

Bitterness

2 Samuel 3:22-39

Halifax: 18 January 2026

Introduction:

In our series in Samuel, we have seen how Abner, who had been the commander of Saul's armies, had taken control of the ten tribes of Israel after Saul died. Only Judah had recognised David, and the Levites did not have their own land.

- Although Abner knew that God had chosen David to be king of Israel in place of Saul, and although many of the elders of Israel wanted to submit to David as king, Abner anointed Ishbosheth (Saul's weak son) as king, and sought to conquer Judah.
- When this effort failed and it was evident that David was getting stronger and stronger and the other tribes were getting weaker and weaker, Abner used a dispute with Ishbosheth as an excuse to bring Israel to submit to David.
 - He did not repent, but acted as if this was, of course, what should have been done along since God had chosen David to be His anointed king over all Israel.
 - He was the one who had led them to do otherwise.
 - Of course, David, a prince of peace, wanted that and knew it was God's will, so when Abner sent to him, David welcomed him but made it clear that he, David, was in charge. He set the terms of reconciliation in a way that forced both Abner and Ishbosheth to publicly show their support of this alliance.
 - The prayers of the godly in both Israel and Judah were being answered! The whole nation was finally coming together under God's anointed. I might mention that wars continue to be fought over who that person is.

Today, as we continue the narrative at 2 Samuel 3:22, we see what happened when Joab, the commander of David's armies, found out that David had received Abner!

- Joab was David's nephew (though probably about the same age). He was the oldest of three very aggressive brothers who were the sons of David's sister, Zeruiah. Joab was especially bitter toward Abner because Abner had killed Joab's youngest brother, Asahel, when Asahel had relentlessly pursued Abner to kill him.
- Joab very much wanted David to be king of all Israel, but his hatred of Abner made that a secondary concern for him.

We will pick up the story at 2 Samuel 3:22. This is the word of God which is given to us by God for our edification:

2 Sam 3:22-39: At that moment the servants of David and Joab came from a raid and brought much spoil with them. But Abner was not with David in Hebron, for he had sent him away, and he had gone in peace. ²³ When Joab and all the troops that were with him had come, they told Joab, saying, "Abner the son of Ner came to the king, and he sent him away, and he has gone in peace." ²⁴ Then Joab came to the king and said, "What have you done? Look, Abner came to you; why is it that you sent him away, and he has already gone? ²⁵ "Surely you realize that

Abner the son of Ner came to deceive you, to know your going out and your coming in, and to know all that you are doing." ²⁶ And when Joab had gone from David's presence, he sent messengers after Abner, who brought him back from the well of Sirah. But David did not know it. ²⁷ Now when Abner had returned to Hebron, Joab took him aside in the gate to speak with him privately, and there stabbed him in the stomach, so that he died for the blood of Asahel his brother. ²⁸ Afterward, when David heard it, he said, "My kingdom and I are guiltless before the

LORD forever of the blood of Abner the son of Ner. ²⁹ Let it rest on the head of Joab and on all his father's house; and let there never fail to be in the house of Joab one who has a discharge or is a leper, who leans on a staff or falls by the sword, or who lacks bread." ³⁰ So Joab and Abishai his brother killed Abner, because he had killed their brother Asahel at Gibeon in the battle. ³¹ Then David said to Joab and to all the people who were with him, "Tear your clothes, gird yourselves with sackcloth, and mourn for Abner." And King David followed the coffin. ³² So they buried Abner in Hebron; and the king lifted up his voice and wept at the grave of Abner, and all the people wept. ³³ And the king sang a lament over Abner and said: "Should Abner die as a fool dies? ³⁴ Your hands were not bound nor your feet put into

fetters; as a man falls before wicked men, so you fell." Then all the people wept over him again. ³⁵ And when all the people came to persuade David to eat food while it was still day, David took an oath, saying, "God do so to me, and more also, if I taste bread or anything else till the sun goes down!" ³⁶ Now all the people took note of it, and it pleased them, since whatever the king did pleased all the people. ³⁷ For all the people and all Israel understood that day that it had not been the king's intent to kill Abner the son of Ner. ³⁸ Then 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 am weak today, though anointed king; and these men, the sons of Zeruiah, are too harsh for me. The LORD shall repay the evildoer according to his wickedness."

Thus far the reading of God's holy and infallible word. Let's be edified by it.

Joab is obviously a very bitter man.

- Bitter malice is a terrible thing.
 - You all know that. Everybody knows that.
 - It turns you against other people and makes you miserable.

I. Let's begin by looking at how bitterness affects people.

- We will look at this through what we are told about how it affected Joab.
- A. First, bitterness causes you to create false narratives about people.
1. When Joab hears that Abner has come to make peace, he immediately comes up with the narrative that Abner had come as a spy.
 - It is true that Abner was the kind of man that might do something like that, but all the evidence shows that Abner really did want to bring the tribes of Israel under David's rule.
 - It was more about policy than principle, but he was indeed committed to actually doing this.
 - But Joab's bitterness caused him to think the worst about Abner.
 2. Bitter people always think the worst about those against whom they are embittered.
 - Their bitterness makes them incapable of seeing anything good in them. Their foe can do nothing good in their eyes.
 - If their enemy repents, they will not believe there could be any sincerity in it.
 - They listen for bad reports about them, and as soon as they hear one, they immediately accept it without question and embellish with a few additional suppositions of their own. They let it confirm suspicions they had and weave it into the negative portrait of the person they have drawn up in their own mind.
 - It is as if they are eagerly looking for more things to hold against them to justify their hard thoughts about them and opposition of them.

- As if they were not bitter enough, they continually add fuel to their own fire.
 - That is just what Joab does here.
- B. A second thing that bitterness does: it causes you to harm other people.
1. Joab tries his best to turn David against Abner by slandering him.
 - He is incensed with David and talks to David as if David is his servant: “What have you done?” he says.
 - He argues his point that Abner is there to spy out David’s situation so that he can launch an attack. He acts as if David is stupid for missing it.
 - Bitter people will very often gossip and slander—sometimes in a subtle way—always in whatever way they think will be most convincing to the hearer.
 - They want to multiply those who join them in the negative view in order to justify their opposition to them... it helps to ease their pangs of conscience.
 2. Joab, however, did much more than slander Abner. He killed him!
 - He does it in a most dishonourable way.
 - Abner has negotiated for peace with David and has been accepted and feasted with David to confirm their friendship and acceptance of each other. He is in the land as one who is on terms of peace with the king.
 - Joab calls Abner to come to him in a friendly way and steps aside to chat with him, only to pierce him in his gut when Abner is not expecting it.
 - His wickedness is somewhat ameliorated because of the “avenger of blood” custom of the day—the notion that it was a relative’s duty to kill anyone who killed their kinsfolk and that to fail to do so dishonoured their dead and their whole family.
 - The LORD had sought to rectify this custom and lead His people to a better way. While capital punishment is proper and ought to be done for first-degree murder, when there was an accidental killing, God had established cities of refuge where the involuntary manslayer could flee, allowing the relative to settle down. Hebron happened to be one of those cities of refuge, but that does not apply here because Abner had not gone to Hebron for that purpose.
 - Abner’s slaying of Asahel was really not a good excuse at all for Joab and his brother Abishai’s slaying of Abner because in Asahel’s case, it was in a time of battle—and Abner had even warned Asahel not to keep pursuing him.
 - Yet, arguing in Joab’s favour, Abner was the one who started the civil war in the first place—the war in which Asahel was slain by Abner’s unjust opposition to and invasion of Judah.
 - Still, what Joab did and the way he did it was clearly wrong.
 - It was fuelled by bitterness.
 - The bitter person always has some arguments to support their bitter aggressions, but the problem is that their bitterness causes them to behave unjustly.
 - Bitterness sets you against another person. That is what is so wrong about it. It exposes the wickedness that is in your heart when you are against another person. You should always be desirous to see them restored and do what you can on your part to make that happen. Jesus said so.

- Now of course if you are a judge, you have a duty to administer justice in God's name, and it is right for you to issue penalties and even death sentences based on principles of justice. That is not murder. Neither is self-defence. Bitterness produces hatred in you.
3. There are lots of other ways besides slander and murder that bitterness uses to harm others and to behave unjustly and ungodly.
 - We have had to put members out of the church for breaking their marriage vows or membership vows because of bitterness.
 - Bitterness can cause you to deprive your neighbour of the good that you ought to have done to them.
 - This happens in the home all the time. Bitter children will not only dishonour and even curse their parents, but they will also neglect duties to them.
 - Bitter wives will refuse to obey their husbands and serve them, and bitter husbands will withhold care and protection of their wives.
 - There are bitter outbursts, manipulations, verbal and physical attacks, belittling, setting traps, publicly humiliating, refusing to help those who are in need...bitterness fuels all sorts of noxious sins.
 - You cannot walk with God when you are bitter. You cannot glorify and enjoy Him. You cannot love Him.
 - You are in the grip of bitterness and the snare of the devil until you repent.
- C. A third thing bitterness does: It causes you to forget all about those who suffer collateral damage from your bitterness.
1. One of the greatest aggravations of Joab's bitterness is that it made him completely forget about the welfare of the whole nation of Israel.
 - Israel was God's people, chosen to serve Him and represent Him in the world, chosen to glorify and enjoy Him.
 - Finally, after years of division, the nation was coming together. David and Abner were making peace! The bloody civil war would end.
 - But Joab was so blinded by his personal malice against Abner that he acted in a way that could have easily derailed the peace process.
 - Wars have been fought because of personal offenses of national leaders! What selfishness! Bitterness makes you think only of yourself!
 - And what makes it all the worse is that it destroys you too!
 2. Many examples could be given of this selfish disregard for the effect that your bitter actions have on others.
 - An embittered couple will fight before their children—and even divorce, as if their children don't matter. Not that they should only work things out or pretend to do so for the sake of their children—it should be done anyway—but it does much harm to their children.
 - Your example is an example of malice instead of an example of Christ's love. You teach them how insult and berate and rant, even to curse instead of how to love and forgive!
 - If you are a bitter child, you make everyone in your home miserable, even if your bitterness is only toward one brother or sister, or one of your parents, you

spoil the home as a loving place of mutual care and refuge and turn it into a miserable place that everyone wants to avoid.

- Instead of the sweet aroma of service and sacrifice, you fill your home with the terrible stench of selfishness and malice. It stinks!
- You do harm to the cause of Christ—we are to show forth God’s love and the transforming power of grace in our lives by the Spirit. You give Christians a bad name and set a bad example, making people want nothing to do with Jesus. What about your lost neighbours and relatives? Instead of turning and attracting people to God, you drive them away!
- Do you not care about them?
- The truth is, you don’t. Bitterness has destroyed your care.

II. I want you all to know that God’s anointed King will have no part in your bitterness!

- A. David represents Jesus Christ quite well when he distances himself from Joab’s deed.
1. He immediately denounces Joab.
 - He testifies that he had nothing to do with his murderous act. He pronounces a curse on Joab:
 - His words are very strong, an example of righteous indignation. 2 Sam 3:28-29: **Afterward, when David heard it, he said, “My kingdom and I are guiltless before the LORD forever of the blood of Abner the son of Ner. 29 Let it rest on the head of Joab and on all his father’s house; and let there never fail to be in the house of Joab one who has a discharge or is a leper, who leans on a staff or falls by the sword, or who lacks bread.”**
 2. Does Jesus not declare that the bitter person who will not forgive will not be forgiven by His heavenly Father?
 - If they will not repent of their bitterness, they show that they don’t know the Lord in a saving way, whatever they may profess.
 - Did we not read in Matthew 5:22 His words: **“But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire.**
 3. It is the duty of the church to discipline those who will not repent of their bitterness.
 - All of us must admonish each other when we see bitterness—and if there is no repentance, we must rebuke, and the elders must act and suspend them from the supper of the Lord and eventually put them out of the church if they will not repent.
 - Did we not read in Eph 4:31 that we must **“Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice”**?
 - 2 Cor 5:11 mentions revilers as among those wicked people that we are commanded to “put away from yourselves.”
 - Bitterness is not to be tolerated in those who profess Christ.
- B. David mourns publicly and appears to be quite sincere in his sorrow.

1. He makes it clear that he does not condone the killing of Abner.
 - a. He orders Joab and his men to engage in mourning Abner's death.
 - v. 31: **“Then David said to Joab and to all the people who were with him, ‘Tear your clothes, gird yourselves with sackcloth, and mourn for Abner.’ And King David followed the coffin.**
 - b. He buries Abner in Hebron (v. 32), this city where he has his throne and where men like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph were buried.
 - c. David follows the coffin with weeping and lamentation.
 - He laments that Abner died as a man falls before wicked men.
 - d. David refuses to eat, fasting until the sun goes down.
2. There is no place for bitterness in Christ's kingdom.
 - We see how Jesus rebuked his disciples in Luke 9:52-55: **And as they went, they entered a village of the Samaritans, to prepare for Him.** ⁵³ **But they did not receive Him, because His face was set for the journey to Jerusalem.** ⁵⁴ **And when His disciples James and John saw *this*, they said, ‘Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?’** ⁵⁵ **But He turned and rebuked them, and said, ‘You do not know what manner of spirit you are of.** ⁵⁶ **For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save *them*.’**
 - Likewise, when Peter cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest who was among those who came to arrest Jesus, Jesus told him to put his sword away and healed the man's ear.
3. David's actions preserved the kingdom.
 - We are told that the people were convinced of his sincerity.
 - They saw that he was not against the people of Israel who had been warring against him. He sincerely wanted to receive them.
 - Look at verse. 36-37: **Now all the people took note of it, and it pleased them, since whatever the king did pleased all the people. For all the people and all Israel understood that day that it had not been the king's *intent* to kill Abner the son of Ner.**
 - They liked what they saw.
 - It was not what they had seen with Saul or with Abner and Ishbosheth. Nor was it what Joab had shown, but it was what God's anointed king wanted.
 - And so they came to him. The kingdom was preserved. They loved their new king.

III. We must not miss the big picture in all of this! Our Sovereign LORD is establishing His Kingdom and setting up David as His king.

- That underlies the whole story! The LORD is building His kingdom and setting forth His Christ.
- A. Last week, we saw how God used Abner to bring all Israel to David.
- Abner was not upright. He did not repent.
 - But the LORD had worked in such a way that Abner was the only one who could have brought all the tribes, including Benjamin, Saul's tribe, to submit to David.

- The sovereign LORD had ordained that David would be a king who was a type of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, who was coming to save His people and bring them all together under God.
- B. In a remarkable way, God also used Joab's slaying of Abner to bring about this purpose.
- What Joab did was sinful and was done in reckless disregard of the effect it might have had on the peace of the kingdom that was being established.
 - But despite Joab's sinful actions, as we just saw, God turned it around so that David gained even more of the favour and confidence of the people
 - His actions shined forth more than ever to secure their ardent devotion.
 - Is this not how it is with Jesus?
 - Let His own people crucify Him.
 - We see that God and Jesus meant it that He might atone for our sins. Far from turning the nations away when He was lifted up on the cross, it drew them.
 - And it still does. Those who do not preach the cross because it might offend do not people to God. The ones who come to God are the ones who learn of the cross.
- C. And there is still more. Abner was wrongly removed by the sword of Joab, but can we not say that he needed to be taken out of the way for the peace of the kingdom?
1. God was arranging for an unprecedented time of peace to be a model of His glorious kingdom in Christ—the day that is yet to come when the swords will be beaten into plowshares and the spears into pruning hooks, and the nations will learn war no more.
 2. There is little doubt that Abner would have been a problem because of his desire to control everyone. He would have destroyed the peace of the kingdom.
 - There are times in God's plan when He uses divisive men (as we have seen even today with Joab) to further His purposes. He had used Abner, but now Abner needed to be removed.
 - The sinful act of Joab was the wise, holy, and sovereign act of God.
 3. The LORD will always fulfill His purposes.
 - You should be grieved by the sinful actions of bitter people, but you do not need to become anxious about what they do or let it bring you to despair.
 - The LORD will build His kingdom in marvellous ways. You do not need to fret. Just calmly continue to patiently do the will of God—do your part by His grace and enablement and He will take care of it all—including you!
 - Yes, cast yourself and all your care upon Him. He will keep you and He will advance His kingdom and glory. You can be kind and gracious—yes, rebuke the wicked—but not as one who is desperate to stop them. As one who is confident in your LORD and Master.

Conclusion:

And let me add a word to all of you.

- Put away your bitterness.
 - God is not pleased with it. It is an ugly malicious thing.
 - It will be your ruin.

- It is so irrational to hold on to it.
 - You don't need to do that. You can come to Jesus, and He will set you free.
 - Come to Him. Confess how wicked you have been. Seriously. Let go of it!
 - Why hold to something so malignant, so destructive to your own soul?
 - Why?
 - Confess and forsake it.
 - You say, "It keeps coming back!"
 - Then keep confessing it, keep asking Jesus to forgive you and deliver you.
 - Make a promise that you will keep on turning away from it and that you will breathe the fresh air of his grace instead of the bitter root of malice.
- See how wonderful our Saviour is?
 - He is always welcoming of sinners.
 - He has more reason for a bitter grudge than you do, but He will have none of it.
 - He graciously calls you to come to Him and live forever in His peace.
 - Why not?