



HANDLING LIFE'S TRANSITIONS

SERIES: ASCENDING THE THRONE

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2 Samuel 2:1-11

Fourth Message

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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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