GIVING GRIEF A VOICE

SERIES: GIVE ME AN AUTHENTIC VOICE

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2 Samuel 1:17-27
Fourth Message
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On the day that we celebrate the graduation of many of our school children it's appropriate that we examine David's "graduation speech" on the day that he ascended to the office of king of Israel. The issues that David addressed then are seldom mentioned in modern-day graduation speeches, however. Today we hear the tired tune played over and over that the current generation of graduates is the best ever; that if they dream dreams and work hard there is nothing they cannot accomplish. But David strikes a different note. His challenge to us is that growing up has everything to do with how we embrace loss and limitation. If we do, we will discover a mysterious love that keeps us going when our dreams are shattered. David's speech is a tribute to Jonathan, the one who contributed most to his life, and what his friendship meant to David now that he was dead. Our culture doesn't deal well with loss, but David was a master at this. There is much to learn from how he gives voice to his grief.

The story of David and Jonathan is the most wonderful tale of friendship in the Bible. It was the one gift that David could count on when the whole world turned against him. The story of these two men has four parts, each of which accentuates the cost and the beauty of friendship in all its glory and pathos. Their relationship began from a distance. Jonathan was a keen spectator during David's confrontation with Goliath. Something indescribable happened to Jonathan that day. The narrator says that his soul "was knit to the soul of David, for Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (1 Sam 18:1). The Hebrew word "knit" (*qashar*) means "bind together as one"; the noun means "a conspiracy." Ironically, this was how Saul would interpret their relationship (20:30-31). The image evokes memories of the Joseph story, when Judah, speaking to Joseph concerning Jacob's love for Benjamin, said, "his life is *bound up* in the lad's life" (Gen 44:30). There is no stronger human affection. This is the kind of bonding that mothers experience with their newborns. David's success did not threaten Jonathan; it stirred him deeply. Instead of feeling jealous and displaced, Jonathan loved this kindred spirit. In a demonstration of that spirit he stripped himself of his weapons and gave them to David, publicly acknowledging that his friend was the rightful heir to Saul's crown. Jonathan ("gift of God") was always living up to his name.

Their second encounter (1 Sam 20) is a four-part scene of incredible drama as each of them comes to realize what their friendship would cost: for David, a life of exile to the wilderness; for Jonathan, death. To prepare for the worst, Jonathan wrote his will, making David the guardian of his children. The text captures the poignancy of their parting: "And they kissed each other and wept together, but David wept the more" (20:41).

Their third meeting took place months later. David had been continually on the run from Saul's relentless pursuit. He was weary, exhausted and in dire need of refreshment, and Jonathan risked his life to find and encourage him. The Hebrew text reads, literally, that Jonathan "strengthened his [David's] hand on God" (1 Sam 23:16). Jonathan was like a refreshing desert stream that reminded David of God's unwavering commitment to him.

The final scene plays out the heights of friendship on Mount Gilboa (1 Sam 31). Gilboa, a barren ridge rising to a height of 1,700 feet, separates the Harod Valley from the plain of Jezreel, about seven miles west of the Jordan River. "The Philistines attempted to dominate the valley and threatened to cut the tribes of Galilee off from Mount Ephraim…The Philistine victory was absolute and the important cities of Jezreel remained under their control."[1] The Philistines routed Israel's army and killed Saul and his three sons. Saul was decapitated. His weapons were carried off as trophies for display in the Philistine temple of Ashtoreths, while his body and the bodies of his sons were impaled on a wall in Beth Shan. In a night raid, a valiant group of men from Jabesh Gilead rescued the four bodies from further defilement. They took them down from the wall, burned them, and then gave their bones a decent burial.

David was in Ziklag when he first received news that Jonathan was dead. How would he give voice to his grief? How does one speak of a friendship so beautiful yet so short-lived, now violently shredded? Are there words to describe such desecration? David's poem is so significant that the editors of the canon, rather than placing the poem in the collection of the psalms, left it in the narrative portion of Samuel so that future generations would take time to pause from the story and enter into David's grief. Perhaps this was to respect David's instructions:

> **David took up this lament concerning Saul and his son Jonathan, and ordered that the men of Judah be taught this lament of the bow (it is written in the Book of Jashar): (2 Sam 1:17-18, NIV)**

Standing with someone who is bound up in grief is a holy act. This is what we will do today as a model of what we should do for each other. David didn't deny, ignore or bury his grief: he faced it and embraced it. It was unthinkable to him to continue his journey to the throne until he had hewn out deep channels to act as conduits for his tears. Studying this poem over the years, I have discovered that it is not only *what* David said that is important, but *how* he said it reveals one way the ancient Hebrews processed their grief. This process unfolds in four distinct stages.

I. Using Images to Verbalize Grief (1:20-23)

The first thing to note about David's "way" of voicing his grief is his use of concrete images from the story to give unspeakable grief a name. These images create strong tensions within his soul that intensify rather than dull his weeping. Giving a *name* to grief is the first step to embracing and controlling it, instead of being overrun by it. David's first cry is one of impotence.

A. The Cry of Impotence (1:20-21)

> **"Tell it not in Gath,**
> **proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon,**

lest the daughters of the Philistines be glad,
lest the daughters of the uncircumcised rejoice." (1:20)

After the opening line about the painful image of the royal crown slain on Gilboa, David cries out in anguish: "Tell it not in Gath!" Here Israel's worst fears were realized. Their king was dead. Saul was left unprotected, abandoned by God. He was slaughtered, defiled, dismembered and displayed by the enemy. The painful irony is that Israel's king suffered the same fate as Goliath. Now the news would spread to Gath, Goliath's hometown. One can almost hear the jeers and gloats of the victorious army on their homeward march, to be greeted with the cheers and songs of the Philistine women whose "gospel" is the defeat of Israel. Once the Israelites were the victors, and their women sang. Now the Philistines are the victors. Their women are singing, while our women are weeping (v. 24). The unthinkable has happened. Life has dealt us our worst fears. The uncircumcised exult and our God is implicated. Shame slaps us in the face, and David is impotent to do anything about it.

In the next verse David makes an anguished cry to the creation to cooperate with him in his grief.

"O mountains of Gilboa,
may you have neither dew nor rain,
nor fields that yield offerings [of grain].
For there the shield of the mighty was defiled,
the shield of Saul—no longer rubbed with oil." (1:21)

If the height of Gilboa was the place where God turned his back on his anointed (depicted in the image of Saul's shield lacking oil[2]), and the shield of the mighty was defiled,[3] then may that be the place where all of creation laments forever. May the heavens hold back their blessings of rain so that in that desecrated place worship will never again be carried out. If we are overcome with grief, we long for all of creation to groan with us in our pain. When Emily and I lost both of our children it was raining. I found that the downpour brought a mysterious comfort. It was as if the heavens were weeping with us. If we are consumed in grief, it is abhorrent to the psyche that things should continue as usual. There is a discord in the soul if the Creator does not act in accordance with the events of history.

Elie Wiesel felt this powerful dissonance when he returned to Birkenau thirty-five years after surviving four concentration camps:

> The Beginning, the end: all the world's roads, all the outcries of mankind, lead to this accursed place. Here is the kingdom of night, where God's face is hidden and a flaming sky becomes a graveyard for a vanished people.
>
> The beauty of the landscape around Birkenau is like a slap in the face: the low clouds, the dense forest, the calm solemnity of the scenery. The silence is peaceful, soothing. Dante understood nothing. Hell is a setting whose serene splendor takes the breath away.
>
> A fluke of nature, or was it planned by the torturers? This contrast between God's creation and human cruelty is to be found wherever the Nazis implemented their Final Solution: Here, as at Treblinka, Maidanek, and Buchenwald, the theoreticians and technicians of collective horror carried out their work surrounded by beauty, not ugliness.
>
> Only now do I discover the harmony and beauty of Birkenau. Surely, I was not aware of it thirty-five years ago. Then I saw only barbed wire; it bounded the universe. Sky? Birkenau had no sky. Only today do I perceive its blinding and searing light; it consumes memory.[4]

David's graphic images give voice to his impotency in the face of death: "That which I dread, I cannot prevent, and that for which I long I cannot create." He is helpless to prevent the inevitable, and powerless to accomplish the impossible. Now, drawing images from Saul's and Jonathan's life, David gives voice to his unspeakable loss.

B. The Cry of Unspeakable Loss (1:22-23)

"From the blood of the slain,
from the flesh of the mighty,
the bow of Jonathan did not turn back,
the sword of Saul did not return unsatisfied.

"Saul and Jonathan—
in life they were loved and gracious,
and in death they were not parted.
They were swifter than eagles,
they were stronger than lions." (1:22-23)

Here at the center of the poem is the eulogy, the place where one remembers the departed at their best. Remembering Saul and Jonathan, David paints them in magnificent splendor as invincible warriors. They never went out to battle in vain; their weapons always accomplished their aim. Overpowering all opponents, they ruled supreme. They were swifter than eagles and stronger than lions. But now these once glorious images are forever ravaged by tragedy. Every image which once evoked praise and awe—the archer's accurate bow, the penetrating sword of the king, the spilled blood of the slain, the eagle's speed, the lion's strength—now becomes a painful reminder of how Saul and Jonathan died on Gilboa. Once glorious memories are transformed into cruel reminders of the savage power of death. Like a two-edged sword they lacerate the soul. This is a common experience when death invades our existence.

Even more grievous to David is the painful irony that what killed Jonathan was not his sin, but his loyalty. Jonathan regarded being Saul's son as his highest role in life . Rather than joining David in the wilderness he stayed with his father in the royal court. Even when his father charted a doomsday course for the royal family, Jonathan stood with him and went down with the sinking ship. "Should loyalty have killed my friend?" David cries.

David has marvelous freedom before God to be honest about all the tensions in his soul. And in the careful selection of each image he gives his grief a name. He gives voice to everything we have ever experienced but did not feel we had permission to speak of. Yet David says it with a bold honesty, in full view of the public, and in the sacred presence of God.

II. Moving Grief Through the Soul (1:19,25,27)

Once grief has been identified it has to find a way to move, for if it remains buried, with the passing of time it freezes over, and our hearts freeze over with it. In this poem David designs images to unlock his grief, then uses repetition of the refrain to gently but firmly move grief through his soul until it is fully spent in the presence of God and others. The refrain appears three times, but oddly enough, it does not occur at regular intervals, nor is it an exact repetition. A careful look at David's use of the refrain will reveal his genius as a poet that accomplishes his healing work on us.

A. First Refrain (1:19)

"Your glory (or "gazelle"), O Israel, lies slain on your heights.
How the mighty have fallen!" (1:19)

Fokkelman captures the poignancy of the scene: "In the (opening) clause and the refrain he does not mince matters for

the length of one verse: the land humiliated, deprived of its pride and ornament, the dead everywhere up there. It is, however, such a terrible sight to the poet that he cannot bear this for longer than one verse."[5] No one wants to venture up to Gilboa to see what took place on that terrible day, yet if we are to be healed we must look—and it is the genius of the poet that he is able to take us there unawares. David gets us up to this mountain to see what we do not wish to see by crafting an image filled with ambiguity that, by its very nature, invites our curiosity. The first word of the poem, *tzevi,* translated "beauty" or "ornament," is also a homonym for the word *gazelle*.[6] Right at the outset the Hebrew listeners are launched down the path of unknowing. They don't know if David has written this poem as a national lament for a dead king, the royal ornament of Israel, or as a poignant song of personalized grief for an intimate friend, that swift footed *gazelle*, Jonathan.

David suspends our emotions for almost the entire length of the poem. It isn't until verse 25, when the refrain repeats and we sing that anguished cry a second time, that the focus becomes clear. With the change of a mere one word, the mysterious *tzevi* is identified, and the harsh reality of what went on is fully uncovered.

B. Second Refrain (1:25)

"How the mighty have fallen in battle!
Jonathan lies slain on your heights." (1:25)

Now we know all too well. Our worst fears have been realized. We are staring at a dead gazelle—Jonathan, pierced through, slain. The poignant irony is that he has fallen in the midst of what he did best—the battle. With these striking blows to our soul we may be tempted to turn away, but before we can collect our dazed thoughts the refrain quickly rings out again, thrusting us forward with amazing speed to the end of the battle. We have been held captive by the poet to see what we did not want to see, and now we are forced to see it to the bitter end.

C. Third Refrain (1:27)

"How the mighty have fallen!
The weapons of war have perished!" (1:27)

What stark finality and eerie silence death brings over the poet. The image of the "weapons of war perished" evokes a number of memories from David's story. His last act over a vanquished Goliath was to cut off the Philistine's head and take his weapon as the trophy of victory. When you capture the weapons of the enemy, it's over. Here the image reminds David of Saul's misplaced trust in his weapons (especially that impotent spear which never found its mark), and of Saul's sword that, ironically, became the instrument of his own death. "The weapons of war have perished." By implication, so are those who trusted in them. But the image has a dual edge. It is also a painful reminder of Jonathan, who is portrayed as the one who is always giving his weapons away, holding nothing back in his loyalty to David. Could such a gift cost his life?

The repetition of the refrain moves grief through the soul. David is adamant that Israel's grief not remain stagnant, lest it petrify, encased within bitter walls of unfeeling. And so it works on us as well. Drawn in by the ambiguity, we are captured by the poet to relive that dreadful day and, carried along by the quick repetition of the refrain, to remain to its severe end. In each of the three repetitions we hear the same agonizing cry, "How the mighty have fallen!" But each time it is packed with more emotion. Tears are released, the river flows freely, and our grief is fully spent.

As David spends his grief before the throne of God, something very profound happens. Mysteriously he is purged of his pain.

III. As Grief is Spent, Pain is Purged (1:23-24)

A. The Gift of Honor (1:23)

"Saul and Jonathan —
in life they were loved and gracious,
and in death they were not parted.
They were swifter than eagles,
they were stronger than lions." (1:23)

Earlier in the story, David was convincing Jonathan that Saul was bent on killing him, saying "there is only a step between me and death!" (1 Sam 20:3). But now David turns a blind eye to Saul's demonic like obsession and describes both Saul and Jonathan by saying, "in life they were loved and gracious, and in death they were not parted." In this candy-coated adulation, or outright hypocrisy? I think neither. I suggest that, having fully spent his grief in the presence of God, David finds himself strangely purged of the pain caused by Saul. Taking our pain directly to the Lord allows us to disconnect emotionally from the hurts that people have done to us. There is not an ounce of bitterness left in David's soul from all the abuse that Saul had thrust at him. Through the power of the poem, his soul is purged of bitterness, cleansed of spite, and protected from retaliation. Then he is able extract something holy out of Saul's life, one thing that displayed the image of God, and honors him with it: Saul was a great warrior.

B. The Gift of Love (1:24)

"O daughters of Israel,
weep for Saul,
who clothed you in scarlet and finery,
who adorned your garments with ornaments of gold." (1:24)

If honor were not enough, David finds the capacity to love his former enemy. Through the poem David gives Saul the gift he always wanted in life: the adulation and respect of the "daughters of Israel." Ironically, this was the very thing that provoked Saul's enmity and fueled his obsession to kill David, when the women first sang, "Saul has slain his thousands and David his tens of thousands" (1 Sam 18:7). But now David has no trouble giving Saul the praise of women, for he himself had something far better: the love of his son. Such is the healing power of David's lament to verbalize his grief, air his pain, and be cleansed from bitterness, all so that he might be able to love.

So David addresses the daughters of Israel who sang the victory songs for him after his military exploits. He reminds them that the clothes they are wearing are a reminder of Saul as the charismatic victor in war (clothed in Spirit), who clothed them with the spoils of victory. Now David says "Weep," because this charismatic figure is no more. With his emphasis on the women's elaborate clothing, David may be making them uncomfortable by what is left unstated: their dead king now lies naked, stripped in shame. Their party clothes are no longer appropriate; therefore they must weep and rend their garments as David has done. Our world tries to numb its pain by partying. But David asks, "How can you celebrate when the king is dead? Weeping is the only appropriate response." There is no greater gift in a time of loss than when multitudes come to stand by your side to weep with you. This is the gift of love that David gives to Saul, the one who formerly tried to kill him.

Once David's pain is purged we come to the fourth stage of

the poem: the ability to transform the desecrated into the sacred.

IV. Transforming the Desecrated into the Sacred (1:26)

"I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother;
you were very dear to me.
Your love for me was wonderful,
more wonderful than that of women." (1:26)

This national lament for a dead king now takes a very personal turn, as David speaks in the first person. We have finally come to the destination to which he has been driving throughout the poem: the chance to speak a final word to his friend. It is always a moving moment at a funeral when the living speak directly to the dead. Years of buried feelings surface and saturate a few well-chosen words with a lifetime of emotion.

The most amazing thing about the power of the poem is David's ability to go back to a past time and place where he was once painfully absent and relive the event as if he had been present. The poem's power transforms a once tragic moment into a holy moment, for now not only is Jonathan present (as if raised from the dead), but David is present as well—and so is God. In the recitation there is holy love flowing between them all.

	Before the Poem	**After the Poem**
Jonathan:	dead	alive
David:	absent	present
God:	?	holy love
Gilboa:	desecrated	consecrated

Once the poem is constructed it creates a window into heaven that transcends time. And this holy window remains open forever, inviting all to freely relive the event in all the holiness of sacred memory. Every time the poem is read that transcendence of heaven uniting with earth, of friends embracing, of love bursting the breast, breaks in upon us again and again.

Through the poet's intensifying cadences we have been mysteriously drawn to a place and time where we did not wish to go, to a forbidden place and foreboding time when memories were marred by the tragic and lacerated by loss. But now the tragic has been transformed into the sacred. And those poetic cadences and rhymes that we once dreaded now fill us with hope and anticipation of life, a beautiful, holy life that we can relive again and again. The poem creates a window into the sacred that transcends time, a window that remains open…forever.

David's poem leaves us to contemplate a love which he describes as "more wonderful than the love of women." Arriving at the depths of his sorrow, he somehow embraces an indescribable love. Sadly, some interpreters with a corrupt lens and narrow life experience take this to refer to an inappropriate kind of male love. But to any honest student of the text and the story, that interpretation rings as blasphemous. The term David uses to describe Jonathan's love is from the Hebrew root *pala'*, which describes something so extraordinary and miraculous that only God could have authored it. The kind of love that sacrifices career and family relationships for another person, and finally gives one's life's blood that someone else might succeed, is a love that describes the character of God. As Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Because of the wonder of this love, David confesses that Jonathan's death affects him in a comprehensive way. He will never be the same. Every time he places the crown on his head will be a sacred reminder that it came at the high cost of Jonathan's blood. And as we pause and weep with David, how can we not be equally as affected by the gift that God gave to David, and the greater gift he has given us, in his Son? Perhaps this suggests that at the place of our deepest sorrow we are able to experience that wondrous love of the cross.

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul,
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul.

–Alexander Means

1. Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 74-75.

2. Warriors would rub their shields with oil before battle to make them slippery. Here the lack of oil on Saul's shield may also be a metaphorical reference to the absence of God's Spirit that had departed from him (1 Sam 16:14).

3. The word defiled means to "abhor, loathe." The only other place where this term is used prior to this text is Lev 26, where it is found five times (11, 15, 30, 43, 44) to explain God's rejection of Israel if Israel abhors the Lord's statutes. With that context in mind, the term implicates Saul for his earlier disobedience.

4. Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory* (New York: Schocken, 1990), 105, 106.

5. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, vol. 2, The Crossing Fates* (Assen/Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1986), 659.

6. *Tzevi* is used as ornament in later texts of Scripture (Isa 4:2; 13:19, 23:9; 28:1,4,5; Jer 3:19; Ezek 7:20), while gazelle is its meaning in earlier and closer contexts (Deut 12:15; 14:5; 15:22, 2 Sam 2:18). The nearest use of the term is found in 2 Sam 2:18, where it refers to Asahel, who "was as swift-footed as one of the gazelles which is in the field."

This message from Scripture was preached at Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino, on Sunday, June 1st, 2003. PBCC is located at 10061 N Blaney Ave., Cupertino CA 95014. Offices: 10062 Miller Ave., Suite 108, Cupertino CA 95014. Tel. (408) 366 6690. Website: www.pbcc.org.