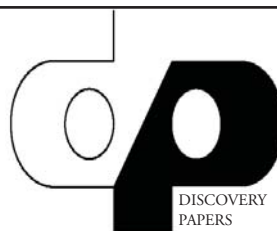


# LEARNING TO GRIEVE

**SERIES: DAVID: A MAN AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART**



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Have you ever considered what you would like to have God say about you? I have often thought I would like to hear something like what God says about David when he calls him “a man after his own heart.” 1 Sam 13:14. Whatever God calls a person is perfect, because only the Lord can look on a person’s heart (1 Sam 16:7) and know for sure what is in it. When God looked at David’s heart, he found it yielded to him. I want a deep connection with God like the one David had, so I began a quest to uncover what it was about David that made him such a man.

## David Holds Nothing Back from God

What I found in studying David’s life and pondering this question over time is that David holds nothing back from God. He pours out his fears, hopes, disappointments, joys and sorrow to God in prayer unedited. *Unedited* means that God heard from David when he was angry, when he was frustrated, afraid, when he really wasn’t expressing his best theology in prayer—and that is what is so great. David brought his messy self to God, and as he worked through his emotions and gave them to God, you can see how God met him there—in the real stuff of David’s soul—and the result was true worship. David’s emotions, his will, and his mind are fully engaged with God over all the circumstances of his life, both good and ill, and that is a feat of trust and faith that most of us attain to but have not mastered. David is the most spiritually vibrant and alive person I can find in the scriptures (outside of Jesus, of course). That is David’s legacy to us. So, how did David develop such “God animation”?

I think the book *Tuesdays With Morrie* can shed some light on this question. For those who might not have read it, it is a story about a young man’s visits with his old professor, a man dying of ALS. On their Tuesday visits, Morrie, the older man, teaches his younger friend the meaning of life.

Here is what Morrie says: “Learn how to die, and you learn how to live.” Being a good teacher, he repeated it, “Learn how to die, and you learn how to live.” Since Morrie knew he was going to die very soon, he had to come to grips with the reality of loss and finally death. As Morrie experienced the daily loss of his physical self to the disease, he learned to grieve fully and daily for his losses. But in that process, he also learned to appreciate more fully and deeply the people who inhabited his world, and the simple joys of his everyday life. For Morrie, the practice of grieving for what was lost in his life also acted as a doorway to attentiveness to life, which produced deeper appreciation and joy for life itself. Facing death, Morrie learned to live.

I believe it was the same for David, and it is the same for us if we will engage with God over both our sorrows and joys equally.

Just as Morrie had to face his death and learn how to live with loss, fear, and pain, David did as well—only David faced it at a young age. David learned to hold nothing back from God because there was no one else to listen to him who could help him. Through no fault of his own, David had to run for his life into the unwelcoming wilderness lands of Judea and beyond to keep out of King Saul’s reach. For ten long years, David lived as a hunted outlaw. The reason for Saul’s mad pursuit? Simple jealousy. David had done nothing wrong to deserve Saul’s hate, but still Saul hated David. “Unfair, unfair, unfair,” I can hear myself screaming in that kind of situation. David does just that, but he does the complaining to the right person. David pours out his grief, fear, and complaints before God. Look at Psalm 18:4-6 as an example:

“The cords of death entangled me;  
the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.  
The cords of the grave coiled around me;  
the snares of death confronted me.  
In my distress I called to the **LORD**;  
I cried to my God for help.  
From his temple he heard my voice;  
my cry came before him, into his ears.”

Henri Nouwen writes, “The great spiritual call of the Beloved Children of God” is to pull their brokenness away from the shadow of the curse and put it under the light of the blessing.”<sup>1</sup> Everything that David experienced, he brought to the throne of grace in prayer, and God heard him. And when God hears, he acts on our behalf. In Psalm 9:9-10 David tells us what he has learned:

“The **LORD** is a shelter for the oppressed,  
a refuge in time of trouble.  
Those who know your name trust in you,  
for you, O Lord have never abandoned anyone  
who searched for you.”

David is as fully alive in lament as in joy because he finds God there.

## God Is Present in Times of Sorrow

I attended a memorial service several years ago where God’s presence was almost palpable. It was during the Christmas season, and the timing made it almost impos-

sible not to notice that this memorial service, which could have been such a downer, was in actuality the most profoundly worshipful service I had attended that season—or actually ever attended. In the midst of so many friends and family members grieving for this person, I have never seen life so affirmed, dignified, and honored. People cried, they lamented, they sang songs of faith, they laughed over some funny stories from the deceased woman's life, they read poems, they told of her loving ways in the workplace, at church, when traveling overseas. But what happened through the mourning was a connection with God that was so wonderful and deep that we didn't want it to end.

And it did not for those of us who went on to attend her burial. When we arrived at the gravesite, this small group of family and friends stood on one side of the grave and the minister on the other. I will never forget the scene. The Episcopalian minister was dressed in his long white robes, a golden prayer shawl falling around his neck. In his right hand, he held a rusty shovel—very ordinary, very used—and in front of him was a rusted blue wheelbarrow full of dirt. We were invited to take the shovel and dig out a small bit of dirt to throw into the grave, and in so doing, we acknowledged death. I felt I was in a holy place, for the minister's white robes spoke of another world, a world of God and beauty and silence and holy words. And the earthy shovel looked at home in that cemetery garden and with the very human task it was helping to accomplish. This was an image to me of heaven and earth meeting at that spot. Heaven and earth meeting in that place of grief. And isn't that where the divine and human Jesus meets us? In our places of grief? Bringing life out of death? Joy out of sorrow? God meets us in our places of grief, and saves us out of them. He does not run away from our pain, our sadness, our loss, but he meets us in them and makes those places holy.

Where are your places of grief? Have you suffered the loss of a loved one? Have you lost a relationship that you hoped would progress and instead it fizzled out? Have the dreams you had for your children shipwrecked? Have you lost a job? Your good name? Is your relationship with your husband or wife strained? Have you been diagnosed with an illness? Have you failed in your classes as a student? Are your parents a source of pain for you? There are a million little deaths in our lives, so many ways to lose something that is important to us. Every time a member of this congregation that I have loved and known well leaves, I suffer the grief of that loss. What I learn from David, though, is that these places of pain are opportunities to draw near to God. He promises that when you do, he will draw near to you.

It is a work of faith to move toward God when pain feels so overwhelming. Sometimes we avoid expressing how we feel because we are afraid of being lost to it. Though that is our internal struggle with facing pain, sometimes we suppress the expression of our pain because we fear our community will think us spiritually immature or lacking in faith if we are "too" upset. Where do we get the idea that strong negative emotions are wrong? Upset doesn't

scare God or make him run away from us. Scripture says that God is close to the brokenhearted. One thing is for sure: unspent grief ruins lives. Suppressed grief collects unwelcome interest in many ways, and these are just a few that I have identified: Suppressed grief can make a person bitter, angry, afraid, hard, depressed. It can drive materialism and addictions of all kinds. It can also make you feel more self-sufficient and in control so that you think you have no need for God and you become hardened to his presence. Times of confusion and struggle always challenge our faith. Will we keep close to God? Or will we move away from him in our pain?

## Grief Expressed Creates a Softer Heart

Once we learn to take our grief to God, what happens? We become softer, more pliable in God's hands and more attuned to the God who has met us in our pain. He teaches us the truth when we come to him and want to hear from him, and he clears up the confusion that pain brings. But this is not a one-time deal; we will revisit our pain and grief when new situations come up. But as we learn to return to God in such times, we grow stronger in our faith and trust in him.

As I noted previously, David learned to hold nothing back from God in his wilderness years. Our passage for this morning finds him emerging from those years ten years older and well trained in the ways of God. He is about thirty at this time, and he will soon begin his reign as king of Israel. The first thing he does as he emerges as Israel's leader is to teach God's people to grieve.

In 2 Sam 1:1-4, David hears of Saul's death:

**After the death of Saul, David returned from defeating the Amalekites and stayed in Ziklag two days. On the third day a man arrived from Saul's camp, with his clothes torn and with dust on his head. When he came to David, he fell to the ground to pay him honor.**

**"Where have you come from?" David asked him.**

**He answered, "I have escaped from the Israelite camp."**

**"What happened?" David asked. "Tell me."**

**He said, "The men fled from the battle. Many of them fell and died. And Saul and his son Jonathan are dead."**

If we had been following the David story closely throughout the entire book of Samuel, we would have been waiting for this point. Saul, the king whom God rejected from being king over Israel and who persecuted David for so long is now dead. The way is paved for David to take over his rightful place as

God's anointed king of Israel. Good news, right?

Verses 11-12:

**Then David and all the men with him took hold of their clothes and tore them. They mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the LORD and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.**

The Amalekite messenger's blood must have run cold. It is not wise to bring a soon-to-be king bad news. He had hoped to be rewarded, but when David tears his clothes as a sign of mourning and commands his people to mourn, weep, and fast for Saul and Jonathan and all who perished with them, the Amalekite must have known he was in big trouble. He had miscalculated. David was not happy at the news at all.

This is a moment of true greatness in David's life, a high point in the David story. David acts in perfect alignment with the purposes of God in his amazing response to the news of Saul's and Jonathan's deaths. He does not rejoice because he personally gains from this news, but he grieves with God that an enemy has won the day over God's people. That is how David immediately sees the situation. He sees it from God's perspective. His time alone with God in the wilderness shows in his God-responsiveness.

## David Leads His People to Lament

Why did David act so swiftly to teach the people to mourn? Because David was sad. David was genuinely distressed that Saul and Jonathan had perished.<sup>2</sup> David's internal world and external behavior are a perfect match. But what he does in leading them to mourn is to give his kingdom a very good start.

David brings dignity to those that went before him and gave the people of Israel a common family history, and in so doing, he also draws that stage of Israel's history to a close. Life comes out of death, scripture informs us. As Saul's kingdom is buried, a new kingdom is born under David's leadership. Grieving together allows the people of God to leave the old behind, feel their common bonds as God's people, and look to the future hope of a new Davidic kingdom.

For people of faith, death is not the last word. This David story points to the greater story of the Son of David, Jesus, who died at Calvary for our sins and was resurrected on the third day in the garden of Gethsemane. In Jesus, we are forgiven of our sins and given the Spirit of God to dwell inside us today so we can live a God-infused life, and we look to the resurrection from the dead in which we will live with God forever. Those of us who know Jesus have great hope. Grieving freely expresses loss but does not mean we are hopeless.

We are a culture in denial about death in many ways, and I think this is an outworking of hopelessness or lack of faith. We do not have many prescribed ways of expressing grief, so we do not know how to act or respond to loss

and death. Without knowing how to grieve, we diminish life by refusing to grieve over what is lost. God thought grief was important enough to give instructions about mourning in the book of Leviticus and to have a whole book called Lamentations dedicated to the topic. Seventy percent of David's psalms, which became the prayer book of Israel, are laments.<sup>3</sup>

If God thinks grieving is important and does not conflict with great faith, then how can we apply this passage to our grief and sorrow? First, we need to engage with it. Grief is expressed communally. It may be experienced most profoundly in our own personal lives, but our faith community has a part in it. Here is how David and his community engaged with grief:

1. They gathered together. They did not isolate themselves at times of grief or isolate the one grieving, but they gathered together to give one another support. There is nothing sadder than to have no one acknowledge our loss, ask us about it, or try to enter into it with us.

2. They let grief show. They threw ashes on their heads and tore their clothing. These activities were a sign of mourning, and the idea of mourning in Israel also implied repentance, which was often part of it. What I think we can do with this is say that grief shows. It is okay to let our grief show, and when we see signs of grief in a person's demeanor or behavior, it is not to be feared but to be shared. We can and should expect some painful evaluations all around from the grieving, and repentance is part of this process.

3. They fasted. The community altered the way it lived to acknowledge and identify with the family of the lost ones. How do we do this?

4. They cried loudly. Wailed, actually. This is not a sign of weak faith but of deep sorrow because of the value of the person lost. This does not suggest that keeping our cool indicates mature faith.

5. They ended the grieving process in this passage in a day. In Leviticus, it went on longer. What is important is that there is a time to stop formally grieving. Grief will ebb and flow, and no one knows for how long, but giving voice to grief actually contains it by expressing it and giving it its due importance.

Do you see how very alive grief is? How expressive it is? How life-affirming it is?

When we as a community hide our grief from each other, or don't acknowledge it in our community, we diminish ourselves.

Finally, David formalizes their grief into a song of lament and tells them to teach it to the next generation. Why teach it? The next generation will thereby have a shared history with their fathers; they will identify with all of Israel as family. They will learn to respect life. Ritualizing death gives it significance. David's lament draws on the good of Saul, acknowledges it, affirms it, and lets God be Saul's judge.

2 Samuel 1:19-20:

**Your glory, O Israel, lies slain on your heights.**

**How the mighty have fallen!**

**Tell it not in Gath,**

**proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon,**

**lest the daughters of the Philistines be glad**

**lest the daughters of the uncircumcised rejoice.**

Laments often begin with the word how. How the mighty have fallen is repeated three times and is the expression that gives voice to the tragedy of Saul's and Jonathan's deaths. In the first verse, "the mighty" is general and can refer to any of God's warriors, allowing all Israel to give voice to their losses.<sup>4</sup> God's glory is seen in his people who now are dead. It is a sad day for Israel.

David is saddened that their archenemies, the Philistines, will rejoice over this. As the women sang when David killed the Philistine giant Goliath, so will these women rejoice at the defeat of God's people. God promised Israel that if they kept their covenant with him, he would fight for Israel. Evidence that Israel did not keep her covenant is the defeat here lamented. David is again concerned for God's reputation before the nations.

2 Samuel 1:21:

**O mountains of Gilboa,**

**may you have neither dew nor rain,**

**nor fields that yield offerings of grain.**

**For there the shield of the mighty was defiled,**

**the shield of Saul—no longer rubbed with oil.**

David calls on creation to stop along with Israel. How can the world continue when my loved one is dead? That is something we all feel when our world is changed so permanently but the rest of the world continues to move ahead unaltered.<sup>5</sup>

The warriors are pictured as offerings. This is the language of the temple. Saul and Jonathan have offered their lives to God in battle. Saul's shield, once oiled for battle, is now thrown aside on the ground in death.<sup>6</sup>

**From the blood of the slain,**

**from the flesh of the mighty,**

**the bow of Jonathan did not turn back,**

**the sword of Saul did not return unsatisfied.**

**Saul and Jonathan—**

**in life they were loved and gracious,**

**and in death they were not parted.**

**They were swifter than eagles,**

**they were stronger than lions. (2 Samuel 1:22-23)**

These two verses comprise the center of the lament. Jonathan's weapon was the bow and Saul's weapon was the sword: each man is pictured as an aggressive, effective warrior. They are remembered as standing their ground and not fleeing in battle.<sup>7</sup>

Saul and Jonathan are each given equal place and honor. It is perhaps amazing to us that David loved Saul, but he really did. David is magnanimous toward Saul and honors their fidelity to one another—father and son—in lament. David gives them highest praise for their abilities as warriors. They shared the attributes of the best of what nature commands in her predators. They were swift as eagles that rule the skies and strong as lion which rule the earth.<sup>8</sup>

**O daughters of Israel,**

**weep for Saul,**

**who clothed you in scarlet and finery,**

**who adorned your garments with ornaments of gold. (2 Samuel 1:24)**

As the Philistine women were certainly going to celebrate this event, David calls on Israel's women to mourn for Saul, who made them prosperous.

**How the mighty have fallen in battle!**

**Jonathan lies slain on your heights.**

**I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother;**

**you were very dear to me.**

**Your love for me was wonderful,**

**more wonderful than that of women. (2 Samuel 1:25-26)**

And now Jonathan is mentioned alone: In verse 26 David becomes personal and speaks in the first person. Instead of Saul's shield, which lay defiled in verse 2, now it is Jonathan himself that David pictures in his mind as laying dead on the mountain. Jonathan is remembered as David's true brother. He was more self-giving and wonderful than David's natural brothers, and his love amazed David because Jonathan gave up his crown for David, yielding to God's will and doing everything he could to promote David. Jonathan had nothing to gain from loving David. This kind of brotherly love, which gives without getting, is more wonderful than that of a woman. Unfortunately, David did have too many women in his life, and he only had one loyal brother. Jonathan's loss was huge in David's life.

While the poem really has Jonathan more as its focus, Saul is given honor as well. He is not shorted by any means. 2 Samuel 1:27:

**How the mighty have fallen!**

**The weapons of war have perished!**

When he ends the lament, the loss of Saul and Jonathan as God's weapons of war is again grieved. David concludes by giving both of them dignity and place in Israel's history.

David's lament draws the formal mourning of Israel for

Saul and Jonathan to a close. He has drawn the community together and brought dignity and place to the lives of those that went before him. Israel's grief formalized and written down gives sorrow voice and a place of honor that can be revisited and remembered. David shows following generations how to grieve for people who have great value. He has used what he learned in the deep recesses of his soul to administer God's grace to others. Eugene Petersen writes of this lament, "Doesn't the lament provide a vehicle of spirit that enables us to transcend self-centeredness? Lament has to do with loss; but David isn't less. Why is he not less?"<sup>9</sup> That is a great questions and one that I invite us to keep reflecting on in our lives, for David's ability to hold nothing back from God in either joy or sorrow is one of the things that made him "a man after God's own heart."

*Lord, may we learn to hold nothing back from you. May we follow David's example in coming to you with our hopes, dreams, disappointments, and losses, so that you can meet us there, heal us, and make us new. Mostly, make us wholly devoted to you and use us in your world to draw others to your throne of grace and mercy. Amen.*

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, Crossroad Publishing Co.
- <sup>2</sup> Eugene Petersen, *Leap Over A Wall*, Harper San Francisco pg 119
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid. pg. 120
- <sup>4</sup> Ronald Youngblood, *1,2 Samuel, Expositor's Bible Commentary* pg 813
- <sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggeman, *1&2Samuel, Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* 1990 pg. 215
- <sup>6</sup> Gevirtz, Stanley, *Patterns in the Early Poetry of Israel*, pg 88
- <sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggeman, *1&2Samuel, Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* 1990 pg. 215
- <sup>8</sup> Ronald Youngblood, *1,2 Samuel, Expositor's Bible Commentary* pg 814
- <sup>9</sup> Eugene Petersen, *Leap Over A Wall*, Harper San Francisco pg 119

