FAMILY MATTERS: A FATHER'S FACE

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Brian Morgan
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SERIES: A MAN AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART

Is Ephraim my dear son?
Is he my darling child?
For as often as I speak against him,
I do remember him still.
Therefore my heart yearns for him;
I will surely have mercy on him,
declares the Lord.
Jeremiah 31:20

Elie Wiesel, one of the most significant writers to emerge from the Holocaust, begins his personal memoirs with the surprising admission –

> I never really knew my father. It hurts to admit that, but it would hurt him even more if I deluded myself. The truth is I knew little of the man I loved most in the world, the man whose merest glance could stir me.[1]

Such a confession is probably more common than we imagine. Several years ago Bernard Bell and I were teaching a group of pastors on the tiny, remote island of Rote, in Indonesia. On our team was a tough-minded, type-A, no-nonsense Silicon Valley CEO, who was part of an infamous group of men I affectionately called, "the sons of Zeruiah" (these were David's strong-willed nephews, Joab, Abishai and Asahel, who lived by the motto – "You want it done, give me a gun!"). Early each morning we would drive from our little hotel on the coast five miles up a windy, dirt road, past fields of lush rice paddies to the Pentecostal church where the conference was held. One morning I turned around to see my friend gazing out the window; tears were streaming down his face. In the distance was a farmer walking hand in hand with his son behind their oxen, plowing their rice field – father and son, son and father, intimately sharing together in the simplicity of everyday work. I discovered later that my friend was inwardly starving for such a touch from his father, but after two decades of hardness of heart, he had lost all hope.

No theme in all of literature moves us more deeply than that of the restoration of severed relationships, especially those involving fathers. Who doesn't long for just one glimpse of his father's face smiling over him in that rare sweetness of approval, especially after years of coldness or silence? That reconciling embrace doesn't happen very often, but when it does, the air seems permeated by the miraculous, as if Jacob's God came down the ladder once again. To witness a vast labyrinth of characters and circumstances working in unison to break through years of resistance, replacing bitterness and rancor with warmth and tenderness, is perhaps one of life's greatest joys. I would rank it up there with the joy of childbirth. When it happens to us, we know we are privileged partners in God's grand story of redemption.

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 staunchly resists this process, so much so that he bears little resemblance to "a man after God's own heart." But though David resists, God does not give up. We pick up the story as David is submerged in grief over the loss of his son Amnon, who was violently killed by his brother, Absalom.

> **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. And the spirit of the king longed to go out to Absalom, because he was comforted about Amnon, since he was dead. Now Joab the son of Zeruiah knew that the king's heart went out to Absalom. (2 Sam 13:37-14:1 ESV)**

David's emotions in verses 13:39 and 14:1 are ambiguous. Most English translations interpret the verbs positively as, "And King David *longed to go* to Absalom, for he was *consoled* concerning Amnon's death. Joab the son of Zeruiah knew that the king's heart *longed for* Absalom" (13:39-14:1 TNIV). But Fokkelman astutely observes that this seems to violate the context of David's rage and the need for Joab to employ such radical means to bring the banished one home. He better translates the verbs in their negative connotations:

> **"And King David longed intensely *to march out against* Absalom, for he was grieved about Amnon, that he was dead. Joab now, the son of Zeruiah, discerned that the king was *ill-disposed toward* Absalom."[2]**

With this interpretation we can begin to comprehend the depths of the pain that Absalom inflicted on his father. With one son dead and the other in exile, David is plunged into a black hole of grief so deep that he cannot get out. Fokkelman writes:

> Its immobility is yet increased by the trap into which he has fallen, and which is one of the cruelest which can emotionally entrap a person, rancor. Its two cords, anguish and rage, pull in opposite directions, only tightening the knot. David's rage for the murderer is the other side of the coin of his mourning for the victim, for both are his sons.[3]

With his rage building with each passing day, David longs to march out against Absalom and bring him back to Jerusalem by force. David's key general, Joab, discerns the king's anguish and rage and attempts to intervene to untie the Gordian knot. But, it is no easy task to penetrate a heart that is mired in grief and walled in by rage. How do you draw forgiveness out of a well of rage?

What follows in the fourteenth chapter of Second Samuel is an ingenious plan; "it is the longest as well as the richest and most complex conversation recorded in the books of Samuel."[4] Every incident in this fascinating account is designed to accomplish one end: to bring a banished son home into the presence (lit. "face") of his father ("face" is the key word that links every scene in the chapter).

I. A Soft Feminine Face (2 Sam 14:2-11)

> **And Joab sent to Tekoa and brought from there a wise woman and said to her, "Pretend to be a mourner and put on mourn-**

ing garments. Do not anoint yourself with oil, but behave like a woman who has been mourning many days for the dead. Go to the king and speak thus to him." So Joab put the words in her mouth. (vv. 2-3)

As Eugene Peterson writes, "Joab, blunt, direct and impetuous, a man of action, is not ordinarily given to subtleties, but this situation seems to call for delicate handling."[5] What Joab needs is a wise and beautiful woman, like Abigail, to intervene. You'll recall that when David was consumed with rage against Nabal, it was Abigail's decisive intervention that disarmed the king's rage and restored his trust in God to vindicate him. Joab finds such a woman in Tekoa, a town just south of David's birthplace in Bethlehem. Joab gives her his script and dresses her in the garb of mourning (a word used three times for emphasis) to reach deep into David's grieving soul for an empathetic hearing. The woman from Tekoa plays her role brilliantly, and goes after the king in three rounds of dialogue.

A. Round 1 (vv. 4-8)

When the woman of Tekoa came to the king, she fell on her face to the ground and paid homage and said, "Save me, O king." And the king said to her, "What is your trouble?" She answered, "Alas, I am a widow; my husband is dead. And your servant had two sons, and they quarreled with one another in the field. There was no one to separate them, and one struck the other and killed him. And now the whole clan has risen against your servant, and they say, 'Give up the man who struck his brother, that we may put him to death for the life of his brother whom he killed.' And so they would destroy the heir also. Thus they would quench my coal that is left and leave to my husband neither name nor remnant on the face of the earth." Then the king said to the woman, "Go to your house, and I will give orders concerning you." (vv. 4-8)

The wise woman from Tekoa humbly approaches the king. With her face to the ground, she petitions David as the highest and last court of appeal. She relates to David the litany of woes that have befallen her and are now threatening to wipe out her family line.

The three incidents are explained, each in increasing length and intensity (1 line, 3 lines, 5 lines). In the first, death struck her husband, making her a widow. In the second, death struck again with greater severity, taking one of her two sons. She has had to endure the cruel fate of reliving the Cain and Abel story. If that were not bad enough, she is now enduring the trauma of having to stand alone against the entire family who are demanding blood revenge against the murderer.

The grieving widow concludes her speech with a powerful metaphor, "they would quench my coal that is left," an image that resonates deeply in the heart of the king. With these deep undertones of anguish she makes her appeal to David, who is in mourning himself.

The facts of the case necessitate that the king must rule between two conflicting principles in Israelite justice. The first is the right of the family clan to exact justice and blood revenge, the second is the survival of the house of a father. Which principle will win out, justice or mercy? By evoking the memory of the Cain and Abel story, the wise woman leads David to God's ruling of mercy, in the mark of protection that he had placed on Cain (Gen 4:15). The result is that the king, himself in mourning over a lost son, wastes no time in favoring mercy. David grants the widow a ruling, and promises to issue a decree of protection (perhaps like our modern restraining order). But the wise woman of Tekoa is not satisfied.

B. Round 2 (vv. 9-10)

And the woman of Tekoa said to the king, "On me be the guilt, my lord the king, and on my father's house; let the king and his throne be guiltless." The king said, "If anyone says anything to you, bring him to me, and he shall never touch you again." (vv. 9-10)

David's promise is too vague for her; she wants something more concrete. Her persistence pays off, as the king promises to personally intervene against all threats on her life. Thus she has secured a decree of protection, coupled with the king's personal intervention. Still not satisfied, she presses David further.

C. Round 3 (v. 11)

Then she said, "Please let the king invoke the Lord your God, that the avenger of blood kill no more, and my son be not destroyed." He said, "As the Lord lives, not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground." (v. 11)

She insists on the king's guarantee, a vow similar to the one that God gave to Cain (Gen 4:15). She presses David to invoke the name of the Lord to prevent the terrible revenge threatening her one remaining son. David responds with an oath, irrevocably committing himself "to protect her son from the impersonal machinery of justice."[6]

Now that she has skillfully placed David in her corner, she very sensitively introduces a new issue–that of Absalom's exile, which has been hanging over Israel like a dark cloud.

II. The Mirror of a Son's Face (2 Sam 14:12-17)

A. The tables are turned (vv. 12-14)

Then the woman said, "Please let your servant speak a word to my lord the king." He said, "Speak." And the woman said, "Why then have you planned such a thing against the people of God? For in giving this decision the king convicts himself, inasmuch as the king does not bring his banished one home again. We must all die; we are like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again. But God will not take away life, and he devises means so that the banished one will not remain an outcast." (vv. 12-14)

That widow's face now becomes a mirror of Absalom's face. With the decree David has condemned his banishment of Absalom, a deed that impacts not just his immediate family, but also the entire nation. In very straightforward language, she pulls theological rank and strikes at David painfully. As God's representative on earth, David has failed to emulate the character of God in refusing to show mercy to his son. The woman's statement is a stinging indictment against cold fathers, who pride themselves in unyielding principle, refusing the slightest touch of warmth. A home that is governed by justice alone will some day be an empty home.

The wise woman of Tekoa follows up her striking, painful words with a radical change of tone.

B. The voice of the populace (vv. 15-17)

Now I have come to say this to my lord the king because the people have made me afraid, and your servant thought, 'I will speak to the king; it may be that the king will perform the request of his servant. For the king will hear and deliver his servant from the hand of the man who would destroy me and my son together from the heritage of God.' And your servant thought, 'The word of my lord the king will set me at rest,' for my lord the

king is like the angel of God to discern good and evil. The Lord your God be with you!" (vv. 15-17)

Surprisingly, the woman of Tekoa changes her tone from blunt severity to vulnerability and flattery. And to our amazement, she manages to do so keeping the cover of her widowhood intact. She explains that, on her own, she would never have broached such a delicate issue with the king. But, given that people knew she was going to have a hearing with the king, they forced her to bring up the issue. Initially the thought terrified her, but she overcame her fear knowing how wise and gracious the king was. She likens him to an angel of God, so she has high hopes. Like a skilled surgeon, the woman from Tekoa first cuts deep to first expose and lay bare, then washes and cleanses the open wound with a soft and tender touch, and finally closes the wound in cheerful hope.

As Fokkelman concludes, "The Tekoite woman has delivered a masterpiece." She is an example of the rare and challenging art of reconciliation, like Abigail, she is a blessed peacemaker.

Like it or not, David is now forced to see the face of his son.

III. A General Changes the Face of Things (2 Sam 14:18-23)

A. A general behind a widow's face (vv. 18-20)

Then the king answered the woman, "Do not hide from me anything I ask you." And the woman said, "Let my lord the king speak." The king said, "Is the hand of Joab with you in all this?" The woman answered and said, "As surely as you live, my lord the king, one cannot turn to the right hand or to the left from anything that my lord the king has said. It was your servant Joab who commanded me; it was he who put all these words in the mouth of your servant. In order to change the course [lit. "the face of"] of things your servant Joab did this. But my lord has wisdom like the wisdom of the angel of God to know all things that are on the earth." (vv. 18-20)

At this point David realizes that behind the mask of the woman from Tekoa is the shrewd Joab. After further probing, the truth becomes known. "Yes," she says, "He did it to turn the *face* of the matter"–an appropriate image, designed to get an angry father to *face* his son with forgiveness. Bound by his own oath, David carries out his vow.

B. A general on his face (vv. 21-23)

Then the king said to Joab, "Behold now, I grant this; go, bring back the young man Absalom." And Joab fell on his face to the ground and paid homage and blessed the king. And Joab said, "Today your servant knows that I have found favor in your sight, my lord the king, in that the king has granted the request of his servant." So Joab arose and went to Geshur and brought Absalom to Jerusalem. (vv. 21-23)

The story ends where it began, but with all the masks removed. Instead of the woman on her *face* before the king, now it is Joab on his *face*. His artful intervention on behalf of Absalom appears to have been a great success. But, like most peace processes, getting an agreement is one thing; carrying it out is painfully quite another.

IV. A Two-faced Son (2 Sam 14:24-32)

A. Shut out from the father's face (v. 24)

But the king said, "He must go to his own house; he must not see my face." So Absalom went to his own house and did not see the face of the king. (v. 24 TNIV)

David's anger, subdued for a few moments by the soft feminine face, now resists and subdues any feelings of tenderness. He fulfills the vow, but only to the painful letter of the law. He brings Absalom out of banishment to Jerusalem, to his very own house, but then quarantines the prince. "You can have your way, you spoiled son of mine, but you can't have my heart." Then like an angry child, David slams the door shut in his face.

Why can't this father look into his son's face? Is it because the son bears his father's image? Is he afraid that if he stares into the eyes of his son, tender affections will well up and overtake his angry soul? Sadly, rather than giving mercy a place in his soul, David prefers to live with the abiding memory of his son as a murderer, thereby keeping his rage intact and his principles firm. So Absalom returns to Jerusalem, but only to be cut off from his father's face. Peterson observes,

Whatever line David is using to rationalize his position, underneath there is a bedrock refusal to forgive, a withholding of grace, a denial of mercy. This is the third monumental sin of David's life, the most inexcusable, and one for which he will pay the highest price.[7]

B. An ominous beauty pageant (vv. 25-27)

Now in all Israel there was no one so much to be praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom. From the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him. And when he cut the hair of his head (for at the end of every year he used to cut it; when it was heavy on him, he cut it), he weighed the hair of his head, two hundred shekels by the king's weight. There were born to Absalom three sons, and one daughter whose name was Tamar. She was a beautiful woman. Absalom lived two years in Jerusalem without seeing the king's face. (v. 28 TNIV)

Sandwiched between the two reports of the king's quarantine is an ominous "beauty pageant," one that takes the national press by storm. Everyone is Israel is taken by the stunning appearance of the king's son and potential heir (not to be confused with hair – a painful note since I have none). Absalom is an icon of beauty, a model specimen for the fashion magazines, and a hands down favorite as heir to throne. His splendor is a throwback of his father's former glory; and his young daughter, Tamar, is a powerful symbol of his commitment to avenge wrongs and uphold the rights of women. In the beautiful Tamar the nation is able to envision the healing Absalom could bring to his father's troubled administration.

But for the discerning listener, one detects an over-inflated ego that is self-consumed and knows how to play the crowd. He flaunts his beauty with his "glorious" ("glory" and "weight" are identical in Hebrew) hair, an object so sacred it remains untouched by human hands for 364 days ever year. Then on the day of reckoning, he transforms an ordinary barbershop into holy Mt. Moriah, placing his holy hair on the altar, announcing its weight (glory) in royal numbers. The prince relishes his fame, while his father is oblivious to it.

C. In the general's face (vv. 29-32)

Then Absalom sent for Joab, to send him to the king, but Joab would not come to him. And he sent a second time, but Joab would not come. Then he said to his servants, "See, Joab's field is next to mine, and he has barley there; go and set it on fire." So Absalom's servants set the field on fire. Then Joab arose and went to Absalom at his house and said to him, "Why have your servants set my field on fire?" Absalom answered Joab, "Behold, I sent word to you, 'Come here, that I may send you to the king, to ask, "Why have I come from Geshur? It would be better for me to be there still." Now therefore let me go into the king's

presence [lit. "let me see the king's face"], and if there is guilt in me, let him put me to death.'" (vv. 28-32)

After two years of living in isolated hatred, Absalom refuses to be ignored any longer. He sends several emails to Joab to intervene, but after they go unanswered, his pent-up rage ignites Joab's field on fire. A characteristic behavior of the spoiled son – when he doesn't get his way, he is "in your face." He is able to bully even the powerful Joab into arranging a meeting with his father.

D. On his face before his father (v. 33)

Then Joab went to the king and told him, and he summoned Absalom. So he came to the king and bowed himself on his face to the ground before the king, and the king kissed Absalom. (v. 33)

Finally, the long anticipated moment arrives. The veil of rejection is lifted, and the eyes of both son and father meet after five years. The irony is that if Absalom, this arrogant son, wants to see his father's face, he must bow his face all the way to the ground, a humbling position for him. Yet bow he does. Then the father moves toward the son and kisses him. A reconciliation that he promised long ago is now sealed with a kiss.

Is that it? After five years estrangement, one courtly bow, followed by a kiss, with no words spoken? How different was this meeting from the occasion when Jacob and Esau met; or when Joseph, after years of exile, finally looked upon his brothers who had sold him into slavery. As Joseph looked at his own flesh and blood, face to face, forgiveness welled up within his soul and completely overtook him. He collapsed on his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin collapsed on his neck, weeping (Gen 45:14). That was true reconciliation. Yet, with David and Absalom, we are left hanging in silent suspense.

Did their faces ever meet?
Did their eyes glaze over with tears replete?
Did they ever lift their voice as if to speak,
father king and long lost son?
Or was pain too strong and killed the song,
for which we ache and in grieving long?

V. Reflections On A Father's Face

A. A Warning

This story serves as a stern warning to those who hide their faces and nurse their anger, no matter how right they are. What pain David had caused by postponing reconciliation. For David, the kiss was a giant step in the long process of healing, but his full emotion would not be fully revealed until Absalom was dead–and then it was too late. Will you wait until the grave to express your tenderness? If you do, you will be like David, left with that gaping void of words with no embrace.

B. A Tribute

When fathers are estranged from their children, everybody is affected: the son who is in exile, the father who nurses his hurt, the royal court which lives in the midst of it, and the entire nation which has became enveloped by it. The emotions of both parties are so charged and the hurt so deep that neither can face the other, and the kingdom becomes choked in a paralysis of an unforgiving spirit.

Onto the scene comes Joab, who inserts that soft feminine face, a disguised voice of reconciliation that invites, probes, exposes, convicts and heals. Once the widow is given an empathetic ear, she puts God's heart on the table. In life, mercy must always outrun justice, or all of life will be eliminated. Blessed be that voice. Blessed are those who understand the dangers of unchallenged rancor and bitterness. Could you see yourself as a Joab and risk yourself to intervene and bring a banished son home?

C. The final story: waiting father

The loose ends of our story stir us to keep reading. How will the story ultimately end? We don't find an ultimate resolution until the story of David's greater Son. In Luke 15 in the parable of the prodigal son we learn how the heavenly Father loves his wayward children. It is an exact reverse image of the Absalom story. In 2 Samuel 14 the father wants to kill his son, but in the gospel of Luke, it is the son who, by asking for his inheritance while his father lives, is saying to his father, "I wish you were dead." In the Absalom story a multitude of intermediaries are needed to convince the father to forgive his son and escort his banished son home. In Luke there none are needed. The son is convicted of his sin by his conscience. He races home, humble and repentant; but with no escort. While at home, a waiting and distraught father needs no urging. Forsaking his dignity, he lifts his robe and runs to embrace his son, something unheard of in the ancient world. It is as the boy makes his way home that we behold the face of the Father*:*

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him (fell on his neck), and kissed him again and again." (Luke 15:20).

Here is mercy outrunning justice.
Father finding lost, sick son,
running til they meet,
til face to face they stand to gaze,
eyes glazed with tears replete,
and O how they lift their voices as if to speak,
father king and long lost son.
Was there ever a kiss so sweet?

When you realized that you were the banished son, and felt the face of your heavenly Father falling upon your neck, with flagrant kisses, weeping, then forgiving a rebellious son is child's play.

1 Elie Wiesel, *Memoirs*: *All Rivers Run to the Sea* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 3.

2 J. P. Fokkelman, *King David, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel* (Assen: Van Corcum, 1981), 126-127.

3 Fokkelman, *King David,* 127.

4 Fokkelman, *King David,* 127.

5 Eugene H. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel* (WBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 197.

6 Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 198.

7 Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 201.

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