



# EXIT ON WINGS OF TRUST

SERIES: *THE DIARY OF AN OLD KING*

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2 Samuel 15:13-23  
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*"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."<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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."<sup>3</sup> 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.”<sup>4</sup> 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!”<sup>5</sup> 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!”<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup>

## 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.