



THE MESSENGER OF DEATH

SERIES: ASCENDING THE THRONE

Catalog No. 1015

2 Samuel 1:1-16

First Message

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I. Introduction to the David Story

(a) The Importance of the Story

This morning we return once more to the story of David. There are more verses devoted to David's life than any other figure in the Old Testament. His name is mentioned more than 800 times there, and more than 60 times in the New Testament.

In order to understand the story of Jesus, the greater David, we must first understand David's life. The power of this Old Testament king's story draws us into his world and lends significance to our own stories.

(b) The Significance of the Story

A study of the life of David reveals that this king recovered the very thing that Adam lost in the Garden of Eden, and that is, the secrets of how man should live in his full humanity. As king of Israel, David was witness to the sovereign rule of God on earth. The kings of other nations in the Ancient Near East were exempted from real life, because they were considered to be deities. But Israel's king was not exempted from anything. Saul banished David into a wilderness, but it was in that desolate place that he became weak and learned to pray. The psalms which he wrote resulted from this period in his life. Eugene Peterson makes the interesting point that there are no miracles recorded in the story of David. The lesson is clear: we become human by facing our limitations, not by trying to escape from them.

(c) The Context of the Story

Three different periods marked David's rise to power. The first covered the time he spent in King Saul's court, where the shepherd boy was anointed with God's Spirit; the second was in the wilderness, where David lived as an outlaw and fugitive, always on the run from Saul. At the end of that period he lived as an expatriate in the Philistine town of Ziklag, reluctantly serving a Philistine king.

In the book of 2 Samuel, where we take up our studies once more, we come now to the third period, following the death of Saul, when David reestablishes connection with the king and his people after receiving the news of Saul's defeat.

This opening incident in 2 Samuel has three movements. First (verses 1-4), David is given the preliminary report from a messenger about Israel's defeat and Saul's death. In the second movement (verses 5-10), David probes the messenger to uncover how he knows what

he knows. (At the center of this movement (verse 8b) the identity of the messenger is revealed.) In the final movement, David responds to the messenger of death.

II. The Story Proper: The Messenger of Death

(a) The Preliminary Report of Death (1:1-4)

Now it came about after the death of Saul, when David had returned from the slaughter of the Amalekites, that David remained two days in Ziklag. And it happened on the third day, that behold, a man came out of the camp from Saul, with his clothes torn and dust on his head. And it came about when he came to David that he fell to the ground and prostrated himself. Then David said to him, "From where do you come?" And he said to him, "I have escaped from the camp of Israel." And David said to him, "How did things go? Please tell me." And he said, "The people have fled from the battle, and also many of the people have fallen and are dead; and Saul and Jonathan his son are dead also." (NASB)

The story opens with the juxtaposition of two battles. Two kings are simultaneously doing battle with two different enemies of Israel. One battle is located in the north of the country, on Mt. Gilboa; the other takes place in the far south, in Ziklag. In the first battle, Saul and the Israelite army suffer a massive defeat at the hands of the Philistines, resulting in the death of Saul and his three sons. In the second battle, David launches a successful rescue and recovery mission against the Amalekites, whose marauding bands had leveled David's city of Ziklag and taken captive their wives and children. The first encounter is a battle of judgment against a rejected king; the second portrays God's redemptive grace bestowed through the person of his chosen king.

Linking these two battles with the destinies of the two kings is a strange, shadowy messenger.¹ This man, who becomes the focal point of the story, deposits in David's lap the royal insignia which he had stripped from Saul's dead body on Mt. Gilboa. This dramatic encounter raises a number of questions. How will David react to the news that Saul and Jonathan are dead? And how will he view this alien messenger of death?

The scene is set in Ziklag. Following a short, two-day rest from battle, a messenger arrives in David's camp. The narrator describes how he appeared in the distance. His torn garments and dust-covered head give the im-

pression that he is an anguished Israelite who has escaped the battle on Mt. Gilboa. The man falls at David's feet and does homage.

Before he interrogates the prostrate man, David pauses to reflect. Then he asks him, "From where do you come?" The messenger replies that he is one of the lucky few to escape from the Israelite camp. David probes further: "How did things go?" he asks. "Please tell me." The messenger relates the terrible news. It was a rout, a disaster: "The people have fled from the battle, and also many of the people have fallen and are dead." Then he makes the climactic announcement, "Saul and Jonathan, his son, are dead also." Saul is dead! David is finally vindicated.

But before David reacts to the news, he probes the messenger further.

(b) The Motives of Death Uncovered (1:5-10)

So David said to the young man who told him, "How do you know that Saul and Jonathan his son are dead?" And the young man who told him said, "By chance I happened to be on Mount Gilboa, and behold, Saul was leaning on his spear. And behold, the chariots and the horsemen pursued him closely. And when he looked behind him, he saw me and called to me. And I said, 'Here I am.' And he said to me, 'Who are you?' And I answered him, 'I am an Amalekite.' Then he said to me, 'Please stand beside me and kill me; for agony has seized me, [although all of] my life still lingers in me.' So I stood beside him and killed him, because I knew that he could not live after he had fallen. And I took the diadem which was on his head and the bracelet which was on his arm, and I have brought them here to my lord."

Upon closer examination, "the man" standing before David is found not to be a soldier, but a mere youth.² David again probes him: "How do you know that Saul and Jonathan his son are dead?" David is a master at getting beyond appearances to the heart of the matter.

The second (and center) movement of the story is dominated by the messenger's speech. He recounts events that he claims to have seen. The man begins by inferring that by a stroke of luck (or coincidence: "by chance"), he just happened to be at the right place at the right time. There he was, on Mount Gilboa, and behold, there was Israel's king, severely wounded, leaning on his spear. Here is yet another reference to that infamous spear, the symbol of Saul's impotence. The spear that he had hurled at David time after time, but it had never found its mark. The weapon in which Saul had placed all his trust. Now, at the end of his life, this spear is his sole source of support. We are reminded of Jesus' warning to Peter, "all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword" (Matt 26:52).

According to the messenger, just upon his arrival on Mt. Gilboa, Saul turned around and saw him, and called to him. The messenger was quick to obey: "Here I

am," he said. At your service. Saul told him that he was about to die, but death would not come soon enough for him. He was in the throes of death, but unfortunately, his life was still fully in him. If he lingered much longer, he feared the Philistines would find him and desecrate his body and make sport of him. The thought horrified him. The problem was, how to get someone to kill him when he was "holy," the Lord's anointed?

Saul asked the man his origin: "Who are you?" inquired the king. Saul was actually asking, "Are you the man I now need? Are you prepared and suitable for this emergency?" Quickly the answer was given, "I am an Amalekite." Well! What a coincidence! (Fokkelman). Because the man was a foreigner, he saw himself as exempt from Israel's laws as to what is holy, thus he was able to expedite Saul's orders. (This account is reminiscent of Doeg, the Edomite, 1 Samuel 22.) The messenger's intimates that Saul was relieved at this chance encounter.

If the messenger feared that David would disapprove of his actions, he provides three reasons to justify himself. You will notice that all three have a modern ring to them. First, it was Saul who requested that he kill him. He was merely following orders, in other words. Second, it was a mercy killing. Saul was going to die anyway. Why postpone the inevitable and add to his suffering? And third, "I am an Amalekite; thus I am exempt from Israelite laws of holiness and responsibility."

Unfortunately for the messenger, his final actions reveal his true motives. Once the ghastly deed is done, he wastes no time stripping the body of the dead king. He lifts his royal diadem³ and bracelet and takes them to the new king as a demonstration of his unreserved loyalty (he calls David, "my lord"). Now the truth comes out. This youth has not come to the camp of David to bring news of Saul's death. He is an opportunistic Amalekite who wants to be the new king maker. He wants to be the man to deposit the crown in the opposing camp, all for personal gain.

Where this messenger went wrong is that he had absolutely no clue as to what was driving David's destiny toward the crown, or David's real feelings towards Saul. He wrongly believed David must be like everybody else in that dog eat dog world. David, he reckoned, must be driven by personal ambition. When he was unjustly wronged, surely he would see revenge.

Seen in this light, the messenger is ill prepared for the response which David is about to make.

(c) David's Response to Death (1:11-16)

Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so also did all the men who were with him. And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and Jonathan his son and for the people of the Lord and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword. (1:11-12)

David's response is in stark contrast to that of the

messenger. When the news finally sinks in, David cries out in anguish. He rips his clothes, and all his men follow in unison. They sob uncontrollably and continue to weep and fast until evening. David's anguish is deep, his sorrow all-consuming. Saul's death is a national loss, for Israel has lost a king. There is personal loss, for David's closest friend is dead. And there is the unspeakable anguish for the tragedy that implicates Israel's God, who by turning his back on the anointed king is now exposed to the shame of Israel's godless enemies. This is grief in boundless dimension.

By contrast, the messenger displays no such emotion. It was this lack that probably aroused David's suspicions. So, after spending his grief, David recalls the youth and reexamines him.

And David said to the young man who told him, "Where are you from?" And he answered, "I am the son of an alien, an Amalekite." Then David said to him, "How is it you were not afraid to stretch out your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?" And David called one of the young men and said, "Go, cut him down." So he struck him and he died. And David said to him, "Your blood is on your head, for your mouth has testified against you, saying, 'I have killed the Lord's anointed.'" (1:13-16)

When David asks the man, for the second time, "Where are you from?" he is actually asking the question, "What are your origins?" The youth responds, "I am the son of an alien (*ger*), an Amalekite." Now the whole truth comes out. He is an Amalekite, but his father chose to become an alien, or stranger, in Israel.

There are three different Hebrew words used to denote a stranger. This word which the young man uses is the term *ger*. Elie Wiesel, in his book *Kingdom of Memory*, explains the *ger* as "the stranger who lives among Jews, meaning, on Jewish land, in Jewish surroundings, in a Jewish atmosphere; but he has not adopted the Jewish faith although he has acquired Jewish customs, values, and friends."⁴ Later, the word was used of a gentile convert. This stranger in Israel was to be given special hospitality, care, and concern in Israel. He was entitled to the protection of Israelite laws, and was responsible to obey them.

Responding to David's question about his origins, the youth presents himself as an Amalekite who is a *ger*. But when Saul asked him the same question, he presented himself as a pure Amalekite, one who was outside the camp of Israel and thus exempt from Israel's laws. This messenger wanted all the benefits that came with being considered one who was inside the camp of Israel, but without the responsibilities that came with that standing. He wanted to have his cake and eat it, too.

With his own words, the Amalekite's fate is sealed. David carries out justice with one swift stroke. He reads the charge in the form of a rhetorical question; then he

announces sentence and execution. Notice that the sentence is carried out by one of the young men, a *na'ar*, who is responsible and obedient to the king's will in contrast to the young messenger.

David then shames the messenger with his culpability and guilt following his execution:

"Your blood is on your head, for your mouth has testified against you, saying, 'I have killed the Lord's anointed.'"

There is no chance for an appeal of the sentence, indicating David's disgust with the Amalekite messenger.

The story ends with an echo from its opening words. At the beginning of the story we witnessed the Amalekite's false mourning. He arrived at the camp of David with "dust on his head." Now, at the end of the story, we witness his just punishment in the words uttered by David, "your blood be on your own head."

What are we to make of this Amalekite? Why is this strange messenger the center of the story? And what does David's reaction to him teach us about being a king?

III. Reflections on the Story: "I am an Amalekite"

The messenger is a liar both in words and in appearance. His dress gives the impression that he is in mourning, but he is actually an opportunistic scavenger, seeking to profit from his prey. His account differs widely from the original story, recorded in 1 Samuel 31. When Saul was mortally wounded by archers, he asked his armor bearer to slay him, but the man refused to kill the Lord's anointed, and Saul committed suicide by falling on his own spear.

Whenever there is a conflict in the Biblical story between what the narrator says and what a character reports, the narrator is always to be considered factually correct. Fokkelman makes a very good case that the youth was quite likely on Mt. Gilboa by chance, and he was an eyewitness to the events that occurred: "The point...is that the innocence attaching to his accidental presence was subsequently polluted and lost when the man decided to take advantage of Saul's death and his position as an eyewitness."⁵ His story rings true right up to the moment of Saul's conversation with the armor-bearer. At that point he inserts himself in the role of the armor bearer and claims that he did what the servant refused to do, i.e. kill the king. The armor bearer was characterized by awe, the Amalekite by the absence of awe. The messenger probably returned that night to strip the dead body of Saul of his royal insignia, thinking that David would reward him handsomely now that he would inherit the royal crown.

The tragedy here is that the purity of youthful innocence was corrupted when the youth sought to use the death of the innocents to make a buck. His position of

being a stranger who was welcomed inside of the community gave him his power.

The essence of the name Amalek is still deeply imbedded in the collective memory of Israel. Elie Wiesel, a survivor of four concentration camps, devotes a chapter in his book *Kingdom of Memory*, to the stranger: "Who is the enemy? He has a name: Amalek—the eternal stranger...The only enemy to inspire unqualified apprehension and anger is...Amalek. Always. We are unmistakably ordered to strike him, to defeat him, to kill him. Why Amalek? Amalek, we said, is the stranger who frightens us most, the stranger who knows our weakness and—perhaps—is our weakness...He attacks women and children, defenseless people. He attacks when we are weak."⁶

After thirty-five years, Elie Wiesel returned to Treblinka, Maidanek, and Buchenwald. The terrible memories come flooding back: "The victims' tears, the sneering of their executioners, the funeral pyres, the dead children, the desperate attempts of the sick prisoners to look 'happy' because the S.S. sergeant loathed unhappy, weak, sick people and sent them off to die." Then, still suffering the memories of these chambers of horror, he traveled to Auschwitz. Here is what he says of that place: "It is a kind of museum, and that is how it is listed on our schedule: Auschwitz, a museum. Clean, well-kept, a real museum."⁷ Then he sees "Auschwitz souvenirs, Auschwitz postcards." He is disgusted and horrified at what has become of the death camp. A buck is being made at the expense of the innocent victims.

Amalek permeates our whole society. Nicole Brown was butchered, but instead of weeping for the innocent, a whole nation of enthusiasts, veiled in the guise of legal experts, witnesses, jurors, media analysts, descended like vultures, stripping their prey of every last vestige of human dignity, all to make a buck. Every week we see her photographs displayed in the supermarket tabloids, proof that someone is making a buck from her slaughter. But if anyone weeps, the cameras turn away. Weeping is not allowed.

So it was with Christ, God's anointed. I wonder if it was this story of the Amalekite messenger, together with a number of the Psalms, that prepared Jesus for his betrayal. Judas, the stranger, was welcomed into the intimate circle of Jesus and his associates. When Jesus was most vulnerable, Judas seized the opportunity to make a buck. He feigned loyalty with a kiss, a long kiss. One kiss for thirty pieces of silver. His execution was as swift as that of the Amalekite.

But the story continues on. This Amalekite is a mirror image of us. No reader of this story can escape the penetrating echo that reverberates from the words, "I am an Amalekite. I am the son of an alien, an Amalekite." And we can't escape the dread indictment from his own

lips: "I killed the Lord's anointed." In the story, the first time these words are uttered, they are spoken casually. They are glanced over, with no emotion. The second time, coming from the lips of David, they are packed with more emotion than one would care to face: "How is it you were not afraid to stretch out your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?" The third time, in the final words in the scene, they form the self-condemning quote that sealed the Amalekite's fate, "I have killed the Lord's anointed."

The words of David, and his tears, live on today. We cannot escape them. How they probe us and examine us. David's part in this story makes us to see ourselves for who we really are—aliens welcomed in by Israel, strangers who killed the Messiah. It was your sin and my sin that put him to death. Yet, so eager are we to use the death of the King for personal gain, to solve our problems, to make a reputation, even to make a buck, we never stop to weep. At this, David asks, "Have you no fear?" And he weeps. Here we learn how we should respond to the death of the Lord's anointed. David weeps. He does not receive the crown of the kingdom with unadulterated joy, but with deep pathos, "love and sorrow flow mingled down." Joy forged in sorrow.

This text leaves us with the burning question: Whose heart drives us, the heart of the Amalekite or the heart of David? That story remains to be written by each one of us.

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1. This scene evokes memories of another messenger who came from the battlefield to deliver similar bad news about the fate of Israel at the hands of the Philistines, in 1 Sam. 4:12-18.
2. Youth: the last time a youth (Hebrew: *na'ar*) delivered an important message, it was regarding David's fate, in 1 Sam 20:35-42. The result of that encounter also ended in many tears.
3. The diadem...and...the bracelet. "These are the royal insignia. The diadem was given to the king at the time of his investiture. The precise nature is not known. Though often translated, somewhat misleadingly, as 'crown,' it is more likely to have been an emblem worn on the forehead, comparable in some ways to the uraas worn on the forehead by the kings of Egypt." P. Kyle McCarter, Jr. *II Samuel*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 60.
4. Elie Wiesel, a survivor of four concentration camps, has an entire chapter on "The Stranger" and how it has affected the Jewish collective memory in his moving book, *The Kingdom of Memory*, (New York: Schocken, 1990), 49-74.
5. J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, Vol. 2, *The Crossing Fates* (Assen: Van Gorcum 1986), 641.
6. Wiesel, *Kingdom of Memory*, 70.
7. Wiesel, *Kingdom of Memory*, 114.



THE POWER OF THE POEM: DISLODGING GRIEF

SERIES: ASCENDING THE THRONE

Catalog No. 1016

2 Samuel 1:17-27

Second Message

Brian Morgan

October 29th, 1995

Grief Silenced In the Modern World

It was a day like any other, a beautiful fall day in November. I was twelve, a painfully shy introvert, entering my adolescent years and carefully trying to tiptoe my way unnoticed among my intimidating peers. We were assembled at a co-ed gym class in the school gym, learning to square dance. Our awkward attempts at dancing were interrupted by the principal, who announced over the loudspeaker: "The President has been shot." We stood numbed, frozen in silence. Then came a second announcement: "The President has been shot and killed."

How do adolescents cope with such news? The teachers consulted together as we looked on, dazed. They concluded it was best we continue dancing. Anyone who felt that to be inappropriate could sit out, they said. Stepping out from the crowd takes courage for an adolescent; so I continued to dance. A nation was weeping, and I was dancing. The scene was surreal, like a dance of corpses. My next class was English. I remember the teacher walking toward the classroom to let us in after lunch. He seemed a bit flustered, but he covered it over with his quick, deliberate stride. With military-like cadence he gathered us together and announced to the little band of troops, "When a soldier falls in battle, the troops must go on. We must go on!" I silently objected: This was no ordinary soldier. But we went on. English, as usual. Death was never mentioned.

After school, my friend's mother insisted we go shopping. Entering a quaint little men's store, I recall the radio breaking in on our transaction with the constant repetition of Hail Marys. It was my first exposure to the rosary. I could tell my friend's mother was growing upset at being subjected to these religious incantations. The owner of store seemed increasingly anxious that his shop was still open. Finally, he broke the tension. He walked over to the storefront window and turned the "Open" sign around to "Closed." I sensed disgust from my friend's mother. She voiced her disapproval all the way home: How could that man have the audacity to close his store when she wanted to buy a pair of pants for her son? That night, alone in my bed, the haunting tones of the rosary kept echoing in my ears. I felt unclean, as if I had violated some unknown, holy boundary. But lest those holy drones penetrate too deeply, they were quickly drowned out on Sunday, when all the National Football League games continued uninterrupted.

That was the day the President was shot, and I was never allowed to acknowledge grief. I was told to keep dancing, studying, shopping, and playing. That was the day I learned how to use silence to confront the dark demon of death: Just erect a wall of denial and the dreaded beast will retreat back into the abyss from whence it came. Or would it?

Grief Acknowledged By the Ancients

David was in Ziklag when he first received the news that King Saul was dead. His relentless oppressor was no more! At last, David could take his rightful place on the throne of Israel. This was the crown predicted by the prophet Samuel, freely given up by Jonathan, lauded by the women of Israel, confirmed by Abigail, and finally acknowledged by Saul. This was the crown that David consistently refused to seize by his own efforts or manipulate by his own strength. This crown was the pure gift of God. The moment of vindication had arrived. David could safely leave the desert caves, dry wadis and valleys of darkness and come out into the open. He could finally don his royal vestments in full view of all of Israel.

After such a long and arduous journey in the wilderness one might expect quick, decisive action by the newly vindicated ruler. But no. The action stops. We, too, are forced to stop with it and take a long pause for reflection. David weeps. David writes a poem. David sings a dirge. And David makes sure all the children in Judah are taught to weep as well and sing about the harsh realities of life.

Then David chanted with this lament over Saul and Jonathan his son, and he told them to teach the sons of Judah the song of the bow; behold, it is written in the book of Jashar (or 'the upright'). (2 Sam 1:17-18, NASB)

The bow (Hebrew, *qeshet*) was Jonathan's weapon. The word is a homonym for a word which means severe, or harsh. The phrase could be translated, "teach your sons the harsh realities of life." Teach them to lament the pain. David did not deny, ignore or bury his grief. Unlike us, he faced it and embraced it. It was unthinkable for him to continue his journey to the throne until he had hewed out deep channels to act as conduits for his tears; thus the poem.

It seems that in Israel's tradition, the poem was the most natural and powerful vehicle for grief: a poem crafted by an individual, publicly presented in commu-

nity, and offered to God as an act of worship; a tool to integrate the individual with life's harsh realities, within a community, and ultimately, to God. The poem was used widely in public worship in Israel. One-third of the psalms were written as psalms of lament. Even many of the psalms of thanksgiving have discordant notes of lament. One entire book of Scripture, Lamentations, is a carefully constructed acrostic poem of lament. The book of Job has lengthy speeches of lament.

So the poem is an apt setting for the expression of grief. Paul Celan, a German-speaking eastern European Jew who overnight lost his parents to Nazi deportation and spent the rest of his life an exile on earth, found that the only language adequate to describe his pain is poetry. He explains, "It is when we are in our deepest grief that the soul cries out for language, not to be more precise, but to lead us to transcendence."¹ The poet creates his work by the selective use of concrete images that emerge out of the story, images that are designed to evoke deep emotions from sacred memory.

By the juxtaposition of opposing images, the Hebrew poets give voice to the tensions we sense in our souls but have never felt the freedom to express. By means of the poem grief is identified, recounted, named, and legitimized. This public identification gives legitimacy to our feelings. As the poem is offered in community as an act of public worship, something new is mysteriously born in us: God descends, not to obliterate the pain, but to be with us in the midst of it. "The Eternal is brought out of contradiction" (Martin Buber). The poem becomes a window through which we may look into heaven. I have experienced the power of the poem at work in my own life and in the lives of this congregation over the past seven years, following my visits to Romania, the land of poets. But it was this text that taught me how and why the poem is such an apt vehicle to transcend grief and bring God near.

David's carefully structured poem has a threefold repetition of a refrain and three stanzas. It opens with the poet's anguished cries of impotence as he contemplates the future:

I. Facing The Future: Anguished Cries of Impotence (1:19-21)

(a) Impotent To Prevent the Inevitable (1:19-20)

**"Your beauty (or gazelle) O Israel, is slain on your high places!
How the mighty have fallen!
Tell it not in Gath,
Proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon;
Lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice,
Lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult.**

David's anguished cry describes the painful image of the royal crown slain on Gilboa. Death has set in emotion his worst fears and he feels impotent to do anything about it. "Tell it not in Gath!" he cries. Israel's worst fears have been realized. Her king is dead. Saul

was left unprotected, abandoned by God, to be slaughtered, defiled, dismembered, and displayed by his enemies. Israel's king has suffered the same fate as Goliath, and now the news is going to spread, of all places, to Gath, Goliath's home town. How painfully ironic! We can imagine the jeering and gloating of the victorious army on their homeward march. Upon arrival, they are greeted with the cheers and songs of the Philistine women whose "gospel"² (good news) is Israel's defeat. Once the Israelites were the victors, and their women sang; now the Philistines are the victors, and their women are singing while the women of Israel are weeping (v 24). The unthinkable has happened! The uncircumcised exult, and Israel's God is implicated. Shame slaps them in the face, and David cannot do anything about it.

In the second stanza, David makes an anguished cry to creation to cooperate with him in his grief.

(b) Impotent To Create What You Long For (1:21)

**"O mountains of Gilboa,
Let not dew or rain be on you, nor fields of offerings;
For there the shield of the mighty was defiled,
The shield of Saul, not anointed with oil.**

If the height of Gilboa was the place where God turned his back on his anointed³ and where the shield of the mighty was defiled,⁴ then may that be the place where all of creation laments forever, is David's cry. May the heavens hold back their blessings of rain so that on Gilboa no worship will be offered. When we are overcome with grief we long for all of creation to groan with us. It is abhorrent to the human psyche that business continue as usual. There is discord in the soul if the Creator does not act in accordance with the events of history.

Elie Wiesel, who survived four Nazi concentration camps, felt this powerful dissonance when he returned to Birkenau after thirty-five years. He writes:

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

blinding and searing light; it consumes memory.⁵

Death shapes David's future, and he gives voice to his pain: "That which I dread, I cannot prevent; and that for which I long for I cannot create." He is helpless to prevent the inevitable, and powerless to accomplish the impossible.

Foreseeing no solace for his soul in the future, David turns to the past. Painfully, he discovers that it too has been clouded by death-dark hues.

II. Facing the Past: A Tragic Sense of Loss

(1:22-23)

**"From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty,
The bow of Jonathan did not turn back,
And the sword of Saul did not return empty.
Saul and Jonathan, beloved and pleasant in their life,
And in their death they were not parted;
They were swifter than eagles,
They were stronger than lions.**

(a) Painful Memories: Glory Trampled By Death

Here, at the center of the poem, is the eulogy, the verses where the dead are remembered at the height of their powers. David paints Saul and Jonathan in all their splendor: two invincible warriors, unconquerable in war. They never went out to battle in vain; their weapons always accomplished their purpose. Overpowering all opponents, father and son ruled supreme. They were swifter than eagles (which rule the skies), and stronger than lions (which rule the land). But these once glorious images are now tainted by thoughts which the poet has left unstated, yet are strongly alluded to. For these glorious images which once evoked praise and awe—the archer's accurate bow, the penetrating sword of the king, the spilled blood of the slain, the eagle's speed, the lion's strength—now become painful reminders to David of Saul and Jonathan lying dead on Mt. Gilboa, and the savage power of death.

These images are like two-edged swords which lacerate the soul. Twenty years ago this very week, I enjoyed one of the happiest moments of my life when my wife Emily gave birth to our son, David Jonathan. A sense of holy love broke upon us, a love that transcended romantic love, when the nurses placed David on Emily's breast. Nine days later, those memories were snatched away as I placed my son in his grave. To this day, the once glorious images of hospital nursery rooms, the scent of newborns, the sounds of infant cries, evoke memories of grief and death for me.

(b) Painful Irony: Should Loyalty Kill?

Even more grievous to David is the painful reminder that the thing that killed Jonathan was not his sin, but his loyalty. Jonathan considered his status as Saul's son to be his highest role in life. Instead of joining David in the wilderness, he stayed with his father in the royal

court. Even when Saul charted a doomsday course for the royal family, Jonathan stood with him. And at last, at the end, he fell with him. What poignant dissonance is found in the Hebrew text, where the words life and death are carefully placed side by side as if to kiss one another: "beloved and pleasant in their life, and in their death they were not parted." Who could blame David for asking, Should loyalty have killed my friend?

Death has shaped the way David perceives the future, and it has equally colored how he looks at the past. Things which once evoked praise now evoke deepest sorrow.

So David turns to the present. But that is the most difficult area to negotiate, because that is where he must now live and survive.

III. Facing the Present: Ever-present Tears

(1:24-27)

(a) Celebration Turned To Mourning (1:24)

**"O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul,
Who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet,
Who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.**

David addresses the daughters of Israel who sang the victory songs for him and Saul following their military exploits. He draws the women's attention to the clothes they are wearing: They are a reminder of Saul, the charismatic victor in war (clothed in Spirit), who clothed them with the spoils of victory. Now David says, "Weep, O daughters of Israel," because that charismatic figure is no more. By emphasizing the women's elaborate clothing, David may be making them uncomfortable by what is not stated: their dead king now lies naked, stripped in shame. Ironically this was foreshadowed when Saul was stripped naked before Samuel. The contrast accentuates the dissonance. The women's party clothing no longer is appropriate, therefore they must weep and rend their garments, as David has done.

Our world tries to numb its pain by partying. But David asks, "How can you celebrate when the king is dead?" How could the NFL continue to play when the President was dead? In those early years after the deaths of our children, Emily and I found it hard to enter into the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, because our son died November 4th, and our daughter Jessica on December 4th. Death casts a long shadow into our celebrations. In the midst of death the world tells us to dress up and go on celebrating, but the festivities only magnify the sorrow.

(b) A Crown At the Expense of Lost Love (1:25-27)

The poem concludes on the most poignant moment. Here the pronoun moves to the first person. The king's funeral is over. David stands alone at the grave and addresses his friend Jonathan.

**"How have the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle!
Jonathan is slain on your high places.**

**I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;
You have been very pleasant to me.
Your love to me was more wonderful
Than the love of women.
How have the mighty fallen,
And the weapons of war perished!"**

Here is grief in its most personal, lonely state. Jonathan's title changes from "son" to "my brother." "I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan," says David. His sorrow is deep, personal, all-consuming. And his distress over Jonathan's death is magnified by the intensity of the love between them, a love he describes as wonderful, a love that transcends all romantic love. The word wonderful (Hebrew, *pala'*) was used of divine wonders, events like the Exodus, things that evoked awe, wonder and praise. When the word is used of man, it speaks of something outside his capabilities, something "too wonderful for me" (Deut 30:11). This gift of friendship is beyond the realm of human ability. It is love divine.

We can trace the development of that love between Jonathan and David in the three encounters which Jonathan had with the Philistines. In the first (1 Samuel 14), Jonathan was the charismatic victor. In the second (1 Samuel 17-18), he was the passive observer who lauded David as the new king. In the third (1 Samuel 31), he was the victim, the sacrificial lamb who died that David might have the crown uncontested. David cries out, "Is this the price of the crown, a lost love that was better than life?" What good is the crown when it comes at such a price? Do you think a day ever went by when Jonathan's death did not invade David's present?

How wonderfully free is the poet to express the tensions he feels in his soul. David gives voice to everything we have ever felt but did not sense we had permission to express. And he says it with painful honesty, in full view of the public, in the very presence of God. David confesses that Jonathan's death affects him in a comprehensive way: It cast dark clouds over the future, it colors the past, and it continually invades the present, where tears remain just beneath the surface.

When we sing this way, we confess the true value of life. Who dares sing today of unspeakable loss, of wounds which won't heal, of gaping emptiness?

Walter Brueggemann says we have nearly lost our capacity for such grief:

We are characteristically so busy with power, so bent on continuity, so mesmerized by our ideologies of control that we will not entertain a hiatus in our control of life to allow for grief. Although we may have lost our capacity for public grief, we still know from interpersonal relationships that where loss is not grieved there are barriers to newness. Through the eloquence of David, Israel lingers (long) in her grief unashamed ... David has such distinctive capacity for pathos. We speak too often of David dancing before the ark in his joyous nakedness. Here is the man utterly naked in his grief. Israel may be defeated but she is not muted. How like David we could be! How unlike David we are in our ideological, technological muteness. We imagine that the mighty do not fall, that the glory is not slain. We imagine if we do not say it, the Philistines will not notice. David knew better, sang better, and acted better. And so could we.⁶

As you read David's poem, let your soul weep.

*Open yourself to their sacred memory,
And mingle your tears with theirs* (Elie Wiesel).

Then write a lament of your own.

1. John Felstiner, *Paul Celan, Poet, Survivor, Jew*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). John Felstiner spent sixteen years studying these poems of Paul Celan. He writes, "Out of darkness and wounding he made striking poems, which challenge the way of our world. In encountering these poems and becoming conversant with them, I have felt a grim energy verging on elation" (p xix).

2. The Septuagint renders the verb "proclaim" as *euangelizomai*, "to announce good news." See Isaiah 52:7.

3. Warriors used to rub their shields with oil before battle to make them slippery. Here the image of the absence of anointing oil may suggest the absence of the Spirit as well.

4. The word *defiled* means to abhor, loathe. The only other place this word is used prior to this text is Leviticus 26, where it is used five times (11,15,30,43,44) to explain God's *rejection* of Israel if Israel *abhors* Yahweh's statutes. Here the word carries much theological freight from the ancient Leviticus text. With that context in mind, the word implicates Saul for his previous disobedience.

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

6. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 1.



THE POEM: A SACRED WINDOW THAT TRANSCENDS TIME

SERIES: ASCENDING THE THRONE

Catalog No. 1017

2 Samuel 1:17-27

Third Message

Brian Morgan

November 5th, 1995

Yesterday afternoon, our television viewing was interrupted with a news flash bringing the stunning announcement: "The Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzak Rabin, has been shot." Shortly afterwards came the second announcement: "Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin has been shot and killed." Yitzak Rabin, shot on the Sabbath, following a peace rally in Tel Aviv. The Prime Minister of Israel assassinated on a day of shalom, when man rests from his labors and connects with God. That blunt, pragmatic professional soldier for most of his life, but in the end a statesman who labored for peace, killed on the Sabbath. Yitzak Rabin, shot by an enemy of peace, a fellow Jew. Another leader who chose to work for peace and reconciliation between opposing parties, attacked from those closest to him. And all Israel weeps.

How does a nation keep its soul intact after its leader is shot by one of its own? How does a nation prevent the escalation of hatred, the threat of civil war? The David story teaches us that it takes more than a politician or a statesman to heal a nation consumed in grief; it takes a poet. Only a poet can give voice to a grieving nation. A poet crafts painful images that we may not wish to see, yet in the seeing there emerges a clear vision and experience of the truth. Perhaps this is what scares us most about writing our own poems: Poetry is the language of the truth, truth that penetrates bone and marrow. One cannot lie in a poem. Nothing is hid from its sight.

In our last study in the life of David we examined the poetic images in his lament for Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam 1:17-27). We learned that for ancient Israel, the poem was the most natural and powerful vehicle for the expression of grief. By means of the poem all the tensions in the soul of the nation were honestly acknowledged and verbalized. Grief was not denied, numbed or ignored; it was embraced. The poet did not fear to stare at his pain, at grief that emerged out of the exposed "nerves of sacred memory" (Paul Celan).¹ Through the poem grief was legitimized and a nation's soul became rooted and grounded in the context of public worship.

Some years ago when I attended a Sabbath service in a local synagogue with Avram, the father of a close friend, I was reminded that the Jews have not forgotten this vital heritage. In the synagogue on the Sabbath, anyone who is in mourning is invited to stand and recite the mourner's Kaddish, the prayer of blessing for the dead. Grief is acknowledged with sacred dignity, and directed to the throne of God through a worshipping community in prayer. Anyone entering the house of prayer in a state of grief is given permission to weep.

In church the following Sunday I wondered whether

Christians who are living in communities engulfed in pain, grant the same opportunity to mourners. Are we free to voice the tensions of fear and doubt, like Job, or the sense of pain and loss which press in upon the soul in midst of suffering, like Jeremiah? Are our wounded even allowed to speak? More often than not, our open wounds are stuffed with packets of praise, dismissed with trite sayings, or silenced by shallow theologies. All tensions are removed; all pain is denied. We might as well hang a sign over the church door that says,

Before entering from without
this bright and holy place,
Please be kind to all
Respect thy place.
Order thy steps, attend thy face,
Lest we fall into disgrace.
Maintain appearance proper pure
and body fit and trim.
For no tensions, fears or pains
Are ever allowed to air within.

What a contrast is David. He is unashamedly naked in his grief. This poet commands that the sons of Judah be taught to sing of the "painful realities of life." Through David's well-honed images we feel his grief, and we are given language to express our own.

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

Once our grief has been identified it has to find a way to move through our souls. If it remains buried, with the passing of time it freezes over, and our hearts freeze over with it. Yet, in talking to friends who have endured a lot of pain, especially as children, I have come to realize that opening that doorway to the past is a scary proposition. It's like opening a dark door to the abyss. Once you open it, the thought of being inundated by raw emotion is terrifying. You have already gone through the pain once, why endure it again? But the other option is worse. If you don't dislodge the grief, you live the rest of your life unable to feel anything. But if the heart encased in thick walls of protection does not feel any more pain, it will not feel love, joy, or peace either.

How does the poet keep these overpowering emotions from getting out of control? The answer is that once the images of the poem are securely anchored in place, they become deep channels that act as conduits for his tears. Then, through the repetition and variation of the refrain, the poet unlocks his grief and gently but firmly moves it through his soul until it is fully spent in the presence of God and others.

David's lament opens with painful images which nei-

ther he nor we want to see. Once we see them, they evoke a deep cry of anguish, a cry which becomes the refrain of the poem.

**Your beauty, O Israel, is slain on your high places!
How have the mighty fallen!** (2 Sam 1:19, NASB)

Fokkelman comments, "In the (opening) clause and the refrain he does not mince matters for the length of one verse: the land humiliated, deprived of its pride and ornament, the dead everywhere up there. It is, however, such a terrible sight to the poet that he cannot bear this for longer than one verse."²

By crafting an image filled with ambiguity which, by its very nature, invites our curiosity, David draws us up the mountain to see what we do not wish to see. The first word of the poem, the Hebrew word *ha-tzevi* (translated "beauty" or "ornament") is also a homonym for the word gazelle.³ Right at the outset we are launched down the path of unknowing. We don't know if David wrote this poem as a national lament for a fallen king, the royal ornament of Israel; or whether he wrote it as a poignant song of personalized grief for an intimate friend, that swift-footed gazelle, Jonathan.

Most English translations have opted for the first meaning: "(Your) beauty," thereby removing the ambiguity and setting the stage for a royal national lament. But for Hebrew listeners, the ambiguity is not removed until the end of the poem (1:25), when the refrain is repeated and the *ha-tzevi* is clearly identified. By "suspending our emotions" (Fokkelman) and carrying us along in suspense for almost the entire poem, the poet heightens the emotional impact of his work, and mysteriously draws us, unawares, into the center of his grief.

It is not until verse 25 that the refrain repeats, and we sing that anguished cry a second time. But now, with the change of a mere word, the mysterious *hatzevi* is identified and the harsh reality of what went on is uncovered.

**How have the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle!
Jonathan is slain on your high places!** (1:25)

Now we learn for whom the poem was written. Our worst fears have been realized. We are staring at a dead gazelle, Jonathan, "my brother," pierced through, slain. The poignant irony is that Jonathan has fallen in the midst of his best endeavor—the battle.

These striking blows may tempt us to turn away, but before we can collect ourselves the refrain rings out again, thrusting us forward to the end of the battle. We have been held captive by the poet to see what we did not want to see, and now we must see it through to the bitter end.

**How have the mighty fallen,
And the weapons of war perished!** (1:27)

The reality of death brings stark finality and leaves the poet in an eerie silence. The image of the "weapons of war perished" evokes a number of memories from the David story. In 1 Samuel 17, David's last act over a vanquished Goliath was to cut off his head and take his weapon as a trophy of victory. Capturing the weapons of the enemy

marks the end of hostilities. Here the image reminds David of Saul's misplaced trust in his weapons, especially that impotent spear which never found its mark; and it reminds him of Saul's sword which, ironically, became the instrument of his own death. "The weapons of war [have] perished," and by implication, so have those who trusted in them.

But the image has a dual edge. It is also a painful reminder of Jonathan, who is portrayed as the one who is always giving his weapons away (1 Sam 18:4; 20:40). He held nothing back in his loyalty to David (1 Sam 18:4). Could such a gift now cost Jonathan, the supreme giver, his life? How the weapons of war have perished!

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

Reflecting now on the poem as a whole, we can see what an impact public grieving had on David's soul. First, I am struck by how the poet eulogizes Saul.

II. As Grief Is Spent, Pain Is Purged (1:23-24)

**Saul and Jonathan, beloved and pleasant in their life,
And in their death they were not parted;
They were swifter than eagles,
They were stronger than lions.**

**O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul,
Who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet,
Who put ornaments of gold on your clothing.**

Earlier in the story, David sought to convince Jonathan that Saul was bent on killing him, saying there was "hardly a step between me and death" (1 Sam 20:3). But now David turns a blind eye to Saul's demonic-like obsession. He describes both Saul and Jonathan as "beloved and pleasant in life, and in their death they were not parted." Is this candy-coated adulation, or outright hypocrisy? I think neither. I sense that David, having fully spent his grief in the presence of God, finds himself strangely purged of the pain caused by Saul.

Taking our pain directly to the Lord allows us to disconnect emotionally from the hurts people have done to us. This is a much needed lesson for our generation. There is not an ounce of bitterness left in David's soul despite all the abuse that Saul had hurled at him. Through the power of the poem, his soul is purged of bitterness, cleansed of spite, and protected from retaliation. Then he is able extract something holy out of Saul's life, one thing that displayed the image of God, and he honors him with it.

If honor were not enough, David finds the capacity to love his former enemy. Through the poem David gives

Saul the gift he always wanted in life—the adulation and respect of the “daughters of Israel.” Ironically, this was the very thing that provoked Saul’s enmity and fueled his obsession to kill David in the first place, when the women sang, “Saul has slain his thousands and David his ten thousands” (1 Sam 18:7).

Such is the power of the poem: it verbalizes our grief, airs our pain, and cleanses us from bitterness so much so that we are able to extend love to our enemies.

What a price we are paying in our own day by neglecting man’s highest form of speech! Where does modern man go with his internal frustrations and aches, his bewilderment and pain? Where does he give voice to his unspeakable grief? Without the poem to articulate and give eternal significance to what lies within, what outlets are left? We have traded the time-honored holy stage of communal worship for the isolation of the therapist’s office, or, worse yet, the public strip-tease of the talk shows. Failing that, the only recourse left to vent our seething frustrations is the non-language of violence. Perhaps we are such a violent generation because we are, in part, the inarticulate generation.

III. A Window To Heaven Left Open...Forever (1:26)

The second observation I want to make is that through the poem David takes care of unfinished business with Jonathan.

**“I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;
You have been very pleasant to me.
Your love to me was more wonderful
Than the love of women.”**

The most amazing thing about the power of the poem is David’s ability to go back to a time past, a place from which he once was painfully absent, and relive the event as if he were present. The poem’s power transforms a once tragic moment into a holy one, for now not only is Jonathan present (as if he were raised from the dead), but David is present as well, and so is God, and holy love flows freely between them. Once the poem is constructed it creates a window into heaven that transcends time. And this holy window remains open forever, inviting all to freely relive the event in all the holiness of sacred memory. Every time the poem is read, that transcendence of heaven uniting with earth, of friends embracing, of love bursting the breast, breaks in upon us again and again.

When Jesus broke the bread in the Upper Room, the disciples had no idea of the sacred significance of what he was doing. Then came his death, burial and resurrection. When at last he appeared to them, following the resurrection, he said, “Remember...” He was referring to what he had done in the Upper Room, and they remembered. From that time on, every time they broke bread and drank from the cup, and recited the poetic metaphors, “This is my body; this is my blood,” Jesus was more present than at any moment in history.

The poem creates a window that transcends time. How ironic, that through the intensifying cadences of the poet

we are mysteriously drawn to a place and time where we did not wish to go. We are transported to a forbidden place and foreboding time, when memories were marred by tragedy and lacerated by loss. But now, “wed to a crevice in time,” (Paul Celan) the tragic is transformed into the sacred. And those poetic cadences and rhymes that we once dreaded now fill us with hope and anticipation of life, beautiful, holy life which we can relive again and again. The poem creates a window into the sacred that transcends time, a window that remains open...forever.

One of the most painful moments of my life came on Friday, December 2nd, 1976. I had just gotten a call from the hospital to say that my newborn daughter was very sick. One medical test told the whole story: she had the same enzyme deficiency my son had had, and she would not live. Accompanied by a friend, I made one last trip to the hospital to visit her. I could gaze at her for but a short time before I turned away. I could not bear the pain. As I left the hospital waves of grief came crashing over me. I wanted to weep, but was I too embarrassed to weep in front of my friends. I was not there when Jessica died. She died alone, abandoned by her father. When the hospital graciously offered to take care of her body, I welcomed that. I could not bear the thought of laying her little body in the ground. How could we have another memorial service? The thought was morbid to me.

Sixteen years later, God called me back to that same hospital. Again, it was in December, and it was raining. Then another son died, this time the son of one of our church families. I did not want to go, but I was mysteriously yet powerfully drawn to watch as a dear couple loved their son and refused to turn away from grief. As he lay dying, we began singing hymns and psalms. When we sang the words of the second verse of the hymn, “It Is Well With My Soul,” heaven united with earth and love burst forth from our breasts. There came a transcendent sense of peace, of power and victory over death that I will never forget.

God was gracious to call me back to my Gilboa to see what I didn’t want to see. I discovered that even when I left my daughter, he was there all along, caring and loving. I wrote a poem for Jessica, and through the power of its verses I was able to reconnect with her: to tell her I loved her, to experience holy love and the power of God that transcends death. I have gone back to that time and place many times. It is a sacred memory. Now I tell all my friends who are engulfed in pain: Do not wait sixteen years to write your poem. Write it now, and turn the tragic into the sacred.

*But memory
Is taken and given by the sea,
And love as well takes hold of our eyes,
But what abides is founded by poets.”⁴ (Paul Celan) □*

Let It Rain

O Jessica, nine months we waited
For your precious hidden frame
To break through the darkness
And turn our souls into day.

Unto us it was given,
Morning came, its dawn so bright,
It loosed our sackcloth,
And girded us with light.

Your form so pure,
Yours the sweetest gaze
A mother's dream,
A father's praise.

Then on the third night
While I slept, you cried
Your mother held you tight,
She knew, but it was hidden from me.

All through the darkness she cared for you
Then gently laid you upon the altar,
She knelt beside those well hewn stones and wept.
Then I heard the shophar's ringing cry...

Terror struck, "Impossible!" I cried,
"Could it be to walk this way again
Conception to pain, never to regain
When the first born, has already paid?"

I pulled back, withdrew
Traumatized by the pain I already knew
I could not stay and watch
For now I knew.

My eyes could not gaze on your little tent
Which would all too soon,
Be broken down and laid to rest,
In the earth rather than upon a breast.

Waves of grief came crashing down,
Heaven was calling through the rain,
"Pour out your heart like water,"
But I turned and left, numb from pain.

O Jessica, nine months we had waited
For your precious hidden frame
To break through the darkness
And turn our souls into day.

O Jessica, O Jessica, where are you now?
Where did the Sower plant the seed,
I long to know
But it is hidden from me.

O could I now go back,
And that dark hour relive,
When you lay limp and still,
I would be your papa and give.

I wanted to forget, it was easy to forget
but I could not forget
You my first precious daughter,
Jessica Lynne.

Sixteen years past,
And in my wanderings here
I came across that valley again,
It was raining.

This time I did not turn away
But obeying heaven's command,
I knelt beside the stones
And stayed until dawn's early light.

O Holy night, Angels sang,
The grip of night grew limp,
He appeared
And each soul felt its worth.

He did not turn away
Traumatized by pain
But stretched out His hand
And placed it into the flame.

Beyond His hand I saw
The wrist - impaled by my spear
Pierced so deep with wounds
Yet draws me near.

Beyond the wrist, His gaze,
O that gaze, ablaze ablaze
With such love it burst my breast
Evoking deepest praise.

O death where is thy victory,
O grave where is thy sting?

Captured with awe, I stared and stared
And then I knew,
That when I left,
He had cared for you.

O Jessica,
Hardly thy life clear forth of heaven was sent,
Ere it broke out into a smile and went.
So swift thy days, a gift to us was lent
Thou, now a daughter and saint inextricably blent,
Wilt one day teach thy father in some heavenly tent.⁵

In appreciation for my daughter
Jessica Lynne Morgan
November 30, 1976 - December 4, 1976
A bright morning star

1. A special note of appreciation to Stanford Professor John Felstiner for his book *Paul Celan, Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). This outstanding work has given me much insight on how the poem functions as a vehicle for grief.

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

3. *Ha-tzevi* is used as an ornament in later texts of Scripture (Isa 4:2; 13:19, 23:9; 28:1,4,5; Jer 3:19; Ezek 7:20, etc.); while *gazelle* is its meaning in earlier and closer contexts (Deut 12:15; 14:5; 15:22; 2 Sam 2:18; 1 Kgs 5:3; Ct 2:9, 17; 8:14, etc.). The closest use of the term is found in 2:18 when it is applied to Asahel, who "was as swift-footed as one of the gazelles which is in the field."

4. Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, 76.

5. These last five lines were adapted from George MacDonald's tribute to his child in *Diary of an Old Soul* (Augsburg, 1975), 132.

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HANDLING LIFE'S TRANSITIONS

SERIES: ASCENDING THE THRONE

Catalog No. 1018

2 Samuel 2:1-11

Fourth Message

Mark Mitchell

November 12th, 1995

This morning I have chosen to remain in the same season of David's life that you have been studying over the past few weeks. But I want to look at this period from a wide angle perspective, as it were. This was a time of change and transition for David and for the nation of Israel. Remember that Saul had been on the throne for some time, while David, whom the prophet Samuel had anointed as the would-be king when David was but a youth, had spent years fleeing from Saul and hiding out in the Judean wilderness. For the eighteen months preceding this account in 2 Samuel 1, David and his men had been hiding in Ziklag, under the protection of the Philistines. But David was thrust into a major passage when he received news of the deaths of both Saul and Jonathan.

Life is full of changes or transitions, what we have come to call passages. Life begins with a passage—literally! A passage might be precipitated by the death of a parent, a career change, or a move to a new location. There are joyful passages, such as moving from single to married, and there are painful ones, too, like the change from married to single. Some passages are part of growing up: starting school, adolescence, first date, first job, moving out, getting married, having children. As we grow older, we don't call this growing up; we call it aging. I think this begins with turning forty—my next passage. The next passage is the empty nest. The final blow is retirement.

So life is marked with passages. Over the last few months, I have been in the midst of a very significant transition. This particular passage has been a stress-filled and anxious time for me. I have never felt so out of control and uncertain about life. Certain passages are also times of temptation. When we feel things getting beyond our control, we are tempted to try and regain control by any means. Because of these realities, we need help in charting a course through life's passages.

Today, we will follow David as he managed this passage in his life. What does it look like to walk with God through these anxious times of change and transition? How do we spiritually navigate our way through these exciting but troubled seas? We will find the answers to these questions in our text from 2 Samuel 1.

Oftentimes, one of the markers that propels us into a new period in life is the death of someone important or someone we're close to. In 1 Samuel 31, we read of the death of David's best friend, Jonathan, and his father, King Saul, both of whom died on the battlefield with the Philistines. The death of Saul signaled a new beginning for David. We might say that we have arrived at the point in the story of David that we have been waiting for, when David is free at last to return to Israel and assume his rightful place as king. We can't help but rejoice that Saul has finally got what was coming to him. We're ready to leave him

behind. We can't wait for the narrative to move ahead with David's bright future. And we would expect that this is what David would have felt as well, after a certain Amalekite messenger ran to Ziklag to report to him on what had happened to Saul.

But David's reaction is the very opposite of what we would expect. Not only did he execute the Amalekite for his disloyalty to Saul, he mourned and wept and fasted for Saul. David recognized that something much larger than his own political future was at stake. At this point in the narrative, matters such as who had power and who was in charge are secondary. David stops and leads the nation in a time of mourning. Verses 17-27 are the public record of a song that he wrote as he mourned for Saul and Jonathan.

You have looked at this song in detail, so we won't read it. But let me reflect on it as it relates to passages of our lives, because these verses have an important lesson about managing transitions. David teaches us that in order to move on to the next stage in our life, *we must first fully acknowledge the pain of the past*. This is especially relevant when the circumstance that propels us into the new era involves loss. We need to pause and mourn before we can move on. Unfortunately, we're not encouraged to do that in our world. Instead we're told to move on, to look to the future and make the necessary adjustments.

About six years ago, my mother died suddenly. It was a shock to my father, who had just retired, to lose his wife of 45 years. In the days that followed I was at his side as we both grieved. I noticed that as he wept, he wept not only for my mother but for his own mother who had been dead for 43 years. My father, an only child, was 18 years old when he enlisted in the United States infantry during World War II. Within a few months he was off to the jungles of the Southern Philippines, where he fought on the front lines. Some months later, he received news that his mother had taken her own life. He requested permission to go home, but was denied. He had no choice but to suppress his grief and go on fighting. But his grief did not go away. After 47 years, it came out when his own wife died.

If we don't learn how to stop and mourn and acknowledge the past, chances are we won't really move on. As we look at David's song, I want you to notice a few things about how he acknowledged the past, things that will help us do the same.

Notice, first, that the appropriate words are very important. David found the right words, even poetry, to express his and the nation's feelings. Mourning the past is often a matter of finding the right words, words that allow us to remember, to experience, and to process what we've lost.

How brutally honest and painful are David's words! And notice, remarkably, that God is not mentioned even once in the poem. In the midst of pain we tend to try and

gloss it over with God-talk: to spiritualize what has happened, to refer to the tragedy as "the will of God." But David avoids all God-talk. He won't allow his raw humanness to be muted by clichés and slogans. There is a time and place to simply say, "I hate what has happened! I'm in pain!" The right words do not always include God-talk.

Second, notice that *we must remember what is best and noblest in people*. How do we grieve for someone who has lived a tragic life? for a parent who has deeply hurt us? for a politician who has lived an immoral life? People ask these questions all the time. David faced that issue, and knowing the worst of Saul did not keep him from remembering the best of Saul. This repeated refrain, "How the mighty have fallen," recognizes the heroism not only of Jonathan, but Saul as well. David even speaks of the love between Saul and Jonathan, when we know that they had, at best, a strained relationship.

It strikes me that David did not have the luxury of completely villainizing his enemy. And Saul was his enemy, make no mistake about it. Saul was the man who had unfairly caused so much pain in David's life. But Saul was not a Satanist. He, too, was a worshiper of Yahweh, albeit a weak one. But David made a choice to focus on what was good about Saul.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could completely villainize our enemies? I find that I can't completely villainize the people whom I have the hardest time with. Most of them are believers! I can't rejoice in their downfall; I have to grieve. And to do that, I must remember the best in them. I must honor them. Here, David honors Saul's memory by having this song placed in the book of Jashar, to be taught to the sons of Judah. This leads us to the next point.

We must learn to grieve in the context of community. David wrote a song for the whole nation to sing, and they were to teach it to the sons of Israel. (The daughters of Israel also are summoned to weep for Saul.) Families and churches and communities that don't learn to process their pain together, that just pretend everything is all right, later on explode under the pressure of their common secret and undealt-with pain.

One of the benefits of grieving in the context of community is that once in a while, someone like David comes along who is able to articulate our grief. I know that some of you have been working on your own poems of lament but, let's face it, we are not all poets. Sometimes we need a leader, a shepherd who has the spiritual perception to interpret our pain and give us words that match it. This is what David did for his people. This is what a shepherd does for his flock. And this is why we have the Psalms...

When we grieve fully, in the context of community, God meets us in the midst of our grief. Why should we do this? you ask. Why should we dredge up all those negative feelings? Here is why: If we don't give expression to our grief, we never give God the opportunity to meet us at that place of our deepest need. We never have the privilege of experiencing his sufficiency in the midst of our pain and sorrow. We end up moving on with an entire area of our existence that is shut down to the Lord. And so we end up cold and distant, not only from him, but from others, too.

So the first thing we learn from this song of lament by David is that when we are going through a passage, we

should stop and fully acknowledge the past.

The second thing is found in chapter 2, verse 1:

Then it came about afterwards that David inquired of the Lord, saying, "Shall I go up to one of the cities of Judah?" And the Lord said to him, "Go up." So David said, "Where shall I go up?" And He said, "To Hebron." (2:1, NASB)

We do not know how much time has elapsed but, at this point, David is ready to move on. Before he does, however, he seeks God's guidance for what he should do and where he should go. We don't know how the Lord spoke to him (some have suggested it was through the sacred lot, or the Ephod), but the Lord told him to go up to Hebron, an important city in the southern part of Palestine, and part of the area originally allotted to Judah. You may remember that this was an area where David's popularity was well established. His wife, Abigail, who was formerly married to Nabal, came from this place. So we're told, in verses 2-3, that David, together with his wives and his men, went up to Hebron:

So David went up there, and his two wives also, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess and Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite. And David brought up his men who were with him, each with his household; and they lived in the cities of Hebron. (2:2-3)

This must have been quite an event. The entourage must have numbered well over a thousand people.

Look what happens next. Verse 4a:

Then the men of Judah came and there anointed David king over the house of Judah. (2:4a)

Though nobody was surprised by David's coronation, it probably took place following considerable negotiations. You will remember that this was the second time that David was anointed. The first time was in a private ceremony, with the prophet Samuel, an event that had more religious than political significance. But this occasion was a public ceremony of tremendous political importance.

Let's pause for a moment here. As David moves to this next stage in his life he exemplifies what we might call a *submitted ambition*. There is no question that his going up to Judah would be a clear statement that he was ready to assume his role as king. And he wanted to be king. He knew this was God's will for him. This was the moment he and so many others had been waiting for.

It is important to keep in mind here that David was not a man void of ambition. He did not kill a Philistine giant without a certain degree of ambition. He did not take two hundred Philistine foreskins without ambition. He did not dream about building a house for God without ambition. But David's was a submitted ambition. It was an ambition primarily for the glory of God. So, before he goes up, he inquires of the Lord, not just to discern whether he should go up, but also, specifically, where he should go up to. David knows that the moment has come, but he is unwilling to take a step without the Lord's direction. That is a submitted ambition.

We see the same thing with Jesus when he made the transition from his quiet life as a carpenter to his public ministry. After his baptism, he was led out to the wilder-

ness by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil. Ambition was one of the issues that came up then. Satan tried to get him to grasp for his crown, his glory, apart from his Father's appointed process of suffering on the cross. But Jesus resisted. During a critical passage in his life, Jesus exhibited a submitted ambition.

In experiencing a transition in life, it is critical to not make any assumptions about the next step. This is especially important, and difficult, when a transition involves a move up or a move into a situation that we have been waiting for a long time. We must not push ahead too fast. We can be honest about our desires and ambitions, but we need to wait for God's timing. This is true even if the circumstances seem perfect. From a human perspective, there was nothing to delay David in this case, but he was still unwilling to move ahead without the Lord's clear direction. This actually was a hallmark of David's life—seeking the Lord's guidance before making important moves. It is one of the things that set him apart from Saul, and it was part of what it meant for David to be a man after God's heart.

I must tell you that this is a difficult area for me. I am a very ambitious person—and not always for the right things or the right reasons. Not only is my heart corrupt, I grew up in a home disrupted by alcoholism. In many ways, I am typical of adult children of alcoholics: I get my self worth from performing, from achieving and being known. Before I met Christ, my ambition was to be the best on the athletic field. After I met the Lord, at age seventeen, my ambition simply got redirected towards being the best pastor, but it still was not a submitted ambition. As a result, much of what the Lord has been doing in my life during the past few years is creating a yieldedness to whatever he has for me. I have spend most of my thirties chafing under some limitations upon my life that I could have done without. And a big part of that has meant waiting on God for direction, wanting to move out from underneath certain situations, but not feeling the freedom to do so in the Lord.

How can we know in the midst of a transition whether or not our ambition is submitted to the Lord? One way we can know is by determining whether we are leaving room for God to shut the door. Are we available to that, or are we pushing ahead so fast, and in such a determined fashion, that we are not even open to a "no"? David exemplified a submitted ambition throughout his life. Remember that he told the Lord he wanted to build a temple for him, a magnificent edifice that would last forever. But the Lord said no. It turned out he had something better in mind for David. But David was willing to accept the Lord's no. That is an example of a submitted ambition.

So we have learned, first, the importance of fully acknowledging the past, and second, the need for a submitted ambition.

But David also has to learn to accept the limitations of the present. Look at vv 4b-7:

And they told David, saying, "It was the men of Jabesh-gilead who buried Saul." And David sent messengers to the men of Jabesh-gilead, and said to them, "May you be blessed of the Lord because you have shown this kindness to Saul your lord, and have buried him. And now may the Lord show lovingkindness

and truth to you; and I will also show this goodness to you, because you have done this thing. Now therefore let your hands be strong, and be valiant; for Saul your lord is dead, and also the house of Judah has anointed me king over them." (2:4b-7)

The people of Jabesh-gilead, in the north, were loyal supporters of Saul and his family. This resulted from Saul's rescue of them from the Ammonites, early in his career. David sincerely wants to honor them for treating Saul with dignity in his death by making sure that he had a proper burial. But, once again, we see something of David's ambition here. No doubt, he saw this as an opportunity to make some political inroads in the north. Notice that he offers them protection as the new king. Recall that he had been anointed king only in the southern part of Israel, over the tribe of Judah. In the north, he had a rival from the family of Saul, as we learn next. Verses 8-10:

But Abner the son of Ner, commander of Saul's army, had taken Ish-bosheth the son of Saul, and brought him over to Mahanaim. And he made him king over Gilead, over the Ashurites, over Jezreel, over Ephraim, even over all Israel. Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, was forty years old when he became king over Israel, and he was king for two years. The house of Judah, however, followed David. (2:8-10)

So, while David reigned over Judah, Saul's son, Ish-bosheth, reigned over the rest of Israel. The implication is clear: The men of Jabesh-gilead turned down David's offer and remained loyal to the house of Saul. The result was that David had to settle for a half-way reign.

And this was not a short-lived situation. Verse 11:

And the time that David was king in Hebron over the house of Judah was seven years and six months. (2:11)

This half-way reign went on for seven and a half years! By the way, the reason it says that Ish-bosheth reigned for only two years is that during the first five of those seven and a half years, the Philistines maintained control of the north and there was no king there. But, as the next couple of chapters reveal, that whole period was characterized by civil war between those loyal to David and those loyal to the house of Saul.

The point is this: Despite his ambition to unite and reign over all Israel, David spent a major portion of his reign as a half-way king. What a bitter pill to swallow, after all the years of waiting for God's promise to be fulfilled and being chased around the wilderness by Saul!

As we move through various transitions in life, we often think that the next stage is going to be free from tension, struggle and difficulty. We idealize each stage. The adolescent idealizes what it would be like to move out and be on his own. The single person idealizes what it would be like to be married. The couple without children idealize what it will be like to have children. The couple with children idealize what it will be like when the children are finally grown and gone. This is true, especially if our situation has been hard like David's in the wilderness. We dream of the next stage as being idyllic, but it never is.

I fear that many of us who don't accept this live for the future and never get down to the difficult business of living today to its fullest. As we move through life's passages, *we have to learn contentment in the present with all its limi-*

tations. That is what David had to do. He had to accept what God gave him for now and live that to the fullest. Sooner or later, we learn there is no passage in life that will deliver us into a perfect situation. It is then we learn that the Lord himself is the one who stands with us at every stage in life, and he is enough.

Frederick Buechner writes profoundly on this very thing in a way that we can all relate to:

A child on Christmas Eve or on the day before his birthday lives for the presents that he will open the next day. And in this sense we all live like children. There are so many presents still to be opened, tomorrow, next month, next year. And in a way, it's our looking forward to the presents that keeps us going. The unexpected friendship, the new job, seeing our name in the paper, falling in love, the birth of a child, all of these are presents that life gives if we want them badly enough and if we are lucky enough. And in a way, every new day is a present to be opened, just as today was and tomorrow will be. The old saying is that "Where there is life, there is hope," and I think that the hope that there is is the hope that if not tomorrow or the next day, then some fine day, somehow, life will finally give us the present which, when we open it, will turn out to be the one that we have waited for so long, the one that will fill the empty place. But one by one as we open the presents, no matter how rich and wondrous they are, we discover that no one of them by itself, nor even all of them taken together, is the one of our deepest desiring; that ultimately, life by itself does not have that final present to give.

Ultimately, there is only one passage that will usher us into a perfect situation. That passage, of course, is our death. When we die in Christ, then all our longings will be fulfilled. All other passages merely lead to a half-way reign. In a very real sense, that is exactly the condition we are in, wherever we are. We reign in life through Jesus Christ, but not completely. As theologians like to say, we live in the "now and not yet." We can taste the glory of the future with Christ, but we can't swallow it yet. The kingdom has come, but not in its fullness. And so, like David, we need to learn to wait and accept the stage we are in, with all its limitations.

How do we navigate our way through the passages of life? First, we have to fully acknowledge the past. Second, we have to keep our ambition in submission to the Lord and his will. And third, we have to accept the place that the passage brings us, with all its limitations.

Jim Elliot, the martyred missionary to Ecuador, was a fine wrestler in his college days. Once he was asked if he really liked wrestling. He replied, "Before the match, I'm terrified; during the match, I'm in agony; and after the match, I'm exhausted. But, yes, I love wrestling."

Facing different passages in life is a lot like a wrestling match. Before, we are terrified; during, we are in agony; afterwards, we are exhausted. And at every point along the way, at every passage, we experience in a different way our own helplessness. But at each stage, the Lord also meets us in our deep need. Jesus Christ, who passed through every passage, stands with us as we acknowledge the past, submit our ambition regarding the future, and live contentedly in the present, with all its limitations. He has already been at every point along the way, and he has provided a way for us to make it home.

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COMPETING WAYS OF POWER

SERIES: ASCENDING THE THRONE

Catalog No. 1019

2 Samuel 2:1-11

Fifth Message

Brian Morgan

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A few years ago I was invited to visit a church in Canada as a candidate for the position of senior pastor. Calls like that can tantalize the ego with dreams of taking over and building something from scratch. This is especially tempting for someone who has been part of an organization like Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino, where there is no “up.” When I visited the church, I was impressed with the size of the facility. There was a beautiful new sanctuary, and right next to it a new gym. There were plenty of Sunday school classrooms, and best of all, unlimited parking! I had visions of preaching to the multitudes, of Christian education classes, an intern program, and built-in athletic fun for the youth. (Later, my elder would say to me, “Brian, it’s obvious they don’t know you!”) As things turned out, when they did get to know me they weren’t interested in pursuing the matter further.

However, a year later I was invited back to lead a men’s retreat at the church. I noticed that their new pastor remained in the background and never identified himself. On Saturday, a number of the men hiked to the top of a nearby mountain. As we sat around resting from our climb, one of the men asked the pastor to share his story. “Do you mean my conversion?” asked the pastor. “No,” said the man, “How are you doing in your role as senior pastor? The pastor replied, “I really did not come here on this retreat to participate. I came to hide. The truth is, this has been the toughest year of my life.” He said that the factions within the church were tearing him apart. The dream of being “king” in a dynamic church was quickly transformed to being a “pawn” caught between warring factions. The dream of “come and take over” quickly had turned to “come and get rolled over”—by the steamroller of division.

As we resume our studies in the life of David, from 2 Samuel, today we find that at last, David is about to take over as king of Israel. King Saul is dead. The funeral ceremonies are over. It is time for David to set about the task of being king. But that will not be easy. He will not roll up to the oval office in a limousine and begin dictating orders. There still is a lot of opposition to overcome in Israel. Though Saul is dead, a number of his sons remain in positions of power, together with some capable generals. Israel is fractured within, and threatened from without. The Philistines still pose a major military threat, especially after their victory at Gilboa. Joyce Baldwin describes the situation well in her commentary:

The Philistines had their outposts as far north and east as Beth-shean, and had established their military hold over Israel, driving a wedge between the northernmost tribes and the central area of Ephraim and Benjamin. Israel’s territory east of Jordan was more or less intact, but the general picture was one of fragmentation and uncertainty and in the absence of one commanding figure to establish a lead and unite the country.¹

Sounds like a typical troubled Silicon Valley company, doesn’t it? A new man is invited to come and take over the company, but he discovers it in chaos from the number of turnovers within the management, and a leadership vacuum that has left the employees with more time for political maneuvering than taking care of business. Sales are down, and the threat of a takeover looms.

Considering the political fragmentation within Israel and the military threat from without, David’s rise to power is nothing less than amazing. Our story has three sections, each of which ends with the same verbal echo: *David anointed king*. In a mere eleven verses we learn how David is given uncoerced public recognition as the anointed king of Israel. That private, secret anointing that he had received at the hands of Samuel long ago (perhaps as much as ten years earlier) is now publicly acknowledged by ever-widening circles in Israel.

How did this come about so quickly? How did this chosen king, David, come to yield such influence over ever-widening circles on earth? And how do the decrees of heaven find their acknowledgment on earth? It is important for Christians to learn the answers to these questions, because oftentimes we find ourselves living in fractured families, broken communities, units that are torn apart by rivalries and power struggles. How does the kingdom of God transcend all that and gather a people into one? May God grant that we will learn the answers to these questions from our text today.

I. Uniting the Home Front (2:1-4a)

Then it came about afterwards that David inquired of the LORD saying, “Shall I go up to one of the cities of Judah?” And the LORD said to him, “Go up.” So David said, “Where shall I go up?” And He said, “To Hebron.” So David went up there, and his two wives also, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess and Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite. And David brought up his men who were with him, each with

his household; and they lived in the cities of Hebron. Then the men of Judah came and there anointed David king over the house of Judah. (NASB)

Fokkelman makes the point that in the Hebrew text, it takes only fifty-four words for David, at breakneck speed, to become king in Judah.² The key verb in the text is *'alah*, meaning "go up." This verb, used five times, moves the story along with a sense of immediacy and singular focus: "Go up, go up, go up, go up." The verbal echo is a picture of David's rising ascendancy in Israel over increasing circles of influence. First, he is alone with God; then he comes, leading his two wives, Abigail and Ahinoam; then come his men and their families, until finally he is given a public reception by the entire tribe of Judah. David is pictured as the supreme gatherer who is able to unite all under his rule.

Even in the mention of David's wives and families the narrator inserts subtle hints that foreshadow David's future success. Fokkelman makes the observation that it was Abigail, the widow of Nabal the Carmelite, who declared that David would one day be king, and she asked to be remembered when that came about. With this tactful woman at his side, David can be assured of the support of the tribe of Caleb, in which she and her large family enjoyed prominence. There is also a hint of future success and fruitfulness for David's family in the place names associated with his two wives. Ahinoam is from Jezreel, which means "God sows"; and Abigail is from Carmel, which means "God's vineyard." Furthermore, when the families are listed they are described as "every man with his household," in contrast to the earlier tragedy in Ziklag (1 Samuel 30), when each man was separated from his wives and children (Fokkelman). The point is clear: David is forging ahead, uniting all with powerful force.

The movement ends in the serenity of settling down. David is warmly received by the entire community, and the men of Judah anoint him king. This is the culmination of the great journey not merely from Ziklag to Hebron, but the whole wilderness period. The wilderness days are over!

What is the secret behind David's influence? We find the answer in the first verb of the text: "David *inquired* of the Lord." "Inquired" is the Hebrew word *sha'al*. While the word has the same consonants as the name Saul, ironically, *inquire* is one thing Saul never bothered to do, as we have already noted. Certainly, David had a plan, but unlike Saul, he wants to make sure that his plan has divine sanction, so he prays. Judah was a logical choice for David. Judah was his tribe, and he had deposited spoils of war there. But he doesn't presume on God; he asks.

Notice the total lack of formality and absence of ritual in David's prayers. There are no introductory formalities, no carefully worded formulas, no complicated rituals. The directness and simplicity of his prayers are

reminiscent of a conversation between two intimate friends. David uses but two and four words in Hebrew to state his questions, and each time God answers with merely one word in Hebrew. David learned to pray like that during his wilderness years (reminiscent of the days in Keilah and Ziklag, 1 Sam 23:9-12; 30:7-8).

So, under divine sanction, David goes up to Hebron, the largest and most central city in Judah. The city once founded by Abraham, whose name means "to join together," is now the home of the king who has come to gather all Israel. Three different verbs summarize the beauty of the scene. There is first the kneeling down in prayer; followed by a rising up higher and higher over ever-increasing circles of influence, until the community recognizes the king; then a settling down in peace and serenity within the security of a walled city.

Next, David's attention shifts to news regarding the men of Jabesh-gilead.

II. An Invitation To Former Rivals (2:4b-7)

And they told David, saying, "It was the men of Jabesh-gilead who buried Saul." And David sent messengers to the men of Jabesh-gilead, and said to them, "May you be blessed of the LORD because you have shown this loyal-love to Saul your lord, and have buried him. And now may the LORD show loyal-love and truth to you; and I also will show this goodness to you, because you have done this thing. Now therefore, let your hands be strong, and be valiant; for Saul your lord is dead, and also the house of Judah has anointed me king over them."

In the second movement of the story, David responds to what he hears were the courageous acts of the men of Jabesh-gilead. It was these men whom Saul had saved, earlier in the Samuel story, from a severe Ammonite threat (1 Sam 11:1-13). Now they repay the kindness Saul showed to them. 1 Sam 31:11-13:

Now when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all the valiant men rose and walked all night, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shean, and they came to Jabesh, and burned them there. And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days.

These brave men rescued their dead king's body from further desecration and, at great risk to themselves, gave him a proper burial. David describes what they did as an act of kindness (*chesed*: "loyal-love"). *Chesed* means "a responsible keeping of faith with another with whom one is in a relationship" (Sakenfeld). Who will return loyal-love to these men now that Saul is dead? David implies that God will, and that he will, too, hinting that he now occupies a new position of power. Further, David implies that since their responsibility to Saul is complete they are free to make a fresh covenantal relationship with him as the new king. The

phrase, “let your hands be strong,” is an invitation to them to join his cause; in other words, “be stalwart,” as men who can be counted on for loyal service (McCarter).

So David meets these men in their grief, and expresses solidarity with them. Then he uses the occasion as a stage to invite them to join the new regime. Though his offer is bold, it is flavored with humility, for he puts himself forward in the language of what others have recognized about him: “The house of Judah has anointed me king over them.” The implication is that they were being invited, not coerced, to join. With such a carefully worded message, David is portrayed as an exceptional statesman. “David sends the community a positively worded letter in which he communicates a blessing and a promise, recognizes loyalty, extends encouragement, and announces a new development” (Fokkelman).

Fokkelman points out that it is remarkable that there is no sequel to the story. The city does not respond with a message of appreciation, a call for help, or how it will serve David. We simply do not hear any more about Jabesh. What did they do with their invitation? We do not know. The tension draws us into the story, and makes us answer the question, What did we do with our invitation?

While David is gathering all in Judah and sending invitations deep into Sauline territory, trouble is brewing in the north, however.

III. Quietly Waiting While the Opposition Organizes (2:8-11)

But Abner the son of Ner, commander of Saul’s army, had taken Ish-bosheth the son of Saul, and brought him over to Mahanaim. And he made him king over Gilead, over the Ashurites, over Jezreel, over Ephraim, and over Benjamin, even over all Israel. Ish-bosheth, Saul’s son, was forty years old when he became king over Israel, and he was king for two years. The house of Judah, however, followed David. And the time that David was king in Hebron over the house of Judah was seven years and six months.

In the third and final movement of the story we hear a strong note of dissonance and threat to David’s rule coming from the formidable Abner, Saul’s chief military officer and first cousin. Abner appoints Saul’s son, Ish-bosheth,³ as king. Abner, of course, is the strong man; Ish-bosheth is merely a puppet. Now that there are two kings and two thrones in Israel, the threat of civil war looms. What havoc this situation will cause in Israel! History records that at one time there were two popes in the Catholic church. One reigned in France, the other in Rome, and each excommunicated his rival. Then a third pope appeared to put an end to the rivalry, excommunicating the other two. This confusion and rivalry ultimately paved the way for the Reformation. So

Ish-bosheth is enthroned at Mahanaim, to the east of the Jordan, out of range of the Philistine threat (near or on the Jabbok, where Jacob met the angels and named it “two camps,” Gen 32:2).

This third movement is set in stark contrast to the first so as to illustrate two competing ways of power. In the first movement, David initiates his rule by “asking,” and he receives divine sanction. But, in contrast, Abner does not ask; he takes. David goes up in obedience, while Ish-bosheth is “brought over” and appointed king, with no anointing. David governs by mutual consent of the governed who recognize a spiritual authority emanating from within him. This spiritual authority gathers all, beginning with himself, then his family, his men, and finally a whole community. Ish-bosheth, on the other hand, rules by the purely arbitrary decrees of a strong man. Acceptance of his rule is dictated from without. And although he rules over a vast amount of territory, his authority derives solely from past loyalties; it has nothing to do with his own character or reputation. David rules but one tribe, which is loyal to him. But the king who has much territory has little time (a mere two years before his rule comes to a drastic end), while the other king has little territory, but all the time in the world. The point is that when David is faced with political maneuvering by the opposition, he does nothing but wait, for time is his ally.

IV. How the David Story Shaped the Son of David

How does this story impact us today? As I reflect on the significance of these texts, I am immediately struck by how they shaped Jesus’ understanding of the kingdom of heaven. The power of the story is found, first, in how it shapes the Jesus story, and how it shapes our own stories. And the significance of these texts is discovered when we view them, not just through David’s eyes, but through the eyes of Jesus. It is he whom we see in these ancient accounts. As the apostle Paul wrote, “But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18). True change is not brought about by ethical admonitions. What changes us is when we see Christ, by the Holy Spirit. His story transforms us and his story becomes our story. As Paul put it in another place, “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

Like David, we behold the Greater David praying before initiating his rule on earth. There is a cave hewn out of the rock that overlooks the Sea of Galilee, called Eremos. Jesus would often retreat there in the morning to be alone and pray. When I visited that spot I looked out over the sea and pictured Jesus in prayer all through the night, seeking God’s guidance on who would form the twelve, the founders of the new Israel. Because of Jesus’ relationship with his Father, he was able to gather into one twelve Jews, so different, so independent, so proud, so factious. Who else but Jesus

would place a tax collector and a zealot together in the same family? So Jesus coveted for his disciples this relationship that he had with his Father. Imagine his elation when the disciples finally asked him, after observing him for so long, to teach them to pray? After the cross and resurrection, we find these men united with the seventy, in the Upper Room, waiting and praying for that coming of the Holy Spirit that would anoint them all, at Pentecost. And, once anointed, they, like Jesus, would be the ones who gathered and unified, until all things in heaven and earth are united under the Messiah.

Then I think of how Jesus was careful to teach his disciples to boldly reach out into enemy territory as ministers of reconciliation, not as self-righteous combatants. How stunned they must have been when Jesus wanted to pass through hated Samaria, not around it, to return to Galilee. How shocked they appeared when they found him offering the invitation of eternal life to a seedy Samaritan woman at the well.

Here is the Christ way: Identify with outsiders in the midst of their pain, and then boldly use that stage as an invitation to them to accept the rule of the Messiah.

In the David story that invitation was left hanging, but in the Jesus story, amazingly, the invitation is accepted and a whole city repents. As believers, the best place for us to be as far as the gospel is concerned, is meeting the world in the center of its grief. It is there we can identify with them and grieve with them. Let us not be tempted to stand apart from them, waving placards and shouting at them in self-righteous simplicity. Let us go to where they live and weep with them, and then invite them to the feast.

Finally, I think of how, when the opposition mounted against Jesus, and his enemies began to plot his downfall, he never panicked. He never launched a counter-

offensive to protect himself, but rather allowed events to run their natural course. Even when the one in his midst betrayed him, he allowed it to happen, because he knew that time was on his side. That was why he told Judas that he must act quickly, because Judas did not have much time. But Jesus had all the time in the world. God had installed him as King on Zion, and on Zion he will reign (Psalm 2).

How we need this vision of Christ, which is so little understood today. We are so prone to act before we pray, to combat our enemies instead of loving them, to launch worldly counterattacks of self-protection instead of quietly trusting the Sovereign Lord to allow time to run its course. The questions the text leaves us with are these:

Will you take the Christ way and pray?

Will you take the Christ way and weep with your enemies and invite them to the feast?

Will you take the Christ way and quietly wait on God while your enemies plot your downfall?

Let us remember that Jesus warned, "He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters" (Matt 12:30).

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1 Joyce Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel*, Tyndale O.T. Commentaries (Downers Grove: IVP, 1988), 183.

2 For many of my observations on this story I have depended on J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, Vol. III, *Throne and City* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 25-40.

3 According to 1 Chronicles 8:33, his real name was Ishbaal "Lord's man," but his probably was changed to Ish-bosheth, "man of shame," since *baal* originally meant *lord*, but later became the epitaph for the Canaanite deity Baal.



STOPPED DEAD IN YOUR TRACKS

SERIES: ASCENDING THE THRONE

Catalog No. 1020

2 Samuel 2:12-32

Sixth Message

Brian Morgan

November 26th, 1995

As I have immersed myself in the David story, I have become more and more impressed by how these Old Testament texts shaped Jesus, the Greater Son of David. These very passages that we are studying in this series taught Jesus the essential lessons he would need to pass on to his disciples in order to bring about the kingdom of heaven to earth.

We must never think that Jesus was exempt from the learning process. Being fully human, he had to formulate his thinking, just like we do, by carefully studying and rigorously reflecting on the ancient texts. It is my opinion that the text to which we come today might well have provided Jesus with a clue as to what would be the most dangerous temptation his disciples would succumb to, the one thing above all others that he would have to transform in their character so that they might be effective ministers of the gospel. That temptation is misdirected zeal: serving the right king, but doing it the wrong way. Misdirected zeal probably has caused more damage in the church than anything else.

When we last left David he was in Hebron, gathering all under his rule with tremendous spiritual force. The atmosphere was one of peaceful unity from within, and gracious hospitality toward those from without. No one was coerced to submit to the rule of the new king of Israel. In our text today, however, the mood dramatically shifts to tense confrontation, mistrust, and bloody violence. Surprisingly, David is absent from the text. Absent, too, is any mention of God. Instead, the spotlight shifts to the two generals of the opposing armies.

What happens when the king is absent and his leaders are left to themselves to implement his rule? How will they react to confrontation? Sadly, as we will see, they revert back to playing the game the way they know best: if people will not join in the cause, they must be killed—with holy zeal, of course! This is war, with all its disastrous consequences. War is always grievous, but it is appalling when it involves brother against brother, and blasphemous when it is carried out in the name of King of the Peace.

Our text, then, in all likelihood answers the question that Jesus would be forced to deeply consider in the gospel stories, What would it take to break his disciples from misdirected zeal?

I. War Among Brothers: 12 + 12 = 0! (2:12-17)

Now Abner the son of Ner, went out from Mahanaim to Gibeon with the servants of Ish-bosheth the son of Saul. And Joab the son of Zeruiah and the servants of David went out and met them by the pool of Gibeon;

and they sat down, one on the one side of the pool and the other on the other side of the pool. Then Abner said to Joab, "Now let the young men arise and hold a contest before us." And Joab said, "Let them arise." So they arose and went over by count, twelve for Benjamin and Ish-bosheth the son of Saul, and twelve of the servants of David. And each one of them seized his opponent by the head, and thrust his sword in his opponent's side; so they fell down together. Therefore that place was called Helkath-hazzurim ["field of the stone knives"], which is in Gibeon. And that day the battle was very severe, and Abner and the men of Israel were beaten before the servants of David. (NASB)

A country with two kings is a land destined for strife. Here we learn that Abner takes the initiative and heads to the southernmost part of his territory in Benjamin, within striking distance of the Judean border; while Joab, for his part, heads off Abner's advance, just beyond the border, at the pool of Gibeon. We can imagine the tense atmosphere as both sides set up camp on either side of the pool.

"The pool separates and unites the sides who both need a lot of water. Motionless, available and centrally situated, the pool reflects the great stir on all sides."¹ Whether they came together to negotiate or engage in a military conflict we don't know. It is noteworthy that neither side attacks the other; perhaps they do not want a large-scale conflict. Finally, the tension is broken by the voice of Abner, who invites Joab to allow "the young men...to rise up...and make sport before us." Sounds deceptively like a touch football game. A contest, for the amusement of the generals; no harm, no foul, merely a little fun to break the tension. Fokkelman calls this language "part of military jargon from time immemorial, full of euphemisms which denote the most terrible things, but avoid adding more pain to the soft heart hidden behind a soldier's rough exterior. Euphemisms attempt to reduce hard facts to manageable proportions."²

Twelve men from each side are selected for the contest. No doubt there were negotiations on the selection process, but we are not allowed to listen in on the bargaining. Twelve men from each side: a sacred number, perhaps symbolizing that each side is laying claim to being the true Israel. "Something hair-raising clings to the use of the sacred number in an arena to run red with blood."³ The language of the battle betrays the reality, however. The word that is twice translated as "opponent" is the Hebrew word *re'a*, which really means "intimate friend" or "close associate." A *re'a* is someone for whom you feel a vigorous affection, someone you delight in. The Hebrew synonym for the term is "brother."

But, to our horror, these “intimate friends” now face each other in death: “Each man seized the head of his ‘close associate’ and [thrust] his sword into the side of his ‘friend’.” The two neatly arrayed lines of friends engage in a battle of precision, and each man is described as the victor. The reality, however, is that all of them are killed. In this “game,” twelve plus twelve equals zero. Twenty-four dead men, each killed by the sword of his brother. The language attempts to cover over the horror with victory symbols (“each man was the winner”), but no verbs are given to describe the death blows inflicted upon the losers.

Such language prostituted in the service of political aims is reminiscent of how the Third Reich tried to cover up its atrocities with its sanitized metaphor of victory, “The Final Solution”—a euphemism of horror. Decades later, we know how the attempts to wipe out an entire race demanded voices to rise out of hell’s frozen silence to shatter illusions with naked realities that defied description. In the same way, the current label “Pro Choice,” tries to draw a respected political veil of freedom over millions of dead fetuses, whose sacred sinews are torn apart by abortion. Something terrible happens to us when language is prostituted to serve the cause of evil.

In the end, the battle site is given a new name, Helkath-hazzurim, the “field of the stone knives.” What a contrast to this pool “with its living water and the rocky quality of the blood-soaked field turned cemetery.”⁴ Now that the “sport” is over, the deadlock gives way to real conflict, and the escalation knows no bounds. As the sun sets, the narrator uses but one word to describe this day of blood: “the battle was *severe*.” Severe: a word out of the “nerve of sacred memory” (Paul Celan), a word that evokes David’s painful lament for the dead on Gilboa and the tears that ensued (2 Sam 1:17). But the grief of this day is even more pronounced, because it results from a battle between brothers—the children of Abraham killing their own seed. Who won? Abner is described as the loser, but no victor is listed. In a civil war, there are no winners.

After the summary statement of the battle, the narrator recalls an incident that occurred on the battlefield that day.

II. What Will Stop the Killing? (2:18-28)

(a) The Deadly Pursuit of One (2:18-23)

Now the three sons of Zeruiah were there, Joab and Abishai and Asahel; and Asahel was as swift-footed as one of the gazelles which is in the field. And Asahel pursued Abner and did not turn to the right or to the left from following Abner. Then Abner looked behind him and said, “Is that you, Asahel?” And he answered, “It is I.” So Abner said to him, “Turn to your right or to your left, and take hold of one of the young men for yourself, and take for yourself his spoil.” But Asahel was not willing to turn aside from following him. And Abner repeated again to Asahel, “Turn aside from following me. Why should I strike you to the ground? How then could I lift up my face to your brother Joab?” However, he refused to turn aside; therefore Abner struck him in the belly with the butt end of the spear, so that the spear came out at his back. And he

fell there and died on the spot. And it came about that all who came to the place where Asahel had fallen and died, stood still.

Here we are introduced to the three sons of Zeruiah again, those macho men whose fiery passions are quick to court danger and deny obstacles. These were the sons who were so eager for David to slay Saul in the cave of Engedi, sons who would use theology in the service of their private war. It took a severe rebuke from David to keep their zeal in check. Now they appear again. Asahel, the third son, is described as “swift footed as a gazelle.” The word “gazelle” (*ha-tzevi*) resonates with a painful verbal echo from David’s lament over Jonathan—a forbidding omen.

Jonathan was swifter than an eagle and stronger than a lion. Asahel, like Jonathan, has speed, and he uses it to pursue Abner. But, unlike Jonathan, Asahel does not have the strength to match the lion. Abner tries to reason with him to get him to turn aside, but Asahel will not be turned away. He is a man whose zeal gives him singular focus, and a passion that takes him beyond reason.

Here we see how unrestrained zeal can blind us from being able to assess reality. Unwilling to turn from his fixation, “Asahel gets the butt end of Abner’s spear, which penetrates with such force that it comes out his back. With a surprising reverse impact, Asahel is dead on the spot” (Fokkelman). The blazing speed of the text is brought to an abrupt halt, and all are forced to stop and feel the shocking blow to the belly. Misdirected zeal blinds and kills; it doesn’t matter whose side you are on.

But the chase does not end. Asahel’s brothers, fueled by the desire for revenge, now take up the pursuit and close in on Abner.

(b) The Shophar’s Piercing Ring (2:24-28)

But Joab and Abishai pursued Abner, and when the sun was going down, they came to the hill of Ammah, which is in front of Giah by the way of the wilderness of Gibeon. And the sons of Benjamin gathered together behind Abner and became one band, and they stood on the top of a certain hill. Then Abner called to Joab and said, “Shall the sword devour forever? Do you not know that it will be bitter in the end? How long will you refrain from telling the people to turn back from following their brothers?” And Joab said, “As God lives, if you had not spoken, surely then the people would have gone away in the morning, each from following his brother.” So Joab blew the trumpet; and all the people halted and pursued Israel no longer, nor did they continue to fight anymore.

The chase continues through the day, until evening. Abner arrives at the last hill before the desert wilderness opens up to them on his escape home. The high ground afforded by the hill would be his final chance to make a stand before the pursuing army. There he is met by the scattered ranks from Benjamin, who converge behind their leader as “one” (the key word which drives the text is filled with poignant irony.) After a “severe” day of bloodshed, the cold, calculating Abner counts his cards and figures it is time to negotiate. In his mind he is no match for the mighty Joab, especially when he has just killed Joab’s

brother. So Abner calls on Joab to negotiate, but what follows turns out to be a war of words.

Abner speaks to Joab as a shrewd statesman, playing the role of grieving victim crying out in despair “before a receding horizon” (Fokkelman). He asks, “Will the sword devour forever?” In reality, it was he who initiated the conflict, and it is Asahel’s brothers who are grieving. The words, “Don’t you know it will be bitter in the end?” suggest stupidity on Joab’s part. Then, still on the offensive, Abner places the blame on Joab for escalating the conflict: “How long will you refrain from telling the people to turn back from following their brothers?”

But Joab will not take this lying down. He invokes an oath before God to place the blame squarely at Abner’s feet: “As God lives, if you had not spoken (i.e. initiated this conflict by invitation), surely then the people would have gone away in the morning.” He invites no response, since he has already condemned Abner with a verdict of guilty. Though Abner is at fault, he will gladly be a gentleman and take the initiative for peace. Joab lifts the ram’s horn (shophar) and its piercing cry brings a quick halt to the fighting. Finally, brother ceases to pursue brother.

Here we have the account of back to back scenes of Abner being pursued by two different sons of Zeruah. In the first, Abner is pursued by the flighty Asahel. Asahel is governed by his speed, which overtakes his logic. He refuses to listen to Abner’s reasoning, and the chase is abruptly halted as he is impaled by the butt end of Abner’s spear. He dies on the spot, and all Joab’s men stop in their tracks to gaze on his dead body. In the second scene, Abner is pursued by the strong man, Joab. As Joab overtakes him, Abner tries to convince him to listen to reason: in a civil war there are no winners. Joab, unlike Asahel, is able to let go and listen to reason. He blows the shophar, and all the army halts from the pursuit, thus ending the fight. In both cases something extraordinary has to break in from without to cause brothers to give up the chase and let go of their zeal. In the first instance, it was the shocking death of one whose misdirected zeal consumed him; in the second, it was the penetrating drones of the shophar, beckoning to all under the name of “brother.”

In the first scene the negotiations between generals is full of ease and agreement, but the outcome is a horrific, bloody annihilation. In the second scene their speech is heated, passionate, and contentious, but the outcome is one of separation and peace. Joab cuts through Abner’s questions and wins the war of words. The killing is over, at least for now.

The story concludes with the homeward march of the two armies.

III. Epilogue: Separation and Return (2:29-32)

Abner and his men then went through the Arabah all that night; so they crossed the Jordan, walked all morning (or “the whole length of the cleft”), and came to Mahanaim.

Then Joab returned from following Abner; when he had gathered all the people together, nineteen of David’s servants besides Asahel were missing. But the

servants of David had struck down many of Benjamin and Abner’s men, so that three hundred and sixty men died. And they took up Asahel and buried him in his father’s tomb which was in Bethlehem. Then Joab and his men went all night until the day dawned at Hebron.

The contrasting images give a clue as to the respective destinies of the two armies. First, we see Abner and his men, retreating through the desert all night, then crossing the Jordan and walking the whole length of the entire cleft.⁵ (The June 1995 edition of *National Geographic Magazine* has a satellite photo revealing this deep canyon of some 1700 feet.) “The march, twice as wearisome after an exhausting day of war, takes the soldiers to Mahanaim. The picture is one of ‘two camps with a (great) chasm in between them.’⁶ While both sides walk through an entire night to make their return, only Joab’s, the winning side, is greeted by sunrise: “Light broke upon them in Hebron.” This rising sun stands symbolically for David’s continued rise to power.

Sandwiched between the return of the two armies is the body count. For every Judean killed, there are eighteen killed on the other side. “Asahel is buried in his father’s grave, in Bethlehem, about half the distance of the journey to Hebron. It is not the darkness of the grave that has the last word, however, but the light of day dawning upon the survivors at Hebron” (Fokkelman). Yes, they are the victors, but, we have to ask, at what price? Earlier in our story, David was gathering all Israel around him in life; now all Israel is gathered around a body count. Though the count is almost twenty to one, what compensation is that when the one is your brother? And what good is victory, when the twenty losers are your brothers as well? Don’t ever forget the body count! Ray Stedman had a gift for asking penetrating questions of Christians who justified the use of manipulative market techniques to spread the gospel because of the positive results of such practices. He would graciously give credit for those won to Christ, and then ask the all too often forgotten question, “But how many did you turn off?” Evangelism at what price? What was the “body count”?

Who wins when there is a war among brothers? Who wins when two brothers sue each other in court? Who wins when two Christians divorce? Who wins the theological war when we lacerate brothers with our words? In this story we learn, rather painfully, that while there may be a right side and a wrong side, there are no ultimate winners, only losers. In this accounting, twelve plus twelve still equals zero. We may desire to serve the right king, but serving in the wrong way is as hellish as serving the wrong king. Both sides become pawns of demons, and it is always “bitter in the end.” Instead of bringing reconciliation, we create massive divides that confine our rivals to disappear in the darkness. Hell is served, and we call it “sport.”

What drives these conflicts is a misdirected zeal that blinds our hearts so that our opponent is no longer recognizable across the chasm. No longer are we able to see him for who he is, a brother. We see him instead by what he evokes in us, a fear that threatens us. Our story does not

underestimate this zeal, but sees it as powerful, and consuming to the point of obsession. Breaking it, according to the narrator, requires an extraordinary occurrence from without. Sometimes that event is as painful as death itself, which grinds our obsessions into the dust. At other times it is the penetrating cry of the shophar, God's shout from heaven, a cry that pierces bone and marrow, heard through the voice of our brother.

IV. The Sons of Zeruiah and the Sons of Thunder

As we reflect on these texts of the David story we can see how powerfully they shaped the Jesus story. Jesus, too, came to an Israel fragmented and divided into a myriad of camps, all claiming to be the true way. Jesus was not timid about entering into the controversy. "I am the way," he claimed. And picking up Isaiah's metaphor of Israel (Isaiah 5), he boldly proclaimed, "I am the vine, the true one." Then he appointed twelve apostles, as if to say, "I am not only the true Israel, I represent the 'exclusive' Israel, 'all Israel.'" Just as was the case in David's time, Jesus' words were such a threat to those in power, they provoked many confrontations. The most difficult question Jesus had to face, however, was how would his disciples react when confronted by the opposition. Would they turn pools of living water into stony graveyards?

Peter, James and John would seem to be the New Testament counterparts of the sons of Zeruiah. Perfect type casts, they were impetuous, passionate, bold, vengeful, quick to draw blood. When they were not received at a Samaritan village, James and John asked the Lord whether he wanted them to "call fire down from heaven," and Jesus had to rebuke them. They even created controversy within their own circle by their ambition to be "first." Rightly did Jesus label them the "sons of thunder." And when the climactic confrontation was at hand, not by a pool this time, but in a garden, Peter, obsessed with his desire for action, took a sword and drew blood. Yes, these were men possessed by zeal.

But what would happen to this blind zeal? Were not these the very apostles who instructed followers of Christ to be slow to speak, and slow to anger, for the anger of man cannot work out the righteousness of God? And to rejoice when we suffer, for if we suffer for doing what is right, we are blessed. Wasn't it one of the sons of thunder who said that he who loves his brother abides in the light, and he who hates his brother is in darkness?

What happened? What stopped them and broke their blinding obsession to fight for the right King in the wrong way? It was a dead gazelle, a crucified Lamb. This was the Lamb who took the place of Barabbas, the revolutionary zealot. Jesus took the place of the zealot, and received the butt end of the spear for Israel. When Peter, James and John saw the crucified Christ, they stopped dead in their tracks, their zeal transformed forever. With these men there was no "bitter end." They loved Christ to the end, and they were happy to be crucified in his service.

And so they say to us today, "Look, look, at the unblemished Lamb impaled by my spear, with wounds so deep, yet draws me near." Let the shophar's ringing cry pierce our breast and cause us to stop our obsessive running in the right cause, but the wrong way. It took the death of the Redeemer to break misplaced zeal. As the prophet Zechariah said,

"I will pour out on the house of David...the Spirit of grace... so that they will look on Me whom they pierced."
(Zech 12:10).

1. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. III, Throne and City* (Assen: Van Gorcum 1986), 42-43.

2. Fokkelman, 44.

3. Fokkelman, 44.

4. Fokkelman, 46.

5. Some translations translate this as walked all "morning," but it is better understood as "cleft." BDB translates it as "cleft" or "ravine." It is used on Song of Songs 8:14, cleft mountains.

6. Fokkelman, 61.

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SEX, POWER, AND POLITICS

SERIES: ASCENDING THE THRONE

Catalog No. 1021

2 Samuel 3:1-21

Seventh Message

Brian Morgan

December 3rd, 1995

One of the things I enjoyed most about my college days was being part of a fraternity. I was motivated by a yearning for the camaraderie of older and younger brothers caring for each other. The value of this brotherhood was brought home to me when I studied in Italy during my sophomore year. In the villa where I was staying, I discovered a trunk, engraved with my fraternity's initials, Theta Delta Chi. Inside the trunk was a collection of paraphernalia passed down by older brothers to the incoming brothers. It had army surplus backpacks, athletic equipment, snorkels and fins, etc., but the real prize was a collection of meticulously documented class notes from several of the courses we had to take.

One notebook covered an art class, taught by the Director of the Uffizi Art Gallery, in Florence. Note-taking was difficult in this class of photographic slides. Working in the dark, students had only a few minutes to sketch the work and make notes to capture its significance. But, thanks to the class notes which I found in the trunk, I was prepared. I knew which slides were coming, so the pressure was off. I could sit back and enjoy the slide show, while the rest of the students were feverishly scribbling away in the dark. Wouldn't it be great if all of life was like that, where we had an older fraternity brother who kept an accurate log of life and passed it down to us?

Jesus had a "fraternity" brother, King David. Both Jesus and David were part of the same "fraternity"—Judah, the tribe of kings. In Jesus' day, while the rest of Israel was slaving away in the dark, trying to find their way in the kingdom, Jesus was poring over the "Davidic notebooks" of the Old Testament.

Our text this morning on the life of David, from the book of Second Samuel, prepared Jesus to face the greatest test in his ministry. Here we learn that life's greatest dangers come not when we are weak, but when we are strong. They come, not from those who oppose us directly, but from those who pose as friends seeking to make covenants with us.

I. Sex and Power (3:1-11)

(a) Legitimate Sons (3:1-5)

Now there was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David; and David grew steadily stronger, but the house of Saul grew weaker continually.

Sons were born to David at Hebron: his first-born was Amnon, by Ahinoam the Jezreelitess; and his second, Chileab, by Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite; and the third, Absalom the son of Maacah, the daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur; and the fourth, Adonijah the son of Haggith; and the fifth, Shephatiah the

son of Abital; and the sixth, Ithream, by David's wife Eglah. These were born to David at Hebron. (NASB)

Here we have a summary verse describing David's rise to power after Saul's death. The first thing the narrator wants us to be aware of is that David's rise was neither immediate nor easy. His ascent was a long drawn-out process filled with conflict, confrontation and casualties. The second thing we observe is that though David was destined for conflict, there was an invisible yet powerful force driving him to the throne. It is God who moves history along. His "intention can be delayed but not defeated."¹

We read that David "grew continually stronger." This is a Hebrew idiom formed from the verb "to walk," a key verb in the story, coupled with the verb "to become strong." Eugene Peterson graphically translates this: "David had a larger stride and a bigger embrace." The text goes on to reveal the secret behind David's strength. While the generals were fighting battles and turning pools of living water into bloody graveyards, David was at home, fathering sons. Three of these sons, Ammon, Absalom, and Adonijah, will take leading roles in the stories which follow; the others we know nothing about. While David is strengthening his house through legitimate sons, however, Abner is busy strengthening himself through illicit sex. But the text says that no house built on illicit sex will stand: "the house of Saul grew steadily weaker."²

(b) Illicit Sex (3:6-11)

And it came about while there was war between the house of Saul and the house of David that Abner was making himself strong in the house of Saul. Now Saul had a concubine whose name was Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah; and Ish-bosheth said to Abner, "Why have you gone in to my father's concubine?" Then Abner was very angry over the words of Ish-bosheth and said, "Am I a dog's head that belongs to Judah? Today I show loyal-love to the house of Saul your father, to his brothers and to his friends, and have not delivered you into the hands of David; and yet today you charge me with a guilt concerning the woman. May God do so to Abner, and more also, if as the Lord has sworn to David, I do not accomplish this for him, to transfer the kingdom from the house of Saul, and to establish the throne of David over Israel and over Judah, from Dan even to Beersheba." And he could no longer answer Abner a word, because he was afraid of him.

The opening verses are set in direct contrast to the earlier scene. David becomes strong by giving six women their full dignity as wives, and fathering legitimate children. These women are not concubines, but mothers who are raising the future leaders of Israel. (Multiple wives were accepted by law in ancient cultures, although this practice was not encouraged by Scripture.) In contrast, Abner is

making himself strong (the Hebrew uses a reflexive verb) through illicit sex, taking what does not belong to him, the concubine of another. By law, Ish-bosheth had the right to his father's concubines, but because he was weak, he refused to act. Abner, on the other hand, seizes the initiative "as if he were the boss in Saul's house."³ This was not merely a sexual act; this was sex in the service of politics, sex as the means of making a brazen challenge to the throne. Such a challenge could not go unnoticed, even by the weak Ish-bosheth, for to do nothing would be tantamount to handing the throne over to Abner uncontested.

The language of the confrontation portrays Ish-bosheth as a weak individual who is reluctant to contend for what is rightfully his. He refers to Rizpah as "my father's concubine"—the concubine of a dead man. It is as if he is afraid to say, "my concubine," lest he have to face Abner's wrath. Even so, the challenge still provokes Abner's rage. It is obvious that Abner is an authoritarian controller who is unaccustomed to being contradicted; but still his emotion seems out of proportion to the issue at hand.

Fokkelman makes the point that the reproach Abner receives from Ish-bosheth is merely the last straw which broke the camel's back, after months of pent-up frustration. All this time Abner had been single-handedly trying to keep the North intact under Saul's deteriorating household, and getting no support from a king who refused to act. Then Abner suffered tremendous military losses at the hands of Joab. Now this puppet king, Ish-bosheth, whom he disdains, has the gall to give him a moral reprimand. This puts Abner over the edge. "Am I a dog's head that belongs to Judah?" he demands. Abner's heated words betray his insecurity. They are reminiscent of Goliath's remarks when he saw that David did not respect him: "Am I a dog?" asked the giant. Before long, of course, Goliath would lose his head. Abner's "sense of self-respect is shaky as soon as the mirror of morality is held up to him."⁴

So Abner pouts with his childlike complaint, "How could you do this to me, when I've done so much for the house of Saul?" In his tirade he refuses even to mention Ish-bosheth's name until he speaks about what he refrained from doing: "I...have not delivered you into the hands of David" (an ugly omen). But now his days of loyalty are over.

To stress the seriousness and resolve of what he is about to do, Abner places himself under the curse of the living God if he is unsuccessful in handing over all Israel to David, from Dan to Beersheba (the geographical limits of the land, an inclusive term for "all" Israel). The fascinating thing is that Abner justifies his actions with religious piety. What he would do was the very thing the Lord swore to David. "Abner now poses as someone who decisively and willingly implements what God decides for the nation...without the slightest trace of...modesty."⁵ Up until now, Abner had been doing everything in his power to stand against this "oath" of the Lord, but when things become grim, he uses an oath in the service of his own political ambitions. We should be leery whenever a politician uses religious justification for political decisions.

Faced with Abner's rage and newly acquired religious resolve, the terrified Ish-bosheth cannot answer a word. The king-maker is defecting, and with him all Israel.

Abner quickly sends messengers to open up diplomatic relations and negotiations in Hebron.

II. The Politics of Power: The Painful Price (3:12-16)

Then Abner sent messengers to David in his place, saying, "Whose is the land? Make your covenant with me, and behold, my hand shall be with you to bring all Israel over to you." And he said, "Good! I will make a covenant with you, but I demand one thing of you, namely, you shall not see my face unless you first bring Michal, Saul's daughter, when you come to see me." So David sent messengers to Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, saying, "Give me my wife Michal, to whom I was betrothed for a hundred foreskins of the Philistines." And Ish-bosheth sent and took her from her husband, from Paltiel the son of Laish. But her husband went with her, weeping as he went, and followed her as far as Bahurim. Then Abner said to him, "Go, return." So he returned.

Abner sends his delegation to Hebron. He wastes no time laying his strongest card on the table. He asks, "Whose is the land? Make your covenant with me, and it shall be yours in its entirety." We can hear the devilish ring in this egotistical claim. David's acceptance is immediate ("Good!"), but conditioned, "If you want to see my face (a symbol of acceptance), bring me the prized princess." David's demand accomplishes two things: first, it tests Abner's loyalty; and second, once Saul's daughter is in the royal palace, that will serve as a guarantee that the rest of Israel will follow suit. So David lays claim to what is his by right, a bride whose dowry had been fully paid but was never given (Saul had betrayed David and given her to another).

When the messengers arrive, we see power politics at work, reducing human beings to being mere executors of the whims of political power brokers. A king is silenced in impotence; a general is reduced to the status of an errand boy; a husband is robbed of his home; and a wife stripped of her dignity as she becomes the final bargaining chip between political enemies. Her husband, Paltiel, is so distraught, he chases after his wife the whole journey, some forty miles, his every step soaked in tears. But tears are impotent in the game of power politics. Everyone caves in under the decree of the king. When the tanks enter the city center, they brook no resistance.

The speed with which Michal is extradited, and the utter lack of resistance, is a preview of what is to come for the rest of Israel.

III. Successful Power Politics: Closing the Deal (3:17-21)

Now Abner had consultation with the elders of Israel, saying, "In times past you were seeking for David to be king over you. Now then, do it! For the Lord has spoken of David, saying, 'By the hand of My servant David I will save My people Israel from the hand of the Philistines and from the hand of all their enemies.'" And Abner also spoke in the hearing of Benjamin; and in addition Abner went to speak in the hearing of David in Hebron all that seemed good to Israel and to the whole house of Benjamin. Then Abner and

twenty men with him came to David at Hebron. And David made a feast for Abner and the men who were with him. And Abner said to David, "Let me arise and go, and gather all Israel to my lord the king that they may make a covenant with you, and that you may be king over all that your soul desires." So David sent Abner away, and he went in peace.

Abner wastes no time soliciting the support of the rest of the nation for David. He appeals to a spirit that he believes was already at work within them, saying, "In times past you were seeking for David." Then he exhorts them to take immediate action: the window of opportunity was wide open! Next, he bolsters the need for immediacy with God's irrevocable vow, "The Lord has spoken." Ordinarily, God's oath alone should be sufficient motivation to do what is right, but Abner carefully words his oath so as to make it seem beneficial to them. The oath is God's guarantee of their future military success—a shrewd move on Abner's part, since Israel had just suffered back to back military defeats. To close the deal, Abner makes a personal appearance in Benjamin, Saul's tribal home. Abner is not one to leave anything to chance, to leave loose ends untied. What a strategist! He gets unanimous support for his new venture, and he heads for Hebron on a very good note. A wave of unification is sweeping over Israel.

Convinced he has all the bargaining chips he needs, Abner arrives in David's court. There he is welcomed as a VIP, and invited to a royal feast. The former enemies now sit and eat at one table, symbolizing the unification of the entire nation. Lest too much time pass and Israel change her mind, Abner asks David's permission to leave in order to gather all Israel to him, so that David might be king over all that his soul desires. The last time David heard such an unlimited offer as these words, "whatever your soul desires," it came from the lips of Jonathan, who out of loyal-love was willing to do whatever David's soul desired (1 Sam 20:4). But this vow cost Jonathan his life. Now David hears it from a power broker who is seeking political advantage. The terms of peace are ratified, and the narrator is careful to note that Abner leaves in *shalom*, reiterated three times for emphasis (vv 21, 22, 23).

IV. Reflections on Sex, Power and Politics

(a) David and the Price of Power Politics

This text is the story of the relationship between sex, power and politics. Here we are presented with a power triangle made up of three politicians, two kings and one general. Each plays the game of power politics, vying for what he wants, and each has a card to play. Ish-bosheth comes out as the loser. He loses his concubine Rizpah to the strong man Abner, and loses his sister Michal to David. David comes out the winner, with the ultimate prize, Israel, the final card in Abner's possession, taken from the hand of Ish-bosheth. The game ends with Abner leaving in peace and David in possession of a united nation.

Such is the successful result of power politics: one king walking and becoming strong, the other walking away in peace. What a deal! The only compassionate figure in the midst of these power brokers is Paltiel. His home is trampled in the game of politics. He weeps with every step until he is ordered to return home. Walking and weeping, Paltiel is set in contrast to a king whose stride is so large,

no one dare get in his way.

In my opinion, at this juncture David crosses a sacred line that opens the door to corruption within his kingdom. Ironically, what prompted the temptation was the gift of God's success. David is riding the wave of euphoria that popular support gives. When Abner arrives, the euphoria takes his breath away. Instead of turning to God in prayer, he quickly succumbs to immediate action and uses popular support for his political advantage. Though he takes what is rightfully his, it comes at an ugly price, Paltiel's tears, and the tearing apart of a home. And what of the devaluation of a woman who isn't even mentioned by name when she arrives, or given the honeymoon reception she deserves? (That is reserved for the general, Abner.) We can see that it won't take long for David's euphoria over the power that is now his to further corrupt him. The door is open for him to take what is not his and to use power politics as a means for sexual favors—worse still, as a cover for murder.

If this text alone were enough to convince us of the evil of power politics, all we have to do is turn the pages of Scripture, where we are afforded a view of the escalating costs. First, Abner's "gift" of a united Israel does not last. This "peace" gives way to a civil war that lasts hundreds of years. The point is this: in the kingdom of God, why negotiate with a strong man, since what he has to offer will not last? Second, and most tragically, we see how easily the way of the power brokers is passed on to three of David's sons. All three, observing their father, learn to be takers rather than givers. Women become objects to satisfy, not wives to honor. Driven by lust, Amnon rapes his own sister; Absalom, in an effort to defy his father's rule and establish his own, goes into David's ten concubines while David is yet alive; and Adonijah seeks to challenge Solomon's throne by requesting one of David's former wives. What is so painful for David is his inability to rebuke any of these sons. He can only stand by in frozen silence and watch his own sons repeat his iniquity, and then pay for their sins with their own blood. That is the price for using sex in the game of power politics.

And the game still goes on... When I was in Bali last year, I went to a marketplace buy earrings as gifts for my wife and daughters. As I left a store, I was greeted by a smiling man. Beside him stood a young girl. The man looked into my eyes and said, "You want woman?" It was then I realized that his smiling at me was a power play. I was a "rich" American, he wanted my money, and the pawn was someone's daughter. When I told him I was a pastor, he said, "I'm sorry. You are a holy man!" I left, angered that I had not done something other than say this. Children were the brokerage fee in this power game.

But we can look even closer to home. At a high school football game a few weeks ago, I was part of the group that moves the chains that mark the down and distance. As I listened to the coaches on the sidelines, I realized that what I was watching was not football, but power politics, played out between a triangle of coaches, parents and boys. I was appalled at the abuse heaped on the kids by the coaches when they didn't meet the expectations of the power brokers.

(b) Jesus on Power, Politics and Women

When we read the gospels, we can see how important

these stories were in shaping Jesus' understanding of the kingdom of God. In Luke's account of the child Jesus, we hear the words of 2 Samuel 3:1 echoed twice, almost word for word: "And the child continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him" (Luke 2:40); "And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52). Hearing these words would serve as a warning to Jesus. As the new David, he would ride a wave of popular support, but on the heels of that support would come temptation from the "strong man" who would try to make an agreement with him.

In Luke 4, the very next scene where Jesus appears, this happens right on schedule. The new Abner, the devil himself, comes on stage. All three of his temptations deal with the wrong use of power for personal gain. We hear the echo of Abner's words resonate in the second temptation, "To whom belongs all the kingdoms of the earth...make a covenant with me." But Jesus refused the gifts of the power broker. He wouldn't even negotiate, because the kingdom of God is non-negotiable.

So Paul says of Christ, "who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself" (Phil 2:6-7). Jesus would not use the power of deity for personal gain. He laid it aside, emptying himself, taking his place at the end of the line, where authority is best served by way of a basin and a towel.

Because Jesus refused to play power politics, no one was victimized in his kingdom. Women were restored to their rightful position of honor. No longer were they considered nameless political pawns, stripped of their dignity to serve as political symbols in a royal court. In our Lord's kingdom, women were raised to the role of prophets in their own right. They were the first to hear the gospel, through angelic messengers, and the first to see the Risen King. Elizabeth and Mary, dual echoes of the ancient Hannah, became vessels of the new creation and mothers of the new order, the sacred wombs of Israel's final prophet and consummate King. These women modeled the best in ancient Israel by their resounding praise and humble obedience.

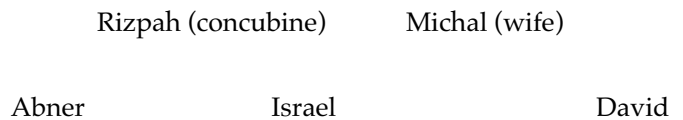
And children, nameless, powerless children, once the victims in the heinous slaughter of Herod's Bethlehem politics, were raised to the status of kingdom heralds. As Jesus entered the city, humbly, mounted on a colt, the children took their place among the perceptive few who recognized that this was The Event in history, the Messiah's public coronation in his capital, Jerusalem. The power brokers in Israel were blind to this, but nameless, powerless children discerned it. From this time forth, greatness would be measured by the infinite value accorded a child; and Christians are described as being eternally "childlike" in respect to their faith.

As we contemplate the meaning of things at this festive time of year, let us not forget that Christmas is the story of the time when the reign of the power brokers came to an end, and the kingdom was given to a Child.

*"There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace,
On the throne of David and over his kingdom" (Isaiah 9:7).*

Power Triangle

Ish-bosheth



1. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*. Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 224.

2. I have been greatly helped for many of my observations by J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. III, Throne and City* (Assen: Van Gorcum 1986), 67-94.

3. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 70.

4. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 73.

5. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 74-75.



WOUNDING THE KING OF PEACE

SERIES: ASCENDING THE THRONE

Catalog No. 1022

2 Samuel 3:22-39

Eighth Message

Brian Morgan

December 10th, 1995

I heard the bells on Christmas day,
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men.

I thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along th'unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men,

And in despair I bowed my head:
"There is no peace on earth," I said,
"For hate is strong, and mocks the song,
Of peace on earth, good-will to men."

I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day, which we sang this morning as a Christmas carol, was written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow after he received news of the death of his son in the Civil War. Christmas is indeed the time when we sing of the birth of the Prince of Peace. But, if we are honest, the harsh realities of life make us pause and wonder, "What peace?" Was peace really our Lord's mission? If it was, what went wrong? Perhaps we misunderstand what the Bible means by peace.

In our text today on the life of David, from the book of 2 Samuel, we get a preview into the heart of the King of Peace. What was his passion for peace all about? Here we will learn who the real enemies of peace are, and how King David responded when these enemies tore apart the delicate fabric of peace which he was seeking to establish, following his ascent to the throne of Israel.

Once again we pick up the story of David, now the powerful king of the land, as he is gathering all Israel under his rule. In our last study we learned that Abner, the leading general in the North and commander of the opposing army, defected, and opened up diplomatic relations with David, in Hebron. A peace treaty was signed, all Israel was promised to David, and Abner left in peace. This was a monumental moment in the history of Israel, as the first powerful military leader pledged to lay down his weapons and become a co-worker with the messianic king for peace. But, tragically, this peace would prove to be short-lived.

Our story has two movements. The first concerns a military general who tears apart the fabric of peace; the second centers on the king who works to repair the tattered fabric.

I. The General: Tearing the Fabric of Peace

(3:22-27)

(a) Peace Is Challenged (3:21-25)

And Abner said to David, "Let me arise and go, and gather all Israel to my lord the king that they may make a covenant with you, and that you may be king

over all that your soul desires." So David sent Abner away, and he went in peace. And behold, the servants of David and Joab came from a raid and brought much spoil with them; but Abner was not with David in Hebron, for he had sent him away, and he had gone in peace. When Joab and all the army that was with him arrived, they told Joab, saying, "Abner the son of Ner came to the king, and he has sent him away, and he has gone in peace." Then Joab came to the king and said, "What have you done? Behold, Abner came to you; why then have you sent him away and he is already gone? You know Abner the son of Ner, that he came to deceive you and to know of your going out and coming in, and to know all that you are doing." (NASB)

While David, the king, was going about the business of peace, his general, Joab, had been carrying on the business of war. In this scene, Joab returns victorious from a raid, eager to deposit a wealth of plunder into the king's treasury. Upon his arrival at the royal palace he is horrified to learn what has occurred between Abner and David. Abner, his military arch-enemy, who killed his brother Asahel, had come to the royal residence and the king had let him go free. They had even signed a peace treaty together. Joab is so infuriated at this news, he sweeps through the palace doors, in breach of protocol, to confront David. His words are so bold, his manners so lacking, that he crosses the sacred line of respect. "How could Abner have come to you, and you let him go?" he rails. Joab can't even bear to mention the word peace, so horrified is he at the thought that Abner had been permitted to leave. Doubtless, had he been present, he would have killed his rival.

As soon as Joab's anger is spent, he insults David for his naiveté. "Don't you know anything?" he is saying to the king, in effect. The verb "know," used four times in verses 25-26, is the theme word that brackets this text. Joab says that Abner was merely a spy who was hiding behind the guise of peacemaker. Chastising David for his ignorance, Joab says that Abner has come "to know" the king's "going out and coming in" (a Hebrew expression of totality). Joab is a pragmatic realist. A determined cynic, a man of the world, he appraises people instantly. But his assessment of Abner is based on past history, coupled with the experience of his own heart. Good as it is, it blinds him to the wondrous workings of God. He lacks the faith to see any potential for the divine spark which can break into an Abner's life and transform him from without.

Strangely, David makes no response to Joab's charges. Was he unable to answer a word? Or was he silenced in fear, loath to rebuke Joab's anger in the privacy of his own office, just as Ish-bosheth, the puppet king of the North, was silenced by his general, Abner? Whatever the truth of the matter, it is obvious that the king's passion for peace

made no impact on Joab, for he leaves the royal office, fully charged for the task that he is about to undertake.

(b) Peace Is Killed (3:26-27)

When Joab came out from David, he sent messengers after Abner, and they brought him back from the well of Sirah; but David did not know it. So when Abner returned to Hebron, Joab took him aside into the middle of the gate to speak with him privately, and there he struck him in the belly so that he died on account of the blood of Asahel his brother.

Joab departs the king's presence, fully determined to use this opportunity to achieve his own personal vendetta. Messengers are sent, and Abner is seized by the well of Sirah and brought back to Hebron. (Fokkelman translates "the well of Sirah" as "the well of turning aside"—another symbol of life turned red with blood.) At the king's capital, where Abner once enjoyed *shalom*, Abner is brought into the privacy (*sheli*) of the inner court, under the guise of intimacy and confidence. In that dark corridor of deception he becomes the victim of Joab's revenge in all its awful sweetness. Blood begets blood as a weapon is thrust into Abner's belly in revenge of Joab's dead brother, Asahel.

The difference, however, is that in Asahel's case, Abner was the reluctant killer. He was trying to reason with Asahel, out in the open, and was left with no option but to kill or be killed. Furthermore, Asahel's death occurred in the midst of battle. But Joab makes no attempt to reason with Abner. Instead, he works under the cover of darkness and deceit, and casts away reluctance for bloodthirsty revenge. Abner's death cannot be counted as a war casualty; it is murder during a time of peace.

The poignant irony is that the dastardly deed is accomplished in the royal capital, without David's *knowledge*. David knows nothing of Joab's "coming in and going out" (which probably indicates a serious estrangement between the two). The mirror of accusation that Joab foisted on Abner as a deceptive enemy of the king reflects back in his guilty face. Joab, who serves his own interests in David's kingdom, is, in fact, David's real enemy.

In the second scene we have David's reaction upon hearing of Abner's murder. This time the roles are reversed as David, the bearer of bad news, does all the talking and acting, while Joab's role is one of passive compliance. The events of this day so widen the breach in their relationship that the enmity between general and king will extend to David's death and beyond.

II. The King: Restoring the Fabric of Peace (3:28-39)

(a) The King's Pronouncement (3:28-30)

And afterward when David heard it, he said, "I and my kingdom are innocent before the Lord forever of the blood of Abner the son of Ner. May it fall (lit. "go round") on the head of Joab and on all his father's house; and may there not fail from the house of Joab one who has a discharge, or who is a leper, or who takes hold of a distaff [an expression which indicates "the oppression of forced labor," Holloway], or who falls by the sword, or who lacks bread." So Joab and Abishai his brother killed Abner because he had put their brother Asahel to death in the battle at Gibeon.

Receiving the news of Abner's murder, the king wastes no time in making a public pronouncement of his own innocence, thereby clearly separating himself and his kingdom from Joab. Then, in a fury that parallels Joab's earlier meeting with him, David pronounces a curse on Joab and his whole family, since family "justice" was the basis of Joab's revenge. This curse "makes up a special variation of *kareth*, of the premature death as punishment from God which goes with certain crimes. Not an 'extermination'... of the criminal, but may a never-ending stream of woe strike this family...With this series, David covers the most important predicaments in war and peace...[it] is a grievous curse."¹ The narrator concludes this section by summarizing the day of this brutal killing as payment in Joab's eyes for Asahel's death in "battle."

Next, we get the account of the funeral procession.

(b) The King's Actions (3:31-37)

Then David said to Joab and to all the people who were with him, "Tear your clothes and gird on sackcloth and lament before Abner." And King David walked behind the bier. Thus they buried Abner in Hebron; and the king lifted up his voice and wept at the grave of Abner, and all the people wept. And the king chanted a lament for Abner and said,

"Should Abner die as a fool dies?

Your hands were not bound, nor your feet put in fetters;

As one falls before the wicked, you have fallen."

And all the people wept again over him. (3:31-34)

Throughout the text, at certain times the term "king" is used and at other times "David," but only here, in the centerpiece of the story, are the two terms united as "King David." This powerful emphasis demonstrates how Joab's actions had severely wounded the heart of the king and effectively destroyed David's efforts to establish peace in the land.

David carefully orchestrates Abner's state funeral to give a public rebuke to Joab—a rebuke which, unfortunately, he had failed to deliver in private. First, David forces the perpetrators of the crime to tear their garments in grief and publicly lead the procession of mourners. Joab and his men are followed by the stretcher carrying Abner's body, with the king following behind. The order is symbolic of Joab's guilt (he was first upon the scene of the crime), and David's innocence (he came upon the scene last, after the crime had already been accomplished). This spatial separation is David's way of distancing himself and his kingdom from the bloodthirsty Joab.

Next, the spotlight is focused on David as he stands by Abner's grave, alone in his grief. Then he is united with the rest of the people, who join in with their own tears for the fallen hero. Here we behold the king in his finest hour, *walking, weeping, and wailing* with his people.

This, too, is the ministry of the Messiah, the greater David. He does not remain distant from his grieving people. Elie Wiesel writes in one of his books about one mysterious Jew in the Auschwitz death camp. In the midst of the despair of that awful place, this "prophet" arose and uttered these amazing words: "We are sores on the body of Israel. This is true also for the Messiah. You relegate him to the heavens, but he is here among us. You imagine that

he is safe, sheltered from danger, but he has come here to be with the victims. Yes, even he, he better than anyone, knows the sorrows that consume you; he feels the fist that smashed into your faces. The darkness that engulfs us engulfs him also."²

David's lament is carefully worded both to renounce the treachery involved in Abner's death, and to condemn the criminal for his crime. "Should Abner die as a fool dies?" he laments. The word "fool" is the Hebrew word, *nabal*. It is reminiscent of the Abigail story, and her churlish husband who died in his wanton wealth. Should Abner, the military warrior, who just a day earlier turned statesman to work for peace, die the death of Nabal? The thought that he died the death of a fool, or worse yet, of a criminal unchained, is appalling to David. "The chained body is a visualization of the impotence of the criminal once he has been caught. He who was strong once must now, whether he wants to or not, surrender himself to what others are about to do with him, and it is this very kind of surrender which is so ignominious for such a free, and a strong... man...as Abner...It is as if the poet himself feels chained by the hard facts."³

Here we have a graphic picture of the king's passion for peace, and his pain that peace has been torn to shreds by the obsessive zeal of a "friend." David walks behind the body of Abner and weeps at his grave. Then he writes a poem to wail over this statesman victimized by the vice of treachery. In the process, Joab is publicly separated, humiliated and condemned.

Next, we have the response of the people. Verse 35:

Then all the people came to persuade David to eat bread while it was still day; but David vowed, saying, "May God do so to me, and more also, if I taste bread or anything else before the sun goes down." Now all the people took note of it, and it pleased them, just as everything the king did pleased all the people. So all the people and all Israel knew that day that it had not been the will of the king to put Abner the son of Ner to death. (3:35-37)

So moved are the people by David's personal involvement in the death of Abner, they bring him "the bread of comfort."⁴ But David remains committed to fasting ("this is his personal contribution to the rites of mourning"⁵), and pronounces himself under a curse (an echo of Joab's curse) if he fails to fast until sunset. With these powerful public actions, all Israel comes to *know* (the theme word of our text) that it had not been the will of the king to put Abner to death. So the king, who at the opening of the story is accused of *not knowing* an enemy, and in fact did *not know* the ways of his own general, turns everything around so that by the end of the story, *everyone knows*, in no uncertain terms, that he is *innocent* of this death, and devastated that peace has been ravaged.

I have been looking through the Davidic Psalms to see if there is one particular psalm that might express how David's heart was shaped by this experience. I think that Psalm 26, where David speaks about his innocence and his being victimized by treachery, is a possibility. In the psalms, many of David's protestations about his innocence concern not his sinlessness, but his innocence in the matter of seizing the crown of Israel. Can we not see Jesus, throughout the history of the church, walking behind the

funerals of the innocent victims of the slaughtered in the name of righteousness? We think of the Crusades, the Inquisition, Cromwellian Ireland, the Holocaust, Bosnia. In all of these slaughters Jesus looks into the eyes of the mourners and says, "I am innocent. This was not of my kingdom."

Our text concludes at day's end with David's personal assessment of this historic day.

(c) The King's Heart (3:38-39)

Then the king said to his servants, "Do you not know that a prince and a great man has fallen this day in Israel? And I am weak today, though anointed king; and these men the sons of Zeruiah are too difficult for me. May the Lord repay the evildoer according to his evil."

Many commentators question the sincerity of David's actions at this state funeral. Were his tears a genuine expression of pain, or were they merely a show—the state staging its own grief to effect diplomacy? What was really going on in the heart of the king? To answer that question, the narrator takes us backstage into the privacy of David's inner court, away from public view, into the arena where the man's real motives are revealed. Just as we saw Joab's true motives exposed in the privacy of the royal palace, so here we have a true reading of the king's heart as he gives his personal assessment of Abner, himself, his real enemies, and his trust.

David initiates the conversation with his servants by asking, "Do you not *know*?" This rhetorical question is actually saying, "you must become fully aware" (Fokkelman). "Do you not know that a prince and a great man has fallen this day in Israel?" asks David. The former military man, Abner, had turned his back on war and had become a statesman for peace. This ancient account has uncanny parallels to the murder of Yitzak Rabin. When Rabin, the former military general and hero, began to work for peace, that was when he made enemies, resulting at last in his assassination.

Thus we have David's assessment of Abner: "a prince and a great man." Unlike Joab, who could see Abner only through the lens of his past history, David saw wonderful potential for the kingdom through this former enemy now a co-worker for peace. What a tragic turn of events, the slaying of the new convert for peace.

Following David's assessment of Abner, we get one of those rare but coveted glimpses into the heart of the king, as David gives his assessment of himself. It is one of pained resignation: "And as for me, this day I am weak, thought anointed king. And these men the sons of Zeruiah are too difficult for me!" What an admission from the head of state! The word "weak" is better translated "soft, delicate, tender"—a perfect counterpoint to "hard," the attribute of the sons of Zeruiah. David is saying, "Here I am, the anointed king of all Israel, but when it comes to these tough family members, I am soft." "He now expresses the gap between his inner world, feelings of vulnerability and the very beginning of his divinely-willed kingship on the one hand and the harsh demands of politics and military matters...on the other. The innocence of the individual disappears into this gap."⁶ David did not have a thick skin.

Unable to carry out the rebuke of Joab directly, David falls back on divine retribution, invoking God's personal

name to take the appropriate action. The word repay (*shallem*) is well chosen, and rounds out our story. It is same root as the word peace (*shalom*), used three times in the opening verses of the account. *Shalem* means "to repay, bring to a completion." Since Abner left David's presence in peace (*shalom*), but was betrayed, may God repay (*shallem*) the evildoer completely, is David's rebuke.

III. The King of Peace and You

Our text draws us into the David story and leaves us with the question, Where do we line up with the King of Peace? If David had a passion for peace, how much more does the greater Son of David feel that passion? It was Jesus of whom the prophets wrote that in the last days, all nations would be drawn to Zion like a flood, and there be taught the Torah by the Messianic King. As a result they would turn their swords into plowshares: nations would no longer practice war, and each would sit under his fig tree with no one to make them afraid (Mic 4:1-4). The most powerful witness to the world that Jesus was indeed the Christ was his ability to reconcile former enemies: zealots with tax collectors, prostitutes with Pharisees, Jews with Gentiles. This is the work of the cross: not merely to reconcile men to God, but to create a community where people deeply love their former enemies. This is Christ's passion: peace on earth through the blood of the cross.

The great mystery in our text is the king's outspoken vulnerability in the process of peacemaking. "I am weak though anointed king," says David. He is not weak with those who openly oppose him, the strong Abners of life. They pose no threat to him. Rather, the threat comes from those who claim they work for his name, those to whom he has entrusted his rule, and who could so easily destroy that delicate fabric of peace: those who prefer judgment rather than grace on the immoral and decadent, who prefer dividing to gathering, lobbying to evangelizing, and judging to reconciling. Oftentimes they cross the sacred line and help the judgment along. And God permits it. But, by forcing his hand, they cause him to distance himself from them. Though some who claim to be his friends may pronounce victory, the King of Peace tears his gar-

ments and walks alongside his enemies. He weeps with them and writes them a poem, crying out in his pain, "I am innocent, I am innocent."

One of the most formidable enemies of Christianity was a Jewish zealot, Saul of Tarsus. Under his sanction and authority, the first Christian martyr, Stephen, was put to death. Yet for all his political power and obsessive zeal, Saul posed no threat to Christ. Just one appearance by Jesus and it was all over for this former enemy. He was even appointed an apostle! One wonders what would the sons of Zeruah have done with the conversion of Saul. Would they immediately appraise him in light of his past history? Would they be cynical, pressing caution to the point of exclusion? Would they see him as a threat to their office, and reap revenge for his part in shedding Christian blood? What a loss if Saul, the former militant now turned apostle of peace, had been assassinated by Peter or John! It took the eyes of Barnabas to look beyond flesh to see the King of Peace resident in Saul's life. Barnabas would bridge the gap between Saul and the apostles.

What joy the King of Peace must have felt when this former militant enemy, Saul, now the apostle Paul, was welcomed into the fold! Paul would become the classic peacemaker, bringing together, through the blood of the cross, two opposing groups never before united in history, Jew and Gentile. Let us, for our part, take to heart today his admonition, that we be "diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace." Amen.

1 J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, Vol. III, *Throne and City* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 106

2. Elie Wiesel, *Legends of Our Time* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 59.

3. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 112.

4. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 113.

5. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 113.

6. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 117.

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ONE NATION UNITED UNDER ONE KING

SERIES: ASCENDING THE THRONE

Catalog No. 1023

2 Samuel 4:1-5:5

Ninth Message

Brian Morgan

December 17th, 1995

*What Child is this, who, laid to rest,
On Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthem sweet,
While shepherds watch are keeping?*

The words of the beloved Christmas carol, *What Child Is This?* give beautiful expression to the awe that we feel at this time of year. What Child is this who gathered angels, shepherds and kings to a lowly cave in the city of David? What would be his task? And how would he accomplish it? If we do not know the answers to these questions, then we do not know our own purpose in life.

In the gospel of Luke, this Child of whom we sing is identified as the "Son of David"—King David's greater Son. In the New Testament, the name "David" is mentioned thirty-five times. David's title, "Messiah," is used fifty-three times of Jesus, as is the title "King." On seven occasions, the titles "David" and "Messiah" are linked in the same verse. The point is obvious: Apart from the David story, the Christmas story cannot be understood.

In our studies in the life of David we come now to the climactic point as David is crowned king over all Israel. Actually, this is David's third anointing as messiah king. The first took place in his teens, when the prophet Samuel anointed him in the seclusion of his home and in the presence of his brothers. With that anointing came great power over Israel's enemies. But it also gave rise to the jealousy of Saul, the reigning king, who forced David out of the royal court to live in a wretched wilderness for perhaps as many as ten years. There in that Judean wasteland of wadis and caves, David became Israel's sacred poet, penning prayers and singing songs of faith. There, in the school for kings, the weakened David learned the power of prayer. At last, in the providence of God, Saul died, and in a second anointing, all of Judah anointed David king, in Hebron. But it took seven more years before all Israel was ready to give up the old Sauline loyalties and negotiate peace with David.

So the task to unite the nation under one king was a long and arduous one. And, ironically, the greatest threat to unification came not from those who opposed it, but from those who tried to speed it along with misdirected zeal, those who crossed the sacred line of trusting God to grant the kingdom as a gift and instead tried to violently seize it with impatient hands stained red with blood. In our text today, David's soul is vexed with pain. Before he can enjoy his coronation, he is

forced to deal with yet another needless assassination. Once more, innocent blood is shed in "the cause" of the kingdom, putting its reputation in jeopardy yet again.

The story, from the book of 2 Samuel, has three movements. The first movement (4:1-7), tells the story of the assassination of Ish-bosheth, Israel's puppet king; the second movement (4:8-12) sets out David's severe punishment on the perpetrators of the crime. (Due to his quick and decisive action, he is able to keep peace negotiations with Israel intact.) Finally, in the climactic third movement of the story (5:1-5), all Israel comes to David to crown him as king over a united nation.

I. David's Rule Threatened With Blood Guilt (4:1-7)

Now when [Ish-bosheth,] Saul's son heard that Abner had died in Hebron, he lost courage [his hands fell limp], and all Israel was disturbed [aghast]. And Saul's son had two men who were commanders of bands: the name of the one was Baanah and the name of the other Rechab, sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, of the sons of Benjamin (for Beeroth is also considered part of Benjamin, and the Beerothites fled to Gittaim, and have been aliens there until this day).

Now Jonathan, Saul's son, had a son crippled in his feet. He was five years old when the report of Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel, and his nurse took him up and fled. And it happened that in her hurry to flee, he fell and became lame. And his name was Mephibosheth.

So the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, Rechab and Baanah, departed and came to the house of Ish-bosheth in the heat of the day while he was taking his midday rest. And they came to the middle of the house as if to get wheat, and they struck him in the belly; and Rechab and Baanah his brother escaped. [The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, gives a better translation of v 6 than the Massoretic Text: And, behold the porter of the house had winnowed wheat; she had fallen asleep and was dozing, and the brothers Rechab and Baanah, sneaked inside.] Now when they came into the house, as he was lying on his bed in his bedroom, they struck him and killed him and beheaded him. And they took his head and traveled by way of the Arabah all night. (NASB)

The story opens with Ish-bosheth's reaction to Ab-

ner's death. To symbolize his impotence, Ish-bosheth's name is suppressed twice by the narrator. "Though Ish-bosheth could not tolerate Abner while he lived, he ceased to exist without him so 'his hands fell limp,' he lost his grip on power" (Brueggemann). Israel's reaction is one of horror. All the tribes are aghast. They had been convinced by Abner, their strong military man, that unification with this new king of Judah, Ish-bosheth, was in their best national interest, and now the king is murdered beneath the very shadow of David's throne.¹ We wonder whether, in the midst of this somber mood of death, fear and horror, that throne can be rescued from this terrible blood guilt.

But the narrator keeps us in suspense with two digressions, the first concerning the sons of Rimmon, the second, concerning a son of Jonathan. These sons of Rimmon, who hailed from Beeroth and served in Ish-bosheth's army, will become the architects of yet another assassination. Like the Amalekite who claimed to have killed Saul, they regard assassination as an opportunity for advancement in David's new kingdom.

They are introduced, first, by what they do, and second, by where they come from. Both their occupations and origins are veiled in ambiguity, however. Their occupation, "commanders of bands," could mean either platoon commanders or some other high ranking military order, or it could mean that they were merely gang leaders, imperial thugs hired to carry out the state's dirty work. As to their origins, were they Canaanites, as were the original inhabitants of Beeroth, according to verse 3? No, we learn, these men were true Benjaminites, which would align them with Saul's tribe and family. This would lead us to expect them to be loyal, as the men of Jabesh were loyal to Saul. Given this second piece of information, we might expect they were "platoon leaders," and thus we are not prepared for the events which are about to unfold.

The second digression concerns Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth. (His name rhymes with Ish-bosheth: "man of shame" vs. "he scatters shame"). When the report of Saul's and Jonathan's deaths is made to a certain unnamed nurse, she picks up the little boy to flee. Tragically, in the confusion the boy falls and becomes lame in his feet. (The reason this information is given in the narrative doesn't become clear until the end of the story.)

So the two sons of Rimmon, Rechab and Baanah, step out on their own initiative to pursue their own interests. They leave their city and arrive at the house of Ish-bosheth in mid-afternoon. It is hot, and the king is taking a nap. Verse 6 is confusing when read as it stands, and doesn't fit chronologically with verse 7. Scholars who feel the Hebrew text of this verse is corrupted offer the Greek translation of the OT as the preferred reading:

And, behold the porter of the house had winnowed wheat; she had fallen asleep and was dozing, and

the brothers Rechab and Baanah, sneaked inside.²

This makes better sense to the development of the story, and imparts a balance of two women in the account, a recurring theme in the narrative of 2:1-5:5. "Their contributions are, in themselves, unfortunate. In her haste to flee with Mephibosheth, the wet nurse has the terrible misfortune of crippling Jonathan's little boy, and the porter, when it is her turn, is unable, through tiredness, to help her master, Ish-bosheth, by sounding the alarm."³

The brothers slip inside the house undetected, and find the king lying fast asleep on his bed. Making use of three quick verbs, the narrator says they strike him, kill him, and decapitate him. The deed is done. Ish-bosheth, the sleeping ruler, a pitiful portrait, impotent when he is bereft of his strong man, is now "three times dead" (Brueggemann). The assassins depart the scene without a hitch, and travel all night through the Arabah to Hebron. What a stark contrast to the loyal Jabeshites who walked all night and crossed the Jordan to honor the body of Saul. In their hands the brothers carry a severed head, their trophy of triumph, which they hope will gain a good price in Hebron. But, just as the Amalekite messenger, that infamous stranger (*ger*), did not know the heart of the king, neither do these two Benjaminites, whose betrayal is far more serious.

The scene presents a visual portrait of a decimated kingdom. The hands of Ish-bosheth are limp, an image of fear; the legs of his nephew are crippled, a sign of impotence; the image of his severed head leaves us in speechless horror. The head of the Sauline state has been beheaded, the dynasty crippled.

How will King David receive these mercenaries who strike, kill and decapitate?

II. David's Vengeance On the Perpetrators (4:8-12)

Then they brought the head of Ish-bosheth to David at Hebron, and said to the king, "Behold, the head of Ish-bosheth, the son of Saul, your enemy, who sought your life; thus the Lord has given my lord the king vengeance this day on Saul and his descendants."

And David answered Rechab and Baanah his brother, sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, and said to them, "As the Lord lives, who has redeemed my life from all distress, when one told me, saying, 'Behold, Saul is dead,' and thought he was bringing good news, I seized him and killed him in Ziklag, which was the reward I gave him for his news. How much more, when wicked men have killed a righteous man in his own house on his bed, shall I not now require his blood from your hand, and destroy you from the earth?" Then David commanded the young men, and they killed them and cut off their hands and feet, and hung them up beside the pool in Hebron. But they took the head of Ish-bosheth

and buried it in the grave of Abner in Hebron.

The eager sons of Rimmon waste no time in presenting their trophy to the king. Then they try to back their bloodthirsty act with a theological justification, saying, "It is Yahweh who is avenged!" They speak as if it were God (they use God's personal name, which is almost transformed into blasphemy) who had given vengeance, and that they were merely the holy instruments of the divine will. Fokkelman says that this "is the siren's song of enmity and vengeance which is all to well known to us—and David."⁴

David reacts immediately with heated, holy zeal. His first concern is to rescue God's name from these murderers and rebuke them for their blasphemous theology. And his first words subvert their last words: "*As the Lord lives, who has redeemed my life from all distress.*" It is the living God who redeems, not men, and when he does so, there is no compromise of holy ethics.

David reminds the brothers of the unfortunate messenger who came to him at Ziklag. When a stranger, an Amalekite, arrived from the field of battle with what he thought was good news, the death of Saul and two of his sons, he paid with his own blood. How much more would these men of wickedness pay for killing a man of righteousness (a word play with Ish-bosheth: "man of shame," *ish-tzadiq*, "a man of righteousness"). And their deed was done not on the field of battle, but in the privacy of the man's home, when he was asleep, armorless and defenseless. They claimed their victim was seeking David's life, but now David has to seek their blood and purge them from the land. In this he is complying with the law (Deut 19:13; 21:9), which says that crimes like this are so vile, the criminal must be shown no pity lest an entire community be affected by the consequences of blood guilt. The land must be purged.

The men are summarily executed, with no appeal. Their hands and feet, the instruments which severed the head of Ish-bosheth, are amputated—an echo of Ish-bosheth's limp hands and Mephibosheth's crippled feet. Their final punishment is to be hung in public, thus exposing what they did in secret. In contrast, the head of Ish-bosheth is given a decent burial in the grave of Abner, in Hebron. Hebron actually became the burying ground for all of David's opponents. They may have been threats to him in life, but they are honored in death.

Miraculously, due to David's swift, decisive action, the men's heinous crime does not hold up the peace process, as we will see in the third movement.

III. David Anointed King Over All Israel (5:1-5)

Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, "Behold, we are your bone and your flesh. Previously [lit. "yesterday and the day before yesterday"], when Saul was king over us, you were the one who led Israel out and in. And the Lord said to you, 'You will shepherd My people Israel, and

you will be a ruler over Israel.'" So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron, and King David made a covenant with them before the Lord at Hebron; then they anointed David king over Israel. David was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned forty years. At Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months, and in Jerusalem he reigned thirty-three years over all Israel and Judah.

At last, the historic moment has arrived. All Israel comes to David to make him king over them. Finally, there is but one king uniting the one nation, Israel. No one is coerced, no political deals are struck. All Israel longs to be joined to this new king—in the language of a bride yearning for her new husband, "bone of your bone and flesh of your flesh." Israel's public vows give voice to the hidden longings that had been true in her heart all along: Even when Saul reigned, David was the true leader—and it was the Lord who decreed it so.

But Israel's eagerness is tempered with caution. The nation's understanding of the office of king had grown considerably since the days of their naive euphoria at Saul's coronation. Then they said, "Give us a king like all the other nations," and Saul was given a blank check. Now, after decades of suffering under a self-serving despot, and numerous examples of betrayal in high places, David's kingship is endorsed only in the form of a covenant of mutual acceptance. "Shepherd" becomes the defining term of office. The shepherd lives for the well being of the flock, not the other way around. He is responsible to feed, nurture and care for them. And the best shepherds will even die for their flock (compare Ezekiel 34 and John 10). The second term, "ruler" (*nagid*) speaks of the king providing military protection for the flock (Fokkelman), and makes room for the kingship of the Lord, to whom the king is ultimately subject.

So here is David's third anointing. It is the culmination of a long journey which he began as a boy shepherding sheep. Now he becomes the shepherd of an entire nation. But it is equally the story of a nation who, through the pain of wrong choices, has come to learn what the work of a true king is all about. The concept of dictator is transformed to shepherd. And it is God's story. In his sovereignty, God brings both people and king together at the proper time, to be wed in a covenant of loyal-love. The shepherd and his people are finally one.

IV. David's Coronation Psalm

The seven years David had spent reigning over Judah taught him much about his identity as king and how he should go about the work of unifying the nation. During those long years, David did not take any initiative to gain the throne; it was the pure gift of God. Yet over that same time period, David officiated at three funerals in Hebron, where men who sought with violence to grasp the throne, were put to death. These violent acts, which almost disqualified the king from office, made a

huge impact on his soul.

So that the lesson he learned would not be forgotten, David wrote Psalm 2, the "Oath of Office" for every king of Israel, to be read on the day of their coronation. At the center of the psalm the king gives a statement of his faith, his personal pledge of how he plans to implement God's rule on earth:

**I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord;
He said to Me, "You are my Son,
Today I have begotten You."
Ask of me, and I will surely give the nations as
Your inheritance,
And the very ends of the earth as Your possession
(Ps 2:7-8).**

The king takes his oath of office by rehearsing the "decree of the Lord" regarding his identity as king. The day of his coronation marked the beginning of a new relationship with God, where he was now adopted as a "son." (This was the origin of the title "Son of God," 2 Sam 7:14-15.) Inherent in the gift of sonship was the special privilege of prayer to his Father. David's legacy thus served as a reminder to every future king to use prayer as the chief vehicle to bring God's rule from heaven to earth. No coercion, politicking, lobbying, or any violent means were to be used to implement God's rule on earth.

So we find these very words from Psalm 2, "This is my Son," echoing from heaven at Christ's baptism. At the outset of his ministry, therefore, Jesus is reminded that prayer would be his chief weapon in his task of uniting all Israel (and the nations as well) under his rule. Not once did Jesus succumb to worldly methods of violent coercion or political manipulation. And to en-

sure that his followers did the same, we find the leaders in the Jesus story taking the blood guilt of others in their innocent bodies. John the Baptist took on the role of Ish-bosheth, and was beheaded. Jesus served the sentence of the violent murderers in the story. Just as the criminals were executed for their blood guilt, their hands and feet cut off and their bodies publicly strung up, so our Lord gave himself over to Deuteronomy's worst curse—public hanging on a tree, with outstretched hands and feet pierced, "with wounds so deep, yet draws me near." The result of such holy actions is that those who come to be ruled by him, come with the heartfelt yearnings of a bride to her new husband. Freely they turn their lives over to the Great Shepherd who died, that they might live. As so the story continues through time, for all time, until at last, every knee shall bow and tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen (Hebrews 13:20-21).

1 I am greatly indebted to the excellent work of J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. III, Throne and City*, (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 121-149, for many of my observations on this text.

2. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 126.
3. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 127.
4. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 130.

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O JERUSALEM!

SERIES: THRONE AND CITY

Catalog No. 1024
2 Samuel 5:6-12
Tenth Message
Brian Morgan
March 31st, 1996

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday, in remembrance of that day two thousand years ago when Jesus, the Son of David, entered Jerusalem. The multitudes gathered to greet him as their Messiah. The voices of the children rang out in celebration of his triumphal entry:

“Hosanna (salvation, please!) to the Son of David; Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest!” (Matt 21:9)

“Voices and melodies swell together into one pure crescendo of sound, overwhelming the listener and drawing him inexorably in the mounting wave of excitement.”¹

For a few brief moments it seemed the ancient dream had come true at last. The King of Heaven, arriving for his coronation on earth; Jerusalem, the city of peace, embracing the King of Peace before all Israel. Pilgrims visiting the city for the Passover festivities were captured with awe and wonder as they were drawn into the center of God’s rule. They were present at the very hinge of history, as heaven became united with earth. The hills resonated with salvation at the dawning of the Messianic Age.

But what happened to the dream of the disciples of Jesus? How could they possibly be prepared for the events that followed? One final meal with their King in a simple room. Then the betrayal; the trial before a kangaroo court; Peter’s denial; the scourging; the ridicule; the impaling on a tree; three hours of eerie silence; the darkened sky. Then a Sabbath day. The disciples, gathered together, numb from consummate grief and shattered dreams.

Forty years later Jerusalem would be overrun by Roman legions. 1.2 million Jews were slaughtered. Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed. What happened to the dream? What of Jerusalem, God’s city of peace, and its Messiah? I have visited the city three times, and on each occasion I looked forward to walking on holy pavement that has been trodden on by pilgrims for thousands of years. But each time I visited I have been keenly aware of the violence that seems always to be present in that place. On my last visit I even got a taste of it myself. A young Arab boy tried to hit me with a metal bar because I refused his offer to watch my car for money. And what is that compared to the recent suicide bombings that have brought sudden, bloody death to scores of Jews?

What happened to the dream? To answer that ques-

tion, I would like to go back to the story of Israel’s first king and his conquest of Jerusalem.

I want to begin by reminding us once more that the Bible is one coherent story. Its myriad of stories build on each other, setting out the rhythms of salvation history from both the Old and New Testaments. Thus we find that the David story shapes the Christ story; and Christ’s story shapes our story.

Returning to our studies in the life of David now, we pick up the account once more, from the book of Second Samuel. In our text today we find David, having been duly recognized as God’s anointed in both Judah and Israel, now chooses Jerusalem as his capital.

I. Conquering Jerusalem (5:6-8)

Now the king and his men went to Jerusalem against the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land, and they said to David, “You shall not come in here, but the blind and lame shall turn you away”; thinking, “David cannot come in here.” Nevertheless, David captured the stronghold of Zion, that is the city of David. And David said on that day, “Whoever would strike the Jebusites, let him reach the lame and the blind, who are hated by David’s soul, through the water tunnel.” Therefore they say, “The blind or the lame shall not come into the house.” (NASB)

Jerusalem would become the joy of the whole earth, the city of the great King, crowned as Zion with Solomon’s temple forty years later. What moved David to choose Jerusalem for his capital? The description here is surprisingly brief, cryptic, and difficult to interpret. Fokkelman rightly observes: “We are told nothing about the course of the events, nothing about the armies, almost nothing about the siege. We get no insight to political motives of the hero who set his sights on this enclave, or how this choice was viewed in Israel.”²

What happened? The text doesn’t help much. We are merely told that the king advanced and subsequently captured the city. But placed alongside the account of the battle are these unique speeches regarding the blind and the lame. Once more we discover, as we did in the story of the confrontation between David and Goliath, that the speeches delivered before the battle are more significant to the outcome than the account of the battle itself. Words are a window to one’s trust; and trust determines destiny.

(a) Jebusite Speech: Derision

David arrived in Jerusalem with a relatively small army ("his men"). These were the men who "had supported him in his fugitive days; loyal and resourceful, they could be depended upon to vie with each other in achieving the impossible."³ With this small but loyal army, David confronts the longtime Jebusite stronghold. The narrator's strong alliteration of the city name (*Yerushalayim*), city dweller (*yosheb*), and tribal name (*Yebusi*) "makes the city adhere more strongly to the non-Israelite tribe in residence there."⁴ It evokes the question whether this newcomer, David, can pry these two apart.

The Jebusites think they are impervious to attack in their densely compacted fortress of some ten acres. The walls of the city fit firmly onto the slopes of a mountain, forming a formidable chain on all three sides. From their inaccessible height the Jebusites gaze down on David and mock him:

"You shall not come in here but the blind and the lame shall turn you away...David cannot enter here!"

Their speech sends a powerful message to David. The echo, "you shall not come in here!" resounds on all sides, reopening old wounds for the king. This is a painful reminder of his wilderness years, when he was forced to find a home in the caves and crevices of the Judean desert. Now he hears the Jebusites mocking: "Keep moving, you and your ragtag band. Don't settle down here!" The derisive echo is amplified by the sight of invalids⁵ on the city wall, turning David away. What mockery!

There is no emotional response recorded of David, nor is a single detail of the battle given. There is but one verb of action, indicating that David captured the stronghold of Zion. The silence, and the glaring absence of detail, speak of the ease with which the city fell. The only thing we are privy to is the inscription of the county recorder, who inscribes the city's new name in the books: "the stronghold of Zion, the city of David." With one stroke of the pen, the long-time settlers are dispossessed and the new king moves in. The once impenetrable stronghold is now David's city.

(b) David's Speech to Counter the Derision

It is only after the battle is over that the narrator hints as to how the city fell. The Jebusite derision is countered by a clever but cryptic speech by David. David's enticement to battle was that anyone who wanted to defeat the Jebusites had to hit (or reach; the Hebrew verb can mean either) them on (or through) the pipe. The pipe is a reference to a large vertical shaft which the Jebusites had constructed through the Ophel (the SE hill of Jerusalem). During a war or siege this carefully constructed shaft enabled the Jebusites to withdraw within their secure walls but still retain the ability to draw water from the Gihon spring, located outside the city

walls.

The tunnel was named Warren's shaft "after the Briton who discovered it 120 years ago—at the foot of the hill. He who manages to conquer or cut off the source of [the water] supply, severs the main artery of those besieged and quickly brings them to their knees."⁶ On a metaphorical level, the shaft is the throat or wind-pipe of Jerusalem (a play on words with "those hated by David's soul"; the Hebrew word for soul, *nephesh*, means literally "throat, or gullet"), the sensitive spot where David hit the Jebusite, and ironically, from whence came the derision.

Chronicles 11:6 reveals that Joab was the first to make his way up the water shaft, and was duly rewarded by David. Once the city is conquered, David turns the Jebusite reference to invalids on its head, and a new saying is inscribed for Israel: "The blind or the lame shall not come into the house" (probably a reference to David's palace). So the saying from Psalm 5 is true:

**The boastful shall not stand before Your eyes...
Their throat is an open grave...
By their own devices let them fall!
But as for me, by Your abundant lovingkindness I
will enter Your house** (Psalm 5:5,9,10,7).

The strength of the Jebusites became their weakness. The throat of the city became the very channel for its defeat.

Having conquered Jerusalem, David proceeds to fortify his newly acquired capital.

II. Rebuilding Jerusalem (5:9-12)

So David lived in the stronghold, and called it the city of David. And David built all around from the Millo and inward. And David became greater and greater, for the Lord God of hosts was with him. (5:9-10)

The Millo was probably some bulwark which formed an existing part of the fortress walls. "The Jebusite city walls were built on the slopes of the hill, which was particularly steep on the west side, hence the need to have secure buttresses resting on terraces, which would not slide...downwards toward the valley."⁷ David started from the outside, making sure the walls were secure, and then worked inward until he had a place to build his palace.

As David is becoming rooted in his capital, the narrator reveals the reason behind the king's unrivaled success. Make no mistake about it: "the Lord of Hosts was with him"! This military term refers to Yahweh as Commander-in-Chief of all armies, including the natural forces of creation (wind, hail, rain, etc.), and both human and angelic armies. David, being borne along by the presence of God and all his authority, thus could not help but grow in importance, as does the city of Jerusalem.

God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved...

The Lord of hosts is with us... (Psalm 46:5,7).

To demonstrate the widespread impact of David's fame, we get the report of a gentile king, Hiram of Tyre. On hearing of David's success, Hiram sends skilled craftsman and precious materials to help build David's palace. Verse 11:

Then Hiram king of Tyre sent messengers to David with cedar trees and carpenters and stonemasons; and they built a house for David. And David realized that the Lord had established him as king over Israel, and that He had exalted his kingdom for the sake of His people Israel.

Joyce Baldwin notes: "Tyre [was] an important port which already at the time of David had for centuries been trading in the eastern Mediterranean. The hinterland of Tyre was noted for its cedars, and the port boasted skilled workers in wood and stone... This foreign recognition was indeed a new development."⁸

The sight of a Gentile king being spontaneously drawn in to help build the kingdom of God helps David realize he is part of something far bigger than himself. A deep knowledge enters his soul that God is acting for the sake of his people Israel. This revelation leaves David with a keen sense of humility, and prevents him from exaggerating his own self-importance (Deut 17:20). Two gentile responses to David's rule are thus: "One party hurls abusive but impotent jeers at David, the other furnishes constructive deeds. The Jebusite sends the paper tiger of 'the lame and blind,'...Hiram sends David skilled craftsman and supplies him with stately accommodation."⁹

As we reflect on the text we can discern a definite pattern of rhythm and repetition. In the conquest of the city there is a pattern of action/speech; action/speech. In the rebuilding of Jerusalem there is repeated pattern of building/recognition; building/recognition. This is important, because these patterns and repetitions prepare us for the Jesus story and give shape to the spiritual rhythms in our own lives.

We all need shape and continuity in our lives. As we approach the end of this century, however, life seems to be characterized by lack of coherence and significance. I am presently coaching a girls softball team in a local high school. I was surprised to find that some of the girls who came out for the team had never played softball before, and none who had were currently playing in positions they had experience in. I thought to myself, "why would these girls want to come out now in high school and face the possibility of humiliation from other teams?"

One afternoon I asked them to share their stories with me. I discovered that the parents of most of them are divorced. That was when I learned why they wanted to play for this team. These girls are hungering to be part of something that is much larger than themselves. They want to be part of a community that gives some coher-

ence and significance to their fragmented lives, and they think that playing for the team will give them that.

The deepest hunger of our souls is the ache we feel for the city of God. We all have that dream, that hunger to be drawn into something that is much bigger than ourselves.

III. Jesus' Arrival In Jerusalem

Having immersed ourselves in David's conquest of Jerusalem, we are now prepared to feel the force and power of the greater Son of David and his reception when he entered the city. When Jesus set out for Jerusalem, he took the same route by which David had left the city, recorded in 2 Sam 15:30. Jesus did not come with a conquering army, however. He rode into the city on the foal of donkey.

Following Jesus' entry, the first word we hear is the resounding praise of the inhabitants, grown-ups and children alike:

"Hosanna (salvation, please!) to the Son of David; Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest!" (Matt 21:9)

For the disciples, this was a dream come true: God's heavenly king, welcomed in Jerusalem. The city of peace and the Prince of Peace embrace.

But the initial reception of warmth and awe is drowned out by the discordant notes of derision by the ruling class in Jerusalem. The New David and his rag-tag group of misfit disciples are not welcome in the city. At this juncture, I imagine the disciples expected the story to continue in classic Davidic fashion. The new King would force out the rulers of Jerusalem and take up residence in his capital; the city would be rebuilt in cosmic new dimensions and all nations would be drawn to its glory; the Messianic age would burst forth in all its fullness.

As was the case in the David story, Jesus counters the derision of the Scribes and Pharisees with lengthy speeches and parables, saying that the kingdom would be taken away from them and given to others. And as in the David story, the blind and the lame are mentioned specifically, but this time with a new twist: instead of being shut out, they are drawn to Jesus and healed (Matt 21:14). What a reversal!

A second ironic twist, one which the disciples failed to hear, was the way in which Jesus would conquer and rebuild Jerusalem. Rather than the King conquering Jerusalem, the city would first kill the king, and then it too would be destroyed. Knowing that this was the fate of Jerusalem was what led Jesus to lament:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Behold your house is being left to you desolate! For I say to you, from now on you

shall not see Me until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Matt 23:37-39).

What a graphic image! During a firestorm, a hen gathers her chicks under the protection of her wings. When the fire is over, the hen lies dead, but the chicks survive. Jesus was grief-stricken, not only because of his own impending death, but for the judgment predicted upon the city. How he longed for Jerusalem! How he longed to gather the people and shelter them under his cross from the coming judgment. But they would not come. That was why, even as he was carrying his cross on the way to Golgotha, he told the grieving women: "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children" (Luke 23:28, KJV).

IV. Jesus Builds the New Jerusalem

If the Messiah was supposed to rebuild the city, we have to ask, "Where is Jerusalem today?" Again in these speeches in Matthew, Jesus proclaims that the stone that the builders rejected would actually become the cornerstone of the new city, with its new temple, made without hands, eternal in the heavens (Matt 21:42). Seeing the exaltation of the new King would so move the Gentiles that they would be drawn in to help the building process (Matt 21:43; Mic 4:1-8). That city is being built in cosmic new dimensions (Zech 2:4-12) that transcends time and space! So today, "whenever two or three are gathered" in his name, that city is being built.

May God grant to us eyes to see and ears to hear all the voices and melodies of the New Jerusalem, swelling together, drawing us inexorably into God's city, until that day, foretold by John, when the New Jerusalem descends from heaven, "having the glory of God...and all nations shall walk by its light" (Rev 21:11,24).

That is the dream worth living for, and the only one worth dying for.

My friends, may you see your dream,
To see what you thought had died,
But lives in glory greater than any dream,
Next year in Jerusalem!

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1. Description taken from Elie Wiesel's portrayal of what it was like in Moscow during Simchat Torah in *Legends of Our Time* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 150.

2. I have been greatly helped for many of my observations by J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. III, Throne and City* (Assen/Maastricht, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum 1986) 157-169, coupled with Joyce Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England: IVP, 1988), 195-203.

3. Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 196.

4. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 158.

5. Maimonides, the great Jewish thinker of the twelfth century, suggested that the derision might be a mocking reference to Isaac and Jacob, who at the end of their lives were blind and lame respectively.

6. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 161.

7. Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 198.

8. Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 199.

9. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 167.



FACING THE UNRELENTING FOE

SERIES: *THRONE AND CITY*

Catalog No. 1025
2 Samuel 5:17-25
Eleventh Message
Brian Morgan
April 14th, 1996

As I listened to the message, the music and the testimonies on Easter Sunday morning, and later enjoyed a rich fellowship meal in the afternoon, I found myself longing to pause in the joy of Easter. I wanted to leisurely linger in that holy air and bask in the rays of resurrection.

But Monday came too soon, and with it the storms of life and the necessity to arm oneself in prayer for the battle. As the week unfolded, I stood alongside friends as grinding lawsuits, collapsed relationships, neighborhood feuds, physical pain, elderly confusion, estranged parents, and a spiritual son diagnosed with leukemia unfolded around me. How thankful we should be that we have the stories of Scripture as a compass to guide us through the storms of life! Newspapers merely report episodes of crises—they seem to have no beginning or end—but the Bible is a unified collection of God-given stories that have beginnings and conclusions which give shape and significance to our lives.

Resuming the story of the life of David from the book of 2 Samuel now, we find that the former renegade has been recognized as king by a united Israel. Furthermore, in a wonderful moment of triumph, David has just crowned Jerusalem as his capital. Doubtless the king longed to pause in the royal residence and revel in that rare moment of peace: a united Israel, universally acknowledging the one king in the royal capital, and Israel's king, basking in God's good pleasure. Things were all the sweeter for David, because these blessings had been realized following a painfully long and arduous road.

But before the poet has time to pen a poem of praise, David hears that the Philistine hordes are launching a massive offensive against his newly united kingdom. Advancing up the valley of Elah (where David had slain Goliath), they have installed a garrison as close as Bethlehem, five miles south of Jerusalem. Once again, David is about to come face to face with the intimidating, unrelenting, age-old enemy, the Philistines. Here is one adversary who would never allow Israel a moment's peace.

Do you have enemies like that? Have you noticed that no matter how much you grow in the Lord, some enemies never seem to go away? Like David, we may have thought, in the adolescence of our faith, that we had dealt with an enemy, but it surfaces again in mid-life. And it seems to return with more force, power and determination than ever to destroy us.

How do we face such an unrelenting foe? What impact do these battles have on our soul? These are the questions that we will seek to answer from our study today.

Our text sets out the story of back to back offensives by the Philistines against the newly united empire, and David's consecutive victories.

I. Battle One: A Flash Flood (5:17-21)

When the Philistines had heard that they had anointed David king over Israel, all the Philistines went up to seek out David; and when David heard of it, he went down to the stronghold. Now the Philistines came and spread themselves out in the valley of Rephaim. Then David inquired of the Lord saying, "Shall I go up against the Philistines? Will You give them into my hand?" And the Lord said to David, "Go up, for I will certainly give the Philistines into your hand." So David came to Baal-perazim, and defeated them there; and he said, "The Lord has broken through my enemies before me like the breakthrough of waters." Therefore he named that place Baal-perazim. And they abandoned their idols there, so David and his men carried them away. (NASB)

The Chronicler adds...

"And they abandoned their gods there, so David gave the order and they were burned with fire" (1 Chr 14:12).

This may give a clue as to why David was in such a hurry to capture Jerusalem: he needed a secure stronghold against a looming invasion.¹ We must never forget the terror evoked by a Philistine threat. Archaeological findings have shown that the Philistines were among the most advanced cultures in the ancient world.² They were leaders in international trade; and in parts of Palestine they held a monopoly on both local and overland commerce. Their cities were highly developed; their agricultural and military prowess were second to none. To face them in battle was to confront the most sophisticated and disciplined war machine of that day.

Their "search for David" is reminiscent of the incident in 1 Samuel 23, when Saul "sought" David. Now a national enemy gives him a taste of being the hunted one. "The Philistines forced their way in and fanned out in the valley of Rephaim"³ (cf. Josh 15:8). They place a garrison at Bethlehem (2 Sam 23:14) to prevent David

from getting help from the south. Their plan was to divide a country which David had just united.

The text is filled with historical echoes of intimidation. The place of the double confrontation is the valley of the Rephaim,⁴ which formed the northern boundary of Judah. It was named after the original inhabitants of Canaan, whom the Israelites imagined to be giants. Those intimidating giants that petrified everyone in Israel, except a few heroes of the faith, like Caleb and Joshua, now reappear in force to confront David.

When David hears of the Philistine threat, he withdraws into the “stronghold.” The Chronicler (1 Chr 11:15) identifies this as the cave of Adullam, which overlooked the valley. From that vantage point, David prays:

“Shall I go up against the Philistines? Will you give them into my hand?”

Notice that David does not assume that every confrontation is tantamount to holy war; nor does he presume to know what to do if it is. We should never assume that every call to battle implies that we ought to be involved.

God’s answer is as brief and direct as David’s request:

“Go up, for I will *certainly* give the Philistines into your hand.”

The only change in God’s answer from David’s two questions is a doubling of the verb “to give” (lit. “*giving I will give*”). This encourages David with the emphatic hope that victory is certain. Hope becomes his basis for action, and divine intervention his ground for obedience. David summarily smites the Philistines; then as conqueror he names the place “Baal-perazim,” (“lord of the breeches”):

“The Lord has broken through my enemies before me like the breakthrough of waters.” Therefore he named that place Baal-perazim.

We are given much more detail concerning David’s reflections following the battle than the actual battle itself (a six to one ratio of words). According to the text, God’s holiness broke out “like the breakthrough of waters.” This may be a clue that God intervened with a flash flood—a common occurrence in that area. A flood would have been especially effective if the Philistines had fanned out in the valley in a sea of chariots. “The Jebusites were outmaneuvered via their water conduit ...and now it is the Philistines’ turn to be subjected to the surprise attack of a flash flood.”⁵

David’s mention of the waters with the verb *paratz* (Exod 19:22, 24) evokes memories surrounding the events of the Exodus. The Lord’s holiness broke through and led the Israelites through the waters, and then he used those same waters to slay the Egyptians. David now feels strangely tied to that event in a new way.

The Philistines, like the Egyptians, found their gods no match for the Creator God. They abandoned their idols there, and David’s men carried them away and burned them with fire.

II. An Interlude Within the Camp: Holy Water (1 Chr 11:15-19)

Now we will look at 1 Chronicles 11, which has a parallel story that took place within David’s camp. This account uses same verb *paratz* of three heroes who risk their lives “breaking through” enemy lines to the well of Bethlehem to assuage a whim of their king.

1 Chronicles 11:15-19:

Now three of the thirty chief men went down to the rock to David, into the cave of Adullam while the army of the Philistines was camping in the valley of Rephaim. And David was then in the stronghold, while the garrison of the Philistines was then in Bethlehem. And David had a craving and said, “Oh that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate!” So the three *broke through* the camp of the Philistines, and drew water from the well of Bethlehem which was by the gate, and took it and brought it to David; nevertheless David would not drink it, but poured it out to the Lord; and he said, “Be it far from me before my God that I should do this. Shall I drink the blood of these men at the risk of their lives? For at the risk of their lives they brought it.” Therefore he would not drink it.

Here we see holy love birthed in the fiery heat of battle. A king’s whim, overheard by those who serve him, becomes holy orders to them, so they risk life and limb to fulfill his desire. As a pastor, I see this kind of thing happen frequently. A hurting brother or sister expresses a desire, which is overheard by another Christian, who takes it as holy orders and rushes out to fulfill the request.

But the Philistines are not about to give up. They set about preparing a second attack.

III. Battle Two: Angels in the Wind (5:22-25)

Now the Philistines came up once again and spread themselves out in the valley of Rephaim. And when David inquired of the Lord He said, “You shall not go directly up; circle around behind them and come at them in front of the balsam trees. And it shall be, when you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees, then you shall act decisively for then the Lord will have gone out before you to strike the army of the Philistines.” Then David did so, just as the Lord had commanded him, and struck down the Philistines from Geba as far as Gezer.

Not to be deterred by a single defeat, the Philistines confront David a second time. Again they fan themselves out in the valley of Rephaim. Again David does

not assume that their provocation mandates a response. Nor does he presume to know what response he should make if one is required. And again he prays.

This time God gives a lengthy speech in reply, explaining that David is not to engage the enemy in direct confrontation (“do not go up”), but he is to circle behind them and wait for God’s signal before attacking. When David hears the sound of God’s holy steps on the tops of the balsam trees, he is to act quickly and decisively, for then God has gone before him. “When you hear the voice of marching at the top of balsam trees”⁶ is perhaps a reference to an army of angelic hosts whom David can hear in the wind but cannot see.

“Act immediately” (*charatz*): the noun form of this verb is a “threshing sled” pulled by oxen, with sharp stones or pieces of iron to rip up stalks of grain. The verb means “to cut,” “to sharpen,” then “to decide”—thus here: “act decisively.” The Dead Sea Scrolls use the term seven times in eschatological contexts for the “appointed” time, the “determined end” (Joel 3:14).⁷ The Philistines, who have fanned out across the valley, may have the horizontal advantage, but David has the vertical advantage, the link between heaven and earth, God and creation, angels and mankind. To take advantage of this, David must act immediately and decisively.

The great archaeologist Yohanan Aharoni summarizes the battle by saying: “David ambushed the Philistines by blocking their retreat at the western end of the Valley of Rephaim. The Philistines were forced to retreat via the watershed road, past Geba, to the Beth-horn road. David pursued them as far as Gezer.”⁸

The narrator reflects on the meaning of this event and again ties it to the Exodus. David’s obedience is exact and complete, reminiscent of Moses, who obeyed every instruction. This battle also is a capstone of God’s faithfulness in Israel’s history. When David acquires the land up to the coastal plane, a divine act of completion is recorded which began with the crossing of the Jordan to give the whole land to the people of God (Hertzberg). This was a very significant moment in Israel’s sacred history.

The question raised by these ancient accounts is this: What is the impact of this kind of warfare on the soul?

IV. Reflections on the Human Soul in Warfare

(a) Proper Expectations

The stories of Scripture give the believer proper expectations in life. Here is one thing you can count on: some enemies never go away. David is confronted by an enemy he had crushed in his adolescence (Goliath), then deceived and lived with in his young adulthood (Agag), and is now facing again in a national confrontation in his manhood, as king. The greater the success that David had, the greater and more organized the opposition became. Now an entire nation unifies against him and seeks him with the same single-minded determination as the deceased Saul. And note that the attack

comes right on the heels on the unification of Israel. Oftentimes when we direct our efforts at working for peace, ironically, we make more enemies than when we were working for war. The assassinated prime minister of Israel, Yitzak Rabin, made far more enemies as a diplomat for peace than he made in his days as a military general.

(b) The Key to Victory

But, no matter how big the battle, or how relentless the opposition, the keys to victory are the same.

1. Dependence on Prayer

First, we must depend on prayer. Every battle requires prayer. Just because there is a battle brewing, doesn’t necessarily mean it’s *our* battle. It can be very damaging to the soul if we engage in every conflict we come across, and fight on a multitude of fronts. The questions needing to be asked are these: Is the confrontation a holy war? Do I need to respond? Will God go with me? If so, what must I do? We must never assume or presume anything.

But then we ask, “How do we pray in the midst of the battle?” If you find praying difficult, notice that David’s prayer in the midst of the battle is intensely personal and brief. There is no holy protocol, no elaborate ritual, no formal address. His prayer is pure, naked substance. This is the language of lovers: “Shall I go up?” And the response: “Go up!”

I am enjoying the memoirs of Elie Wiesel, and I am struck by his succinct writing style. In this context, he says:

“All my subsequent works are written in the same deliberately spare style as *Night*. It is the style of the chronicles of the ghettos, where everything had to be said swiftly, in one breath. You never knew when the enemy might kick in the door, sweeping us away into nothingness. Every phrase was a testament. There was not time or reason for anything superfluous. Words must not be imprisoned or harnessed, not even in the silence of the page. And yet, it must be held tightly. If the violin is to sing, its strings must be stretched so tight as to risk breaking; slack, they are merely threads.”⁹

David’s brief prayer, the request, “Shall I go up against the Philistines?” is filled with passion, emotion and power. Secondly, I would add, to help you pray, pray the Psalms out loud. These psalms have been the prayer book of the saints for three thousand years. They were birthed out of the soul of David and were used by every subsequent king in Israel. They were the very breath and sustenance of Jesus. As you pray the Psalms you will learn a language for your soul.

So the first key to victory is prayer.

The second is obedience.

2. Obedience to Revelation

The irony here is that there is a profound simplicity of action required in comparison to the complex emotions we feel. Oftentimes when we face our most implacable enemies we can be overrun with terror, paralyzed by fear and plagued with pain. But God says: "Listen. Wait for me. Then show up." Jesus warned the disciples to not prepare beforehand what they would say when they were hauled before the law courts. There is a window of opportunity which is opening up, heaven is breaking in on earth, so when it comes, act decisively!

But notice that no details are given after that, lest we make an idol out of the method and forget the source of victory. What we are left with is an intimate working together of God's holy activity, which we perceive in prayer, and our activity, which we live out in obedience. As Fokkelman notes, David's 'striding forward' and the 'marching out' of God are to be synonymous.¹⁰ The result is that heaven unites with earth, angels descend in the wind, and God comes to the aid of man. But without prayer we do not see it, and without obedience we do not seize it.

(c) The Impact on the Soul: Holy Awe (Psalm 108:1-6)

Even for the most seasoned warrior, when God acts from heaven there is an ever-increasing sense of humility and awe. We come away with a greater spiritual attentiveness of God at work. The only way David can capture this feeling is to write a poem and sing it. In Psalm 108:1-6, we see the clear reference to Philistia, in verse 9: "*Over Philistia I will shout aloud!*"

**My heart is steadfast, O God;
I will sing, I will sing praises, even with my soul.
Awake, harp and lyre;
I will awaken the dawn!
I will give thanks to You, O Lord among the peoples;
And I will sing praises to You among the nations.
For Your lovingkindness is great above the heavens;
And Your truth reaches to the skies.
Be exalted, O God, above the heavens,
And Your glory above all the earth (Ps 108:1-6).**

David never got over these two victories over the Philistines. He relived them again and again in song as the experiences broke his soul open to comprehend the incomparable dimensions of God's love. He was awed to be set in the center of it, fully integrated in the midst of it, and pulled into something so comprehensive and integrating. He was awed that in the first battle, God's holiness broke out through the creation, in a flash flood. When the battle was joined again, he actually heard the angelic troops descending from heaven on the tops of trees, and he experienced the rout with angelic swords at his side. If that was not enough, he was further awestruck when he looked back on history and recognized a supernatural linking with Moses and Exodus.

Finally, David was overcome with emotion when his warriors risked life and limb to break through enemy lines to offer a cup of water to him in an act of grateful homage. In the gospels, Jesus made reference to this when he said: "And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you he shall not lose his reward" (Matt 10:42).

In these stories David is drawn into something much larger and more comprehensive than himself. He is integrated with God and his creation; with angels and their weapons; and with events and leaders of sacred history. Finally, the bonds between brothers are forged in the white heat of battle, making them stronger than death.

Notice the response of the Philistines. They "abandoned their idols there" (1 Chr 14:12). Fighting idols will never rid you of the idolatries in your life. Addictions will never cease when you merely come face to face with the idols. You must be drawn into the bigger scene of what God is doing, fighting his battles and becoming integrated with creation and history. Then those idols will drop like dust, and you will be left with the holiness of God, awestruck as you live in his holy air.

May God grant you such a week of holy victory in your battles.

1. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, Vol. III, *Throne and City* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 171. I have been greatly helped for many of my observations by Fokkelman.

2. For a complete and up to date archaeological history of the Philistines, see the excellent work Trude & Moshe Dothan, *The People of the Sea: The Search for the Philistines* (New York: Macmillan/Domino Press, 1992).

4. On *Rephaim*, see Gen 14:5; 15:20; Deut 2:20; Josh 15:8; 17:15.

5. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 173-174.

6. "The balsam-trees, from which the attack is made, are mastic terebinths, 'more like bushes than trees', and are even now a characteristic feature of the hilly country." Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *1 & 2 Samuel*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 274.

7. "*charatz*," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck & Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 5:216-220.

8. Yohanan Aharoni & Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 77.

9. Elie Wiesel, *Memoirs: All Rivers Run to the Sea* (New York: Knopf, 1995) 321.

10. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 175.



TO DANCE OR DIE!

SERIES: *THRONE AND CITY*

Catalog No. 1026
2 Samuel 6:1-23
Twelfth Message
Brian Morgan
April 21st, 1996

Has there ever been a time in your life when God rained on your parade? How about when the parade was in his honor, and you thought you were doing the Lord's work?

In our text today we come to just such an occurrence in the life of David. Our story, from the book of Second Samuel, records one of the most memorable events in the history of Israel, when David brought the ark of God up to Jerusalem. Incredibly, in the middle of his own "party," God became a disgruntled guest and called a halt to the celebrations. But in the end, God teaches all of Israel, and us as well, what it means to be a true worshipper of Yahweh. As Jesus said in the New Testament: "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth...such people the Father seeks to be His worshippers" (John 4:23-24).

Our text records the story of David's two attempts to bring the ark of God up to Jerusalem. Each attempt has three elements: a procession filled with celebration; a blessing; and a death. In the responses of the three major characters in the account, Uzzah, David, and Michal, we learn what constitutes the difference between true and false worship.

I. The First Attempt to Bring the Ark Up¹ (6:1-12a)

(a) Procession of the Ark Upward Towards Jerusalem (6:1-5)

Now David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. And David arose and went with all the people who were with him to Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God which is called by the Name, the very name of the Lord of hosts who is enthroned above the cherubim. And they placed the ark of God on a new cart that they might bring it from the house of Abinadab which was on the hill; and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were leading the new cart. So they brought it with the ark of God from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill; and Ahio was walking ahead of the ark. Meanwhile, David and all the house of Israel were celebrating before the Lord with all kinds of instruments made of fir wood, and with lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets and cymbals. (NASB)

By this time, David has conquered Jerusalem and cleared the Philistine occupied territory west to the coastal plain. Now he assembles thirty thousand men for the task of bringing the ark up to Jerusalem. The ark is carefully identified in the text as "*the ark of God, which is called by the Name.*" The ark is described as the holy meeting place of God and his people. This avoids any idolatrous notions that God and the ark are one and the same, as if God lived

in a box and therefore could be managed.

David's passion to find a resting place for the ark is described in Psalm 132:1-5,

**Remember, O Lord, on David's behalf,
All his affliction,
How he swore to the Lord,
And vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob,
"Surely I will not enter my house,
Nor lie on my bed;
I will not give sleep to my eyes,
Or slumber to my eyelids;
Until I find a place for the Lord,
A dwelling place for he Mighty One of Jacob."**

How different David was from Saul, who showed no concern for the ark of God. Once it had been abandoned by the Philistines, Saul allowed it lie unattended for twenty years. But David is consumed by the ark. He yearns to place it at the very center of God's people.

The priests are commissioned to transport the ark, while David is left free to celebrate. The sons of Abinadab, in whose home the ark was housed for twenty years, choose a new form of transportation, one that was different from the age-old prescribed method of carrying the ark on poles. They adopt a Philistine innovation, placing the ark on a new ox-cart—a high tech approach, one that was much more efficient and less cumbersome.

But this new means of transporting the ark is not without its problems.

(b) The Death of Uzzah and the Halting of the Royal Procession (6:6-10)

But when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out toward the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen nearly upset it. And the anger of the Lord burned against Uzzah, and God struck him down there for his irreverence; and he died there by the ark of God. And David became angry because of the Lord's outburst against Uzzah, and that place is called Perez-uzzah to this day. So David was afraid of the Lord that day; and he said, "How can the ark of the Lord come to me?" And David was unwilling to move the ark of the Lord into the city of David with him; but David took it aside to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite.

As the priests and the ox-cart descend down the hill from the house of Abinadab, the narrator describes David as a man overcome with joy. The king is in the midst of his people, caught up in a full blown festival that employs every musical instrument known to man—lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets, cymbals. The scene is one of unbridled ecstasy before the Lord. Jerusalem will be the site of

the king's city and God's throne as well! Worship is called for.

But, like most events in David's life, his joy is short lived. As the oxen descend the hill they come upon the smooth stone threshing floor of Nacon. Their hooves stumble on the stony smooth floor, the cart lurches forward, and the ark is about to be catapulted off the end of the cart. Uzzah's reaction is instantaneous. He stretches out his hand and grasps (seizes) the ark to put it back in its place.

Human hands seizing the Holy! The outcome is as if Uzzah had grabbed a 220-volt line: "an unmanageable current sizzles his grasp to ash, flaring from the ends of his bones."² Uzzah drops dead by the side of the ark. The celebration comes to a crashing halt. The scene must have resembled baseball's opening day in Cincinnati a couple of weeks ago, when the home plate umpire dropped dead of a heart attack. The game was canceled and 50,000 fans had to go home. At the threshing floor of Nacon, the royal procession skids to a halt as Uzzah is struck down for his "irreverence." The majestic music is muted; the onlookers struck dumb.

David is enraged. How could God rain on his parade? But, the question has to be asked, Whose parade was it, anyway? David names the place Perez-uzzah, meaning "the outbreak against Uzzah." The same outbreak of God's holiness that enveloped the Philistines and established David's reign, in chapter 5, has now turned against David. What a painful and disturbing turn of events! Quickly, David's anger turns to fear. He wonders, "How can the ark of the Lord come to me?" With no answer from heaven, he gives up the quest and abandons the ark to the nearest house, the home of Obed-edom, a Gittite. Obed-edom, whose name means "servant of Edom," is identified as a Levite, in 1 Chr 15:18, 21. He was from the tribe of Korah, and later became a gatekeeper of the ark.

This results in another strange turn of events.

(c) The Lord Blesses the House of Obed-edom (6:11-12a)

Thus the ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months, and the Lord blessed Obed-edom and all his household.

Now it was told King David, saying, "The Lord has blessed the house of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, on account of the ark of God."

The ark remained there for three months, and to everyone's surprise, God not only treated Obed-edom's home as an acceptable abode, he blessed this man and all his household. The parents, children, crops, livestock, and servants are blessed with a fertility beyond measure.

This is the turning point of the story. This gracious extravagance poured out from heaven upon the home of Obed-edom gives David new confidence to resume the holy procession. The king picks up where he left off, but this time in an entirely different spirit.

II. The Second Attempt to Bring the Ark Up (6:12b-23)

(a) The Procession of the Ark Upwards Towards Jerusalem (6:12b-17)

And David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom into the city of David with gladness. And so it was, that when the bearers of the ark of the Lord had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. And David was dancing before the Lord with all his might, and David was wearing a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel were bringing up the ark of the Lord with shouting and the sound of the trumpet. Then it happened as the ark of the Lord came into the city of David that Michal the daughter of Saul looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart. So they brought in the ark of the Lord and set it in its place inside the tent which David had pitched for it; and David offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord.

(b) David Blesses All Israel (6:18-19)

And when David had finished offering the burnt offering and the peace offering, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord of hosts. Further, he distributed to all the people, to all the multitude of Israel, both to men and women, a cake of bread and one of dates and one of raisins to each one. Then all the people departed each to his house.

The oxcart, a high-tech but careless form of transportation for the ark, is replaced with the prescribed, personal mode of carrying, on poles, with priests as the bearers. The procession begins somewhat tentatively, for six steps, "one less than the sacred number seven."³ Then a sacrifice is made to atone for their previous sin, and God is given his rightful place in the procession. Having gone through the dramatic Uzzah sequence, David makes a subtle but significant change in his role in the procession. Reminiscent of the young boy Samuel, he takes off his royal robes and dons the more humble attire of a linen ephod, the clothing of a priest. Therefore, instead of inviting God as a guest to bless his royal party, the king takes the role a priest to serve at God's party.

This shift of roles changes everything. The once tentative celebration now takes off in exuberance and unadulterated joy, and is followed by even more sacrifices. Caught up with God's homecoming, David dances with abandon. Everything he had dreamed for has come true. Such an eventful day needs to be enjoyed to the fullest; it is worth lingering over. Burnt offerings⁴ are made as an expression of total dependence upon God, and peace offerings are to be enjoyed as fellowship meals. David continues in his role as the priestly host at God's party and distributes part of the sacrifice to every individual in the city. No one is left out of this grand occasion. David acts like the father of a bride at the wedding reception, going to every table, welcoming, embracing, and then distributing from the wealth of the moment.

The lesson is clear: When God breaks in on our lives with salvation, there is always more than enough joy to go around. Everyone is to be blessed personally by what God has done. There are no private parties in heaven.

David saves the final blessing for his wife, Michal, and heads home. He anticipates a joyous end to his consummate joy, but he is little prepared for the welcome he is about to receive.

(c) Michal Despises David, and is Barren Until Her

Death (6:20-23)

But when David returned to bless his household, Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David and said, "How the king of Israel distinguished himself today! He uncovered himself today in the eyes of his servants' maids as one of the foolish ones shamelessly uncovers himself!" So David said to Michal, "It was before the Lord who chose me above your father and above all his house, to appoint me ruler over the people of the Lord over Israel; therefore I will celebrate before the Lord. And I will be more lightly esteemed than this and will be humble in my own eyes, but with the maids of whom you have spoken, with them I will be distinguished." Thus Michal the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death.

"David returns to 'bless his house'—the very last little stone in what he has built today...But Michal goes outside." Notice how she is identified: "Michal, the daughter of Saul" and not 'his wife, Michal.' She does not keep waiting for David to enter the room in which she finds herself, but is much more active: she gets up and goes outside to meet him. She can't wait to vent her spleen!"⁵

"How the king of Israel distinguished himself today! He uncovered himself today in the eyes of his servants' maids as one of the foolish ones shamelessly uncovers himself!"

The first procession of joy came to an abrupt halt with the death of Uzzah; the second procession skids to a halt in David's own home. There is nothing more painful than to be applauded in the community but rejected in one's own home.

Why is Michal so angry? Certainly, her past with David has been painful. She loved him, then lost him. Her new husband, Paltiel, loved her, but she was ripped away, like a political pawn, and returned to David. When she arrived in the royal court there is never any mention that David loved her. Her pain is real, and justified. But now it has taken root and become a root of bitterness. Her pain colors everything she sees.

The text portrays the image of Michal viewing the procession through "the window." Having distanced herself from everyone, as the daughter of Saul she interprets David's celebration through the lens of propriety. She looks down on her husband and "despises" him. Her "lens" is colored by jealousy over a husband who had yet to demonstrate any love for her. This blinded her to the significance of that day. Out of this comprehensive scene—the ark proceeding, God descending, Jerusalem embracing, David dancing, musicians playing, multitudes singing, servants rejoicing, and creation resounding—all she sees is her husband dancing without inhibition before some servant girls. A very restrictive lens indeed!

Michal publicly mocks David, insinuating that his religious surrender before God was sexually motivated. To her, this was not the dance of a humble priest, but the gyrations of a shameless gigolo. The dig about his clothing "is all the more painful for David because the only garment he had on to cover his shame was the linen ephod."⁶ Her poisoned invective penetrates bone and marrow.

David does not retreat. He answers the charge, and stings Michal with her own words. Her view of the whole

scene and David's motives was wrong. His dance was not before an audience of women, but before the Lord. She had left the Lord completely out of the picture—the Lord who had chosen him over her father, and had this very day placed his seal on the new monarchy. As to his humiliation, it was of his own free will—and he would gladly do it again. And as to his honor, those servant maidens had shown more honor to the king in his humiliation than his wife had demonstrated toward him in his glory. (This humbling of oneself, and the later exaltation, is reminiscent of Hannah's song in 1 Sam 2:7.)

David has rescued his honor from the very jaws of hell.

The account gives but one verse to describe the remaining years of a cold marriage relationship. Verse 23:

Thus Michal the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death.

We are left with some ambiguity as to whether it was the Lord who closed Michal's womb in judgment or whether David deliberately abstained in their relationship. In either case, there is no doubt as to the coldness of their marriage. Michal becomes a "marked woman, doomed to isolation...[she] undergoes a slow death in life in the new palace."⁷

All three characters in this account, Uzzah, Michal, and David, are excellent studies in what constitutes true and false worship, and how worship determines our destiny.

III. Reflections on the Nature of True Worship

(a) On Uzzah, Keeping God in a Box

From Uzzah we learn the danger of religion becoming so routine that we become careless, leading us to compromise holy ethics. This is disastrous to one's health. Uzzah represents that deadly tendency in all of us to "manage God, by keeping him in his place." Eugene Peterson puts this beautifully in these words:

Uzzah is the person who has God in a box and officiously assumes responsibility for keeping him safe from the mud and dust of the world...Uzzah's reflexive act, reaching out to steady the Ark as the oxen stumbled, was not the mistake of a moment; it was a piece of his lifelong obsession with managing the Ark...He ignored (defied!) the Mosaic directions and substituted the latest Philistine technological innovation—an ox-cart, of all things. A well designed ox-cart is undeniably more efficient for moving the ark about than plodding Levites. But it is also impersonal—the replacement of consecrated persons by an efficient machine, the impersonal crowding out the personal. Uzzah is the patron saint of those who uncritically embrace technology without regard to the nature of the Holy. Uzzah was in charge (he thought) of God and meant to stay in charge...The eventual consequence of that kind of life is death, for God will not be managed. God will not be put and kept in a box, whether the "box" is constructed of crafted wood or hewn stone or brilliant ideas or fine feeling. We do not take care of God; he takes care of us."⁸

We dare not try to put God in a box.

(b) On Michal, Past Pain Blinding the Present

While Uzzah is struck dead for his efforts to manage God, Michal's slow death comes as a result of distancing

herself from God and everyone else. She views life from her window of pain that colors everything she sees. Her past dealings with David so consume her that she does not allow anything new to break in. Thus, she is blinded to the glory of the present. Looking out her window she cannot see God taking his throne on earth. She is deaf to the music and numb to David's devotion. Worst of all, she transfers her own jealousy on to others. That imposition is the destructive blow to all that is holy and to all that is honorable in worship. She dies barren, her barrenness a symbol of a rotted soul.

How much of life do you view through a lens that is colored by your past pain? Do you keep your distance from God and from others, refusing to enter into the greatness of what he is doing because you are bitter? How many grand changes, conversions and royal processions have you missed because you allowed the pain of your past to outweigh the greatness and brightness of what God is doing in the present? God keeps blessing, but you prefer not to see it from your window. If you insist on living this way, you will die barren.

(c) On David, Living Recklessly Before God

Finally, we come to David. All three major characters, Uzzah, David and Michal, are recipients of an angry God. But of the three, David is the only one who gets angry at God in return and lives! He refuses to hide behind a polite facade. He is alive to God in his anger. This is something that neither the propriety of Michal nor the religion of Uzzah would have allowed. Of the three characters, David is the only one who changes.

When you give God your anger, it means he has access to you. Then, your anger is transformed into fear, and fear is transformed into insight. David realizes this is not his party, it is God's. In that humility, David changes his role at the celebration, dons the clothes of a priest, and dances with unadulterated joy in response to the living God. "He was on the edge of mystery, of glory. And so he danced...David knew something Michal didn't,...that we don't have to be careful and cautious with God; that it is death to decorously and politely manage God; that it is life eternal to let him take care of us."⁹

So let us worship God "in spirit and in truth," with our whole hearts, holding nothing held back, with no compromise of God's holiness. When God acts in salvation, there are only two choices open to us: we either dance or die.

Managing God

A stumble of beasts, a lurch
of the oxcart, and Uzzah's hands leap
to harness God's holy box. On the instant
he feels heaven's fire strike—
an unmanageable current sizzles his grasp
to ask, flaring from the ends of his bones.

David, when he senses the same perilous
burn ignite his fingers and
his flying feet, self-abandoned, his
spirit blazing, is stripped naked by joy
to servant girls, himself, and God,
who plays him like a wind-harp.

From her arrogant window Michal's jealousy
watches this wanton worship—holiness dancing
beyond propriety. Snuffing David's joy
like a candle, she learns the swiftness
of Yahweh; derision has cauterized her own
fecundity; contempt has stopped up her womb.

—Luci Shaw¹⁰

1. Note the key words that link this text with chapter 5. The verb "go up" (*alah*), used of holy war when David sought guidance: "Should I go up?," is now used of David bringing the ark of God up to Jerusalem. But in this case it is lacking the prayer that accompanied it in chapter 5. David does not "inquire" (*sha'al*) of the Lord. The root "go up" also comes at the end of the text, in v. 18, for the "burnt offerings" whose scent ascends (*goes up*) to heaven. Also "to break through, or out" (*paratz*), which was used twice in the victories over the Philistines, to depict the Holy God breaking through to defeat the enemies of Israel encased in their idolatry, is now used of that same God breaking out to kill those *within* Israel who have "no fear." This is a very painful turn of events.

2. Luci Shaw, "Managing God," *Crux* 31:3 (Sept. 1995), 6.

3. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. III, Throne and City* (Assen: Van Gorcum 1986), 195. I have been greatly helped by Fokkelman for many of my observations.

4. The term "burnt offering" also comes from the same Hebrew root as the verb "go up", since the whole offering was burned up, and its scent "went up" to heaven. Thus the Hebrew root "go up" (*alah*) frames the passage, vv 2, 12, 15, 17.

5. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 198.

6. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 199.

7. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 205.

8. Eugene Peterson, "Why Did Uzzah Die? Why Did David Dance?" *Crux* 31:3 (Sept. 1995), 5-7.

9. Peterson, "Why Did Uzzah Die?" 8.

10. Shaw, "Managing God," 6.



LONGING FOR A LASTING LEGACY

SERIES: *THRONE AND CITY*

Catalog No. 1027

2 Samuel 7:1-17

13th Message

Brian Morgan

April 28th, 1996

During the past few weeks I feel I have discovered what the gist of mid-life is all about. We have begun taking care of my wife's 85-year-old stepfather. He is very feeble from constrictive heart failure. He can barely walk. His world moves at a slow, dream-like pace, one in which time seems suspended and memory is more significant than action. From that world, Emily and I must make the transition into the passionate, fast-paced world of our teenage daughters. In their arena, vigor and strength are what counts; reflection is a private matter.

I have found that mid-life is like being on the top of a high mountain from which I can see both the beginning and the end. From this vantage point I am more keenly aware of my beginnings, and acutely conscious of my end. I have concluded that there are two responses one can have to mid-life. You can try to relive your youth, denying there is an end; or, knowing the end is near, you can become more reflective. Longing for eternal significance, you try to extract the eternal out of your remaining years.

That very yearning surfaces in our story on the life of King David of Israel, from the book of Second Samuel this morning. David is at mid-life, and he longs to leave a legacy that will outlast his years, to leave his fingerprint on the pages of history. God answers those yearnings and makes David a number of outrageous promises which the Bible calls the Davidic Covenant. These promises become the driving force of salvation history, the taproot of the Messiah, and the very bedrock of the New Covenant and the gospel of grace.

This text marks the theological center of the books of Samuel. It is the hinge on which everything else turns. This is the core of Old Testament faith; not the whole of it, but the core of it. It answers the question, Where is that lasting legacy we so desperately yearn for to be found? Our story opens with David's dream to build a house for God.

I. David's Dream to Build a House for God (7:1-3)

Now it came about when the king lived (dwelt) in his house, and the Lord had given him rest on every side from all his enemies, that the king said to Nathan the prophet, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells within tent curtains." And Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that is in your heart, for the Lord is with you." (NASB)

At this point David is well established¹ in his rule in Jerusalem. All major enemies have been conquered; the once abandoned ark of God has found a home in the capital; and the king resides in a luxurious palace built with foreign funds. But, as David looks out from the luxury of his cedar-paneled palace, he feels a twinge of embarrassment

as he beholds the ark of God housed in a canvas shelter. "The king, who had roamed about as a guerrilla for years, sees how settled he has become and almost seems ashamed of his God's nomadic trait."² The king is in his condo, while God resides in a pup tent.

David voices his unsettled feelings to the prophet Nathan. This is the first time we hear of this court prophet, who makes his entrance into the David story without introduction.³ Underneath the words of David, Nathan immediately perceives the vision, and grants David full prophetic sanction to proceed. After all, David is a man after God's own heart. His long string of uninterrupted successes proves that God is with him.

I imagine that both king and prophet went to bed that night charged with enthusiasm for the new venture. David dreamt of raising the venture capital needed; and he began planning the new tax structures necessary to fund the project. He dreamt of recruiting the best architects and gathering thousands of workers—stonemasons, metal craftsmen, weavers and embroiderers—all to leave behind a permanent place for God in Israel. What a legacy—a temple, with David's name on it, forever etched in stone! Sweet dreams for David.

But Nathan did not get much sleep that night. His repose was interrupted with a visit from the Lord. God put an abrupt halt to David's dream, and unveiled his dream for the king. The narrator grants us the privilege of hearing the revelation at the same time as Nathan receives it, as an oral audition. Thus we hear the revelation before David hears it in the morning. This literary technique draws us into the drama and makes us "live" with the revelation through the night, as if we were right there with the prophet.

II. God's Refusal of David's Dream (7:4-7)

But it came about in the same night that the word of the Lord came to Nathan, saying, "Go and say to My servant David, 'Thus says the Lord, "Are you the one who should build Me a house to dwell in? For I have not dwelt in a house since the day I brought up the sons of Israel from Egypt, even to this day; but I have been moving about in a tent, even in a tabernacle. Wherever I have gone with all the sons of Israel, did I speak a word with one of the tribes of Israel, which I commanded to shepherd My people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built Me a house of cedar?"'"

As is the case with many visions in the Bible, God makes his appearance at night, when people are alone, asleep and still. It is at night, when our senses are shut down, that God speaks to the hearts of men (see Job 4:13; Ps 16:7). And he speaks personally and intimately ("you and Me"). God calls David "my servant." This is a remark-

able title, one that is seldom conferred by God on anyone in the Old Testament. Previous to this time, the only two men considered worthy of being called this were Moses and Joshua. As Fokkelman observes: "It is a sign of great trust. God expects his servant to run things properly."⁴

David's ambition provokes a pointed question from God: "Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in?" Then God gives David a history lesson. From the time of the Exodus to the present, God asks, was there ever a single occasion when he needed or spoke of a permanent residence? The question must be asked: Why did God choose to dwell in a tent? How scandalous that the Creator God, the Redeemer of Israel, would travel with his people in the wilderness—and in a tent, of all things!

A tent had certain advantages, however. A tent gave God freedom and mobility to move wherever his people went. God is a walker. He is a hiker, a dynamic mover who loves his freedom and mobility. A temple could have dangerous implications for how God is perceived. It might serve to guarantee his permanent presence, but at the same time it could inhibit his freedom. The dynamic God of the wilderness, replaced by a static deity encased in the royal stone of an established monarchy? Not likely. In fact, the thought of a cedar palace is not at all to God's liking. It provokes an astonishment that verges on indignation: "You want to do this for Me? A house of cedar?" God demands. I wonder how often our desire for a legacy impinges on the freedom of others.

After God refuses David's initial proposal, he unveils his plans for David, in four parts.

III. God's Dream to Build a House for David (7:8-17)

(a) David's Past: God Designed, God Driven (8-9b)

"Now therefore, thus you shall say to My servant David, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be ruler over My people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you have gone and have cut off all your enemies from before you.'"

First, God reviews David's past. What humble origins he had. As the despised youth of the family, David occupied his days following after sheep. How things had changed. Now, as king, all the sheep of Israel were following him. God had drawn David out of his humble and painful origins into something very large and significant. And in that journey from shepherd to king, God was right beside him, defeating every enemy.

The personal and intimate tone of God's review of David's past can be heard in the resonant repetition of the pronouns "I" and "you," which echo through the text. There is a very personal touch about divine election. When we pause to reflect on our own election, our eyes well up with tears of appreciation.

Life up to this point in David's existence was God designed and God driven.

Next, God goes on to speak of David's future.

(b) David's Near Future: God Driven, God Expanding (9c-11b)

"and I will make you a great name, like the names of the great men who are on the earth. I will also appoint a place for My people Israel and will plant them, that they may live in their own place and not be disturbed again, nor will the wicked afflict them any more as formerly, even from the day that I commanded judges to be over My people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies."

God says he is not done with David. There is still more grace to come. David is not yet an international star on the horizon ("a great name"). God had yet to grant his people Israel a secure place on earth where they could dwell undisturbed by their enemies. The clear point is that God's choice and lavish blessings on David were not an end in themselves; they were for the benefit of all Israel, his people whom he loved. Leaders exist for the benefit of the people, not the other way around.

So God reminds David that just as his past was all of grace, so his future is going to be driven by God's grace. God was not done. He was not about to stop midstream.

The rest of the oracle looks ahead to David's distant future and redefines his original dream.

(c) David's Dream (Distant Future): God Redesigned in Greater Dimensions (11c-13)

"The Lord also declares to you that the Lord will make a house for you. When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever."

Here is the "center of gravity" of the oracle.⁵ God's vision for David is communicated in the terms of David's original dream, thereby validating his dreams. God says, in effect, "Now as to that house you have been talking about, that dream you have for a lasting legacy. It's a good idea, but it needs some major redesign work. First, you've got the wrong builder. You are not going to build a house for me. I'm going to build a house for you. Second, you have the wrong materials." This is a play on words. David wanted to build a house made of stone, but God wants to build David an eternal dynasty of sons. We have dreams of building, but God has dreams of birthing. What we build is temporary, what God births through us is eternal.

Actually, one of David's future sons, Solomon, would be the temple builder. But Solomon was merely a shadow of the true seed of David—Christ—who would build the ultimate temple of God (Eph 2:19-22). God's Messiah would build a temple of living stones! This was where God would find his ultimate rest. Revelation reveals that this new temple, "made without hands," when complete, will fill the whole creation. David never had such dimensions in mind.

God concludes the oracle with a word of assurance guaranteeing the results of this new venture.

(d) David's Dream (Far Future): Sealed in a Father's Love (7:14-17)

"I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, but My

loyal-love shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever.”” In accordance with all these words and all this vision, so Nathan spoke to David. (7:14-17

God announces that every future king upon taking office would be adopted by him into a Father/son relationship. This is a powerful invitation of intimacy and privilege. This is where the title “son of God” originates (see Ps 2:7, the coronation psalm for Israel’s kings). This is the designation of Israel’s anointed king, who had a unique relationship of intimacy with the Father, one that was especially evidenced in prayer. We can see this developed in 1 Kings 8, when Solomon dedicates the temple, labeling it a house of prayer for the king. (We have seen several times in these studies that the Psalms were the prayers of the king.)

Furthermore, God says that the success of this new dynasty is guaranteed. Unlike the Old Covenant, which was dependent on man’s obedience and faithfulness, this New Covenant could not be set aside by the behavior of the sons. There is no “if” clause in the New Covenant. From now on, God would take ultimate responsibility for both sides of the relationship. The sons may be disciplined, but they would never be cut off. Thus there would always be a son on David’s throne. Here is the blank check of blessing and glory.

What a life David had! It was God initiated, God designed, God driven, God expanded, and God completed. But, most important of all, throughout David’s life his relationship with God was an intimate one. How shabby those temple plans must have seemed to David after he began to get a glimpse of a different kind of house, in all its new dimensions. Imagine David’s joy in heaven, when he meets all his sons.

The scene closes in verse 18:

Then David the king went in and sat before the Lord, and he said, “Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that You have brought me this far?”

The text opened with David “sitting” in his royal palace, longing to give God a permanent dwelling place “to sit” on earth. It ends with David out of his palace, “sitting” before the Lord.

We achieve a sense of permanence in life not by what we build for God, but by having our eyes opened to what God is building for us. This is not like a parent-child relationship. No matter what occurs down the road, this relationship is never going to change. God doesn’t want anything from us. We do not have to build anything or do anything. All we have to do is just keep receiving. Nothing else is required.

IV. Reflections On David’s Dream

(a) David’s Legacy, Our Dream

Remember that the narrator allows us to hear the revelation, and to live with it through the night, before David hears it. The reason for this is to draw us into the story, so that we can feel as if David’s story is our story. If ever

there was an oracle addressed directly to you and me, it is this. Is David a unique servant of God? In Christ, so are we. Is David a “son of God,” uniquely drawn into the heart of Father as Israel’s king? In Christ, that invitation and privilege of intimacy is ours. Is David’s life a pure gift from God, with no conditions from beginning to end? In Christ, so is ours. Our lives are God initiated, God designed, God driven, God expanded, and God completed.

In Christ, you may sin, you may be disciplined, but God will never disown you. This Father can never disown a son. And you can never remove yourself from his love, a love which beckons you, draws you, embraces you, weeps over you, cleanses you, and renews you. This is the gospel of pure grace. You can be a Christian for many years, but at some juncture, as was the case with David, God’s love breaks through in a new way and expands the dimensions of grace for you. This is a beautiful thing to behold as you gain a deepened sense of God’s love, confirming your identity as a son.

When this kind of experience came to saints in the past, the only way they could express their overwhelming sense of appreciation for this kind of unconditional love was to draw on the language of the Song of Solomon to speak of their love for the Lord:

St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*

On a dark night,
Kindled in love with yearnings—oh, happy chance!
I went forth without being observed,
My house being now at rest.

In darkness and secure,
By the secret ladder, disguised—oh, happy chance!
In darkness and in concealment,
My house being now at rest.

In the happy night,
In secret, when none saw me,
Nor I beheld aught,
Without light or guide, save that which burned in my heart.

This light guided me,
More surely than the light of noonday
To the place where he (well I knew who!) was awaiting me -
A place where none appeared.

Oh, night that guided me,
Oh, night more lovely than the dawn,
Oh night that joined Beloved with love,
Lover transformed in the Beloved!

Upon flowery breast,
Kept wholly for himself alone,
There he stayed sleeping, and I caressed him,
And the fanning of the cedars made a breeze.

The breeze blew from the turret,
As I parted his locks;
With his gentle hand he wounded my neck
And caused all my senses to be suspended.

I remained, lost in oblivion;
My face I reclined on the Beloved.
All ceased and I abandoned myself,
Leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies.

(b) When Do We Best Perceive It?

A second thing that I find amazing about this text is the place where David is in his journey with God when he perceives this new truth. Note that his perception of the ever-expanding dimensions of God's grace come at the very point in his life when his dream dies. David's hunger to leave a lasting legacy, a permanent home for God, is flatly refused. When our earthly dreams die, our souls become most sensitive to what is eternal. It is as if at this crucial moment in our journey, a window into Eden is thrown open and we are able to perceive heaven's horizon as never before. The key is to go sleep. That is when we perceive God's dream, a dream that outlasts history.

The movie *Mr. Holland's Opus* opened me up to a dream that died in me, but one that in its death exposed me to a new dimension of God's dream. Mr. Holland dreamt of being a composer of great music, but instead he had to settle for becoming a teacher of music in a high school. He never realized his dream, but his life and music touched hundreds of high schoolers. That was his opus.

As I watched that movie, some pain surfaced in me from some of my dreams that have been shattered. But then I remembered that it was the death of my dreams that resulted in my birth as a heavenly son.

1. "to dwell", "settle down", "live" (Hebrew, *yashab*) carries with it the idea of permanence. It is a key word, used six times in the text (vv 1, 2, 2, 5, 6, 18).

2. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. III, Throne and City* (Assen: Van Gorcum 1986), 210.

3. Nathan makes three appearances in the story here, 2 Sam. 12, and 1 Kings 1.

4. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 214.

5. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 227.

□

Son,
I love that name,
Conjuring up
All within me.

"A serene splendor,
That takes your breath away."

I haven't heard it
In a while,
In fact, I ache to say
I can't remember when?

Did he ever think it,
Say it, mean it?
Did son ever conjure up joy
For him beyond my birth?

I thought I was over it,
Over forty,
But now perhaps most pained
When reflection is the brightest.

I thought I was over it,
Until someone dedicates
An opus to his son,
And I forever remain a stranger.

And then I remember my son,
Who conjured up everything for me
For a few brief moments;
Now gone until the Dawn sings.

O sing O soul,
Play the notes,
Resonate and play,
For this is what you were made for.

"This is my beloved son,
My son, my son!"

—Brian Morgan

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SPEECHLESS WITH PRAISE

SERIES: *THRONE AND CITY*

Catalog No. 1028

2 Samuel 7:18-29

14th Message

Brian Morgan

May 5th, 1996

A few weeks ago, my wife and I attended the fiftieth wedding anniversary of a dear couple. Their children gave a celebration dinner for three hundred of their friends, but the best gift they gave them was when they passed around a microphone so that the guests could share words of appreciation for what the Lord had done through their fifty years of marriage. Later in the evening, twenty individuals who had been adopted into the home of this couple posed for a special photograph to be presented to them.

How important praise is to the human soul! We are most human, and God is most present, when we stand and speak appreciation for those whom we love.

In our text today we come to an occasion in David's life when his soul bursts forth with praise for God. His words of praise are uttered at a holy juncture: the God of Israel had just revealed what we now call the "Davidic Covenant" to the king. David, who was well established in his rule in Jerusalem, had wanted to leave God a lasting legacy, a permanent house to dwell in. But God told David he could not build a house for him. God was going to build a house for David, not a temporal house of cedar, but an eternal dynasty of sons, culminating in the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. These promises build on the Old Covenant. They narrow the promises and blessings of Israel to one house, the house of David, and they supersede it, because there is no "if" clause attached to them. These are promises that are unconditional and irrevocable.

On hearing the promises for the first time, David is undone. He cannot grasp the dimensions or plumb the depths of what God has promised. Awestruck and dazed, he has difficulty finding words to articulate his feelings. But speak he must, and in the beauty of humility, he places a plethora of praise on the altar of God.

Our text serves as a very good description of what happens to the human soul when it finally comes to an experiential knowledge of the New Covenant. How does the soul react when the notions of election and grace move from the head to the heart; when the love of God permeates the very air we breathe; when we finally wake up to the fact that everything is from God, and nothing from us? (2 Cor 3:5). We respond by giving up, letting go, and losing ourselves in the love of God. We quit trying to be something we are not. We give up the masks of our shame, and enjoy being ourselves.

This event permanently shaped David's demeanor, and how he viewed his life from every vantage point,

past, present and future. My prayer is that it might shape the way we view our lives as well.

I. Awestruck by the Present Encounter (7:18-22)

Then David the king went in and sat before the Lord; and he said, "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that You have brought me this far? And yet this was insignificant (small) in Your eyes, O Lord God, for You have spoken also of the house of Your servant concerning the distant future. And this is the custom (torah) of man, O Lord God! And again what more can David say to You? For You know Your servant, O Lord God! For the sake of Your word, and according to Your own heart, You have done all this greatness to let Your servant know. For this reason You are great, O Lord God; for there is none like You, and there is no God besides You, according to all that we have heard with our ears. (NASB)

(a) The Soul at Rest

The text opens with the king sitting beside the ark, before the presence of the Lord. He is seated in praise, his soul quiet, his whole being at rest. It was this "settled rest" that David had longed to give to God by building him a house. But lasting permanence is not for man to give to God. Rather, it is God who gives permanence to man, and that comes as pure gift. God said to David: "You shall not build a house for me. I am going to build a house for you."

This new revelation diminishes David's vision to a whisper. It breaks in on the corridors of history with a new vision that will fill eternity itself. And, unbelievably, David is the center of it. There is nothing more fulfilling than being part of something much larger than yourself. So David "sits" in the presence of God, basking in that relationship. There is no talk of a house for God, and no props. There is nothing but God, the God who gives rest.

(b) Plunged into Humility

Secondly, the vision plunges David into hallowed humility. "Who am I?" he asks. What a beautiful thing it is to see a soul bathed in humility and overflowing with appreciation. David's first words are: "Who am I, O Lord God...that You have brought me this far?" He continues: "But for you, that is not far enough. You have the far future, even eternity, in mind. What I consider the greatest measure of grace in my life, you con-

sider small." This is a verbal echo to David being the "smallest" in his family.

Then David says: "And this is the torah of man, O Lord God." Some translations read: "This is the custom of man." But this is best understood literally as "torah." In other words, this is the New Covenant, a new torah for man. This is the new engine that is going to drive history to eternity—rest and hallowed humility.

(c) Identity Secure

Thirdly, the vision gives David a wonderful sense of secure identity. He has an abiding sense of who he is and who God is. Ten times he addresses God as the "Lord God," and seven times, himself as his "servant." David has a vision of the lofty exaltedness of God in his senses, coupled with the supreme sense of privilege he has for being God's servant. His identity is founded and secure, placed, as it were, in stone.

(d) Inadequate in Speech, but Eloquent in Heart

Finally, David, the one gifted in speech, is so overcome with appreciation that he cannot find words to express himself. He can merely recount what he has heard. Though he cannot speak, however, the knowledge of his being known penetrates him. Thus he knows his heart will speak—he will speak because he must—though his words are inadequate. When God acts in such a lavish way, the soul finds no rest until it speaks in full embodied praise.

How do you know if you have truly experienced this New Covenant? The answer is, there will be a quiet rest in your soul because you will know who you are. Your demeanor will be bathed in humility. You will yearn to praise God from your heart.

I am always overwhelmed when I read letters from our friends in Romania, especially the letters of Jonathan, the brother-in-law of our own Jim Foster. Jonathan is always so appreciative of our visits to his country that he can scarcely find words to express his appreciation. I will read an excerpt from a recent letter from him:

Often I ask myself, Why O God do you surround me with so much loyal love and goodness? Through whose sacrifice was I, a sinner, made worthy of such brotherly love? Because of what mystery, kept to the coming day, did you mobilize the Saints from PBCC and send them to the mountains of far off Romania with hearts and backpacks full of unique love? What did you find in us, O Lord, that you put into the heart of those shepherds, in love with heaven, the desire to gaze upon us, some dreaming little sheep, which through the mountains and valleys with storms were languishing in our longing to meet with you? What did you whisper in that mysterious moment into their ears of your servants, who left their wives and precious little children, the flowers of their hearts and little buds like dew covered berries, when they departed across countries and seas with dangers and

sacrifices? What did you tell them O Lord that caused them to come and weep with us in longing for you? What did you show them, I wonder, that there would be the light of heaven in their eyes and in their voice some kind of mingling of Golgotha's sighs and hymns of the resurrection? And what kind of strength poured forth from your grace O Lord that you convinced some in their old age to climb the mountains like in the years of his youth. And others to eat with us from the same pot and to wash themselves in the spring and to sleep in the attic of an abandoned cabin. Why Lord did you use a chain of wonders through which we met one another?

For what Lord did you do so many miracles and make so much of an investment in us? Other innumerable questions carry me on the path of memories which are from now on more and more with you and about you our beloved brothers. That is why our impatience to see you again is growing moment by moment, and I don't know if this burden will melt in the mystery of our holy embraces of if it will grow again and again!

We will do anything for people who show such appreciation. And God will do anything for us when we praise him, because we are awestruck by what he has done.

Now David turns from the present to speak of how this revelation ties him with his holy past.

II. Appreciation for Our Privileged Past (7:23-24)

"And what one nation on the earth is like Your people Israel, whom God went to redeem for Himself as a people and to make a name for Himself, and to do a great thing for You and awesome things for Your land, before Your people whom You have redeemed for Yourself from Egypt, from nations and their gods? For You have established for Yourself Your people Israel as Your own people forever, and You, O Lord have become their God.

Have you noticed how rootless people feel in our modern world? In our fast-paced, high tech society, we have little sense of family or history. Painfully, we are learning that we can't function without a sense of history. No sense of lasting significance can be wrought from present experience alone. We must be part of something that is larger than ourselves.

The revelation of the New Covenant strengthens David's historical roots, and gives him a heightened awareness and appreciation for his privileged past. That is why he asks: "What nation is like Israel upon the earth?" He could never forget the redemption of Israel in the Exodus, when heaven touched earth on an international scale. Egypt, the greatest nation on the face of the earth, quaked in terror as Israel was given birth through the sea. David could never get over the uniqueness of that event. It was something that had

never happened before in history. It unheard of, unthinkable. Nor could David could forget the power of it, when ten plagues shook a nation and its idols. And he could never forget the intimacy of it ("for Yourself"), or the impact of it (it would last forever). The New Covenant, though new, does not cut us off from our past; it keeps us in close touch with the roots of our salvation. How privileged we are to be part of the elect!

This same sense of privilege came home to a friend of mine a few years ago in Jerusalem. I was standing at the Wailing Wall with my friend, Kim Anderson. It was my third time there, but it was the first time for Kim. He was quietly looking at the same Herodian stones that were there when Jesus came to the temple. As Kim stared at three thousand years of redemption history represented by these stones, he began to weep, awestruck that God had grafted him in as an adopted son into this heritage.

Awestruck by the present and appreciative for the past, David now turns his gaze to the future.

III. Anticipation of Future Glory (7:25-29)

"Now therefore, O Lord God, the word that You have spoken concerning Your servant and his house, confirm it forever; and do as You have spoken, that Your name may be magnified forever, by saying, 'The Lord of hosts is God over Israel'; and may the house of Your servant David be established before You. For You, O Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, have made a revelation to Your servant, saying, 'I will build you a house'; therefore Your servant has found courage (lit. "heart") to pray this prayer to You. And now, O Lord God, You are God, and Your words are truth, and You have promised this good thing to Your servant. Now therefore, may it please You to bless the house of Your servant, that it may continue forever before You. For You, O Lord God, have spoken; and with Your blessing may the house of Your servant be blessed forever."

The revelation provokes in David awe in the present and appreciation for the past. Now it draws him into a future of blessing beyond his wildest dreams. If the past was good, and the present better, the future was beyond comprehension. David was part of a privileged nation among nations. Now, out of that privileged nation, there would be one house, and one son in that house who would be the focus of all the blessings of Abraham. And David is right at the center. This revelation powerfully draws him into a future he never dreamed could be so good.

People of the New Covenant are eschatological people. They are drawn into the future. They delight in it and live for it. Why is that? It is because they know that the best is yet to be. They take no delight in the good old days. The word "retire" is blasphemy to them. So let us lift our gaze beyond earth to heaven. God's Kingdom is going to reign with a future that is all encompassing.

Jesus will be Lord over all Israel and all the nations of the earth, with infinite blessings, forever and ever.

I see this attitude so clearly demonstrated by several women in our congregation, most of whom have out-lived their husbands. They are so filled with appreciation for God that every service they offer to God is a delight to them. They are always forward looking. One gathers immigrants from foreign countries; another evangelizes at youth prisons; another travels to Russia every year to preach the gospel. She takes part in prayer renewal country wide, and is helping organize a Billy Graham Crusade in San Jose. These women are New Covenant Christians.

David enters into this future through prayer. But even prayer begins not with us, but with God. Because God revealed his heart to David, David found the heart to pray to God. Prayers are not arbitrary wishes based on wishful thinking or naive optimism buoyed by our unpredictable hormones. David prayed: "Your words are truth." God's words are bedrock. Stand on them. Hang your life on them. God has spoken from heaven; we answer from earth. Eugene Peterson calls prayer, "answering speech." When we answer from earth, heaven is then engaged and history is moved by God. The holy circle of eternal life is completed.

What impact did the New Covenant have on David's soul? He is awestruck in the present, appreciative for his past, and he exults in the future, in the hope of the glory of God.

IV. Reflection and Application

(a) A Reflection

In reflecting on this text I notice that this is first time in David's career when his advance is not somehow laced with grief.

David was anointed king, privately in his home, only to be spurned by his own brothers and abandoned by his mother and father. After his great victory over Goliath he was lauded by Saul's son and by all Israel. But the king tried to impale him on his spear; and he was driven out into a wilderness for ten years. On the very day of his vindication, when at last he could publicly wear his crown, he was stabbed with grief over the death of Jonathan. His first act as king was to preside at his best friend's funeral. Then David finally united all the northern tribes with the south into one people. He was crowned as the one king over one people. But as a consequence, both the leading general and former king of the north were brutally murdered by members of David's own house and David had to preside at their state funerals. Then in his finest hour, as spiritual leader of Israel, he brought the ark of the covenant up to Jerusalem. But his jubilation was struck down by the death of Uzzah. Months later, when he was successful, his jubilation was again dashed when he was publicly vilified by his own wife. Every successful step which David took was followed by grief and sorrow, until now, in this

very moment when God speaks of a New Covenant.

Now David speaks with pure praise. There is no grief, no sorrow, only unadulterated joy, because his future is all God's doing; it would be untainted by the hands of men. David did nothing to gain all of this. All he had to do was receive it as a gift while he slept. History will move irresistibly to this goal solely because of God's loyal-love. And this is future we are all destined for, one that is solely God's doing, untainted by human hands; and thus our soul will be given over to pure praise.

(b) Application

Have you been touched by the love of God in the New Covenant? Are you awestruck by your own encounter with God's love? Perhaps you are saying, "That's not for me." But it is! Listen to these words of the apostle Paul, from his letter to the Romans:

Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,...and we exult in hope of the glory of God...and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Rom 5:1-5)

If there has not been a moment in your life when this love of God has moved from your head to your heart, I recommend you go on a silent retreat for a day. Don't do anything. Just detach yourself from your normal surroundings, the earthly voices that beckon you and belit-

tle you, and get away. Take your Bible and listen to God, and pray that he will reveal his love to you.

Perhaps you have already experienced such a moment, but you never have memorialized it. Without praise, life is incomplete. Write a poem of praise! "Who am I, O Lord, that you have brought me thus far?" People think my love for poetry comes because I was an English major in school. But the fact is, I was an economics major. I didn't write my first poem until I was forty. Then, I wrote because I had to. Appreciation was building up inside of me for God and for people who had touched me, and it just came out. I had to say it.

At our friends fiftieth wedding anniversary I thought of how much they meant to Emily and me. Years ago, immediately after the death of our son, they invited us into their home for dinner every week for a year. They wanted to help us in our grief. Their home became our home. That evening I felt an uncomfortable urge to speak, but I felt inadequate and embarrassed. I told God that I was in need of a sign. Then their son said to me, "Mr. Morgan, do you have something to say?" I choked. I could hardly speak. Finally, I took the microphone and said, "We love you." I gave some inarticulate details of that year when they ministered to us. How could I not speak in praise to a couple who had adopted us during our time of grief?

And how can we not speak to the One who severed his own soul and gave his Son to take us into his family, and gave us a future that will outlast history?

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SURVIVING SUCCESS

SERIES: *THRONE AND CITY*

Catalog No. 1029

2 Samuel 8:1-18

15th Message

Brian Morgan

May 12th, 1996

Can we have it all in life? This question was posed by a young man recently in a Bible study that I attend. He was being presented with open windows of opportunity in business, and he felt like he was standing beneath an ever-rising ladder that was gilded with promises for those who climbed higher and vested deeper.

For some in this valley, a rush of adrenaline surges through their veins as they see seemingly limitless opportunities for start-up companies, stock options and travel opportunities. With these advances, of course, come dreams of bigger homes, exclusive neighborhoods, private schools and community influence. Sometimes these awards are the pure gift of God; they are a blessing. The question is, what happens to our soul when we are gifted with success? Is there a price to be paid?

If ever there was someone who got in on the ground floor of a gilt-edged start-up venture, that man was David, the shepherd boy who became king of Israel. David was drawn into the most productive venture in history. He entered as the first employee. He had no capital; just a little oil was all he needed. The venture's principle backer was God, the "Lord of Hosts." This little company of one, which began in a cave, grew with amazing speed. When it went public, David became the CEO of the leading nation of earth. Now he was the royal monarch, standing right at the pinnacle of Israel's history. The queen of the nations, with a dynasty promised to outlive history! Talk about having it all. David had a brilliant career, a big house, with the prospect of a multitude of children, and influence abroad.

But what happened to David's soul when at last he had it all? Our text today, from the book of 2 Samuel, tells the story of his massive conquests abroad (8:1-14), followed by internal organization at home (8:15-18). Yet these successes are interwoven with red flags that appear as dangerous omens for David's spiritual life.

First, we will look at the king's latest successes abroad.

I. New Heights of Success Abroad (8:1-14)

Now after this it came about that David defeated the Philistines and subdued them; and David took control (lit., the bridle) of the chief (lit., mother) city from the hand of the Philistines. And he defeated Moab, and measured them with the line, making them lie down on the ground; and he measured two lines to put to death and one full line to keep alive.

And the Moabites became servants to David, bringing tribute.

Then David defeated Hadadezer, the son of Rehob king of Zobah, as he went to restore his rule at the River. And David captured from him 1,700 horsemen and 20,000 foot soldiers; and David hamstringed the chariot horses, but reserved enough of them for 100 chariots. And when the Arameans of Damascus came to help Hadadezer, king of Zobah, David killed 22,000 Arameans. Then David put garrisons among the Arameans of Damascus, and the Arameans became servants to David, bringing tribute. And the Lord helped David wherever he went. And David took the shields of gold which were carried by the servants of Hadadezer, and brought them to Jerusalem. And from Bethah and from Berothai, cities of Hadadezer, King David took a very large amount of bronze.

Now when Toi king of Hamath heard that David had defeated all the army of Hadadezer, Toi sent Joram his son to King David to greet him and bless him, because he had fought against Hadadezer and defeated him; for Hadadezer had been at war with Toi. And {Joram} brought with him articles of silver, of gold and of bronze. King David also dedicated these to the Lord with the silver and gold that he had dedicated from all the nations which he had subdued: from Aram and Moab and the sons of Ammon and the Philistines and Amalek, and from the spoil of Hadadezer, son of Rehob, king of Zobah.

So David made a name for himself when he returned from killing 18,000 Arameans in the Valley of Salt. And he put garrisons in Edom. In all Edom he put garrisons, and all the Edomites became servants to David. And the Lord helped David wherever he went. (NASB)

The battles summarized here, which took place over a period of twelve years, gather up David's military and administrative successes as king of Israel. These conquests took his rule to new heights never before achieved by himself or by any other leader in Israel. In much of this we can see God fulfilling his promises of chapter 7 to make David a name and to plant his people Israel in peace. God would be victorious over Israel's enemies.

What is so striking in the description of the battles is the stark brevity with which they are catalogued. Often just one verb ("David smote") is used to describe an en-

tire campaign. This is rather amazing when we realize that David was dealing with international conflicts involving thousands of troops. The numbers are staggering: 1,700 horsemen, 20,000 foot soldiers, 22,000 Arameans, 18,000 Arameans. They convey a feel for the surge of irresistible power driving David's tidal wave of success which moves through foreign soil at breakneck speed. When a few details are given to linger over, even then the focus is not on the battle, but on its aftermath. This emphasizes the new heights David has achieved. He is now the dominant force on the international scene.

The narrator begins this whirlwind tour of international conflict in the west, where David defeats Israel's perennial enemy, the Philistines. Again they are severely beaten. But now, for the first time, David takes new ground by bringing the battle into enemy turf, capturing their crown jewel and chief city. Literally, the term is the "bridle" of the mother city. This is a metaphor for severe oppression and absolute control. "The report that David took the reins 'out of the hands of the Philistines' means the roles are reversed from now on; the enemy finds himself in his hand."¹ A secure new rung is put in place in David's ladder of success.

From the west the narrator turns south-east, to Moab. David defeats Moab and makes them a permanent vassal kingdom under Israelite rule. The second rung is secured.

Next David faces a formidable foe, Hadadezer. David not only crushes him, he proceeds to break the back of an entire coalition of Aramean states that come to support him. The name Hadadezer (which means, "the god Hadad gives help"), rings out eight times in the text. Each time we hear the name, it is met with deafening silence; there is no answer from this "god." The Aramean defeat opens the door for conquest and resettlement to the far north. There David places garrisons to make his rule a permanent fixture in Damascus, broadening the tax base. The third and fourth rungs in David's ladder are safely installed.

Hearing of Hadadezer's defeat, Toi, king of Hamath (located on the Orontes river, due north of Damascus), is so elated that his archenemy has been destroyed, he comes with massive amounts of tribute to David. Tributes of silver, bronze and gold, covering the gamut of wealth's expression, make their way into the royal capital. This willing gesture opens the door of David's influence all the way north to the Euphrates river. Yet another rung is in place.

Fokkelman summarizes David's conquests in these words: "Five campaigns, six peoples, seven names of the defeated—all this diversity obtains a center, when the gravitation's center, vv.7-12, displays the conqueror in his capital Jerusalem."²

David is unstoppable. His empire is insatiable in its acquisition. The final rung on the ladder is identified in the words: "*David made a name (for himself).*" David is a

star on the international scene. He has it all.

I was fascinated recently to learn that this is how Silicon Valley entrepreneurs appear to people from other lands. I have a friend, Mattei, who comes from Romania. He wrote a the following poem describing how he views these modern-day conquerors:

They talk of gold, like I of water,
they talk of places I've never dared to dream
they dine with demi-gods like equals
they ride the winds and laugh like kings

Their words are swords
their swords divide
they make the west be west
while the east is quiet and oppressed
their arms set boundaries for the rest!

They pet the sky,
they dry the sea
Put Himalayas on its knee,
to beg for life, life is not free.

At war, they're skillful warriors,
The army is for them a phrase
The soldier is a notion of a phase
And victory is granted by a gaze!

And yet they talk of more,
their hearts are in distress
their barns so full, yet need to be rebuilt, I guess
they've lost count of herds and lands—oh yes

This is how the captains of Silicon Valley are viewed in the Third World.

II. The Reason for David's Success (8:6, 14)

What lay behind David's unparalleled success? The text is clear and emphatic. It is given twice, in verses 6 and 14:

And the Lord helped (lit., *saved*) **David wherever he went** (*walked*).

"The verb translated as 'help' is the term *yasha'* which means 'to deliver, to save.' The root idea is to give 'width and breadth to something, to liberate.'" Thus, salvation is to be taken from a narrow, constricting place, to a broader, more expansive place. God's gift to David was to be with him wherever he went. Now David is truly the beneficiary of a God who will not be confined in a house, but who is with David, to broaden his influence where David "walks."

If we have any success in life, credit is due to God alone. If you have gained any semblance of richness, breadth, influence or wealth, the credit is due to the God who has walked with you.

But the question that this text leaves us with is this: How does this tidal wave of success affect David's soul?

I have titled the next section: Holy Devotions and Abrasive Emotions.

III. David's Response to Success

(a) Holy Devotions (8:4, 11)

and David hamstrung the chariot horses...King David also dedicated these to the Lord with the silver and gold that he had dedicated from all the nations which he had subdued:

In the face of success, David does what a good king is supposed to do: He refuses to place his trust in the spoils. He hamstringing most of the horses (see Deut 17:16), and dedicates all of the spoils to God, in Jerusalem. David publicly declares everything to be God's victory, and all the spoil is holy to God. His company has just gone public after acquiring three foreign subsidiaries, yet David walks down the aisle, gives glory to God, and puts his entire gain in the plate, keeping nothing for himself. This is the center of the text. The messianic king dedicates to God everything he received. The sweet scent of holy devotions permeated the air in Jerusalem that day.

But not every rose in this bouquet was so fragrant. There were some dangerous omens in the midst of the holy devotions.

(b) Abrasive Emotions (8:2)

This wave of success lands David on dangerous ground. Success oftentimes spawns a perilous euphoria that can lift our senses up to heaven, but it can just as easily sweep us away to hell. When the air around us is permeated with success, when we seem fused with God's perennial activity, and we are at the center of everything that is significant, it is tempting to endow ourselves with some aspect of deity. In the language of the Moabite tribute, the narrator gives subtle hints that this is the shift that is occurring here: "the Moabites became servants to David, bringing *tribute*." The term "tribute" (*minchah*) is normally a "gift" (usually a grain offering) brought to the Lord by his servants. Now David is receiving it while the Moabites become *his* servants. David's euphoria causes him to cross the sacred line between being a servant of God engaged in holy war and becoming a god unto himself. When that happens, a horrible detachment from human beings occurs that gives birth to the most terrifying wickedness.

We see this in the heartless subjugation of the Moabites.

And he defeated Moab, and measured them with the line, making them lie down on the ground; and he measured two lines to put to death and one full line to keep alive. And the Moabites became servants to David, bringing tribute.

David lines the Moabites on the ground and measures them off with a rope to determine who lives and dies. David, the undisputed victor, now makes sure he remains victor by demonstrating that he is lord of life

and death—and this is determined arbitrarily, by the length of a rope. In the end, twice as many Moabites are dead as alive. Those who managed to survive are left in awe that this "lord" permitted it. In this way David commands their allegiance for their remaining days. Such servants often end up as mercenaries of the worst kind, carrying out the dirty work of kings and commanders.

Here then we find the strange juxtaposition of holy devotion inside the temple and random violence on the battlefield—holy piety, coupled with unrestrained, humiliating, abusive emotions, practically verging on the demonic. As happens with many of the ambiguities in life, we are left a little dazed as to how to put these things together.

When the narrator says: "David made a name" (a direct link with the promise in chapter 7, but with the subject changed), we are left to wonder. Yes, David made a name. But was that the result of the pure gift of God, or was some of it of David's own making? In the euphoria of success, it is easy to become detached from God and seek to make our own name.

In summary, we see three themes to David's international conquests: First, David is taken to new heights of success never before achieved in Israel; second, the narrator emphatically declares that the basis of David's success was God's grace; but third, the impact of such success was a mixed bag in David's soul. Holy devotions coupled with abrasive emotions.

Stepping back from the world of international affairs now, the narrator grants a view inside of the kingdom, and how David's success was received at home.

IV. The Aftermath of Success at Home (8:15-18)

So David reigned over all Israel; and David administered justice and righteousness for all his people. And Joab the son of Zeruiah was over the army, and Jehoshaphat the son of Ahilud was recorder. And Zadok the son of Ahitub and Ahimelech the son of Abiathar were priests, and Seraiah was secretary. And Benaiah the son of Jehoiada was over the Cherethites and the Pelethites; and David's sons were priests.

"The successful conclusion to military violence abroad culminates in harmony at home created by so righteous a king."³ ("David administered justice and righteousness for all his people")... 'Justice' and 'righteousness' "stand next to one other twenty-seven times in the Bible." Here it "ensures that David is permanently occupied with this quality."⁴ Here is a reign that is well oiled. Everything is orchestrated to a tee, listing the highest ranking army officers, government officials, civil servants, to priests. "Now that everything is in order, at home and abroad, it seems as if heaven on earth has broken loose. Where to now? What more is there to experience?"⁵

David has it all. Or does he? There is a price to pay for all that administration and machinery: the king be-

comes detached from the people. In the very last line in the story, the narrator places "a stick of dynamite"⁶ under David's perfect world:

And the sons of David were *priests*.

"This is such a difficult thought that the translators of the LXX and other Aramaic versions stretched the meaning of the word priest to be 'administrators of the royal estates.' But this is the same word in verse 17, and carefully placed outside the circle of priests. But it may be that, in light of their father's success, the sons themselves usurped the office of the priesthood, and their father did nothing to correct them (just as Absalom and Adonijah usurp the office of king later). In that case the episode provides a sequel to the corruption of Eli's sons and Samuel's sons earlier in Samuel."⁷

David's immeasurable success has left him detached from his own sons. They love daddy, they respect him, but most of all they want to be like him, so they imitate him. Unfortunately, the father has not been home to teach his sons that the way to glory is the way of the wilderness, brokenness and prayer. Instead, surrounded by success and power, the sons grab some of it for themselves and usurp the holy priesthood. Through these sons the whole kingdom disintegrates, and David spends the rest of his life trying to recover what he had lost.

How successful do you want to be? Do you want to be world renowned? A millionaire? Perhaps God will grant you your dream. But be warned. Success may detach you from God and the ones you love the most, and you could lose everything.

For the past several years I have enjoyed coaching the girls softball team at our high school. Each year I found to my joy that I was experiencing greater and greater influence among the girls. This year was especially rewarding because we had four Christians on the coaching staff. But this spring, after five years, I found that I was becoming detached from my two daughters who are still living at home. I was drifting from their world. I discovered that I cannot do all the things I want to do in life. At the team party yesterday, I tendered my resignation as coach. I do not want to have influence but lose my children in the process. God told me to go home. There is much that is of value in staying home. For one thing, you will never be mistaken for God in your own home!

A number of weeks after the brother who asked the question: "Can we have it all?" and he had taken a step or two down that road, he said, emphatically: "You can't have it all." Perhaps that is why, when we come to the New Testament, there is only one King left in the story, and he is crucified.

1. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. III, Throne and City* (Assen: Van Gorcum 1986), 257. I have been greatly helped by Fokkelman for many of my observations.

2. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 259.

3. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 261.

4. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 262.

5. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 262.

2. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 262.

7. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 262.

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ELEVATING CRIPPLES

SERIES: KING DAVID

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Where does passion for the gospel come from? This is the question we will seek to answer this morning in our study in the life of David, the king of Israel.

Last summer, I spent two weeks in Indonesia, ministering with our missionary, Eli Fangidae. Eli is a man who has a deep passion for the gospel. Whenever he sees a need he throws himself headlong to meet it. He brings to bear whatever resources of heaven and earth are needed to accomplish it. The result is that schools are built, teachers are recruited, books are translated, the poor are lifted up, a radio station is envisioned.

Where does such depth of passion come from? That question haunted me as I spent time in Eli's world. What motivates him? I asked myself. How is it that certain people in God's kingdom expend all so freely? What consumes them with souls aflame? The answer came one night on the balcony of Eli's hotel. As tears of joy poured from his eyes, he told me the secret.

Such a moment of extraordinary passion leaps out of David's soul in our text today from 2 Samuel. Out of all the scenes in the David story, this little cameo does more to shape the ministry of Jesus and the early church than any other. Yet, I have never heard a sermon preached from this text that reveals the greatest work of kings, and unfolds the mystery of how God extracts the very best out of us for ministry.

What unlocks our deepest passions to care for others with abandon? What turns our glib service and rank routine into fiery, joyous, life-giving acts? This story concerning David's relationship with a cripple named Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, will answer these questions. There are three movements to the account, each of which takes Mephibosheth to a deeper level of intimacy with David. In the first movement, Mephibosheth is sought for; in the second, he is embraced; and in the third, he is permanently cared for.

I. Mephibosheth Eagerly Sought (9:1-4)

Then David said, "Is there yet anyone left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness (loyal-love) for Jonathan's sake?" Now there was a servant of the house of Saul whose name was Ziba, and they called him to David; and the king said to him, "Are you Ziba?" And he said, "I am your servant." And the king said, "Is there not yet anyone of the house of Saul to whom I may show the kindness (loyal-love) of God?" And Ziba said to the king, "There is still a son of Jonathan who is crippled in both feet." So the king said to him, "Where is he?" And Ziba said to the king, "Behold, he is in the house of Machir the son of Ammiel

in Lo-debar." (NASB)

The story opens with a burst of resolve gushing up out of David's soul. His passion is like a pent-up geyser that cannot be contained. He is going about the busy life of being king—winning wars, organizing domestic affairs, managing leaders, leading national assemblies—when suddenly he is overcome with a desire to do something. And his desire is not to build a house, fight a war, or lead the nation. It is to repay a debt of love owed to an old friend. Memories of Jonathan which come looming out of the past forcibly engage David's soul, provoking him into action. The time has come to take care of some unfinished business.

The strength of David's desire is so pronounced it is expressed twice, in verses 1 and 3:

"Is there yet anyone left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness (loyal-love) for Jonathan's sake?" (9:1)

"Is there not yet anyone of the house of Saul to whom I may show the kindness (loyal-love) of God?" (9:3)

There is sense of urgency in those words ("yet"). It is apparent that immediate action is required. Ten years earlier, David and Jonathan had met secretly, in a field outside the royal court, to discuss their future. Then, David was running scared. He was but one step removed from death. But Jonathan was naive as to the danger his friend was facing. It took an oath on David's part to convince him that Saul was bent on killing him, and without Jonathan's vow of loyalty he would die. The faithful Jonathan took an oath in turn vowing that David would not die: He himself would stand between David and his father.

Then the realization hit Jonathan that his oath could cost him his life. At that point he and David renewed their covenant. Jonathan requested David to reciprocate in a vow of loyalty to insure the survival of his descendants. In a holy scene, the two men made vows of loyal-love that were stronger than death. Love that is born out of that kind of commitment is very powerful. Once it surfaces it moves inexorably toward its goal. Jonathan kept his covenant, and paid the price in blood.

So the time has now come for David to keep the vow he made to his friend. The search for Jonathan's children goes out. Ziba, a loyal servant to Saul's house, tells David that there is indeed one descendant left. He describes the descendant as "crippled in both feet." The person's name is not even mentioned. His condition overshadows his identity: He is crippled. In one day, Mephibosheth lost both his grandfather and father. In her haste to escape, the nurse who was carrying him dropped him and the child was

crippled in both feet. In one day he lost both his past and his future. Now every day he faced the prospect of living a marginal life, cut off from much of the zest for life that his peers felt.

Mephibosheth was living in Lo-debar (“no word”), “in the land east of the Jordan and north of the Jabbok, evidently in the region of Mahanaim. Jonathan’s son has thus been hidden in the immediate vicinity of Ishbaal’s earlier residence. His host is a certain Machir, whom we meet again in 2 Sam 17:27 as a man who stands by David even in his ill fortune.”¹ How ironic, that Mephibosheth’s city of refuge is called Lo-debar (“no word”). Here dwelt a cripple in the land of silence, one whose name was rooted in “shame” (*bosheth*).

Once David discovers Mephibosheth’s whereabouts he wastes not a moment springing into action.

II. Mephibosheth Personally Escorted and Elevated (9:5-8)

Then King David sent and brought him from the house of Machir the son of Ammiel, from Lo-debar. And Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan the son of Saul, came to David and fell on his face and prostrated himself. And David said, “Mephibosheth.” And he said, “Here is your servant!” And David said to him, “Do not fear, for I will surely show kindness (loyal-love) to you for the sake of your father Jonathan, and will restore to you all the land of your grandfather Saul; and you shall eat at my table regularly (continually).” Again he prostrated himself and said, “What is your servant, that you should regard a dead dog like me?”

David takes extreme care to ensure Mephibosheth’s coming. The man is sent for and personally escorted by the king’s emissaries. A poignant scene follows: “We observe the cripple bowing to the ground with all the difficulty and pain that that entails.”² As David looks upon this crippled son it is a painful reminder to him of Jonathan, who gave everything for him. Filled with warmth and compassion for this son of his friend, David speaks words of comfort: “Do not fear.” These tender words lift the face of one whose own face, buried in shame, cannot even look David in the eye (cf. Luke 18:13).

Then the king emphatically reassures Mephibosheth of the promise of restoration. Notice the doubling of the verb “*doing I will do*”; this is loyal love. Apparently, after the death of Saul, all of Mephibosheth’s possessions had reverted to the crown; now they would be restored to him in full. Not only that, Mephibosheth would be fully restored and elevated to the highest position of privilege and intimacy in the kingdom. He would eat at the table of the king “continually” (the word is used three times for emphasis). Mephibosheth is elevated to the status of a royal son, just as if his father, Jonathan, were king.

Mephibosheth is amazed by this news. He says to David: “What is your servant, that you should regard a dead dog like me?” His words so resonate with emotion that David cannot speak. Silent tears well up in his soul as he remembers uttering the same words to Saul (1 Sam. 24:14).

There was a time when David was an outcast, a fugitive, a “dead dog” whom God looked upon and elevated to the table of a king. The crippled Mephibosheth is a mirror to David of his own past.

So Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, is sought for, escorted, embraced, and elevated by king David.

David now turns from the emotions of the moment and starts putting his future plans into action.

III. Mephibosheth Permanently Provided For (9:9-13)

Then the king called Saul’s servant Ziba, and said to him, “All that belonged to Saul and to all his house I have given to your master’s grandson. And you and your sons and your servants shall cultivate the land for him, and you shall bring in the produce so that your master’s grandson may have food; nevertheless Mephibosheth your master’s grandson shall eat at my table regularly (continually).” Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants. Then Ziba said to the king, “According to all that my lord the king commands his servant so your servant will do.” So Mephibosheth ate at David’s (literally “my”) table as one of the king’s sons. And Mephibosheth had a young son whose name was Mica. And all who lived in the house of Ziba were servants to Mephibosheth. So Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, for he ate at the king’s table regularly (continually). Now he was lame in both feet.

David sets his plans in motion with a personal stamp that demands implementation. The servant Ziba is clearly instructed in every detail by the king. There are no loose ends, no ambiguous memos. All directions are given first hand, dictated by the king of Israel. Jonathan’s son shall not only have ownership of the land, but the right to use it for life. Ziba, who is made trustee of this large estate, is instructed to employ a staff of thirty-five full-time workers to cultivate the property on behalf of Mephibosheth. From time to time Ziba must appear in Jerusalem and give an account to David. Later we will discover that Mephibosheth’s elevation will cause Ziba to become jealous and resentful, because he must spend the rest of his days serving a cripple. At last he betrays Mephibosheth by deceiving David as to Mephibosheth’s loyalty (2 Sam 16:1-4).

The story ends with the orders of the king fully executed in every detail. Mephibosheth, once marginalized to the place of silent shame, is now sought for, personally escorted and elevated, and permanently provided for. The cripple dines at the table of the king. The former fugitive now eats by David’s side, having been elevated to the status of son. This is a love that seeks, a love that elevates, a love that is secure. Mephibosheth is valued, accepted, and embraced.

Someone might conclude, “What a lot of resources to waste on one individual! Thirty five employees, a huge estate, all for one place at the king’s table. Couldn’t these assets have been put to better use?” The Hebrew mind-set has a much better understanding of the value of human life than we do. The Jews have a saying: “Save one person and you have saved the whole human race.” The Jewish

perspective always looks downward to the impact of our choices on future generations. One soul is infinitely worthy.

The text concludes by setting out the hope in all of this: “And Mephibosheth had a young son whose name was Mica.” Jonathan’s son, and his line, survived. In one act of loyal-love, David changed the destiny of Jonathan’s descendants.

IV. Reflections on Passion and Ministry

(a) The birth of passion

What motivated David to put aside the king’s business and set out on the salient search for a cripple? What inspired him to so passionately and personally escort Mephibosheth, to welcome him, embrace him, elevate him, and provide for him? The answer is found in the Hebrew word, *hesed*. This is the term for loyal-love, covenanted love, loyal vows. Here is the most important theological term in the Old Testament. It drives everything that God does, yet it is absolutely foreign to us. *Hesed*, the key word in the text, is used three times here and three times in 1 Samuel 20. It is a vow of future loyalty based on a present commitment. It is a binding vow that promises a future of unceasing kindness and care. It is a costly vow that spares no expense. *Hesed* is a word that speaks of a debt of love.

Do you know that Someone made a vow to love you in this way? And that he fulfilled his word by dying on a hillside, outside the city? From that cross, Jesus says to you: “For love of you I was covered with spit, punched, beaten, and affixed to the wood of the cross” (Brennan Manning). Jesus counted the cost, and then he died so that the sword of death would not impale you and me. Today his memory is alive in us, and he wants us to care for his children, the abandoned orphans who live in the silence of shame. Did you know that Christians are Christ’s hands and feet? Here is how the apostle Paul put this in Second Corinthians:

For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf (2 Cor 5:14-15).

Eli Fangidae was a successful businessman once, but then his life began to unravel. He could not handle the shame, and he planned to commit suicide. In his own home he put his neck in a noose and tried to hang himself. His brother, awakened from sleep, found him and rescued him from death. God would snatch Eli from the very jaws of death at the end of a rope, and elevate him to eat at the King’s table. This was the beginning of Eli’s passion for the gospel of grace. And this is what he has dedicated himself to doing for the rest of his life—rescuing the lame, the blind and the homeless and leading them to the table of the King.

If it is love that births our passion for the gospel, what is it that intensifies it?

(b) The intensification of passion

To David, Mephibosheth was a mirror of his own for-

mer life of shame. In the eyes of the cripple, David saw himself, the one who could not eat at the king’s table, but was cast out, a “dead dog,” to find his food in a wilderness. When the mirror of our own life is held up we, too, are brought face to face with our past. We are reminded of our former silent, shameful condition when we could not look the King in the eye. But then we remember that it was he who personally escorted us to eat at his table. Now, with passions engaged, David can usher in a whole new future for Mephibosheth. Love is unleashed, a destiny is changed.

In my work as a pastor I find I do many things out of faithfulness to my calling. But occasionally, everything comes to a halt. I see my own face mirrored in the life of someone else, and my passions are aroused to give, extend, elevate, and embrace. The lesson is clear: The area of our greatest suffering becomes the wellspring of our strongest passions for good.

This is the very thing that Paul is referring to in these beautiful words from Second Corinthians:

Blessed be the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God (2 Cor 1:3-4).

Christ’s death gives birth to passion, and the mirror of our past intensifies it.

Finally, what does passion look like when it is unleashed?

(c) Passion’s personal touch

David’s encounter with Mephibosheth is extremely focused, intimate and personal. Time is given away as if it were free; valuable possessions are spent lavishly; words are crafted with warmth and care; there is the lifting of the face, the personal escort to the table. What does all this tell us? It tells us that when we are at the height of our passions we grant infinite value to every human being. If we save one life, we have saved the whole human race.

It would not be an overstatement to say that this little cameo from David’s life became the driving force of Jesus’ ministry. The gospel stories have nothing to say about strategic planning seminars, committee meetings, bulk mailings, multi-media crusades and mass marketing techniques. The gospels are accounts of the personal, intimate encounters of a Man who was seeking marginal people. On the surface these meetings seem to appear as interruptions to the main plot. At these critical junctures, however, time stands still. The plot comes to an abrupt halt as marginal people are attended to: a hemorrhaging woman is healed; a synagogue official’s daughter is raised; a blind man is given sight; tax collectors are invited to dinner; an immoral woman is offered living water; a prostitute is embraced, an adulterous woman is cleansed. Yes, all of these are interruptions to the story, but to the sensitive eye they emerge as the real story within the story.

The greatest work of kings is seeking out cripples and elevating them by giving them a seat at the royal table.

Last week, the elders honored one of our pastors who is taking a year-long sabbatical. For the past ten years this pastor has been elevating cripples. She ministers behind closed doors, in privacy, seeking them and personally escorting them to the table of the King to be elevated and embraced. Every encounter is personal, deep, rich, and life changing. I have never met anyone with such passion and tears for what they do. Fleeing abuse, Pat Patmor actually spent a night in a cave once. But through those doors of rejection she was healed by the Lord. Now when she ministers, she looks into the mirror of the soul of each individual and sees her own past, and she leads these souls, one at a time, to the table of the King.

I wrote this poem, *My Daughter*, to honor Pat.

MY DAUGHTER

Feminine frames
etched in frailty,
delicate limbs
of Shulammite splendor.

Once lauded as daughters,
courted like sisters
held in arms of costly care,
now crushed victims of despair.

Shechem's crime
abhorrent deeds.
Amnon acts, Tamar shrieks
a brother's silent hate seals her fate.

Now my daughters walk the streets.
Some say wounded
but in naked truth, slain
widowed in despair.

Driven by appalling aches,
dreamless sleep
souls a-bleeding
ever dark underneath.

Who will find them
cowering safe beneath their beauty,
walking briskly, acting kindly
ever speaking, only sleeping in despair?

Who will unlock them
vanquished souls, walking lifeless
languishing in their own abrasive wombs
walled in tombs of heaving, sighing?

Who will listen and with courage
face the onslaught of what is hidden
and cannot be spoken
lest it be known, sheer disgrace?

□

Who will lance the aged wounds
and dredge the deep,
where none dare see
nor feel the surge of consummate grief?

Who will seek them,
find them, wash them?
Who will embrace them,
love them, birth them?

My daughter, O my daughter
'tis the one who touched my wounds
in the raging cave like dampness
seeking shelter from the storm.

She who felt the awful dagger
lacerate soul and seal her fate.
Empty stares and farewell places
place a market on despair.

But there in Adullam splendor
she gazes on Him, an outcast
clothed in naked marks of shame,
etched in madness meek upon his frame.

Golgotha's sighs and midnight beating
infuse her breast,
wash her deeply,
blood and cleansing leap and play.

With one touch of soothing oil
and humble hands to weep and pray,
she's healed, alive and holy rising
held in arms of Boaz's strong embrace.

Now she lives to seek with passion
O what passion
and loyal-love
stronger than death.

And now they come in O, what numbers.
Feminine frames of Shulammite fare
lauded as daughters in bride-like beauty,
held in arms of costly care.

Eve's promised sacred offspring
once wounded in an anguished time
mothers, sisters, wives of others,
now true daughters, solely MINE!

*In Appreciation of Pat Patmor
Ten Years of Ministry
Shepherding the Wounded
PBC Cupertino*

1. Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 300.

2. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*.



ENTANGLED

SERIES: KING DAVID

Catalog No. 1031
2 Samuel 11:1-37
17th Message
Brian Morgan
May 26th, 1996

Our text today from the book of 2 Samuel is what I would describe as the hinge of David's career. This story is very relevant for our own day. It is the story of God's representative caught in sexual entanglement, betrayal, treachery, and a cover-up. Sadly, the theme is all too relevant because it is so common today. No matter how jaded we become as we view these events from a distance, when we get close to the victims we discover that the pain that is caused is staggering.

What our society sorely lacks is a no holds barred, black and white version of events from God's perspective. The narrator in this story doesn't hold back. He takes us right into the glamour of the bedroom; the dark descent into treachery and death; then a forced march through every step of unspeakable pain and sorrow that will accompany David for the rest of his life and the life of the nation of Israel. In the background is God, who in our worst moments pursues, exposes, convicts, judges and restores us. We will focus on these events for the next three weeks; then we will take some time for reflection, repentance and renewal.

The context of this story is extremely important. In response to God's loyal-love (*hesed*), David had made *hesed* a key principle of his domestic policy. In chapter 10, he tried to make loyal-love the driving force of his foreign policy, too, sending an official delegation to mourn (an apt expression of *hesed*) the death of an old friend, the king of the Ammonites. But David's action is interpreted as a deceitful cover for a military exploit "to search, to spy and destroy." His ambassadors are sent home, humiliated, with beards clipped and buttocks exposed. The king of the Ammonites "chooses two areas of the human body by which he can most effectively humiliate his victims: the countenance and the buttocks. Then he disables their appearance by shaving and cutting."¹

These actions violate Israel's very being. They are tantamount to an act of war. In response, the infuriated David plans a large scale military offensive, with Joab at the helm.

I. Easy Adultery (11:1-5)

Then it happened in the spring, at the time when kings go out to battle (or, "at the same time the messengers had marched out," i.e. the previous year) that David sent Joab and his servants with him and all Israel, and they destroyed the sons of Ammon and besieged Rabbah. But David stayed at Jerusalem.

Now when evening came David arose from his bed and walked around on the roof of the king's house, and from the roof he saw a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful in appearance. So David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, "Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" And David sent messengers and took her, and when she came to him, he lay with her; and when she had purified herself from her uncleanness, she returned to her house. And the woman conceived; and she sent and told David, and said, "I am pregnant." (NASB)

David specifically plans his revenge to coincide with the time he had sent the messengers the previous year.² It is in the midst of that context of war that the incident with Bathsheba, to which we now come, occurs. Contrary to times past, the warrior David stays home this time. But idleness quickly leads to fornication. From his royal perch, David takes a casual stroll after his afternoon nap, and he is attracted by the appearance of a naked woman bathing below. He inquires as to her identity, then he uses all his kingly powers to get her. "[T]he curtness of 'he took her'...betrays his sudden, moral brutality and immense desire."³

The astounding thing here is the ease with which David falls into adultery. The king of Israel, a man after God's own heart, loved from the gutter to the palace, in bed with a woman who is not his wife! It is shocking to think that it takes only four brief verbs until the deed is done. How stunning that this David, who was once a warrior when everyone stood idle because they were paralyzed by fear, is now idle when all around him are risking their lives. We are dazed that this man when he faced Goliath was spiritually governed not by what he saw, but by what he heard, Goliath's blasphemy. Now this same David is so overwhelmed by what he sees, he cannot hear anything. He is deaf to the title "wife"; he is stone cold to the name "Uriah," the intimate friend who pledged his loyalty to him in the wilderness and converted to the God of Israel for David's sake. We are aghast that this servant of Yahweh, who just earlier used his authority to send emissaries on missions of loyal-love, is now using royal envoys to cater to his own personal desire.

Are you stunned by this? Are you shocked? Perhaps you are immune to the pain because of the all too common occurrence of this type of thing—until it happens to you. Is this not a picture of our own lives? When we

are faced with rejection to our own loving overtures, how often have we turned around and embraced an idol as a balm for our grief?

Our last view of the sordid scene shows Bathsheba, who has cleansed herself of her uncleanness. This act of washing herself in the midst of David's embrace (something reserved for the sanctity of marriage) repulses us with David's impurity and acts of desecration (Fokkelman). What it reveals is that Bathsheba "had thus just had her period which implies that the child which she now expects...cannot possibly be Uriah's."⁴ The two little words (in Hebrew) spoken by Bathsheba are every man's nightmare: "I'm pregnant!" These two little words carry enough potency to undo kings. They tell us that our choices have consequences that have lifetime implications. David's worst fears have been realized.

But what he is soon to discover is that the task of covering sin is much more difficult than accomplishing the sin itself, even for a king. Easy adultery now becomes difficult deception.

II. Difficult Deception (11:6-13)

Then David sent to Joab, saying, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." So Joab sent Uriah to David. When Uriah came to him, David asked concerning the welfare (*shalom*) of Joab and (the *shalom*) of the people and the state (*shalom*) of the war. Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet." And Uriah went out of the king's house, and a present from the king was sent out after him. But Uriah slept at the door of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. (11:6-9)

The only way David can get out of the mess he has made for himself is to summon Uriah home from the front and convince him to pay his wife a conjugal visit. To accomplish this, all of David's kingly powers and resources are brought into play. Uriah is summoned and received in a highbrow atmosphere that has despicable ease written all over it. The word "peace" (*shalom*), used three times, is casually thrown about in the context of life-threatening war. But not even a word is recorded from Uriah to answer these niceties. This soldier's holy focus remains with his troops.

The perfunctory meeting accomplished, David encourages the war veteran to go home and "wash his feet" (a euphemism for sexual intercourse). To help matters along, the eager matchmaker sends the war hero home with a gift—some lingerie for his wife to enhance the evening perhaps, or a bottle of wine. But Uriah won't even allow himself one gaze at his beautiful wife. The holy mission consumes him totally. The king is foiled.

But he is not done. Verse 10:

Now when they told David, saying, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "Have you not come from a journey? Why did you not go

down to your house?" And Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in temporary shelters, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field. Shall I then go to my house to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife? By your life and the life of your soul, I will not do this thing." Then David said to Uriah, "Stay here today also, and tomorrow I will let you go." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day and the next. Now David called him, and he ate and drank before him, and he made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his bed with his lord's servants, but he did not go down to his house. (11:10-13)

David is no match for Uriah. The cover-up is much more difficult than he imagined, even for a king with all his resources. So David challenges Uriah as to his motives. He asks, "Have you not come from a journey? Why did you not go down to your house?" What sort of man is this, anyway? Uriah's answer stabs David right in the heart: "The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in temporary shelters, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field. Shall I then go to my house to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife? By your life and the life of your soul, I will not do this thing." The act of sleeping with his wife is so repulsive to Uriah, in the face of vows of holy war, he refuses to even pronounce the word. That is why he says, "this thing."

As the adulterous king stares at the figure of Uriah he is forcefully confronted with a mirror image of himself when he was at his faithful best. This was the kind of single-minded focus that David had possessed for years. Uriah's passionate concern about the ark is drawn verbatim from David himself, from 2 Sam 7:2. This heroic figure provokes David's memory, reaching into the deepest part of his soul to draw the very best out the real David. If he stares at this beckoning image much longer, he will have to make a full confession.

But sadly, instead of confessing, David hardens his heart. He cranks things up a notch and resolves to keep the cover-up going. This time he desecrates his loyal brother by getting him drunk. David thinks that in his drunkenness, Uriah will compromise all that is holy within him and sleep with his wife. But the irony is that a drunken Uriah is a better man than a sober David. Uriah will not make that descent down to his own house. David is unable to play the role of pimp with Uriah. He is foiled again. "David's royal pretensions are debunked comically."⁵

The plot thickens. Adultery escalates to deception, and now deception escalates to treachery.

III. Terrible Treachery and Treason (11:14-25)

(a) Treachery (11:14-17)

Now it came about in the morning that David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah.

And he had written in the letter, saying, "Place Uriah in the front line of the fiercest battle and withdraw from him, so that he may be struck down and die." So it was as Joab kept watch on the city, that he put Uriah at the place where he knew there were valiant men. And the men of the city went out and fought against Joab, and some of the people among David's servants fell; and Uriah the Hittite also died.

If David cannot break Uriah's loyal-love, he will use it in the service of the cover-up. So he writes Uriah's death warrant. In a most tragic irony, Uriah faithfully carries the warrant to his executioner, Joab. These instructions detail an act of treachery under the guise of holy war.

But in the carrying out of the order, things get a little messy. They always do, don't they? More than one innocent Jew is slain. But the deed is done. David finally has his cover-up. There is no one left to question the king. No one, that is, except Joab, who is a little vexed by how history might assess the deed. He does not want to bear any of the blame if the event is regarded as treason by later generations, so he makes sure the king goes on record, absolving the general of any "misdeed."

(b) Was it Treason? (11:18-21)

Then Joab sent and reported to David all the events of the war. And he charged the messenger, saying, "When you have finished telling all the events of the war to the king, and if it happens that the king's wrath rises and he says to you, 'Why did you go so near to the city to fight? Did you not know that they would shoot from the wall? Who struck down Abimelech the son of Jerubbesheth? Did not a woman throw an upper millstone on him from the wall so that he died at Thebez? Why did you go so near the wall?'—then you shall say, 'Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also.'"

Joab prepares the messenger for the worst. This event will not go down well in David's war memoirs. Joab is supposed to be well versed in military history. How could the general allow a repeat of the Abimelech story, the king who was stupid enough to get near the city wall and suffer death at the hands of a woman? So if David responds with rage, Joab instructs the messengers, then they should tell him, "your servant Uriah is dead." But Joab's words are double-edged. They not only protect the messenger, they also stab at David's weak heart. The name Abimelech means "my father is king." And Abimelech was brought down by a woman. What an apt title for David at this moment in his life. Joab's ringing question, "Why did you go so near the wall?" is a veiled rebuke to his superior.

(c) Hellish Hypocrisy (11:22-25)

So the messenger departed and came and reported to David all that Joab had sent him to tell. And the messenger said to David, "The men prevailed against us and came out against us in the field, but

we pressed them as far as the entrance of the gate. Moreover, the archers shot at your servants from the wall; so some of the king's servants are dead, and your servant Uriah the Hittite is also dead." Then David said to the messenger, "Thus you shall say to Joab, 'Do not let this thing be evil in your eyes, for the sword devours one as well as another; make your battle against the city stronger and overthrow it'; and so encourage him."

Heretofore, messengers bearing bad news had a poor record of survival with David. Anticipating an angry reply, this messenger doesn't wait for a response to give the information about Uriah. He blurts it out with the original report. Surprisingly, no rage and no tears come from David. This is highly unusual for him. He replies with just a little abstract theology, a quaint proverb, glibly applied: "the sword devours one as well as another." "War is war," replies David. "Casualties must be expected. *Ç'est la guerre*. Don't let it be evil in your eyes. Give it another go. Besiege them."

Emotions, or I should say, the lack of them, are often a dead giveaway to the guilty. The cover-up is now complete. David has but one more loose end to tie up. The story ends where it began, with Bathsheba in David's bed.

IV. Epilogue: Only One Loose End (11:26-27)

Now when the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she mourned for her husband. When the time of mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house and she became his wife; then she bore him a son. But the thing that David had done was evil in the sight (eyes) of the Lord.

On this sad occasion, Israel's poet and master mourner does not mourn. I wonder what that was like for him. Certainly, the funeral was kept to a minimum. David did not write any poetic lament. He probably didn't even attend. It was enough to have to stare at Uriah when he was alive. How much more difficult it would be to stare in the face of the dead. But had he done so, David might have come to terms with what he had now become—not merely an adulterer and a murderer, but worse yet, a dead man, his soul cut off from Yahweh.

When the mourning period is over, David immediately plays the role of the "kinsman redeemer," the king caring for the widow, just as he cared for Mephibosheth earlier. How touching. For a second time David sends for Bathsheba. They marry, have a son, and live happily ever after. Only three people were aware of the true facts, and no one was telling. Joab could not tell. If he did, he too would be implicated. What could Bathsheba say? As for David, for the first time in his life he could not speak, not even to God.

There was only one leak in David's carefully fabricated vessel. The text says: "The thing was evil in the eyes of the Lord": "the thing" which Uriah could not bear to mention, "the thing" of which David said so glibly, "Do

not let this thing be evil in your eyes.” We may think no one sees and no one cares, but when we cross the line and redefine what is good and what is evil, we have reached the depth of depravity. The Lord sees, and the Lord cares. And because the Lord loves David, he will act.

That is the hope of this story: If God loves you, he will uncover all your sins while you live, that your soul may not remain in death.

V. Painful, Needed Lessons

A realization, a warning, and a hope.

(a) A Realization: The Depth of Our Own Depravity

How do you feel about David now, the one who was shown so much love, now an adulterer and a murderer; the one who was so moved by the depths of *hesed*, now breaking all the bonds of loyal-love? After years of experiencing the loyal-love of God, all it took was one lustful look to cast David headlong into sin. Then, the sexual sin that resulted was so shameful that his fear of being exposed led him to far worse sins. He was willing to throw away his identity and take on entirely new personages: David the king became a Peeping Tom, a buffoon host at a cocktail party, a pimp, a thug who composed hit letters, a phony sage offering glib encouragement, and an impostor kinsman redeemer. *Hesed* was ripped apart in every one of these personages. So too were a man and his wife, a king and his court, a general and his soldiers, a king and his nation, a man and his God.

This sordid account brings us face to face with the depth of our own depravity. If we feel even a whiff of self-righteousness after reading this text, we have not entered in. There is not a man in this congregation who has not started down that road: throwing off his identity, taking on new personages, wanting to live in secret, planning cover-ups. This story is a warning about the depths of our own depravity.

How true are the words of the prophet Jeremiah:

**The heart is more deceitful than all else
And is desperately sick,
Who can understand it? (Jer 17:9)**

No one is immune from sin, especially sexual sin.

That is why this text raises three warnings. We must build walls of protection to help us when we are vulnerable.

(b) A Warning: When Are We Vulnerable?

First, notice that David made his illicit reach when he was angry, because he had extended loyal-love to someone and was violently rejected. If we are wallowing in the hurt of rejection we are especially vulnerable to sin’s appeal. Second, notice that David left the battle and fell

into idleness. We need to stay in the battle until we die. The battleground is a much safer place than the ease of home. And third, David was vulnerable because he had been riding a tidal wave of success that had distanced him from loyal friends. No one had gotten close to him since Jonathan’s death. He had no friend to confront, correct and rebuke him. No one challenged David’s inquiry about Bathsheba; Joab did not try to overturn Uriah’s death sentence. We are most vulnerable when we are hurt, idle, and isolated.

That is why there are no kings in the New Testament. Leadership is always shared in the church. And in that circle, the highest title is “brother.” The main qualification for leadership in the church is the ability to foster strong relationships in every sphere of life. If men do not have intimate male friends, they are easy targets.

(c) Hope: God’s Beckoning Voice

In the midst of this story of darkness comes God’s wooing voice, subtle, powerful, penetrating. And it comes first through the voice of Torah. David hears the words “wife,” and “friend.” But he doesn’t want to listen. Then God’s voice comes dressed in the clothes of a close friend who is a mirror of his past greatness, a poignant reminder to David of his real identity. Although David stares at that image, he still rejects God’s voice. Then, through a general comes a stronger word of rebuke, God’s voice, pleading, beckoning, reminding David of who he is. But the king will not listen.

If that is how we respond when we hear the voice of God, if we won’t listen, he will press a little harder. He will be the foil to all our plans and pretensions; we will be the buffoons. If that is to no avail, and we continue in our ways—an unrighteous union, a shady business deal, a desecrated birth—God will reluctantly, painfully give us what we want. But then he will send a prophet to pronounce judgment and uncover our cover-up. We will eventually confess, because spending the rest of our life under the weight of a cover-up is to sojourn in hell. Eventually we will confess, because God loves us. That is the hope of the gospel.

1. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. I, King David* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 44.

2. See the argument of Fokkelman (*King David*, 50-51), accepting the *Ketib* reading “messengers” over the *Qere* “kings” in the Massoretic Text. There is but one consonant change between the two words.

3. Fokkelman, *King David*, 52.

4. Fokkelman, *King David*, 52.

5. See the well written and highly provocative pamphlet by Peter Berger, “*You are the Man*”, The Trinity Forum Reading, 1992.



THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

SERIES: KING DAVID

Catalog No. 1032

2 Samuel 12:1-25

18th Message

Brian Morgan

June 2, 1996

When I watch the television program “Rescue 911,” I am always amazed at the amount of resources that are expended to accomplish even one rescue. Someone falls off a cliff, an observer calls 911, and there is an immediate rush of fire engines, ambulances and police cars to the rescue. In the anguished moments before the arrival of the rescue teams, neighbors, friends and bystanders gather to help the victim. Within minutes there is the quick assessment of the paramedics, the arrival of the Coast Guard helicopter, then the flight to the hospital, where the special teams of doctors and nurses work their wondrous skills. Money is spent like water. Rescue 911 is one television program that leaves no doubt as to the value of a human life.

In our studies in the life of David we come to an incident where it seems the king of Israel has fallen off a cliff; his pulse is almost non-existent. I am referring, of course, to his taking of Bathsheba in adultery, and his subsequent arranging of the death of her husband—and his own faithful friend—Uriah. Nine months have now passed since these terrible events, and David has been living in a hell of his own silence. He absolutely refuses to call for help. But the 911 call goes out anyway, not from David, but from heaven, dispatching a prophet on earth to rescue the anointed one.

There are five movements to this story, each one of which depicts a stage on the long journey home. At the end of this tragic fall, God gets his son home; David makes a full recovery. Following a fall of these proportions it is astonishing that such a complete recovery is possible. But, at what a cost is David rescued. We will learn today, however, that no matter how bad the fall, a full, complete recovery is possible—but only if we faithfully submit to the process demanded. And the process is painful, long, and hard. There are no shortcuts. But it works. What a testimony this story is to a gracious God!

The text opens with God himself making that all-important rescue call.

I. Self Exposure (12:1-6)

Then the Lord sent Nathan to David. And he came to him, and said,

“Two men were in one city,

A rich man and a poor man.

The rich man had flocks and herds, very many.

And the poor man nothing except for one little ewe lamb which he had bought.

He raised it and it grew up together with him and

his sons.

It ate of his bread, drank from his cup, and slept in his lap,

it was as a daughter to him.

A visitor came to the rich man.

He found it a pity to take any of his flock or herd to prepare for his guest.

He took the poor man’s sheep away,

And prepared it for the man who had come to him.”¹

Then David’s anger burned greatly against the man, and he said to Nathan, “As the Lord lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die. And he must make restitution for the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and had no compassion (pity).” Nathan then said to David, “You are the man! (NASB)

The scene opens with a new protagonist “who is completely unique in 2 Samuel 9-20 and 1 Kings 1-2; it is God himself who here, and here alone, participates in the continuing action...David’s behavior literally provokes heaven, and God himself intervenes.”² In chapter 11, David did all the sending; now it is God’s turn to do so. In chapter 12, “David no longer sends, he only receives” (Brueggemann). God makes the 911 call, sending Nathan the prophet to confront David and rescue him from his sin. This event is unique in the ancient world. Then, kings were treated as gods; they were never challenged. But that was not the case in Israel. Here we learn who holds the ultimate authority. Kings, if they are to remain in power, must submit themselves to God’s prophetic word.

This confrontation between prophet and king is woven with meticulous care. Fokkelman observes: “The prophet in motion is a poet in motion.” Rather than confronting David directly, Nathan crafts a story outside of David’s life. This is designed to draw David in, and evoke his own sense of injustice, so that a complete self-exposure will result. Thus the story, which may appear untrue on the surface, will penetrate David’s soul with the truth in a much deeper way than would a direct accusation.

Nathan brings to David an incident that needs a ruling: a rich man has robbed a poor man. The two men in the story have nothing in common. One has more possessions than he knows what do with, and takes them for granted, the other man is so poor “he can permit himself a lamb only once with great difficulty, a lamb

he selects with care.”³ The poor man cares for the animal like one of his own. It eats from the man’s own bowl, drinks from his cup, and sleeps in the man’s bosom. It is like a daughter to the man (the Hebrew word *bat* evokes the memory of Bathsheba). “The twosome of pauper and sheep grows into a unity in an atmosphere of warmth and care...It emanates the mystical luster of everyday life, as we often suspect and come to know in our most open moments.” The care given to this little lamb speaks of its owner’s loyal-love, which permeates all his relationships and everything he does.

In contrast, “[t]he rich man’s ego has so strongly identified itself with his possessions that he cannot ‘take pity’ to part with even one of his own animals.”⁴ So, when a guest arrives at the front door, and with this, all the expectation of potential intimacy and togetherness that hospitality brings, the rich man becomes uncomfortable. All he can think about is having to slay one of his animals. So he takes what belongs to another, tearing the very fabric of someone else’s home in the process.

This powerful story is designed to evoke David’s deepest sense of justice. And so it does! David is drawn in, hook, line and sinker. His anger provoked beyond ordinary dimensions, he pronounces the immediate and severe judgment: “This man must die. He must make restitution fourfold, because he did this thing, and he had no pity.” David grasps at the truth, and pronounces a guilty verdict on his own two crimes. This truth had already been working on him, but he had expended enormous amounts of energy suppressing it.

Deep within every one of us is that subterranean region of the soul where the conscience lives, “the breeding place of...truth, authenticity, love, care...it is...that part of man which transcends the visible and everyday existence in meaning.”⁵ It tells us we can’t live in isolation.” You can silence it by day, but it will haunt you by night.

In Psalm 32, David describes what it was like to live with the guilt that came with adultery and murder:

**When I kept silent my body (bones) wasted away
Through my groaning (roaring) all day long.
For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me;
My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat
of summer** (My life juices were turned into the drought of summer) (Ps 32:3-4).

Charles Spurgeon, the great English preacher of the last century, described the terrible torment of a guilty conscience in these words:

Give me into the power of a roaring lion, but never let me come under the power of an awakened, guilty conscience. Shut me up in a dark dungeon, among all manner of loathsome creatures—snakes and reptiles of all kinds—but, oh, give me not over to my own thoughts when I am consciously guilty before God!

The conscience can be suppressed, but only for so

long. Finally, it will speak, and its pronouncement will be: Guilty! Thus, self-exposure, self-condemnation is first step toward healing. As we reconnect with what is true in us, integrity rises through the muck and mire. Breaking through the surface, it shouts the naked truth. It is only then that the soul that has been fragmented starts to become whole again.

So the first step on the journey home is complete and thorough self-exposure.

The next step is, listen in silence to the Judge.

II. A Silent Submission (12:7-12)

“Thus says the Lord God of Israel, ‘It is I who anointed you king over Israel and it is I who delivered you from the hand of Saul. I also gave you your master’s house and your master’s wives into your bosom, and I gave you the house of Israel and Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added to you many more things like these! Why have you despised the word of the Lord by doing evil in His sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the sons of Ammon. Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.’ “Thus says the Lord ‘Behold, I will raise up evil against you from your own household; I will even take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your companion, and he shall lie with your wives in broad daylight (lit. “before the eyes of this sun”). Indeed you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and under the sun.””

Now God does all the talking and David does all the listening. God prosecutes the king with a terrifying intensity. David’s crimes are first and foremost a breach of trust against God. Notice that the word “I” is used five times. David is guilty of acts of treachery that spurned his Creator. He has returned a slap in the face to a generous God, a God who had given all, provided all, and was by no means finished with his generosity. This is why David says, in Psalm 51:4, “Against Thee, Thee only I have sinned.” We can hear the pain of God’s amazement in his question, “Why?” (v 9). We can feel the weight of his anger.

It is this scorning of God’s word that explains why the punishments imposed appear more severe than the crime. But David had brought God’s name to shame. And David was no private individual, but the Lord’s anointed; thus there was a national dimension to his sins: “The whole nation must therefore be witness to the punishment.”⁶ Jesus said, “By your measure it shall be measured unto you.” David had perverted the holy office of war to accomplish a private murder and cover-up. Now the sword would never depart from his house: he would suffer the premature death of four of his sons.

His punishment for his adultery, which he did in secret, would be that his close associate, who is unnamed, would commit the sin of adultery before David's eyes, and "before the eyes of the sun." Later, his son Absalom would have intercourse in public with David's ten concubines on the palace roof.

As David is silenced in judgment, I am reminded of Jeremiah's word to help Israel back to the road of restoration:

**Let him sit alone and be silent
Since He has laid it on him.
Let him put his mouth in the dust,
Perhaps there is hope.
Let him give his cheek to the smiter;
Let him be filled with reproach (Lam 3:28-30).**

After David has been exposed, and then silenced in a lacerating litany of judgment, he finally speaks.

III. A Naked Confession (12:13-15a)

Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan said to David, "With this the Lord has taken away your sin; you shall not die. However, because you have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, by this deed the son also that is born to you shall surely die." So Nathan went to his house.

In reply, David can speak but two words in Hebrew. But these are two weighty words that entail a full confession: "I sinned...against Yahweh." Unlike Saul, who said, "I sinned, but..." David does not offer even a word of justification. He quietly listens and painfully agrees to every charge. He is guilty. He deserves everything he has coming. This is the attitude that counselors have to look for: Do people take full responsibility for their sin, or do they try to justify their behavior.

Amazingly, miraculously, once the whole truth is faced and fully acknowledged, the Judge becomes advocate and rescinds the death sentence which David had pronounced on himself. David will not die. But because the son who would result from his union with Bathsheba was the fruit of David's adultery and his acts which incited blasphemy, Yahweh must act to protect his name; thus the son must die.

Self-exposure, silence, confession. These three things lead to the next step, and that is mourning, the most important element of the healing process.

IV. Intense Mourning (12:15b-23)

Then the Lord struck the child that Uriah's widow bore to David, so that he was very sick. David therefore inquired of God for the child; and David fasted and went and lay all night on the ground. And the elders of his household stood beside him in order to raise him up from the ground, but he was unwilling and would not eat food with them. Then it happened on the seventh day that the child died. And

the servants of David were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they said, "Behold, while the child was still alive, we spoke to him and he did not listen to our voice. How then can we tell him that the child is dead, since he might do himself harm!" But when David saw that his servants were whispering together, David perceived that the child was dead; so David said to his servants, "Is the child dead?" And they said, "He is dead." So David arose from the ground, washed, anointed himself, and changed his clothes; and he came into the house of the Lord and worshiped. Then he came to his own house, and when he requested, they set food before him and he ate. Then his servants said to him, "What is this thing that you have done? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept; but when the child died, you arose and ate food." And he said, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who knows, the Lord may be gracious to me, that the child may live.' But now he has died; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go (lit. "I am walking") to him, but he will not return to me."

David's reaction to the sickness of his son is very different from his reaction to the news of the death of Uriah. Then, David showed no mourning, no emotion, no care. He came up with just a glib piece of theology, which he tossed to Joab like stale piece of beef jerky. But now, when his son is sick, his entire being is engaged. He is on his face, in tears, entreating God with as much as a man can give to God—prayers, accompanied by fasting. Instead of lying with a woman he is lying on the ground, grasping the earth, trying to take hold of heaven.

The true David is back, with remarkable pathos and freedom. This is the David we know from the Psalms, praying to God, beseeching God, wrestling with God, worshipping God. This is the David who won't be swayed either by ease or by majority opinion; the David who has penetrating insight into the heart of all matters; the David who is humbled by his own mortality.

The death of this son is absolutely essential to David's restoration. This death becomes the trigger for the recognition of things for which David had never mourned: a dead friend, a violated woman, an illegitimate birth, a compromised nation. In the act of mourning his soul is reconstructed bit by bit, and he becomes the man of tenacious face that he was in his youth. In the end, it is the heart of God that he reacquires, the God who wept as his own pleas were refused when he beseeched David to spare Uriah in subtle but powerful ways. Now David weeps as he beseeches God for a life he loves. David could not be healed without deep personal mourning, and neither can we.

These then are the steps to recovery: exposure, conviction, confession, and weeping.

When we have wept in full, then we are surprisingly

able to offer comfort to others.

V. Comforting Others (12:24-25)

Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba, and went in to her and lay with her; and she gave birth to a son, and he named him Solomon. Now the Lord loved him and sent word through Nathan the prophet, and he named him Jedidiah for the Lord's sake.

David settles accounts with any illusions he might have had for healing. Weeping is of no further use, so he turns to comfort his wife. This is the final step to healing—being able to give to someone else. “She is called Bathsheba instead of the painful ‘wife of Uriah.’ ...For the first time she is no longer being used but is treated by David as a person...The intercourse which he henceforth has with her is legitimate.”⁷ God personally names the baby, “the beloved of Yahweh.” And the baby is not only a legitimate child, but one who is loved. This child is Solomon (“Peace”) the one who will carry the David story into Kings, the son of the Messianic seed.

What an incredible turn of events! David's past is restored, his present invaded by love, and his future would surpass his dreams. Only God could do such a thing to reverse David's “this thing.” Brueggemann comments that God has an “amazing capacity to work more life at the border of death, to act in promise-keeping ways just when the promise seems exhausted.”⁸

Notice that the restoration of David took place publicly, in the midst community. A 911 went out, then the healing began in the community of the prophet, of God, of the elders, and all Israel. Afterwards, David wrote these Psalms which we have all come to love. The hardest part of healing is being exposed to shame. We don't want that. But when we're dangling from the edge of a cliff, staring death in the face, being exposed to a little shame is the least of our problems. We welcome any and all intervention to rescue us.

That is what the church is supposed to be, of course—a hospital of healing for cliff fallers. Last week, our pastoral staff attended a conference in Canada with Dr. Larry Crabb. Larry, who is a brilliant psychologist, has now come to the conclusion that the real work of healing belongs not in the therapist's office, but in the community of the church, with ordinary people caring for each other.

Are you dangling over the edge of a cliff? Is your pulse almost gone? Have you spent enormous amounts of energy suppressing the voice of your conscience shouting to you to come clean? Do you stay awake at night in fear of being found out? Perhaps you think you've been gone too long and you have wandered too

far. The good news is, there is a way back. God is willing to expend amazing amounts of resources to save just you. A full recovery is possible. The bad news is, there is no other way. And there are no shortcuts. Every step is essential. If you skip one, there will be no recovery.

- 1) Full public exposure.
- 2) Sacred silence. Submit to the accusations of God and of others; take in the pain.
- 3) Naked confession. Take full responsibility for your actions.
- 4) Tears. Pour out your grief with tears.
- 5) Comfort. God gives a hope.

As we conclude our study this morning, David himself will exhort us with these verses from Psalm 32, which he wrote following the incident with Bathsheba:

**Do not be as the horse or as the mule which have no understanding,
Whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check,
Otherwise they will not come near you. (Ps 32:9)**

**Therefore, let everyone who is godly pray to You in a time when You may be found,
Surely in a flood of great waters they will not reach him.
You are my hiding place; You preserve me from trouble;
You surround me with songs of deliverance. (32:6-7)**

1. Translation taken from J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. I, King David* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 72. I have heavily depended on the excellent insights of Fokkelman, 71-93.

2. Fokkelman, *King David*, 71.

3. Fokkelman, *King David*, 73.

4. Fokkelman, *King David*, 75.

5. Fokkelman, *King David*, 83.

6. Fokkelman, *King David*, 86.

7. Fokkelman, *King David*, 91-92.

8. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*. Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1990).



WHITER THAN SNOW¹

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Psalm 51

19th Message

Brian Morgan

June 9th, 1996

Graduation season is upon us. The focus is on our graduates and their growing achievements. Teary-eyed parents watch their children take the stage. Graduation is the time when all our yearnings for them break through the surface. What do we want for our children? If we are honest, we must admit we long for them to be the best—the best athletes, the best scholars. These are the things that appeal to the pride in all of us, especially in this extremely competitive part of the world.

It is traditional to invite dignitaries to address graduating students and challenge them to be the best they can be. I wondered what David, the greatest King in Israel and forerunner to the Messiah, would say to our graduates today if he were asked to address one of our graduating classes. What incidents from his life would he memorialize as the things that shaped his soul? I think he would chose the words of Psalm 51, which he authored, for his text.

Let's imagine that David is delivering the commencement address at one of our local high schools or universities. As his eyes rest upon the graduating class, and the thousands of parents and friends assembled, David begins his remarks by describing how he had found life's greatest secret, the thing that would draw the very best out of them. He says that he even wrote a poem about it and set it to music, a work that had become a centerpiece for worship in Israel.

But the students and the audience alike are taken aback when David reads the title of his poem:

For the choir director. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

The superscription² is a permanent public reminder that God sent the prophet Nathan to enter David's soul, just when David entered into Bathsheba. Every time this psalm was sung at the temple it would be a public reminder of the king's sin and the prophet's word. It was at this point in his life that David learned that the greatest secret in life is the grace of God. This was what the King of Israel experienced when he came face to face with his own depravity.

Psalm 51 has four major divisions: an appeal, a confession, a prayer of restoration, and then these three are climaxed by the king's vows. Tacked on at the end (vv 18-19) is an addendum, written by an unknown poet during Israel's exile. These forsaken exiles found David's penitent words so fitting to their own condition, they appropriated Psalm 51 for the circumstances which they were facing and then added a prayer of their own. In doing so they set a wonderful example for how we should view these psalms: We should memorize them and personalize them. This is essential for our own healing.

The psalm opens with David's appeal to God.

I. The Appeal (51:1-3)

Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness
(loyal-love);
According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my
transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
And cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions,
And my sin is ever before me. (NASB)

After you have taken a wrong turn in life and you are lying in the filth of your own making, how do you make your appeal to God? How do you approach a Holy Being who has treated you with grace, but whom you have despised? Do you fall on your knees and recite a rosary or some other litany of formal prayers to prove your sincerity? Do you make a vow never to fall into sin again? How do you begin to speak? Notice that David doesn't say very much. His prayer is short, but it is wonderfully crafted, and it is offered in the right spirit. His psalm, spoken with humility, passion and creativity, gets to the heart of the matter.

David's first word (in Hebrew: *channeni*, "Be gracious to me, O God") signifies that he has nothing to give, so he asks God to give him something he does not deserve. What does David appeal to within the heart of God that might move him to be gracious? This man who is so well acquainted with God draws upon the deepest part of God's heart and appeals his loyal-love (that oath of covenantal loyalty) and compassion. You can always get God's attention when you speak to him about his covenantal promises. He will respond with tender warmth (Kidner).

Secondly, notice how David's appeal is bathed in a spirit of humility. He takes full ownership for his sin. He uses the whole range of Hebrew vocabulary for sin, grasping each word unequivocally as his own, using the personal possessive pronoun "my": *My* transgressions, *my* iniquity, *my* sin, *my* transgressions, *my* sin.

Thirdly, David confesses that what is really driving him is his need. Sin is having a terrible effect upon him. He selects a verb ("to know") and a preposition ("before"). The first time these words are used together in the Bible they describe a wife whom her husband *knows* intimately (a sexual term, Gen 4:1), one who was created to be his constant companion in his presence (Gen 2:20). Now David cries out in his pain that though his acts of sin are over, their memory is very much alive. They have given birth to a living memory which looms out of the past and hovers over him in the present. The memory penetrates so deeply, he cannot probe it. It is ever before him. He cannot escape it. This is what terrorizes him and drives him to appeal for grace. When a needy, desperate sinner who takes full responsibility for his sin approaches God in this way, God is always moved to help.

David's appeal is followed with a confession that comes from a new understanding.

II. Confession With a New Understanding (51:4-5)

Against You, You only, I have sinned,
And done what is evil in Your sight (eyes),
So that You are justified when You speak,
And blameless when You judge.
Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
And in sin my mother conceived me.

David's terrible memories of his adultery and murder have left him with a deep understanding about God and himself. God was fully in the right. David was fully in the wrong. So when God judged, David deserved whatever he got. Note that the five

"You's" are David's answer to God's five "I's" of 2 Samuel 12:7-8: "I anointed you, I delivered you," etc.

In the poem David uses every Hebrew term for sin to describe his depravity: sin, transgression, iniquity, evil; he had sinned; he had missed the mark; he did not do what he should have done (i.e. gone to battle); he had transgressed; he had done what was wrong, in a high handed manner, flaunting his wrongdoing in the eyes of his God. "Iniquity" speaks of the perversions and twisted wreckage of lives and relationships left behind. David had perverted the office of king for personal gain, and the office of commander-in-chief to cover up a murder. He had twisted the sacred bonds of friendship to shed blood. But, when he said glibly to Joab: "Do not let this thing be evil in your eyes," he had reached the depths. When David renamed that which was evil and called it good, it was then that all heaven was provoked into decisive action. His tragic experience taught him with poignant severity that he was capable of anything.

But even more painful to David was this new realization that his propensity to sin was not the exception. It was not a rare fit and flurry of unbridled passion and anger. Sin was always present with him. It lived just below the surface; it had been with him since birth. All that was needed was the right set of circumstances to bring it to the surface. Sin was part of his character. He was inbred with it. Thus, David moves from saying, "I sinned," to "I am a sinner." This is the same understanding that dawned upon Martin Luther and the Reformers in Europe. When we come to the same knowledge, then we, too, become candidates for new revelations of grace.

In the third part of David's poem, the prayer of restoration, the sobering knowledge of the depth of his depravity now forces the king to new heights of creativity.

III. Prayer of Restoration (51:6-13)

The heart of David's poem comprises four couplets. In these verses the poet reaches the pinnacle of genius. This is where David gets a doctoral degree for new developments in the theology of grace. This is where he makes daring, outrageous statements that had never before been attempted. He utilizes only four words for sin, but more than twenty metaphors for how God cleanses the sinner from sin and its effects. With astonishing freedom, David pushes the limits of grace to infinity. David, the Einstein of grace, a thousand years before the time of Christ, anticipates the New Covenant in all its majestic beauty. His prayer is profoundly simple, like Einstein's $E=mc^2$, yet it is a work of absolute genius. David throws himself headlong upon the mercy of God, risking everything in the process.

The first of his four petitions is, "Wash me."

(a) Wash me

**Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being,
And in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom.
Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.** (51:6-7)

God desires truth "in the innermost being," but as David probed the hidden parts of his soul he saw that he was a spiritual leper. The image, "Purify me with hyssop," was used for the purification rights of a leper (see Lev 14:6-7; Mark 1:40-45). David needed to be opened up, to be washed and scrubbed clean by God. Then, he says, "I shall be whiter than snow." This is a new metaphor for cleansing, a David original. The prophet Isaiah would adopt it and turn it into orthodox theology, saying: "Though your sins are as scarlet they will be as white as snow" (Isa 1:18). It is significant that in Mark 1:40-45, Jesus cleanses a leper; and following the Lord's resurrection, an angel sat on the stone which had sealed the tomb, and his appearance was like lightning, his clothes were "as white as snow" (Matt 28:3).

If that were not enough, David asks for more. Once God had washed him, then God had to take the initiative to teach him wis-

dom in his innermost being. God would have to act if that were to happen ("You will make me to know"). And David had confidence that God would indeed take the initiative. It did not depend on David to get truth into his heart. What a bold request!

David's second request for restoration is for God to heal him.

(b) Heal me

**Make me to hear joy and gladness,
Let the bones which You have broken rejoice.
Hide Your face from my sins,
And blot out all my iniquities.** (51:8-9)

David's sins had made him deaf to joy; and they had made him lame, so that he had no delight in his step. He needed God's miraculous, healing touch to make him well again.

There are interesting implications here concerning the miracles of Jesus. When our Lord healed the deaf and the lame, he said to them: "your sins are forgiven." Verse 9 of the psalm is radical: "Hide your face from my sins, and blot out my iniquities." Up to this point in OT history, the verb "to blot out" was used to describe what God does to sinners.³ In Gen 6:7, God said he would "blot out" all mankind in the flood. "Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot him out of my book" (Exod 32:33). David even used this verb in his prayers: "may [the wicked] be blotted out of the book of life" (Ps 69:28). But here, in Psalm 51, David is the wicked one. Now what does he do?

Notice the change. Here he says to God, in effect: "Instead of blotting out my name from the book of life, will you redirect your energy and passion to blot out my iniquities?" This is daring stuff. David was the first OT author to use the term this way. Later, the prophet Isaiah would use it to anticipate the New Covenant in Christ: "the Lord God will wipe (blot out) tears away from all faces" (Isa 25:8). This is astonishing theology, coming from a layman, and a sinner at that.

So David prays, "wash me, heal me."

Thirdly, he petitions, "recreate me."

(c) Recreate me

**Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from Your presence,
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.** (51:10-11)

David knows full well that he deserves the same fate as Saul. There was a time when the Holy Spirit rushed mightily upon Saul, but then the king was cast away, permanently removed from the presence of God. David confesses that that is what he too deserves, yet he boldly asks God to work a miracle so that he may not suffer the same fate.

David reaches to the most powerful, God-activating verb in the Bible (*bara*) to make his request. This is the very first verb used in Genesis to describe God's creation of the world out of chaos and void. David knew that his heart could not be reformed. He was doomed if God did not perform in him a new creative work on par with his work in the original creation. If God granted his prayer, then his inner spirit would be permanently fixed, established to participate in eternal life.

Later, the prophets would pick up, anticipate and detail what David longs and prays for (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 11:17-20; 36:25-31). The apostle Paul refers to this creative act as having been fulfilled in Christ, so that it becomes the lifegiving miracle of every conversion: "If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature" (2 Cor 5:17). And David's longing for this creative act to have permanent results on our spirits is verified, when Paul says that believers are "sealed" by the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13).

Thus David prays to be washed, healed and recreated.

Finally, he prays for restoration.

(d) Restore me

Restore (*shuv*, turn, return) **to me the joy of Your salvation,
And sustain me with a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors Your ways,
And sinners will be converted** (*shuv*, turn, return) **to You.**
(51:12-13)

Soon after the assassination of President Kennedy, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who was part of Kennedy's administration, was asked about resuming life after that terrible event. He replied: "We may laugh again, but we will never be young again."⁴ Restoration can only go so far. But that is not enough for David. Remembering the joy of his youthful, eager spirit, he prays that he might laugh again, *and* that he might be young again. David has vivid memories of what it was like to rush headlong into the thick of the battle, anticipating Yahweh's salvation. So he asks God to restore that to him. But not just for his own satisfaction. He prays to be restored so that he could restore others. Then life would be meaningful again. Knowing what life was like when he was a broken sinner himself, he would have even more to offer.

After three thousand years, God is still answering that prayer. Who teaches you the road to recovery? Who gives your soul words to shape your grief? Who grasps your thoughts and places them on the sacred page, so that when you read them they become wet with your tears? It is this man, David. He had the courage to pray for the impossible, to dream the improbable. I confess I do not learn much from the valedictorians of success. David is my teacher. I love this man. He was broken, crushed and empty, yet he dared to appeal to God for his grace, a thousand years before Christ.

David's ends his prayer with vows of thanks.

IV. Vows of Thanks (51:14-17)

**Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation;
Then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips,
That my mouth may declare Your praise.
For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it;
You are not pleased with a burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit,
A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.**

In the land of Israel, when God answered prayers, it was a sin to fail to offer public praise. For the king, these moments of praise were filled with anticipation. David asks God to not let him die in his sins, and he asks for opportunity to praise God before the nation. Normally, an OT vow consisted of two parts, a poem of praise and an animal sacrifice. The king would write a poem of thanksgiving, a work carefully crafted to unlock emotions of joy and jubilation, memorializing the event for all time; and this was followed by a sacrifice, which was a peace offering. One-third of the sacrifice was placed on the altar, one-third was given to the priest, and one-third was dedicated for three days of feasting in celebration for what God had done. So David keeps his vow and crafts a poem, Psalm 51, a work which would be read for all time.

But, as David approaches the place of worship, carrying his lamb, he is struck with a lightning bolt of insight. This revelation unfolds for him the significance of Israel's sacrificial system, the mystery of the lamb. The insight is this: All that God was seeking was a broken spirit! His spirit crushed, David chants his poem and leaves the lamb and goes home. There was no need for sacrifice. This was a first. And God does not despise it.⁵ David walks away in the freedom anticipated by Jesus, worshiping God "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24).

Three years ago, Marty Brill, a Jew, told me that he had been looking for God for twenty-five years. As he related his story to me, he said that after years of failure he was utterly broken, and

thus he felt he was disqualified from ever finding God. I asked him to read Psalm 51. He didn't know it, but he had been quoting this psalm as he shared with me. Reading Psalm 51 lifted his burden and led him to the Lord. At the end of my message, Marty will come and share with us the poem that he wrote following his conversion to Christ.

Now we come to the addendum to Psalm 51, which was written by an unknown poet during the time of the exile.

V. Addendum from Exile (51:18-19)

**By Your favor do good to Zion;
Build the walls of Jerusalem.
Then You will delight in righteous sacrifices,
In burnt offering and whole burnt offering;
Then young bulls will be offered on Your altar.**

In these verses we see how powerful David's psalm was to the Jews. Almost five hundred years after he wrote these words they were picked up and appropriated as being the exact sentiments of the Jews who were living in exile during the days of Haggai or Zechariah. The words of the king became the words of the nation in their darkest hour, expressing their yearning for national restoration from exile⁶ and the rebuilding of God's city.

David's words ought to be an inspiration to us, too. Let us memorize this classic psalm and offer it as our own prayer. Even in the New Testament, nothing surpasses Psalm 51 in its profound spiritual piety and language of repentance. So let us allow David's powerful metaphors to penetrate bone and marrow, and then let us write our own personal addendum.

Finally, notice that David's freedom may have been too much for the exiles to handle. That is why they are quick to add these words about God "delighting in righteous sacrifice." David's insight and genius for expressions of grace may have been too much for the exiles to enter into. Indeed, David's freedom is so radical, not many are able to fully enter into it.

So how do we enter into the love of God and his grace? Do we have to commit the terrible sins of murder and adultery to do so? No, we do not. But at some point we may have to be broken and crushed. There is no other way. If that is where you find yourself today, if your spirit is broken, and if you have a contrite heart, then you, too, may be on the very edge of the greatest discovery of your life. Recite the inspired words of King David's Psalm 51 for your prayer as you come to Christ.

Marty Brill:

God reached down to me through Psalm 51 and welcomed me home as a failure. What a shock to my rational thinking! Failure equals no good, disqualified. Yet I was welcomed and embraced by pure grace.

Here is a brief summary of my life prior to accepting Messiah, September 23rd, 1993. I grew up in a driven New York Jewish home, the third of three children. Success was expected. Yet I never felt quite good enough. I achieved, but never enough. The standards were always so high. I was an all-star third baseman in Little League, but my brother was the MVP. I graduated first in my graduate school class with a masters degree, but only from a state school. My brothers graduated from Columbia and Yale Law Schools.

By age 12 I had an ulcer. I knew there must be another way. So in college I turned to psychology, and then New Age spirituality. I was tempted and seduced by false idols. For twenty-five years I have searched, through ashrams, EST, and sacred medicines, through three marriages, looking for intimacy, striving the best I knew how. Three years ago, I was in crisis. Life was unraveling in front of me. I kept trying to hold it together until I couldn't anymore. Circumstances overwhelmed me. My car exploded and burned up in my garage. My body was aging,

my hair gray and thinning, my memory fading. I was dragged into a lawsuit. I was changing my job. But the blow that threw me into overload was when my wife said move out, and I heard "divorce." Three strikes, you're out. I was devastated, defeated, depressed, and broken. Why go on?

Psalm 51 welcomed me. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart. Now, almost three years later, only because of God's will, Kate and I are not divorced. Our marriage is still rough, but we both have hope in God's strength. I am beginning to get some clues as to what it means to be God's man.

I wrote this poem as a thank offering to God and to the men of this church.

What a gift of life, since September 29th, at 3:15 p.m.
It seemed all over. Why go on? My walls were falling.
Then Kate said, "Divorce," and I had no strength to go on.
And so in desperation I got down on my knees and prayed,
"God, come in, help me, please, if you are there."
Swiftly You answered and guided my steps,
And screamed so I couldn't not hear
You are here, and You are here for me.
You sent your servant Brian to welcome me
And give me the good news
That my falling apart was what You were waiting for
It was something to celebrate, not to mourn
In my weakness, God could enter
While I was strong, there was no room.
He welcomed me, son of Abraham, son of David.
My Father welcomed me home as a Jew.
I felt exalted and honored
The depression and burden lifted.
He provided strong fellowship.
That first Wednesday at 6:30 a.m.
I couldn't hold it together
Brothers prayed for me
What a comfort. I had never had that before
My wonderful brother Thomas walking with me and pouring
 God's Word down me
Reading, and feeling a deep thirst for His Word, His teaching.
Since my way doesn't work, I cling to hope that He is the way.
What is that way?
So I read and read, Old and New, and a Psalm a day
And I begin to learn how to pray, to talk to God
A retreat at Pajaro Dunes
Friendship, walking on the beach
Welcomed in special ways
Brian prayed that we would come away with a friend
And my soul connected with Roger
I shared and listened to Greg and Stu and you and you and
 you
Another retreat. Five hundred men to deepen me
It was designed for me.
Could I really be a Jew and have Jesus die for me?
Yes, I need to give my sexual desires to Him, too
What a blessing to give Him your secrets.
I'm learning about David
It's OK to be in the desert
It's good to be in the desert
What a comfort, since I'm in the desert, too
When it hurts the most and I'm all alone
I cry to God and I discover
This King of the Jews did so too
All He had was God to lean on
It's OK to say, "Listen to my cry, hear my prayer
Give me wisdom, teach me how to speak."

And it's OK to cry the tears of love for You
They are cleaning me.
I trust You are guiding my steps
And You will continue to walk with me and Kate
To take me to the Promised Land, filled with Your love
And a promise, a covenant, with me, to remember
He forgave me, and redeemed
And I was baptized, too.
Remember to love my Lord with all my heart
And all my soul and all my might.
Thank you, brothers, for loving me
Through this difficult time and precious time.
And God bless each of you in a very special way.

1. *Whiter than Snow*: title taken from Derek Kidner's title to this psalm in his superb commentary, *Psalms 1-72*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1973), 189.

2. This may also give us a hint as to when David penned this classic. In 2 Sam 12:13, after the prophet came to him, David said to Nathan, "I have sinned." This may be the time when he penned these words. The language of verses 2, 8, 9, 14, suggests that he had not yet heard the word of forgiveness; also, the Massoretes placed the letter *samek* after David's words, indicating a pause in the reading of the text.

3. For "blot out," see Gen 6:7; 7:4, 23; Exod 7:14; 32:32, 33; Deut 9:14; 25:19; 29:19; Isa 25:8; 43:25; 44:22; Ps 9:6; 69:28.

4. Quote taken from Walter Brueggemann, *David's Truth In Israel's Imagination and Memory* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 63.

5. *despised* - note the play on words from 12:6, David *despised* God's word (12:9), God broke his spirit, David offers that crushed spirit, God does not *despise* it.

6. see Neh 12:43 for the answer to this prayer.

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PAWNS OF DECEPTION

SERIES: *THE DIARY OF AN OLD KING*

Catalog No. 1034

2 Samuel 13:1-22

20th Message

Brian Morgan

October 13th, 1996

We come now to the final chapters in our studies in the life of King David of Israel. I have entitled this series *The Diary of an Old King*. In these texts, David's life will be played out before him in the mirror of his spoiled sons. These men take on the sins of their father with flagrant zest and zeal, playing their roles to extremes—all of this to give the king, in his old age, the heart of God.

The first story is the account of the rape of David's beautiful daughter, Tamar, by her half-brother, Amnon. The story has seven movements, each of which is portrayed in pairs of interlocking relationships. These seven pairs of relationships ought to be illustrative of family loyalty, care and protection, but instead, they become clasped hands in a labyrinth of seduction. One broken link in this chain could have prevented the disaster, but, tragically, every link only serves to aid in the seduction and rape of the princess of Israel. This ancient tale of tragic proportions sadly has become all too familiar in our modern world. The one who will feel the weight of this tragedy is David, whose own life is reflected in this story as in a mirror.

The account opens in 2 Samuel, chapter 13:

I. Obsessed With Desire (13:1-5)

Now it was after this that Absalom the son of David had a beautiful sister whose name was Tamar, and Amnon the son of David loved her. And Amnon was so frustrated because of his sister Tamar that he made himself ill, for she was a virgin, and it seemed hard to (was difficult in the eyes of) Amnon to do anything to her. But Amnon had a friend whose name was Jonadab, the son of Shimeah, David's brother; and Jonadab was a very shrewd man. And he said to him, "O son of the king, why are you so depressed morning after morning? Will you not tell me?" Then Amnon said to him, "I am in love with Tamar, the sister of my brother Absalom." Jonadab then said to him, "Lie down on your bed and pretend to be ill; when your father comes to see you, say to him, 'Please let my sister Tamar come and give me some food to eat, and let her prepare the food in my sight, that I may see it and eat from her hand.'" (NASB)

In verse one we are introduced to the two sons of David. These "chips off the old block" frame the verse; their beautiful sister, Tamar, is caught in the middle. The brothers are princes, the sister, a princess in the royal family. Absalom was the handsome third son of

Maacah, the daughter of Talmi, king of Geshur; Amnon, the eldest son of David by Ahinoam, the Jezreelitess. Every time we hear the names Amnon and Absalom, which mean *faithfulness* and *father of peace*, respectively, we are stung with the painful irony of the rape and murder which follow.

As the scene opens, Amnon, is lovesick for his half-sister, Tamar. The term "frustrated" means to be "bound up beyond measure"; in this case, Amnon is tied up in knots by his all-consuming lust. Surprisingly, the obstacle to his having Tamar is not his father the king, but Tamar's brother, Absalom. Absalom appears to have "the sanctioning power behind the girl, inhibiting him from 'doing something to her,'"¹ Fokkelman suggests that the fact that Absalom is the prominent figure in the text, and that David is always "limping on behind,"² indicates that David may have already slipped from his place of prominence, and Absalom, his handsome son, has already emerged as the successor to the throne. So with lust burning within him, so much so that he "made himself ill," and Tamar's virginity preventing him from acting upon it, Amnon sees no way out of his quandary.

But, as if in answer to Amnon's prayers, his "Uncle Joe" enters onto the stage. Verse 3:

But Amnon had a friend whose name was Jonadab, the son of Shimeah, David's brother;

Jonadab was David's brother and Amnon's close friend. Seven Hebrew words form the line which introduces Jonadab. Of the seven, five words resonate with covenantal loyalty: "faithfulness," "intimate friend," "God is willing," "son of obedience," and "brother." Yet what follows makes a mockery of all the holy standards of loyal-love that hold the fabric of families together. With cunning wisdom, Jonadab breaks through all the obstacles and sets out to use David to satisfy the lusts of his nephew. He tells Amnon, "Pretend to be sick; lay on your bed. When your father comes to see you, request that Tamar serve you a private meal. When you see her preparing food, the very sight of her will make you well!" What a sordid scene: the uncle feeding the lust of his nephew, through the vehicle of his father, for the rape of his sister.

II. Seduction and Rape (13:6-17)

So Amnon lay down and pretended to be ill; when the king came to see him, Amnon said to the king, "Please let my sister Tamar come and make me a

couple of (heart-) cakes in my sight, that I may eat from her hand."

Then David sent to the house for Tamar, saying, "Go now to your brother Amnon's house, and prepare food for him." (13:6-7)

Addressing his father the king, Amnon makes a subtle allusion to his sexual passions: "Please let my sister Tamar come and make me a couple of cakes in my sight, that I may eat from her hand." Both the verb "to make" and the noun "cakes" come from the same Hebrew root as the word "heart." Fokkelman translates this, "Let her knead two heart-cakes."³ The same words are used in Song of Songs:

**"You have made my heart beat faster, my sister, my bride;
You have made my heart beat faster with a single glance of your eyes"** (Song 4:9).

The dual image of the "beating heart" reveals Amnon's obsession, and "betrays his secret wish, a meeting with Tamar without any snoopers."⁴ But, like an unthinking errand boy, David does not take time to investigate these hidden images. When he passes on the request to Tamar, he removes these sexual overtones and delivers the message in its bare essentials—a sister's duty to her brother.

Verse 8:

So Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house, and he was lying down. And she took dough, kneaded it, made cakes in his sight, and baked the cakes. And she took the pan and dished them out before him, but he refused to eat. And Amnon said, "Have everyone go out from me." So everyone went out from him. Then Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the food into the bedroom, that I may eat from your hand." So Tamar took the cakes which she had made and brought them into the bedroom to her brother Amnon. When she brought them to him to eat, he took hold of her and said to her, "Come, lie with me, my sister." (13:8-11)

The princess enters her brother's house, playing the role of a faithful cook, unaware of the plot that is now afoot. Immediately we are given a sense of the ugly undertones of Amnon's love-starved imagination. No visual pleasure of his sister's delicate frame is withheld from his voracious eyes. The lust of his eyes feeds his fleshly appetites beyond control; and Amnon orders everyone out of the room so that he can carry out his secret desire. He invites Tamar into the intimate chamber of his bedroom, and greets her with the base request, "Come, lie with me, my sister"—words which should not even be uttered in the same sentence!

A horrified Tamar objects forcefully and soundly. Verse 12:

But she answered him, "No, my brother, do not violate me, for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do this disgraceful thing! As for me, where could I

get rid of my reproach? And as for you, you will be like one of the fools in Israel. Now therefore, please speak to the king, for he will not withhold me from you." However, he would not listen to her; since he was stronger than she, he violated her and lay with her.

Then Amnon hated her with a very great hatred; for the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. And Amnon said to her, "Get up, go away!" But she said to him, "No, because this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you have done to me!" Yet he would not listen to her. Then he called his young man who attended him and said, "Now throw this woman away from me, outside, and lock the door behind her." (13:12-17)

Tamar, having left the safety and protection of her home, enters the most intimate room of her half-brother's residence, a place which too ought to be a sanctuary of protection. But, painfully, this intimate chamber becomes the sordid scene of a rape. Tamar's plea, and her objections to Amnon, are most honorable and logical. They speak of the dignity with which she holds herself, and the holy standards of God's laws in Israel—"what is not done" and "should not be done."

Tamar counters Amnon's lust with a logic that presses her brother to consider a future that will be inescapably shaped by his present choices. As for herself, to lose her virginity would mark her forever, and sentence her to a life of isolated shame. Who would condescend to pay the price of her dowry? As for Amnon, he would be labeled the worst kind of "fool" in all Israel. The word "fool" (Heb: *nabal*) is reminiscent of the Nabal story. It is a dangerous omen, foreshadowing his violent and certain death. If Amnon wants Tamar, she intimates, he should do so legitimately and ask permission of his father, the king. (Marrying a half-sister was not illegal in Israel.)

But lust favors no patience, no propriety, only savage satisfaction. "Once [Amnon] has seen, he is lost, just like his father in 11:2."⁵ So now, this "prince who is constantly served at his every whim" cannot handle any interruption of anticipated desire and blazes away in an act of love which is pure aggression"⁶—rape, which in Israel was punishable by death. I wish it were so everywhere!

Now comes the turning point of the story.

Then Amnon hated her with a very great hatred; for the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. (13:15)

"What was once marked as love was merely a passing desire, now completely spent...Amnon feels no lingering attraction, no desire for continued intimacy, nothing that might remotely be called love."⁷ Amnon now hates Tamar with a great hatred, and "the transition from love into hate is so complete that the element of love becomes totally driven out...He who seeks inter-

course pretends to be able to reciprocate tenderness, to make deep contact, and to taste the union of true love."⁸ But any illicit reach outside the sacred bonds of marriage issues forth a devaluing of the person, emptying them of their very worth.

When I was thirteen years old, I had a friend who used to take me fishing and hunting, a wonderful man whom I idolized. One day while we were riding in his truck, suddenly he turned to me and said, "Don't you ever have sex with a woman before marriage!" It will make you feel about this big," he said, holding his forefinger and thumb about an inch apart. I was shocked. After all, I was only thirteen. But I knew he was speaking from experience; he knew what he was talking about. He knew even as a non-Christian that sex before marriage is an illicit reach which debases both parties. I have never forgotten his words.

The face of the violated victim now becomes a mirror of Amnon's own depravity, and a constant reminder of the desecration to which he had subjected Tamar. But the perpetrator cannot face this reflection, so he throws her out with merciless bluntness. "[He] has only one syllable left for her: the deep disdain of [the Hebrew] *zot*—'get rid of *this* wretch,'" still speaking of the princess whom he violated and whose name he won't even use. He pushes her out the door, outside, the door is slammed shut behind her. "Now that she has been used she is disposable."⁹

III. Public Protest and Private Rage (13:18-22)

(a) Tamar's Public Protest

Now she had on a long-sleeved garment; for in this manner the virgin daughters of the king dressed themselves in robes. Then his attendant took her out and locked the door behind her. And Tamar put ashes on her head, and tore her long-sleeved garment which was on her; and she put her hand on her head and went away, crying aloud as she went. (13:18-19)

Perhaps Amnon thinks that Tamar, like Bathsheba, will cooperate and keep the act a secret. But Tamar will not go in silence; she is a better person than Bathsheba. She makes public what Amnon did in private in order to bring some semblance of honor to her violated soul. She tears her beautiful robe, which was a symbol of her royal worth, symbolizing the violent loss of her virginity. "As she was not taken in by his desire, so she is not immobilized by his hate."¹⁰ Tamar, who was a very visible person in the court, lets everyone know what has occurred. She exposes her shame openly, boldly and forcefully. This is a very important step in the healing process. Society forces victims to keep silent, but silence does even more damage than the act itself.

(b) Absalom's Private Rage

Then Absalom her brother said to her, "Has Amnon your brother been with you? But now keep silent, my sister, he is your brother; do not take this matter

to heart." So Tamar remained and was desolate in her brother Absalom's house. Now when King David heard of all these matters, he was very angry. But Absalom did not speak to Amnon either good or bad; for Absalom hated Amnon because he had violated his sister Tamar. (13:20-22)

Absalom sees through the affair instantly. He tells Tamar, rather bluntly, to keep quiet: "*do not take the matter to heart.*" This is a painful echo of David's words in 2 Sam 11:25, following the arranged death of Uriah. Fokkelman suggests that Absalom is warning her that taking legal action against Amnon would be difficult, because Amnon "is a prince and is much beloved by his father."¹¹ Perhaps Absalom wishes to prevent the royal family from being exposed to a formal lawsuit and the resulting national scandal; and spare Tamar the misery and humiliation which that might involve. Absalom will take her rage on himself. He would care for his violated sister in his own way, and permanently.

When David finally hears of what went on in his own household, he is furious with rage. The king is furious at Amnon, his lustful son; at Jonadab, his shrewd brother; and at himself for his naiveté at not seeing through Amnon's request. But he does nothing. He is "so compromised by his own past he can do nothing."¹² "David's limping on behind betrays that his rage is, in fact, the mask of his own powerlessness."¹³ So when the violated princess looks to her father for help, there will be no investigation, no inquiry, no charges pressed, no legal proceedings, and no justice—just rage with no action.

But if King David is passive in action, his son and possible successor, Absalom, is not. His response to the matter is to publicly excommunicate his brother in a rage of silence, a rage that will brew and fester into a methodical and passionate revenge. Fueled by a burning hatred, Absalom's rage will move with relentless force until a sister's debt is paid in full, with nothing less than Amnon's blood.

What are we to make of this sordid account?

IV. The Sins of the Fathers

(a) A Distant Mirror of Our Depravity

There is much that we can learn from this story. On one level, it is a painful portrait of our own culture, which raises its sons to be spoiled princes, in contaminated courts of ease. Uncle Jonadab is everywhere, beckoning to us, telling us to feed the sexual cravings of our souls, assuring us that there is no harm done.

But the problem with this, as Amnon was to learn, is that when you feed the lust of the eyes, rather than satisfying the soul, the cravings become uncontrollable and cannot be satisfied outside of illicit sex—and violent sex at that. As far as Amnon is concerned, it took seven years to live out the consequences of this one act;

but for Tamar, it would take a lifetime.

We live in a culture that seems hell-bent on feeding our sensual cravings. We are told that if there are dangers to such choices to just lay a condom over the whole affair, for easy protection. But into our culture comes Tamar's penetrating cry to awaken us, and the tearing of her robe to haunt us. The consequence for her was not just an unwanted pregnancy, or AIDS, but something far worse: Tamar lost her purity, her virginity, her dignity; in short, everything she had to give a man.

(b) The Tool of a Daughter to Shape a Father's Heart

But there is a much deeper level to the story. This incident is aimed primarily at David. This is the Diary of an Old King, who in his remaining years is watching his life reflected in the mirror of the lives of his own children, as his sins are visited upon him through a son and a daughter. But in the lives of these children the voice of God breaks through even louder, and the images and reflected brighter than ever before.

Can you hear the beckoning voice of God breaking through at night, when David is alone on his bed?

*Look at your son, David,
what do you see?
A prince, a future king,
or a fool to lust?
That's you, David.*

*And you, David, used like a pawn,
for someone else's private jest,
the court joker in a game of secret seduction,
your royal touch its faithful service,
servicing his untamed lusts.
How does it feel, David?
Weep, David.
That was you, David.*

*Look at your daughter, David,
beautiful Tamar, succulent palm tree,
princess in Israel.
What do you see, David?
Innocence gone,
seized in a moment,
royal robe rent in violent song.
She's crying, David.
Are you angry that she cries, David?
Would you rather she keep silent, David?
She's crying for you.
She wants her daddy, David.
She's crying for justice.
Where are you, David?
Why can't you hold her?
Why do you look away, David?
Does that gaping wound of desolation*

stare bloody back at you?

*Why are you weeping, David?
Is it because you could have,
but didn't?
Your once quick, decisive hand
that played the harp,
seized the spear and shot the sling,
now frozen in silence, paralyzed
by sin's deafening blows.*

*Why are you weeping, David,
an absent father now purged tender,
by a daughter's inconsolable grief?
That was how I felt, David,
plagued with pain, unable to reach
my daughter, whom you touched.
So weep your weary eyes dry, O David,
I love you, David,
for today she, your daughter
has made you a father.*

And so we leave David, the man who became king only to fall into his own demise and doom, now being reshaped through sorrow, the very finger of God.

1. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 1, *King David* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 101. I have depended heavily on Fokkelman for many of my insights into the story line.

2. Fokkelman, *King David*, 100.

3. Fokkelman, *King David*, 105.

4. Fokkelman, *King David*, 105.

5. Fokkelman, *King David*, 106.

6. Fokkelman, *King David*, 106.

7. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*. Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 288.

8. Fokkelman, *King David*, 107.

9. Fokkelman, *King David*, 104.

10. Brueggemann, 288.

11. Fokkelman, *King David*, 111.

12. Brueggemann, 289.

13. Fokkelman, *King David*, 100.

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OVERRUN BY A SON'S RAGE

SERIES: *THE DIARY OF AN OLD KING*

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2 Samuel 13:23-39
21st Message
Brian Morgan
October 20th, 1996

In our last study in the life of King David of Israel, we found David, who once had used others to satisfy his lusts, being victimized in the same way by his own son. The reflection of his son's crime not only returned to the king, it magnified his own sin. Amnon's offense grew both in the act and its object, as sin escalated from quick and easy adultery to premeditated rape. The victim of the first crime was the wife of an intimate friend; in this latest incident, the victim is a sister.

The consequences of this one act within the royal family of Israel were catastrophic. As we pick up the story once more, two years have passed since David's eldest son, Amnon, raped his half-sister, Tamar, two years during which David has sat idle, sealed shut in his own silent rage. Compromised by his past, David is unable to discipline his son and bring about restitution for his daughter. Two years with no action taken, no inquiries sought, and no justice gained. The royal court is enveloped in a shroud of shame, masking a sea of seething emotions.

How often did David look upon Tamar's face during those two years? How can a father look upon a daughter who had sought his help, only to be turned away? How did David greet Tamar when she attended the royal feasts? Was she kept conveniently out of sight in the safe seclusion of Absalom's home, protected from public scrutiny and the embarrassment of her father? And what kind of a relationship did the king now enjoy with Amnon, that lustful son who had imitated and exceeded David's own sin? Did David get angry at him in public, or was every rebuke and angry stroke he wanted to fling at his son cut off at the throat by the memories of his own past indiscretions? And what of Absalom, who had excommunicated his brother in a rage of silence? How did he engage his brother at family feasts? Did rage continue to burn in his silent eyes, or did he feign politeness, adopting the severe coolness that hatred brings?

Such was life in the royal court, where even the simplest of transactions could not be carried out without engaging the deepest emotions. David could do nothing to change matters, but two years had pushed Absalom over the edge. He would not allow his father's passive silence to continue. It was time to act, and that is what he will do, with a well conceived plot of bloody revenge.

This then is the story of father against son, and their contrasting roles. In the first act, the key figure is Absa-

lom: "He has plans, he insists, and he acts." In the second act, it is David who is plagued in passivity: "He is doomed to wait, to talk, and to mourn."¹ Which of these two men, David or Absalom, would hold the key to the future of the nation Israel?

I. Absalom, Master of Revenge (13:23-29)

(a) Putting Father in the Uncomfortable Corner (13:23-27)

Now it came about after two full years that Absalom had sheepshearers in Baal-hazor, which is near Ephraim; and Absalom invited all the king's sons. And Absalom came to the king and said, "Behold now, your servant has sheepshearers; please let the king and his servants go with your servant." But the king said to Absalom, "No, my son, we should not all go, lest we be burdensome to you." Although he urged him, he would not go, but blessed him. 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 when Absalom urged him, he let Amnon and all the king's sons go with him. (NASB)

If Amnon had used his father as an accomplice for rape, then Absalom would respond by using him as an accomplice in his brother's murder. If Amnon's actions were the result of the uncontrolled passions of the moment, Absalom would counter with actions methodically plotted out over two years. If Amnon was aided by Jonadab in secret, Absalom would use his assistance publicly. Absalom has worked long and hard to pick out the exact time and place of his revenge. He trusts that two years would give him the cover of time; and the proposed location, about twenty miles to the north of Jerusalem, enough distance to make good his escape. The occasion for his plot is a sheepshearing festival, well known in Israel as an occasion rich in festivities.

So it is time for Absalom to approach his father. He says to him, "Your servant has sheepshearer; please let the king and his servants go with your servant." He is making a request for the king and the whole court to attend the festival. Absalom knows he is asking far too much from his father; his request is purposely calculated to elicit a negative response. David responds politely that he should not go lest he be too big a burden to his son. Absalom, unsatisfied, presses the issue with strong urgings,² but David does not yield. He imparts his blessing, hoping to end the matter. But Absalom has

succeeded in placing his father in the uncomfortable position of twice saying “no” to his handsome son.

Absalom counters with another request, this time mentioning Amnon by name. This seems risky, putting his brother’s name right out in the open. Wouldn’t this arouse suspicion? But, in a bold move, Absalom does this to give the appearance that he has nothing to hide. This time, however, David’s suspicions are aroused. “Why should he go with you?” he asks. David’s third denial comes with less force. Following Absalom’s repeated, forceful urgings, the king buckles. He can be besieged only for so long before he weakly capitulates. What Absalom did was to successfully drive “his father into the uncomfortable corner of having to say no.”³ David cannot bear the thought of disappointing his son a fourth time, so he compromises. But, to alleviate his fears, he dispatches all of his sons to the festival.

So in this first scene, David is no match for his determined son.

At the festival, Absalom has his young servants do the dirty work for him.

(b) Absalom a Commanding Leader Over His Servants (13:28-29)

And Absalom commanded his servants, saying, “See now, when Amnon’s heart is merry with wine, and when I say to you, ‘Strike Amnon,’ then put him to death. Do not fear; have not I myself commanded you? Be courageous and be valiant.” And the servants of Absalom did to Amnon just as Absalom had commanded. Then all the king’s sons arose and each mounted his mule and fled.

Absalom knows he will not be able to get near his brother at the festival, so he engages a group of young servants, thereby revealing his control and influence over them as he plots Amnon’s death. The whole plan is designed to vindicate his sister Tamar’s speech following her brutal rape by her brother. Tamar had warned Amnon that if he gave in to his sensual pleasures, he would be considered as one of the fools of Israel. The word fool (*nabal*) is reminiscent of the Nabal story and his subsequent demise, after his heart was “merry with wine” (1 Sam 25:36-37). Absalom reasons: “Let this sensual brother of mine have his wine, and when it has consumed him, and he has lost his senses and the ability to react quickly, strike him dead!” His timing assures the servants that they are in no danger of counter-attack.

But such a treasonable act demands great courage, so Absalom raises the stakes, commanding his servants with the language of holy war, with himself as the new commander in chief. The servants, mere boys, are instantly transformed into elite military troops on a secret mission for the new kingdom. They pull it off uncontested, without so much as a struggle. The event is so understated that it paints this war strategist, Absalom, as one who occupies a high position of authority in Israel. By contrast, all the other king’s sons are forced to

flee on their mounts. Once symbols of royal status, the mules now carry them away into exile, as refugees. What an ironic turn of events, all which transpire in the twinkling of an eye.⁴

Absalom has proven to be more shrewd than his father David, and more powerful than his brother Amnon. The king’s eldest son, his successor, is dead; Tamar is avenged; and the last obstacle to the throne eliminated. With powerful force, the text presses the reader with the question: “Who shall be the next king in Israel?”

The second act focuses on David and the effect of these events upon his soul.

II. David, Ripped In Mourning (13:30-39)

(a) The First Report of Death (13:30-31)

Now it was while they were on the way that the report came to David, saying, “Absalom has struck down all the king’s sons, and not one of them is left.” Then the king arose, tore his clothes and lay on the ground; and all his servants were standing by with clothes torn.

The rumor which spreads from Baal-Hazor to Jerusalem travels even faster than the refugees. Is this part of Absalom’s perfect organization? Did he use Jonadab as Amnon had done? “*Absalom has struck down all the king’s sons, and not one of them is left.*” The false report hits David like a punch to the stomach. The king rises and shreds his robe, showing as much grief as Tamar felt when she rended her royal garment following her rape. The heartrending sound of David tearing his robe multiplies and moves through the palace like a tidal wave of grief resonating off the walls.

David finally is captured by the grief that he denied his daughter, the grief that he refused Bathsheba, and the grief that he glazed over in the death of Uriah. Grief has seized him by the throat; he is speechless with horror. He cannot begin to comprehend the thought that his entire family, save one, has been annihilated, while even that one had disqualified himself from ruling. This was a disaster of cosmic dimensions. Had the Davidic covenant been completely annihilated? Speechless with horror, David falls to the ground and grasps the earth, hoping to lay hold of heaven.

I am reading the memoirs of Elie Wiesel, the survivor of the Nazi terror. In one paragraph he describes his feelings as a thirteen-year-old about to be deported to the concentration camp. Perhaps this is how David felt as he tried to come to grips with the news of the death of his entire family:

We arrived at the station, where the cattle cars were waiting...My very last resistance broken, I let myself be pulled, pushed, and kicked, like a deaf and mute sleepwalker. I could see everything, grasp it and register it, but only later would I try to put in order all the sensations and all the memories. How stunned I was, for example, to discover another time outside

time, a universe parallel to this one, a creation within Creation, with its own laws, customs, structures, and language. In this universe some men existed only to kill and others only to die. And the system functioned with exemplary efficiency: tormentors tormented and crushed their prey, torturers tortured human beings whom they met for the first time, slaughterers slaughtered their victims without so much as a glance, flames rose to heaven and nothing ever jammed the mechanism. It was as if it all unfolded according to a plan decreed from the beginning of time.⁵

But now a second report reaches David.

(b) The Second Report of Death (13:32-33)

And Jonadab, the son of Shimeah, David's brother, responded, "Do not let my lord suppose they have put to death all the young men, the king's sons, for Amnon alone is dead; because by the intent of Absalom this has been determined since the day that he violated his sister Tamar. Now therefore, do not let my lord the king take the report to heart, namely, 'all the king's sons are dead,' for only Amnon is dead."

Onto the stage once more comes Jonadab. The one who plotted with Amnon to use his father to feed Amnon's lust, now appears on the stage as an ironic comforter, a bearer of good news to David. The narrator gives a clue that Jonadab may have been Absalom's instrument for the well-timed rumor that had devastated the king. Jonadab's label, "son of Shimeah," is a strong verbal echo to verse 30: "the report came to David" (the words are the same in the Hebrew). Perhaps this is a subtle clue in the well-crafted art of the narrator that Jonadab has been in the mix again, this time as a secret accomplice to Absalom's revenge. What a conniver! In one instance, he feeds the lust of Amnon, in another, he plots Absalom's revenge.

Jonadab's words are venomously crafted to sting with David with harsh invective from his past: "Do not suppose all the sons are dead, only Amnon is dead." This is followed with the most painful of lines: "Now therefore, do not let my lord the king take the report to heart, namely 'all the king's sons are dead,' for only Amnon is dead." In Uriah's case, the blow was lessened. Not only were many killed, but Uriah, David's servant, was killed also, so the death of the one lessened the grief over the deaths of the many. In this instance, the many spared will lessen the blow of the death of the one. Though the report may lessen David's pain, the words are designed to pour salt on his wounds: "Only one son, Amnon, is dead. It's just a little family tiff. Don't take the report to heart."

This new report is confirmed by what the watchman sees on the horizon.

(c) The Third Report of Death (13:34-36)

Now Absalom had fled. And the young man who

was the watchman raised 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; according to your servant's word, so it happened." And it came about as soon as he had finished speaking, that behold, the king's sons came and lifted their voices and wept; and also the king and all his servants wept very bitterly.

The young watchman looks out over the city wall to the northwest of Jerusalem and sees the king's sons racing home like a pack of refugees. Jonadab again uses the scene to elevate his own ego and status. What a good servant he has been in the whole affair! Shrewd, cunning, propitious Jonadab could be counted on.

David is traumatized. Three times he has had to endure hearing the details of the death of his son. Each time, the gaping wound is reopened. The first time he heard the report, it was enflamed rumor; the second time, the truth was imparted by Jonadab, and confirmed by what David saw; now finally, he has to hear it a third time, from those closest to the event and to the king himself—his own sons. Their weeping rings through the palace like the shophar of the Jews at the festival. Loud and all-consuming, it beckons everyone and everything to the center of David's sorrow.

And what of Absalom? Verse 37:

Now Absalom fled and went to Talmai the son of Ammihud, the king of Geshur. And David mourned for his son every day. So Absalom had fled and gone to Geshur, and was there three years. And King David longed to go out to Absalom; for he was comforted (or grieved) concerning Amnon, since he was dead. (13:37-39)

In the meantime, Absalom has fled north, seeking safety in the camp of 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 in Absalom's hand prevents David from going out after him for three years.

During those three years, David "mourned for his son every day," according to the text. The question is, which son was he mourning? The text is ambiguous. One son is dead, another banished to permanent exile. "The denseness of the king's loss is so thick he cannot sort it out."⁶

David's final emotion, revealed in verse 39, is ambiguous as well. Most of our English translations render this verse in this way:

David longed to go out [i.e. in reconciliation] to Absalom for he was comforted (nacham) concerning Amnon, since he was dead.

I think it would be better translated as:

David longed to go out [i.e. in a military operation] to Absalom for he was grieved (nacham) concerning

Amnon, since he was dead.

This second translation better fits the story which follows. David is so enraged at Absalom he wants to hunt him down and kill him. But the narrator's ambiguity is deliberate. It shows that these tragic events have left David's soul tossing and turning in a sea of conflicting emotions. On the one hand, the king is engulfed with waves of unrelenting sorrow that crash over him with power and force, eliciting tears to awaken lost love in his soul. But on the other hand, the waves recede, pulled back by an undertow of rage. The rage is manifest later in the story when David is backed into a corner and coerced into bringing Absalom home to Jerusalem. But even then, he refuses to allow him to see his face. The son lives in the city of the king, but he is not permitted to see the king's face.

There is a lot of anger in these actions by David. Every step that Absalom takes and every ounce of the air he breathes in Jerusalem is a reminder of his father's separation and condemnation. But in the end, when Absalom's life is finally on the line, the deep longings of lost love resurface in the midst of battle. When we come to that, we will behold a father's nervous demeanor as he is obsessed with the safety of his son. At Absalom's death, we hear a father's final agonized cry: "O my son, Absalom, my son, my son, would I have died instead of you." It is a cry of all-consuming ache for love lost between a father and son. In the end, David's love is totally absent of rage.

The lesson for David is clear. He who once abused, who pretended to see and be merciless, is now abused, by sons, manipulated for their crimes. "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."⁷

I have come to the conclusion that sorrow is a very good thing, especially later in life. Sorrow transforms us. It recreates our hard hearts and makes them into fathers' hearts, hearts that know how to be tender, how to weep and mourn and love. David's embrace of this deep and all consuming sorrow is the very thing that will reinstate him in his rightful place as father of his family and King of Israel forever. After all, whose prayers do you read at night, David's or Absalom's?

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1. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 1, *King David* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 111. I have heavily depended upon Fokkelman for many of my insights into the story line.

2. The verb "*paratz*" (to urge) is a strong military term meaning "to break or burst through." It is used of breaking through a breach in a city wall, or of a baby bursting out of the womb. The last time the verb was used in this sense in Samuel, was when Saul made a vow not to eat, but his will was broken by the strong urgings of the witch's servants (1 Sam 28:23), when she and her servants prevailed upon Saul.

3. Fokkelmann, *King David*, 115.

4. Fokkelmann, *King David*, 117.

5. Elie Wiesel, *Memoirs*, 78-79.

6. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*. Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 291.

7. Fokkelmann, *King David*, 159.



LONGING FOR HIS FATHER'S FACE

SERIES: *THE DIARY OF AN OLD KING*

Catalog No. 1036

2 Samuel 14:1-33

22nd Message

Brian Morgan

October 27th, 1996

No theme in all of literature moves us more deeply than the theme of the restoration of damaged relationships, especially relationships involving fathers. We find ourselves moved, because this is something that is close to many of us. We are haunted by a hunger to see our father's face engaging us with that rare sweetness of approval, even for a moment. That warm embrace of reconciliation doesn't happen very often today, but when it does, the air seems permeated by the miraculous, as if touched by the very finger of God himself.

We resume the David story with the portrait of an angry father. David is still submerged in grief three years after the loss his son Amnon, who was violently killed by his brother Absalom. The pain has plunged David so deeply into a black hole of grief that he is paralyzed, unable to act. Fokkelman writes: "Its immobility is yet increased by the trap into which he has fallen and which is one of the cruellest which can emotionally entrap a person, rancour. 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."¹

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, discerning the king's ill-disposition, realizes that if he is to intervene, he must act soon, before orders are handed down to carry out a mission that will end in disaster for the kingdom. But, it is no easy task to penetrate a heart that is walled in by rage and mired in grief. How does one draw forgiveness out of a well of rage? or lift up a father's iron face to behold in mortal tenderness his depraved son?

What follows now in the fourteenth chapter of Second Samuel is an ingenious plan, "the longest as well as the richest and most complex conversation in the books of Samuel."² 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. As we will see, the word "face" is the key word which links every scene in the chapter.

I. A Soft Feminine Face (14:1-11)

Now Joab the son of Zeruiah perceived that the king's heart was inclined toward Absalom. So Joab sent to Tekoa and brought a wise woman from there and said to her, "Please pretend to be a mourner, and put on mourning garments now, and do not anoint yourself with oil, but be like a woman who has been mourning for the dead many days; then go to the king and speak to him in this manner." So Joab put the words in her

mouth. (14:1-3, NASB)

Based on David's history, Joab knows full well that it was not a man, but a woman—Abigail—who was able to break down the king's angry defenses and penetrate his heart when he was consumed with rage on another occasion. So Joab carefully picks a soft feminine face 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 (14:4-8)

Now when the woman of Tekoa spoke to the king, she fell on her face to the ground and prostrated herself and said, "Help ["Save!"], O king." And the king said to her, "What is your trouble?" And she answered, "Truly I am a widow, for my husband is dead. And your maidservant had two sons, but the two of them struggled together in the field, and there was no one to separate them; so one struck the other and killed him. Now behold, the whole family has risen against your maidservant, and they say, 'Hand over the one who struck his brother, that we may put him to death for the life of his brother whom he killed, and destroy the heir also.' Thus they will extinguish my coal which is left, so as to leave 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."

The mourning woman approaches the king in courtly humility. With her face to the ground, she cries, "Save, O king," petitioning David as the highest and last court of appeal. She relates to David the litany of woes that have befallen her and which even now are now threatening to destroy her.

The three incidents are explained, each in increasing length and intensity (1 line, 3 lines, 5 lines). In the first incident, death had struck her husband, making her a widow. Then death struck a second time with an even more severe blow, in the death of one of her sons. Through them she had suffered the trauma of having to relive the Cain and Abel story, when one son killed the other. And if that were not bad enough, she is now traumatized, forced to stand alone against the entire family who were rising up against the murderer, demanding blood revenge.

The widow concludes her speech to David with the powerful metaphor for life, "Thus they will extinguish my coal which is left." She ends her case where she began it,

pleading the interests of her dead husband, who will have neither name nor *heir* (a term which resonates deeply for the king) on the face of the earth.³ With these deep undertones of anguish she makes her appeal to David, who is in mourning himself.

The legal 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 (and us as well) to God's own ruling of mercy, in the mark of protection which he had placed on Cain. 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 (14:9-10)

And the woman of Tekoa said to the king, "O my lord, the king, the iniquity is on me and my father's house, but the king and his throne are guiltless." So the king said, "Whoever speaks to you, bring him to me, and he will not touch you anymore."

David's general promise is too vague for her; she wants something more concrete. So 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 (14:11)

Then she said, "Please let the king remember the Lord your God, so that the avenger of blood may not continue to destroy, lest they destroy my son." And he said, "As the Lord lives, not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground."

She wants guaranteed results—a holy vow similar to the vow which God himself had promised Cain (Gen 4:15). So she presses the king to invoke the name of the Lord in an oath to prevent the terrible revenge now threatening her one remaining son. The king promptly responds with the oath, irrevocably committing himself to what she has asked.

Now that the widow has artfully 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 (14:12-17)

Then the woman said, "Please let your maidservant speak a word to my lord the king." And he said, "Speak." And the woman said, "Why have you then undertaken such against God's people? Yes, because the king has uttered this, he is guilty for not taking back his cast-out one. Truly, we must certainly die, yes, as water oozing away into the soil which can no more be gathered up! But would God make no effort

or take no initiative to let the cast-out one not remain cast out from him?"⁴

That soft feminine face now becomes a mirror which reflects David's son's face. In very straightforward language, the woman strikes at David painfully. "[S]he reveals the divine dimension which makes being judge and king and bearing guilt matters of extreme gravity... The metaphor of the water oozing away is an ingenious successor to the warming fire... There the clan, just as threatening as David now is, tries to douse the widow's ember." Here David is pouring out water; "water seeps away into the soil," and "life is prematurely lost through David's doing." In her craft the two metaphors, fire and water, symbols of life and death, link the two stories as one.⁵

The widow has pulled theological rank on the king, saying, in effect, "Your behavior is not like God's, whose ruling you just gave! Does God not take any initiative to bring a banished one home? Does he let a cast out one remain cast out forever?" God always brings the banished one home. The woman's statement is a stinging indictment against cold fathers, whose frozen faces 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 woman follows these striking, painful words with a remarkable change of tone. Verse 15:

"Now the reason I have come to speak this word to my lord the king is because the people have made me afraid; so your maidservant said, 'Let me now speak to the king, perhaps the king will perform the request of his maidservant. For the king will hear and deliver his maidservant from the hand of the man who would destroy both me and my son from the inheritance of God.' Then your maidservant said, 'Please let the word of my lord the king be comforting, for as the angel of God, so is my lord the king to discern good and evil. And may the Lord your God be with you.'" (14:15-17)

Her tone changes from blunt severity to vulnerability and flattery, amazingly, all the while keeping the cover of her widowhood intact. She explains that on her own she would never have ever broached such a delicate issue, but since she was already on her way to see the king, the people forced her to do so. She was in fear of them, but she overcame that to lay the matter before the king, knowing how wise and gracious he was. She likens him to an angel of God, so she has high hopes. Like a surgeon who cuts deep to first expose and lay bare, then washes and cleanses with tenderness, and then mends the wound in cheerful hope, so is she. She first delivers a shock, then praise, "full of hope, in order to give him the chance to get over the painful surprise...[She] has delivered a masterpiece."⁶ Her words reveal what a difficult thing it can be to talk to fathers about such matters, let alone bring about change.

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

III. David Forced To Face His Son (14:18-23)

Then the king answered and said to the woman, "Please do not hide anything from me that I am about

to ask you." And the woman said, "Let my lord the king please speak." So the king said, "Is the hand of Joab with you in all this?" And the woman answered and said, "As your soul lives, my lord the king, no one can turn to the right or to the left from anything that my lord the king has spoken. Indeed, it was your servant Joab who commanded me, and it was he who put all these words in the mouth of your maidservant; in order to change the appearance of things [lit. "the face of the matter"] your servant Joab has done this thing. But my lord is wise, like the wisdom of the angel of God, to know all that is in the earth." (14:18-20)

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 in forgiveness.

Under oath now, David carries out his vow.

Then the king said to Joab, "Behold now, I will surely do this thing; go therefore, bring back the young man Absalom." And Joab fell on his face to the ground, prostrated himself and blessed the king; then Joab said, "Today your servant knows that I have found favor in your sight, O my lord, the king, in that the king has performed the request of his servant." So Joab arose and went to Geshur, and brought Absalom to Jerusalem. (14:21-23)

The scene 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*. The intervention for the purpose of reconciliation 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. At Home, Shut Out From His Face (14:24-32)

However the king said, "Let him turn to his own house, and let him not see my face." So Absalom turned to his own house and did not see the king's face. (14:24)

David's anger, subdued for a few moments by the soft feminine face, now rises again, burying the tender feelings he had experienced earlier. 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 he shuts him out from his face. It is as if David is saying, "You can have your way, you spoiled son of mine, but you can't have my heart."

Why can't this father look into his son's face? It is because he knows that if he stares into the eyes of his own flesh long enough, he will find deep affections welling up inside, feelings that at first warm his cold heart, until at last, forgiveness completely overtakes his soul. David feels it is better to shut Absalom out, to not see him, but rather to live with the abiding memory of his son as a murderer, thereby keeping his rage intact and his principles firm. The wall that David builds is self-imposed to thwart the onslaught of fatherly love that might overtake his pride.

So Absalom returns to Jerusalem, but he may not see his

father's face. Verse 28:

Now Absalom lived two full years in Jerusalem, and did not see the king's face. Then Absalom sent for Joab, to send him to the king, but he would not come to him. So he sent again a second time, but he would not come. Therefore 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, came to Absalom at his house and said to him, "Why have your servants set my field on fire?" And Absalom answered Joab, "Behold, I sent for you, saying, 'Come here, that I may send you to the king, to say, "Why have I come from Geshur? It would be better for me still to be there."' Now therefore, let me see the king's face; and if there is iniquity in me, let him put me to death." (14:28-32)

Absalom lives in this condition of isolated hatred for two years. He knows that his only hope for change is Joab, but Joab does not respond. So Absalom sets his field on fire.⁷ A little extreme, yes, but symbolic of his pent-up frustration and rage that is like a fire, ready to blaze out of control and take over an entire nation. How characteristic of this handsome spoiled son! If he doesn't get his way, he is, as our modern expression goes, "in your face"! Absalom is a bully. With arrogant brashness, he demands to see the king's face, saying, "if there is iniquity in me, let him put me to death." Fokkelman writes that this "sounds pathetic and brazen if we are aware that this formulation elsewhere comes from the mouth of innocents" (his own father, 1 Sam 20:8).⁸

So Absalom is successful in forcing his father to see his face.

V. The Son On His Face Before His Father (14:33)

So when Joab came to the king and told him, he called for Absalom. Thus he came to the king and prostrated himself on his face to the ground before the king, and the king kissed Absalom.

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 difficult demand 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's 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?

Reflections On A Father's Face

1. 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! His banishment of Absalom so angered his son, he would never be reconciled to his father. 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. The lesson is clear: Do not wait until the grave to express your tenderness. If you do, you will be like David. You will be left with that gaping void of words, with no embrace.

2. A Tribute

When fathers are estranged from their children, as was the case in the David story, 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 become 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 unforgiveness.

Then 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 voices who know the dangers of unchallenged rancor and bitterness. Blessed are those who will risk themselves to intervene and bring home banished sons.

3. The Final Story

These loose ends make us want to keep reading. How does the story finally end? It doesn't find its ultimate resolution until we read of the greater son of David. In the New Testament, Jesus retells the David and Absalom story in the parable of the prodigal son. The parable is a total reverse image of the David and Absalom story. Here, the fa-

ther wants to kill the son, but in the gospel of Luke, it is the son who reaches for his inheritance while the father yet lives, saying to his father, in effect, "I wish you were dead." In the Absalom and David story, a multitude of intermediaries are needed to convince both father and son of the error of their ways and to escort the son home. In Luke, none are needed. The son is thoroughly convicted of his sin by his own conscience. He races home, humble and repentant, without escort. The waiting father needs no urging. Forsaking his dignity, he runs to embrace his son. It is as the boy makes his way home that we behold *the face 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" (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 lift their voices as if to speak,
father king and long lost son.
Was there ever a kiss so sweet?

When you realize at last that you are the banished son, and then feel the face of your heavenly Father fallen upon your neck, with flagrant kisses, weeping, then forgiving a rebellious son is child's play.

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1. J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 1, *King David* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 127. I am indebted to this classic work on narrative for many of my observations in this text.

2. Fokkelman, *King David*, 127.

3. Another allusion to the Cain story, Gen 4:14.

4. The translation of the woman's speech in vv 13-14 is based on Fokkelman, *King David*, 135.

5. Fokkelman, *King David*, 136.

6. Fokkelman, *King David*, 141.

7. The image of the field on fire and that of Absalom's hair is reminiscent of the Samson story.

8. Fokkelman, *King David*, 152.



EXIT ON WINGS OF TRUST

SERIES: *THE DIARY OF AN OLD KING*

Catalog No. 1037
2 Samuel 15:13-23
23rd Message
Brian Morgan
November 3rd, 1996

"Heavenly Father, in your Son Jesus Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Enlighten our minds by your Holy Spirit, and grant us that reverence and humility without which no-one can understand your truth, through the same Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord."

—John Calvin

Prelude to Rebellion (15:1-12)

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, now will burn across an entire nation in a conspiracy of hatred. The son was angry at his father for taking no action against his brother Amnon, who raped their sister Tamar. His anger escalated to rage for his father's public two-year humiliation of him. Now he conspires to strike deep wounds in his father's heart.

Absalom begins by 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: "no man listens to you on the part of the king" (15:3b). In the fertile soil of these empathetic hearts Absalom now plants the seeds of revolution: "Oh that one would appoint me judge in the land, then every man who has any suit could come to me, and I would give him justice" (15:4). The fortuitously timed meeting would then be sealed by Absalom's kiss, and the plaintiff would depart, having been personally received, empathetically listened to, and intimately touched by the son of the king. In this manner Absalom stole the hearts of all Israel away from his father.

Now, after four years of sowing the seeds of discontent within the populace, the time for action had arrived. Absalom comes to David under the guise of sacred duties to pay his vows to the Lord in appreciation for God having brought him back to Jerusalem. His action is not only treachery against his father, it is flagrant blasphemy against God. After years of aged weakness, David is unable to discern the deception; he sends Absalom away to Hebron in peace (*shalom*).

To the reader, this *shalom* is a word steeped in irony, for here is a son who is planning treachery against his father, a son whose very name means "father of peace." Finally, at the appropriate time, in a manner reminiscent of the battle of Jericho, Absalom sounds trumpets all throughout Israel, announcing that he is king. A new king has risen in Israel, a son of David, but he is a self-appointed king. As the trumpet blasts reverberate throughout the surrounding

districts of all Israel, David feels the tremor in Jerusalem.

We pick up the text in 2 Samuel 15:13.

Exit to Exile (15:13-16)

Then a messenger came to David, saying, "The hearts of the men of Israel are with Absalom." (15:13, NASB)

David's kingdom is collapsing under his feet, all at his son's initiative. What are the emotions that are churning inside him on this day? His life is now under a dark cloud of regret: regret for his handling of the Amnon/Tamar affair; regret for the way he handled his vengeful son Absalom and kept him banished in a rage of silence for two years. But underlining each layer of regret is bitter remorse for his own twin sins of adultery and murder that had birthed the character of his two sons. Yes, the kingdom is collapsing under David's feet. Once a salient shepherd boy, sweet singer in Israel, invincible warrior, now David is an outcast, on the edge of exile. What to do? To 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? What happens when you reap what you sow? When the affair is found out (as it always is) and your wife leaves? When the secret, silent drinking now starts screaming at your liver? When those minimum payments that bought you time now have purchased your slavery? When your job is eliminated? When you enter the jaws of a lawsuit and you cannot claim full innocence? What do you do? Can God's name be mentioned? Can his presence be sought? Will he be found? Can one ever be reinstated from the holy office that his own hands have corrupted? What do you do? Where do you go? Where do you find solace for your soul that wants to crawl away and hide and weep tears replete until you can weep no more? What to do?

In the many counseling situations I have with people who find themselves in circumstances like the ones I have listed, people whose whole world is being disassembled before their eyes, the best counsel I can offer them comes from the chapter of the David story to which we have now come, David's flight from Jerusalem to the desert. What follows is one of the most beautiful literary masterpieces in Scripture. Ari Cartun, my friend and fellow worker on the Stanford University campus for many years, wrote a brilliant article tracing the topography of David's journey as a template for the spiritual implications for David's soul. Cartun writes, "the primary unifying thread of the journey is its many ups and downs, both physically over a hilly terrain, and in David's fortunes. In fact, there is throughout this section a perfect correspondence between David's topographic and spiritual elevation and descent."¹

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. Along the way, five significant meetings force him into a deep reflection that nurtures his faith and strengthens his trust. My friend Ed Melinat tried to come to terms with the enormity of what is going on here. Here is what he says:

In some ways this text is overwhelming. There is so much that is happening all at once. We have to pay attention to it in a variety of ways. There is the initial story. Then there is a story within and a story layered upon the story. There is the intense narrative of a large and hurried retreat from a military stronghold. There is all the palace intrigue of a military coup and subsequent *contra coup*. There is the story of David falling headlong on his face before God that is superimposed on the whole story; but it is as if it is all in slow motion. There is the story of David as a Christ figure as he descends from his palace, crosses the Kidron and ascends the Mount of Olives and then descending again into the wilderness of God. It is also a resurrection story, a story of how God once again, and maybe in the deepest way, reaches out and upholds David, His man, when David is completely undone and without any power of his own.

Let us begin the journey with David. Verse 14:

And David said to all his servants who were with him at Jerusalem, "Arise and let us flee, for otherwise none of us shall escape from Absalom. Go in haste, lest he overtake us quickly and bring down calamity on us and strike the city with the edge of the sword." Then the king's servants said to the king, "Behold, your servants are ready to do whatever my lord the king chooses." So the king went out and all his household with him (lit. *at his feet*). But the king left ten concubines to keep the house. (15:14-16)

David wisely chooses to flee rather than fight, lest he bring the whole city down with him. But there is another reason for his flight: He has never reached for the crown throughout his life. Now when it is contested, he will not fight for it. God alone must reinstate him. With Absalom approaching the city the atmosphere in Jerusalem is charged with fear. David is consumed with haste. Twice he uses the word "quickly" (*mahar*), but his servants answer him with the Hebrew *bahar* ("choose"). Their steady coolness and their quiet rhyme of appreciation is meant to defuse the king's haste. It is a timely reminder to David that though he fears he must flee with speed, he is still the king of Israel, and as such his every word carries sovereign authority. Calmed by their word, David gathers up his family and servants, leaving behind ten concubines to maintain the palace until his safe return. He exits his palace, which overlooks the entire city, and walks away into exile.

Descent to the Kidron (15:17-18)

So the king went out and all his household with him (lit. *at his feet*), and they stopped at the last house. Now all his servants passed on beside him, all the Cherethites, all the Pelethites, and all the Gittites, six hundred men who had come with him (lit. *at his feet*) from Gath, passed on before the king.

What a poignant scene this is. The king exits his palace, the *highest* point in the city, and walks the entire length of

the city wall to the *lowest* point in the city, where he stops at the last house, the one that is furthest from his house. Ari Cartun writes:

As the palace was atop Jerusalem's highest point, thus David traversed the length of the city, probably to mobilize all his supporters. Having assembled them, the text says he 'stopped' at Beit haMerchak, as 'all his servants crossed at his command: the Cherethites and Pelethites, and 600 men who had followed him since his days at Gath, in revue before the king'...[thus] David had to endure the dual punishments of descending the full length of the city under the humiliating stares of the population and of gazing upon the whole of his beloved capital from which he would soon be exiled.²

The route that David chooses is not the quickest escape way out of Jerusalem, but it is the path most conducive to reflection, as is his mode of travel, which is on foot. This is not the most efficient way to flee in haste from the onslaught of the enemy, but it is a route that will bring the maximum benefit for David's soul. Thus we have here an important principle for people whose world is unraveling: Plot your course and route your steps through the darkness in a way that magnifies your sorrow and opens your soul for reflection.

David's choice of crossing at the "furthest house" is also deeply symbolic. Cartun writes, "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."³ David doesn't run away in secret. He leaves his home under the scrutiny of the public eye, in full view of all, on foot yet, with no royal escort, chariots or entourage. He carefully chooses his point of exit at the end of that steep descent, at that lowest, most shameful place, now an apt symbol and confession for his life.

David's public humiliation, however, only serves to intensify the loyalty of his subjects, most of whom are foreigners; and their loyalty is magnified by their tears. Assembled together, they now cross in review before the king: "all the Cherethites, all the Pelethites, and all the Gittites, six hundred men who had come with him from Gath" (Goliath's home town).

As they pass before the king, David is taken aback by the sight of one Gittite who just recently joined the holy ranks of his followers.

A Mirror of Loyal-love (15:19-23)

Then the king said to Ittai the Gittite, "Why will you also go with us? Return and remain with the king, for you are a foreigner and also an exile; return to your own place. You came only yesterday, and shall I today make you wander with us, while I go where I will? Return and take back your brothers; mercy and truth be with you." (15:19-20)

Standing by the Kidron, having divested himself of all dignity, David can hardly believe what he sees—a recent convert from Gath attempting to cross over with him. In a conversation that is reminiscent of Naomi's words to that sweet clinging Ruth (who also was a foreigner), David bids Ittai the Gittite to return home with his family. This

foreigner had pledged his vows a day earlier, and David cannot bear the thought of taking a man who was once a foreigner wandering in exile, back into that desolate, uncertain world. It is too great a price to pay. So David bids Ittai to stay in Jerusalem and throw his lot in with the new king—a much more certain situation. So he bids good-bye to Ittai, saying, “mercy and truth be with you.” David’s courageous word allows Ittai the freedom to annul his holy vows without guilt.

But Ittai refuses David’s sensitive offer. Verse 21:

But Ittai answered the king and said, “As the Lord lives, and as my lord the king lives, surely wherever my lord the king may be, whether for death or for life, there also your servant will be.” Therefore David said to Ittai, “Go and pass over.” So Ittai the Gittite passed over with all his men and all the little ones who {were} with him. (15:21-22)

“Ittai forcefully rejects David’s order, he does not consider going back, and expresses this by an oath.”⁴ Answering David’s command to return to his *place*, Ittai responds that his *place* is with the king. He is saying, “I belong just as closely to you as you do to God.” He poetically picks up on the word *place* and redefines it in terms that transcend time and space. Now *place* is stretched to the extreme limits of *in death or in life*. The general from Gath has skillfully lifted a line right out of David’s own poetry, one that described the loyalty of Jonathan (2 Sam 1:23: *in life and death not parted*). The love that Jonathan had extended to David over the years is now compressed into one moment. One gaze into Ittai’s face, and there appears a mirror reflecting the face of Jonathan, risen from the dead. How well David remembers Jonathan.

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

Just as David is at the nadir of his exodus, departing Jerusalem with the refuse of the city, God gives him the gift of loyal-love, a vision from his past, Jonathan, risen from the dead, and 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. “*What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul?*”

David reacts to Ittai’s oath by accepting it in two words of motion: “Go, march on!”⁵ The narrator, who up until now has given us a close-up view of these two men locked in embrace, now gives us a larger view. We see not only Ittai, but all his men, some six hundred under his command, and to our great surprise, all their little ones who cross over behind. The word “little ones” is the Hebrew word *taph*, a term of affection that “comes from the fond eye of the Hebrew parent watching the young child clinging to its mother—as it were, ranging itself by her” (Edersheim). These were the toddlers. As Jonathan had stripped and given all he had to David, so Ittai now gives all that he

has—his entire family, “the migration of a small nation!”⁶ What a beautiful scene this is as the foreigner, with family in tow, embraces the king at the very moment when David must embrace his shame.

And now the departure for the wilderness. Verse 23:

While all the country was weeping with a loud voice, all the people passed over. The king also passed over the brook Kidron, and all the people passed over toward the way of the (*face of the*) wilderness.

The scene is sealed with a whole nation bent over in tears and draped in sorrow. Their voices fill the valley of the Kidron in a chorus of anguish. If Absalom’s trumpets were reminiscent of the days of Joshua and the collapse of Jericho, so also this processional crossing over the Kidron evokes the memory of the crossing of the Jordan—but now in a painful reversal. Instead of a crossing over to possess a new land and a capital, it is a crossing over to the desert and exile: “toward the way of the *face* of the wilderness.” He who would not allow his son to see his *face*, is now consigned to the *face* of the wilderness.

The name *Kidron* is also resonant with symbolic meaning. Its root means “to be dark or obscure.” Fokkelman writes that the word occurs most frequently “in a context of mourning or disaster. The wadi occurs as a boundary, a deadline, and as a tip for rubbish and defiled material.”⁷ Thus David has carefully chosen the route of his exit to publicly portray shame and mourning. He leaves the highest place of his house and descends to the lowest place at the furthest house, from whence he will cross over to that place of obscurity and mourning. “His son has consigned him to the dustbin of history and all are witness to his humiliation.”⁸

Reflections on David’s Descent into the Dust

A. Direction for those in David’s plight

Do you find yourself in David’s plight today? Is your world being disassembled before your very eyes? Are your sins flying back in your face, forcing you to make an exit out of a home, a company, a marriage? If so, choose your route with care. Don’t run away secretly. Don’t grow bitter or fight back. Don’t be victimized by haste. Choose the slow route, the public route, the vulnerable route that will maximize your sorrow and heighten your humiliation. Carefully choose the lowest place, the furthest house, to make your crossing, where you can publicly confess your sin and embrace your shame. Rather than isolating you from others, this will elicit the highest forms of love, the strongest bonds of loyalty. I have watched this very thing happen over and over again in our men’s group. As men share their sordid stories, other men surround them with love and acceptance. But you will never know that love until you are broken and vulnerable. If you fight it, you will never find it.

Before you object, “I cannot do that,” think about the humiliation of David’s Greater Son.

B. Appreciation for Jesus’ humiliation

As we move from the David story to the Jesus story, we gain a deeper appreciation for our Lord’s humiliation. What do you think Jesus felt as he studied David’s flight and saw in it a foreshadowing of his own humiliation? Da-

vid's route of flight was the exact route Jesus took when he made his Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, but in reverse. And the spiritual journey of David's humiliation is identical with Jesus' exit from the Upper Room and his own journey to the Garden of Gethsemane, at the foot of the Kidron valley. In a sense, Jesus' descent transcended these dimensions, for he left "his Father's house" in heaven to descend to the "furthest house" of mourning, in Gethsemane, to the unspeakable shame of the cross. He carefully chose the route to that garden in the Kidron. His weeping there transcended David's weeping. He sweat drops of blood as he begged for some way other than the public, naked humiliation and torture of the cross. But there was no other way. So he accepted it, publicly identifying with the refuse of Jerusalem: Barabbas, the bloodthirsty revolutionary. But for Jesus in his hour of shame there was no Ittai the Gittite, no disciple to confess loyalty at the very moment when he had to embrace his shame. What was it that kept him going? The writer of Hebrews says, "for the joy set before Him He endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb 12:2). This view of our Lord's humiliation should move us deeply with inexpressible appreciation.

Thirdly, our text leaves us with an encouragement.

C. Encouragement to be an Ittai

Be an Ittai to Christ. Identify with Jesus in his shame. Much of our modern Christianity seeks to identify with Christ in his victory, striving to come out on top in sporting events, accumulating power, even preaching a blasphemous health and wealth message. But what about identifying with Christ in his shame? The writer of Hebrews exhorts his hearers,

Let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing his reproach. For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come (Heb 13:13-14).

Finally, be an Ittai to those who are in Christ by identifying with them in the moment they embrace their shame. Jonathan identified with David in his victory and pledged him a love that cost his life. Ittai the Gittite identified with David in his shame, pledged him a love that was stronger than death, and backed it up by uprooting his entire family, friends and community to live with David "outside the camp."

A beautiful example of this comes from one of our PBC family members. Becky Armstrong, sister of Rick Armstrong, was a vital Christian woman of vision and faith. When she visited Romania, long before the Iron Curtain fell, she felt deep longings for the mission field. Later she became engaged to a man named John Matthews. But tragically, the night before her engagement party, a biopsy indicated that she had a rare form of soft tissue cancer. Becky arrived at the party on a stretcher. Several family members, shocked by this, began to question John about the wisdom of undertaking a marriage with such an uncertain future. But John remained undaunted, and strengthened his commitment to Becky. That was in April of 1988. Becky underwent several surgeries; she had chemotherapy and radiation treatments. But as sick as she was, she insisted on walking down the aisle on her wedding day. In tennis shoes, leaning on her crutches, Becky walked down the aisle of this church on that day, and she and John exchanged holy vows. What kind of emotion to do you think was felt on that altar when the pastor read the lines,

*for better or worse
in sickness and in health
till death do us part.*

Three years later, Becky died in the arms of her Ittai. John now serves God with Becky's dream in his heart, on the mission field, working for Brother Andrew.

Pray that at some time in your life you will embrace the joy of being like Ittai, the Gittite from Gath. Amen.

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1. Ari Mark Cartun, "Topography as a Template for David's Fortunes during His Flight," *Journal of Reform Judaism*, Spring 1991, 18.
2. Cartun, "Topography," 21.
3. Cartun, "Topography," 21.
4. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 1, *King David* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 182. I am indebted to this classic work on narrative for many of my observations in this text.
5. Fokkelman, *King David*, 183.
6. Fokkelman, *King David*, 183.
7. Fokkelman, *King David*, 184.
8. Fokkelman, *King David*, 185.



ASCENDING OUT OF THE MOURNING DUST

SERIES: *THE DIARY OF AN OLD KING*

Catalog No. 1038

2 Samuel 15:23-37

24th Message

Brian Morgan

November 10th, 1996

As one of our elders was surveying the life of David from the book of 2 Samuel and he arrived at the account of the king's exit from his palace to the desert, he commented: "I enjoyed 'The Lion in Winter' [the story of David's later years] much more than the 'boy king'." This is where we all live, isn't it? Who among us has not been stung by sorrow, wounded by the wages of sin, or at least seen the effects of sin on a family member? Who among us can say they have never tasted the tainted fruit of having their own way, forcing them to make a painful exit from all that is familiar? Yes, "The Lion in Winter" touches much more deeply than the 'boy king.'

The life of David is a story that is painfully real, and yet as the account unfolds, the narrator leads us into the most sacred moments of love, trust, and redemption. J.P. Fokelman comments that as

David's world is tottering, [he] faces his fate by honestly and realistically, formulating it in the contacts with Ittai and Zadok...he meets powerful support from the unconditional loyalty of individual, and groups of, subjects. 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 egoistically 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.¹

Our text today drives home the lesson of how to be a man, how to be a true human being when you face the loss of everything you hold dear. David has exited his palace in Jerusalem. He has closed the door behind him and begun his final descent along the city wall, to the Kidron valley. The place he chooses to make his historic crossing to that other world is at the "last house," the location where the refuse exits the city. Bereft of royal apparel and courtly entourage, David publicly embraces his shame. And though he is forced to flee in haste, he chooses a slow, contemplative route of departure, one that will make him feel every stone and pebble under his bare feet, one that will magnify his sorrow and heighten his humiliation. When he reaches the place of crossing he is embraced by an entire nation, consisting mainly of foreigners, in a foreshadowing of Christ, who also would be embraced by foreigners in his time of humiliation.

From that lowest place David now rises, lifts his head, and makes his ascent to the summit of the Mount of Olives. Our text today reveals how to ascend to that mysterious place of worship that is to be found in the midst of deepest sorrow.

I. Rise Naked With No Props (15:23-29)

(a) The Backdrop: A Miniature Universe of Mourning

(15:23)

While **all** the **land** (or *earth*) was weeping with a loud voice, **all** the **people** passed over (were **crossing over**). The king also passed over (was **crossing over**) the brook Kidron, and **all** the **people** passed over (were **crossing over**) toward the way (of the face) of the **wilderness**. (NASB)

To show the heightened spiritual dimension of David's journey, the narrator changes from prose to the elevated medium of 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 is an event of cosmic dimensions.

At the center of the verse is the king, around whom everything revolves. Bracketing his movement are the twin lines containing the phrases, "*all the people*," lines which in turn are framed in the largest of geographical dimensions, "*all the land*," with that foreboding "*face of the wilderness*" looming over the horizon. This concentric structure reveals that everything in life is integrated; nothing occurs in isolation. Thus, the fate of the God's messianic king determines the fate of all the people, which in turn impacts the entire earth, from the Garden of Eden to the desert.

In this case it is the king's movement, his *crossing over*, that moves the whole earth with him. But this is a movement in the wrong direction, thus every line is tinged with a dense sorrow that is as painful as the exit from Eden. This sorrow is manifested in every dimension: first, in what we *hear*, in the loud *weeping* of all the earth; then in what we *perceive*, the king at the Kidron (which means "dark" or "obscure," hence a place of mourning); and finally, in what we *see*: that terrifying face of the wilderness. This last image is so foreboding that the movement that dominated every line ceases and we are cast in a moment of frozen silence.

It is at that moment that David raises his head out of dust of mourning and beholds the priests coming to meet him.

(b) The Individual Encounter: Zadok the Priest (15:24-29)

Now behold, **Zadok** also came, and all the Levites with him carrying the ark of the covenant of God. And they set down the ark of God, and Abiathar came up (or, "*made a fire offering*") until all the people had finished passing (**crossing over**) from the city. (15:24)

David is embraced by the priest, Zadok, and all the Levites, who are carrying the ark of the covenant. Here is the entire priesthood giving their fugitive king their full

weight of trust and their most valuable gift. At first glance one might think David would be elated by Zadok's vote of confidence and that of the entire priesthood and the pledged presence of God himself, symbolized by the fire offering of Abiathar and the ark of the covenant. But I think David, whose spiritual senses are now highly sensitized by his grief, is jolted by the horror of a sacred memory. Viewing this scene against the backdrop of Israel's history, the memory of Joshua at the Jordan rises out of his imagination:

And the priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan while all Israel crossed on dry ground, until all Israel had finished crossing the Jordan. (Joshua 3:17; cf. 4:1, 11)

Sorrow magnifies the senses, enabling us to see more than just one dimension in an event, integrating the present with past history. The juxtaposition of these two scenes deepens David's sorrow. The nation, the priests and the ark, together with all the people, crossing over in a divine miracle of protection, now appear to be unraveling as a result of the king's sin. David feels the weight of *walking backwards* in history, unraveling the development of God's kingdom over the last four centuries, perhaps even further to the very memory of "'Avram the Hebrew' (Hebrew - *ha'Ivri*, 'transient?' 'the one from across the river?'), for David has now become a wandering patriarch like his ancestor."² So this gracious gesture of loyalty and gift of the ark and its offerings only serve to intensify David's ache in exiting the city.

What should David do? Export the ark with him into the wilderness, carrying the fortunes of God with him into exile? For David, that would be the height of presumption. It would be saying that God could be manipulated by him. This was Saul's gravest sin. He was always trying to manipulate God to join him on his terms. Saul refused to submit to the limitations of judgment and discipline.

But David is a man of different spirit. He surrenders unconditionally to the hands of God.

And the king said to Zadok, "**Return** the ark of God to the city. If I find favor in the sight (**eyes**) of the Lord then He will bring me back again (cause me to **return**), and show me (cause me to **see**) both it and His habitation. But if He should say thus, 'I have no delight in you,' behold, here I am, let Him do to me as seems good to Him (in His **eyes**)." (15:25-26)

Through a skillful play on the words *return* and *eyes*, David unfolds the mysterious relationship between repentance and restoration. The Hebrew word for *return* (*shuv*), used here four times, also means to *repent*, i.e., literally "to turn around 180 degrees." David knows that without true repentance on his part there will be no possibility of restoration, so he demonstrates true repentance (*shuv*) by allowing the ark to return (*shuv*) to Jerusalem. His faith enables him to fully accept his fate. He will carry no props into the wilderness. That is why he tells Zadok to *return* (*shuv*) the ark of the covenant to the city.

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 the Lord's hands to do whatever is *good* in his *eyes*. The terrible implication of David's words is that he may not return; but he leaves that unstated and open to God's prerogative. David's spirit is totally absent of any semblance of coercion. He allows God space in the relationship, allowing him to *return* to his place, creating some distance between God and himself. In this way God is allowed to take the first step in restoration. If it comes, it will be on God's terms and timing, thus it will be pure gift. Restoration is not assumed, presumed or demanded by David. This leaves God complete freedom to act in grace. This is faith at its finest.

As David gives voice to his trust, he is given a flash of insight. Verse 27:

The king said also to Zadok the priest, "Are you not a seer? (or "**See** for yourself") **Return** to the city in peace and your two sons with you, your son Ahimaaz and Jonathan the son of Abiathar. **See**, I am going to wait at the fords of the wilderness until word comes from you to inform me." Therefore Zadok and Abiathar **returned** the ark of God to Jerusalem and remained there. (15:27-29)

Precisely at the moment that David gives up and lets go he is granted insight to see God's provision right in front of his eyes. The words *see* 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. This happens just as the widow from Tekoa had told David: "Yet God does not take away life, but plans ways so that the banished one may not be cast out from him" (2 Sam 14:14). What was spoken of originally in Absalom's interest is now David's.³

The first line, "Are you not a seer?" can also be translated as a command: "*See* for yourself," i.e., "take special care in the following matter." David commissions Zadok with concealed words, giving him the grave responsibility of establishing a network of spies within Absalom's palace, while David will await essential news on the other, more dangerous side of the Jordan. "The vigilance of the human eye is the sequel to, the partner of God's eye."⁴ David's letting go, his allowing the ark to return to Jerusalem, becomes the vehicle for God to cause his return. "In the meantime we admire the presence of mind with which David—scarcely departed—opens a line of communication with the lion's den and with which he leaves nothing undone in favor of his return as the king reborn."⁵ Here we see the beautiful balance between David's total trust in God and his own use of every means available to aid his future deliverance. Zadok and Abiathar take on their royal commission and return the ark to Jerusalem, where they will remain, awaiting Absalom, who is just kilometers distant from the city.

Meanwhile, David continues his ascent up the Mount of Olives.

II. Lifting the Head to Pray (15:30-37)

(a) The Backdrop: A World Ascending in Mourning (15:30)

And David went up (was *going up*) the *ascent* of the Mount of Olives, and wept (was weeping) as he went (as he was *going up*), and his head was covered and he walked (was walking) barefoot. Then all the people who

were with him each covered his head and *went up* weeping as they went (as they were *going up*).

Again the narrator paints an all-encompassing scene, using a minimum of words dense with power. This verse is built upon the tiny skeleton of the Hebrew word *alah*, which is repeated five times. The word means “to go up,” “to climb,” “to ascend.” One of its noun forms means “whole burnt offering,” because the entire offering was consumed on the altar and *ascended* in smoke to heaven (a picture of complete dependence on God). Here the whole nation is pictured like a burnt offering to God, totally consumed by the king’s mourning as they make that strenuous ascent up the Mount of Olives. Every action of the king is mirrored in the people: barefoot, weeping, dust on his head. The total integration of the inner soul with the outward actions, and of the one king with all the people ascending this mount in tandem, is a sweeter scent of sacred worship than any burnt offering.

Out of this mini-universe, a cameo of national mourning, emerges David’s next personal encounter.

(b) The Individual Encounter: Hushai the Archite (15:31-37)

Now someone told David, saying, “Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom.” And David said, “O Lord I pray, make the counsel of Ahithophel foolishness.” It happened as David was coming to the summit (lit. ‘the **head**’), where God was worshipped, that behold, Hushai the Archite met him with his coat torn, and dust on his **head**. And David said to him, “If you **cross over** with me, then you will be a burden to me. But if you **return** to the city, and say to Absalom, ‘I will be your servant, O king; as I have been your father’s servant in time past, so I will now be your servant,’ then you can thwart the counsel of Ahithophel for me. And are not Zadok and Abiathar the priests with you there? So it shall be that whatever you hear from the king’s house, you shall report to Zadok and Abiathar the priests. Behold their two sons are with them there, Ahimaaz, Zadok’s son and Jonathan, Abiathar’s son; and by them you shall send me everything that you hear.” So Hushai, David’s friend, came into the city, and Absalom came into Jerusalem.

A messenger arrives with the worst possible news: a member of David’s cabinet, chief counselor Ahithophel, has betrayed the king and joined Absalom’s conspiracy. As the breath of these words reaches David’s ear, the king breathes out a prayer of his own, crying: “Foolishness please, the counsel of Ahithophel, O Lord!” This quick prayer of desperation, uttered in haste, has only four words, all of which are nouns in Hebrew. David doesn’t have time to include a verb! No sooner do the words leave his lips than he arrives at the summit of the Mount of Olives, the place where it was customary to worship God. Here God graciously gives him an immediate answer to his prayer in the face of Hushai the Archite. Ari Cartun writes:

[T]he 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.

At this point, interestingly, David is higher than he was when he started out, and higher than Absalom will ever get, for the summit of the Mount of Olives overlooks David’s city, including the palace from which David hastily fled and to the top of which Absalom shall climb. Thus 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.⁶

Once again, a divine appointment is coupled with a flash of human insight. David reasons: “I must send this man back to Jerusalem and set him against Ahithophel if I am to have any chance of escaping from the grip of his brilliant counsel.” So David plans an elaborate spy network. What Hushai hears in the palace he will pass on to the priests, Zadok and Abiathar, who, while executing their priestly duties, will secretly pass it on to their sons, who serve as runners to the waiting David. The elaborate network makes us feel the dangerous distance that has to be traversed between father and son, David and Absalom. Will Hushai agree to David’s plan? It is the supreme sacrifice of friendship to put one’s life at risk inside enemy headquarters, but Hushai agrees. His return to Jerusalem “gives great depth to the [term] ‘David’s friend.’ Hushai shows us what friendship is capable of.”⁷

Hushai reaches the city a little before Absalom. He has just enough time to change his clothes and wash his dusty face. And by the time Absalom arrives in Jerusalem, David has just crossed the summit of the Mount of Olives, a hair’s breath away from being spotted, before descending down the other side. Now it is impossible for him to be encircled by Absalom’s army. Thus 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; Hushai will be there to counteract Ahithophel. And the negative *report* which David hears finds its perfect counterpart in the network of *reporting* that David has set up for his deliverance.

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, the God who is a shield about him, the glory and lifter of his head (Ps 3:3).

III. Reflections: The Divine Dance

(a) A Royal Dance of King and People

The literary structure of David’s ascent gives a clue to the text’s deeper spiritual significance. In each scene the narrator first paints a compact, moving portrait of king and people united in cosmic proportions and density. Once the king has faced and embraced his humiliation, a symphony of love envelops him. In my opinion, this dance is more beautiful than David’s dance of jubilation when the ark first came into Jerusalem. This is the dance of a whole nation embracing the king’s sorrow as if it were their own—an identification that allows them to leave their possessions, their homes and their city to find their uncertain destiny with David. His tears are their tears, his torn garments are their garments, his humiliating dust is placed on their heads, every stony pebble under his bare feet scores their feet. This is a royal dance of king and people, one in which every step of the king is perfectly mirrored by his

subjects. And behind the dance, all of creation weeps on cue with the royal “couple.” This is the resonant energy of love that enables David to ascend so that by the end of the day he will be lifted up to the mount where God is worshiped.

How can we do this today? Catholics and Orthodox branches of the church preserve this in their tradition of pilgrimages. We may feel this practice is a bit morbid, but it is an attempt to experience the humiliation and sorrows of Christ, something that we evangelicals often deny ourselves. I remember that one of my most sacred moments of worship occurred in Jerusalem in 1976. I was with a group standing over the pavement where Christ was flogged, and there we sang the hymn “Man of Sorrows.”

But on a more practical, daily basis, I would suggest you consider positioning yourself at those crossroads in life, those exit points where people are forced to embrace their shame—prisons, hospitals, crisis pregnancy centers, courtrooms—and simply identify with them in their sorrow. You don’t have to be an expert who seeks to fix everything; just be a friend and identify with them. Take the opportunity to look them in the eye, weep with them, embrace them, and walk with them, especially if they are believers, for then we are under obligation. Remember Paul’s admonition, “Bear one another’s burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2). In this context, one of the burdens we need to bear is the sorrow of sin that weighs heavily on others. Regrettably, at times we trample on our wounded instead of lifting them up.

(b) A Divine Dance of God and Humanity

But there is more going on here than an identification of people with king. There is also a dynamic dance between God and man—the two embracing partners of divine sovereignty and human initiative.⁸ Against the backdrop of the crowd emerges these wonderful, divinely timed encounters with Zadok and Hushai. As David gazes into each face he sees the very face of God, whose presence is more real, I think, than he ever saw in Jerusalem. As they converse together, king and friend, David is seized by the concept of divine sovereignty on the one hand and human initiative on the other. This is a dance that is played out in an exquisite harmony and balance that defies orchestration. All the way up the mountain we see this two-step dance of man and God, twin mirrors of each other, ascending in the slow, unhurried pace of a divine waltz. What love is this, that each is so caught up in the presence of the other that the urgency of the 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. There is so much tension breaking out in every dimension within the text, yet the divine intimacy that permeates the air is overwhelming. It has been magnified by the sorrow with an intensity that David found rare in Jerusalem. Isn’t it ironic that it is the ache of departure that has brought God near, with an intensity that the king seldom experienced in Jerusalem?

(c) The Dance Memorialized in a Poem

So moved was David by this divine dance that after he had safely escaped, he expanded on that prayer that he had breathed on the mountain. He incorporated it into a poem, which became Psalm 3. This poem was then transformed into a song in Israel’s hymnal, becoming the first Psalm to be prayed in their hymnal (Psalms 1 and 2 serve as the introduction to the Psalms). In these verses, David invites all to enter into that sacred moment of the divine dance.

Psalm 3:

(A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son.)

O Lord, how my adversaries have **increased!**

Many are rising up against me.

Many are saying of my soul,

“There is no deliverance for him in God.” Selah.

But Thou, O Lord, art a **shield** about me,

My **glory**, and the One who **lifts** my head.

I was crying to the Lord with my voice,

And He answered me from His holy mountain. Selah.

I lay down and slept; I awoke,

for the Lord sustains me.

I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people

Who have set themselves against me round about.

Arise, O Lord; save me, O my God!

You have smitten all my enemies on the cheek;

You have shattered the teeth of the wicked.

Salvation belongs to the Lord;

Thy blessing be upon Thy people! Selah.

If your world is falling apart today, and if you have to exit the city, do not miss this dance.

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1. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 1, *King David* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 190. I am indebted to this classic work on narrative for many of my observations in this text.

2. Ari Mark Cartun, “Topography as a Template for David’s Fortunes during His Flight Before Absalom,” *Journal of Reform Judaism*, Spring 1991, 23.

3. Fokkelman, *King David*, 186.

4. Fokkelman, *King David*, 187.

5. Fokkelman, *King David*, 187.

6. Cartun, “Topography,” 25.

7. Fokkelman, *King David*, 191.

8. See Bruce Waltke’s outstanding article, “The Dance Between God and Humanity,” in *Doing Theology for the People of God: Studies in Honor of J. I. Packer*, Donald Lewis and Alister McGrath eds. (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 1996), 87-104.



DAVID'S FINAL DESCENT: USED AND ABUSED

SERIES: *THE DIARY OF AN OLD KING*

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2 Samuel 16:1-14

25th Message

Brian Morgan

November 17th, 1996

Growing up as the only boy in a four-sibling household, I loved to go on trips with men. Camping, fishing, hunting trips—I would do anything just to be with men. But I discovered that one can go on a journey with a man and yet never really get “inside” him. Elie Wiesel took a traumatic journey to a Nazi concentration camp with his father, and watched him die there. Yet in the first line of his memoirs, the survivor of the Holocaust writes:

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. What was the secret of his inner life? What was he thinking as he stared in silence at some far-off, invisible point in space?¹

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 that holy crossroads when he becomes a man of God.

That rare sense of privilege resounds in my heart this morning as we come to our text in the David story. This detailed account of a 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 his 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 David exits the city with the refuse; the loud weeping of a nation grieving with him; his clothes of sorrow draped in dust and ripped in mourning; and then the surprise of certain figures embracing him with costly love. The committed faces of these figures give us sudden visions of Jonathan risen from the dead. 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 is a mountain-top experience in every sense of the word, one that is coupled with a vision of restoration.

But, like most things in life, the vision of triumph is followed by more humiliation. Before David will be fully restored he has to make another descent. On the way he will come under vicious attack from two members of the family of Saul: Ziba, the servant of Mephibosheth, and Shimei, the son of Gera. David is used by one and abused by the other. At the lowest point in his life, he is taken advantage of and trampled in the dust. 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 downward 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 we discover the most pleasing puri-

fication for David's soul.

I. Ziba: Deceptive Generosity (16:1-4)

Now when David had passed a little beyond the summit, behold, Ziba the servant of Mephibosheth met him with a couple of saddled donkeys, and on them were two hundred loaves of bread, a hundred clusters of raisins, a hundred summer fruits, and a jug of wine. And the king said to Ziba, “Why do you have these?” And Ziba said, “The donkeys are for the king's household to ride, and the bread and summer fruit for the young men to eat, and the wine, for whoever is faint in the wilderness to drink.” Then the king said, “And where is your master's son?” And Ziba said to the king, “Behold, he is staying in Jerusalem, for he said, “Today the house of Israel will restore the kingdom of my father to me.” So the king said to Ziba, “Behold, all that belongs to Mephibosheth is yours.” And Ziba said, “I prostrate myself; let me find favor in your sight, O my lord, the king!” (NASB)

David's descent down the mountain and his meetings with Ziba and Shimei are the counterparts to his meetings with Zadok and Hushai on his earlier ascent up the Mount of Olives. His first encounter on this occasion is with Ziba. This is the man who, when he was commanded by David to serve Jonathan's only heir, the cripple Mephibosheth, was overcome with jealousy and resentment. Ever since that day he has been plotting, circling like a vulture, awaiting the moment when he could seize his master's estate. Now, when David is most vulnerable, Ziba sees his opportunity. How often does it happen that when people are at their most vulnerable, the vultures descend and devour their prey?

Ziba intersects David's path just after the king has had his encounter with Hushai and received the dreaded news that Ahithophel had joined Absalom's conspiracy. So with the stinging memory of betrayal fresh in David's memory, Ziba arrives clothed in the mask of a loyal servant. He surprises David with an array of generous gifts and provisions—donkeys, bread, raisins, fruit, wine—enough to feed an army. On closer examination, the arrangement of these gifts is so similar to the arrangement that Abigail presented David when she intercepted him for his good (1 Sam 25:18), that one senses it is a result of deliberate design. Ziba presents himself as a the “new” Abigail, in the shadow of her memory and all that she evoked in David. 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.” What stinging words to a man who

has just been betrayed by another son! Ari Cartun writes: “[Ziba] is bringing a bribe and a slander to ingratiate himself to a man who would overreact to a tale of Mephibosheth’s disloyalty, being as he is in the grip of Absalom’s disloyalty.”²

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.

How depraved, to take advantage of an exiled king when his soul is gripped by mourning and betrayal! How treacherous, to give gifts that are designed to disinherit the innocent! 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. David, none the wiser, with faulty judgment, continues his descent, “while fleeing from one who is disloyal, he has blindly abetted another who is disloyal.”³

We come now to David’s encounter with Shimei.

II. Shimei: A Storm of Criticism (16:5-14)

When King David came to Bahurim, behold, there came out from there a man of the family of the house of Saul whose name was Shimei, the son of Gera; he came out cursing continually as he came. And he threw stones at David and at all the servants of King David; and all the people and all the mighty men were at his right hand and at his left. And thus Shimei said when he cursed, “Get out, get out, you man of bloodshed, and worthless fellow! [McCarter translates: “you bloodstained fiend from hell!”] The Lord has returned upon you all the bloodshed of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the Lord has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. And behold, you are taken in your own evil, for you are a man of bloodshed!” (16:5-8)

Just when it seemed things could not get any worse, the situation deteriorates further. As David and his men continue their perilous descent down the mountain, to the small village of Bahurim, another Saulide, Shimei, appears on the horizon. This man creates no small commotion as he *comes out*, ranting and raving, swearing endlessly at the top of his voice. Then, to the utter amazement of all, he starts pelting stones at the king and his followers. 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 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.⁴

David’s exit from Jerusalem gives Shimei occasion to vent “a poisonous and savage rage”⁵ 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 that 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 in his newest book, 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!⁶

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

Then Abishai the son of Zeruiah said to the king, “Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over now, and cut off his head.” (16:9)

The sons of Zeruiah could always be counted on for swift, severe action when conflict arose. On the surface, Abishai’s response seems highly orthodox. David, his lord and king, is being wrongly accused in an area in which he is innocent. 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 (more times than in any other text in the OT). If cursing 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, lacking either judge or witness, Shimei takes it upon himself to carry out the death penalty—and not just upon David, but his whole army. Add to the injustice Abishai’s love for David, and this son of Zeruiah’s righteous anger certainly appears justified. To these heated emotions, Abishai applies a little theology that seems well suited to the situation. In his view, the whole scene is no different from than the occasion when Goliath cursed the living God. The Philistine giant had sneered at and cursed David when the king was but a youth, saying, “Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?” David, of course, promptly made Goliath a dead dog—and cut off his head into the bargain. So Abishai offers to be God’s man in the gap: “Let me go now, and cut off his head,” he pleads with David.

Some contemporary Christians react in a similar fashion today. They imagine they see things clearly; to them, everything seems black and white. Injustice is present, the correct theology is obvious, so they attack the evil head on with quick, severe strokes to eliminate the wrong that appears embodied in those who attack them. Sadly however, in this encounter, Abishai is no different than Shimei.

Fortunately, David had a different view of the situation. Verse 10:

But the king said, “What have I to do with you, O sons of Zeruiah? If he curses, and if the Lord has told him, ‘Curse David,’ then who shall say, ‘Why have you done so?’” Then David said to Abishai and to all his servants, “Behold, my son who came out from me seeks my life; how much more now this Benjamite? Let him alone and let him curse, for the Lord has told him. Perhaps the Lord will look on my affliction and return good to me instead of his cursing this day.” (16:10-12)

First, 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 have worked together to heighten David's spiritual sensitivities. At this point, integration is returning to his soul, so that now he sees life in its many dimensions. Thus while Abishai could say, "Consider the source of the criticism. This Shimei is a 'dead dog'", David could respond by saying, "Yes, consider the source." David's faith penetrates beyond the immediate to the true 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 own angry son; and behind the voice of a son he hears the voice of the Lord.

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 a messenger, like a Nathan or a woman from Tekoa, coming to him in disguise to speak the voice of the Lord. In Shimei's voice he hears the angry voice of his son, and behind that, the voice of the Lord. "Truth is truth," George MacDonald once said, "whether it is spoken by the lips of Jesus or Balaam's ass."⁷

Another factor that has sensitized David is the fact that this event occurs at Bahurim, the place where Michal was forcefully ripped from her husband's arms (2 Sam 3:16).⁸ 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 people were left in tears. So behind Shimei's curse David hears the Lord's accusation, and behind the blows he feels the hand of the Lord.

This theology is a very bitter pill to swallow. The only reason we can swallow it is that it comes from the lips of David. But this would not be appropriate counsel to give anyone going into exile, for then we might be guilty of acting like Job's counselors. Only the one who is going through the situation can make these connections. If there has been sin in the past, he or she can say, by faith, "It is the Lord."

In summary, when you are unjustly criticized, do not try to dismiss it based on the source, but try to penetrate beyond the critic to *the* source behind the criticism. If you can be truly humbled by unwarranted abuse, you have entered the graduate school of spirituality. Yet so often we spend much wasted effort defending ourselves. A.W. Tozer writes, "The labor of self-love is a heavy one indeed. Think of yourself whether much of your sorrow has not arisen from someone speaking slightly of you. As long as you set yourself up as a little god to which you must be loyal there will be those who will delight to offer affront to your idol. How then can you hope to have inward peace? The heart's fierce effort to protect itself from every slight, to shield its touchy honor from the bad opinion of friend and enemy, will never let the mind have rest."⁹

The second thing we must learn is how to respond to the criticism. Fokkelman captures the genius of David's reaction in these words:

First, David does not deal directly with Shimei, for 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...[but by naming the Lord,] 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...[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] but creating with them a complete text of his own, David nullifies the poisonous influence of Shimei's curse.¹⁰

David has successfully defused a potential minefield, where a misstep could have proved fatal. With great spiritual sensitivity he transforms Shimei's curse into an opportunity for purification, retribution into forgiveness, and pleasure in the misfortune of others into a hope in the kindness of God who takes pity on our plight. So David the poet embraces the vocabulary of the curse and transforms it into vibrant, life-giving verse. Such is the power of the poem! Surprisingly, he does not pick up the key word of Shimei's speech (*blood*, used three times). In the silence of innocence that word is left alone, for true innocence requires no defense.

This brings us to the last scene. Verse 13:

So David and his men went on the way; and Shimei went along on the hillside parallel with him and as he went he cursed, and cast stones and threw dust at him (dusted him with dust). And the king and all the people who were with him arrived weary and he refreshed himself there. (16:13-14)

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. Fokkelman points out that the mention of *parallel lines* is symbolic: that Shimei "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."¹¹

At last, David arrives at the fords of the Jordan, at the end of a very long day and a fatiguing march; and at last the army can "pause for breath. The fugitives need fresh air, particularly after the clouds of dust that Shimei stirred up."¹² David has ceased descending. He is as low as he will go. His journey has brought him to the place where he will be fully embraced by God. Thus at the fords of the Jordan he refreshes himself and finds life in a poem and a song. Psalm 3:3-5,

**But Thou, O Lord, art a shield about me,
My glory, and the One who lifts my head.
I was crying to the Lord with my voice,
And He answered me from His holy mountain. Selah.
I lay down and slept;
I awoke, for the Lord sustains me.**

After being pelted by the stones of Shimei's hate, David sings a song; then he gets into his sleeping bag and goes to sleep. The trust which David voiced to Zadok has been put to the test and purified by Shimei; and David seals that trust in the sacred act of sleep. So the king ends his journey

at the lowest place geographically, but at the highest pinnacle of faith, a faith so holy it casts our gaze upon his Greater Son, who...

While being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed (1 Pet 2:23-24).

III. Reflecting on the Irony of Pain

As we reflect on this scene of descent, we are struck by the irony of David's pain. It was an ache that made him vulnerable to deception, yet it made him steadfast and pure in the face of hate. His pain was a gaping hurt that blinded him, but that same hurt had imbued him with penetrating vision.

Descent Into The Dust
2 Samuel 16:1-14

*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.*

This sermon is dedicated to
David Roper,
who taught me to go unarmed into the wilderness,
and to silent sleep under Shimei's stones.

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

2. Ari Mark Cartun, "Topography as a Template for David's Fortunes during His Flight before Absalom," *Journal of Reform Judaism*, Spring 1991, 27.

3. Cartun, "Topography," 28.

4. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 1, *King David* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 196.

5. Fokkelman, *King David*, 198.

6. David Roper, *A Man to Match the Mountain: Overcoming the Obstacles of Life* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1996), 211, 213.

7. Roper, 213.

8. Cartun, "Topography," 29, writes, "Surely Paltiel's very name, 'God is my refuge,' applies to David, a refugee depending upon God's will, here! To reinforce this connection, David had been described in 15:30 as 'crying as he ascended' and Paltiel, similarly, in 3:16, had followed Michal as she was carried off into exile, 'crying as he went.'"

9. Roper, 220.

10. Fokkelman, *King David*, 199-200.

11. Fokkelman, *King David*, 201-202.

12. Fokkelman, *King David*, 202.



HEAVEN IN THE SAND

SERIES: *THE DIARY OF AN OLD KING*

Catalog No. 1040

Psalm 63

26th Message

Brian Morgan

November 24th, 1996

We have carefully charted the course of David's journey from the palace to the desert and the many ups and downs of his soul along the way. The king's walk to exile has covered twenty miles, and a descent of four thousand feet. In the last scene we left David, weary after the long journey, together with all the people at the fords of the Jordan. He had finally reached his destination, the wilderness of Judah, and there he refreshed himself. Much has happened in just a few kilometers. For David, a lifetime of emotion has been compressed into hours: sorrow coupled with surprise; humiliation yoked with love; delight dancing on the heels of betrayal; illumination birthed out of abuse, and human initiative quickened by divine sovereignty.

The clearest evidence that David is being restored is the fact that spiritual integration is returning to his soul. Everything that had once been fragmented and torn now appears to be reconnecting into a unified whole. Spiritual insight returns; honesty is welcomed; tensions are acknowledged. A wholeness that breeds integrity settles deep into David's soul. Miraculously, the real David is coming back—and he knows it. Even though he is forced to live as a fugitive on the run, he takes time out to return to his calling as a poet and writes Psalm 63. He cannot let the significance of his journey to exile fade away into the desert dust. He is driven by a deep passion to memorialize this spiritual journey into Israel's sacred memory, so that the taste of eternity which intersected his painful path for a moment in time can be relived again and again.

Why poetry? you ask. Walter Brueggemann writes:

The...task of articulation for the preacher is to trace and voice the delicate, tortured, dramatic way in which God moves for and with us from one world to the other, a move wrought in love and faithfulness, but also wrought in grief and humiliation...The artful drama of hurt healed requires an artful voice that stands shrewdly against the voices that either make guilt our fate, or that offer healing too soon and too cheaply...When the text comes to speak about this alternative life wrought by God, the text must use poetry. There is no other way to speak.¹

In this psalm, David crafts vibrant verses designed to transport the poet to heaven, indeed to the highest heavens, within reach of God's very throne, by interspersing his speech with vivid images of the mud, muck and mire of earth below.

The superscription of the text is: *"A psalm of David,*

when he was in the wilderness of Judah." The vocabulary of the psalm, and the fact that David as king (v 11), is fondly recalling his experience of worshiping God in Jerusalem (v 2), points to his estrangement from Absalom as the appropriate context, rather than the period when he was persecuted by Saul. The psalm is a devotional masterpiece, a "rare jewel of Christian contentment," which gives the reader a privileged look inside David's soul at perhaps its finest hour. Derek Kidner says of this text: "There may be other psalms that equal this outpouring of devotion; few if any that surpass it."²

Psalm 63 means much to me personally. This was one of the texts that I stumbled upon at a time when I was drowning in sorrow, and in it I found a shelter for my soul. Like David, I was about to exit from Jerusalem when I got a telephone call from home, from my wife Emily. It was tragic news. Emily's sister, who had earlier been diagnosed as HIV positive, now had full blown AIDS and was close to death. I was stunned. I wanted to go home, but I couldn't. I had to get back on a bus that was leaving Jerusalem. Soon we were headed south, through the Negev, into the wilderness to Egypt. As I took my seat, my mind was dazed. It was as though I was awakening from a dream. My eyes were glazed in tears. Though I was among friends, I felt very much alone.

The bus transported me to a place I did not want to go, through that dreaded highway of the wilderness. I felt like I was taking a backwards journey into grief's vertigo. Driven by pain, I reached for my Hebrew book of psalms and by chance opened to Psalm 63. When I read the words, *"A psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah,"* a strange comfort emerged in the ache. The poem carved an entrance into my soul and began to do its work in me. The world outside became surreal, as if it was passing in slow motion. My soul seemed to leave the company of my companions and to fly away to a far off place, a place that was safe, at home. Ever since, this psalm has been a sacred memory for me, a reminder of a feast that is provided in the wilderness.

While the narrative of 2 Samuel 15-16 unfolds David's physical journey to exile, this poem unfolds the journey that was taking place inside his soul. In its verses the poet recounts three gifts which the wilderness provided for his broken heart. The first gift is an increased hunger for God.

I. Appetites Are Intensified (63:1-4)

**O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly;
My soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You,
In a dry and weary land where there is no water.
Thus I have beheld You in the sanctuary,
To see Your power and Your glory.
Because Your lovingkindness (loyal-love) is better
than life,
My lips will praise (glorify) You.
So I will bless You as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands in Your name. (NASB)**

David's renewed hunger for God is apparent in the alliteration of the opening words of the poem. The first words begin with the opening letter of the Hebrew alphabet (*aleph*). This is an artistic use of alliteration to stress 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 "dawn," suggesting 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/Thou* relationship. In the wilderness, everything is reduced to "you and me"; there are no intermediaries. David found that his journey, painful as it was, had a way of stripping away all that was not essential to his life.

Two things in the wilderness heightened his hunger for God. The first was the appearance of the landscape. Jerusalem rests at about 2600 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 but 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. "In a region where he is surrounded by sun-burnt aridity and a nature that bears only one uniform ash-colored tint, which casts its unrefreshing image into his inward part, which is itself in much the same parched condition, his soul thirsts, his flesh languishes, wearied and in want of water, for God, the living One and the Fountain of life."³ Isn't it ironic that when we have an internal ache, God often places us in situations that, rather than dulling the ache, act like mirrors to magnify it?

The second thing that sharpens David's appetite for God is his memory. Now that he 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—sheer memory. There are no earthly gateways to open his five senses to heaven; no sacred steps to climb; no smell of fragrant incense; no piercing sound of the shophar; no taste of hot shew bread; no holy sight of the ark glistening underneath the wings of the cherubim—and no music. Oh the music! Its harmonic strings

that once resonated among thousands of worshippers, muted now in the quaking silence of the desert. All that remains is a fragment of past imaginings. But ironically, this only serves to make David's memory all the more acute, sharpened as it is by the ache of separation and sorrow: "thus I have seen you (i.e. with this longing)...in the sanctuary." So through metaphor and memory David recreates those wondrous moments when he beheld God in glory and power within 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: "Your loyal-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, now become mirrors of Jonathan's face; Jonathan, who loved David "to 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 shape his life. It is a passion that is deeper than life, for David counts his life no longer dear to himself. The old man, an exiled king, is finally transformed into a Jonathan. That wondrous love seizes him, and slips beneath him, unaware; his bones, his flesh, enmeshed as if now one with God's *hesed* love. And so in the desert, with no choir, no worship leader, no instruments and no sacrifices, David worships God with fullest expression of body and soul. A worship service of two: "I," and that "Holy You."

So the ache of the wilderness gives David an increased appetite for God and a renewed commitment to him.

The second gift bestowed upon this hungry exile is a meal from heaven itself.

II. The Soul is Satisfied (63:5-8)

**My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness,
And my mouth offers praises with joyful lips.
When I remember You on my bed,
I meditate on You in the night watches,
For You have been my help,
And in the shadow of Your wings I sing for joy.
My soul clings to You;
Your right hand upholds me.**

Verse 5 marks a radical change of mood in the poem. Surprisingly, it comes when the light of day gives way to the terror of night, when David has to take his turn at one of the four-hour night watches. Four hours with nothing to do but watch. There under that starlit canopy of desert sky, time seems to grind to a halt, its slow, dream-like cadence marking the endless seconds of the night. 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 sharp focused 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. Here is the reality of what the metaphors “streams in the desert” and “honey from the rock” are all about. 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. 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 seizing grasp that awakens a deep love which reaches back for God with strenuous surges: *“My soul followeth hard after thee”* (KJV).

Isn’t it ironic that the “ache” of the wilderness actually becomes the “gate” to heaven? Yet so often we miss it, because we try to drown out the pain by feeding ourselves with idols instead of allowing God to feed us.

The last time I found myself in this “gateway” I was on a plane, flying home from Romania. I had returned there after four years of anticipation and longing to see my friends. After waiting so long, one begins to wonder if reality can possibly meet expectations. Yet, to my amazement, all that I had been waiting for, yearning for, longing for came to me. Every face I wanted to hold, every heart I wanted to embrace, every angelic song I wanted to hear, everything was granted me. It was so splendid, so real, so intimate; not one wish was withheld from my soul. But then, in a moment of time, it was over. At midnight at the railway station in Cluj, as the train whistle blew, its shrill blast tore at my soul in the painful emotion of parting. Was it real, or was it just a dream? On the plane flying home, the ache transported me to heaven, and I wrote these words:

That Strange Gate,
Again⁴

That same ache,
of the strange gate,
has opened up and let
me in.

On a plane again,
strange, oh how strange,
to feel that river lively flowing,
to be alone with You.

But that ache the same,
strange now, not of rejection,

but of acceptance,
from that other elusive world.

Acceptance that I bathed in,
freely given soaked my soul,
now gone,
has left me in the gate, alone.

And now lost in darkness,
caught between two worlds,
I sit to contemplate the ache,
as it drives me just to You.

Where was I?
Did I not see to touch and feel?
Was it only a dream now gone,
or is this gateway real?

How strange You,
gaping, aching, ache
that binds me only
just to You.

Love rejected given,
or love accepted taken,
the ache the same,
like Isaac bound to You.

Oh the irony of such sweetness, framed in the window of the ache!

The wilderness intensified David’s appetites, then it satisfied his soul.

Finally, after his soul is fed and fully sated, David’s vision is clarified.

III. Vision Is Clarified (63:9-11)

**But those who seek my life, to destroy it,
Will go into the depths of the earth.
They will be delivered over to the power of the
sword;
They will be a prey for foxes.
But the king will rejoice in God;
Everyone who swears by Him will glory,
For the mouths of those who speak lies will be
stopped.**

The third gift which the wilderness imparts to David is a clarity of vision. This idea poetically fits the etymology of the word *wilderness*, which comes from the Hebrew word *dabar* = word (so perhaps, *midbar* = “place of revelation”?). Having been fed by God, everything now comes into focus and David sees the end of his distress. In the end, justice will win. The wicked who were seeking his life will descend into the deepest parts of the earth. David also comprehends that in the justice of God, the ways of the wicked will be used against them: they will be devoured by the sword (a metaphor for no uncertain death). Even their final memory will be dese-

crated, for they will be left as prey for the jackals. Othmar Keel writes:

In death nothing was worse than to lie exposed on the field—a prey to animals—or in a strange land. So long as the bones are intact, even a dead man retains a minimal existence...The bodies of those fallen, slaughtered and executed were often left to lie as food for jackals, ravens, and other scavengers. The dead were thus deprived of the last vestiges of their existence.⁵

Not only does David get a clear vision of their end, he sees his own end: *“The king will rejoice in God”* is a clear statement that David sees his own restoration to public office. And that 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. The wilderness has fully done its work.

It intensified his hunger for God;
it fed him with the very life of the living God;
and it gave him a clear vision of God’s Justice,
something that was God’s responsibility, not his.

Will it work for you, though? Will God meet you in your wilderness? When I picked up the telephone in Jerusalem and heard the dread news of my sister-in-law’s impending death, I was forced to make my exit into the wilderness. I spent a week encased like a mummy in the sultry heat of Egypt. At times I felt as if I was almost suffocating in the dense air of tombs, and strangled by shrouds of ancient artifacts. In the tunnels of one of the pyramids I was almost overrun by a swarm of French tourists and overcome with claustrophobia. Driving through the city of the dead, my personal sorrow was so magnified it practically choked me in despair.

Finally, when we exited the city, I had to endure fourteen more hours of cloistered plane travel, sitting in the middle seat of a row of five seats, in the deepest part of the smoking section! I couldn’t wait to touch American soil. When we finally landed in Chicago, I immediately called home to check on Melanie’s condition. She was dying, but in the midst of her collapsing world, two of my closest friends (my Ittai and Zadok) went to visit her with the gift of the gospel. She listened to the good news, and then cast away all her props of support and put her trust in Christ. It was about 1 a.m. Chicago time when I re-boarded the plane to fly home. The entire plane was like a morgue, with everyone lost in sleep, but heaven entered my seat and I sang all the way home.

It was as the poet said:

Your loyal-love is better than life.

In the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 14, 15, 41.

2. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1973), 224.

3. C. F. Keil & F. Delitzsch, *Psalms, Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 5:215.

4. *“The Strange Gate”* was the first poem I wrote referring to the intense, divine love felt in the soul through the “strange gate” of rejected love. It too was written on a plane.

5. Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World, Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 66, 103.

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FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES

SERIES: *THE DIARY OF AN OLD KING*

Catalog No. 1041

2 Samuel 16:15-17:23

27th Message

Brian Morgan

December 8th, 1996

The thing I love most about the Christmas season is not just rehearsing the announcement of the kingdom of God on earth, it is being captured by wonder at *how* that kingdom comes to earth, how God uses powerful politicians, people with massive egos, driven by greed and paranoia, as stage hands who set the scene for the real story, the birth of a Baby. I love the way God works in obscurity, out of sight of the movers and shakers but in full view of the humble of the earth. And at the precise moment in time, angels and beasts meet to contemplate, heaven and earth kiss, and kings and shepherds are drawn into an animal cloistered cave to be captured with awe and drenched with wonder. Angels sing, the grip of night grows limp, and each soul feels its worth. The cave in Bethlehem becomes womb to a mini-universe.

Yet we seldom allow this perspective to permeate our everyday world. Most of the time we feel overrun by the megalomaniacs of the world. We feel impotent to stand against the massive machinery whose iron-clad cogs seem to grind inexorably against all that is good. If we get in their way, they will crush our sinews and pulverize our bones into dust. So we live our lives, trapped in the tension. We love the true King in our hearts, but we find it difficult to serve him in cities ruled by tyrannical impostors. We wonder how will God restore the kingdom to its rightful heir.

At Christmas, we get one of those rare, behind the scenes looks at how heaven's rule permeates earth's dust. In our text from the David story today, we find just such a view in an account that gives shape to the Bethlehem story a thousand years later.¹ We left David and his followers trying to collect themselves after their demoralizing journey from Jerusalem to the desert, an exodus which ended in a barrage of stones raining upon their fragile psyches from the outraged Shimei. At the exiles' moment of arrival, fatigued after a long, hot journey, Absalom, refreshed and fortified, arrives at his destination in Jerusalem. Now with Ahithophel at his side we are made to feel the "threat radiating from this political heavyweight is now more acute than ever. This man knows that David must not be given any pause for breath."²

We take up the account in 2 Samuel 16.

I. Making A First Impression (16:15-19)

Then Absalom and all the people, the men of Israel, entered Jerusalem, and Ahithophel with him. Now it came about when Hushai the Archite, David's friend, came to Absalom, that Hushai said to Absalom, "Long live the king! Long live the king!" And Absalom said to Hushai, "Is this your loyalty to your friend? Why did you not go with your friend?" Then Hushai said to Absalom, "No! For whom the Lord has chosen, this people, and all the men of Israel, his will I be, and with him I will remain. And besides, whom should I serve? Should I not serve in the presence of his son? As I have served in your father's presence, so I will be in your presence." (NASB)

Fortunately for David, Hushai arrives on the scene in the nick of time and immediately goes to work as David's friend. Not waiting for Absalom to question his arrival, Hushai goes

on the attack in an effort to create a good first impression. His passionate cry to Absalom, "Long live the king. Long live the king!" is crafted with deliberate ambiguity to conceal his true loyalty. The king is not named, but the emphatic echo is enough for the vain Absalom, who hears Hushai's words as a transfer of allegiance to him. Stunned and surprised, Absalom questions Hushai as to why he broke loyalty with David and did not depart with his *friend*.

In reply, Hushai blurts out principles containing more truth than Absalom will every know, but the prince, flattered by the fine rhetoric, is blinded by a vanity that borders on blasphemy. "No!" Hushai states emphatically, "I am loyal"—loyal to the one (and only one) whom the Lord has chosen, and the one whom the people serve. It is this one he stands beside and shall remain beside. That short phrase, "the Lord has chosen," presses in on the text with such weight that we already know the outcome of this war council. Hushai then pushes a little further, attempting to bridge the chasm between father and son, as if there were no breach in their relationship. He strikes a deep emotional chord in Absalom's soul, saying: "Should I not serve in the presence (*face*) of the son as I served in the presence (*face*) of the father?" Hushai is trying to impress upon Absalom that he is exactly the same as before, and that Absalom can count on his loyalty. The fact of the matter is that he is the same, but he desires to be in the presence of the son to faithfully *save* the father. What Absalom hears is entirely different, however, and with but one taste of flattery he swallows the whole rhetorical meal prepared for him by Hushai.

Hushai's action is one of the great demonstrations of loyalty, indeed of everything embodied in the term friendship. This faithful brother deliberately places himself in harm's way, inside the enemy capital, to serve the purposes of the true king. Like a spy lying in wait, he must carry out his operations covertly, until the grand moment arrives when the kingdom is restored to his lord. If he is discovered he can expect no mercy; certain death will follow. That is a very difficult assignment, one that is fraught with danger, but that is what being a friend to the Messianic king is all about—and that is what the Lord asks many of his children to do.

The scene now moves to the war chamber, where Absalom asks his national council for guidance.

II. Ahithophel's War Plan (16:20-17:4)

(a) Seize the Harem! (16:20-23)

Then Absalom said to Ahithophel, "Give your advice. What shall we do?" And Ahithophel said to Absalom, "Go in to your father's concubines, whom he has left to keep the house; then all Israel will hear that you have made yourself odious to your father. The hands of all who are with you will also be strengthened." So they pitched a tent for Absalom on the roof, and Absalom went in to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel. And the advice of Ahithophel, which he gave in those days, was as if one inquired of the word of God; so

was all the advice of Ahithophel regarded by both David and Absalom.

Absalom addresses the group of elders, using the plural, but he is speaking directly to Ahithophel. He is the one who gives all the advice, while the rest of the elders of Israel fade into the background. He is very pragmatic. Without courtly rhetoric, he sets out the naked truth, suggesting an outrageous deed: Absalom must seize David's harem without hesitation. Fokkelman writes that by doing this, "Absalom can now penetrate the most intimate part of David's life, the part where he himself was formed, the area of eroticism, fertility, procreation, etc. Although David is absent, Absalom has the opportunity of... 'uncovering his father's nakedness.' His sexual penetration of the women is a penetration of the father's psyche, an irreversible act of the utmost provocation, comparable even to rape."³

Ahithophel knows the consequences of such counsel: it will cause a stench in his father's nostrils. There will be no possibility of turning back. The die will be cast; the relationship between father and son will be completely severed. Absalom's act would have this effect—"a state act equivalent to a declaration that the previous king is dead" (Budde). Once Israel witnesses the deed, their hands will be strengthened to follow Absalom. Such advice so appeals to Absalom's powerful lusts he wastes no time. Courting no further counsel, he plunges headlong into the act. And so the very roof from which David had spied Bathsheba, and where illicit desire overpowered him, becomes the place where a tent is pitched for Absalom. But this time the act is done in the light of day, when, in a calculated insult to his father, in the sight of all Israel, Absalom forces each of David's ten concubines. What Nathan had prophesied, "I (the Lord) will take your wives...and give them to your neighbor" (2 Sam 12:11) has now come to pass.

We are aghast as such a sordid act. How could such shameful advice be followed? To this, the narrator is quick to relate the high regard in which Ahithophel's advice was held in that day. It carried the same weight as if one inquired of the word of God. Ahithophel relies on his overpowering reputation to carry out his wicked scheme. His advice may also be the result of his own heated rage against David, since he was the grandfather of Bathsheba.

Following the forcible takeover of David's harem, Ahithophel offers the second phase of his war strategy.

(b) Strike While the Iron is Hot! (17:1-4)

Furthermore, Ahithophel said to Absalom, "Please let me choose 12,000 men that I may arise and pursue David tonight. And I will come upon him while he is weary and exhausted (weak-handed) and will terrify him so that all the people who are with him will flee. Then I will strike down the king alone, and I will bring back all the people to you. The return of everyone depends on the man you seek; then all the people shall be at peace." So the plan was good in the eyes of Absalom and of all the elders of Israel.

Ahithophel knows David from long years of close collaboration. He knows that David is traveling with women and children, that he is weary and that he cannot travel quickly. He therefore plans to strike while the iron is hot, and eliminate David in a sudden night attack, while all Israel has strengthened their hands, and David is weak-handed. The plan places Ahithophel in the limelight, with 12,000 men gathered around him. Fokkelman writes that such a number was not only enough to ensure victory but to implicate "all the tribes in David's destruction, so that they become politically and morally jointly responsible...for the execution of the coup, and hence even more strongly joined to the new re-

gime."⁴ Ahithophel's plan carries minimum risk for Absalom, and risks but little bloodshed for Israel. He intends to play a cat and mouse game until the king is discovered, at which time all the people will slip away from David. They will be offered a pardon, he will kill only the king, and all the land will enjoy peace. "Here speaks a sober politician, nay a wise statesman...no rhetoric, no flattery, not one flourish from the courtly style."⁵

As Ahithophel unfolds his evil plan, everyone in the war council is swayed by the force of his argument, which wins unanimous approval. Hushai has his work cut out for him. Not only does he have to refute such powerful advice and turn the majority opinion around but, as he was kept out of the war room, he must refute Ahithophel's counsel without the luxury of having the time to prepare an alternative plan.

III. Hushai's War Plan (17:5-14)

(a) The Refutation of Ahithophel's Plan (17:5-10)

Then Absalom said, "Now call Hushai the Archite also, and let us hear what he has to say." When Hushai had come to Absalom, Absalom said to him, "Ahithophel has spoken thus. Shall we carry out his plan? If not, you speak." So Hushai said to Absalom, "This time the advice that Ahithophel has given is not good." Moreover, Hushai said, "You know your father and his men, that they are mighty men and they are fierce, like a bear robbed of her cubs in the field. And your father is an expert in warfare, and will not spend the night with the people. Behold, he has now hidden himself in one of the caves or in another place; and it will be when he falls on them at the first attack, that whoever hears it will say, 'There has been a slaughter among the people who follow Absalom.' And even the one who is valiant, whose heart is like the heart of a lion, will completely lose heart; for all Israel knows that your father is a mighty man and those who are with him are valiant men."

Thinking on his feet, Hushai wastes no time going on the attack. "This time," he says (in contrast to every other time), "the advice of Ahithophel is *not good*." What a tremendous opening this is. Hushai begins with calculated deference to Ahithophel, but then makes his rebuttal by appealing to what Absalom and everyone else intimately *knows* about David. From his reservoir of memory he draws out an arsenal of images from David's past to paint a portrait of the king in all his former glory. The images of a *bear* robbed of her cubs, the *heart of a lion*, a *fugitive lying in ambush* in secluded caves, and the incomparable *skill of warfare* are all designed to transport Absalom into the shoes of Saul, whose grave still spoke of just how impotent a commander-in-chief can be when opposing David. Hushai is quick to add that David is no fool. He would lure Absalom into an ambush, striking first blood. When that happened, rumor would travel with shock waves, confirming what Absalom and the people already knew—that David was a mighty man, as were those who were with him. The people would melt at the news and Absalom would lose the kingdom.

There is a better way, says Hushai, one that minimizes the risk for Israel and maximizes the glory for Absalom.

(b) Inflated Dreams of Glory (17:11-13)

"But I counsel that all Israel be surely gathered to you, from Dan even to Beersheba, as the sand that is by the sea in abundance, and that you personally go into battle. So we shall come to him in one of the places where he can be found, and we will fall on him as the dew falls on the ground; and of him and of all the men who are with him, not even one will be left. And if he withdraws into a

city, then all Israel shall bring ropes to that city, and we will drag it into the valley until not even a small stone is found there."

In Ahithophel's plan, he himself would be the one on center stage receiving the glory. In Hushai's plan, however, Absalom would play that role. He is placed at the center of the entire nation. Everyone in Israel, from the northern and southern boundaries of the land ("Dan to Beersheba"), all the way to the coastline ("the sand by the sea") would flock to him. Then they would search out David and fall on him, like the dew which falls "silently, gradually and inimitably."⁶ And if David retreated into a city, they would drag the city into a wadi, where its forceful waters would wash away every trace of it. "The picture...is one of megalomania: to drag a city with ropes is half a metaphor for catching David, half a metonymy referring to the arsenal of engines of war used to hammer a besieged city, breach, and finally demolish the defensive works...While Ahithophel's plan does not expose Absalom to the dangers of war, Hushai flatteringly suggests in v.11d that the mighty army of 11bc will be inspired only by the personal presence of the leader."⁷ This is a participation that will cost Absalom his life. Hushai's speech is a "masterpiece or oriental eloquence" (Hertzberg).

Imagine Ahithophel hearing all this in the war council. Before Hushai has even finished, he has undoubtedly torn Ahithophel's counsel to shreds with his cool and sharp intellect; there is no rebuttal. Hushai's counsel so appeals to Absalom's massive ego that Ahithophel's advice is overturned in an instant. Brueggemann wryly notes: "Our own history tells us that war councils are not simply forums of reason but struggles between massive egos, partisan interests, and much fantasy. So it is here."⁸

But there is still another reason...

Then Absalom and all the men of Israel said, "The counsel of Hushai the Archite is better than the counsel of Ahithophel." For the Lord had ordained (literally: *commanded*) to thwart the good counsel of Ahithophel, in order that the Lord might bring calamity on Absalom. (17:14)

The Lord who heard that four-word prayer breathed out of David's soul in his desperation, "Foolishness, please, the counsel of Ahithophel, O Lord!" has now commanded to thwart the counsel of Ahithophel. The outcome has been predetermined.

IV. Two Destinies (17:15-23)

(a) David's Flight To Safety

It was not for nothing that David sent the priests and their sons back to Jerusalem. Just as soon as Hushai has completed his speech, the intricate espionage network is set in motion to inform David. The news travels from Hushai to the priests, who in turn inform an unnamed maid, who is able to pass through the city wall undetected to relay the information to the sons of the priests, Ahimaaz and Jonathan. But the intricate line of communication is discovered by an unnamed youth who spots the two young men. The lad runs to report to Absalom, while the two foxes take cover from the hunters. They quickly depart to a house in Bahurim where they are received and hidden in the recesses of a darkened well. "Holding their breath in the depth of the pit they can only hope that a nameless (!) woman can cope with the situation."⁹ The woman places a cover over the well, spreads grain over it, then sends Absalom's servants off in the wrong direction. When the coast is clear, the messengers rise up out of the well (a symbol of David's survival) and carry their report to David. He quickly heeds their counsel and safely crosses the Jor-

dan, where he is greeted by the fresh rays of the morning sky, tinged with the flames of dawn.

The scene is replete with images which convey a reversal of David's fortunes. Bahurim, the place which frames the story, once the site of Shimei's spitting hate and abusive stones, now becomes a place of warm reception, providing a secluded shelter of protection. Memories of the Joshua story and the crossing of the Jordan, which seemed to be unraveling in David's shameful departure from Jerusalem, now reappear as symbols of salvation. The nameless woman is a reminder of Rahab, who hid the spies and lied on their behalf, and foreshadows David's success. The king has now safely crossed the Jordan and stands "in the light of the laughing sun."¹⁰

In Jerusalem, Ahithophel succumbs to a far different fate.

(b) Ahithophel's Suicide

Now when Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his donkey and arose and went to his home, to his city, and set his house in order, and strangled himself; thus he died and was buried in the grave of his father. (17:23)

David's crossing the Jordan to safety spells disaster for Absalom—and Ahithophel knows it. The cold calculator is buried by a wrenching resignation. Without hesitation, he methodically saddles his ass, goes to his home, sets his house in order, and strangles himself, ending his life in ignoble suicide. He risked everything by defecting from David, and in a moment lost everything. The lesson is clear: no matter how powerful a politician or how weighty a counselor rises against David, it is suicide to oppose him, for he is chosen of the Lord. The once honorable counselor ends his life as ignominiously as Saul, and becomes the forerunner of the despicable Judas.

V. Reflections

As I reflect on this story, I am awestruck by the intricate web of events that turned the fortunes of the exiled David. A friend, making a timely appearance inside the highest government chambers, utters a masterpiece of Eastern eloquence, which he has to invent in a moment, and succeeds in overthrowing the counsel of the highest ranking advisor in the kingdom. And what of the delicate line of communication which must travel the dangerous highway to the wilderness, changing hands from counselor to priest to servant to runners, all undetected? The odds against this thin thread remaining intact seem insurmountable. How amazing, to think that when the sly foxes have been spotted and they are forced to sink into a deep well for cover, the fate of the entire mission rests in the hands of a nameless woman who must act with the initiative and courage of a seasoned spy or David's fortunes will lie buried in the darkness!

How did it all work out? Was it friendship, loyalty, daring, human initiative, courage, a little luck? Yes, all of these. But what the narrator really wants us to see is the thing David is not privileged to see: "*The Lord commanded it.*" The Lord in heaven heard David pray as he was ascending the Mount of Olives: "Foolishness, please, the counsel of Ahithophel, O Lord!" A short, spontaneous prayer (only four words in Hebrew), but once it was spoken, heaven stopped, Deity stooped to listen, edicts were decreed, and events set in motion to change the course of politics, kings, and history. This is the amazing way that God works. With but the four words of a desperate prayer, the fortunes of an exiled king are restored.

I cannot enter the Christmas season without thinking of how my fortunes as a parent were instantly reversed with but a one-sentence prayer. It was exactly twenty years ago this month, on December 4th, 1976, when Emily and I got the

news from Stanford Hospital that our newborn daughter had died, that I said, "We're not going to put away the baby furniture. Let's pray for a baby." The next day an unnamed woman, hearing about our plight at church, prayed, "Dear Lord, give them a baby by Christmas." Another unnamed young woman was in church that evening. Her roommate was due to deliver a baby the next day, but she had not told her doctor (who had eighty people on a waiting list) that she was giving her baby up for adoption. The girl told her roommate about us, and the young woman said she wanted us to have her baby. Rebecca Noelle was born on December 18th, one week before Christmas. In appreciation to God for that amazing Christmas gift to us, a miracle child, I wrote this poem on my daughter's graduation from high school:

A Shout of Joy Comes in the Morning

Clothed in darkness,
Shrouded with pain,
My soul poured out like water,
Drenched by heaven's rain.

Was it not enough to journey to Moriah,
To leave our first born, days from his birth,
That he might reign above,
An angel not destined for earth?

But now death's dark shadow crushed my chest.
To steal again the light of day and with it, dreams,
And to stand before an empty crib, silence screams.
No daughter to place upon a breast.

Would our home never hear an infant's cry,
Or see a mother's gaze enfold a child
For whom she feeds,
Would I never ever be a dad on earth?

But God,
Bent the heavens and came down,
He heard the cry of this poor couple,
And considered our low estate.

And did He delay? Not even for a day!
Before Jessica found her place of rest,
He sent a messenger to pray,
"By Christmas Lord, and do not delay!"

With such strange inward stirrings
We knew, we knew a baby was on the way.
And while we waited expecting you,
He turned our darkness into day.

He bent the heavens and came down,
He rode upon a cherub and flew,
He sped upon the wings of wind.
Oh, how my anticipation grew.

This is Rebecca Noelle,
Heaven's gift, Christmas JOY,
First carried, then caressed,
At last one to be laid upon breast.

A gift of grace from God alone,
Who delights to repair a broken heart,
By breaking in from without,
A New Creation to impart.

O Rebecca, will I ever forget that Day,
When I learned what it means to pray,
And see Him touch our lives,
And turn our darkness into day.

And from that day
The void that grew,
That gaping ache,
He has filled with you.

Your vivacious smile,
Your spirit bold,
Unthwarted, undaunted
Living life in ways untold,

To shatter walls,
Fearing no place and no one,
But gathering all,
Priceless.

What you have been to me,
From those dark days,
So long ago yet so near,
Words cannot tell, except to say,

*"Tears may come to stay the night,
But a shout of joy comes in the morning."*

You have brought me more joy,
Laughter,
And song,
Than ten sons.

How can I ever forget memories
Etched upon the heart, playing ball,
Being a dad, a coach, a friend,
Even a Swiss comedian.

But what I'll miss the most,
Is that sweet sweet angelic voice,
Which lighted among us,
Unashamed to sing and praise.

And now Rebecca, leave our nest,
Take off and fly amidst the clouds,
Touch the sky, see His face,
But most of all, feel His grace.

But as you leave, glance back, and know
That though we shall never be the same,
It will be enough for me, your Dad,
If you take thought from whence you came.

Yes, these were the days
When words of the Ancients came true,
He bent the heavens and came down,
And dried our tears with you.

1. I have depended heavily on J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 1, *King David* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981) for many of my insights into this scene.

2. Fokkelman, *King David*, 204.

3. Fokkelman, *King David*, 209.

4. Fokkelman, *King David*, 212.

5. Fokkelman, *King David*, 213-214.

6. Fokkelman, *King David*, 218.

7. Fokkelman, *King David*, 219.

8. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 312.

9. Fokkelman, *King David*, 229.

10. Fokkelman, *King David*, 228.

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THE WORST POSSIBLE "GOOD NEWS"

SERIES: *THE DIARY OF AN OLD KING*

Catalog No. 1042

2 Samuel 17:24-19:8

28th Message

Brian Morgan

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At Christmas time we think of the angels descending from heaven to earth, breaking in on the shepherds in Bethlehem with the announcement: "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you *good news* of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Messiah the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11). Hearing the words "good news" (gospel), the shepherds were overcome with emotion. The term was rich with meaning which sprang from the Old Testament stories. But, because oftentimes we are unaware of that context, we lack the appropriate emotional response that the gospel brings.

The background and context of the "good news" is a battle scene. It begins with a rebellion and the exile of the true king. A battle is fought, victory is secured, messengers run from battlefield to the city of the king, announcing the victory as "good news." The news was heard first, by the watchmen on the city walls. They announced it to the city, and everyone was overcome with joy that their God reigned. Today, we come to the place in the David story where that exact framework of the gospel is laid out. But what is unique about this text is that we see from the father's perspective how the good news impacts him, especially when he learns that the price of victory is the death of his son.

Following the rebellion of Absalom, his son, David was exiled to the desert. At last he has safely arrived in Mahanaim.¹ While Absalom puts on an elaborate coronation ceremony for himself in Jerusalem, David organizes himself for battle.²

I. Assembly for War (18:1-5)

Then David numbered the people who were with him and set over them commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds. And David sent the people out, one third under the command of Joab, one third under the command of Abishai the son of Zeruiah, Joab's brother, and one third under the command of Ittai the Gittite. And the king said to the people, "I myself will surely go out with you also." But the people said, "You should not go out; for if we indeed flee, they will not care about us, even if half of us die, they will not care about us. But you are worth ten thousand of us; therefore now it is better that you be ready to help us from the city." Then the king said to them, "Whatever seems best to you I will do." So the king stood beside the gate, and all the people went out by hundreds and thousands. And the king charged Joab and Abishai and Ittai, saying, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." And all the people heard when the king charged all the commanders concerning Absalom. (NASB)

With the battle now imminent, David numbers his

troops and divides them into three divisions, each commanded by a general: Joab shares the command with his brother Abishai and his newest disciple and loyal friend, Ittai the Gittite. After he organizes the troops, David expresses a strong desire to personally direct the battle in the field. He does not want to stay home. We are reminded, ever so painfully, that his staying home from the battle years earlier (2 Sam 11:1) set in motion the terrible sins of adultery, murder, rape, more murder, insurrection, and finally, exile. David is not about to make that mistake again. But his troops object to having their aged king exposed to the heat of battle. His presence would place them in great jeopardy, so they request that he play his role as commander-in-chief from the city. David submits to their counsel and directs the battle at home from "beside the gate." This is a well placed counter by the narrator to the memory of Absalom, who stood "beside the gate" (2 Sam. 15:2) to steal away the hearts of Israel from his father.

Once the troops are numbered they are paraded before the king. In the middle of the ceremony, David blurts out the impassioned plea: "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." Here we see the real reason behind David's request to lead the battle in person. He feels that victory is in the air, but he cannot bear the thought of what victory might cost: the death of his son. Death, of course, is the sentence that his son's blatant treason deserves, but it is a sentence from which his father's heart recoils. David's words ring out with the piercing clarity of a church bell at high noon. Not one of the assembled troops failed to appreciate the desire of this father's heart. But the king's command fills the air with a new tension. How can restoration occur without justice?

And now the battle. Verse 12:

II. The Battle (18:6-18)

Then the people went out into the field against Israel, and the battle took place in the forest of Ephraim. And the people of Israel were defeated there before the servants of David, and the slaughter there that day was great, 20,000 men. For the battle there was spread over the whole countryside, and the forest devoured more people that day than the sword devoured. (18:6-8)

David has arranged for the battle to be fought in the forested lands of Ephraim, where the terrain would work in favor of his own outmanned forces. The result is a rout of Absalom's army, with tremendous loss of life. The dense forest and the panic of battle sends Absalom's confused soldiers running in all directions until they became hopelessly disoriented and finally, ravaged. The Transjordan countryside which feeds David's men (17:24-29), devours the men of Absalom.

Next, the narrator moves from the fate of the army to

the fate of their leader.

Now Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. For Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. And his head caught fast in the oak, so he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him kept going. (18:9)

Just as the mass of the Israelite army is liquidated by a forest, their leader is “liquidated by an individual tree, the size of which is both the symbol and the ironic negation of Absalom’s pride.”³ By chance, Absalom is spotted by David’s men. Fokkelman describes the scene: “Through his great dread of the soldiers, he pays too little attention to the surroundings, so that he does not stoop in time to avoid the low-hanging tangle of boughs.”⁴ Ironically the dumb animal keeps trotting on, unaware that his departure has left the would-be king helplessly suspended between heaven and earth. At one moment he is seated on his princely mount, at the next, he is suspended helpless. “‘Losing his mule Absalom has lost his kingdom’ (Conroy)...Suspended ‘between heaven and earth,’ the mortal Absalom fails to achieve either, fulfillment of his life on earth, as a prince or king, and the transcendent dimension of existence, heaven, the kingdom of God. ‘Between heaven and earth’ means that he has become a nowhere man. His pride, his ambition and his rebelliousness—in short, his ego—have brought him to a point where he is no longer in control. His bid for power has removed the ground from beneath his feet and led to complete impotence.”⁵

The scene gives the reader a touch of the humor of divine justice. A spoiled son, deprived of nothing, whose glory was his hair, whose ambition was the throne, so royally seated on his princely ass, is now deprived of both, by means of his donkey and his hair.

What follows (vv 10-18) is a heated exchange between an unnamed soldier who spies Absalom’s helpless condition, and Joab. The soldier reports to Joab what he has seen, only to be met by the general’s fury that he did not kill Absalom. When the youth reminds the general of the king’s clear command, Joab loses patience. He grabs three spears and flings them right at the heart of Absalom, dislodging him from the tree. Ten of Joab’s attendants finish off the helpless usurper. They throw his body into a pit and cover it with stones, a memorial to his dishonorable death. Thus Joab “assumes a king’s responsibility for the State, which in his opinion David neglects or, as a sentimental father, is unable to bear.”⁶

A would-be usurper of the crown, Absalom dies with no legacy, no son, and no house of his own, only a self-made monument to his vainglory.

Meanwhile, on the battlefield, the good news of victory is carried by messengers to the waiting king. Normally, such a report of messengers carrying good news is dispensed within a few lines of information, but here the narrator gives almost twenty times that amount of detail so as to give us pause and allow us a glimpse into a father’s psyche and the anxious feelings that are assailing him.

III. Messengers of “Good News” (18:19-32)

Then Ahimaaz the son of Zadok said, “Please let me run and bring the king news that the Lord has freed him from the hand of his enemies.” But Joab said to

him, “You are not the man to carry news this day, but you shall carry news another day; however, you shall carry no news today because the king’s son is dead.” Then Joab said to the Cushite, “Go, tell the king what you have seen.” So the Cushite bowed to Joab and ran. Now Ahimaaz the son of Zadok said once more to Joab, “But whatever happens, please let me also run after the Cushite.” And Joab said, “Why would you run, my son, since you will have no reward for going?” “But whatever happens,” he said, “I will run.” So he said to him, “Run.” Then Ahimaaz ran by way of the plain and passed up the Cushite. (18:19-23)

Following the victory, Ahimaaz, Zadok’s son, once the messenger of bad news, can’t wait to volunteer for this role again—only now as an enthusiastic messenger of “good news.” But the naive youth has no idea of the impact this good news will have on a waiting father. Initially, Joab refuses the youth’s request, insisting that a foreigner with no emotional ties to the king is better suited to deliver this terrible good news. However, after repeated requests by Ahimaaz, Joab condescends and allows him to tag along as a second runner.

Verse 24:

Now David was sitting between the two gates; and the watchman went up to the roof of the gate by the wall, and raised his eyes and looked, and behold, a man running by himself. And the watchman called and told the king. And the king said, “If he is by himself there is good news in his mouth.” And he came nearer and nearer. Then the watchman saw another man running; and the watchman called to the gatekeeper and said, “Behold, another man running by himself.” And the king said, “This one also is bringing good news.” And the watchman said, “I think the running of the first one is like the running of Ahimaaz the son of Zadok.” And the king said, “This is a good man and comes with good news.”

And Ahimaaz called and said to the king, “All is well (Shalom).” And he prostrated himself before the king with his face to the ground. And he said, “Blessed is the Lord your God, who has delivered up the men who lifted their hands against my lord the king.” And the king said, “Is it well (shalom) with the young man Absalom?” And Ahimaaz answered, “When Joab sent the king’s servant, and your servant, I saw a great tumult, but I did not know what it was.” Then the king said, “Turn aside and stand here.” So he turned aside and stood still.

And behold, the Cushite arrived, and the Cushite said, “Let my lord the king receive good news, for the Lord has freed you this day from the hand of all those who rose up against you.” Then the king said to the Cushite, “Is it well (shalom) with the young man Absalom?” And the Cushite answered, “Let the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up against you for evil, be as that young man!” (18:24-32)

Pitched with adrenaline and excitement, Ahimaaz outruns the foreigner and is first to arrive at the city. David is “sitting between two gates”—a graphic description of a king delicately perched between two destinies, one of victory and restoration, the other of defeat and permanent exile. As the messengers arrive, we get an insight into Da-

vid's psyche. His role as a distraught father has completely overshadowed his role as king and head of state. The lens he uses to interpret information from the battle is a narrow one at best, and completely one sided. He interprets everything through the grid of the "good news" he so longs to hear—the only news that he will permit himself to hear.

The sight of Ahimaaz evokes good memories for David. The king is heartened with his word of "*Shalom*," which resonates with his son's name, Absalom, giving David the impetus to interpret the messenger's arrival as good news. Ahimaaz "thinks that he is addressing a king, but it is only the father who is listening."⁷ After making the initial announcement, the realization finally sinks in to the naive youth that he is talking to Absalom's father, a father whose only desire is not the "good news" of the battle, but the "good news" that his son is well (*shalom*). Ahimaaz avoids the issue. Choking back his words with an evasive, "I saw...ah...a commotion...but I don't know what...uh ...", he stands aside, hoping to buy some time until the Cushite arrives with what Ahimaaz now realizes is terrible news.

When the Cushite arrives, this second messenger announces good news: "You, O King, are free from all!" Good news for the head of state, but disconcerting news for the waiting father. An anxious David probes further: "Is it *shalom* with the young man Absalom?" The Cushite answers in terms of David's role as king, not as father, stating in no uncertain terms that this young man, the treacherous rebel, is dead, but he carefully avoids using his name and the word death. Finally, the father knows that the price of restoring the kingdom and the penalty for treason is the life of the son—a son hung on a tree.

What follows is one of the most poignant scenes in Biblical narrative.

IV. The Impact of Terrible "Good News" (18:33-19:8)

And the king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And thus he said as he walked, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

Then it was told Joab, "Behold, the king is weeping and mourns for Absalom." And the victory that day was turned to mourning for all the people, for the people heard it said that day, "The king is grieved for his son." So the people went by stealth into the city that day, as people who are humiliated steal away when they flee in battle. And the king covered his face and cried out with a loud voice, "O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (18:33-19:4)

The news of Absalom's death hits David with an explosion of pain that buries his soul in sorrow. He rises to escape public view and climbs a stairway to a chamber above the gate, seeking to be alone. Walled in by isolation, he paces back and forth like a wounded animal, and with agonizing cries unleashes his consummate grief:

*O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom!
Would I had died instead of you,
O Absalom, my son, my son!"*

David's poignant cry takes the shape of a poet's lament,

one that is dense with pathos. It is made up mostly of nouns, all linked with but one verb. The first and last lines have but two different words (*beni*: "my son," and *Absalom*: "father of peace"). These are everyday terms—son, father, peace—but they are powerful words which resonate with emotion. Each carries both images of the father and the son and links them with what ought to have been... peace, peace, peace. In the center is a father's atoning wish to have taken his son's place in death. The poem powerfully draws these two estranged men face to face and unites them at every level with intimate touch, wholeness, and a well being that is dreamlike. But reality has shattered the dream, and now silence screams from a son's grave. Thus that five-fold repetition of "my son" rings out a lifetime of emotion for David's failings as a father.

From a father who suddenly loses a son due to an accident, war or for whatever cause, the exclamation 'had I but died in your place!' is moving, understandable and sound, but in the mouth of this father who has not the courage required for drastic remedies in connection with such an incorrigible spoiled son, the same exclamation is quite different, a sign of pure self-torment.⁸

Contrasting David's sorrow on this occasion with the sorrow that he felt during his ascent up the Mount of Olives, Fokkelman points out that on the Mount, David was in the role of a king mourning the loss of his throne. Politically and emotionally, he was realistic and adequate through his trust. He was himself, he was whole and able to reach out and embrace others in healthy relationships. But now, at the Mahanaim gate, David is in the role of a father mourning the loss of his son. He is governed by illusions which lead to disillusion and a one-sided view of reality. Being self absorbed, he is inadequate to cope. The wholeness he once exhibited is now split by too great an identification with his son. This leaves him alone, and isolated from relationships.⁹

David's self-absorbed sorrow weighs heavily on the entire city and drags it down into the pit that he occupies. Victory is tinged with blackness; jubilation is drowned out by silence. Each citizen, once consumed in full-throated praise, now secretly slips out of the celebration as if their joy had made them unclean. The isolation into which David withdraws, when his soldiers have spent their lives to save his crown, is intolerable. Action is demanded.

Alarmed and outraged, Joab intervenes. He breaks into David's womb of isolation and confronts him with manly force to shake him and awake him and drag him out of his pit of despair. Verse 5:

Then Joab came into the house to the king and said, "Today you have covered with shame the faces of all your servants, who today have saved your life and the lives of your sons and daughters, the lives of your wives, and the lives of your concubines, by loving those who hate you, and by hating those who love you. For you have shown today that princes and servants are nothing to you; for I know this day that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased. Now therefore arise, go out and speak kindly to your servants, for I swear by the Lord if you do not go out, surely not a man will pass the night with you, and this will be worse for you than all the evil that has come upon you from your youth until now." (19:5-7)

The scene ends in verse 8, with a compliant father bowing to the bidding of his general and returning to his honored role of king, reluctant though he may be. David descends the chamber and puts on his public face where he can mask the pain and play the game that protocol demands. He takes his place in the receiving line and extends his quivering hand to everyone with what probably amounted to a wet handshake. The narrator has made his point: David's role as father had overshadowed his role as messianic king, and as such, placed the kingdom of God in great jeopardy. The God of Abraham has appeared again in history to demand his exacting price for a "good news" that will not be cheapened by easy sentimentality. The narrator has painted Joab, who clearly disobeyed the king's command, as a better servant of the kingdom than David, because Joab was willing to deal head on, without compromise, with the grim realities. This is a telling tale for fathers who can become so attached to their offspring that they lose sight of the highest good. Most of us would respond like David. Rare is the father like Abraham, who in obedience lay his son on the altar of sacrifice.

The story leaves us with a warning, and captures us with wonder at a perspective of the gospel that we do not see anywhere else. Here the focus is on a father's grief, and we see that, from his perspective, the "good news" is the worst possible news. I remember how comforting this text was for me when as a father, I lost a son. I used David's words to articulate my own grief:

*O my son David, my son, my son,
would I had died instead of you!*

Observing this perspective of a father's grief in the David story, we would come to expect it in the Jesus story. But surprisingly, it is absent. Why is it, I wonder, when we come to the Jesus story, our Emmanuel, our Dayspring, the climactic *good news* of history, we are drawn into the story from everyone's point of view except the Father's? When the angel appears to Mary, we sing her song. When Joseph hears his wife is with child, we experience his unbelief. When the angels break through the night sky to announce good news to the shepherds, we are struck by their fear. As the star appears in the East and kings journey to Bethlehem, we walk with them. When Joseph and Mary present Jesus at the temple, and Simeon and Anna catch sight of him, we are drawn with them into Israel's most sacred visitation. But where is the Father's perspective in the story? It is totally eclipsed.

What did the Father feel when he committed his Son over to human flesh? What was it like to relinquish control of a Son to be raised by mere teenagers with no experience as parents? More fearful yet, what pain swept his soul when the Son was given over to a career of rejection within Israel? Jesus was no captain of the football team. He was no thriving success. He was a "man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." What terror gripped his soul in the final hour when he was handed over to hell itself, whose forces impaled him on that tree and he hung suspended between heaven and earth, a nowhere man? What was it like for the Father to see his Son in the place of Barabbas, who was, in fact, an Absalom, a revolutionary seeking to take over the kingdom by force? What did he feel when the Son uttered the agonized cry, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" He hung there, not by his hair, but suspended by his veins, until a spear pierced his heart. What grief did the Father feel as he looked over horizon's rim, and gasped. Did he not crawl up into his chamber, in isolation, and cry, like Absalom's father,

*"My son Jesus, my son, my son Jesus,
Would I had died instead of you,
O Jesus, my son, my son!"*

Perhaps this is the allusion we long for, but we are privy to neither words nor voice, only the sight of the heavens turning black as death's dark shadows are put to flight. What Father is this who carries the deepest sorrow in his bosom, sorrow suffered because of me, and never displays it in front of me? He never holds his grief over us but hides it, that we may be drawn by love alone to that wondrous tree where he contemplated, paid, and set us free, to bind one and all, Father Son, until one and all are filled with Peace, for he is our Ab shalom!

1. Mahanaim means "two camps" after Jacob's experience there when he witnessed angels camped around him (Gen 32:2). It is a foreshadowing of David's victory.

2. I have depended heavily on the classic work of J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 1, *King David* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 232-297, for many of my insights in this scene.

3. Fokkelman, *King David*, 241.

4. Fokkelman, *King David*, 243.

5. Fokkelman, *King David*, 242.

6. Fokkelman, *King David*, 246.

7. Fokkelman, *King David*, 257.

8. Fokkelman, *King David*, 263.

9. Fokkelman, *King David*, 262.

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