

Joab and the Horns of Power

(1 Kings 2:28-34)

A time-warp interview with Joab

Excuse me, sir. I understand you are Joab, the late King David's famous general and head of the Israeli armed forces. I feel honored to be . . .

David is dead, young man. It's all history. . . all I did for Israel and David and for God. I'm a forgotten, unappreciated, and now doomed man.

No! It can't be! For what reason? For remaining faithful to the call of duty, as I've always done.

But why, I mean . . . what . . . Adonijah was next in line to be the king. David was wasting away in bed. There was virtually no real king in authority. So Adonijah simply responded to the need of the people for leadership, for a shepherd. And I stood behind him as I had supported his father. We had the backing of Abiathar, the legitimate priest and descendant of Eli, Ithamar, and Aaron.

Well then why are you doomed? We were outmaneuvered by that wily Bathsheba, just as she seduced David in his prime.

O no! Is there no judgment in Israel? Does God hear?

Yes, God hears, and there *is* judgment. That's why I'm cleaving to the horns of the brazen altar. These horns represent the power of God's justice with men and of men with God. Every spark of meaning in the sacrifices and the blood is summed up in these horns. Imagine a strong bull with his horns braced against the enemy in defense of the herd and you've got the picture. Only it's God's might against Satan. The horns have always been a place of refuge for an innocent manslayer fleeing the blood avenger. (Ex 21: 12-14)

Wow! I guess you're on the winning side, my brother. But then why do you feel doomed?

It's hard to express, my boy. David felt Solomon was God's chosen for the throne.

And you disagreed?

Well, you don't know David as I do. I doubt if there's a man living who knows him quite as well in all his strengths and weaknesses.

Tell me, please!

David was a paradox as well as a military genius of uncanny insight and power. He took a bunch of society dropouts and patiently molded them into an invincible army. I've recently seen a list of his three dozen or so leaders and officers he called "mighty men." I was over them as chief of staff, yet I'm not

even listed. It is proof of David's deep-seated resentment of me.

O my! This must have been an awful hurt to you, perhaps a breach in your relationship.

Yes and no. I refused to let it bother me as I began to sense his attitude. It was the other side of David . . . the *weaker* side. I felt the nation needed strong leadership, and I was not about to allow His weaknesses to bring us both down.

I should say not! When did you first notice this weakness in him?

It showed up most obviously when General Abner took the Northern Kingdom of Saul out of the hands of Saul's son, Ishbosheth, and turned it over to David after seven and a half years. And would you believe David accepted him with open arms—this *traitor*, this treacherous man who murdered my brother (2 Sam 2:18-23). David was completely taken in by his deception and would have recognized him as my equal over the army. It was the first real manifestation of David's weaker side.

What happened to General Abner?

It was one of a series of episodes in which I was forced to take justice into my own hands for the good of the kingdom. It was also the beginning of a life of personal reproach from the king himself, for after I executed the traitor, David publicly proclaimed it as a crime worthy of a wicked man. He literally pronounced a curse upon my posterity. Can you imagine that? (2 Sam 3:29) Yet this is hardly the beginning. Wait till you hear the rest!

Don't tell me there's more?

Listen, son, listen carefully. Someone has *got* to know the truth before I die. David is renowned for his conquest over the last great enemy stronghold—the Ammonites. That victory made David a monarch of world-wide reputation, equaled only by Egypt. Yet it was I who actually fought and won the war, inviting David in at the last to take the spoils . . . and the glory. (2 Sam 12:26-31)

No kidding?

Yes, but that's not even my point. While I was on the battlefield risking my life for king and country, David was at home laying around with his wives and concubines. (2 Sam 11: 13)

O no!

Ha! Wait till you hear this: As if he didn't have enough women to love, he fell in love with Uriah's wife. Do you know who Uriah is?

I'm not sure.

He is listed in David's catalogue of mighty men: one of my high ranking officers. Now mind you, David gets his wife pregnant, then has Uriah brought home from the war so the baby will appear to be his. Well, Uriah was too noble to go to bed with his wife while the rest of us were sleeping on the ground, so David was left with only one recourse.

What was that?

He sent Uriah back with a note telling me to place him right under enemy fire so he would be killed, which he was. That's *murder*, wouldn't you say?

Sure sounds like it.

That's when David's troubles *really* began, and his weaknesses began to manifest like you wouldn't believe. I really think his conscience wouldn't allow him to be strong any more. According to the law of Moses he should have been put to death just for adultery (Lev 20:10), let alone murder.

Anyway his oldest son, Amnon, raped his half sister, the full sister of another son, Absolem, who finally murdered Amnon in revenge. Of course David should have had both of them put to death, for incest also carried the death penalty. (Lev 20:17) But no, his sons were spoiled brats, and besides, with David's criminal record, what could he do?

My gracious! This is frustrating. I can hardly believe it!

Listen on, man. There's more. So Absolem is exiled three years with his father torn between love for him and his unforgiveness. No telling how long they would have been unreconciled had I not intervened and brought them back together. Do you get the picture of David: a very weak, childish man who very much needs a strong hand to guide him?

Wait a minute. Didn't Absolem after this literally take the kingdom away from his father and would have killed him had God not intervened?

Yes, but there again it was not only God's intervention, but mine as well. I remained true to David against the entire nation of Israel, including Judah. My own cousin, Amasa, had turned traitor with Absolem against us and was over the army in my place. We were out in the wilderness like fugitives. And that jelly-belly David had the gall to command us to spare Absolem's life. Again in the interest of national safety I killed him on the spot when justice suspended him between heaven and earth in a big oak tree as he was being pursued.

Wow! I certainly agree with you, Joab. I never dreamed David was so indulgent toward his kids. What a rotten example he'd be today . . . oops - I mean . . .

Now listen to this: Because of Absolem's death, David was so upset after we won the battle and he was king again, that he wept and mourned until all the people were humiliated and ashamed. It was absolutely disgraceful—a *king* acting like a big spoiled baby! It was painfully obvious where his *heart* was.

O brother! I feel embarrassed for him. Did you step in again?

You bet I did. I rebuked him strongly and told him to snap out of it, brace up, and be a *man*, or he'd lose everything, including his original loyal supporters. (2 Sam 19:1-8) He obeyed, thank God! And how do you think he rewarded me for my fatherly encouragement?

O dear, I hate to hear any more. I don't know if I can take it, Joab.

He immediately placed the treacherous Amasa over the army in my place! Period! Joab, his lifetime, old faithful, undefeated general, venerable counselor and chief of staff *completely* out of the picture. Forgotten—just like that, as though I'm a leper.

No! Unrea!

Yes, it's true. And again I'm caught standing between the reproach and childish irresponsibility of an irrational king, and the safety of the nation and people I love. Amasa didn't come through in time to avert another coup-de-tat, which, by the way, was brought on by David's lack of foresight in handling the delicate situation of his return to the kingdom. (2 Sam 19:43) So stubborn ol' David put my brother Abishai in command and we pursued the enemy, Sheba.

Abishai was in charge?

Well, Abishai recognized me as the true leader of the army, even if David did not. And when Amasa finally did show up, it was for his own execution. (2 Sam 20: 10)

You did it in the interests of the nation, right?

Of course. There was another execution I should have proceeded with but David prevented me. Shemei had followed David as he was fleeing Jerusalem, cursing and throwing dust and stones at the king. Can you imagine? He would not let Abishai touch Shemei, muttering something about God allowing it to humble him—David. (2 Sam 16:11,12)

You keep your eye on Shemei and you'll see what I mean. He's a powerful man of influence and will yet bring pain to the nation. I tell you, it baffles me!

What does?

David's philosophy of life. Do you see what I mean about being a paradox, a mystery? And yet that's still not the end.

What?

The last big confrontation we had ended in Israel's *greatest* tragedy by far. (2 Sam 24, 1 Chr 21) David got it into his head to number Israel. I could see he was getting that exalted feeling again. He was losing his sense of wisdom which characterized him in his few better moments. I tried my best to talk him out of it, but he was king - a stubborn kid hiding under a crown! It's another one of those times I stood between him and the safety of the nation, but this time failed. Maybe it's a good thing.

Why?

Because all posterity will see firsthand who was right, for it was God Himself who punished David by destroying 70,000 of his people . . . *our* people! (2 Sam 24:15) The tragedy is that the people had to suffer for David's sin. (But see 2 Sam 24:1) It's a sample of what would have happened had I not intervened in all those other cases to spare us from needless sorrow and more bloodshed.

Joab, your situation here as the unsung hero of Israel cowering before of the altar awaiting an inglorious death for your faithfulness reminds me of some of the great Shakespearian tragedies I've read. I can hardly fathom it. I wish there was something I could do.

Quiet, son. It'll be over soon. Here comes the next commander in chief, Benaiah.

Thanks for listening. At least someone cares. Benaiah, how *dare* you touch someone clinging to the horns of God's altar? Is there

no judgment in Israel? Is there not a God who sees and hears?

Joab, I have been respectfully listening to every word you have given in self-defense, for I fear God and have always esteemed you highly as my commanding officer. However, I too know David quiet well. I have watched you both in your struggles at the top of authority and have wished many times I could speak heart to heart with you, but no, you were too preoccupied with your own greatness. Now maybe you'll listen.

I agree with you, Joab, concerning most of David's weaknesses, from his lack of parental authority and discipline and softness, to his ridiculous leniency with his enemies, who should have been executed by his command. Many times I bit my tongue in frustration as I watched him forgive another so-called "brother" bent on destroying him or making a laughing stock out of him.

You didn't even mention Ziba, who lied about Mephibosheth so he could get the inheritance. (2 Sam 16:1-4; 19:24-30) I would have put Ziba in prison for life, but David took it so nonchalantly I wanted to ram my fist through a . . .

Benaiah, can't you see why I had to take judgment into my own hands? Why don't you admit you were secretly glad I acted even against the king's wishes. Come now, tell the truth!

Joab, in a way, my heart breaks for you. I can see your point so, clearly it hurts. But while you were studying military strategy and plotting your next move, I was searching out and studying some of David's writings. Were you aware of his private life before God and his intense preoccupation with the ark of the Covenant?

Of course I was aware of his abnormal and unreasonable preoccupation with God and the ark. I never did figure out why he had to set up another tent for just the ark, especially since it was in flagrant violation of God's blueprint for the Tabernacle and its furnishings, especially the ark! (Ex. 26:33-34)

Benaiah, David was a divided man, torn between two worlds. I brought *balance* to his life. He *needed* me! This is evident after the numbering of Israel, so much ado over another altar (2 Sam 24:18) because of his sin, when all he had to do was listen to me and curb his voracious appetite for power.

Then it's obvious you know nothing of the *heart* of this truly great man, who is known by those closest to God as a "man after God's own heart" (Acts 13:22b). Do you remember when three of his mighty men sneaked past the Philistine garrison and brought David the water from the well of Bethlehem? (2 Sam 23:15-17)

Yes, most vividly. He poured it all on the ground after the men risked their lives to get it for him.

Joab, the point is that he poured it out as a drink offering unto the Lord; it was the most precious thing he could do as an act of worship. While we were standing around feeling important to the military, David was seeing spiritual realities more tangible than the swords and shields we carried. Has it ever once

dawned upon you there might possibly be a connection between David's weakness and his value and estimation of the strength and power of his God?

Why don't *you* need God as much, mister strong man? Look at yourself, cleaving to those brass horns like a timid little child. Now your moment of truth has come and all you've got to hold on to is an outward, *symbol* of something David carried deep within his heart. The more he failed, the more he came to know the wisdom—and judgment of a merciful God.

Why didn't you go to David and cleave to *him* in *repentance* when he was alive? He would have been a *living* altar where you would have experienced that very mercy you now despise. He who spared Abner and Shemei and Amasa would now prevail for *you* Joab. The power you credit him with is not in his military insight but in his power with *God*. He understood God's power because he understood how *desperately* he needed it in his own life. This is the reason for the altar. That's where you'll find the *true* horns—not these man-made brass-plated protrusions.

But no, you are too much like King Saul, whose concept of altars and sacrifice was limited to outward show, not heart reality. I bet you were not even aware of the role Saul played in David's life, were you, Joab?

Yes, of course I was. Saul kept David under pressure, driving him to plummet the depths of the wisdom he learned for rulership. I too know some of David's writings, like this nugget: "You have enlarged me when I was under pressure." (Ps 4: 1b paraphrase)

Much of his writing carries this theme of drawing nigh to God and to His Word through his afflictions. (Ps 119:67,71) I also know the spiritual meaning behind the sacrifices and the altar and is why I have humbled myself before this brass altar. God sees the altar of my heart, Benaiah, whether *you* do or not!

Joab, I'm not talking about affliction. That barely scratches the surface, and it's obvious your minor affliction hasn't even penetrated your heart. You don't even fear death, though you'd better listen intently, for you are but a stroke away from it. Are you familiar with David's prayer of repentance over his sin with Bathsheba against Uriah?

Vaguely.

Let me quote some of it to you, my brother.

"Have mercy upon me, O God,
According to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, Blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight—that You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge. . . . Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. . . . For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart— These, O God,

You will not despise. (Ps 51:1-4, 7, 16-17 NKJV)

Do you understand what a broken heart is, Joab? . . . No answer! You can find a brilliant strategy for taking Jerusalem out of the hands of the Jebusites (1 Chr 11:6), but you cannot comprehend the meaning of a broken spirit, which is basic to an invisible and eternal Jerusalem, a heavenly Zion more real than our great city of David. (Gal 4:26 Heb 12:22,23)

Are you listening?

While David was fleeing from Saul, God was teaching him dependence and trust, that judgment belongs to God alone, and God's judgment is totally wrapped up in mercy. We judge according to our own set of standards, God's standard of holiness is intertwined with mercy. That's why David was so taken up with the ark on top of which is God's throne of mercy, where He ministers righteous judgment. (Ex. 25:22)

Do you remember the night your brother Abishai went down with David to the camp of Saul and took his spear and canteen while the enemy slept? Your own brother wanted to kill Saul on the spot. It would have ended all David's troubles even as you thought you spared David much heartache by your "executions." Do you recall the words David used to restrain Abishai?

Let me refresh your memory: "Who can stretch forth his hand against the Lord's anointed, and be guiltless? The Lord forbid that I should stretch forth mine hand against the Lord's anointed." (1 Sam 26:9b,11a)

Now listen to David's answer to Saul when Saul humbled himself momentarily on that rare occasion: "Now behold, as your life was highly valued in my sight this day, so may my life be highly valued in the sight of the Lord, and may He deliver me from all distress." (v.24 NAS)

Joab, listen to me, please! David's greatness consisted in his *weakness*, not his military might and brilliance (2 Cor 12:9,10). Let me tell you this, whether you believe it or not. All the while you were disobeying the king's orders because you knew the "right way" it should be done to "save Israel," you were an instrument of affliction and breaking to David exactly as Saul was. (2 Sam 3:39)

You credit your *self* with most of David's conquests, but I tell you solemnly it was directly opposite to the way you think. You can take much of the credit, along with Absolom and Shemei and Saul because you unknowingly helped him conquer his own strong man.

You became in God's hands an altar of hard brass, hardened against correction, immune to reproof, but perfect for the job of rendering your king a mighty conqueror through weakness and dependence upon the God of Hosts.

I promise you, Joab, your name will be remembered, alright, but only in connection with the greatest king who ever lived. And that because he put up with men like you through the strength and mercy and *power* he found in

his "abnormal and unreasonable preoccupation with God and the ark."

Do you have anything to say, Joab? . . . Well, I don't blame you for keeping silent. I am returning to King Solomon, a man of tremendous strength and wisdom like *you*. He is also the son of the woman you mentioned in your catalogue of grievances.

This king who has never known what it is to be weak and helpless because of unconquerable leaders around him . . . let me hear *his* verdict. Let's see whether he has learned from his father that the true horns of the altar are not made with brass but with heart . . . that power with God is not the sword and strategy but humility and brokenness in the fear of God.

Let's find out the judgment of God from another man of great concern for his nation, one unscathed by sin and failure, one like *you*, Joab, who has always done *just the right thing*. Except that he is ruled by a divine wisdom that can see right through your motives.

I'll be back shortly with either the mercy of David or the sword of Solomon. I'm sure you'll still be holding on to the horns, awaiting the counsel of God according to the mercy you have rendered others.

1985 Victor Dodswright

A chapter from my unpublished book on the Tabernacle
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