

One very important Biblical figure that you don't really hear much about is Joab, the commander of David's armies. Joab was a tremendous military man who had difficulty keeping his personal ambition out of his activities. Not that he had ambition to be king; no, he was intensely loyal to David as his king. But people had better not get in Joab's way of being David's chief general! He was mostly loyal to himself. In battle Joab is a man of God, but he viciously takes personal revenge.

We first encounter Joab right after Saul and Jonathon are killed in battle. The kingship of the entire nation is up for grabs and David's army meets with that of Ish-Bosheth, who was a surviving son of Saul. Abner had been the commander of Saul's army, and now was supporting Saul's son as heir to the throne. Through his skill in the attack on the Jebusites and Jerusalem, Joab had been given the role of David's commander-in-chief (1 Chronicles 11:6). Here he also won a major battle, as recorded in 2 Samuel 2:12-30. But Joab's brother Asahel was killed by Joab in the process.

Abner comes to David and makes a deal that effectively will turn the land of Israel over to David. (2 Samuel 3:22-31) Part of the deal is that Abner becomes commander of the united forces. When Joab was told about this, Joab found Abner and took him aside as though to speak to him privately. Then he savagely murdered him to avenge his brother's blood. It also cleared the way for him to remain the commander of the entire army. David made it clear that he did not condone this act of treachery, but he did not remove Joab from his post.

Later we see the faith that Joab had in God when he was in battle against the Arameans and the Ammonites (2 Samuel 10:7-14). When Joab saw that there were battle lines in front of him and behind him, he selected some of the best troops in Israel and deployed them against the Arameans. Then Joab said to his brother Abishai, "If the Arameans are too strong for me, then you are to come to my rescue; but if the Ammonites are too strong for you, then I will come to rescue you. Be strong and let us fight bravely for our people and the cities of our God. The LORD will do what is good in his sight." He knew that God would give them victory.

We see Joab's sense of righteousness when David orders him to withdraw from Uriah the Hittite after Bathsheba became pregnant. Joab would not forsake a fellow soldier and so would not order the army to leave him. As a result, David is really responsible for the deaths of more than just Uriah.

Joab did act for the glory of his king. When Joab fought against Rabbah of the Ammonites (2 Samuel 12:26), he sent messengers to David telling him to come and finish capturing the city so that David could get the credit. Joab also tried to reconcile David with his son Absalom (2 Sam 14:1), but he lived to regret that decision. He eventually killed Absalom, against David's express wishes, because he was so upset about what he had set into motion. Once the battle was over, and David was safe, Joab then had to protect David from losing what he had regained. Joab used tough love and finally got David to mix with the people and show his gratitude for their loyalty and service. But David replaced Joab with Amasa as commander.

Joab shows his dark side again when, in treachery similar to the case of Abner, he pretends friendliness and stabs and kills Amasa. He just could not stand to have someone else in his place.

Joab then shows a desire to follow God when David asks him to number his fighting men (2 Samuel 24:2). Joab knew that it was wrong, and that if God was on your side it didn't matter how many men you had. Joab went through the motions, but purposefully did not enroll Levi and Benjamin in an attempt to do what was right. Even so, David's act resulted in great evil for Israel.

When David was old, Joab couldn't wait for him to proclaim his successor, so when Adonijah evidently offered him the job as his commander (1 Kings 1:7), Joab gave Adonijah his support. This was not the wish of David, who had promised the kingdom to Solomon.

Joab had some kind of grave inner conflict. There was a mismatch between his spiritual life and his personal agenda. He didn't seem to have a clue about it, either. We can learn a good lesson about that. Paul wrote of his inner struggle, where he knew good but still did evil. Paul was aware of his problem. But Joab seems to have lived in ignorance of it. We all probably know someone like this, too. They can be very spiritual sounding one minute, and go about destroying lives the next. The scary part is that they believe that they don't need to change.

We must make sure that we don't let our personal goals cloud our knowledge of Good and Evil. Neither can we condone the actions of such people. David did not condone the actions of Joab, but he still let him be the commander. And this, of course, simply led to more problems. Let us weigh each of our actions to ensure that they follow the Goodness of God.

© Copyright 1998, Heard Lowry