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SERMONS ON 2 SAMUEL

CHAPTERS 1-13

John Calvin

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THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

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Now let us prostrate ourselves before the majesty of our good God, recognising all our faults, praying to him that he may touch us with such repentance; that groaning over and confessing our sins, we may be displeased with them; and that we may be confused in ourselves and may seek in him all that is lacking in us. May this not only serve to abolish our past offences, but may it renew us in such fashion that, being clothed with this righteousness, we may glorify him in all our life and words and deeds and thoughts. Thus, let us all say, Almighty God, heavenly Father . . .

## 5

*The Dreadful 'Game' of War\**

*Now Abner, son of Ner, captain of Saul's army took Ishbosheth, son of Saul, and made him go to Mahanaim, and made him king over Gilead and Asshur and Jezreel, and over Ephraim and Benjamin and over all Israel . . . (2 Sam. 2:8-17).*

WE see here how the ambition and desire to rule is blind, for after the people of Israel were defeated, as mentioned above, no-one should have desired to rule over them. Nevertheless, a contention arose among them which would cause a greater disaster than before.

Here is a body without a head, and enemies whom victory has made bold are near. Nevertheless, since Abner, who was captain under Saul, feared that he might become less important and lose the position that he held previously, brought forward the son of Saul to be king. Well, this was, as I have already said, about to cause a greater division among the people. For with so many outside enemies, the twelve tribes of Israel were ready to break up and, indeed, the tribe of Judah was alone over against the eleven others. Even if the Philistines had not touched them, they could easily have destroyed themselves.

These happenings warn us to conduct ourselves with such modesty that we will not seek to be too great. For if this wretched desire dominates us, it is certain that we shall pay no attention to right or fairness or anything else. Abner should have thought that, even though the kingdom belonged to the sons of Saul, there was no other way to save the people unless

\*Thursday, June 4, 1562.

David became leader. He should have concluded that it was a foolish undertaking to set Ishbosheth on the throne with but few people under his rule, for he could have had his throat cut. However, having a good reputation, he trusted in his own strength. But he was thus exposing the people to butchery, and did not recognise that the Philistines would be all the more incited to pursue their victory when they saw such a division and civil war within Israel. That is one point.

We have here a mirror to show us how pride and haughtiness is a mortal plague which is bound to dissipate the Church of God, of which the reign of David was a type. We see the present state of the Church reflected in the war. Abner put on a good appearance, claiming to fight for possession of the kingdom which was once for all established; thus implying that the tribe of Judah wished to introduce innovations and to resist God. Therefore Abner, on his part, could claim that he was maintaining the law, which even in his day was of ancient date. David and his followers were accused of causing a revolution, of attempting to take the seat of authority and of spreading sedition among an impoverished people. In the same way today, the papists claim antiquity and establishment and custom when they want to exalt themselves. And, indeed, they make our cause odious by charging us with introducing novelties and changing the character of the Church. In this way, they wish to make us guilty of all the evil which has happened during the last forty years, and which grows and increases more and more.

We must stand firm against such wicked accusations. At first glance, it would seem that we are left without excuse, and that our enemies could win their case out of hand if their claims were true. But we are shown here that such false accusations are nothing new. We cannot doubt – and they also will be constrained to confess – that the cause of David was approved by God, that it was just and good. It is also true that Abner was a rebel guilty of mutiny, and that Saul's kingdom, which he wished to maintain, was a bastard, for God had undoubtedly chosen David to succeed Saul (2 Sam. 3:9–10, 18). Since, then, by the very confession of our enemies, the cause of Abner was a

bad one, let us despise all their calumnies. And let not the weak be worried and distressed if they are told that we are trying to bring in novelties, and that the papists still maintain the established order of things and ancient customs.

But let us be certain that there was no novelty on the part of David, for he did not push himself forward into the kingdom, but was called to it by God. Therefore, we can reply and protest in good conscience that we have not the least intention of changing anything in God's Church, and that we are not causing trouble in it. Instead, our hearts are set on him whose perpetual reign has been ordained by God his Father, and this promise belongs far more to Christ than to David. And as long as there is a sun and a moon in the sky, there will be testimonies that his sovereign empire is permanent and inviolable (Psa. 72:5). All the more, therefore, do we seek that all men give homage to our Lord Jesus Christ, that he be recognised as sovereign Saviour, and that all should bow the knee to him (Phil. 2:10). Our following of Christ proves that we are in no sense guilty of any novelty. On the contrary, we want the judgement which God himself has pronounced and published to be carried out and to be retained in all its rigour. Thus, no matter what superficial covering the papists claim on their side – that they retain the ancient ecclesiastical structure; that traditional procedure favours them; that the order of their Church has been confirmed through long ages; that everyone has consented to their position; and that they have the majority of men on their side – all of that is nothing in the eyes of God. Indeed, what they must do is become companions of Abner, since in contempt of God they wish to retain abuses and corruptions which are made manifest and rejected by Holy Scripture. Furthermore, their great numbers are like a mass of wandering beasts which have no regard for the unction which God has given to his only Son. This is what we must note.

Nevertheless, it is a lamentable thing that those who are joined together, who bear the name of God, and claim to be of him, should be ready to tear themselves in pieces. Although such a scandal exists, it should not astonish us. Having come from the time of David, it is necessary that these former things

be fulfilled today in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. For we have to make a comparison between the earthly reign which is spoken of here and the spiritual reign which was manifested at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, although those who have been baptised in his name may take up arms against one another, still we must not be appalled, as are many who do not know which way to turn. Amidst conflicting opinions, they do not know what to believe.

That is how it happens that many lower themselves to the level of brute beasts, reject all consciousness of God (Rom. 1:18), and stamp underfoot the clarity of the Gospel in order to extinguish it. This is their sole excuse, that in the light of the troubles and disintegration which one sees in the world, it is best to give up everything.

Next, we take note of the fact that the members of the tribe of Judah were approved by God in that they ratified his unction and received as king him who was given to them from on high. If those who accepted David, a mortal creature, in the name of God are thus approved, what will be done to us if we ignore our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the life and salvation of the world, when we fail to recognise that majesty which has been given to him by God his Father? He bears that 'name which is above every name' (Phil. 2:9), as St Paul says.

Therefore, however much we deplore the contentions and debates which exist today among those who are called Christians, we must be sure to take sides with the true party, so that we may be prepared, in every case, to maintain that which God has constituted. And if we are assailed, let us fight valiantly for him, maintaining his empire against all those who rise up against him.

With these things in mind, we must strengthen ourselves today and arm ourselves with invincible virtue when we are called to battle for the truth of God against the idolatries and superstitions of the papist; indeed, against all idolatries and falsehoods by which the truth of God has been corrupted. Now that is one point.

Should it also happen, however, as experience shows us, that some of the unenlightened ones who are in the Church do not

cease to love foolish ambition, it should not surprise us too much. It is true that it is a crime against truth and against nature for people to pour evil upon evil on someone who is already afflicted. Well, that is how it was in the time of Abner, and again today one can see it happening afresh.

When the Church is faced with enemies, when she is assailed on every side and greatly endangered, in brief, when it appears that at any hour all may be lost, still there will be those who want to elevate themselves, to seek to be honoured, and to take advantage of the situation. That is detestable, but since it has been so from the beginning, let us rise above it and do our best to correct the evil as much as possible. And let us see to it that we ourselves are never turned from the truth.

It must also be noted that David's trial was all the more grievous because it lasted so long; for we are told that he reigned in Hebron for seven and a half years (2 Sam. 2:11). It might have been expected that God would have given him rest after the death of Saul. But even though he was accepted as king by his own tribe, still he saw the Church dismembered. He saw that the people were not one body and, whereas they should have had one head, he found them sadly divided. The eleven tribes wholly misjudged the situation. They followed evil advice, and went against the line indicated by God. A year went by, then two or three more. Even after seven years, the divorce still remained. Civil war set in among the people, and it seemed that David would never obtain the kingdom for which he was waiting.

By these events, we are admonished not merely to be patient for a day or a year, but to hold on to the very end. Let us realise, I say, that we must prepare ourselves to sustain many temptations and battles, and to resist evil. Even though God sends trial after trial and it appears that they will never end, we must never lose courage.

For where is our repose? We will not find it in this world. We do, indeed, find some relaxation here – God sustains us in our weakness and does not want us to be without periods of quiet in the midst of the battles. But be that as it may, it would be self-deception to let ourselves think that we should be at our ease

here below, and that we should escape all vexation and every trial which has been ordained to prove our faith.

It is not so. We must patiently endure all temptations and resist them when it pleases God to test us. If we are frail and our trials seem interminable, let us cast our eyes on the example of David. We must realise that what is written of him pertains to us, in that we are members of our Lord Jesus Christ of whom he was a type.

Furthermore, we must note well what St Paul says, that 'all things work together for good' for the children of God (Rom. 8:28). It will make us feel the love that he has for us much more when we are tested all the way, and seem to be falling backwards rather than advancing. When, instead of being raised up, we seem to be cast into a deep abyss, God's help at such a time confirms much more the trust we ought to have in his fatherly love and care. And then, also, it is a situation which gives God opportunity to continue his mercy towards us. Let us take note of what Jeremiah tells us: 'I remember you,' says the Lord, 'from the [deeds of] kindness of your youth, when you followed me in the desert' in hideous and horrible places (Jer. 2:2). Our Lord here compares himself to a young man who has taken a young woman, whom he has promised never to abandon, and who is ready to endure both heat and cold and hunger and thirst and all other wants; and to experience many pains and troubles. Therefore, when we follow God, when each one of us adheres to him in our life's work and remains firm in obedience, although he tosses us about with miseries, anguish, burdens, worries, and torments – that will certainly make us feel his grace all the more. It will also make him show himself even more merciful to us.

Thus, when God chastises us for our offences, he will still feel and be moved by compassion, especially when we conduct ourselves patiently and persevere in following him, since we are joined and united by the sacred bond of spiritual marriage which he has made with us. That is what we must remember about the times that are spoken of here – that is, the seven and a half years when David reigned in Hebron.

Now the trial is growing worse, as if a fire were starting to

burn up everything. The passage says that the army of Abner or of Ishbosheth, son of Saul, had emerged 'from one side of the well of Gibeon', and that of David 'from the other' (2 Sam. 2:13). Here is a spectacle which is very sad, but one which shows the true state of those who think too highly of themselves, as did the people of Israel. For they were the only people in the world that God had chosen and adopted for his heritage. The promises of salvation and all its benefits were exclusively theirs. Scripture says that there was nowhere else among all the heathen nations where God manifested his will as he did in Israel (Deut. 4:7-8, 32-40).

Moses, indeed, says that God, having all the world in his hand, placed his everlasting name on this people which he chose for his service. And yet, in another passage, he remonstrates with them that it was not for their greatness nor for their nobility and dignity that God chose them above all others, but only because he took pleasure in their fathers (Deut. 4:37). This showed the excellence and the prerogative which that people had when it pleased God to choose them, as though they were more worthy than others, and when he showed himself so familiar to them as to give them his help and make them feel it in their time of need. Indeed, he declared that he was their gracious Father, and he proved it by his promises. Here, then, was God, who had spread his treasures among this people whom he adopted as his children. Here then, I say, were the people, who were armed against one another. Though supposed to be united as a single body, as I have already said, they engaged in deeds of cruelty. They were ready to exterminate themselves from the world without even a second thought. Is not that a most hideous and detestable thing? Must we not say that the devil has possession of them, at least in part?

By definition, one would have said that the tribe of Judah and the eleven other tribes were all one. And yet the tribe of Judah alone is here seen to be maintaining the cause of God. Thus, when we see contention between those who bear the same name, and that the majority is enraged against the minority so as to ruin them, let us remember that it so happened in ancient times to David. Be that as it may, we still

lament as we see those who bear the mark of Christianity engaged against those who seek only their salvation – yes, against the name of that very power by which they claim to be the people and the Church. Let us lament, I say, such a calamity, and yet let us never fail to maintain the cause of God, come what may.

So much, then, for this point where Scripture says that the two armies came, the one from one side of the well of Gibeon, and the other from the opposite side. Now here are all those who claim to be in favour of the Church. They are fighting against one another. It is not a question here of fighting against foreign enemies. On the contrary, they are waging a deadly war among themselves to exterminate from the world the memory of the very name of Abraham – to abolish the Law of God and the pure religion.

The Scripture tells us that it was Abner, captain for Ishbosheth, who started the battle, while Joab led the troops of David (2 Sam. 2:14). Now there is not the least doubt that this resulted from the pride and presumption of Abner, who, being the stronger, went forward and mocked David for wanting to be king, since he was followed by one tribe only, whereas Abner's master was followed by eleven. We see this same thing today when the papists vomit out their boastings. They reproach us for having only a handful of people, while they have an infinite number on their side. They say, 'Where are the kings and princes who belong to your small party and will maintain it? Where are the great cities and countries? Where are the people of authority, and where are the great prelates who instruct you against us?' In a word, they are in such pre-eminence that their sole work is to stamp us under their feet and spit in our faces. Thus, they certainly advance against us in the manner of Abner.

Furthermore, they resemble too much Abner's presumption and recklessness in that they rejoice in shedding human blood. It ought to horrify us when Abner says, 'Now then, let the young men play' (2 Sam. 2:14). But play what game? The game of killing one another, so that no-one will be spared but all will be included. In this, I say, Abner in his pride and presumption

shows us his cruelty. Well, we say the same thing today of the enemies of the Gospel, for we see how their pride causes them to rejoice in shedding innocent blood. When it was a matter of burning [at the stake], did any one of them have the least scruple? People have, indeed, had pity on thieves, highway robbers, murderers, whoremongers and all other malefactors, but it seems that everyone has been so enraged against the poor Christians that when they burn them, they do it, so to speak, with extra large bonfires; and everyone who comes to watch it triumphs over it, rejoicing with hearty laughter. Thus, we see that they have kept their eyes closed.

Again today, when their rage is similarly inflamed, we see that they spare nothing; that they are as much like Abner as if they were his bosom friends. It is only a matter of playing a game. Indeed, it is certain that if God had not often held them in check, they would without difficulty have wiped towns and cities off the map. And how has this poor place here remained until now? It is certain that they have conspired a hundred thousand times to destroy it, and not to leave one stone on another. And he who became noted for his cruelty would have been considered the finest, the most charitable and solid of men. And who prevented them? They were not held back by any feeling of humanity from carrying out their malice, but God prevented it, as it were, in spite of the gnashing of their teeth (Psa. 112:10).

Thus, we see that it has always been a game, as I have said, to shed human blood and to get drunk on it. It has even been worse to see poor people dragged to death for the testimony and confession of the Word of God. Well, when we see that happen, let us close our eyes and pray to God that he would make us feel, and would show us in effect, that our lives are precious to him, as he says in the 116th Psalm: 'Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints' (Psa. 116:15). If, therefore, the iniquitous and wicked play their games and pastimes, employing such cruelty that human blood is poured out like the blood of cattle and sheep at the slaughterhouse, let us pray to God that, as he has begun, he will continue still to hold back these wretched ones – who are thus inflamed and indeed possessed by

demons – from destroying their fellow-men and becoming drunk on innocent blood. That is one point.

Furthermore, if the servants of God, that is to say, those who uphold his Word, are sometimes badly advised, evil then is doubled, as we see here in Joab. He upheld a good cause. He was David's captain. In brief, he was one of the leaders of the Church. Thus, he had to conduct himself in the fear of God, and keep himself from murder. It is true that he could not flee from battle, and yet he was too thoughtless when he said, 'Very well, let them play' (2 Sam. 2:14), and treated as a game what he should have detested. Now it is a pathetic sight when poor people kill one another in this way. Joab was motivated here by ambition, for he did not want to let Abner get the better of him, and thus let him be puffed up with pride. Hence, he agrees to this game, which ought to have been abhorrent to him. Let us, therefore, note that when swords are unsheathed, and when men are armed to enter into battle, not all will conduct themselves as could be hoped. Much excess will result. Thus, let us detest as much as possible these wars and combats which arise because of religion.

It is true, as I have already said, that we cannot avoid them, for God intends to prove us by them. Hence we are constrained to fight, but let it be in spite of ourselves. And moreover, when we are involved, we must be very careful to pray to God that he will govern the hearts of his own – for today we see once again that in the army marshalled under the name of Jesus Christ and of the Gospel, there are many rascals among the troops. Some of them are there to strip and pillage, and others to commit outrages; some to satisfy their appetite for vengeance; others to murder no matter how; and still others for publicity. Hence, let us learn to pray to God that he will not allow the armies which have been gathered in his name to be blackened, either by our wicked affections, or by the desire for vengeance, or by any such thing. And if the enemies of the truth seek only to bathe themselves in blood, let us for our part try to spare it, as much as we can. And if they make a game out of killing, let us always keep in mind that it is a detestable thing to ruin and efface the image of God which is in his creatures, since all men are created

in his image. Now this is what we must remember from this passage, where it says that Joab agreed with Abner, saying, 'Let the young men play'.

And yet we see how these miserable people came as helpless beasts to stab themselves – for Scripture says that 'they killed one another' (2 Sam. 2:16). It is true that this was considered memorable, so much so that the place became renowned and was called 'the field of the strong, or of the brave men', as though it was desired to celebrate their praises after their death. But that does not mean that their 'game' was praised by God, for they came there rashly. How much more must we keep ourselves strictly under control when we see that our enemies are exasperating us as much as they can in order to make us quarrel! Let us in no way be eager seekers of vainglory or of high position. Rather, let us humble ourselves, and although we see our enemies so addicted to evil, let us not be ashamed to seek their good as far as we can.

However, that will not prevent us from resorting to arms when it is necessary. In that case we will do all that necessity requires. But be that as it may, let no evil proceed from us, and let us never seek to shed human blood, except to maintain the cause of God when it is necessary. That, then, is another point which we take from the death of the twenty-four who killed one another, which is spoken of here.

But still God had pity on his own, and it says that 'Abner was defeated' (2 Sam. 2:17) with his army. Scripture describes 'the battle' as a 'very hard' one – on the one hand, to show us that God was afflicting his people as a punishment and yet, on the other, showing us in their victory that he still recognised his own and watched over them to show them mercy and maintain their cause. Now this admonishes us that no victory in a civil war is desirable. We ought not, I say, to have victory over domestic enemies. Why? Because the Church of God will, to that degree, be reduced in number; much blood will be shed. It is much better to seek peace and to do everything we possibly can for Christ to reign without entering into combat. That is one point.

But be that as it may, this shows us that God finally will not



allow his own to be oppressed for ever. Although for a time they endure oppression, he will at last relieve them, and will elevate them so that they will be able with ease to ruin and stamp underfoot those who were previously persecuting them.

The battle was hard from the side of David. It was horrible in that some of David's men were cut in pieces, and that others of them killed men in Abner's army. But still Abner was defeated and overthrown, despite the great multitude that followed him. Thereby let us learn today, as far as possible, to hold ourselves back, so that battles will not be cruel, and blood will not flow without good and just cause.

We should always bear in mind this principal consideration – it will sweeten our sadness – that God gave the victory to Joab, David's captain. Hence, let us hope that today he will act in a similar manner. When he gives us a victory, let us realise that it is a sign of his favour to us, and let us learn to glory in him, and thus to follow the route he has shown us. For when we go thus on our way, we may say that we have received a manifest blessing from God. Let us, therefore, hope that God will overcome our enemies and when sometimes he gives us a good beginning, let us be aware that it proceeds from him, and let us give him the praise that he deserves. Thus, being clothed in humility, we may say that we are ever his, come what may. Let us not make it an occasion to rejoice in ourselves when it pleases God to make us feel his blessing.

Now, for the rest, let us note this circumstance, that Abner, having been so bold as to start the war, was defeated with his army, and the single tribe of Judah was victorious. Let us notice then, in the first place, that if it is our enemies who start a war, we can protest both before God and before men that we have in no way sought quarrels or fights with them and that we only ask to live in friendship and concord with others. It is our enemies who have been enraged against the children of God and even against the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is because, enraged by demonic audacity, they have developed brutal hatred, and they have persecuted us incessantly – as in fact they would have done again and again unless God had prevented it by what he has ordained. I say, then, that the whole war has

been caused by them; their malice and rebellion made them strike out against God. Let us wait in true faith for him to care for and prosper our cause; not only because it is good, but also because we did not take up arms through recklessness and presumption, but because we had to resist them. Necessity constrained us.

Now for the rest of the matter, let not the great multitude of our enemies overawe us, since we see here a single tribe defeating eleven. If, therefore, the papists have many armies and are helped on every side, if they have impressive equipment and go forward as though the wind were in their sails, let us not talk only of them. At all times, let us not fail to hope in him who gives victories, and there is no doubt that we shall obtain them – for as good King Jehoshaphat says, it is not by a great multitude of men and of horses that God shows his strength (2 Chron. 20:6, 12, 15ff.). It is just as easy for him to give victory to three or four men as to a hundred thousand. Therefore, let us not fail to have good courage. Let us trust God to maintain his cause, however much stronger than ourselves his adversaries may seem in the eyes of the world. Moreover, when God gives us strength and it seems that we are well fortified, that is not to make us eager in our desire to throw ourselves into the firing line, confiding in our strength. Rather, let us rise above our passions and always keep our eyes on our Captain and Protector by whom we are guided. Let us be careful, I say, not to indulge in vainglory and to confide in it, but let us ever rest on the Lord. Let us call on him to be pleased to govern us. If he has strengthened us, may he temper our zeal and keep us from throwing ourselves into excessive cruelty. Instead, may he give us grace to use our zeal modestly. And may we ever look straight in front of us, so that we will not proceed foolishly, and be ruined. But may we never take a step unless the way is shown to us by him!

So much, then, for this point concerning the victory which was given to Joab and his men. Now it is not that the tribe of Judah was better than the others, but rather that it held fast to what God had ordained for it and followed the leader whom God had chosen. Today we have our Lord Jesus Christ, who is

not a type, as was David, but who has all perfection of virtue in himself, under whose protection we live in true assurance. He saves us from the hand of our enemies, and indeed leads us even to eternal life when we follow him as we should. Let us always carry our weapons, both spiritual and temporal, for the glory of his name. And when we have thus valiantly done battle, let us not doubt that he will give us cause to rejoice in his goodness.

Now let us prostrate ourselves before the majesty of our good God, recognising the infinite faults of which we are guilty, praying to him that he may more and more cause us to feel them, and that this may serve to lead us into a true repentance and to strip us utterly of our carnal affections, so that we are clothed with his righteousness. May we be patient in all our adversities, peaceable and modest with one another; yet may we on our part be courageous when fighting for him is at stake. And above all, let us take up spiritual arms to battle against Satan and against all iniquity (Eph. 6:11-12; 2 Cor. 10:3-5). And let us not doubt that he will assist and strengthen us more and more when we request this of him with sincere affection, until he brings all our battles to an end and calls us to his eternal rest. And may he not only grant us this grace . . .

## 6

*Disunity and War\**

*Now Zeruiah had three sons, Joab and Abishai and Asahel. Asahel was as light of foot as a roe or a wild goat. And Asahel pursued Abner and turned not to the right hand or to the left but followed only Abner. Abner looked behind him, and said: Are you not Asahel? And he said: I am. And Abner said to him: Turn aside one way or the other and lay hold of one of these young men and take his armour . . . (2 Sam. 2:18-32).*

Scripture tells this story, here, to explain why we see such a wicked act committed later by Joab against Abner. This passage describes how Abner killed Joab's brother. Here are the details. The young man Asahel, being light and agile, was pursuing Abner. Abner did not want to kill him, but this young man kept on following until he did turn round and kill him. That is the first point. Afterwards they talked about the details of the defeat and the retreat of the two armies.

The first detail that we must notice concerning the death of Asahel is that he was 'swift in running'. This is intended to show that those who have some strong point always presume on it more than they should. That is what caused the death of Asahel. He trusted too much in his own agility. He pushed himself in running, and he thought it was great to have pursued and caught up with his enemy. He gave no thought to their encounter, and felt that he was valiant enough to fight Abner. He thought that he had done enough by merely stopping him, but was foolishly deceiving himself. Let us learn therefore, from

\*Friday, June 5, 1562.