



THE POEM: A SACRED WINDOW THAT TRANSCENDS TIME

SERIES: ASCENDING THE THRONE

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2 Samuel 1:17-27

Third Message

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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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