

# DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

**John Kitto, D.D., F.S.A.**

Thirty-Sixth Week - Monday

## THE FIRST BLOW

*"Now Abner the son of Ner, and the servants of Ishbosheth the son of Saul, went out from Mahanaim to Gibeon. And Joab the son of Zeruiah, and the servants of David, went out and met them by the pool of Gibeon. So they sat down, one on one side of the pool and the other on the other side of the pool. Then Abner said to Joab, 'Let the young men now arise and compete before us.' And Joab said, 'Let them arise.' . . . So there was a very fierce battle that day, and Abner and the men of Israel were beaten before the servants of David" (2 Samuel 2:12-17).*

It seems to us that all the twelve tribes would have invited David to reign over them had they been left to follow their own convictions and impulses. But Abner, the first cousin of Saul and chief captain of his host, determined that the house of Saul should reign, and thus he acted with promptitude and decision to bring it about. From what eventually transpires, it is indeed clear that Abner had views of personal ambition, not willing to sink into an inferior position from what he had formerly occupied.

Abner, not less than David, seems to have attached great importance to uniting the tribes beyond the Jordan. Therefore he crossed into the land of Gilead with Ishbosheth, the only surviving son of Saul, and proclaimed him king at Mahanaim. This step was not miscalculated. Only the western tribes had successively given their loyalty to David; and thus David, for the present, was shut out from the expectation of establishing his authority over the whole nation. It would have been fruitless to attempt to coerce the tribes to accept him, so he was content to await the course of the Lord's providence, assured that not one of the things which had been promised him would fail to be realized.

There is no appearance that David sought to engage in any conflict with the house of Saul. Rather, it seems to have arisen through some attempt of Abner on the kingdom of Judah. As a general rule, the military aggressor is he who marches an armed force toward the territory of the other, and we find that Abner concentrates a large force at Gibeon close upon the frontier of Judah. This had a threatening aspect, whatever was its intention. David therefore advanced a corresponding force to observe its movements. It was under the command of Joab, whose valor, military capacity, and rough energies were well known, and which had given him power with David.

Two such forces could not remain apart for long. Nor could two men of such fiery spirits as Abner and Joab long stand in the presence of each other with folded hands. Very soon a proposal came from Abner that twelve chosen men on each side should fight the matter out for the rest. This appeared to show a wish for avoiding a needless flow of brothers' blood. Twelve men were therefore chosen from each side and stood between the two armies. Then they assailed each other with great passion, each grabbing their opponent by the beard. The entire twenty-four were all at last stricken with fatal wounds.

Whatever was the original intention, the result was that after a severe struggle Abner's troops were obliged to flee before those of Joab. And now Abner found himself pursued by Joab's swift-footed brother, Asahel, who purposed to possess for himself the spoils of this great chief. Eventually they were both far away from the companions, Abner fleeing and Asahel pursuing. Abner, knowing that he was a far more powerful man than the light and agile Asahel, begged him to stop the pursuit: *"Turn aside from following me. Why should I strike you to the ground? How then could I face your brother Joab?"* However, this reasoning carried no weight with Asahel, who believed himself a match for Abner.

Finding that Asahel would not give up, Abner gave a backward thrust with the heel of his spear, which was sharpened in order for it to be stuck into the ground when the army was at rest in camp. No second stroke was needed, for the brother of Joab had received a fatal blow and lay drenched in his own blood. The body was laid to the side in the woods so that Joab would not be aware of what had happened.

As the evening approached, Abner stood on the top of a hill and made an earnest appeal to Joab's better feelings against further bloodshed. "Shall the sword devour forever? Do you not know that it will be bitter in the latter end? How long will it be then until you tell the people to return from pursuing their brethren?" (surely a point he might well have considered before he provoked this disastrous conflict). Joab felt the force of the appeal and immediately recalled his men from the pursuit by sound of trumpet. Abner, afraid that Joab might change his mind when he found out his brother had been killed, marched all night and did not rest until he had passed over the Jordan and found himself once more at Mahanaim.