

**“Pursuing the Goals of Yahweh According to the Ways of Yahweh”**

**2 Samuel 2:1-3:1**

**February 23, 2020**

**Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service**

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We come this evening to Second Samuel, chapter two.

Saul, the king of Israel, is dead. David, who has been called by God and anointed by the Prophet Samuel to succeed Saul, is with his army of 600 men, living outside of Israel, in Ziklag. When he gets the news of Saul’s death, David responds by lamenting.

Israel has no king. David has been called to that role, but is by no means on the throne at this point.

With that in mind, we come to Second Samuel, chapter two through chapter three verse one.

Please listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this evening:

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

When they told David, “It was the men of Jabesh-gilead who buried Saul,” <sup>5</sup> David sent messengers to the men of Jabesh-gilead and said to them, “May you be blessed by Yahweh, because you showed this loyalty to Saul your lord and buried him. <sup>6</sup> Now may Yahweh show steadfast love and faithfulness to you. And I will do good to you because you have done this thing. <sup>7</sup> Now therefore let your hands be strong, and be valiant, for Saul your lord is dead, and the house of Judah has anointed me king over them.”

<sup>8</sup> But Abner the son of Ner, commander of Saul’s army, took Ish-bosheth the son of Saul and brought him over to Mahanaim, <sup>9</sup> and he made him king over Gilead and the Ashurites and Jezreel and Ephraim and Benjamin and all Israel. <sup>10</sup> Ish-bosheth, Saul’s son, was forty years old when he began to reign over Israel, and he reigned two years. But the house of Judah followed David. <sup>11</sup> And the time that David was king in Hebron over the house of Judah was seven years and six months.

<sup>12</sup> Abner the son of Ner, and the servants of Ish-bosheth the son of Saul, went out from Mahanaim to Gibeon. <sup>13</sup> And Joab the son of Zeruiah and the servants of David went out and met them at the pool of Gibeon. And they sat down, the one on the one side of the pool, and the other on the other side of the pool. <sup>14</sup> And Abner said to Joab, “Let the young men arise and compete before us.” And Joab said, “Let them arise.” <sup>15</sup> Then they arose and passed over by number, twelve for Benjamin and Ish-bosheth the son of Saul, and twelve of the servants of David. <sup>16</sup> And each caught his opponent by the head and thrust his sword in his opponent’s side, so they fell down together. Therefore that place was called Helkath-hazzurim, which is at Gibeon. <sup>17</sup> And the battle was very fierce that day. And Abner and the men of Israel were beaten before the servants of David.

<sup>18</sup> And the three sons of Zeruiah were there, Joab, Abishai, and Asahel. Now Asahel was as swift of foot as a wild gazelle. <sup>19</sup> And Asahel pursued Abner, and as he went, he turned neither to the right hand nor to the left from following Abner. <sup>20</sup> Then Abner looked behind him and said, “Is it you, Asahel?” And he answered, “It is I.” <sup>21</sup> Abner said to him, “Turn aside to your right

hand or to your left, and seize one of the young men and take his spoil.” But Asahel would not turn aside from following him. <sup>22</sup> And Abner said again to Asahel, “Turn aside from following me. Why should I strike you to the ground? How then could I lift up my face to your brother Joab?” <sup>23</sup> But he refused to turn aside. Therefore Abner struck him in the stomach with the butt of his spear, so that the spear came out at his back. And he fell there and died where he was. And all who came to the place where Asahel had fallen and died, stood still.

<sup>24</sup> But Joab and Abishai pursued Abner. And as the sun was going down they came to the hill of Ammah, which lies before Giah on the way to the wilderness of Gibeon. <sup>25</sup> And the people of Benjamin gathered themselves together behind Abner and became one group and took their stand on the top of a hill. <sup>26</sup> Then Abner called to Joab, “Shall the sword devour forever? Do you not know that the end will be bitter? How long will it be before you tell your people to turn from the pursuit of their brothers?” <sup>27</sup> And Joab said, “As God lives, if you had not spoken, surely the men would not have given up the pursuit of their brothers until the morning.” <sup>28</sup> So Joab blew the trumpet, and all the men stopped and pursued Israel no more, nor did they fight anymore.

<sup>29</sup> And Abner and his men went all that night through the Arabah. They crossed the Jordan, and marching the whole morning, they came to Mahanaim. <sup>30</sup> Joab returned from the pursuit of Abner. And when he had gathered all the people together, there were missing from David's servants nineteen men besides Asahel. <sup>31</sup> But the servants of David had struck down of Benjamin 360 of Abner's men. <sup>32</sup> And they took up Asahel and buried him in the tomb of his father, which was at Bethlehem. And Joab and his men marched all night, and the day broke upon them at Hebron.

<sup>3:1</sup> There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David. And David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul became weaker and weaker.

This is the Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

Let's pray ...

Lord, as the psalmist does,  
we ask you to work now through this, your word to your servants,  
the very word in which you have helped us to place our hope.  
For our comfort in the afflictions we face in this world  
is that your promises in your word give us life.  
Though the world may deride us,  
we do not turn from this your revelation to us.  
Teach us from it now, we ask, in Jesus's name. Amen.  
[Based on Psalm 119:49-51]

A lot happens in our text this evening. To begin, David inquires of Yahweh whether he should go into the land of the tribe of Judah. God tells him to go, and so he goes.

The tribe of Judah anoints him as their king ... which is a step in the right direction. But we need to remember that that is only one tribe. There are eleven others who have not yet accepted David as their king.

Meanwhile, Abner the son of Ner, the commander-in-chief of Saul's army, crowns Saul's son Ish-bosheth as king of the remaining eleven tribes. It's somewhat unclear how much authority Ish-bosheth really exercised over all eleven tribes, though he was more clearly in control within the tribe of Benjamin [Firth, 333]. Some suggest he may have gradually extended his power, so that while he may have been formally appointed as king around the same time that David was,

his reign over *all* Israel may have been shorter, as we see in the different numbers of verses ten and eleven. [Alter, 204]

There is obvious tension with two kings in place, and that erupts into violence in the verses that follow, and finally into civil war, as we are told in chapter three, verse one.

And as we look at this chapter as a whole, there are three patterns that emerge before us, and each is a different combination of ends and means – of goals and approaches to get there.

In terms of goals, one could either be pursuing Yahweh's goals, or a different set of goals. And then in terms of approaches, one could either be following Yahweh's approach or a different approach.

And in David, Abner, and the sons of Zeruiah we see three different combinations of those two elements. Let's take a look at each.

First, in David, we see someone who is seeking Yahweh's goals and doing it according to Yahweh's ways.

First, David's goal is to fulfill the calling that the Lord – that Yahweh – has given to him. Yahweh has called him to be king over all of Israel – he has anointed him for that purpose. And David is pursuing that goal.

And second, David is pursuing that goal according to Yahweh's ways – which here means that he is pursuing it by patiently and faithfully pressing forward.

And each of those elements is key. First, David is acting in faith. He is relying not on himself, but on God. But then along with that, the faith he is exercising is not passive faith – but it is active. He is pressing forward – he is seeking to advance towards the goal that the Lord has given him. But even as he advances, he does it with patience. He is not grasping. He is not acting rashly. But he is showing patient faith even as he presses forward.

We see this in several places in the beginning of our text.

We see it first in verses one and two. David has heard of Saul's death. But he does not rush in to grasp at the throne. He acts in patient faith by first inquiring of God whether he should enter the land of Judah. But then, once the Lord affirms that step, David moves – he advances – he presses forward. David patiently and faithfully advances.

David acts by entering Hebron and settling himself and his men – his army of about 600 – in the land. But even then, he doesn't take it by force. He doesn't grasp at leadership even within Judah, but he waits until it is offered to him by the leaders of Judah. David is faithful and patient even as he presses forward.

Then we see it once more, in how he interacts with the people of Jabesh-gilead. A couple chapters ago we were told that when Saul was killed and the Philistines desecrated and displayed his disfigured body, the men of Jabesh-gilead – people who would be especially faithful to Saul as Saul had rescued them from the Ammonites at the beginning of his reign – the men of Jabesh-gilead go into the land held by the Philistines in order to retrieve Saul's body.

Now ... when David is told this in the second half of verse four, we need to recognize that there would be a temptation for him to act against the people of Jabesh-gilead – to either preemptively strike them, or to at least keep a suspicious eye on them. Their act of heroism showed a deep loyalty to Saul. Which a ruler trying to step into the throne in place of a descendant of Saul might view as a liability. What would David do? [Leithart, 182-183]

Well, David once again pressed forward in faithful patience. He did not distance himself from the people of Jabesh-gilead or attack them. Instead, he sent them a message rightly praising what they had done for Saul their king. He prays for Yahweh to bless them, and he promises to bless them himself as well. In all this, David does not act in arrogance or impatience, but he trusts the Lord, he is faithful to his brothers in Israel, and he is patient for them to decide what they will do next.

But then even as he is faithful and patient, David also presses forward. He tells them that he has been anointed as king in Judah and he invites them, in verse seven, to follow him now as their king.

David here gives us a picture of one who has a right goal and is pursuing it in a right way – David is pursuing the will of God, and he is pursuing it by patiently and faithfully pressing forward to advance God's will.

The second pattern we have is of Abner. And in Abner we see a man who is not pursuing God's will, but who is, at the same time, pursuing his goals in a way that is more or less consistent with God's ways.

In terms of his goals, Abner appoints Saul's son Ish-bosheth to the throne. It is clear that Abner is the real power behind things in Israel after Saul's death, but he does not take the throne himself, but appoints an heir of Saul.

We're not told why Abner did this or where his heart was. His goal that is contrary to God's will may have been out of rebellion against God or it may have been out of being unconvinced that God had really anointed David to succeed Saul. There is no mention of Yahweh or of Abner consulting him before appointing Ish-bosheth as the next king – though that could have been out of rebellious autonomy *or* out of an assumption of succession growing out of his loyalty to Saul. By chapter three it's clear that Abner is aware that God has called David to be king of all Israel. But whether his declaration there is an act of repentance from previous rebellion, or of acceptance after earlier confusion or doubt – that is unclear to us.

In any case, Abner is working for a goal that is contrary to Yahweh's will – he has established, and is promoting and defending, a king in Israel that is a rival to the one Yahweh has chosen.

And yet, what is striking, is that Abner seems to take an approach not unlike David's – an approach characterized by patiently pressing forward, and by faithfulness at least towards his fellow Israelites, even if we are unsure of his relationship to the Lord at this point.

So, we should note that while both armies are on the move in verses twelve and thirteen, Abner does not invade David's territory. Gibeon was in the territory of Benjamin – a region clearly under Ish-bosheth's control and not David's. Abner does not break faith or act impatiently as he moves his men to Gibeon.

But then, when his men do come into contact with David's men under the command of Joab, Abner tries again and again to deescalate the conflict between them.

With the armies gathered together, Abner suggests in verse fourteen that they select some men from each side to engage in representative combat. Commentators disagree over what Abner is suggesting here – whether he is suggesting non-deadly competitions, which (contrary to his intentions) then turned deadly [Leithart, 185-186], or whether Abner's suggestion was that rather than full-scale battle, they select a few men to battle as representatives of each side – much like the set-up when David fought Goliath [Alter, 204]. In either case, Abner would seem to be seeking to deescalate a tense situation by preventing full-scale battle. He is acting in faithfulness to his fellow Israelites and patience regarding his goals.

Whatever Abner's intent, the competition becomes deadly. And it's not only deadly, it's also indecisive – all twenty-four men (twelve from each side) fall. There is no clear winner.

And so, the representative battle turns into all-out battle.

And yet still, even as it does, we see Abner working to deescalate. When Asahel pursues Abner, Abner urges him to go and fight someone else. Asahel is Joab's brother. And Joab is leading David's army. Abner knows that if he kills Asahel, it will make it impossible for him to negotiate peacefully with Joab in the future – as it will add a blood feud to an already complicated and tense situation [Firth, 339]. Abner wants to leave a path open to restore peace and faithfulness in the future, but Asahel pursues him anyway.

And then, in verse twenty-six, it is Abner who urges Joab to bring an end to the battle. And we should note that when Abner calls for end to the battle, he is not asking for relief before he is defeated even further, but he asks the question when he is in his greatest position of strength. Abner and his men are gathered on the top of a hill in verse twenty-five – they have the high ground – they have the advantage. And it is *then* that rather than striking from a position of advantage, Abner calls on Joab to pull back – reminding him that they are all fellow Israelites – that they are brothers. And Joab relents. Abner shows no interest in arrogantly grasping at David's territory or impatiently provoking conflict. He rather seems intent on maintaining faith between his fellow Israelites while patiently – and as peacefully as possible – pressing on towards his goals.

Though Abner's goals are contrary to Yahweh's, his approach is in many ways like David's and is marked by a faithful and patient pressing forward.

The third pattern we see is in the sons of Zeruiah – Joab, Abishai, and Asahel. These three men are, we learn in First Chronicles 2:16, David's nephews.

And in these men, we see the pattern of pursuing Yahweh's goals – but doing it in a way that is contrary to Yahweh's ways.

The sons of Zeruiah pursue Yahweh's goal – they too want to see David on the throne of all Israel.

But in this chapter, we see them pursue it in a way that is contrary to the ways of Yahweh. We see them pursue their goals not by patiently and faithfully pressing forward as David does – but by arrogantly and impatiently attacking and grasping.

Joab, Abishai, and Asahel, the sons of Zeruiah, pursue the right goals in the wrong way – by arrogantly and impatiently attacking and grasping.

Where do we see that?

Well, it begins with the fact that it is Joab who encroaches on Ish-bosheth's territory in verse thirteen. We may wonder how much authority Ish-bosheth had over different tribes, but we are told specifically of his authority in Benjamin, and in verse thirteen, Joab just walks into the territory of Benjamin with his army. Joab is provoking the men of Benjamin – acting in arrogant impatience against Israel.

Abner tries to deescalate the situation, but even so, it results in a full-out battle ... and one wonders if that is what Joab wanted all along.

Next, we see the pattern of arrogant and impatient attack among the sons of Zeruiah, as Asahel pursues Abner in verse eighteen through twenty-three. Abner knows there could be serious consequences not just for them, but for Israel and Judah, if he and Asahel fight. But Asahel is indifferent to that. He pursues nonetheless, arrogantly and impatiently seeking a fight to grasp at what he wants. And it ends not only in Asahel's death, but in animosity that will shape the chapters that follow, all to the detriment of God's people.

Third, we see that even after Asahel has been killed in battle, by the reluctant engagement of Abner, Joab and Abishai do not leave it at that, but they continue to pursue Abner in verse twenty-four. And at that point we wonder how much they are motivated by David's kingdom versus how much they are motivated by their own vendetta. They continue to arrogantly and impatiently pursue their fellow Israelites, into the night.

And finally, we see something of Joab's approach even as he makes a temporary truce with Abner. Abner, as we said, is in the position of strength when he calls for the truce. And when he does, he emphasizes again how bad this situation is. Abner calls to Joab: "Shall the sword devour forever? Do you not know that the end will be bitter? How long will it be before you tell your people to turn from the pursuit of their brothers?"

Abner's call emphasizes the tragedy of this situation. But even then – even as he accepts the call for a temporary truce – Joab cannot seem to help but add some arrogant bravado. He shouts back: "As God lives, if you had not spoken, surely the men would not have given up the pursuit of their brothers until the morning."

Joab, Abishai and Asahel are fighting on the right side – they are pursuing the goals of Yahweh ... but they are doing it in a way that is contrary to ways of Yahweh. They are pursuing the right goal in the wrong way – by arrogantly and impatiently grasping at what they want, and attacking others.

And so our chapter gives us these three patterns: David, Abner, and the sons of Zeruiah. And the first contrast that we should especially be struck by is the difference between David and the sons of Zeruiah. Because they confront us with a reality that we often try to ignore: that you can pursue a right goal in a wrong way.

David has – for the most part – been pursuing the call of God in the right way. And the result has been that, so much as it is in his power, he has been at peace with others – particularly Saul. Of

course, some conflict was outside of his control. But for the most part David sought to deescalate the tension between him and Saul, and to patiently and faithfully pursue God's calling on him.

By adopting this approach – by pursuing God's calling according to God's ways – David has managed to *avoid* civil war for the last seventeen chapters.

And now the sons of Zeruiah have plunged Judah and Israel *into* civil war in the space of just over seventeen *verses*.

*That* is the difference that means can make – that is the difference that our approach can make – even when our goal is good.

And while we might often fail to see that reality when we consider our own ways, we should especially notice it when it comes to the ways of our Lord.

Because David's approach to his kingdom looks an awful lot like Christ's approach to his. Christ does not come to this earth grasping at power and authority, but he patiently and faithfully presses on to the calling of a throne that the Father puts before him.

Remember – this is one of the temptations that the devil brings to Jesus in the desert – to grasp at the kingdom rather than patiently pressing towards it in faithful obedience. The devil gives Jesus a vision of all the kingdoms of the world and all their glory, and he offers to give them to Jesus, if Jesus would fall down and worship him.

Of course, Jesus reigning over the world would be a *good thing*. But the process matters! The *way* he gets there matters. And he will not do it by grasping at the throne, but by patiently following the path his Father has laid out for him.

In a similar way, Jesus comes to assert his kingly reign over the world not all at once, but he patiently waits, so that more people – so that you and I – can not only be born, but be gathered into his kingdom as subjects. Had he acted sooner we would either not exist, or would need to be confronted as his enemies.

Christ pursues his kingdom in this world through patiently and faithfully pressing forward, not through impatiently grasping or attacking.

And that's not only how he pursues his kingdom – it's also how he pursues individual Christians. Our Lord has every right to smite us for our sin, for our hardness of heart, for our slowness to believe and to obey.

But he doesn't. Because that is not his way with his people. Instead he patiently presses on in our hearts. He advances his influence in our souls step by step. He pursues peace with each of us, even when we deserve his wrath.

Christ's goal is to bring justice and righteousness, but he does it by patiently working in us, not by striking and destroying us.

It is in David, not in Joab, that we catch a glimpse of how Jesus Christ works his will in this world and in our lives.

We should rejoice in that. We should find peace and assurance in that. We should see the gospel in that. We should turn to God and worship him for that.

And we should also desire to imitate that.

Because far too often we, even as God's people, even as Christ's Body, even as we pursue goals that are good and right – still far too often we walk in the pattern of Joab when we are called to walk in the pattern of David.

And we can see this in a variety of ways.

We see it first in the relationship between the Church and the world.

We struggle to be patient and persistently faithful as we seek to see Christ's kingdom grow in this world.

And I think that is why so many Christians begin to put more time and energy into advancing their political and cultural goals for this world than God's spiritual goals for this world.

And don't get me wrong – political and cultural issues are important – we should care about them and we should work for them. But they are not more important than the spiritual needs of this world. And they are certainly no substitute for them.

But God's spiritual goals for this world so obviously require patient reliance on him and persistent faithful effort that I think we find ourselves more drawn to token political and cultural battles instead ... in part because the means in those battles at least *appear* to be easier, and we feel like we can get more done there in less time.

But God especially calls us to pursue his *spiritual* desires for this world.

And the same is true for how we relate to individual non-Christians in our lives. Lovingly investing in the life of a non-Christian and being Christ's representative to them, in order that they might come to know him, are godly goals ... and we know that ... but they also require the patient and faithful persistence of a David ... and when we see that clearly, we tend to pull back.

Often, we grow distant from non-Christians not because they reject us, but because we are unwilling to walk with them in the ways that Christ has walked with us.

In how we relate to the unbelieving world we are called to walk in the ways of David ... but we often prefer the ways of Joab.

That's a first place we see this.

A second place we see this tendency is in the big picture divisions among the people of God – the Church of Christ.

In the ways we speak about other Christians whom we disagree with – across denominational or party lines – and whether we are talking about them among ourselves, or talking about them online, or joining others who ridicule them in mocking laughter – we far too often display the pattern of Joab. We adopt worldly ways of treating our brothers and sisters in Christ – attacking them for selfish gain, and arrogantly disparaging them. And as we do, we fail to appreciate, as

Abner points out in verse twenty-six, how our own verbal attacks set brother against brother and always end in bitterness.

This is a problem for Christians today, in our polarizing age. But even so, it's encouraging to note that in many ways our age is more tame than previous ages. One benefit to studying church history is that it gives you some perspective. We may be discouraged by the unkind ways Christians speak of one another, and we should desire that to change. But a study of history helps one appreciate just how often disputes among Christians have led to very worldly outbursts in the past.

One of the most striking examples I remember is recorded by Henry Chadwick, as he explains how when the fourth-century bishop Demophilos was enraged with eighty of his presbyters who complaining to the Emperor about his appointment to the office of bishop, Demophilos's solution was to pile all eighty of the complaining presbyters into a small boat, which was then put a little bit out to sea and set on fire. All eighty of them perished. And I assume after that there was a marked decline in formal complaints against Demophilos. [Chadwick, 422].

There have been many Joabs in the history of the Church. But we need not be violent to be a Joab. We can seek to destroy others with our words, just as Demophilos did with his torch. But our calling is to follow in the path of David. Our calling is to patiently and faithfully press forward with Christians we disagree with, rather than arrogantly attacking them.

Our calling is to reflect Christ to one another and to the outside world, even in our disagreements.

Where do you need to reconsider the Joab-like ways in which you speak of Christians from other traditions or theological stances?

A third place we see this tendency is within individual congregations of the church – even within congregations like ours. Some congregations, of course, are worse than others. But every congregation has this to some degree.

Every church has room to grow. And every believer can see those areas for growth in different ways. And the Body of Christ needs all of those eyes and all of those voices. Seeing areas for growth is not the problem. The problem is how we respond.

Because we are often tempted to respond with the impatience or the aggression of Joab. We tell someone about an area in which the church needs to grow, and we are angry when it isn't fixed by someone else right away. We tell others about a culture change we think is needed, and we begin to speak ill of the leadership when a couple months later things don't look different. We, like Joab, may have good goals for the church ... but we can be impatient with when we want results – leading us to grasp at quick fixes and attack any who seem to be in our way. Maybe those attacks are overt ... maybe they are just the complaints we grumble about with another congregant ... but where do you see those patterns in your life? And what would it look like, when you see an area for growth in the church, if you were to pursue it with a David-like – with a Christ-like – patience and faithfulness? Christ is remarkably patient with his Church. How can we follow in his steps?

A fourth and final place we see these patterns is among our friendships and relationships with other Christians.

Joab-like worldly impatience is all too common when Christians really get to know each other. We see it in friendships, in relationships where we volunteer together, in accountability groups, in our bible studies, in our families, in our marriages, in our children.

Real, deep relationships where we work for the spiritual good of others – for the goals God has for their lives – is difficult, slow work. We want it to be quick. And when people take too long to change or too long to grow, we get impatient. And we lash out. Or we grasp at worldly quick-fixes. Rather than come alongside people and seek to join in what God is doing in their lives, we want to lay hold of them, and fix it. And when that doesn't work, we get angry.

We far too often treat others as Joab treated Israel ... *but that is not how Christ treats us*. Christ is incredibly patient with us. Who is he calling you to be patient with as he has been patient with you?

In many areas of life, we are far too much like Joab. But as we look at David, and as we look at the Greater David, we are called to walk in his ways and in each and every one of these relationships to pursue God's goals by patiently and faithfully pressing forward, rather than by arrogantly and impatiently attacking and grasping.

But then, even as we consider that, we need to make sure not to forget Abner – the man who pursued the wrong goal, but did it in a right way. And we need to remember him for two reasons.

First, as you see the ways you have walked in the pattern of Joab and his brothers, then you need to let not only the Davids around you rebuke you, but also the Abners.

God has placed faithful Christians around you to correct you, and that is good. But he can use an unfaithful or confused Christian or a non-Christian to do that as well – sometimes to do that even better.

Who in your life is working for goals contrary to the will of God, but even so, is working in a way that is so peaceful towards you, so patient towards others, that if you're honest, it should rebuke you for the ways you have pursued the goals of God?

We must allow God to use the people around us – including the unbelievers and the pagans – to rebuke us. Augustine makes essentially this point in the *City of God* – that many pagans had showed more courage and self-sacrifice in defending the honor of Rome than the Christians had in defending the honor of Christ. And he urged Christians to look upon that and receive from it a rebuke. [*City of God*, e.g.: V.17-18]

And in the same way, when people from a secular stance or a pagan stance show more respect and patient civility than we and other Christians do in our cultural conflicts, then we should receive the rebuke. Our goals, of course matter. But so do our ways. And in the kingdom of God, the ends do not justify the means. We must humbly receive correction from the Abners around us.

But along with that ... we must make sure that we are not Abners ourselves.

Abner is not the goal. David is. And it can be really easy to adopt patient and faithful ways of pursuing *our own* desires, instead of the desires of God in our lives. And so long as we do it patiently and peacefully ... most people will assume we are being good and faithful Christians. But we're not. Because our goals matter.

Abner stands as a rebuke to some of us, but he also stands in this chapter as a warning to others. Being a faithful Christian cannot be reduced to patience and general kindness. It includes those things to be sure, but checking those boxes does not make us truly faithful. To be truly faithful, we must be using those virtues in service of God's kingdom, and not our own. We are *not* to be like Abner.

Where might you sometimes substitute peacemaking and agreeableness for an actual pursuit of the kingdom of Christ? Where might you be more like an Abner than a David?

Our text tonight holds out three patterns of life. Two will lead us to disaster. The first of those two can make us feel comfortable with pursuing selfish goals simply because we pursue them in a peaceful way. The second can make us feel comfortable with arrogantly attacking others and faithlessly grasping at things, because we tell ourselves that our goals are right.

But the third path is the path of our Lord, who pursues a kingdom of righteousness, and who does it in a patient and graceful way – seeking to make peace with those who oppose him and to draw them into his kingdom.

We owe our eternal hope to the fact that *that* is how Christ pursued us.

And as we think of our lives – of how we should relate to this world – of how we should relate to others – of how we should relate to one another – let us walk in the footsteps of Christ our Lord and Savior. Let us, like David, pursue the goals of Yahweh according to the ways of Yahweh.

Amen.

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**This sermon draws on material from:**

- Augustine. *The City of God*. Introduction and Translation by William Babcock. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012.
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