



*Joab*  
*The Great Military Leader*

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## Overview

### JOAB SET HIS OWN STANDARDS

Joab's story is told in 2 Samuel 2-1 Kings 2. He is also mentioned in 1 Chron. 2:16; 1 Chron. 11:5-9, 20, 26; 1 Chron. 19:8-15; 1 Chron. 20:1; 1 Chron. 21:2-6; 1 Chron. 26:28; and in the title of Psalm 60.

Joab, the great military leader, had two brothers who were also famous soldiers: Abishai and Asahel.

Joab proved to be the greatest leader of the three and was the commander of David's army throughout most of David's reign. There is no record that his troops ever lost a battle.

Joab was a fearless fighter like his brothers. Unlike them, he was also a brilliant and ruthless strategist.

His plans usually worked, but he was seldom concerned about those hurt or killed by them. He did not hesitate to use treachery or murder to achieve his goals.

His career is a story of great accomplishments and shameful acts. He conquered Jerusalem and the surrounding nations, defeated Abner, and reconciled Absalom and David.

But he also murdered Abner, Amasa, and Absalom, took part in Uriah's murder, and plotted with Adonijah against Solomon. That plot led to his execution.

Joab set his own standards—he lived by them and died because of them. There is little evidence that Joab ever acknowledged God's standards.

On one occasion he confronted David about the danger of taking a census without God's command, but this may have been little more than a move to protect himself.

Joab's self-centeredness eventually destroyed him. He was loyal only to himself, even willing to betray his lifelong relationship with David to preserve his power.

## **Son of David's sister**

### **1 Chron. 2:16**

Their sisters were named Zeruiah and Abigail. Zeruiah had three sons named Abishai, Joab, and Asahel.

## **Commander of David's army**

### **2 Samuel 20:23**

Joab once again became the commander of David's army. Benaiah son of Jehoiada was commander of the king's bodyguard.

Benaiah was the captain of David's bodyguard and a famous member of that special group of mighty men called "the Thirty" (2 Samuel 23:24). He remained loyal to David during Absalom's rebellion. Later he helped establish Solomon as king (1 Kings 1:32-40; 1 Kings 2:28-34) and eventually replaced Joab as commander of Israel's army (1 Kings 2:35).

### **1 Chron. 11:6**

David had said to his troops, "Whoever leads the attack against the Jebusites will become the commander of my armies!" And Joab, the son of David's sister Zeruiah, led the attack, so he became the commander of David's armies.

### **1 Chron. 18:15**

Joab son of Zeruiah was commander of the army. Jehoshaphat son of Ahilud was the royal historian.

David was a victorious and just ruler. We see in David's glowing success a hint of what Christ's reign will be like—complete victory and justice. If David's glory was great, how much greater will Christ's glory be! The great news for us is that we can be rightly related to Jesus Christ through faith. One day we will share in his glory as we reign with him.

## **1 Chron. 27:34**

Ahithophel was succeeded by Jehoiada son of Benaiah and by Abiathar. Joab was commander of the Israelite army.

When Absalom rebelled against David, Ahithophel betrayed David and joined the rebellion. Hushai pretended loyalty to Absalom, and his advice caused Absalom's downfall (2 Samuel 15:31-17:23).

### **Dedicated the plunder of his battles**

## **1 Chron. 26:28**

Shelomoth and his relatives also cared for the items dedicated to the Lord by Samuel the seer, Saul son of Kish, Abner son of Ner, and Joab son of Zeruah. All the other dedicated items were in their care, too.

War plunder rightfully belonged to the victorious army. These soldiers, however, gave their portion of all the plunder to the temple to express their dedication to God. Like these commanders, we should think of what we *can* give, rather than what we are obligated to give. Is your giving a matter of rejoicing rather than duty? Give as a response of joy and love for God.

### **Defeats and kills Abner**

## **2 Samuel 2:13-32**

The nation in general refused David. By this the Lord trained up his servant for future honour and usefulness; and the tendency of true godliness was shown in his behavior while passing through various difficulties. David was herein a type of Christ, whom Israel would not submit to, though anointed of the Father to be a Prince and a Saviour to them.

Abner repeatedly warned Asahel to turn back or risk losing his life, but Asahel refused to turn from his self-imposed duty. Persistence is a good trait if it is for a worthy cause.

But if the goal is only personal honor or gain, persistence may be no more than stubbornness. Asahel's stubbornness not only cost his life, but it also spurred unfortunate disunity in David's army for years to come (2 Samuel 3:26-27; 1 Kings 2:28-35). Before you decide to pursue a goal, make sure it is worthy of your devotion.

This battle ended with a victory for Joab's troops (2 Samuel 2:17), but war in the divided nation continued until David was finally crowned king over all Israel (2 Samuel 5:1-5).

## **2 Samuel 3:27**

When Abner arrived at Hebron, Joab took him aside at the gateway as if to speak with him privately. But then he drew his dagger and killed Abner in revenge for killing his brother Asahel.

Joab took revenge for the death of his brother instead of leaving justice to God. But that revenge backfired on him (1 Kings 2:31-34). God will repay those who deserve it (Romans 12:19). Refuse to rejoice when your enemies suffer, and don't try to get revenge. Seeking revenge will ruin your own peace of mind and increase the chances of further retaliation.

Abner killed Joab's brother Asahel in self-defense. Joab then killed Abner to avenge his brother's death and also to save his position of military leadership. People who killed in self-defense were supposed to be safe in cities of refuge (Numbers 35:22-25). Joab showed his disrespect for God's laws by killing Abner out of revenge in Hebron, a city of refuge (Joshua 20:7).

David was saying that Joab's descendants would be unclean, unhealthy, and in want. Why did David say such harsh words about Joab? David was upset over Abner's death for several reasons. (1) He was grieved over the loss of a skilled military officer. (2) He wanted to place the guilt of Abner's murder on Joab, not himself. (3) He was on the verge of becoming king over the entire nation, and utilizing Abner was the key to winning over the northern tribes. Abner's death could have revived the civil war. (4) Joab violated David's agreement to protect Abner. Joab's murderous act ruined David's plans, and David was especially angry that his own commander had committed the crime.

## **Destroys all the males in Edom**

### **1 Kings 11:16**

Joab and the army had stayed there for six months, killing them.

Edom was the kingdom southeast of the Dead Sea. David had added this nation to his empire (2 Samuel 8:13-14). It was of strategic importance because it controlled the route to the Red Sea. Edom's revolt was disturbing the peace of Solomon's kingdom.

## **Defeats the Ammonites**

### **2 Samuel 10:7-14**

When David heard about this, he sent Joab and the entire Israelite army to fight them. The Ammonite troops drew up their battle lines at the entrance of the city gates, while the Arameans from Zobah and Rehob and the men from Tob and Maacah positioned themselves to fight in the open fields.

When Joab saw that he would have to fight on two fronts, he chose the best troops in his army. He placed them under his personal command and led them out to fight the Arameans in the fields.

He left the rest of the army under the command of his brother Abishai, who was to attack the Ammonites. "If the Arameans are too strong for me, then come over and help me," Joab told his brother. "And if the Ammonites are too strong for you, I will come and help you.

Be courageous! Let us fight bravely to save our people and the cities of our God. May the Lord's will be done."

When Joab and his troops attacked, the Arameans began to run away. And when the Ammonites saw the Arameans running, they ran from Abishai and retreated into the city. After the battle was over, Joab returned to Jerusalem.

There must be a balance in life between our actions and our faith in God. David said, "Let us fight bravely." In other words, they should do what they could, using their minds to figure out the best techniques and using their resources. But he also said, "The LORD will do what is good in his sight." He knew that the outcome was in God's hands. We should use our minds and our resources to obey God, while at the same time trusting God for the outcome.

### **Barley field of, burned by Absalom**

#### **2 Samuel 14:29-33**

Then Absalom sent for Joab to ask him to intercede for him, but Joab refused to come. Absalom sent for him a second time, but again Joab refused to come.

So Absalom said to his servants, "Go and set fire to Joab's barley field, the field next to mine." So they set his field on fire, as Absalom had commanded.

Then Joab came to Absalom and demanded, "Why did your servants set my field on fire?"

And Absalom replied, "Because I wanted you to ask the king why he brought me back from Geshur if he didn't intend to see me. I might as well have stayed there. Let me see the king; if he finds me guilty of anything, then let him execute me."

So Joab told the king what Absalom had said. Then at last David summoned his estranged son, and Absalom came and bowed low before the king, and David kissed him.

Already we can see the seeds of rebellion in Absalom. As an independent and scheming young man, he took matters into his own hands and killed his brother (2 Samuel 13:22-29). Without his father or anyone else to keep him in check, he probably did whatever he wanted, as evidenced by his setting Joab's field on fire to get his attention (2 Samuel 14:30).

Undoubtedly his good looks also added to his self-centeredness (2 Samuel 14:25). Children need discipline, especially those with natural abilities and beauty. Otherwise, like Absalom, they will grow up thinking they can do whatever they want whenever they want to.

David only made halfhearted efforts to correct his children. He did not punish Amnon for his sin against Tamar, nor did he deal decisively with Absalom's murder of Amnon. Such indecisiveness became David's undoing. When we ignore sin, we experience greater pain than if we deal with it immediately..

## **Kills Amasa**

### **2 Samuel 20:8-13**

As they arrived at the great stone in Gibeon, Amasa met them, coming from the opposite direction. Joab was wearing his uniform with a dagger strapped to his belt. As he stepped forward to greet Amasa, he secretly slipped the dagger from its sheath.

"How are you, my cousin?" Joab said and took him by the beard with his right hand as though to kiss him.

Amasa didn't notice the dagger in his left hand, and Joab stabbed him in the stomach with it so that his insides gushed out onto the ground. Joab did not need to strike again, and Amasa soon died. Joab and his brother Abishai left him lying there and continued after Sheba.

One of Joab's young officers shouted to Amasa's troops, "If you are for Joab and David, come and follow Joab."

But Amasa lay in his blood in the middle of the road, and Joab's officer saw that a crowd was gathering around to stare at him. So he pulled him off the road into a field and threw a cloak over him. With Amasa's body out of the way, everyone went on with Joab to capture Sheba.

Once again Joab's murderous act went unpunished, just as it did when he killed Abner (2 Samuel 3:26-27). Eventually, however, justice caught up with him (1 Kings 2:28-35). It may seem that sin and treachery often go unpunished, but God's justice is not limited to this life's rewards. Even if Joab had died of old age, he would have to face the Day of Judgment.

## **Joab murdered two army commanders in time of peace.**

### **1 Kings 2:5**

"And there is something else. You know that Joab son of Zeruah murdered my two army commanders, Abner son of Ner and Amasa son of Jether. He pretended that it was an act of war, but it was done in a time of peace, staining his belt and sandals with the blood of war.

Joab epitomizes those who are ruthless in accomplishing their goals. His strength was his only code, and winning the battle his only law. He wanted to get power for himself and protect it. In contrast, Barzillai stands for those who are loyal to God and live by his standards. When offered glory, for example, he unselfishly asked that it be given to his son. Is your leadership self-serving or God-serving?

David had some harsh advice for Solomon concerning his enemies. This advice was designed to help the young king establish and secure his throne, and it was directed only toward blatant enemies—those who opposed God by opposing God's appointed king. Legally, David was asking Solomon to give his enemies the punishment they deserved. It was against both civil law and God's laws for Shimei to curse a king (Exodus 22:28).

## **Causes Sheba to be put to death**

### **2 Samuel 20:16-22**

But a wise woman in the city called out to Joab, "Listen to me, Joab. Come over here so I can talk to you." As he approached, the woman asked, "Are you Joab?"

"I am," he replied.

So she said, "Listen carefully to your servant."

"I'm listening," he said.

Then she continued, "There used to be a saying, 'If you want to settle an argument, ask advice at the city of Abel.' I am one who is peace loving and faithful in Israel.

But you are destroying a loyal city. Why do you want to destroy what belongs to the Lord?"

And Joab replied, "Believe me, I don't want to destroy your city! [21] All I want is a man named Sheba son of Bicri from the hill country of Ephraim, who has revolted against King David. If you hand him over to me, we will leave the city in peace."

"All right," the woman replied, "we will throw his head over the wall to you." Then the woman went to the people with her wise advice, and they cut off Sheba's head and threw it out to Joab. So he blew the trumpet and called his troops back from the attack, and they all returned to their homes. Joab returned to the king at Jerusalem.

This incident fulfilled Nathan's prediction that because of David's sin, another man would sleep with his wives (2 Samuel 12:11-12).

### **Opposes the numbering of the people**

#### **2 Samuel 24:3**

But Joab replied to the king, "May the Lord your God let you live until there are a hundred times as many people in your kingdom as there are now! But why do you want to do this?"

Did God cause David to sin? God does not cause people to sin, but he does allow sinners to reveal the sinfulness of their hearts by their actions. God presented the opportunity to David in order to deal with a disastrous national tendency, and he wanted this desire to show itself. 1 Chron. 21:1 says Satan incited David to do it. Hebrew writers do not always distinguish between primary and secondary causes. So if God allowed Satan to tempt David, to them it is as if God did it.

What was wrong with taking a census? A census was commanded in Numbers to prepare an army for conquering the promised land (Numbers 1:2; Numbers 26:2). A census amounted to a draft or conscription for the army. The land was now at peace, so there was no need to enlist troops. Israel had extended its borders and

become a recognized power. David's sin was pride and ambition in counting the people so that he could glory in the size of his nation and army, its power and defenses. By doing this, he put his faith in the size of his army rather than in God's ability to protect them regardless of their number. Even Joab knew a census was wrong, but David did not heed his advice. We sin in a similar way when we place our security in money, possessions, or the might of our nation.

### **1 Chron. 21:3**

But Joab replied, "May the Lord increase the number of his people a hundred times over! But why, my lord, do you want to do this? Are they not all your servants? Why must you cause Israel to sin?"

David's census brought disaster because, unlike the census taken in the book of Numbers (Numbers 1-2) that God had ordered, this census was taken so David could take pride in the strength of his army. In determining his military strength, he was beginning to trust more in military power than in God. There is a thin line between feeling confident because you rely on God's power and becoming proud because you have been used by God for great purposes.

The Bible text says Satan *incited* David to take a census. Can Satan force people to do wrong? No, Satan only *tempted* David with the idea, but David *decided to act* on the temptation. Ever since the Garden of Eden, Satan has been tempting people to sin. David's census was not against God's law, but his reason for the census was wrong—pride in his mighty army while forgetting that his real strength came from God.

Even Joab, not known for his high moral ideals, recognized the census as sin. From David's example we learn that an action that may not be wrong in itself can be sinful if it is motivated by greed, arrogance, or selfishness. Often our motives, not the action itself, contain the sin. We must constantly weigh our motives before we act.

David fell to Satan's temptation. God provided a way out in Joab's counsel, but David's curiosity was spurred on by arrogance. His faith was in his own strength rather than in God's. If we feel self-sufficient and put confidence in ourselves apart from God, we soon fall to Satan's schemes. Self-sufficiency pulls us away from God.

When you are tempted, examine your inner desires to understand why the external temptation is so appealing. (See 1 Cor. 10:13 for more about escaping temptation.)

## **Numbering the people**

### **2 Samuel 24:4-9**

But the king insisted that they take the census, so Joab and his officers went out to count the people of Israel.

First they crossed the Jordan and camped at Aroer, south of the town in the valley, in the direction of Gad. Then they went on to Jazer, then to Gilead in the land of Tahtim-hodshi and to Dan-jaan and around to Sidon.

Then they came to the stronghold of Tyre, and all the cities of the Hivites and Canaanites. Finally, they went south to Judah as far as Beersheba.

Having gone through the entire land, they completed their task in nine months and twenty days and then returned to Jerusalem.

Joab reported the number of people to the king. There were 800,000 men of military age in Israel and 500,000 in Judah.

Scripture does not record that God made any such statement to David or his men. The men were probably offering their own interpretation of some previous event such as David's anointing (1 Samuel 16:13) or Jonathan's prediction that David would become king (1 Samuel 23:17). When David's men saw Saul entering their cave, they wrongly assumed that this was an indication from God that they should act.

### **1 Chron. 21:4-5**

But the king insisted that Joab take the census, so Joab traveled throughout Israel to count the people. Then he returned to Jerusalem and reported the number of people to David. There were 1,100,000 men of military age in Israel, and 470,000 in Judah.

## **1 Chron. 27:23**

When David took his census, he did not count those who were younger than twenty years of age, because the Lord had promised to make the Israelites as numerous as the stars in heaven.

Joab began the census but never finished it because the anger of God broke out against Israel. The final total was never recorded in King David's official records.

### **Joab supports Adonijah as successor to David**

#### **1 Kings 1:7**

Adonijah took Joab son of Zeruiah and Abiathar the priest into his confidence, and they agreed to help him become king.

God-fearing people like David and Samuel were used by God to lead nations, but nevertheless they had problems in family relationships. God-fearing leaders cannot take for granted the spiritual well-being of their children. They are used to having others follow their orders, but they cannot expect their children to manufacture faith upon request. Moral and spiritual character takes years to build, and it requires constant attention and patient discipline.

David served God well as a king, but as a parent he often failed both God and his children. Don't let your service to God even in leadership positions take up so much of your time and energy that you neglect your other God-given responsibilities.

Because David had never interfered by opposing or even questioning his son, Adonijah did not know how to work within limits. The result was that he always wanted his own way, regardless of how it affected others. Adonijah did whatever he wanted and paid no respect to God's wishes. An undisciplined child may look cute to his or her parents, but an undisciplined adult destroys himself and others. As you set limits for your children, you make it possible for them to develop the self-restraint they will need in order to control themselves later. Discipline your

children carefully while they are young, so that they will grow into self-disciplined adults.

### **1 Kings 2:28**

Although he had not followed Absalom earlier, Joab had also joined Adonijah's revolt. When Joab heard about Adonijah's death, he ran to the sacred tent of the Lord and caught hold of the horns of the altar.

### **Killed by Benaiah, under Solomon's order**

#### **1 Kings 2:29-34**

When news of this reached King Solomon, he sent Benaiah son of Jehoiada to execute him.

Benaiah went into the sacred tent of the Lord and said to Joab, "The king orders you to come out!"

But Joab answered, "No, I will die here."

So Benaiah returned to the king and told him what Joab had said.

Do as he said," the king replied. "Kill him there beside the altar and bury him.

This will remove the guilt of his senseless murders from me and from my father's family. Then the Lord will repay him for the murders of two men who were more righteous and better than he.

For my father was no party to the deaths of Abner son of Ner, commander of the army of Israel, and Amasa son of Jether, commander of the army of Judah.

May Joab and his descendants be forever guilty of these murders, and may the Lord grant peace to David and his descendants and to his throne forever."

So Benaiah son of Jehoiada returned to the sacred tent and killed Joab, and Joab was buried at his home in the wilderness.

Joab had spent his life trying to defend his position as David's commander. Twice David tried to replace him, and both times Joab treacherously killed his rivals before they could assume command (2 Samuel 3:17-30; 2 Samuel 19:13; 2 Samuel 20:4-10). Because Joab was in his service, David was ultimately responsible for these senseless deaths.

But for political and military reasons (see the note on +2 Samuel 3:39), David decided not to publicly punish Joab. Instead he put a curse on Joab and his family (2 Samuel 3:29). Solomon, in punishing Joab, was publicly declaring that David was not part of Joab's crimes, thus removing the guilt from David and placing it on Joab where it belonged.

### **Life Application**

Those who live by violence often die by violence. Even brilliant leaders need guidance

Joab's life illustrates the disastrous results of having no source of direction outside oneself. Brilliance and power are self-destructive without God's guidance. Only God can give the direction we need. For that reason, he has made available his Word, the Bible, and he is willing to be personally present in the lives of those who admit their need for him.

**To ask Jesus to come into your heart please pray this Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, I believe you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I ask you to forgive me of my sins and coming into my heart. I accept you as savior and will follow you as Lord. Amen.

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