
Lesson 25: Man of Blood

Text: II Samuel, Chapters 19-20

When David was on his way back to Jerusalem after the defeat of Absalom, Shimei the son of Gera begged forgiveness for his earlier treacherous behavior. David promised him an oath: "Thou shalt not die" (19, 24). It was not easy to forgive because "Shimei had cursed the Lord's anointed" (19, 22) and he had said terrible things about David: "Begone, begone, thou man of blood, and base fellow!" (16, 7).

The stinging insult had deeply hurt the fleeing king, and although he forgave, he had not forgotten (1 Kings 2, 8-9). It was particularly hurtful because there was a good deal of truth in it. David was in fact a warrior, a "man of blood". Each phase of his life, from the time he left his father's sheep, was marked by a bloody struggle. And the struggle was not always directed against non-Israelite enemies.

He started his public career with his single-handed fight with Goliath, and soon afterwards he went on to fight the Philistines in order to gain the hand of Michal, the daughter of king Saul (1 Samuel 18, 26-27). As captain of his troop he was practically living by his sword. When he took refuge in the land of Gath he carried out fighting raids against the Amalekites and other tribes: "And David smote the land, and left neither man nor woman alive, and took away the sheep, and the oxen, and the asses, and the camel and the apparel" (1 Samuel 27, 8-11). It was a continuous sound of wars, raids, attacks and defense-battles.

When David ascended the throne, he had to continue with more battles on an even larger scale than before. There was the dangerous archenemy, the Philistines, and then he went on to fight all the neighboring peoples. But before David was able to turn on non-Israelite enemies, he was locked in a prolonged civil war with the followers of king Saul: "Now there was long war between the house of Saul and the house of David; and David waxed stronger and stronger, but the house of Saul waxed weaker and weaker" (Samuel II 3, 1).

Dark shadows were cast over David's life. David felt he was responsible for the tragedy that befell the priestly town of Nob (1 Samuel 22, 22). And there were also Abner, Asahel and Amasa - all killed in the course of the internal struggles, and above all – the burden of Uriah the Hittite. No wonder David was told that his life was marked by bloodshed. "And David said to Solomon: My son, as for me, it was in my heart to build a house unto the name of the Lord my God. But word of the Lord came to me saying: Thou hast shed blood abundantly and hast made great wars; thou shalt not build a house unto My name, because thou hast shed much blood upon the earth in My sight" (1 Chronicles 22, 7-8).

The very fact that David was incessantly on the warpath was bound to make an impact upon his personality. A daily habit may become second nature, and incessant wars undoubtedly color the outlook of the soldier-king. In their inscriptions the Egyptian and Assyrian kings proudly and gleefully told of the havoc they caused in conquered lands. Again and again we read: "I have destroyed numerous cities, I have burned them down and killed their inhabitants". One of the Assyrian kings takes pride in the following achievements: "Like a whirlwind have I attacked all who stood in my way, and I have covered the fields with heaps of their corpses. I have destroyed with the sword their numerous armies and their blood flowed all over the land. The fields of battle were too small to hold the magnitude of the destruction. The wide fields could not contain all who had to be buried. With their corpses I dammed up the flow of the river, and walked over the numerous corpses like one crosses water over a bridge". Assyrian kings vied with one another in inflicting the most cruel treatment to their captives. They also drew these kinds of treatment on clay and stone in order to perpetuate for posterity their mighty "prowess". Blood and corpses were the pride of successful rulers and the most beautiful temples of antiquity were built by the most bloodthirsty mass-murderers.

David is trying to curb and restrain his military inclinations. When Nabal the Carmelite refused to contribute his dues to David's troop and went on to insult David, there was a real danger that David was going to revenge the insult in a cruel manner. It was Abigail's intervention that made David temper his desire for revenge. And then David admitted to her that he was pleased to have been saved from avenging Nabal's insult: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who sent thee this day to meet me; and blessed be thy discretion, and blessed be thou, that hast kept me this day from bloodguiltiness, and from finding redress for myself with mine own hand (Samuel I 25, 32-33).

The "man of blood" is wary of bloodshed. The murder of Abner aroused David's wrath: "I and my kingdom are guiltless before the Lord for ever from the blood of Abner the son of Ner. Let it fall upon the head of Joab and upon all his father's house" (Samuel II 3, 28-29). Of Rechab and Baanah, who murdered Ish-bosheth, David said "... wicked men have slain a righteous person in his own house upon his bed, now I will surely require his blood of your hand and take you away from the earth" (4, 11).

In his mind David was not in harmony with his continuous fighting. Contrary to conquerors and rulers of his time, David was always looking beyond the military needs to a time when he would lay down his arms and build a Temple unto the Lord. Shimei spoke only half of the truth, for David was a man of war - by force of necessity - but he did not become another of these real royal "men of blood".

This was no small achievement. It is easy enough for a man of letters to be devoted to peace, but it is rare indeed for a warrior and great conqueror to abhor bloodshed and to care passionately for human life.