a kingdom governed by justice and righteousness. These two young men that committed murder, murder most foul, the murder of a king while he's sleeping in his bed — this was a murder with intent. They got what the Law, what the Torah had prescribed. That's all that happened to them.

You see, let me put it this way tonight. If we have, if we have a low view of justice, if we have a low view of justice, we read this passage and we "tut-tut" at it. How dare David do this? What kind of uncivilized society is this, to put murderers to death? What kind of uncivilized society is that? It's a society governed by the Law of Moses, that's what it is. We are so far away from that we find it almost disgusting. But there is nothing here in what David did that was anything other than what was right and prescribed in the Law of Moses.

You see, let me put it this way — if we have a low view of justice, we'll have a low view of the Gospel. And you say, you say, "How can that possibly be?" Because, my friends, the Gospel is actually built on the foundations of justice.

Do you remember when Paul says in Romans 8, "He that did not spare His own Son"? He didn't spare Him. The innocent, perfect, Lamb of God, He didn't spare Him. You see, here's the thing — Jesus had asked to be spared. In the Garden of Gethsemane He had said to His Father, "Father, if it is possible, if there's some other way." You can almost eavesdrop the answer. The Father says, the Father says to His Son, "Son, we promised. We made a promise. We made a covenant in eternity. Remember? We made a covenant and You would be the Mediator of that covenant. It's a promise. Son, we can't go back on our word. It's a matter of justice. It's a matter of integrity. It's a matter of righteousness."

David is bringing in the kingdom that is built on the foundations of righteousness

and justice, not the end justifying the means. Now David will forget, because power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, for human beings anyway. Within a few chapters we'll see David behave like a Chicago gangster thug, sending murderers to battlefield to ensure that the husband of the wife that he has now impregnated be killed. But at least here, at least here in chapter 4, David's concern is for a kingdom that is built on the foundation of justice and righteousness.

Do you remember what Paul says in the opening chapter of Romans when he says, "I'm not ashamed of the Gospel. I'm not ashamed of the Gospel because therein is the forgiveness of God revealed"? No, that's not what it says. You might think that's what it says, you might have thought in a quiz that's what Paul said — that's why he's not ashamed of the Gospel because in the Gospel there is forgiveness — but that's not what he said. "I'm not ashamed of the Gospel because the righteousness of God is revealed in it."

You know, when Luther read that, he said at one point, as he tells us in his introduction to his commentary on Romans, he says that when he first read that and he thought about it, he hated God and he hated God's righteousness. How can the righteousness, the justice of God, be something in which he rejoice? Because as he came on to see, that righteousness is revealed from faith to faith. It's a righteousness that we receive by faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. "He was made sin for us who knew no sin that we might be reckoned the righteousness of God in Him." I'm not ashamed of the Gospel because it's about righteousness. It's about being right with God. It's about integrity. But it's a rightness and an integrity that I received by faith in Jesus Christ. That's the Gospel my friends. That's what's at the heart of the Gospel.

David is introducing a kingdom. He's ushering in a kingdom. He's on the very threshold of that kingdom. Now in the next few chapters, he's going to be crowned in a great pomp and ceremony in Jerusalem and a covenant, a covenant in chapter 7 is going to be established. That's one of the most important things in all the Old Testament. And it's going to point to the coming of Jesus.

Now David isn't Jesus. He sometimes acts as a type of Jesus, but David could never save us.

Only Jesus can save us. Only the righteous one. Only the just one. Only the perfect one.

So right here, in a chapter that is — you know it's like a murder mystery that I think goes on TV tonight, on public television on I think one of those programs where it's all about murder and there's usually two or three of them — and you've got it here. Three people are dead in this small chapter. And God in His indescribable, inexplicable providence, is working out His purposes. God, yes

God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm.
Deep in unfathomable mines of never-failing skill,
He treasures up His bright designs and works His sovereign will.
Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan His work in vain.
God is His own interpreter and He will make it plain.

Yes, this sad, awful, wretched story is one of the pillars that leads eventually to the edifice, which is Christ Himself, the only true and just and righteous King.

May God bless His Word to us. Let's pray.

Father, we stand amazed as we read these Old Testament stories and as we are traveling through the books of Samuel, sometimes we feel glad that we're not there, that we live in what we sometimes fool ourselves into thinking are more enlightened times. We thank You, O Lord, for the ways in which these passages beg for us to call out for a righteous King and how we have seen that righteous King in the face of Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Savior. How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear, calms his sorrows, heals his wounds, and drives away his fear. We thank You that for those who feel like Ish-bosheth tonight, victims of circumstances that outwardly appear to be unfair, that only in Jesus Christ can peace and resolution and contentment come. So to those of our brothers and sisters tonight, who perhaps secretly and quietly have identified with Ish-bosheth, may that peace that passes all understanding that garrisons the heart be theirs tonight. For Jesus' sake we ask it. Amen.

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, be with you all.

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