



LONGING FOR HIS FATHER'S FACE

SERIES: *THE DIARY OF AN OLD KING*

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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 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.