



ASCENDING OUT OF THE MOURNING DUST

SERIES: *THE DIARY OF AN OLD KING*

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2 Samuel 15:23-37
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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.