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2 Samuel 15, Psalm 3  
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# THE (NARROW) ROAD TO RECOVERY

**SERIES: A MAN AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART**

Father's Day is a day to honor fathers, and in the past we have often heard testimonies by a son or daughter in the congregation on the exemplary character of their dad. It's always moving to hear heart-felt words of appreciation from the younger generation – words that raise the bar on the role that fathers play in the lives of their children. But what about those men who failed as fathers? Some men entered fatherhood with no tools for nurturing their children and damaged their children as a result. Others left untold wreckage in their wake by abandoning all they knew to be true, and dove headlong into self-indulgence. Do the Scriptures have a word for them on Father's Day?

To those of you who have been following the David story, it comes as no surprise that he was far from being a model father. But from the character he exhibits in our text today, I would award him the title, "The Father of Repentance."

## I. Prelude to Revolution (2 Sam 15:1-13)

### A. Seeds for revolution (vv. 1-7)

In our last study we left Absalom on bended knee, being kissed by his father David. This gesture was the king's first movement toward reconciliation with his son after isolating him for two years. But it was too little, too late. Absalom's rage, which lit Joab's field of barley ablaze, will now burn across an entire nation in a conspiracy of hatred.

Absalom began by strategically placing himself at the entrance to the city gate in the early morning hours to intercept all who were on their way to receive legal rulings from the king. At every encounter he gives voice to the frustration that the plaintiffs of Israel felt regarding the king's inaccessibility: "See, your claims are good and right, but there is no man designated by the king to hear you" (2 Sam 15:3). In the fertile soil of these empathetic hearts Absalom planted the seeds of revolution: "Oh that I were judge in the land! Then every man with a dispute or cause might come to me, and I would give him justice" (v. 4). These well-timed encounters were sealed by a kiss, and the plaintiff would depart, having been personally received, empathetically listened to, and intimately touched by the king's son. In this manner Absalom stole the hearts of all Israel away from his father.

### B. Launching the revolution (v. 8-13)

After four years of sowing the seeds of discontent within the populace, the time was ripe to launch his revolution. Absalom approached his father under the guise of paying his vows to the Lord in appreciation for God having brought him back to Jerusalem. This was not just an act of treachery against his father, but also flagrant blasphemy against God. Sadly, a broken David is unable to discern the deception and sends Absalom ("father of peace") away to Hebron in "peace" (*shalom*), a word steeped in irony. D-Day arrives, and in a manner reminiscent of the battle of Jericho, Absalom sounds the trumpets all throughout Israel announcing that a new king has arisen in Israel – a son of David, a self-appointed king. As the trumpet blasts reverberated throughout the surrounding districts of Israel, David felt the tremor in Jerusalem.

And a message-teller came to David, saying:

**The heart of the men of Israel (has gone) after Avshalom!**

**(2 Sam 15:13 Everett Fox's translation)<sup>1</sup>**

David's kingdom is collapsing under his feet, all at his son's initiative. It's difficult to imagine the emotions that must have been churning inside David on that day. His soul was tormented with regret: regret for his handling of Amnon's rape of Tamar; regret for the way he handled his vengeful son Absalom. And underlining each layer of regret was bitter remorse for his sins of adultery and murder, inexcusable behavior that had now shaped the character of his two sons. What to do? Fight or flee? What would you do?

What do you do when the consequences of life come raging back to slap you in the face? When the affair is found out (as it always is) and your marriage is in jeopardy? Or when the secret, silent drinking starts screaming at your liver? Or when those minimum payments that bought you time, suddenly plunge you into bankruptcy? What do you do? Can God's name be mentioned? Can his presence be sought? Will he be found? What do you do?

In the many counseling situations I have had with those who were in similar circumstances, I found this to be a life-saving text. David's journey from Jerusalem to the desert provides us with a topographical map for "The Narrow Road to Recovery." It reveals that repentance is not an instantaneous action, but a lengthy and arduous process that restores one back to wholeness. In this journey, David exits from his palace, descends down to the valley of the Kidron, ascends up the Mount of Olives, and then descends into the desert. The topography of the scene mirrors the interior transformations within David's soul. The two descents symbolize his humiliation, while his ascent up the Mount of Olives symbolizes his exaltation through faithful friends. Along the way, he has five significant encounters that purge his pride, renew his faith, strengthen his trust and give birth to hope.

## II. The Gateway of Humility (2 Sam 15:14-17)

### A. Walking away and letting go (vv. 14, 16)

- 14 So David said to all his servants  
who were with him in Jerusalem:  
Arise, let us get-away,  
for we will have no remnant (left) before Avshalom!  
Hurry to go,  
lest he hurry and overtake us and thrust evil upon us  
and strike the city with the mouth of the sword!
- 16 So the king and all his household went off on foot,  
and the king left ten concubine women  
to keep watch over the palace-house.

As David's world topples he faces it honestly and realistically, choosing to flee rather than fight, lest he subject the royal capitol to a blood bath. Throughout his entire life, David never made an illicit reach for the crown. Now when it is contested, he still refuses to grasp the crown that is only God's to give. He trusts in God alone to reinstate him (a message sorely neglected by dictators, politicians and Christian leaders). David willingly walks away from everything he holds dear – his

reputation, his comfort, his dignity. There is nothing he doesn't actively discard, all for the sake of having God...*again*. He closes the palace door behind him and makes his final descent along the city wall to the Kidron valley.

### B. Humiliation crossings (v. 17)

- 17 The king and all the fighting-people went off on foot, and they stopped at the Far House.

Though he is forced to flee in haste, David chooses a slow, contemplative route of departure, one that will make him feel every stone and pebble under his feet, one that will magnify his sorrow and heighten his humiliation. The place he chooses to make his historic crossing to that other world is at the "Far House," the location from which he will nostalgically look back upon his beloved capitol. And as Ari Cartun suggests:

If the sewer system of that time was anything like that of subsequent Jerusalems, the sewage probably flowed out of the city through the lowest gate, which would have been the farthest from the palace. Thus, David's first humiliation is completed by his exiting the city with the refuse."<sup>2</sup>

Bereft of royal apparel and courtly entourage, David publicly embraces his shame. This terrible "letting go" and vulnerable exposure with nothing to hide is a vital first step to restoration and a mark of true greatness.

## III. Expressions of Loyalty (2 Sam 15:18-23)

### A. Undying loyalty (vv. 18-22)

- 18 Now all his servants were crossing over next to him,  
that is, all the Cherethites and all the Pelethites  
and all the Gittites, six hundred men  
who came on foot from Gath,  
who were crossing over in front of the king.
- 19 The king said to Ittai the Gittite:  
Why will you go, even you, with us?  
Return and stay with the king,  
for you are a foreigner,  
and also you are an exile from your (own) place.
- 20 (Just) yesterday (was) your coming;  
and today should I make you wander with us,  
in (our) going-forth?  
I am going wherever I am going;  
return, and have your brothers return with you,  
(in) loyalty and faithfulness!"

To David's surprise (and ours), when he reaches the nadir of his descent, he is immediately embraced by a vast number of loyal subjects who became David's followers when he was residing in Gath. Standing by the Kidron, having divested himself of all dignity, David is stunned by what he sees. A recent convert from Gath named Ittai is attempting join ranks and cross over with the king. In a conversation reminiscent of Naomi's words to the resolutely clinging Ruth (who also was a foreigner), David bids Ittai and his family to return home with his blessing. This foreigner had pledged his vows to David just days earlier, and the king cannot bear the thought of taking him into that desolate, uncertain world of exile. It is too great a price to pay. David gives Ittai the freedom to annul his vows and urges him to remain in Jerusalem and to throw his lot in with the new king—a much more certain situation.

- 21 Ittai answered the king, he said:  
As Yhwh lives and as my lord king lives,  
only in the place where my lord king is,  
whether for death or for life—  
indeed, there will your servant be!
- 22 David said to Ittai:

Go, cross over!"

So Ittai the Gittite and all his men

and all the families that were with him crossed over.

Answering David's command to return to his "place," Ittai forcefully responds with an oath that his "place" is with the king. The wording of the oath affirms, "I belong just as closely to you as you do to God."<sup>3</sup>

He poetically picks up on the word "place" and redefines it in terms that transcend time and space—"in death or in life." The general from Gath has skillfully lifted a line right out of David's own poetry (2 Sam 1:23), one that described Jonathan's loyalty (Heb. "in life and in death not separated"). The love that Jonathan extended to David over years is now compressed into one moment. How well David remembers Jonathan...

Loving him as oneself,  
intertwined, knitted,  
to strip leaving all,  
naked, bare, nothing  
held back,  
all for him,  
crown, messiah, king  
til death bid him bring  
his life his soul his all,  
ahavah, ahavah (love, love).

At the very moment David embraces his humiliation, God gives him the gift of loyal-love, a vision from his past—Jonathan, risen from the dead; risen from the redeemed ranks of those whose arrows impaled his friend on Gilboa. So these two men, once strangers, now in the womb of dangerous flight, are instantly forged as friends forever.

David has little choice but to accept Ittai's incredible oath of loyalty and grant him permission to "pass on." The narrator, who has kept our focus upon these two locked in embrace, now pans the camera back to give us the full view. Ittai's oath includes not just the warrior from Gath, but all his men, some six hundred under his command, and to our great surprise, all their "families" (Heb. *taph* - "children," from the descriptive verb *taphaph* - "take quick little steps") who cross over behind. As Jonathan had stripped and given all he had to David, so now Ittai gives all that he has—his band of brothers along with their wives and children. As Fokkelman observes, "It is the migration of a small nation."<sup>4</sup>

### B. A nation united in grief (v. 23)

- 23 Now all the land was weeping in a great voice  
while all the people were crossing over,  
while the king was crossing Wadi Kidron  
while all the fighting-people were crossing over,  
facing the way to the wilderness. (my translation)

The scene is sealed with the image of a nation bent over in tears and draped in sorrow. Their voices fill the valley of the Kidron in a chorus of anguish appropriate to its name. As Fokkelman observes, "The root *qdr* [which means 'obscure'] occurs only in a context of mourning or disaster."<sup>5</sup> To show the heightened spiritual dimension of the scene, the narrator elevates his description from prose to poetry. Like an artist creating a painting with a minimum of brush strokes, so the poet, using a minimum of words and infusing them with life and movement, creates a miniature universe. Using the broad brush of hyperbole, he declares that what is happening in this obscure, tiny valley of the Kidron has cosmic dimensions.

At the center of the verse is the king, around whom everything revolves. Bracketing his movement are twin lines containing "all the people." They in turn are framed by geographical dimensions, representing the opposite poles of "life in the land of the living," and that foreboding

“face of the wilderness” that looms over the horizon. This concentric structure reveals that all of life is integrated; nothing occurs in isolation. The fate of God’s king determines the fate of all the people, which transports them from Israel’s Eden to the wild and untamed desert. The final image is so foreboding that it stops us in our tracks; like frozen sentinels we stare into the abyss.

This poignant scene is an exquisite cameo of spiritual devotion – a foreigner, with families in tow, embracing Israel’s king in his humiliation and choosing to follow him into that vast unknown. Their devotion foreshadows the gospel, when foreigners would embrace Jesus at the time of his humiliation.

#### IV. Taking the High Road of Trust (2 Sam 15:24-37)

##### A. Misdirected zeal (v. 24)

- 24 And here: also Tzadok and all the Levites with him  
were carrying the Ark of the Covenant of God;  
they set down the Ark of God, and Evyatar (also) went up,  
until all the people had completed crossing through the city.

Before David starts his ascent up the slope to the Mount of Olives, Zadok and the Levites come to meet him. To show their solidarity, they are carrying the Ark of the Covenant, and set it beside the Kidron to signify that God was “crossing over” with David and his loyal friends. One might think David would be encouraged by Zadok’s vote of confidence and the gift of the Ark. But David, whose spiritual senses are now sensitized by his grief, is jolted by the horror of sacred memory. Viewing this scene against the backdrop of Israel’s history, the memory of Joshua at the Jordan rises out of his imagination:

**The priests who bore the Ark of the LORD’s Covenant stood on dry land exactly in the middle of the Jordan, while all Israel crossed over on dry land, until the entire nation had finished crossing the Jordan. (Josh 3:17 JPS)**

David feels the weight of “walking backwards” in history, unraveling the tapestry of God’s kingdom for more than two centuries. This gesture of loyalty only serves to intensify David’s ache in exiting the city. What should David do? Transport the ark with him into the wilderness, carrying the fortunes of God with him into exile? For David, that would be forcing God’s hand and the very height of presumption.

##### B. Naked trust (vv. 25-26)

- 25 The king said to Tzadok:  
**Return** the Ark of God to the city;  
if I find favor in YHWH’s eyes,  
he will let me **return** and let me **see** it, along with his abode.  
26 If thus he says: I am not pleased with you,  
here I am—  
let him do with me as is good in his eyes.”

Through a skillful play on the words “return” and “eyes,” David defines the mysterious relationship between “repentance” and “restoration.” The Hebrew word “return” (*shuv*) used here four times in vv. 25-29), also means “to repent” (lit. “to turn around”).

David explains to Zadok that without authentic repentance on his part there will be no possibility of restoration. David demonstrates his repentance (*shuv*) by allowing the ark to return (*shuv*) to Jerusalem. He will carry no props with him into the wilderness.

Restoration is defined in terms of the “eye,” of seeing God in his rightful resting place while abiding in his presence. If David finds favor in God’s “eyes,” then God will cause him “to return” and he will “see” it again. But if God says, “I have no delight in you” (as he said to Saul), then David will place himself totally in God’s hands to do whatever is good in his “eyes.” David will not presume on God’s grace. Instead, he gives God space in their relationship, allowing him to return to his

“place.” In this way God is free to take the first step in restoration. And if God so chooses, it will be on his terms and his timing, meaning that it will be pure gift. Restoration is not assumed, presumed, or demanded by David. This is faith at its finest, and the second vital step on “the narrow road of recovery.”

##### C. Human initiative (vv. 27-29)

- 27 And the king said (further) to Tzadok the priest:  
Are you a seer?  
Return to the city in peace,  
along with Ahima’atz your son and Yehonatan son of Evyatar—  
your two sons with you (both).  
28 See, I myself will tarry at the crossings in the wilderness  
until word comes from you, telling me (something).”  
29 So Tzadok and Evyatar returned the Ark of God to Jerusalem,  
and they stayed there.

Right as David gives up and lets go he is granted insight to see God’s provision right in front of his eyes. The words “eye” and “return,” which in the first dialogue expressed repentance and restoration, now become the key words that define the practical provisions for David’s survival. It is just as the widow from Tekoa had spoken David:

**But God will not bear a life away, he will plan plans, so as not to banish from him a banished one. (2 Sam 14:14)**

As Fokkelman observes, “What was spoken of originally in Absalom’s interest is now David’s.”<sup>6</sup> David’s letting go, his allowing the ark to return to Jerusalem, becomes the “means” through which God can orchestrate his return. Here we see the beautiful balance between a faith that trusts in God, and a faith that “works” with God and takes initiative to implement the “means” that God provides.

Zadok and Abiathar take on their royal commission and return the ark to Jerusalem, where they will wait for Absalom, who is just a few kilometers from the city.

##### D. Beaten by betrayal! (vv. 30-37)

- 30 But David was going-up the ascent of Olives,  
going-up and weeping, (with) his head covered,  
and (with) him walking barefoot,  
while all the people who were with him  
covered each-man his head  
and went-up, going-up and weeping.  
31 Now David was told, saying:  
Ahithophel is among those banding-together with Avshalom!  
David said:  
Pray make-foolish Ahithophel’s advice, O Yhwh!

A messenger arrives with the worst possible news: a valued member of David’s cabinet, chief counselor Ahithophel (Bathsheba’s grandfather) has betrayed the king and joined Absalom’s conspiracy.

Hearing the shocking news, David quickly breathes out a prayer, “Please-make-foolish, the-counsel-of Ahithophel, Lord!” This hasty prayer of desperation has only four words. David doesn’t have enough breath even to include an “amen.” After more time of reflection, David gives voice to his desperate emotions in Psalm 3:

**LORD, how many are my foes!  
How many rise up against me!  
Many are saying of me,  
“God will not deliver him.” (Ps 3:1-2 TNIV)**

The weary king plods on up the steep slope of the Mount of Olives to its summit, the place where it was customary to worship God. Looking up, he sees the immediate answer to his prayer in the face of Hushai the Archite.



## E. Answered prayer! (vv. 32-37)

- 32 So it was, when David was coming to the peak [lit. “the head”], where (people) would prostrate-themselves to God, that here: (coming) to meet him was Hushai the Arkite, his tunic torn and earth on his head.

Ari Cartun describes the scene:

The appearance of a man with dirt on his head furthers the irony in the scene. That is, on the “head” (summit) of the mount, the head of state, who is fleeing a pretender to the crown, is met by a man whose head is crowned with dirt, yet who will be instrumental in ensuring that the crown stays on David’s head...the text mocks Absalom’s revolt even before it is consummated. And, in this vein, it is significant that it is the Mount of Olives that David ascends to the head of, for it is the oil of the olive that anoints the head of the kingdom.<sup>7</sup>

The timing and appearance of Hushai is no coincidence to David. Once again, a divine appointment is coupled with a flash of human insight. David reasons that Hushai will make an excellent mole within Absalom’s court.

- 33 David said to him:  
If you cross-over with me,  
you will be to me a burden;  
34 but if to the city you return  
and say to Avshalom: Your servant will I, O king, be—  
servant to your father was I formerly,  
but now, I will be your servant!—  
then you will annul Ahithophel’s advice for me.  
37 And Hushai friend of David entered the city  
(just) as Avshalom was about to enter Jerusalem.

David presents Hushai with the opportunity of joining Zadok and his sons in the creation of an elaborate spy network that will transfer insider information from Jerusalem to David in the wilderness. Hushai agrees and reaches the city with just enough time to shower, shave and change his clothes before Absalom arrives. The loyal mourner transforms himself into a 007 spy. His willingness to become a mole in the enemy camp “gives great depth to the [term]...‘David’s friend.’ Hushai shows us what friendship is capable of.”<sup>8</sup>

By the time Absalom reaches the capitol, David has already crossed the summit of the Mount of Olives. A hair’s breath away from being spotted, he safely descends down the opposite side with no possibility of being encircled by the invading army. The scene ends in perfect balance. David, who was betrayed by a friend, now has a friend in the palace, and is therefore not alone in his struggle against Absalom.

## V. Loyal Friends and a Loving God

David has come a long way. He has been lifted out of the humiliation of the Kidron, enveloped in national mourning, and ascended to the very summit where God is met, encountered and worshipped. As Fokkelman observes, these multiple acts of loyalty infuse David with the inner strength necessary to continue on “the narrow road to recovery.”

This positive energy enables him to unfold to the main task, to meet the humiliation and thus be completely himself, very upright and very vulnerable. He had egotistically misused the kingdom and that is why it is now lost, but as a result of that loss there remains only one path open: to be a man. And in actual fact David re-finds himself and his dignity in necessity.”<sup>9</sup>

The story gives depth and definition to David’s words in Psalm 3:

- But you, Lord, are a shield around me,  
my glory, the one who lifts my head high.  
I call out to the Lord,  
and he answers me from his holy mountain. (Ps 3:3-4 TNIV)

As David gazes into the face of his friends, he sees the face of God, whose presence I suspect was more real than what he experienced in Jerusalem. And as they speak, David is infused with the reality of God’s sovereign grace working hand in hand with human initiative. It is a dance of exquisite harmony and balance that defies orchestration. All the way up the mountain we witness the alternating steps of man and God, God and man ascending in the slow, unhurried pace of a divine waltz. What love is this where each partner is so caught up in the presence of the other that the urgency of flight practically disappears? Yet the dance ends right on cue, with David arriving at the summit, safely out of sight, at the exact moment when Absalom enters the city.

This is God’s gift to a failed king who abused his power, and a failed father who doted on his sons. We should never underestimate the power of God’s love to heal the brokenhearted.

## VI. Could You Be An Ittai?

Which leaves me with just one question. When someone has the courage to expose their sin and shame, and then demonstrates their trust by walking away from all they hold dear, could you see yourself being a friend like Ittai, Zadok or Hushai? Could you look them in the eye and identify with them in their humiliation? Could you embrace them and walk with them through an unwanted pregnancy, a divorce, or a prison term. I guarantee you that it won’t be easy. But perhaps you’ll discover new meaning to Paul’s words, “Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2 ESV).

**So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. (Heb 13:12-14)**

1 In order to capture the art and texture of the Hebrew narrative, I have used Everett Fox’s translation with a few minor changes. Everett Fox, Give Us a King! Samuel, Saul, and David, A New Translation of Samuel I and II (New York: Schocken Books, 1999), 226-232.

2 Ari Mark Cartun, “Topography as a Template for David’s Fortunes during His Flight,” *Journal of Reform Judaism*, Spring 1991, 18.

3 J. P. Fokkelman, *King David, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel* (Assen: Van Corcum, 1981), 182. I have leaned heavily on Fokkelman’s outstanding work for my observations and insights on this text.

4 Fokkelman, *King David*, 183.

5 Fokkelman, *King David*, 184.

6 Fokkelman, *King David*, 186-187.

7 Cartun, “Topography as a Template for David’s Fortunes,” 25.

8 Fokkelman, *King David*, 191.

9 Fokkelman, *King David*, 189-190.