

# Joab: David's Weak Strongman



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *2 Sam. 2:17–23, 3:23–27, 11:15–25, 20:7–11, 1 Kings 1.*

**Memory Text:** “All a man’s ways seem right to him, but the Lord weighs the heart” (*Proverbs 21:2, NIV*).

Joab’s story is a story of power politics, intrigue, misguided loyalties, jealousy, and stubbornness; Joab’s time is a time during which survival is not guaranteed by a strong central administration and a comprehensive retirement plan. Strong people survive; weak people quickly seem to fade away. It is during Joab’s tenure as David’s strongman and caretaker that Israel truly becomes a nation. After the clan feuds and tribal rivalry that characterized the period of the judges, it is the figure of the king (beginning with Saul and later on, to a much stronger degree, with David and Solomon) that unites Israel, even though the Bible makes it clear that centuries of clan thinking will not be done away with in a matter of 30 or 40 years. Joab’s life, as depicted in the Bible, is marred by wars, feuds, and even genocide.

Though we might not be involved in the kind of things that Joab was, we may come to face some uglier sides of our own character when we look at his story. It is here that, through the negative example of Joab—the weak strongman of David—we may be able to identify some of our own character faults and seek the only answer to them: Jesus.

*\*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 20.*

## A Family Affair

Even though Joab, linked to David's family (*see 1 Chron. 2:13–17*), had the responsibility of being in charge of David's troops, we get a glimpse of his true character for the first time in 2 Samuel 2. Saul and Jonathan had been killed in battle. Judah readily appointed David as king. Joab's counterpart in King Saul's army was Abner, who somehow survived the battle in which Saul and his sons had fallen.

Abner and David had a history. It was Abner who had led Saul's troops on numerous manhunts for David. Abner was not about to accept as king the man he had been hunting. Accordingly, Abner puts Ishbosheth (*vss. 8, 9*), the fourth son of Saul, who was not in the battle, on the throne of Israel and starts a war against Judah and David. Although Israel was numerically stronger, David's kingdom went on from strength to strength.

**Read** 2 Samuel 2:17–23 and summarize what takes place.

---

During the skirmish Joab's younger brother unwisely chases Abner. Abner warns him off repeatedly, but the rash young man won't hear of it, and Abner kills him in self-defense. Joab never forgets this event.

After a while, Abner realizes that things are going nowhere under Ishbosheth, who is a very weak king. And so he defects to David and offers to bring over the other tribes (*2 Sam. 3:1–22*). Meanwhile, Joab has been away. On returning home, he learns of these new developments, which greatly unsettle him.

**How** does Joab cope with this change that he did not initiate? *2 Sam. 3:23–27*. Contrast what Joab says to David and the reason Joab ultimately kills Abner. *See also 2 Sam. 3:30*. How does Joab attempt to portray Abner's motives? What does this reveal about him?

Perhaps Joab truly believed he was acting in David's best interest when he killed Abner. This brings out an important point: think about your actions. What are the real reasons for some of the things you do, as opposed to reasons you use to justify them in your own mind? How can you learn to know the difference between the two when they are, indeed, different?

## *The Lesson in Brief*

► **Key Text:** *Proverbs 21:2*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Identify the strengths that made Joab valuable as the general of David's army and the grave weaknesses that undermined his leadership.

**Feel:** Sense the futility of worldly scheming, deceit, jealousy, and intrigue in achieving justice even for a worthy cause.

**Do:** Rely completely on God's ways and means to accomplish God's purposes, even when events seem unfair.

► **Learning Outline:**

### **I. Know: Power for Good and Evil**

**A** As general, Joab held an important place in David's support group. What good things did Joab do for David throughout David's life?

**B** How did Joab's jealousy and underhanded methods undermine and eventually destroy his usefulness to David?

### **II. Feel: Family and Clan Loyalties**

**A** While family loyalty can be very important, how did Joab's family loyalties override principles of honor and justice?

**B** What crime did he commit in order to gain revenge for the loss of a brother?

### **III. Do: The Test of Faith**

**A** How are we tempted to follow our own ideas of making things happen the way we think they should instead of waiting for God to act on our behalf?

**B** What areas of our lives do we need to commit to God for justice?

► **Summary:** Joab served King David as general for many years and, at times, gave him good counsel. However, by taking revenge into his own hands and acting in jealousy to the point of murder, Joab eventually brought the sword on himself.

## The Cost of Sin

It seems that David is not in a position to do anything about the murder of Abner at the time, even though he publicly mourns for Abner and rebukes Joab's actions (*see 2 Sam. 3:28–35*). To avoid future reprisals, Joab tries to ingratiate himself as closely as possible with David. He sets about to make himself indispensable. He is ready to do the dirty work for David. But striving to make oneself indispensable rather than focusing on doing the right thing often involves violating one's conscience. If that happens again and again, the voice of our conscience becomes duller and duller, until we are unable to stand up when it really counts.

Sin also breaks credibility. We see this principle repeated several times in the life of David. Because of his sin with Bathsheba and against Uriah, David, even though he has been forgiven, is unable to discipline his sons. When his oldest son rapes his half sister (*2 Samuel 13*) and his second son becomes a murderer (*2 Sam. 13:23–39*), David stands helplessly by, knowing that he is guilty of similar sins.

**Read 2 Samuel 11:15–25. What does this passage tell us about Joab?**

---

Joab has the same problem. Having the blood of Abner on his hands makes him unable to react appropriately and help save a good man's life. And so Joab adds to his list of crimes by becoming, in effect, Uriah's assassin. Notice in 2 Samuel 11:17 that Uriah is not the only victim. Joab sends some other men along on this foolhardy expedition in order to make the whole thing look more authentic. Although we know from the life of David that God is merciful and forgives us when we repent, the consequence of a ruined credibility and a lack of integrity is still something that we will have to carry with us.

**In the previous example Joab obeyed David's orders. Now read 2 Samuel 18:5–15. What does his action here tell us about him? How might he have rationalized this deed, as well?**

---

It is interesting to note that Joab follows David's orders even when they violate God's commands, but he has no trouble disobeying the king's express orders when he stands to gain personally. After all, had Absalom succeeded in his revolt, Joab probably would have been killed himself (*2 Sam. 19:5, 6*). Joab seems to be looking out for no one but himself.

How easy it is to fall into the same trap!

## Learning Cycle

### ► **STEP 1—Motivate**

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** Unless we surrender our hearts to the truth as it is in Jesus, we will fall prey to the sinful machinations of the human heart.

**Just for Teachers:** This week’s lesson study peers into the life of Joab, King David’s enforcer, and shows us a man driven by unholy ambition and self-promotion. Joab’s thirst for power and prestige is not unlike that of the Wall Street wizards whose greed nearly destroyed the world’s financial system, plunging it into a global recession in 2008. Your goal in Step 1 is to get the students thinking about what motivates human action.

**Opening Activity:** Share and discuss the following familiar story with your class. Late in 2008 and onward, economies around the world seemed destined for financial ruin. Currencies were devalued, towering financial institutions such as Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers disintegrated, countless people lost their jobs and retirement savings, and governments appropriated trillions in taxpayer funds to help shore up a broken financial system.

What caused such a worldwide catastrophe in the financial markets? The culprits were many, but it is generally accepted now that the lion’s share of responsibility rests with a relatively small group of elite financial wunderkinds in New York whose desire for monetary gain had outstripped all ethical and rational considerations. They created risky financial instruments that made them wealthy at the expense of their corporations, shareholders, and everyone else.

Ask your students to share how their lives were impacted by the financial crisis. Then, together with the class, create a short list of unethical and/or dishonest practices that led to the crisis. Discuss with your class whether these practices were the result of lapses in judgment or the outgrowth of a deeper unspiritual condition.

### ► **STEP 2—Explore**

**Just for Teachers:** The goal of this Explore section is to examine the

CONTINUED ►

## Joab the Politician

Second Samuel 13 tells the story of Absalom's premeditated murder of his half brother Amnon. Absalom flees the country and bides his time. David is once again in a difficult situation. Amnon was guilty of the rape of his half sister Tamar, Absalom's sister. It seems that David—paralyzed by the memory of his own sin—is unable to administer justice. By taking things into his own hands, Absalom avenges the rape of his sister and restores the family honor. (Honor and shame were two very important elements of the value system during the time of David.) Second, and as a nice benefit, once Amnon, David's oldest son, is dead, Absalom is now in line to inherit the throne. David's heart is torn between his grief for his dead son, his love for Absalom, and the keen knowledge that all of this mess is somehow rooted in his own sin.

Amid all this, Joab decides to become involved. However, since he does not see a direct way to put this item on the agenda of King David, he resorts to cunning and uses a wise woman of Tekoah.

**Read 2 Samuel 14. What does the woman of Tekoah's story communicate about God's love and forgiveness? At the same time, what does this passage also tell us about Joab?**

---

The story that Joab put into the mouth of the woman suggests that Joab knew about God's great love toward the sinner. His theology was correct. Unfortunately, for Joab this remained head knowledge only. His own life continued to be characterized by revenge and a lack of forgiveness. Joab had become immune to God's love in his own life. For him, everything, even religion, had a political end and could be used for self-promotion. Joab recognized Absalom's potential and wanted to begin to ingratiate himself with the future king. It seems, however, that Joab met his match in Absalom. Joab receives no Thank-you notes for his initiative in bringing Absalom home. Absalom simply wants to use him and quickly shows Joab that he can be every bit as cunning and dangerous as Joab can be. He did this by burning Joab's fields in order to force him to arrange a meeting with David (*2 Sam. 14:28–33*). The point is that thanks to Joab's interference, the stage was now being set for an awful rebellion that would lead to civil war.

**How easy is it to let personal ambition, pride, and desire for self-supremacy motivate your actions? How can you learn to recognize these things in yourself? How can you, through God's grace, defeat them before they lead to your ruin?**

---

*Learning Cycle* CONTINUED

**human heart and the actions that result from it. Knowing this, how ought we keep our hearts, so that they remain yielded to God?**

**I. Matters of the Heart** (*Read Proverbs 21:2 with your class.*)


The truth expressed in Proverbs 21:2 was shared by someone who had experienced Joab's duplicity from close range. We don't know whether Joab's treachery inspired this particular musing from the Bible's great sage, but the truth of this verse applies to all humanity. No matter how much we delude ourselves in the belief that our actions are right, the ultimate Judge of whether they are or not is God.

Furthermore, God's chief concern is not our actions, our appearance, or any other surface consideration. He is most concerned about the condition of our hearts, the soil from which our actions grow. This is the message that God sharply communicated to Samuel as he looked upon Eliab, David's eldest brother. Eliab's height and noble bearing suggested that he was king in waiting (*1 Sam. 16:6*), but God thought otherwise. He said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (*vs. 7, NIV*).

As dastardly deeds go, David's failures were not better than those of Joab, but there was one characteristic that separated the two. When shown his sin, David always was willing to repent and do the will of God. He had the human weaknesses that we all suffer with, but God said of him, "I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart, who will do all My will" (*Acts 13:22, NKJV*).

When confronted with his crimes, Joab schemed his way to a false solution. He killed Abner in a fit of cold-blooded revenge but claimed that he was protecting David from Abner's duplicity (*2 Sam. 3:30*). He put Uriah and several other brave soldiers on the front lines of the battle to die and felt justified in his actions because the king ordered him to do it.

**Consider This:** How do we assess the actions and behaviors that seem right in our own eyes? If God is the One who evaluates our hearts and the actions that flow from them, how can we acquaint ourselves with His standard for holy conduct and behavior? The lesson notes that even after repentance there is a price to be paid for sin. How does God express His mercy in cushioning the blows that are the natural results of our sins?

CONTINUED 

## Living by the Sword

**Read** 2 Samuel 20. What role do we find Joab in again? How was Joab's treachery justified?

---



---

Amasa and Joab were cousins (*2 Sam. 17:25*). Amasa was commander of Absalom's forces. After Joab disobeys David's orders in the case of Absalom (*2 Sam. 18:5, 14*), David wishes to rid himself of Joab and promises Amasa the high command of his army (*2 Sam. 19:13*). After all, it was Joab's scheming and planning that set the stage for the rebellion. Obviously, David's design is not motivated only by anger toward Joab (who had consciously disobeyed the king's order and killed his son). Amasa's appointment was also a political move that would signal reconciliation to the rest of the pro-Absalom forces.

**What** does 2 Samuel 20:1, 2 tell us about the political situation in Israel?

---



---

David ignores Joab, for he has promised the command to Amasa, and now he sends Amasa to round up the troops in order to deal with a new revolt. Amasa is not able to do this in time. David then sends for Abishai, the brother of Joab, and turns to him rather than to Joab in this time of crisis. Joab and Amasa finally meet, and, borrowing a leaf from Abner's assassination, Joab murders Amasa. The biblical writer emphasizes the total unexpectedness of the attack (*2 Sam. 20:8–10*). Joab coolly murders his cousin, simply because he has been passed over and is no longer number one.

One of Joab's men tries to legitimize Joab's actions by linking Joab to King David. The people are being led to believe that loyalty to David means loyalty to Joab (even though the king has explicitly distanced himself from Joab), and being loyal to Joab means that Joab's right to be judge, jury, and executioner in the case of Amasa cannot be questioned.

**Look at Joab's duplicity in how he betrayed Amasa. How careful we need to be that we don't betray someone who trusts us, using that trust to do them dirty. How easily Matthew 7:12 should apply here.**

---



Learning Cycle CONTINUED**II. The Darkness Within** (*Read Jeremiah 17:9 and Proverbs 4:23 with your class.*)

From the murder of Abner to Joab’s flight to the sanctuary in search of security from Solomon’s death decree, the picture painted of Joab’s interior life is a dark one. There are no bright hues of personal devotion to God. There are no serene tones of personal reflection. To be sure, there are moments that Joab seems to express a deep understanding of God’s dictates, such as when he sends a woman to King David to plead for the forgiveness and return of Absalom (*2 Samuel 14*). But even this noble deed is undertaken in a duplicitous manner, since Joab interjects himself in the matter to position himself for future power after David is off the scene. Every action he undertakes is calculated for his own benefit. There appears to be no consideration of God’s will.

God, through Jeremiah, tells us that the human heart is deceitful above all things (*Jer. 17:9*)—not exactly a ringing endorsement of humanity’s core. God is stating here that the human heart is given to cheating and deceiving. It is deliberately misleading and deceptive. Furthermore, God makes clear that we cannot even “know” it. Such a statement flies in the face of our self-help culture with its belief that we can indeed know ourselves and modify our behavior. We may make valiant attempts and even experience positive changes in our lives, but lasting change comes only from a transformed heart that abides in Christ (*John 15:1–5*). The carnal mind cannot submit to the law of God (*Rom. 8:7*).

**Consider This:** King Solomon urges, “Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life” (*Prov. 4:23, NKJV*). How do we “keep” the heart so that our motives and actions are pure? What principles of “heart maintenance” might we find in Psalm 51, for instance?

**► STEP 3—Apply**

**Just for Teachers:** One of the central points made in this week’s lesson is the toll that duplicity takes on the life of one whose heart is not surrendered to God. This apply section seeks to examine the role that truth plays in saving us from the inevitable destruction that comes from a life that lacks integrity.

CONTINUED ►

## Joab's Last Stand

The timing seems to be perfect. David is a very old man now, who cannot keep warm at night. A beautiful young woman is found who becomes King David's personal attendant. The biblical author specifically emphasizes the fact that David has no sexual relations with her (*1 Kings 1:1–4*), which further underlines the feeble state of the king. David does not “know”—not only young Abisrag but also what's happening in his kingdom. Adonijah, as the oldest remaining son, now decides that it is time to arrange his coronation.

**Read 1 Kings 1. What is Joab up to now? What more does this tell us about him?**

First Kings 1:7 makes it clear that Joab is one of the key players in this coup attempt. Joab, as he has done several times before, simply goes ahead and acts, thinking that old King David will be powerless to do anything about it. However, this time David, with the help of Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan, does act. He foils Joab's and Adonijah's plans by publicly declaring Solomon as his co-regent.

Joab seems to take God completely out of the equation. While he may have all of the theological knowledge about God, God doesn't seem to have relevance in his life. Joab thinks that he always can live as he pleases and escape the consequences. He forgets that God is not David. God cannot be fooled; even though retribution may not come immediately, it will one day come—if not in this life, then in the final judgment. However, often at the end of the day in this life, even a very long day, “a man reaps what he sows” (*Gal. 6:7, NIV*).

Before final judgment, there always is mercy. Joab gets a last chance, in that Solomon does not punish him for his scheming with Adonijah and allows him to retain his position. However, Joab shows no remorse and makes no apology, and he is involved in a second coup attempt. When this does not work, Joab finally realizes the gravity of his situation. He flees to the sanctuary and takes hold of the horns of the altar. Joab forgets, however, that the altar provides asylum only for those who have killed unwittingly (*Exod. 21:14*). Joab's unconfessed past has finally caught up with him. The man who lived by the sword now dies by the sword (*1 Kings 2:28–35*).

**However scheming, ambitious, and deceitful Joab was, everything he did could have been forgiven by the Lord had Joab come to God in faith, humility, and repentance. What about you and your defects? Forgiveness is there if you are willing to claim it for yourself.**

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Thought Questions:**

- 1 What role does truth play in helping us to live a life of integrity? How can we know what truth is and apply it to each dilemma we face in life?
- 2 Jesus declared, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me’ ” (*John 14:6, NKJV*). In this scripture Jesus makes clear that truth is a Person. He is the Truth. How does Jesus’ sinless life, death, resurrection, and ascension help us live lives of fealty to the Truth? What impact does Jesus have on the day-to-day decisions we make in life?

**Application Questions:**

- 1 Have you ever manipulated a situation to benefit yourself at the expense of others? How did the situation turn out?
- 2 How does your day-to-day decision making affect your character? Can you be ethical in certain areas of life and unethical in others? Why, or why not? What are the dangers of a compartmentalized life?

**► STEP 4—Create**

**Just for Teachers:** Share the following activity with your students. While most of us never will be in a position to make the decisions that Joab did while military commander of King David’s forces, each day presents us with ethical dilemmas nonetheless. Ask the students to apply what they’ve learned this week to help solve the following dilemmas. Or think of others.

**Activity:**

- 1 Your manager is very difficult to deal with. Her language often is abusive, and she sometimes attaches her name to your hard work and claims it as hers. While reading through a document that she has prepared for the boss, you notice a glaring error that would cause her major embarrassment or worse. What should you do, and why?
- 2 You are shopping in the grocery store when you notice a young woman carrying a two-year-old child who appears to be quite sickly. The woman looks around furtively but doesn’t notice you. She then proceeds to stuff two bottles of baby medicine into the inner pocket of her coat. What would you do—alert security, offer to pay for the medicine, or let the theft go unreported—and why?

**Further Study:** “We should not only take hold of the truth, but let it take hold of us; and thus have the truth in us and we in the truth. And if this is the case, our lives and characters will reveal the fact that the truth is accomplishing something for us; that it is sanctifying us, and is giving us a moral fitness for the society of heavenly angels in the kingdom of glory. The truth we hold is from heaven; and when that religion finds a lodgement in the heart, it commences its work of refining and purifying; for the religion of Jesus Christ never makes a man rough or rude; it never makes him careless, or hard-hearted; but the truth of heavenly origin, that which comes from God, elevates and sanctifies a man; it makes courteous, kind, affectionate, and pure; it takes away his hard heart, his selfishness and love of the world, and it purifies him from pride and ungodly ambition.”—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, May 9, 1878.

### Discussion Questions:

- ❶ How far should we go in our expression of loyalty to our families, employers, and country? What are the limits to these important relationships?
- ❷ Reread the Ellen White quote in Friday’s lesson study. What evidence can you see in your own life that the truth has taken hold of you? While it’s important to focus on Christ and not on ourselves, we also need to be honest with ourselves about where we stand in regard to the faith (*2 Cor. 13:5*).
- ❸ Many evil acts have been done throughout history by those who said, “I was only following orders.” How are we as Christians to deal with situations in which we are ordered to do things that we know are wrong? More important, how can we develop the kind of faith we need to stand firm, even when it means defying orders, when it could be very costly to ourselves and to our loved ones?
- ❹ Is it practical or even possible to forgive and forget when we have been hurt? What principles can we learn from this week’s study about forgiveness, lack of forgiveness, and the consequences of not forgiving?
- ❺ Oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller used unscrupulous business practices in order to buy out competitors. He would justify his actions by telling competitors that they needed to sell their companies to him and let him take on the risks of the oil business for them. “Get into the ark,” he would tell them, making it sound as if he were doing something charitable for them when, in fact, he was swallowing them up. What lessons can we learn from this about how easy it is to justify immoral deeds?