

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Thirty-Sixth Week - Wednesday

BLOOD REVENGE

"And Saul had a concubine, whose name was Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah. So Ishbosheth said to Abner, 'Why have you gone in to my father's concubine?' Then Abner became very angry at the words of Ishbosheth, and said . . . 'Today I show loyalty to the house of Saul your father, to his brothers, and to his friends, and have not delivered you into the hand of David; and you charge me today with a fault concerning this woman? May God do so to Abner, and more also, if I do not do for David as Yahweh has sworn to him to transfer the kingdom from the house of Saul and set the throne of David over Israel and over Judah, from Dan to Beersheba. . . . So Abner and twenty men with him came to David at Hebron. And David made a feast for Abner and the men who were with him. Then Abner said to David, 'I will arise and go, and 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. . . . 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" (2 Samuel 3:7-10; 20-21; 27).

Abner had no reason to complain of his reception by David, who entertained him and his guard of twenty men in a most princely style. The result of the conference was highly satisfactory to him, and he took his departure with the promise of gathering deputies from Israel who should publicly acknowledge David for their king.

Joab had been absent on a military expedition at this time; and as neither David nor Abner would want his presence there, it is likely that this visit of Abner had been timed accordingly. But Joab returned upon Abner's departure and became greatly incensed when he heard of the visit. Joab feared for himself, for he knew Abner was a man of ability, maturity, and long experience. There can indeed be little doubt that Abner would have become the second man in David's enlarged kingdom and commander of the armies of Israel.

There is also no reason to question that Joab really felt grave apprehension over the visit. Perhaps Abner was deceiving David and only sought an opportunity of effecting his ruin. He hurried to the king, and with the roughness and freedom of their close relationship and their old companionship when David was in trouble, he felt warranted in sharply berating David for his ease, affirming that Abner could have no other goal than to betray him. If such was Joab's real

belief, it goes a small way in alleviating some of the blackness of his subsequent murder of Abner.

Joab sent messengers to bring Abner back to Hebron under the pretense that some important communication had been forgotten. Abner accordingly returned and was met outside the gate by Joab, who saluted him in a friendly manner. Then taking him aside as if to speak with him privately, Joab smote him suddenly with his sword under the fifth rib so that he died. He alleged that this was done in his right of blood revenge for his brother Asahel, whom Abner had killed. Joab's brother Abishai concurred in this view. Now the question is not whether this was the true reason, but whether the excuse was so sound and valid as to justify him in the eye of the law; that is, to protect him from the legal consequences of this assassination--in other words, whether public opinion would or would not bear him out in this excuse.

The law stated that when a man killed another by either manslaughter or justifiable homicide, then the nearest relative had a right to take vengeance--to put that man to death wherever he could find him. This was an old custom of the pastoral tribes, too deeply rooted to be abolished by the Mosaic law. However, the law sought to neutralize the manifest evils of it by providing certain cities throughout the country to be designated "cities of refuge." Within the walls of these cities the man-slayer was safe from the sword of the avenger, for the avenger himself would be accounted a murderer if he slew the man-slayer there. However, if the avenger killed him anywhere beyond the limits of these city asylums, he would not be held accountable to the law for his action. The real question then is whether Abner was responsible for the blood of Asahel. Was it shed in self-defense? We know it was not Abner's wish to kill him.

It has been argued that it was most unreasonable for Abner to be held accountable for it. Now the unreasonableness may be granted, but the question is not what was reasonable but what was the custom. We find that the custom in its very essence was unreasonable, and the law had endeavored as much as possible to mitigate what it could not do away with altogether. The act of Abner was justifiable homicide; but it was precisely to such cases that the rule of blood revenge applied--not to those of murder, against which no protection was afforded. And besides, unless the right of blood revenge applied to such a case as this, there would be no such deep anxiety on the part of Abner to avoid killing Asahel. Yet the expressions used by him on that occasion show his fear that the death of Asahel would establish a blood feud between him and Joab. In further confirmation of this view, it may be noted that the other brother, Abishai, who had no direct hand in this bloody and barbarous deed, adopted and maintained it as an act of blood revenge for a brother.

It may be admitted that some doubt might arise in a case of this nature, and very likely the law respecting blood revenge was not often enforced in those cases. And where any room for doubt might exist, Joab and Abishai would probably interpret the law in their own favor as their justification for an act the true motives of which dared not be alleged, and as a ground on which they might claim exemption from the punishment due to murder.

In Abner's view too it seems probable that the case stood on doubtful grounds and that he would not be held accountable; for he would hardly have quickly returned to meet with Joab if he had not thought his slaying of Asahel had been forgiven. It was in his assurance that public opinion, however shocked it might be, would look upon the whole episode as justifiable homicide when the reason was brought to light.

It was highly important for David to see it as an act of private revenge rather than of political jealousy, in which he might have been implicated. Therefore he had abundant reason not to punish Joab for murder. It is usually said that Joab was too powerful to be brought to justice; but we cannot but think that David would have found means of subjecting him to disgrace or punishment if public opinion had not judged the deed to stand on the grounds of blood revenge. In the existing state of affairs, it was just as well that it should rest upon that footing so that David might be relieved from any suspicion of having connived at this mode of ridding himself of a powerful and dangerous rival.

David did not share Joab's suspicions of Abner's loyalty, and he was deeply concerned at a crime which not only marred all the expectations he had of a unified kingdom but rather threatened to widen the breach even more. He therefore ordered a general fast and mourning, and the body of Abner was honored with a public funeral in which the king himself appeared as chief mourner. He followed the corpse with loud lamentations to the grave, and amid his own tears and those of the people he gave vent to his feelings in this poetical utterance: *"Should Abner die as a fool dies? Your hands were not bound nor your feet put into fetters; as a man falls before wicked men, so you fell."*

To explain this lamentation it should be observed that Hebron was a city of refuge. If one fled to such a city, he was subjected to a sort of trial to ascertain his claim to the right of sanctuary. Then, if found to be a murderer, he was delivered up bound hand and foot to the avenger, who would deal with him as he pleased. Now although Abner left Hebron, not as a man delivered up as a murderer but free, he no sooner left its gates than he met a murderer's doom from the hands of the avenger. The idea behind the lamentation is founded upon Abner's being slain as soon as he had left a city of refuge.¹

David's grief and lamentation were well received: *"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."*

¹This was a most unusual circumstance to one not found guilty of murder, seeing that those entitled to protection were not sent away.