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2 Sam 13:23–13:38

6th Message

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# FAMILY MATTERS: THE GIFT OF GRIEF

SERIES: A MAN AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART

It is better to go to the house of mourning  
than to go to the house of feasting,  
for this is the end of all mankind,  
and the living will lay it to heart.

Sorrow is better than laughter,  
for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.  
The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,  
but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

Ecclesiastes 7:2-4

In our series on David, we find Israel's king in the midst of a reconstruction process. The good news is that God took seriously David's prayers to be restored with a clean heart (Ps 51:10-12); the bad news is that David does not like the process. Nathan prophesied that God was going to use his sons as mirrors of the crimes David committed against Bathsheba and Uriah. What he did in secret, they will do in public. Last week we saw how Amnon's rape of his half-sister Tamar brought out into the light the hidden violence of David's adultery with Bathsheba.

Through the sins of his sons, God was faithfully restoring David with a new heart, one like the Father's that grieves the sins of his children, and yet never loses compassion or tender longings for them (Jer 31:20). But surprisingly David, a man after God's own heart, staunchly resists this process. Instead of embracing the sorrow and confronting his son with his crime, he retreats into isolation and nurses the rage of his bruised ego. It's not hard to empathize; after all, who among us enjoys abdominal surgery, let alone having it broadcast on *60 Minutes*. But God is faithful and never gives up on his servant, for he loves David even when he spurns his methods. Fortunately, God has the ultimate weapon that is able to break through even the most resistant heart. I call it "the gift of grief."

As we pick up the story, two years have passed since David's eldest son, Amnon, raped his half-sister, Tamar. During that time David sits idle, sealed shut in his own silent rage. Compromised by his own past, he is impotent to discipline his son and bring about restitution for his daughter.

Living in the shadow of a compromised monarch, the royal court is enveloped in a shroud of sordid shame that masks a sea of seething emotions. Life in the royal court must have seemed like a bad soap opera during those days. I wonder how David was able to look Tamar in the face during those two years. How do you face a daughter who, when she needed you most, you turned away from? How did her father address her when she was in attendance at the royal feasts? Or was she conveniently absent, kept in seclusion in Absalom's home to avoid public scrutiny and not be an embarrassment to her father? How did the king relate to Amnon, his lustful son, who imitated his sin in spades? Did he ever vent his anger to him in public? Or was every rebuke and angry stroke he wanted to fling at him cut off at the throat by the memories of his own past? And what of Absalom, who excommunicated his brother in silence? How did he engage his

brother at the family feasts? Did rage continue to burn through his penetrating stare, or did he feign politeness with a severe coolness that only hatred brings?

After two years, Absalom steps into the vacuum left by the king and takes matters into his own hands. Our text today depicts the contest of son against father and their contrasting roles. In the first section the key figure is Absalom, who emerges as the master planner, initiator and victor. In the second, "we encounter a passive David who is even literally *patiens*, suffering. He is doomed to wait, to talk, and to mourn."<sup>1</sup>

## I. Deceiving His Father (2 Sam 13:23-27)

### A. Absalom's ploy (vv. 23-25)

After two full years Absalom had sheepshearers at Baal-hazor, which is near Ephraim, and Absalom invited all the king's sons. And Absalom came to the king and said, "Behold, your servant has sheepshearers. Please let the king and his servants go with your servant." But the king said to Absalom, "No, my son, let us not all go, lest we be burdensome to you." He pressed him, but he would not go but gave him his blessing. (2 Sam 13:23-25 ESV)

Once again David is made an unwitting accomplice, but Absalom's orchestration far outshines his brother's. Amnon carried out his sordid lust for his half-sister through the help of his cousin's spontaneous plan. Absalom, on the other hand, needs no assistance, and methodically plots his actions out over two years. With meticulous precision he doesn't leave anything to chance. He begins by orchestrating the exact time and place of the murder. It was sheep shearing time, when families and workers normally gathered to celebrate and divide profits after summer grazing. For Absalom to invite "all the king's sons" to the annual stockholders celebration was nothing out of the ordinary. And Baal-hazor was an excellent location. Being fourteen miles north of Jerusalem, it provided ample distance from the royal court for Absalom to make his escape.

To alleviate David's suspicions, Absalom invites the king and his royal officials to join in the festivities. It is a calculated request, given in the knowledge that David will refuse. To bring the entire court to the festivities would be a burden that the king does not want to impose on his son. But Absalom persists. "In so doing, he drives his father into the uncomfortable corner of having to say no"<sup>2</sup> not once, but twice. Unable to comply, David retreats behind his blessing on the event.

### B. Absalom's persistence (vv. 26-27)

Then Absalom said, "If not, please let my brother Amnon go with us." And the king said to him, "Why should he go with you?" But Absalom pressed him until he let Amnon and all the king's sons go with him. (vv. 26-27)

Having successfully manipulated his vulnerable father into passive resistance, Absalom makes a bold move. Like a Las Vegas high

roller, he boldly lays the “Amnon” card on the table, as if he has nothing to hide. The king’s suspicions are briefly aroused, but when he questions his motives, Absalom’s insistence overpowers David’s resolve until he finally caves. Compromised by sin, David has lost his astute ability to discern hidden motives, not to mention his moral resolve to stand alone in what is right and true. Israel’s leader cannot bear the thought of disappointing his handsome son. Rather than standing up to his manipulation, David grants his request. Amnon is sent along with the rest of his sons, to ensure Amnon’s safe return.

The father is no match for his son, whose cunning skill is superior to Amnon’s. Unlike his brother, Absalom is brazenly bold in confronting his father and succeeded without the aid of an assistant like Jonadab.

Having won the first battle, we’ll see how Absalom functions as a military commander.

## II. Commanding his Troops (2 Sam 13:28-29)

**Then Absalom commanded his servants, “Mark when Amnon’s heart is merry with wine, and when I say to you, ‘Strike Amnon,’ then kill him. Do not fear; have I not commanded you? Be courageous and be valiant.” So the servants of Absalom did to Amnon as Absalom had commanded. Then all the king’s sons arose, and each mounted his mule and fled. (vv. 28-29)**

Absalom knows he will not be able to get near his brother at the festival, so he enlists his loyal servants to carry out the treacherous deed. His plot is designed to fulfill Tamar’s prophetic words that, if Amnon violated her, he would be forever labeled as a depraved fool in Israel. The term fool (*nabal*) reminds us of the Nabal story and his demise after his heart “was merry with wine” (2 Sam 25:36-37). Absalom will take on the persona of his angry father when he vowed to exterminate Nabal. “Let this sensual brother of mine consume his wine. And when he has lost his senses and the ability to react quickly, strike him dead!” Absalom’s timing assures his servants that they court no danger in a possible counterattack.

But such an act is high treason and requires great courage. To stir their royal imaginations, Absalom adopts the language of holy war and sets himself up as the new commander-in-chief. With their courage enflamed, Absalom’s servants are transformed into obedient warriors on a secret mission to establish the new kingdom. They strike their target with precision and encounter absolutely no resistance. The event is so understated it makes Absalom appear as the premier military strategist in Israel. By contrast all the king’s sons who, assuming that they are also marked for assassination, flee on their mounts. These mules, once symbols of royal status, now in the blink of an eye, carry the king’s sons into exile, as refugees – an ironic turn of events.<sup>3</sup>

This is Absalom—more shrewd than his father, David, and more powerful than his brother, Amnon. The king’s eldest son and successor to the throne is dead. Tamar is avenged and the obstacle to the throne eliminated. With powerful force the text presses the reader with the question, “Who indeed shall be the next king in Israel?” The second movement focuses on David and the impact the day’s events had upon his soul.

## III. Manipulating the Media (2 Sam 13:30-33)

### A. First report: enflamed rumor (vv. 30-31)

**While they were on the way, news came to David, “Absalom has struck down all the king’s sons, and not one of them is left.” Then the king arose and tore his garments and lay on the earth. And all his servants who were standing by tore their garments. (vv. 30-31)**

Leaving nothing to chance, Absalom not only orchestrates the exact time and place of the murder, but also the reporting of the event. David is traumatized having to endure the details of his son’s death not once, but three times. Each time the gaping wound is reopened with more salt poured in. The first time it is enflamed rumor, where the murder of one is reported as a massacre – “Absalom struck down *all* the king’s sons.”

The news hits David with the force of an airline disaster. He rises, shreds his robe with as much grief as Tamar felt with the rending of her royal garment. The heart-rending tear multiplies and moves through the palace in an unstoppable wave of grief. David is finally captured by the grief that he denied his daughter, refused Bathsheba, and eschewed Uriah. Grief has seized him by the throat. David has already endured the death of his infant son, but this has cosmic dimensions he cannot comprehend – his family is annihilated and the only son left has disqualified himself to rule. That phrase “not one of them is left” strikes not only at a father’s heart, but at the promise of God. Has Absalom’s act annihilated the Davidic Covenant? Speechless with horror, he grasps the earth, hoping to lay hold of heaven.

The fact that the rumor travels from Baal-Hazor to Jerusalem faster than the refugees on their mounts makes us wonder if this was part of Absalom’s master plan. But who spread this rumor with its inflated numbers? It had to have originated in Jerusalem, and it doesn’t take us long to figure out who the culprit was.

### B. Second report: truth stings (vv. 32-33)

**But Jonadab the son of Shimeah, David’s brother, said, “Let not my lord suppose that they have killed all the young men, the king’s sons, for Amnon alone is dead. For by the command of Absalom this has been determined from the day he violated his sister Tamar. Now therefore let not my lord the king so take it to heart as to suppose that all the king’s sons are dead, for Amnon alone is dead.” (vv. 32-33)**

Once again Jonadab, David’s nephew, steps onto the stage at the critical moment. He dispels the rumor of a massacre with the facts – facts that he knows. But how did he get the facts, when the messengers have not arrived from the scene? The answer is that he has been Absalom’s instrument all along and, as his accomplice, it was he who planted the palace rumor that flattened David. Now he reads his scripted speech penned by Absalom. Eugene Peterson gives us a modern look at Jonadab:

Jonadab has a way of being in on the action without taking any responsibility for what happens. Earlier he provided the scheme that made the rape possible; here he seems to know all about the plans for the murder. He is the kind of person who shows up so often in areas of religion and politics—a parasite on persons in power. People like this do nothing creative or responsible, but always seem to be on hand with insider gossip information that may be of use.<sup>4</sup>

Jonadab reads his script flawlessly. Beneath the veil of comfort his words are laced with venom designed to strike deeply at the heart of

Absalom's father. "This was not mass murder; only one son is dead. And Absalom really did you a favor, carrying out the justice for his sister that was denied by you." Twice he smites David's heart with "Amnon alone is dead," while the phrase, "don't take it to heart," stings like a hot blade on an open wound: these were David's exact words to his general, Joab, when informed of Uriah's battlefield death and the collateral damage of innocent soldiers. David, the master of words, is decimated by those scripted by his son.

### C. Third report: death confirmed (vv. 34-36)

**But Absalom fled. And the young man who kept the watch lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, many people were coming from the road behind him by the side of the mountain. And Jonadab said to the king, "Behold, the king's sons have come; as your servant said, so it has come about." And as soon as he had finished speaking, behold, the king's sons came and lifted up their voice and wept. And the king also and all his servants wept very bitterly. (vv. 34-36)**

Having had to endure two reports of his son's death, David must undergo the trauma a third time through those closest to the event, and to the king himself -- his own sons. We are pulled into the event through the eyes of the young watchman. As he looks over the city wall to the horizon northwest of Jerusalem, he sees a cloud of dust approaching the city as the king's sons race home on their mounts. As we anticipate the emotional reunion of father embracing sons, the ever-present Jonadab inserts an info-commercial. Like a dispassionate news reporter, he upstages the relational drama to promote his position as the most reliable source of information in the kingdom. "Yes, you can always count on "Jonadab," spelled J O N A D A B ("he is willing), to give you accurate reporting whenever a tsunami of grief arrives at your door!"

Jonadab understands the importance of timing. Not a moment after he finished speaking, his words are immediately confirmed by the arrival of David's shell-shocked sons. Their cries ignite the whole palace in wailing. It is loud, it is all consuming, and it beckons everyone and everything to the center of their sorrow. Such tears can be healing, cleansing us of old wounds and reawakening us to God's presence and the things that matter. Unfortunately for David, Absalom inflicts a final blow on his father, making resolution impossible.

### IV. Leaving His Father Powerless (1 Sam 23:37-38)

**But Absalom fled and went to Talmai the son of Ammihud, king of Geshur. And David mourned for his son day after day. So Absalom fled and went to Geshur, and was there three years. (vv. 37-38)**

Absalom fled north to seek protection from the king of Geshur, a country East of the Jordan in Syria. Talmai, the king of Geshur, was the father of Maacah, Absalom's mother (2 Sam 3:3). This final card played by Absalom prevents David from exacting justice. With no resolution possible, David's wounds will remain open, just as Tamar's did for two years. David, temporarily restrained, lives paralyzed by a sorrow so deep he cannot sort it out. With one son dead and the other in exile, David is plunged into a black hole of grief where he will remain for three years.

### V. Grief's Gift

The lesson for David is clear: the one who once abused and stood indifferent to others is now likewise abused and powerless to combat it.

[David] had abused the people around him in various ways, had in his egoism pretended not to see its mercilessness, and had put on an air of stark indifference. Now he is abused; his sons Absalom and Amnon use him for their own crime thorough manipulation. The victims are of David's own flesh and blood so that he finally experiences himself what mercilessness is. His ego cannot protect him against this with an armor of indifference and mock-strength. It is destroyed, and a weak, mourning David *patiens* remains.<sup>5</sup>

Without the lens of faith, we might be tempted to think that David's story is about to end, and that Absalom will be taking center-stage. For as Waltke writes, "The father is blind and out of touch, while the younger generation outwits the king who is supposed to have preternatural powers of insight. (cf. 14:20; Prov 25:2-3)."<sup>6</sup> But for those who cast their lot in with the handsome upstart, they would soon be gravely disappointed. Just like Judas to come, they would find him hanging from a tree.

Though David's life falls prey to agony and mourning, his life and legacy will continue to endure. He will attempt to resist God's gift for still longer, but eventually God will win. And when grief does its work, we will witness one of the most glorious portrayals of humility in the narrative dramas of Scripture (2 Sam 15-16) and hear some of the most devout prayers in the entire Psalter (Pss 3, 63, 143).

I've come to the conclusion that grief is a divine gift to us, regardless of the reasons for which it is given. Whether we are the innocent victims of tragic circumstances or receiving the consequences of our sins, it makes no difference. If we will embrace it, grief is perhaps the most effective tool God has for spiritual transformation. It has the unique ability to break through hard and merciless hearts and to reprogram them with a renewed capacity to feel pain. Pain, rightly received, gives birth to compassion, and compassion sows seeds that bring us into a harvest called love.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, a professor of philosophy at Calvin College, lost his twenty-five year old son, Eric, in a climbing accident. In his book, *Lament for a Son*, he writes,

Standing on a hill in Galilee Jesus said to his disciples,  
Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they shall be comforted. (Matt 5:4)

Blessings to those who mourn, cheers to those who weep, hail to those are filled with tears, hats off to those who suffer, bottoms up to the grieving. How strange, how incredibly strange!

When you and I are left to our own devices, it's the smiling, successful ones of the world that we cheer. "Hail to victors" – the nations that won in battle, the businesses that defeated their competition, the athletes who came in first, the politicians who won their campaigns.

Why cheer tears? It must be that mourning is also a quality of character that belongs to the life of his realm.

Who then are the mourners? The mourners are those who have caught a glimpse of God's new day, who ache with all their being for that day's coming, and who break out into tears when confronted with its absence...They are the ones who realize that in God's realm there is no one without dignity and who ache whenever they see someone treated with indignity. They are the one's

who realize that in God's realm of peace there is neither death nor tears and who ache whenever they see someone crying tears over death. The mourners are aching visionaries.

The Stoics of antiquity said: Be calm. Disengage yourself. Neither laugh nor weep. Jesus says: Be open to the wounds of the world. Mourn humanity's mourning, weep over humanity's weeping, be wounded by humanity's wounds, be in agony over humanity's agony. But do so in the good cheer that a day of peace is coming.<sup>7</sup>

Fifteen years after the death of our firstborn son, I was privileged to see the musical of all musicals, *Les Misérables*. The night before the battle at the barricade, Jean Valjean prays for the life of his son-in-law. It is a passionate, haunting prayer of a father for a son. God hears his prayer, the son lives and the father dies. In my case, the son died and the father lived. In the mourning process I discovered what Nicholas Wolterstorff affirmed – I became an “aching visionary.”

“God on high, hear my prayer,  
in my need, you have always been there.  
He is young, he is afraid,  
let him rest, heaven blessed,  
bring him home, bring him home.”

Grief bore a window into my steel heart,  
ache became light's channel of another place.  
Now I long to be where you dwell, knowing  
I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.

You made my soul a lyre,  
and placed in it new strings,  
to play a tune of broader range,  
than can ever be sung on earth.

I cannot sing the song yet,  
but in my wanderings as a stranger here,  
the God of Mt. Moriah has lifted the veil,  
and for a few moments I have stood there.

What I have seen the eye cannot tell,  
but over the horizon my heart has heard,  
you singing in harmony with the Son,  
not alone, but in a symphony of boys.

God on high, heard my cry,  
“Bring him home.”  
He brought him home,  
not my home, but his,  
not one son, but many.

So I am content to continue my journey here,  
not begetting but adopting  
the orphans of every race  
to join the procession Home.<sup>8</sup>

Besides being an aching visionary, I also discovered that without suffering, God's love remains theoretical and distant. As we learn to accept and embrace our grief, in some measure we enter into the sufferings of Christ and are better able to appreciate Jesus' sacrificial love demonstrated in his atoning sacrifice on the cross.

**And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn. (Zech 12:10)**

This is the ultimate gift of grief – to look on him who *we* pierced, and mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child – this is grief divine, that transcends our sorrow and gives birth to love.

1 J. P. Fokkelman, *King David, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel* (Assen: Van Corcum, 1981), 114.

2 Fokkelman, *King David*, 116.

3 Fokkelman, *King David*, 117.

4 Eugene H. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel* (WBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 196.

5 Fokkelman, *King David*, 159.

6 Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology, an Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 667.

7 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 84-86.

8 Brian G. Morgan, “Bring Him Home, In Appreciation for My Son, David Jonathan” (unpublished, 1990).