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2 Sam 16 & Psalm 63

9th Message

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THE (NARROW) ROAD TO RECOVERY: PART 2

SERIES: A MAN AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART

Growing up as a boy in an all-girl household, I longed to be invited on adventures with men. Whether it was sporting events, or camping, fishing or hunting trips, I would do anything just to be with men. But it wasn't long before I discovered that one can travel alongside a man, and yet never really get "inside" him. It is a privilege to journey alongside a man, but it is an even greater privilege to travel inside him, to see and touch the deepest parts of his soul, especially when he is at a holy crossroads of turning to God in his need.

That rare sense of privilege resounds in my heart as we come to our text in the David story. This detailed account of his journey from Jerusalem to the desert is a no holds barred revelation of the reconstruction of David's soul. We are permitted to enter in on everything that occurs in the long process of restoration. Nothing is hidden from the reader's curious eye: the humiliating egress through Jerusalem in the face of the ghastly stares of the populace; the sense of shame as he exits the city with the refuse; the loud weeping of a nation grieving with him; his mourning clothes draped in dust and ripped in mourning; and then the surprise of countless figures embracing him with a costly love. Their tender touches of sacred loyalty give David's soul the energy to make the ascent up the Mount of Olives to the place where God is met, encountered and worshipped. This mountain-top experience took David by complete surprise and for a brief moment transforms his dark mourning into a joy verging on elation.

But before David will be fully restored he must make another descent, and the vision of triumph will be followed by two more doses of humiliation. On the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives he will come under vicious attack from two members of Saul's family: Ziba, the care-giver of Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth; and Shimei, the son of Gera. David is used by one and abused by the other. The story would be comical if it were not so real to life. Mountain-top experiences are momentary at best. Oftentimes they are followed by dark journeys into the valley of the shadow. Restoration requires tenacious determination to go on, no matter what the cost, and that is what David does. In this steep descent David experiences the most pleasing purification of his soul.

I. Used by Ziba (2 Sam 16:1-4)

A. Deceptive generosity (vv. 1-2)

- 1 Now David had crossed a little beyond the summit where here: Tziva, Mefiboshet's retainer, (coming) to meet him, along with a brace of saddled donkeys, and on them were two hundred (loaves of) bread, a hundred raisin-cakes, a hundred (cakes of) figs, and a skin of wine.
- 2 The king said to Tziva: What do you (mean) with these? Tziva said: The donkeys are for the king's household, for riding, the bread and the figs are for eating (by) the lads, and the wine is for drinking (by) those weary in the wilderness.

(2 Sam 16:1-2 Everett Fox's translation)¹

Ziba was appointed by David to be the executor of Jonathan's estate on behalf of his crippled son, Mephibosheth. To fulfill his vow of loyal-love to his beloved friend, David gave Jonathan's son a permanent place of honor at the king's table (2 Sam 9:6-13). Mephibosheth was incredibly grateful for the king's gracious and generous care.

Typically when an act of kind generosity is given, others are filled with jealousy and envy. They interpret privilege and grace as entitlement. Ziba was no exception. Ever since the day he entrusted with Mephibosheth's property, he has been circling like a vulture, waiting for the opportune time when he could seize his master's estate. Now, when David is most vulnerable, Ziba sees his opportunity.

Ziba intersects David's path just after he had been stung by the news of his chief counselor's betrayal. With the memory of betrayal fresh in David's memory, Ziba surprises David with an array of generous gifts and provisions—donkeys, bread, raisins, fruit and wine—enough to feed an army. On closer examination, the arrangement of these gifts is so similar to the arrangement that Abigail presented David (1 Sam 25: 18ff), that one might suspect that it is the result of a deliberate and devious design. Ziba is garbed in Abigail's shadow and all that she evoked in David. A discerning eye knows that a shadow has no substance. Unfortunately our weary and exhausted king is bereft of his powers of discernment.

B. David takes the bait (vv. 3-4)

- 3 The king said:
And where is your lord's son?
Tziva said to the king:
Here, he is sitting in Jerusalem,
for he says (to himself): Today the house of Israel
will return to me and my father's kingdom!
- 4 The king said to Tziva:
Then here, yours is all that was Mefiboshet's!
Tziva said:
I prostrate-myself!
May I find favor in your eyes, O my LORD king!

Only after the inspection of these gifts, and the granting of the king's favor which Ziba had won, does David ask, "Where is Mephibosheth?" Ziba parts with the information that he has been longing to release, betraying his master with a slanderous lie: "Mephibosheth is staying in Jerusalem, thinking the house of Israel will *return* the kingdom of my father to me." These are stinging words to a man who has just been betrayed by another son.

Tired and vulnerable, and pressed between twin memories of generosity and betrayal, David is thoroughly taken in. Without further investigation he reacts to the tale of deception with a snap decision: "All that belongs to Mephibosheth is yours." Only after Ziba gets the material possessions that he wants does he bow in homage. This gesture is a dead giveaway of his insincerity, but to David, blinded by betrayal, it goes unnoticed and he unwittingly assists in Ziba's betrayal.

Ziba is a forerunner to Judas, who for a few coins betrayed our Lord in his darkest hour. If this has been your experience, know that these are well-trodden, sacred steps for the soul.

II. Abused by Shimei (2 Sam 16:5-14)

A. A storm of stones (vv. 5-6)

- 5 Now when David came to Bahurim,
here: a man was going-out from there,
from the clan of the House of Sha'ul,
his name was Shim'i son of Gera,
going-out, going-out and cursing (him);
6 he pelted David with stones,
and all of King David's servants,
along with all the fighting-people
and the mighty-men to his right and to his left.

Just when it seemed things could not get any worse, the situation deteriorates further. As David and his men continue their perilous descent to the small village of Bahurim, another Saulide appears on the horizon. This man creates no small commotion as he comes out screaming, ranting and raving, swearing endlessly at David. Then, to the utter amazement of all, he starts pelting the king and his followers with stones. Fokkelman describes the scene:

The scene thus conjured up is not without humor: this man on his own is waging a war against an entire army! According to the list of objects, Shimei has no lack of targets. He is certainly not afraid, he completely disregards the truly present (v. 9c) risk that one of his victims may not see the funny side of the rain of stones and curses and will eliminate him at a stroke.²

B. Venomous rage (vv. 7-8)

- 7 And thus did Shim'i say when he cursed him:
Get-out, get-out, Man of Blood, Man of Worthlessness!
8 God has returned upon you
all the blood of the House of Sha'ul
in whose place you reign-as-king,
YHWH has given the kingdom
into the hand of Avshalom your son,
from here, you are in your evil-fate,
for you are a man of blood!

David's exit from Jerusalem gives Shimei occasion to vent a "poisonous and savage rage"³ that he has harbored since David was anointed king in place of Saul. Now Shimei rejoices in David's misfortune. Harkening back to the brutal murders of Abner and Ishbosheth, the accusation that he hurls in the midst of his abuse is that David is a man of bloodshed. David has been guilty of many things in his life, but ironically, this was not one of them. He had nothing to do with those murders, and he never once made an illicit reach for Saul's crown. He had received it as a gift through years of patient waiting and painful persecution. The fact that this self-appointed critic attacked the one area of David's innocence must have burned deeply into the soul of the king. David Roper reflects on this incident, noting that criticism often comes when you least deserve it, from those least qualified to give it, and in a form least helpful to receive it!⁴

However, one man in the crowd that day was not about to allow Shimei's tirade to go unchallenged.

III. Responding to Abuse (2 Sam 16:9-12)

A. Resisting retaliation (vv. 9-10)

- 9 Avishai son of Tzeruya said to the king:
Why should this dead dog curse my lord king?
Pray let me cross-over and take-off his head!

The sons of Zeruiah can always be counted on for swift, decisive action whenever conflict arises – "You want it done? Give me a gun!"

On the surface, Abishai's response seems theologically sound. David, his lord and king, is being unjustly accused for something he didn't do. Further, Shimei not only accuses wrongly, he curses vehemently. The word "curse" (*qalal*: "to treat lightly," "to treat with contempt") is used seven times in this text. If cursing one's parents was a capital offense (Exod 21:17) worthy of the death penalty, how much more deserving of death is cursing the Lord's anointed.

If that were not enough, with no judge or witnesses, Shimei takes it upon himself to carry out the death penalty, and not just upon David, but his whole army. That pushes Abishai right over the edge. Abishai fortifies his heated emotions with theology that seems well suited to the situation. In his view, the whole scene is no different from than when Goliath cursed the living God. The Philistine giant had cursed David, saying, "Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?" David, promptly made that proud Philistine a dead dog and cut off his head. So Abishai offers to be God's man in the gap, "Let me go now, and cut off his head." Sadly however, in this encounter, Abishai is no different than Shimei.

B. Discerning the ultimate source (v. 10-12)

- 10 But the king said:
What is there between me and you, O sons of Tzeruya?
Let him curse (me), for if YHWH says to him:
Curse David,
who is to say: Why do you do thus?
11 And David said to Avishai and to all his servants:
Here, my (own) son, who came-out of my body,
is seeking my life;
how much more, then, the Binyaminite!
Let him be, that he may curse (me),
for YHWH told him to.

David separates and distances himself from Abishai and embraces Shimei's abuse. He knows that Abishai poses a greater threat to his healing process than Shimei. As we have seen all through this journey, sorrow, grief and exile are working together to heighten David's spiritual sensitivities. While Abishai could say, "Consider the source of the criticism. This Shimei is a dead dog," David's faith penetrates beyond the immediate to the ultimate source. He sees a man *coming out*, screaming, "*Get out, get out!*" But behind the face of the man, David sees an angry son, who *came out* from him, and now seeks his life, just as a once angry David longed to *go out* to seek his son's life. Beyond the face of Shimei, David sees his angry son; and behind the voice of a son he hears the voice of the Lord.

Another factor that has sensitized David is that this event occurs at Bahurim (2 Sam 3.16), the place where Michal was forcefully ripped from her husband's arms. Though David may not be guilty of seizing the crown, Bahurim reminds him that he is guilty of seizing other things, with the result that many were left in tears. Yes, integration is returning to David's soul, a spiritual sensitivity that enables him to hear the voice of the Lord in all circumstances. No longer does he need an intermediary, like Abigail, Nathan or the woman from Tekoa, to help him discern the word of the Lord. In Shimei's voice David is able to discern the voice of his wounded son; and in his son's voice, the voice of the Lord drawing near.

There is great irony in David's pain as he made his descent down the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives. On the one hand, it blinded him to deception; but on the other, it imbued him with penetrating vision. Reflecting on this mystery, I wrote this poem:

Descent into the Dust

In craft of bribe,
 masked in memory of that
 fragrant, feminine face,
 our wounded king,
 bereft of friends,
 is used and taken in,
 but in the storm of spitting hate,
 our king awake,
 keeps distance, space
 and sees beneath
 that cruel-like face,
 the longing for a distant son,
 now gone,
 whose face he kissed without a tear,
 but now with blurry eyes
 that holy search beyond that veil of tears,
 that cannot make up for the years,
 he sees,
 tis the face of God
 drawing near.

C. Transforming a curse into a blessing (v. 12)

12 Perhaps YHWH will look upon my affliction
 and YHWH will return me good
 in the place of his curses on this day.

Discerning the God's hand behind Shimei's curses, David is able to neutralize their impact by bypassing the abusive Shimei and turning directly to the Lord. Fokkelman captures the genius of David's reaction:

David realizes that it is beneath his dignity to argue with Shimei and that it is a trap for himself to step into Shimei's system...By all at once naming Yahweh as an agent in the matter, David gives a surprisingly new and deep view of the incident...Shimei's action is a psychic invasion which weighs so heavily that there is practically no more room to see any other side. However, [by distancing himself from Shimei he can] deal creatively with the stream of filth offered to him...By picking up five words of Shimei's [curse and] creating with them a complete text of his own, David nullifies the poisonous influence of Shimei's curse.⁵

David's skill as a poet has returned and through it he successfully defuses a potential minefield where one misstep could have been fatal. With spiritual sensitivity and creativity, he transforms Shimei's curse into an opportunity for purification, his retribution into forgiveness, and his pleasure in the misfortune of others into a hope in the kindness of God who takes pity on our plight. So David embraces the vocabulary of the curse and transforms it into vibrant, life-giving verse. Surprisingly, he does not pick up the key word of Shimei's speech ("blood" is used three times). In the silence of innocence that word is left alone, for true innocence requires no defense. David's actions foreshadow our Lord, "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly" (1 Pet 2:23).

D. Taking the high road of non-engagement (v. 13)

13 Then David and his men went on (their) way;
 but Shim'i was going-along the flank of the hill, alongside him,
 going-along and cursing and pelting stones alongside him
 and dumping dust (on him).
 14 And the king and all the people

that were with him came back weary,
 so they paused-for-breath there.

So David continues on his way, untouched by Shimei's outburst. But Shimei will not be silenced. He follows David's band along the ridge line that parallels the valley, continuing to vent his curses in every direction, all the while pelting the army with stones. David's refusal to respond only serves to heighten Shimei's rage, for he "dusted them with dust"—an act of extreme frustration, yet it does not affect the king. As Fokkelman points out,

The text shows particularly that Shimei cannot really touch David...on the one hand Shimei is cursing in every direction while on the other hand he is a captive in his own frustrated world and cannot make real contact any more...Parallel lines never meet and the scene ends with a Shimei who is left absolutely alone...while David continues on his way.⁶

At last, David arrives at the fords of the Jordan, at the end of a very long day and a fatiguing march, so the army can "pause for breath. The fugitives need fresh air, particularly after the clouds of dust that Shimei stirred up."⁷ David has ceased descending. He is as low as he will go. His journey has brought him to the place where he can now be embraced by God. At the fords of the Jordan he refreshes himself and finds life in poetry and a song (Psalm 63). While the story gives us the privilege of walking alongside David, the psalm gives us a first-hand testimony of what occurred deep within his soul. Psalm 63 is a rare jewel of spiritual devotion. Derek Kidner says "There may be other psalms that equal this outpouring of devotion; few if any surpass it."⁸ The psalm authoritatively answers the question, Can an individual find intimacy with God when they find themselves in a wilderness of their own making?

IV. A Crown in the Dust (Psalm 63)**A. A renewed hunger for God (vv. 1-4)**

O God, you are my God;
 earnestly I seek you;
 my soul thirsts for you;
 my flesh faints for you,
 as in a dry and weary land
 where there is no water. (Ps 63:1 ESV)

David found that his journey, painful as it was, stripped away all the accumulated layers of self-centered and sinful ways that had dominated his life since the Bathsheba affair and revitalized his appetite for God. David's renewed hunger is apparent in the alliteration of the opening words of the poem. The first four words begin with the opening letter of the Hebrew alphabet (*aleph*). This artistic use of alliteration underscores the fact that David is returning to the basics, the ABC's that hold everything together, the very bedrock of his faith: "O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you." The verb "earnestly seek" is derived from the Hebrew root *shachar* ("dawn") and connotes an intense desire that rises with the first rays of daybreak. This rooted passion for God is also seen in the pronouns that give shape to the poem. Almost every image of the psalm is crafted in the simple terms of the *I/you* relationship. In the wilderness, everything is reduced to "you and me," for there are no intermediaries.

Ironically, the desolation of the environment also served to magnify David's longing. Jerusalem rests at about twenty-six hundred feet above sea level, but from the top of the Mount of Olives, the ridge is so steep on its eastern slope that one seems just a single step away from that forbidding wilderness. Standing on the mount and facing east, one can feel the intense heat like a slap in the face. And that is

how it hits David. As he gazes into the face of that scorched desert, it stares back at him, like a mirror magnifying the condition of his own soul that is weary and parched for God.

**So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live;
in your name I will lift up my hands. (vv. 2-4)**

Now that David has been forcibly torn from his city, exiled from home, and bereft of the sanctuary, all that remains to help him experience God is memory. There are no earthly gateways to open his five senses to heaven: no sacred steps to climb, no smell of fragrant incense, no sound of the shophar, no holy sight of the ark glistening underneath the wings of the cherubim, and no music. All that remains is a fragment of past imaginings. But ironically, this serves to make David's memory all the more acute, sharpened by the ache of separation and sorrow: "So I have looked upon you (i.e. with this longing) in the sanctuary."

As the king relives those memories again and again he is strangely moved to a deeper commitment to God than he ever experienced in Jerusalem – "Because your steadfast love is better than life... So I will bless you as long as I live." The memory of those faces: Ittai, who embraced him in his shame; Zadok and Hushai, who risked their lives for him, become reminders of his dearest friend, Jonathan, who loved David unto death. David has experienced this kind of loyal-love before, but receiving it now, as a desperate exile, when he doesn't deserve it, transforms him. That passion now begins to invade his life so that David no longer counts his life as dear to himself. At days end, the hated father, an exiled king, is transformed into a Jonathan.

B. "My soul is satisfied" (vv. 5-8)

**My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food,
and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,
when I remember you upon my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.
My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me. (vv. 5-8)**

When the light of day gives way to the terror of night, David has to take his turn at one of the four-hour night watches. There, under that starlit canopy of desert sky, time seems to grind to halt. Most of us would be haunted by fear, wearied by the monotony, or restless for the sensuous stimulations of the day, but for David, alone on his bed, the ache of memory drives his gaze upward in concentrated meditation. Acting like radar, it "locks on" to God.

The audible rehearsal of his acute memory transports him beyond the horizon to within view of the celestial city. And there he is welcomed, invited in and sat down to a feast that transcends all earthly pleasures. Everything he had left behind in Jerusalem, everything he lacked in the wilderness now descends from heaven with more power and pleasure than he ever experienced on earth. His soul, once parched with thirst, now not only drinks, it eats – and not mere food, but the richest of delicacies, marrow and fatness, until his soul is sated.

The ark, which David had abandoned and sent back to Jerusalem, now descends from heaven itself. The wings of the cherubim rest right

above his head. It is a sight too amazing to comprehend. Under the shadow of those wings, a canopy of protection, David's soul sings. Above the wings of the cherubim, the God who earlier had exiled David now grabs him with a powerful grasp that awakens a burning love that reaches back for God with strenuous surges. The silence of the desert that engulfed David now gives way to full-throated singing as shouts of ecstatic joy burst forth from the deepest parts of his soul.

C. Vision is clarified (vv. 9-11)

**But those who seek to destroy my life
shall go down into the depths of the earth;
they shall be given over to the power of the sword;
they shall be a portion for jackals.
But the king shall rejoice in God;
all who swear by him shall exult,
for the mouths of liars will be stopped. (vv. 9-11)**

Having been fed by God, everything now comes into focus and David sees the end of his distress. Though evil will run its course, God will have the last word and vindicate his king. The wicked who were seeking his life will be destroyed. And, their judgement will befit their crime – they will be devoured by the sword and given no lasting memory on earth.

As for David, he sees that his restoration will bring resounding, "wide-mouthed" praise to all who had put their trust in God and did not join the conspiracy of lies. What does David do in the meantime? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

**I lay down and slept;
I woke again, for the Lord sustained me. (Ps 3:5 ESV)**

The trust that David voiced to Zadok and was later put to the test and purified by Shimei is now sealed by the sacred act of sleep. David's vision shaped our Lord's hope that he would survive the grave and the lies that put him there, and that his restoration would elicit praise and glory from all peoples of the earth.

As you have been privileged not only to walk alongside David on his narrow road to recovery, but also to travel inside his soul, how can you ever doubt God's willingness and ability to restore repentant sinners? As a pastor, I feel privileged to serve in a church that has countless stories of restoration, not mention scores of loyal Ittais, Zadoks and Hushais.

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), 232-234.

2 J. P. Fokkelman, King David, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel (Assen: Van Corcum, 1981), 196. I have leaned heavily on Fokkelman's outstanding work for my observations and insights on this text.

3 Fokkelman, King David, 198.

4 David H. Roper, A Man to Match the Mountain, Overcoming the Obstacles of Life, (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1996), 211.

5 Fokkelman, King David, 199-200.

6 Fokkelman, King David, 201-202.

7 Fokkelman, King David, 202.

8 Derek Kidner, Psalms 1-72 (TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 234.