THE KING RETURNS

2 SAMUEL CHAPTERS 19-20

“ABSALOM IS DEAD.” David’s own son, the one who had rejected the Lord’s anointed, has been taken out and is no longer a threat. King David can now return to Jerusalem and resume his reign as king. Sounds simple enough, right? But there’s just one problem – the nation of Israel is divided. Remember, most of the people had followed Absalom and had rejected David as their king. They have just ended a civil war in which thousands of Israelites lost their lives on the battlefield. So there are yet some unresolved issues. Who will be the king? If it’s David, will he retaliate against those who rejected him? Will he reconcile with his old enemies? Will David be able to heal the nation? At this point in time it’s NOT clear cut that David will be the king. We know that David is the only person who is fit to be the king. We know this because he’s the Lord’s anointed. He is the rightfully anointed king of Israel. And we know something about David’s godly character. But Absalom’s propaganda against David had been quite effective. He spread lies about his father and the people had bought into them – He said things like, “David is a tyrant. David is an ineffective leader. David is not an impartial judge. David is not a caring shepherd.” The bottom line for many Israelites is this: David is no longer fit to be king. This mindset paved the way for Absalom to take the throne of Israel from David. So even though Absalom is dead, no longer king, doubts about David still exist in the minds of most Israelites. This is the setting as we open up our lesson today beginning in 2 Samuel 19:8…

READ 2 Samuel 19:8a

After Joab’s rather harsh rebuke (of David as he wept for Absalom), David to his credit gathers himself. He picks himself up and again assumes the role as king. He begins to act like a king. And the people, desperate for a strong leader, respond to this by gathering around David.

READ 2 Samuel 19:8b-10

“Israel” here refers to the northern 10 tribes. When we read about “Judah” in the next few verses that will be referring to the southern 2 tribes of Judah and Benjamin. V 9 says that there is an internal debate among the leaders of Israel as to whether or not they should bring David back as king. Clearly among the northern 10 tribes David is garnering lots of support. David may be in exile right now, but they recall when David first became king of a united Israel, way back in Ch 5, how he had delivered them from their enemies, the Philistines. Furthermore, in v 10, the leaders of Israel recognize that they themselves had been complicit in Absalom’s rebellion. THEY had chosen Absalom. THEY had anointed him as their king. By the way, their actions went against the Law of Moses. In Deuteronomy God gave this instruction to the people of Israel: “When you come to the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you possess it and dwell in it and then say, ‘I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me,’ you may indeed set a king over you whom the LORD your God will choose…” And that is what happened with Israel’s first two kings, Saul and David. God chose them Himself. Both Saul and David had been set apart for God’s service as kings over God’s covenant nation. Both had been anointed by God’s priest, Samuel. Both were the Lord’s anointed. But in regard to Absalom the leaders of Israel had taken matters into their own hands. Here they acknowledge that they were responsible for making Absalom king. He wasn’t God’s choice. With Absalom dead the question is, “Should we bring David back?” Surprisingly it is the northern 10 tribes who appear to take the initiative in bringing David back as king.

Just as surprising is the apparent hesitation by the tribe of Judah, David’s own tribe, to bring him back. So David goes to the leadership of Judah and he does this thru Zadok and Abiathar the priests.

READ 2 Samuel 19:11-14

In an effort to promote national reconciliation and unity, David offers to make Amasa his new military commander. Who is Amasa? We haven’t really talked about him. He had been Absalom’s commander during the rebellion. Why would David want to replace Joab who had been a highly effective military leader for him? The Bible doesn’t tell us the reason but we can conjecture with reasonable certainty that David is probably angry at Joab for killing Absalom. So he has no qualms about replacing him, basically demoting Joab. This is actually a calculated and wise move on David’s part. This move does, in fact, help to persuade David’s opposition in Judah (those who had previously supported Absolom) to now support David’s return to the throne.

Just an aside here… if you are a student of American history then you will recall that Abraham Lincoln employed this very same strategy following the American Civil War. To promote national healing (and to help him get re-elected as president) Lincoln chose as his vice president for his second term a southerner by the name of Andrew Johnson. During Lincoln’s first term his vice president had been Hannibal Hamlin from Maine. By making this move Lincoln hoped to unite a divided country and to appease the South.

So an interesting parallel between what Lincoln did following our civil war and what David does here in our passage following Israel’s civil war.

READ 2 Samuel 19:15

The rallying point for meeting King David and bringing him back to the capital city of Jerusalem is a place we’ve heard of before…Gilgal. Gilgal was an important place spiritually in the history of the nation of Israel. It’s where the children of Israel under Joshua encamped after they had crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land. There was a mass circumcision there as the people renewed their covenant with God. Later under Samuel’s leadership there was a call to national revival that took place at Gilgal. That is where Saul was anointed as their first king. So this is a place of both political as well as spiritual significance. I believe this is why David chooses this location. The nation needs healing. It needs revival. It needs to return to God.

Notice who meets David to bring him over the Jordan and back into Israel – it’s the leadership of Judah. Who was it that had initiated David’s return as king back in v 9-10? Israel. So this will become a sticking point a little later on.

For now the author focuses on various individuals who meet up with David upon his return as king. We’ve met most of them before.

READ 2 Samuel 19:16-20

Remember Shimei? He was the nut who met David while he was fleeing from Absalom. He was the rock throwing, cursing crazy man. Recall that Abishai had wanted to cut Shimei into pieces but David had restrained him. Now as David returns to resume the throne, Shimei goes out to meet him, but this time he’s not cursing at David and throwing stones. He is apologetic for his actions. Also he’s not alone. He is accompanied by 1000 men from the tribe of Benjamin. He feels like there might be safety in numbers. So what do you think about old Shimei’s apology to David? Was he sincere? *[discussion about how we cannot get inside somebody’s head and know whether or not their motives are pure]*

David is touched by a statement Shimei makes. “For your servant knows that I have sinned.” David had said these very same words before himself to Nathan the prophet back in Ch 12 after he had been confronted with his sin. David had responded, “I have sinned against the Lord.” So David forgives Shimei. Those who have been forgiven are more willing to forgive. Does Shimei deserve David’s pardon? Does he deserve mercy? No. What Shimei deserves and what David deserved back in Ch 12 is death. That’s what the Law required as payment for their sins. At this point Abishai speaks up. He represents the Law –

READ 2 Samuel 19:21-23

Just like he had done before Abishai says, “this guy deserves to die for what he did – he cursed the Lord’s anointed. Let me kill him!” Abishai is technically correct. Shimei does deserve to die. That’s what the Law says. But David spares Shimei from the penalty of his sin just as he himself had been spared from the penalty of his sin. David shows Shimei mercy. Later, toward the end of David’s life, 1 Kings Ch 2, he will warn his son Solomon about Shimei. David will charge Solomon as the new king to deal with Shimei wisely. When Shimei crosses Solomon, Solomon has him executed. But for today, as David heads back to Jerusalem, Shimei is spared.

We just read that Ziba, the servant of Saul, is among the people who came to meet David at Gilgal. Ziba is a man with questionable motives. He had supplied David with donkeys, food and drink hoping it would pay dividends in the future. So now that David’s returning as king it is not surprising to see Ziba there to meet him. Maybe David will reward him for his earlier act of kindness. When last we met Ziba he had given a less than flattering report about Mephibosheth. He had told David why Mephibosheth had remained in Jerusalem and not followed after David – “Behold [Mephibosheth] remains in Jerusalem, for he said, ‘Today the house of Israel [referring to Absolom the new king] will give me back the kingdom of my father [the throne of Saul].’” So now David meets up with Mephibosheth. And he questions him about what Ziba had told him.

READ 2 Samuel 19:24-28

We have no way of knowing whether Mephibosheth or Ziba is telling the truth. One says this and the other says that. But one thing does stand out in the text which implies strongly that Ziba might not have been telling the truth about Mephibosheth is the apparent lack of personal hygiene on Mephibosheth’s part. His actions are not consistent with someone who wants to impress on the new king the idea of restoring to him the throne of his father (grandfather Saul). Rather it seems to indicate that while David was away he had been deeply distraught. So although Mephibosheth and Ziba are apparent followers of David, there are a lot of questions we are left with about just how loyal and faithful they really are.

David’s reaction to this whole situation shows his wisdom. He has no way of knowing who is telling the truth.

READ 2 Samuel 19:29-30

David splits the land up between Mephibosheth and Ziba. He had originally given all the land to Mephibosheth back in Ch 9. Then when he felt betrayed by Mephibosheth he had taken it away from him and given it all to Ziba, Ch 16. Now with Mephibosheth’s account contradicting Ziba’s account David divides the land between the two of them. And with that he washes his hands of the whole situation. He’s through discussing it.

Mephibosheth’s reaction to David leaves us feeling as though it had been Mephibosheth who had been telling the truth rather than Ziba. He could care less about the land. Instead he expresses his joy that King David is finally returning home and his gratitude for past blessings. Meanwhile Ziba is apparently content with the settlement and we never heard from him again.

The last character that David meets up with is Barzillai the Gileadite. He is discussed in v 31-39. Barzillai is a wealthy man, 80 years old, who had supported David during his escape from Absalom. He had provided food for David and his followers while they had been in exile. David rewards Barzillai. He offers to let him live in Jerusalem as his guest. But Barzillai turns down David’s offer preferring rather to live out his days in his own house and in his own hometown. Instead Barzillai requests that Chimham, either his son (1 Kings 2:7) or a close servant (v 37), be allowed to go with David to Jerusalem. David agrees to this.

READ 2 Samuel 19:38-40

Why is all this attention given by the writer of 2 Samuel to these men and their interactions with David? There’s a lot going on in the nation but the writer takes the time to focus on these various individuals. Why? Because it is here, in his one-on-one interactions, that we see David’s heart. David rewards his faithful followers (Ziba and Barzillai) and has mercy on his enemies (Shimei) and pardons those who had allegedly wronged him (Mephibosheth). David shows us the very heart of God. It is in these kinds of personal interactions where we see who David really is. He’s not a vengeful person at all. He’s indeed a man after God’s own heart, a man who demonstrates godly character, restraint and wisdom.

Well I wish I could tell you that they all lived happily ever after, but this is a true story not a fairy tale. There is an underlying tension between Judah and Israel that’s not going to just go away. We see it at the end of Ch 19. David gathers all the people together at Gilgal from both sides for national reconciliation and in a show of unity. They will all bring him back to Jerusalem as their king. But there are feelings of jealousy, selfish ambition and wounded pride by the leaders of Israel.

READ 2 Samuel 19:41-43

Sadly, Chapter 19 ends with this silly disagreement (senseless trash talking on both sides) between the northern 10 tribes of Israel and the southern 2 tribes of Judah.

Chapter 20 begins with these words…

READ 2 Samuel 20:1

It only takes one worthless person to stir the pot of dissension in any group. As the saying goes, “One bad apple spoils the whole bunch.” And here that worthless guy is Sheba. Notice that Sheba is from the tribe of Benjamin. This is the same tribe as King Saul, a past enemy of David and Shimei, a more recent enemy of David. His call to rebellion against King David foreshadows what will happen about 45 years later during Rehoboam’s reign when the kingdom will split permanently. First Kings 12:16: “And when all Israel saw that the king [Rehoboam] did not listen to them, the people answered the king, ‘What portion do we have in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, O Israel! Look now to your own house, David.’ So Israel went to their tents.” Eerily similar.

READ 2 Samuel 20:2

So what does David do about this rebellion by Sheba which pulled away Israel’s support of him so quickly? Remember the wise counsel that Ahithophel had given to Absalom and which Absalom failed to follow? “Hit David immediately before he can get organized and mobilize his army.” Well that’s exactly the strategy that David employs here in Ch 20. Needless to say Sheba’s rebellion doesn’t last very long. Just a quick summary for the sake of time –

When Amasa is slow to carry out David’s orders, Joab seizes an opportunity to kill him and, by doing so, he regains his lost position as commander. Joab then takes up pursuit of Sheba way up north to the fortified city of Abel, which is near Dan, 25 miles N of the Sea of Galilee. Joab threatens to destroy this city unless they hand Sheba over. They actually begin to lay siege to the city. The people of the city respond to the counsel of a wise woman. They kill Sheba and throw his head over the wall to Joab. End of rebellion! Joab heads back to Jerusalem. David once again rules as king over a united Israel.

You may wonder what happens to Joab. Apparently nothing happens to him immediately. David has little choice but to retain him as his commander. But within 5 years Joab will get what he deserves. In 1 Kings Ch 2, just before David dies, he instructs Solomon to kill Joab and shortly after David’s death Solomon does just that. He has Joab executed because (Solomon’s words)… “he attacked and killed with the sword two men more righteous than himself, Abner the son of Ner, commander of the army of Israel, and Amasa the son of Jether, commander of the army of Judah.” So Joab gets what he deserves later.

Application. There are a number of possible ways I could have gone with a lesson like this. But I want us to focus on what happens at Gilgal. You see, David understands the need for reconciliation between himself and his nation following a period of rebellion. The nation is at odds with their king, the Lord’s anointed. So David takes the initiative to meet at Gilgal with the idea of seeking reconciliation with his people. These are God’s covenant people. There needs to be unity moving forward. Before David can be an effective king, the relationship with his people, God’s people, needs to be made right. And David understands that it’s more than just the people being reconciled to him, but they must, in fact, be reconciled to God.

In 2 Corinthians 5 Paul talks about this whole matter of reconciliation – we sinners, we need to be reconciled to a holy God. You all know 2 Cor 5:17: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” But then Paul adds this… “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”

All that to say this – God is in the business of reconciling people who have been alienated from Him, in rebellion against his Anointed One, His Messiah, Jesus. God took the initiative to make that relationship right. It was Christ’s death on the cross that made it possible for such reconciliation with God to take place. And we get the privilege of taking this message of reconciliation and hope to a lost world. “All this is from God,” Paul says.

What David does at Gilgal just touches the hem of the garment. The seeds of rebellion will continue to some degree for many years to come. But his effort is noteworthy and it is straight from the heart of God. It points us forward to the cross. That is where our ultimate reconciliation with God took place. Our broken relationship with God can only be mended thru Jesus Christ.