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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 . . .

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.
this example, that when God gives us some strength, we are to be so temperate that we will in no way abuse it.

Moreover, when Abner told Asahel to go back and seek someone else, he was speaking out of pride and mockery, as though he were saying, 'Follow someone who is your equal. How dare you come after me!' There is no doubt that Abner disdained encountering this young man, seeing that he was giddy-headed and unimportant and was simply driven by this foolish glory which he wanted to display – namely, how fast he was. This is one point.

However, it is possible to see that Abner had hopes of gaining promotion, and that he wished to show that he was well disposed towards the house of Saul. It is true that he had not usurped the crown, but he had put Ishbosheth on the throne. Nevertheless, there were always two motives in his actions. He thought that if something bad were to happen, he might be appointed himself. That could not be done without betraying his master, but that is the way with such people. We have already seen that he could have been led only by a deliberate malice, in that he was not ignorant of the promise and unction given to David. Therefore, he was resisting God by wanting to name a successor to the crown instead of the one whom God had ordained. He was not really seeking the well-being of the house of Saul, since he wanted to be looked up to and to rule. For however much Ishbosheth had the name and title of king, it was Abner who had all the power and who was using Ishbosheth as a figure-head. In short, he cared only for himself, just as worldly people always tend to do (however they may cover it up), for each one is addicted to himself. That, I say, is what motivated Abner when he divided the people and made of them two bodies, so to speak.

Then Abner said, 'How could I dare look in the face of your brother, Joab?' Now why should he care about that? He was Joab's mortal enemy, so he should have been seeking his destruction instead. Yes, but then we are shown that when he saw himself conquered, he was prepared to make peace with the house of David and gain their favour. Abner was willing to desert his master, and he finally did so.

Let us learn, therefore, that when men do not have a good foundation, they will involve themselves in all sorts of iniquity and will go from bad to worse. However much they may protest their innocence, they still continue adding sin to sin, until they go so far that God puts a bridle on them. Now that should teach us not to do anything against our conscience. For when we begin to do some evil, even though we think it will all be over soon and will not last long, yet we are voluntarily throwing ourselves into the snares of the devil, and God will pay us the wages that we have earned. One evil will cause another and we will spin a long thread. It will be like a chain which has many links, in that offences will attach themselves endlessly one to another. Therefore, let us learn to keep ourselves strictly under the control of the fear of God, so that we may never permit ourselves to start some evil, and then go on and do still worse.

Furthermore, let us recognise that among all other virtues, well-rounded balance should recommend itself to us. Abner was praiseworthy in many things. However, we see that he was disloyal, so that all his excellence was contaminated and was nothing less than rotten! For we also know that when God regulates our life, he renews us so that in no way will we be double-minded. There will be no pretence in us. We will conduct ourselves with such a degree of integrity that even in our dealing with the children of this world, whatever malice, disloyalty and fraud there may be, still we will not fail to be always straightforward. Our simplicity will be united to a prudence which is both good and right, but is without any cunning (Matt. 10:16).

Moreover, when we see that Asahel was killed, we must note, on the one hand, that when swords are unsheathed there will be no more freedom, and even those who wish to keep from evil-doing will not be able to do so. However perverse and rebellious against God Abner may have been, he still wished to spare Asahel. But in the heat of battle, he could not, for Asahel would have overtaken him. All the more should we avoid going so far, seeing how war brings so much confusion.

But on the other hand, let us notice also that the excessive boldness of Asahel was the cause of his death, as we have
already said, for he was over-confident in the lightness and swiftness which had been given to him. And there is not the slightest doubt that he desired to be seen, and wanted to do a memorable deed in getting his enemy. Well, it cost him very dearly. Hence, let us learn to be brave according to rule, and not according to rashness. So much, then, for this particular story.

Now for this act one cannot condemn Abner. Since there was a war going on and since Asahel attacked him and refused to turn from him in spite of warnings to the contrary, what else could Abner have done? Even if he had not been such a great enemy, what he did would still have been excusable. We will see that soon afterwards Joab took vengeance on him by treason and trickery (2 Sam. 3:27). But that will be discussed in its place. Scripture briefly mentions it here to show us the reason for which this story is included.

Now to show that this young man, Asahel, was well known, it says that 'when they came to the place where he had fallen dead, everyone stopped'. That was a sign that he was held in higher esteem than all the others, for there were several others dead – indeed, nineteen – and yet they were ignored while everyone stopped at Asahel. We must also carefully note that Joab took such vengeance for the death of Asahel because he considered him so well favoured, since people had loved and esteemed his brother. But that did not justify him before God, as will be stated more fully in the proper place. But we see here that one man will often carry away more than a hundred or a thousand, for all stopped at Asahel, and the sight frightened them. After a great defeat, people are not astonished, and yet when they see a single man dead, everyone is shocked. Battles are often broken up and an army put to flight by the death of a captain or a leader, for it will seem that everything is lost and scattered when there is no-one in command. Therefore, even though Asahel gained a great reputation, he thus hindered the army of Joab – so much so that it turned the tide for the enemy and worked to their advantage. So instead of David's men winning, in the end they were vanquished.

Now let us come to what Scripture adds concerning this defeat. It says, in the first place, that Abner exhorted Joab to stop. ‘How long’, he said, ‘will the sword devour? Do you not know that there will be bitterness in the end? Why do you not call back the people from following their brothers?’ Here Abner changed his language. Formerly, it had been a game to him to make men kill each other. Now the game pleased him no longer, since it could only get worse. Hence, he began to exhort Joab to pursue it no more, in that it would be a great cruelty for brothers to kill each other in this way.

Now in the first place, we see how God broke down the foolish arrogance which puffed Abner up when he said: ‘Let our people come out and enjoy themselves’ (2 Sam. 2:14). He joked about shedding human blood; it was all mockery to him. But now he knows that the outcome was not what he had imagined. Let us learn, thus, that God will punish any pride that strengthens our cruel passions so that we have no pity on men, but expose them to butchery like calves or sheep. That is an enormous vice to which we must give serious consideration. I speak to those who have power of some sort, for one sees how earthly princes only rejoice when they fill the fields with dead bodies. There will be many poor widows and orphans as victims of their greed. That, to them, is only a pastime; it is of no more concern than wiping their mouths. Well, since God has declared a manifest judgement on them, they will in no way escape giving an account for such cruelty.

Yet let us notice, in the second place, this example of Abner. He was now no longer speaking with his customary haughtiness and pride, saying: ‘Let them play’, or: ‘Let them enjoy themselves’, but instead: ‘How long will the sword keep devouring?’ He was horrified, it seems, on seeing these murders, and yet he had derived joy and entertainment from it. He changed, however, only because he saw that this pursuit affected him and was harmful to him.

That, therefore, is why the cruel make a pretence of being moved and touched with compassion when they fail to get what they desired and sought for. We often see that those who have been the most addicted to tyranny and cruelty become religious hypocrites and use beautiful rhetoric when they realise that...
they can do nothing more. If necessary, they are ready to seek peace. When they have the upper hand, it is certain that they do not care how much confusion they cause. But when they see that their designs have been frustrated, they begin to preach peace and concord, and want to make people believe that they are doing this out of pity. But such hypocrisy is too hard to maintain, and the shamelessness of such people is soon seen when they lose their tempers and revert to their previous desire to kill and wipe out everything. But even in doing that, they will put on a good appearance of wishing to set right what has been wrongly done. It is obvious, I say, that they are completely without shame.

We should learn from this example, for such things do happen, as in fact we have seen. This kind of experience is only too frequent. It is particularly clear when Abner says, ‘How long will everyone pursue his brother?’ For in fact, it was a horrible spectacle to see the children of Abraham fighting with those to whom they were united and who were called by God to be his heritage. They should have been joined, therefore, in the unfeigned union which is spoken of in the Psalm (Psa. 133); they should have ‘dwelt together in holy and cheerful brotherhood’ before God, ‘which is like the ointment that anointed Aaron which flowed down upon his garments, and like the dew that fell on the hill of Hermon’ in the plain. They should have been united in this way, and such a union would have been God’s principal blessing on them. But when they killed each other like dogs and cats, was it not as though they wanted to throw God out of the country, so to speak! For they went against everything that God had established among them.

Well, while on the surface Abner’s statement was holy indeed, his motive was insincere; for it was he who had started it all, and the swords were unsheathed by his advice and command and the killing came from that. Indeed, he shows that he detested the accusation that Abner was making. In sum, Joab condemned his adversary and excused himself—and rightly so.

Joab’s speech is as though he were calling God as witness, so that Abner would be all the more convicted. Now we know that hypocrites always have new subterfuges. One thing that we can never do is win them over, for truth does not matter to them. They will argue to the very end, and will still have some kind of
reply. That is why Joab swears ‘by the living God’ that if Abner had not first started it, everyone would have gone away and would have ceased pursuing their brethren.

Now from this response, we must gather that when we are accused by the wicked who have caused some evil, we may protest that the evil displeased us and that we did not seek it. We may add that we did not start it. We must, I say, state this protest, but it can be stated before God. For what have we gained when we have washed our hands before men and have made them believe that we are innocent, and yet our conscience condemns us both before God and his angels? Let us, therefore, look within ourselves when we have reason to protest our integrity, to purge ourselves from slander directed at us, and to rid ourselves of defamation of character. Let us do this as in the presence of God, and let him be our Witness, our Judge and Defender. Now that is what we must remember from this passage.

Furthermore, let us note also that we have to use preventive medicine to avoid evil. For once we have begun, it will not be easy to stop. That is why Joab says that ‘in the morning’, if Abner had not begun, his brothers would have stopped killing one another. When he says, ‘in the morning’, he means that he did not start it. Therefore, as far as we can, let us prevent all contentions, for where the fire is lit it is difficult to put out. So as much as we can, let us resist starting anything, and when the devil tries to incite us to contentions and debates, let us be prepared ahead of time not to give him an opening. For when he gets in, it is very hard to run him out. We must also remember that point from this passage concerning the protestations of Joab.

The text then says that it was discovered that there were ‘three hundred dead men on the side of Abner’ (2 Sam. 2:31), and ‘sixty from David’s band’ (2 Sam. 2:30).1 Earlier, it was stated that the battle was hard and grievous. Now this does not seem to agree with that. For one would not consider it a great defeat if three hundred men on one side and sixty on the other were dead; and on the other hand, that there were only twenty. This seems to be a contradiction. But it shows even more how horrified we should be over the shed blood of the faithful and of those who are joined to us in the name of God. In general, one cannot kill a man without the image of God being violated. And that is why Scripture says that a man, being created in the image of God, cannot be killed without the offence being against God himself (Gen. 9:6), who has stamped his image in our nature. It is a crime also because everyone should see himself in his neighbour. We are worse than savage beasts when we are thus burning to destroy one another. And there is, in particular, a sacred bond among those who claim to be the people of God – as it was formerly among the whole family of Abraham, so it is today in the Church. That is why, even though there were only 380 men killed among all who were defeated, it is still said that the battle was hard.

That is for our instruction. Thus when we see that in Christendom people are tearing one another apart; let us realise that this is being taken into account by God, and even if men harden themselves, God does not change his mind. We have already seen battles for such a long time. There is no end to them. And even apart from battles, we have seen how many people have been killed by wars. This has not been the case merely in one place and in a single army, but it has gone on among princes who claim to be Christians and Catholics – and yet they are killing an infinite number of people. And then the war has swept through one country like a storm. One sees poor people dead among the bushes, and others who are left have to endure hunger and thirst, and heat and cold, and many deprivations – to such a degree that if you cut their throat, you would do them a favour. For they are suffering and will die ten times, so to speak, before death strikes the final blow.

Now that is nothing to us, because we have become too used to it. But be that as it may, the whole affair will be brought to account before God. For what is written here, that battles are grievous and hard even when only a small number of people

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1Supplementa Calviana, p. 49, suggests that the meaning is: ‘that there were three hundred and sixty men dead on Abner’s side, and twenty from the band of David’. There is an obvious error in the copyist’s text.
die, is a strong and truthful description when we consider that the ones involved are those who claim the name of God and profess to be his people and Church.

Not only is it unbelievers who attack one another in a diabolical rage, but also the adherents of Christianity are thus embittered against one another. Notice the extremity of the situation, that the bond (as I have said) of our union consists in the call that God has given to us to be his people, and yet we come to the point of breaking and dismembering it. Well, under the shadow of the name of God, under the shadow of the pure religion which ought to keep us united in one body, under the shadow of our Lord Jesus Christ who is our Head, if we are in strife and contentions, what will be the outcome?

There is a double war in the Church because of religion, for often it is the case that swords are not unsheathed, and yet they manage to have a battle. Indeed, if there are heresies and errors, it is legitimate to kill one another, for poison, when it is widespread, does far more evil than the sword. Now this is one kind of mortal combat. When people are banded against one another in sects and when there are heresies in the Church, eventually they reach the point of action with swords. After people have waged verbal debates and have grown even more stubborn so that they exercise less restraint, it becomes necessary to resort to arms.

Well, be that as it may, these things must still happen. As St Paul says, ‘It is necessary that there be heresies’ (1 Cor. 11:19), so that all who are solid and have true zeal might be approved by God. He thereby gives them a mark by which people can recognise that there was no hypocrisy when they declared themselves to be Christians. It is also necessary that, from time to time, there be controversies and debates, even to the point of killing one another, as we see in the statement of St Paul when he says that he will carry on amid seditions (2 Cor. 6:5). When he speaks of debates and strife, he holds that up as a mirror to us of the universal condition of all Christians. He says that he was not able to avoid seditions and quarrels. Now that is a terrible word, and we should detest it—and not without cause. Even so, it was still necessary that St Paul, who was of a docile and patient spirit, should experience it. Why? Because the devil never ceases to incite and inflame all his followers to do battle; so much so that the Gospel cannot be preached without fires being started, without troubles, battles, wars and many calamities among those who claim to be the very people of God, as was the case in olden days.

Let us not be astonished, therefore, if this takes place in our own times. For however horrible a thing it is to hear that only three hundred faithful men are dead and that they bear the name of God, still we must not conclude that Joab did wrong in fighting against Abner and his army. It is true that he did wrong when he consented to this ridiculous game, but still it was right for him to take up arms. And why? Because the fight was good and just and approved by God. It would have been by no means proper for David to give up his right to the crown and to fail to go forward when God had given him his hand. Now then, are we to condemn those who fight not merely under a mortal man, but for the truth of God, for his service, for the pure religion, for the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ?

Therefore, let us note well when there are wars inside the Church, that even if the matter is wrong in itself, still that does not mean that one should confuse judgement by considering both parties in the same class or as wrapped up together in the same bundle. That would be a failure to discern properly. And even when there are two opposing camps in the Church, if one is opposing the truth of God in order to overthrow it and the other holds to the good so that it may always follow what is commanded, it is certain that whoever is neutral will be disloyal and a traitor. For we are not to follow a compromising course, as when we see one side fight for the name of God, and indeed for the cause of our salvation, and yet fold our arms. Nor are we to be in the position of knowing how to use our tongue to speak evil and yet not daring to utter a word to maintain the honour of God. So today there are many who would like to be neutral in the midst of all these troubles. They think: ‘Very well, I do not want to be involved on one side or the other. I will wait and see who is going to be the strongest and is more likely to win.’ So it is a matter (for believers) of becoming as deeply
involved as possible. Therefore, far be it from us to condemn those who follow the right party. So much, then, for this exhortation.

Nonetheless, let us try to carry on peaceably as far as we can and to pursue brotherhood as far as possible. For the love of Joab is shown here to be worthy of praise, when he had compassion on his unfortunate brethren. Even though those people in history, with the exception of the tribe of Judah, were his enemies, he nevertheless treated them kindly, keeping in mind the fact that God had chosen them to be his heritage along with the others. When he took that into consideration, he was moved with pity for them. Therefore, even when we do battle for the cause of God, we should still seek reconciliation when it is genuine and necessary, but not hollow reconciliations. For it would be much better for everything to be lost than to act falsely in any way, so that the service of God, above all, might be carried out in integrity, as befits pure religion. This is better even than sparing the lives of men — and, indeed, the whole world. When things are going against us, still we must put first the service of God so that its integrity is untarnished and not reduced in the least.

But when we see miserable folk scattered, let us not fail to pray to the Lord that he will be pleased to build up his flock; in other words, that he would pour his Spirit out upon those today who are given over to evil and who nevertheless belong to him according to his secret decree and are eventually to serve him along with us. Let us pray that they will be made ready for this sacred union with us, and be dedicated to the name of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ; that they will be joint soldiers with us in his defence, and that in this way human blood will be spared. Now that is what we must remember from this story of the killing of 380 men who were destroyed from the family of Israel. That is why it was called a great and grievous defeat, because they were descendants of the line of Abraham, and because God had given them the mark of his adoption.

Well, finally it states that Joab returned to David, and Abner went to Gibeon, to Ishbosheth, whom he called and had ordained to be his master. Now this shows us that Abner admitted that he was beaten. For when he retreated with a much larger army than Joab, slinking away like a dog with his tail between his legs, that, I say, is a confession which shows how much he realised that he was defeated. But even so, he still did not return to or subject himself to David. He always used retreat as the means to go forward even more. Hence, we see that hypocrites, even when they are humiliated, come back with pride, stubbornly malicious. Thus, they will not change under any conditions, in spite of any good appearance they may put on, as long as this rancour is eating them up.

Now the wicked can certainly tremble, and do so especially when God pursues them. For that matter, even if they have no enemies here below, their own shadow can frighten them. At such times, they see how God is pressing in on them and thus do not know which way to turn. And yet does that mean they will return to the right way? Not at all. But they are always there in their holes and caves, full of treason. When they remain hidden, it is to cover up their venom, to do this and that according to their own desires and wicked intentions, and to cause fires which afterwards will declare and demonstrate their presence. Now that is how all those behave once they have joined themselves together against God. And even when they are overcome by force, that does not mean that they will remain peaceable, or that they will want to submit themselves, or lay down their arms. Indeed, they will do worse than ever if they can.

Concerning Joab, it was a praiseworthy thing that he returned to Hebron with David. He wanted to see if there was any way that David could reign, as God had decreed. It showed that he had no regard to the matter of personal benefit or profit in who should reign, but he was concerned with the mutual benefit of the whole people — that they would not be harmed. That is why Joab is to be praised.

Therefore, let us note that however much the wicked never cease to be enemies of God, still if we seek the reign of our Lord Jesus Christ — that everyone should be given over to his obedience — God will bless it. For we cannot exterminate all the wicked from this world. It is impossible and, indeed, what
would it accomplish? Then let us attempt to reform all those who are not totally incorrigible, and at the same time leave the others to the judgement of God. For all punishments cannot be given now. It is true that those who are in charge of justice ought to punish those living in their land and country. Nevertheless, when one has done all one’s duty, one must realise that there will be the wicked who remain among the good, so that the Church of God will always have to fight, either with weapons or with verbal disputations.

Let us, therefore, endeavour as far as possible to put far away from us all that could corrupt us, and let us concentrate all our thoughts and energy on our Lord Jesus Christ, having his authority. Let our aim be that everyone should do him homage and recognise him as sovereign, that everyone should submit to him. While we confess to deserving eternal death, nevertheless, we should not be so horrified by it that we despair and flee from his presence. Rather, in true repentance, we can avoid the dangers to which we have been exposed, and instead embrace his mercy as he is pleased to offer it to us by his Word. Now it is certain that we would be traitors if we did not fight both for his name and for our salvation with those whom he has taken under his banner, as I have already said.

But I am speaking now in general, that we should flee conflicts as far as possible, and follow the example of Joab, which is set before us here. Even so, we have no other refuge than our king, the Son of the living God, for whom we should hold back nothing, whether it be goods or our lives and everything that God has given us.

Now we must carefully note this point, that Joab came to Hebron to have fellowship with David. Well, the papists and enemies of God would certainly like to make peace with us in such a way that they would then be able to ruin us, so that we would no longer know what it means to be on David’s side, nor what the pure religion is. That is what they are attempting. We must withstand such malice in all cases and, above all, have no agreement or understanding with them. We must not listen to them nor even regard their practices, as far as consenting to them is concerned. But when we have made a judgement concerning them, in accordance with what the Word of God teaches us, let us make use of this judgement as we have been taught. In that way we will always hold fast to our Lord Jesus, our Captain and our Head. That is to say, let us hold on to the doctrine of his Gospel, that he may govern with all authority, and exercise his sovereign authority over his Church, so as to maintain it and that he may govern us by his Word.

When we have done that, I say, if there are some who wish to perish, then let them perish. But be that as it may, at least let us not perish because of our own cowardice. Instead, let us embrace God’s promises so that we can be firmly grounded on them. And when we see that we will be attacked from every side and that he will find no way by which to rescue us, when it seems that heaven and earth are against us, nevertheless, let us be assured of our good cause, let us bravely follow David – not the one who was a temporal king, but our Lord Jesus Christ, the sovereign King. He has taken us under his protection and to him all power is given by God his Father (Matt. 28:18), with the result that when we are his obedient people, as the Psalms say, he will distribute to us our necessary and sufficient portion (Psa. 81:14ff.; 85:9ff.; 110). He will do this even as we place our neck beneath his yoke, in order to say, ‘Here am I, O Lord!’ every time and always when he calls us to his service.

Now let us prostrate ourselves before the majesty of our good God, recognising all our faults, praying that he will make us feel them so much that it will cause us more and more to be displeased with ourselves. Let us pray that, in our afflictions and in all our battles, he will give us an invincible constancy, so that we may walk the narrow path according to his Word, and rest totally on him, making no compromise with the wicked when we are aware of their cruelty and craft. At the same time, may we have pity on them without deviating from what is taught us by our Lord. Thus may we always be at his disposal and totally dedicated to his glory, so that we will never deviate or turn from our vocation, in any way. And may he show this grace not only to us . . .