Faith in the Fray—Caught in the Vortex
2 Samuel 2-4
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I received an email this past week from a ministerial group known as “The Pastors Rapid Response Team” in response to the upcoming arguments in the Supreme Court over the definition of marriage. (I don’t know how they got my email address!) The email calls Christians to “March for Marriage” in Washington DC on March 26th. The group is also calling pastors to preach messages on marriage on June 9th. All of this is intended to bolster support in the ever-mounting conflict over marriage.

My aim, this morning, is not to talk about social issues. Rather, my aim is to consider how we as Christians should walk amidst conflict. I think most of us sense that we’re living in a time of great upheaval and conflict—a vortex of swirling currents. I can feel it—the mounting pressures moving against each other, morally, politically, and religiously. I wouldn’t be surprised if one of the major reasons Pope Benedict offered his surprising resignation is that he knows he doesn’t have the strength (at 85) to deal with the mounting pressures and conflicts.

Then you add our own personal issues—marital, family…you name it. It’s tough not to get sucked in. The important question for us is how do we walk in the midst of conflict without getting sucked into the vortex of a loveless fight? People tend to take one of two approaches. Some choose the path of avoidance by putting their heads in the sand and pretending issues don’t exist. Others align themselves with a person or political agenda to forcibly eliminate the threat. The first response is foolishness. The second response runs the danger of engaging in a loveless, man-centered fight that hinders our central mission.

So how should we navigate these waters of growing conflict in the world around us in a way that is both wise and redemptive? I believe the part of David’s journey that we’re going to look at in 2 Samuel 2-4 gives us a positive example. In these chapters David goes from the fray of persecution to the fray of civil war—into a vortex of conflict. But watch how David walks.

Since the story covers three chapters, I’ll summarize most of it drawing special attention to how David navigates the conflict, and then draw some lessons to consider.

1 After this David inquired of the LORD, “Shall I go up into any of the cities of Judah?” And the LORD said to him, “Go up.” David said, “To which shall I go up?” And he said, “To Hebron.” 2 So David went up there, and his two wives also, Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail the widow of Nabal of Carmel. 3 And David brought up his men who were with him, everyone with his household, and they lived in the towns of Hebron. 4 And the men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah. (2 Sam 2:1-4)

The story begins with David seeking and following God’s will. In obedience, David goes up to the mountain city of Hebron where he’s finally anointed king. But he’s only anointed king of Judah (just one tribe among the twelve of Israel). Meanwhile, miles to the north near Galilee, Saul’s commanding general, a powerful man by the name of Abner takes the last remaining son of Saul—a man by the name of Ish-bosheth (“son of shame” in Hebrew)—and crowns him king. So you have two kings over the tribes of Israel—Ish-bosheth (the puppet king) over the eleven...
tribes in the north and David over the tribe of Judah in the south. (Refer to the map to get a better picture of what’s going on.) You can already sense conflict on the horizon.

Intending to reunite the nation of Israel, Abner takes what remains of Saul’s army and marches south toward Judah. (It’s helpful to note that Abner was Saul’s uncle and served as the commander of Saul’s army for almost 40 years. In other words, he is a crusty, seasoned veteran. Abner would have medals due to all the battles he’s fought in.) Abner takes the offence and draws first blood.

David’s commanding officer, a man by the name of Joab (who happens to be David’s nephew) leads the army of Judah. Just north of Jerusalem, the two armies meet and decide to have twelve men from each army fight each other (kind of like a David and Goliath thing only with twelve-on-twelve). They fight and all of them die. A battle erupts and Abner runs away defeated with the men of Judah hard on his trail.

Joab, Abishai and Asahel are all brothers (and all nephews of David). But Asahel is the Olympic runner of the bunch and catches up to the aging Abner. Abner warns him twice to give it up…but Asahel refuses. Then Abner, the experienced veteran, skewers him with the back end of his spear. Royal blood has been shed; blood that Joab would neither forget nor forgive, despite the fact that it was done in self-defense and in the midst of battle (aka not murder). Then both of the armies return home. Notice that David plays no part in this conflict between Abner and Joab.

At some point, Abner and the king of the north have a serious falling out over a woman (surprise, surprise). As a result, Abner decides he’s going to hand over the kingdom to David. The King of the north is too weak to oppose the general. So Abner makes plans.
has promised David, saying, ‘By the hand of my servant David I will save my people Israel from the hand of the Philistines, and from the hand of all their enemies.’”  

Abner also spoke to Benjamin. And then Abner went to tell David at Hebron all that Israel and the whole house of Benjamin thought good to do. When Abner came with twenty men to David at Hebron, David made a feast for Abner and the men who were with him. And Abner said to David, “I will arise and go and will gather all Israel to my lord the king, that they may make a covenant with you, and that you may reign over all that your heart desires.” So David sent Abner away, and he went in peace. (2 Sam 3:12-21)

Abner plays a key role. He arranges a meeting with David to discuss the reunion of Israel. He even gains the consensus of the other tribes to do so. David welcomes Abner with a feast. Here we see David extending grace to his enemy. Then David sends him away in peace. Everything seems to be going well…until Joab shows up and hears that David has reconciled with Abner. So Joab concocts a quick scheme of vengeance.

26 When Joab came out from David’s presence, he sent messengers after Abner, and they brought him back from the cistern of Sirah. But David did not know about it. 27 And when Abner returned to Hebron, Joab took him aside into the midst of the gate to speak with him privately, and there he struck him in the stomach, so that he died, for the blood of Asahel his brother. 28 Afterward, when David heard of it, he said, “I and my kingdom are forever guiltless before the LORD for the blood of Abner the son of Ner. 29 May it fall upon the head of Joab and upon all his father’s house, and may the house of Joab never be without one who has a discharge or who is leprous or who holds a spindle or who falls by the sword or who lacks bread!” (2 Sam 3:26-29)

What could be worse? Joab, in a rage of personal vengeance over his dead brother, kills the emissary of peace, not to mention the commanding general of the north. The fragile peace could be destroyed in a single act of personal violence. But notice carefully what David does. He takes his stand against his own nephew. In the conflict between Abner and Joab, David doesn’t side with “family” but sides with justice and denounces in the strongest language possible (a curse), the wickedness of Joab’s sin. Why David didn’t execute Joab is a matter of some debate. The text doesn’t tell us. But it does show David taking a stand against his own family. David sides with justice and laments the death of his former enemy.

Without Abner, the northern kingdom is under the control of a weak king. Evil plots unfold on him too.

1 When Ish-bosheth, Saul’s son, heard that Abner had died at Hebron, his courage failed, and all Israel was dismayed. 2 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 Beeroheth (for Beeroheth also is counted part of Benjamin; (2 Sam 4:1-2a)

5 Now the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, 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. 6 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. 7 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 the Arabah all night, 8 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.” 9 But David answered Rechab and Baanah his brother, the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, “As the LORD lives, who has redeemed my life out of every adversity, 10 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. 11 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?” 12 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. (2 Sam 4:1-12)

Two men, in a miscalculated attempt to win David’s favor, murder the northern king in his sleep bringing the head to David hoping to earn his favor. David, true to character, does not delight in taking the crown through evil means. Rather, he executes justice. You can see how messy these chapters are. They are filled with intrigue, conflict and murder. Abner attacks Judah. Asahel attacks Abner. Abner kills Asahel. Joab kills Abner. Abner’s men kill Ish-bosheth in cold blood. It’s a chain reaction of evil.

How does David navigate these waters of conflict when people are reacting and positioning for power and control though evil schemes? Answer? David walks faithfully through this swirling vortex of political wrangling with grace, justice and patience. David refused to exercise force over Abner but instead shows grace to his enemy Abner. Then he stood on the side of justice against his own family and the men who thought they were doing him a favor by murdering the opposing king. In this he shows patience for God to work in his time to crown him king. In sum, he demonstrated grace toward enemies and justice towards evil and patient-faith toward God.

Jesus did the same thing in the Garden of Gethsemane when armed guards came to arrest him in the dark of night. Peter, like Joab, acts in rage and attempts to kill a guard but managing only to cut off his ear. Jesus, in an act of grace heals his enemy’s severed ear and rebukes the injustice of his friend, Peter. David, like Jesus, is a peacemaker—“blessed are the peacemakers.”

In our conflict-filled world, most people who enter the vortex don’t do so well. When it comes to social battles over the unborn, the redefinition of marriage, gun control or family conflicts over divorce, drugs or alcoholism, do we walk in a way that demonstrates grace, justice and patience? If we’re to walk through conflict, which so easily sucks us into the anger and fury of the fight, we must walk as David did. “What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness [grace], and to walk humbly with your God…” (Micah 6:8). Is that how you’re walking as we seek to honor Jesus in a conflicted world?

But there’s one thing that makes these God-like virtues possible. Underneath a life of grace, justice and patience in a divided world, is a conviction of faith. It’s summed up in words David said at the end of the story. To the two murderers he said, “9 As the LORD lives, who has redeemed my life out of every adversity…” (2 Sam 4:9).

This is a confession of David’s core conviction that the LORD’s redemption is comprehensive—“out of every adversity” the Lord has redeemed him. Through his days of suffering he learned that the LORD preserved and rescued him through all his troubles.

This sounds simple, but it makes the crucial and pivotal difference in life. Some of us subscribe to the false view that God’s redeeming grace is partial, not comprehensive. Like liability insurance, we believe that the redeeming grace of the cross covers the big things like sin,
judgment and death. But daily life is not included in God’s package of redemption. Therefore, we tacitly believe that those things are left up to us to fix. So we try to force our agendas. David didn’t subscribe to “liability-redemption” but “comprehensive redemption”—all is included with no deductible. The price of comprehensive redemption was paid for fully by God at the cross.

That means that God’s preserving, sustaining, delivering grace is always with us in each and every situation—“out of every adversity.” What is your adversity—the gargantuan struggle you’re facing? Financial? Physical? Relational? Moral? If we believe that God’s loving work in our lives is comprehensive as opposed to partial, then we can trust that while we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, he will guide and protect us at every step as we trust him. That frees us to be gracious, do justice, and wait upon the Lord in patience trusting that God will fulfill his purposes in our day.

“They that wait upon the Lord will renew their strength!”