

## AVERTED

2 Samuel 20:1-2, 14-21

How many times have we worked on a problem and thought it was solved only to shortly discover that the problem did not “stay fixed” or another similar issue popped up. That situation would make a good illustration of what we define as “life’s frustrations.” Depending on what is causing the problem, we might decide that “enough is enough” and simply toss the whole thing we were trying to “fix” in the trash and start over. However, when the “thing” that needs fixing is a critical part of your very life, then the option of “toss it out and start over” is not open to us or it really shouldn’t be a choice we would even consider.

We have been looking at the multiple problems that plagued David, negatively impacted his family members and caused significant loss of life in Israel in the civil war that occurred during his reign as king. Following the significant sin involving Bathsheba and Uriah, the judgment of God was pronounced by the prophet Nathan. That judgment could be generally stated as “the sword will not depart from your house” and, historically, we know there were a series of problems and disasters that literally threatened the kingdom of Israel. We could argue that these problems got bigger and more dangerous and part of the reason was the earlier problems and issues were not properly addressed and handled by the established government that was under David’s direction.

After being confronted by incestuous rape (Amnon and Tamar), there was fratricide (Absalom murdered Amnon), and undermining the people’s confidence in the government which led to insurrection and civil war. All this was a result of the leadership of the nation failing to embrace and follow the principles of righteousness that are characteristic of a nation whose God is the Lord.

Do we see any similarity in what has been and is currently happening in our nation following the decisions of our “leaders” to take prayer and Bible reading out of our schools and to legalize murder of unborn humans? We could make a long list of all the problems that have plagued our nation and its people. We have had more than sixty years of problems that range from floods to droughts, from record heat to record low temperatures, from openly homosexual relations to gender transition operations, from disregard of national boundaries to terrorists flying planes into buildings, from needing to not let your children walk home from school by themselves to having to have armed guards in schools and churches. I would suspect that we can expect more and worse in future years.

After the civil war was ended and the people had expressed their support of David, another problem immediately came up because one person thought that David was treating the tribe of Judah in a more favorable manner than the other tribes of Israel.

### Division – 20:1-2

<sup>1</sup> Now a troublemaker named Sheba son of Bicri, a Benjamite, happened to be there. He sounded the trumpet and shouted, “We have no share in David, no part in Jesse’s son! Every man to his tent, O Israel!” <sup>2</sup> So all the men of Israel deserted David to follow Sheba son of Bicri. But the men of Judah stayed by their king all the way from the Jordan to Jerusalem. 2 Samuel 20:1–2 (NIV84)

The first thing we see is that the winners in conflicts get to write the historical accounts. Sheba was characterized as a troublemaker by those who recorded this story. A brief background on what led up to this may be helpful. After the Absalom revolt was stopped, most of the people decided that they need to get back into the good graces of the king. The people of Judah were a little slower in their response and David did some things that were favorable to

them such as assuring them that since he was of the tribe of Judah that they were brothers and he also promoted the leader of the army of Absalom to the main leadership role over all the armies of Israel. This was an effort to let those who fought for Absalom know that all was forgiven. The northern tribes did not ask for nor did they receive any favors.

In an effort to show support for David the people of Judah sent a delegation to the Jordan River to help the king and his household cross the river on their way back to Jerusalem. The tribes from the north were already there and they were in position to help. They resented the people of Judah coming to interfere what they were doing for the king. Accusations erupted that accused those of Judah of “stealing the king away and bringing him across the Jordan.” The answer that came back was that the king was their close relative and it was a natural thing to do.

This incident combined with the knowledge that David apparently showed favoritism to Judah caused the outburst from Sheba that stated what a lot of people in the north already thought. Again we see the statement “every man to his own tent” which was a euphemism for “everyone needs to look out for his own interest rather than for the common good.”

As we noted earlier, many people will follow anyone who appears to be a leader and many of the people of the northern tribes who were there to help David cross the Jordan quickly switched sides and followed Sheba instead. As would be expected those of Judah did not join this revolt that was developing and, instead, accompanied David back to Jerusalem.

When this rebellion started, the people were at Gilgal near the border of Jericho which was in the territory of the tribe of Benjamin. There were still some people who thought that since the first king of Israel was Saul (a Benjaminite) that the future kings of Israel should come from that tribe. There was disrespect shown to David in the words used by Sheba when he referred to David as “the son of Jesse.” Jesse was considered to be just a common person and his son should not have any claim to be the king of Israel.

The group following Sheba left the Gilgal area and headed northeast trying to enlist people to join their cause.

#### Civil War – 20:14-16

<sup>14</sup> Sheba passed through all the tribes of Israel to Abel Beth Maacah and through the entire region of the Berites, who gathered together and followed him. <sup>15</sup> All the troops with Joab came and besieged Sheba in Abel Beth Maacah. They built a siege ramp up to the city, and it stood against the outer fortifications. While they were battering the wall to bring it down, <sup>16</sup> a wise woman called from the city, “Listen! Listen! Tell Joab to come here so I can speak to him.” 2 Samuel 20:14–16 (NIV84)

We could argue that this rebellion was simply another opportunity for the fulfillment of Nathan’s prophecy that the sword would not depart from David’s family. A very serious rebellion and coup by Absalom had just been stopped and before any semblance of normalcy could be established another potentially more serious coup attempt was made by Sheba.

The rebellion led by Sheba was more significant since it had its roots in a long-standing and deep-seated resentment that the ten northern tribes had against Judah. The coup led by Absalom had its foundation primarily in the charisma and popularity of Absalom and was destined to fail when he was no longer personally available to lead the revolt. While Sheba may have simply been an opportunist taking advantage of the moment, the revolt he started could have taken on a life of its own and done much more damage unless it was dealt with quickly.

David ordered Amasa to assemble and lead the army and stop this rebellion before Sheba was able to establish his forces in a fortified city. Amasa did not act quickly and so David gave the assignment to Abishai to pull the fighting forces together. Abishai called together those men who had served under Joab and the foreign fighters that had been serving David since he left

Gath of the Philistine territory and was anointed king. Sometime later Amasa caught up with them and he was immediately killed by Joab (his cousin) who then took over as the leader of the army. The sword not departing from the house of David was even having its influence on David's extended family.

In the meantime, Sheba discovered that he was not an effective leader and the revolt did not bring in many supporters from all over Israel's ten northern tribes. He did have support from those who were from the same region from which he came. He essentially wound up taking refuge in the city of Abel near the northern border of Israel.

It did not take the seasoned fighting forces under the leadership of Joab to track Sheba and his supporters to the city where he was hiding. Like most cities that were of any significant size it was protected by a wall so that the people could control who might come into the city. These people knew that without controls of this type that the people would be vulnerable to attacks from opportunists who might be passing through the area.

Joab and his army apparently assumed that the city leaders were protecting Sheba and he proceeded to start the ground work for breaching the walls protecting the city. Why they did not just tell the residents of the city what they were doing there remains a mystery. It might be simply an example of people doing what they would normally do without having a conversation with others to determine other alternatives.

Not everyone acted with conditioned responses. There was a person described as a "wise woman" who started a conversation with the ruthless killer Joab in an effort to work out a better solution than destroying everything and everybody. She was bold and confident enough to send word that she wanted to speak to Joab.

### Wisdom Conquers – 20:17-21

<sup>17</sup> He went toward her, and she asked, "Are you Joab?" "I am," he answered. She said, "Listen to what your servant has to say." "I'm listening," he said. <sup>18</sup> She continued, "Long ago they used to say, 'Get your answer at Abel,' and that settled it. <sup>19</sup> We are the peaceful and faithful in Israel. You are trying to destroy a city that is a mother in Israel. Why do you want to swallow up the LORD's inheritance?" <sup>20</sup> "Far be it from me!" Joab replied, "Far be it from me to swallow up or destroy!" <sup>21</sup> That is not the case. A man named Sheba son of Bicri, from the hill country of Ephraim, has lifted up his hand against the king, against David. Hand over this one man, and I'll withdraw from the city." The woman said to Joab, "His head will be thrown to you from the wall." 2 Samuel 20:17-21 (NIV84)

So much of what we read about the role and rights of women during this time in history would cause us to think that they had no influence. However, if we think about it, very few people had any significant influence regardless of their gender. The laws regarding ownership of property and inheritance did not prevent people from exerting influence if they were so inclined. This unnamed woman in the city (town) of Abel was apparently in a leadership role in the city. She had influence and she made a difference in the world around her.

We see a lot of very positive things about this wise woman's behavior. The first thing she did was to take action that would allow her to communicate her ideas to a person of influence rather than just complaining to anyone and everyone. She could have shared her convictions regarding the importance of the people and the city with all her friends and neighbors and it would not have made any difference. She realized that all the talk in the world does no good unless it gets to someone who can make a difference.

The next thing we see is that she made sure that she had the right person listening to her. After confirming that Joab was there before her, she then took the extra effort to make sure she had his attention. She apparently spoke with a confidence that commanded the attention of this military leader.

She then appealed to the importance of reputation and heritage. The reputation was with

regard to the city and its people. They were known for being knowledgeable and wise for generations. How important is having and protecting a good reputation? Just think about some well-known cities of today and what we might think if we heard that a new policy was being proposed and supported by say San Francisco, for example. Based on their reputation, most of us would likely reject the idea even before we heard what it was.

The appeal for respecting the heritage that Abel was related to it being known for being a model for other towns and had been influential over the past several hundred years in helping form the character of the nation. This kind of appeal only works for those who can appreciate the value of such influence. Apparently, Joab could appreciate both these appeals even though he acted ruthlessly when it came to protecting the nation and his position as the military leader of Israel.

This dialogue provided an opportunity to communicate the real objective for attacking the city which did not require destruction of the city or killing the citizens. What a great idea: Talk and negotiate before taking drastic action. It worked and the problem of the revolt was solved by removing the “trouble maker” from the picture.

What are some other lessons that we can learn from the way “the wise woman” and Joab dealt with Sheba? They decided that the guilty person had to be punished but that punishment did not have to impact everyone else. How would such an approach to dealing with crime influence what we do today in response to bad behavior? An illustrative example that we can appreciate is what has happened to air travel. A group of Muslim extremists hijacked several airplanes and created a national disaster by killing 3000 people and destroying property worth billions of dollars. In response to that action, we now subject all passengers to intrusive security measures rather than targeting only those who are most likely to do something similar. Another example is that some mentally unstable people have committed mass murders with firearms and the response of some is to disarm everyone rather than making sure that the mentally unstable are treated for their illness and prevented from having access to deadly weapons.

Another thing that we can note that allowed “justice” to be carried out was that both Joab and the wise woman kept their word. They did what they said they would do. There were no empty promises and that worked out well for everyone except the person who was guilty of leading the revolt.

As we observe how another civil war was averted we learn more about how complex people are and how little we actually know about the culture in Israel around 1000 BC. We also see that the person who is held up as the greatest king Israel ever had was a man of many flaws and struggled to make right choices. We also see the faithfulness of God to keep His promises regarding preserving David’s reign which we know allowed his descendants to serve in the role of the kings of Israel.

The New Bible Commentary makes a remark that bears further exploring: “Once again the death of a single individual settled the issue.” Is that a universally accepted position of how things work? What other examples can we think about where that idea is apparently accepted as appropriate? Could we argue that the death of Absalom was needed for peace to be restored in Israel? Was the death of Amnon needed for peace to come to the immediate family of David?

We may be seeing this same idea in the statement that was made by the high priest as the Jewish leadership was trying to decide what to do about Jesus. We read in John 11:49-50, “Caiaphas, being the high priest that same year, said unto them, you know nothing at all, nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not.”

Admittedly, the death of Sheba did avert the breaking up of Israel into two separate nations at that point in history, but since the actual problems of pride and jealousy among the various tribes was never addressed, this was only a temporary solution. We could also make the argument that Caiaphas was correct that the death of Jesus did quell a potential revolt against Rome by Zealots and put off the physical destruction of Jerusalem for forty years. However, the delay in the physical destruction was only temporary since the problems of the basic rebellious nature of the Jews were not addressed since they had rejected God's ultimate solution of providing Himself as the sacrificial Lamb for the sins of the world.

This idea of one dying for the people so that the whole world would not perish was completed in the eternal, spiritual realm and resulted in a new relationship and a new kingdom where righteous prevails and the principles associated with Godly character are valued and are given priority.