

The Lackluster **Return of the King** 2 Samuel 19:8-43

“And all the people came before the king...and all the people were arguing throughout all the tribes of Israel”

Introduction: If you’ve seen it, you know. At the end of the *“The Lord of the Rings”* trilogy is the conclusion named **“The Return of the King”**. Here we see the culmination of the brave and risk-laden adventure come to a pleasing conclusion as the hero takes his rightful place as king of middle earth, to the shouts and celebration of man, elf, dwarf, and hobbit alike. Not only do we see Aragorn marry his love interest, but we see him operate in deferential humility to honor four Hobbits who had shown immense resolve and faithfulness, despite their diminutive size and strength. It is a scene that gives goose bumps, that fills with hope, and is appropriate when a worthy king takes back his rightful throne.

This is what we’d like to picture as David returned to Jerusalem after **“the LORD delivered him from the hand of his enemies”** (2 Sam. 18:19). If you remember where we’ve been with David (or are simply starting with us now), we have seen the rollercoaster ride of Israel’s best king go from the height of power and influence – as God made an eternal Covenant with him (2 Sam. 7) – to the depths of despair after an adulterous affair which led to a murderous cover-up (2 Sam. 11). This gave way to **confession, forgiveness, restoration, and consequences** (2 Sam. 12), of which we observed in the murder of one son of another, the sexual assault of his son with his daughter, and the rising up of a coup from Absalom. David was run out of Jerusalem, and but by the divine and providential intervention of God Himself through faithful servants, David would have been wiped out. But instead, God allowed for David’s forces to win the unfortunate civil battle, and Absalom met his demise by getting caught in an oak tree, dangling, before being dispatched by **Joab**, the general of David’s army. Now the conflict was over, the king could return, but the damage was felt – and would be for the years and generations to come.

Often in the Old Testament we get a picture of what Christ will be like in His coming the first or the second time. David was the king Israel deserved, but he was also not the king they ultimately needed. In this stage of David’s life, we see more **negative examples** than positive ones, and this chapter is no different. In fact, it would seem that the return of David to the throne was **lackluster** or a **letdown** at best, not to the praise and celebration of the people, but to arguments, divisions, and political decisions that were made for expediency sake, rather than the ultimate best for the nation. In this, we **gain a longing for our real KING**, the One who said He would return just as He left (Acts 1:11), and would reign over the entire world as King (Zech. 14:4, 8). He will bring perfect justice, will bring lasting peace, and will finally vanquish all enemies, including death and sin. This chapter should leave us longing for Jesus and His future Kingdom, knowing that even at our best, we cannot bring the type of peace and security that we long for.

Source of a Lack of Leadership (19:1-8a)

*It was told Joab, “Behold, the king is weeping and mourning for Absalom.” 2 So the victory that day was turned into mourning for all the people, for the people heard that day, “The king is grieving for his son...For you have made it clear today that commanders and servants are nothing to you, for today I know that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased. 7 Now therefore arise, **go out and speak kindly to your servants**, for I swear by the Lord, **if you do not go, not a***

man will stay with you this night, and this will be worse for you than all the evil that has come upon you from your youth until now.” 8 Then the king arose and took his seat in the gate.” (1-2; 6b-8)

The lackluster response to David returning to the throne did not come out of nowhere nor was it sourced in a vacuum. David’s leadership was flaccid after his sin as he became more of a passive leader rather than the faith-driven warrior who was out in front in his youth. It was seen clearly in the nation and in his home. Whether it was a sense of **inadequacy, inability to trust the grace of God or the feeling of being a hypocrite**, David became more inward-focused after the exposure of his sin. This culminated in his response to the death of **Absalom**, the son who rebelled, killed his brother, and drove David out of Jerusalem and agreed to try to wipe him out from existence. We looked at the fact that every parent has sorrow for the death of a child, even/especially for those who are rebellious, but his sorrow was sourced in **regret**, which disallowed him from leading the people *though his pain and sorrow*, and instead became debilitating.

When **Joab**, the unscrupulous pragmatist who served as David’s general came on the scene, he spoke the truth to David and was willing to wound him (if there was any love, it was more 95/5 on the truth to love scale). As David was paralyzed to move forward, Joab reminded David: 1) **you have shamed the loyal soldiers who have risked their lives to save you**; 2) you have made everyone feel **like you’d rather have Absalom alive** and all of them dead; 3) you need to get up off the mat, speak kindly to your people and thank them, because if you do not, it will all go worse for you than anything up until this point. To David’s credit, he arose and took his place in the city gate, where he could meet with the leading men of the nation.

We’ve talked throughout these weeks how David fell short in his leadership of the nation, which is both a **caution and comfort to us**. It is a caution because we see the consequences when we fail to lead, how it affects others around us, especially our families. When we are **unclear or inconsistent** in our lives, those that follow us can become insecure, divided, and follow our example. But there should be a bit of comfort to know that even the greatest of men have failed, and God still was gracious to hold them and walk them through the trials of life. In the end, David DID want for his children and the nation something better than he could give, which is why he called **Solomon to be strong and show himself a man --- and to do this by keeping the law and obeying consistently with all his heart and soul** (1 Kings 2:1-4). Even in our failure and lack there are opportunities to change, and even when we fail, God is faithful to accomplish His will and purpose in our families.

But there are **voids** often caused, and that is what David faced as he returned from exile.

Void Filled in a Lack of Leadership (19:8-15)

Now Israel had fled every man to his own home. ⁹ And all the people were arguing throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, “The king delivered us from the hand of our enemies and saved us from the hand of the Philistines, and now he has fled out of the land from Absalom. ¹⁰ But Absalom, whom we anointed over us, is dead in battle. Now therefore why do you say nothing about bringing the king back?”

*¹¹ And King David sent this message to **Zadok and Abiathar** the priests: “Say to the elders of Judah, ‘Why should you be the last to bring the king back to his house, when the word of all Israel has come to the king?’ ¹² You are my brothers; you are my bone and my flesh. Why then should you be the last to bring back the king?’ ¹³ And say to **Amasa**, ‘Are you not my bone and my flesh? God do so to me and more also, if you are not commander of my army from now on in place of Joab.’ ” ¹⁴ And he swayed the heart of all the men of Judah as one man, so that they sent word to the king, “Return, both you and all your*

*servants.”¹⁵ So the king came back to the Jordan, and Judah came to **Gilgal** to meet the king and to bring the king over the Jordan.*

We remember that in exile, David had fled *across the Jordan River* up to the city stronghold of Mahanaim (see map). Israel did not have a standing army like we do today, so after being called up to battle, by and large, most of the men would have returned home. But though the war was over, the result hung in the balance. There was no clear consensus of what to do in moving forward, since there was a **lack of clarity in leadership**: *we had David, and he was great and saved us from the Philistines, but then Absalom ran him out, so it looked like he was the one to follow, but now he’s dead.* Remember, Absalom had **“stolen the hearts of the men of Israel”** (15:6), and it left the nation in a quandary. *Can we trust David as king? Will he want retribution against us? What other choice do we have?*

What strikes me about how David operated in moving forward is that he was forced to **lead from behind** since he had lost the hearts and minds of the people. And though he was able to win them back, it was NOT the same loyalty that he enjoyed before. David heard the **rumor mill going on**, so he knew he had to act. He called on his loyal priests, **Abiathar and Zadok** to appeal first to the tribe of Judah, the southern tribe that he was from.

Appeal to Pride – “Look, all of Israel is coming to me, why would you want to be last” (11). Don’t lag behind, lead the pack.

Appeal to Loyal Relationship – He reminded them of the covenant they had together: *“my bone and flesh”* – This was language he used when ALL of Israel came to him at Hebron (2 Sam. 5:1) when the whole of the country was united. Here, he reminded Judah that they were the closest of relatives. NOTE: This is the same language used by Adam when he saw Eve for the first time, committing to her in a marital relationship, a covenant which is not easily or quickly broken.

Appeal to Anxieties – What would David do to those who were disloyal to him?!? To establish a baseline of mercy, David placed **Amasa** over his army. Remember, Amasa was his nephew, but also was named Absalom’s general. This was clearly a **statement** against Joab, who killed his son, but also a **signal** to the people that there can be peace and restoration moving forward.

David’s appeals were successful! **“And he swayed the heart of all the men of Judah as one man”** (v. 14), and called the king to return with all his people. In another stroke of wisdom, David met the tribe of Judah at **Gilgal**, the place where God had the people of Israel renew their covenant with Him and where He **“rolled back their reproach”** (“Gilgal” sounds like the Hebrew word for “roll”) in Joshua 5:9. This was a place of restoration, reconciliation, forgiveness, and mercy. Gilgal was a great reminder for Israel, Judah, and us that even though we may stray from what we know to be true, even with recklessness, God does not wash his hands of us. God is a God of **patient mercy, lavished grace, and whole-hearted forgiveness in Jesus Christ**. And because grace was given to us in this fashion, we too can be gracious to others.

Costly Political Wrangling in a Lack of Leadership (19:16-40)

David had successfully won back **one tribe** out of 12, but bringing in the rest would take some doing. It’s important to keep in mind that the nation was hurting, having lost 20,000 men in a senseless civil war. And even BEFORE Absalom’s coup, there were those that held disdain for David. There were **three**

encounters recorded with certain individuals which we've seen before and two which we'll see again that David interacts with. The outcomes of these are unclear, unexpected, and unique.

SHIMEI – When David left Jerusalem under the onslaught of Absalom's invading forces, he was met with the jeers and curses of Shimei, a loyalist of Saul and one who hated David. His words prompted **Abishai** to offer a lobotomy, willingly detaching his head from his shoulders. David gave **mercy** and recognized that the curses, though unlawful, were against a man who had sinned worse than he even knew (16:5-14). As the dust settled from war, it was Shimei who was from Benjamin, who made sure he was first in line to get to David. Now, he also had **1000 men with him**, which definitely makes a statement, and as he saw David, fell down at his feet. He asked for **clemency, to overlook his wrong done to the king, and acknowledged his sin.** (19-20). When **Abishai** heard it, he sensed this was a hollow gesture, and once again offered to kill the man who cursed the king. But David, wishing to move forward and not fight anymore, once again chose NOT to kill Shimei, though he would have been in the right to do so.

In some ways, this shows the grace, mercy, and humility you'd expect from David. However, it was also a show of **expediency** and **pragmatism**, since it is clear David was not truly reconciled with Shimei. In **1 Kings 2:8-9**, as he was dying, David still had Shimei on his mind, and told his son Solomon to clean house, and "*bring his gray head down with blood to Sheol*". In other words, David had not truly forgiven Shimei but also did not want to fight another battle at the time. In the end, Shimei disobeyed a direct command of Solomon and met his end by the end of a sword (1 Kings 2:46).

MEPHIBOSHETH – In another unclear interaction, David finally has an opportunity to clear the air with Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan and grandson of Saul whom David showed *hesed* love to and brought him into his palace and gave back his family's land. As David fled out of Jerusalem, **Ziba** had approached David with provisions and word that Mephibosheth had turned on him, ticking David off. Now, as he finally got a glimpse of Mephibosheth, it was clear that he had been in mourning and solidarity with David since he looked like a **first year college student away from home for the first time** – hadn't taken care of his feet, cut his hair, and hadn't washed his clothes.

Mephibosheth claimed innocence to the whole situation. He was deceived by Ziba, just as Ziba had slandered him to David. He reiterated his **fidelity, his gratitude for the grace given to him, and his profession that David being back was better than any land or provision.** At this point, my expectation would have been that David would have done what Solomon would do later with the two women who were arguing about the dead baby and gave the living one to the rightful mom (1 Kings 3:16-28) in a she-said, she-said situation. But here, David simply divided up the land equally between the two men. *Was this right? Wasn't Mephibosheth swindled? Why did he deserve to lose the situation that David gave him before?* Again, it seems clear that David was NOT looking to make enemies but trying to win support, and though this ruling made **political sense**, it did not seem to be as just as it could have been.

BARZILLAI – As David fled from Absalom across the Jordan River, he came into the area of **Gilead**. Having left in a frenzy and haste, he would not have all the prepared provisions needed for the families and soldiers he had with him. There, a man named **Barzillai** helped him and brought beds, water, food, and sheep for David and his family (2 Sam. 17:27-29). He was described as both **wealthy and VERY OLD, since he was already 80!** (please fill in your own commentary regarding this!).

Before David went all the way to Jerusalem, he called over to Barzillai to come with him and he would provide for him in the last phase of his life. But an unusual **and surprising response came to David:** I am

old, I don't taste, hear, or enjoy things like I used to, and would rather go home and live out my days with my people (19:34-37). Instead, he asked David to take **Chimham** with him (most likely a relative, probably a son). David not only honored this by taking care of Chimham (he even owned land in the future around Bethlehem – Jer. 41:17), but charged his son Solomon to make sure that he took care of Barzillai's family because of his loyalty to him (1 Kings 2:7).

We said in the beginning that this chapter did not show what the kingdom of Jesus will be per se, but showed what it would not be. It sticks out that a man like Barzillai rejected or refused the offer to go with David in his kingdom. This shows how much David had lost in his days of passive leadership. It also reminds us that NOTHING compares to the kingdom that is offered to us in Christ, a place to dwell with Him forever, to see Him as He is, and to enjoy His presence forever.

Divisions Perpetuated in a Lack of Leadership (19:41-43)

41 Then all the men of Israel came to the king and said to the king, "Why have our brothers the men of Judah stolen you away and brought the king and his household over the Jordan, and all David's men with him?" 42 All the men of Judah answered the men of Israel, "Because the king is our close relative. Why then are you angry over this matter? Have we eaten at all at the king's expense? Or has he given us any gift?" 43 And the men of Israel answered the men of Judah, "We have ten shares in the king, and in David also we have more than you. Why then did you despise us? Were we not the first to speak of bringing back our king?" But the words of the men of Judah were fiercer than the words of the men of Israel.

Unity is imperative to maturity (see Ephesians 4), and maintaining unity is an act brought about by the Spirit of God. David enjoyed a united kingdom in the height of his faith-driven leadership, but that unity was short lived. Now, he faced the sting of division, partly brought about by leading through politics and deals, rather than courageous boldness. Verse 40 says that when he came to Gilgal, it was with **half of Israel and ALL of Judah**, meaning still half of the northern tribes were not with him. This led to the ultimate bickering of brothers.

Realizing that it seemed like they were being treated like the second fiddle, ALL of Israel charged Judah with weaseling in and stealing the heart and people of David, just because you are the favorite son! Judah responded: *Stop overreacting just because we happen to be his only brother! Trust us, we aren't taking advantage of it or anything!* To which Israel replied: *Um, we hate to do this, but we ARE the BIGGER of the tribes, we were the ones who were the first to say to bring him back (where were you chumps on that one!), and you were the ones to instigate!* To which Judah continued with fierce words back.

Have you ever heard this kind of exchange among brothers?! David was leading from behind and on his heels, rather than in front. He was not giving the 12 tribes something to fight FOR or unite BEHIND, so they were left with selfish and self-centered position grabs. We see this in political wrangling of our day, when power and position are sought and fought for, rather than solutions or a common purpose. The same is true for the people of God today, as we can easily get disunified because we major on our own **preferences, or major on secondary issues, or fight for our own preferences**. The antidote of this is Ephesians 4:1-3:

"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

This fracture among the 12 tribes was a precursor of what would come: a schism after the rule of Solomon in the Divided Monarchy, where Israel would lose strength, power, and influence, never to regain it until Christ returns to bring peace and justice.

Some Thoughts to Consider:

1. **When we have leadership responsibilities and fail to lead, we leave the people following without clarity and in a no-win void** – Leaders must be moving somewhere and must call others to follow toward that destination.
2. **Leading must be done out in front, with conviction rather than accommodation, since trying to please everyone will only cause division.**
3. **The only time we will experience true leadership and peace with a unified front will be when Jesus reigns on this earth** – Until then, He has given us the Spirit to maintain unity in the church, which means we all must humble ourselves, give grace to one another, and move toward our common goal of glorifying God, making disciples, and calling others to worship with us.