GETTING OVER GRIEF

SERIES: A LIFE OF PASSION:
THE STORY OF DAVID.

DISCOVERY PAPERS

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2 Samuel 1:1–27
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2 Samuel 1:1–27

Like most of my discoveries in life, the gift of poetry in a word-soaked world landed upon me much later than I would have preferred. But as is often the case, the wait only served to increase my capacity for joy. I studied economics at Stanford University with the intention of going into business but, through the ministry of Peninsula Bible Church, I changed course and became a pastor. Shortly after Emily and I were married in 1972, we lost our firstborn son, David Jonathan, nine days after birth due to a rare enzyme deficiency. The following year our daughter Jessica endured the same fate.

Nothing prepared me for how to process my grief until poetry found me where, in the outskirts of hell, a poet had shaped the soul of his nation to sing. The place was România and the year 1988, a little more than a year before the brutal, 20-year regime of Nicolae Ceausescu would come to an end with his execution on December 25, 1989. The poet was Traian Dorz, a man of profound and abiding faith, who watched in horror as his beloved country was ravaged, raped, and left to grope alone in the darkness, her dignity stolen, her faith mercilessly stomped out. Working in this wasteland, God gave Dorz a voice powerful enough to pierce the oppressive darkness of Communist Romania and energize his silent, suffering countrymen. So powerful were his poems that the Securitate brutally confiscated every page of them, piled them in an oxcart and burned them before his eyes. Then, they imprisoned the poet. But they could not silence his voice.

Over the next seventeen years of imprisonment, arrest, and brutal torture, Dorz worked with relentless energy. Equipped with only his memory, a glass shard for a pallet, lime and spittle as his paint, and a matchstick for a brush, he resurrected his poems from the ash heap—some 4,500 poems. And then I met the man. It was a warm summer evening in Cluj. I just had returned from a secret meeting, full of song and Spirit and entered my host's home. As I opened the door to my room, I saw him standing there—Traian Dorz, seventy-three years of age. He was a man of small stature, but he possessed a powerful presence—a peasant yet a king. Here was a man who endured more suffering and swallowed more evil than I could comprehend. Seeing him, I felt conflicting emotions warring within me. Repelled by my own sense of unworthiness, I felt like dust on the scale, and at the same time, drawn by a holy love. I showed him a photo I had taken of the Roman pavement stone in Israel where Pilate presented the scourged Jesus to the crowds, saying, "Behold the man." He took it and held it with unspeakable tenderness and wept. Then he took me into his arms, looked deep into my eyes and said, "**You** teach **about** the cross….**we** live **under** the cross." Then in an act of extreme tenderness, he gently pressed his cheek to mine and prayed for me. I needed no translation. Like the apostle Paul, he was praying that I might comprehend "the breadth and length and height and depth of the love Christ...that surpasses knowledge" (Ephesians 3:17-19), a love that he had come to know **under** the cross. The words rolled off his tongue in dream-like cadences. The soft timbre and pulsating rhythms of his voice seized me and tore my heart like water.

Coming home, I came to treasure the poem and to recognize its unique power to unlock grief in the soul in a way that doesn't deny or obliterate it, but rather transcends it by naming and embracing our grief in the presence of God and his people. Along with the Psalms, David's lament over Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:17-27) became a signature text that revealed some of the mystery as to why the poem was such an effective tool to process and transcend grief for the ancients. David's speech is a tribute to the one who contributed the most to his life, Jonathan, and what his friendship meant to him now that he is dead. We live in a culture that doesn't acknowledge grief. But David was a master at it, and we can learn much from how he gives his grief a voice.

David was in Ziklag when he first received the news that King Saul was dead. Saul was decapitated and his weapons were carried off as trophies for display in the Philistine temple of Ashtoreths, while his body and the bodies of his sons were nailed to a wall in Beth-Shan. A valiant group of men from Jabesh Gilead pulled a night raid and rescued the four bodies from further defilement. They pulled them down from the wall, burned them, and then gave their bones a decent burial.

How will David give voice to his grief? How do you speak of a friendship so precious yet so short-lived and now violently ripped away? Are there words for such desecration? The poem that David wrote was so significant that the editors of the canon, rather than placing it in the collection of the psalms, left it in the narrative portion of Samuel so that future generations would take time to pause from the story and enter into David's grief. Perhaps this was in obedience to David's instructions.

2 Samuel 1:17-18:

And David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and Jonathan his son, 18 and he said it should be taught to the people of Judah; behold, it is written in the Book of Jashar.

It is a holy act to stand with someone in his or her grief. I've come to treasure this poem for decades, not only for "*what*" it says, but for "*how*" David constructed it as a tool to process his grief. The process unfolds in four distinct stages.

I. Giving Grief a Name
(2 Samuel 1:20-23)

The first step processing grief is to give it a name. If you can name something accurately, you can begin to absorb it and integrate the experience into your life so that you can move forward. Yet, when we are overwhelmed with sorrow, language often eludes us, making it extremely difficult to give voice to our turbulent emotions. So we often cave in to silence and venture on in numbness. David found that the secret to overcome gaping silence was creating metaphors, concrete images from the story, to give unspeakable grief a name.

A. Impotent to prevent the inevitable

2 Samuel 1:20:

Tell it not in Gath,
publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon,
lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice,
lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult.

After the opening line of the painful image of the royal crown slain on Gilboa, David cries out in anguish: "Tell it not in Gath!" Israel's worst fears are realized, for her king is dead. Saul was left unprotected, abandoned by God, subsequently slaughtered, defiled, dismembered, and displayed by the enemy. The painful irony is that Saul has suffered the same fate as Goliath, and now the news is going to spread to of all places, Gath, Goliath's hometown. We can hear the painful jeering and gloating of the victorious army on their homeward march. Upon arrival they are greeted with the cheers and songs of Philistine women whose choruses glory in Israel's defeat, while the daughters of Israel are weeping (v. 24). The unthinkable has happened. Life has dealt us our worst fears, the uncircumcised exult and our God is implicated. Shame slaps us in the face, and David is impotent to do anything about it.

In the next verse we hear David's anguished cry for the creation to stand with him in his grief.

B. Impotent to create what he longs for

2 Samuel 1:21:

"You mountains of Gilboa,
let there be no dew or rain upon you,
nor fields of offerings!
For there the shield of the mighty was defiled,
the shield of Saul, not anointed with oil.

If the height of Gilboa was the place where God turned his back on his anointed (depicted in the image of Saul's shield lacking oil[1]) and the shield of the mighty was defiled, may that be the place where all of creation laments forever. May the heavens hold back their heavenly blessings of rain so that in that desecrated place there will never again be worship. When we are buried by grief, we long for all of creation to groan with us in our pain. When Emily and I lost both of our children, it was raining. The skies' downpour brought me a mysterious comfort as if the heavens were weeping with us. When consumed in grief, it is abhorrent to the human psyche when things continue, business as usual. There is a discord in the soul when the Creator does not act in accordance with the events of history.

David has incredible freedom before God to be honest about all the tensions in his soul. And in the careful selection of each image, he has given his grief a name. David gives voice to everything we have ever felt, but did not sense we had permission to speak. Yet David says it with a bold honesty, in full view of the public, and in the sacred presence of God.

II. Moving Grief Through the Soul
(2 Samuel 1:19, 25, 27)

Once grief has been identified it has to find a way to move. For if grief remains buried, with the passing of time it freezes over, and our hearts freeze over with it.

In this poem, David designs his images of the poem to unlock his grief, then uses the repetition of the refrain to gently but firmly move grief through his soul until it is fully spent in the presence of God and others. The refrain appears three times, but oddly enough it does not occur at regular intervals, nor is it an exact repetition. A careful look at David's use of the refrain will reveal his genius as a poet that accomplishes his healing work on us.

A. First refrain

2 Samuel 1:19:

"Your glory (or "gazelle"), **O Israel, is slain on your high places!**
How the mighty have fallen!

Fokkelman writes, "In the (opening) clause and the refrain he does not mince matters for the length of one verse: the land humiliated, deprived of its pride and ornament, the dead everywhere up there. It is, however, such a terrible sight to the poet that he cannot bear this for longer than one verse."[2]

So how does David get us up to this mountain to see what we do not wish to see? The answer is that he crafts an image filled with ambiguity that, by its very nature, invites our curiosity. The very first word of the poem, "tzevi[3]" translated "beauty" or "ornament," is also a homonym for the word "gazelle." Right at the outset the Hebrew listeners are launched down the path of unknowing. They don't know if David has written this poem as a national lament for a dead king, the royal ornament of Israel; or as poignant song of personalized grief for an intimate friend, that swift footed *gazelle*, Jonathan.

It isn't until verse 25 when the refrain repeats and we sing that anguished cry a second time. But now with the change of a mere one word, the mysterious tzevi is identified, and the harsh reality of what went on is fully uncovered.

B. Second refrain

2 Samuel 1:25:

How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle!
Jonathan lies slain on your high places.

Now we know all too well, our worst fears have been realized, we are staring at a dead gazelle, "my brother," pierced through, slain. The poignant irony is that he has fallen in the midst of what he did best, the battle! With these striking blows to our soul, we may be tempted turn our turn away, but before we can collect our dazed thoughts, the refrain quickly rings out again, thrusting us forward with amazing speed to the end of the battle. We have been held captive by the poet to see what we did not want to see and now we are forced to see it to the bitter end.

C. Third refrain

2 Samuel 1:27:

How the mighty have fallen,
and the weapons of war perished!"

There is stark finality and eerie silence that death brings over the poet. The image of the "weapons of war perished" evokes a number of memories from David's story. David's last act over a vanquished Goliath was to cut off his head and take his weapon as the trophy of victory. When you capture the weapons of the enemy, it's over. Here the image reminds David of Saul's misplaced trust in his weapons, especially that impotent spear which never found its mark; and of Saul's sword that ironically became the instrument of his own death. "The weapons of war have perished" and by implication so are those who trusted in them. But the image has a dual edge, it is also a painful reminder of Jonathan, who is portrayed as the one who is always giving his weapons away, and held nothing back in his loyalty to David. Could such a gift cost his life?

The repetition of the refrain moves grief through the soul. David is adamant that Israel's grief not remain stagnant, lest it petrify, encased within the bitter walls of unfeeling. And so it works on us as well. Drawn in by the ambiguity, we are captured by the poet to relive that dreadful day and carried along by the quick repetition of the refrain to its severe end. In each of the three repetitions we hear the same agonizing cry, "How the mighty have fallen!" But each time it is packed with more emotion. Tears are released, the river flows freely, and our grief is fully spent.

As David spends his grief before the throne of God, something very profound happens. Mysteriously, he is purged of his pain.

III. As Grief is Spent, Pain is Purged
(2 Samuel 1:23-24)

A. Honoring the deceased

2 Samuel 1:22-23:

From the blood of the slain,
from the fat of the mighty,

the bow of Jonathan turned not back,
the sword of Saul returned not empty.

Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely!
In life and in death they were not divided;
they were swifter than eagles,
they were stronger than lions.

Here at the center of the poem is the eulogy, the place where one remembers the person at their best. As David remembers Saul and Jonathan, he paints them in magnificent splendor as invincible warriors, unbeatable in battle. They never went out to battle in vain; their weapons always accomplished their aim. Overpowering all opponents, they ruled supreme. They were swifter than eagles, stronger than lions.

But these once glorious images are now forever ravaged by the present tragedy. Every image which once evoked praise and awe––the archer's accurate bow, the penetrating sword of the king, the spilled blood of the slain, the eagle's speed, and a lion's strength––now becomes a painful reminder of how Saul and Jonathan died up their on Gilboa. Once glorious memories transformed as cruel reminders of savage power of death. The images are like a two edged swords which lacerate the soul.

Even more grievous to David is the painful irony that what killed Jonathan was not his sin, but his loyalty. He took it as his highest role in life to be Saul's son, and rather than joining David in the wilderness, he stayed with his father in the royal court. Even when his father charted a doomsday course for the royal family, Jonathan stood with his father, and went down with a sinking ship.

In recounting the pain, David finds himself strangely purged of the pain caused from Saul. Taking our pain directly to the Lord allows us to disconnect emotionally from the hurts people have done to us. There is not an ounce of bitterness left in the soul from all the abuse Saul had thrust at David. Through the power of the poem, David's soul is purged of bitterness, cleansed of spite and protected from retaliation. As David honors Saul with a pure heart, I suspect that Abigail was intensely proud of how the king, now her husband, had taken her counsel to heart (1 Samuel 25:30-31).

B. Loving the deceased

2 Samuel 1:24:

You daughters of Israel, weep over Saul,
who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet,
who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.

If honor is not enough, David finds the capacity to love his former enemy. Through the poem David gives Saul the gift he always wanted in life, the adulation and respect from the "daughters of Israel." Ironically this is what first provoked Saul's enmity and fueled his obsession to kill David. When the women sang, "Saul has killed the thousands and David his ten thousands" (1 Samuel 18:7). But now David has no trouble giving Saul the praise of women, for he had something far better, the love of his son. Such is the healing power of David's lament: to verbalize his grief, to air his pain, and to be cleansed from bitterness so that he the capacity to love his enemy.

Once David's pain is purged we come to the fourth stage of the poem: the ability to transform what was desecrated into something sacred.

4. Love Transcends Sorrow

2 Samuel 1:26:

I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;
very pleasant have you been to me;
your love to me was extraordinary,
surpassing the love of women.

This national lament for a dead king now takes a very personal turn as David speaks in the first person. We have finally come to the destination David had been driving towards throughout the poem, the chance to speak a final word to his friend. It is always a moving moment at a funeral when "the living" speaks directly to the dead. Years of buried feelings surface and saturate a few well-chosen words with a lifetime of emotion.

To me, the most amazing thing about the power of the poem is David's ability to go back to a past time and place where he was once painfully absent, and now relive the event as if being fully present. Before the poem Jonathan was dead, David was absent, God had abandoned them, and Gilboa was desecrated. In the recitation of the poem Jonathan is alive, David is present, God is intimately present between the two and Gilboa is sanctified. Once the poem is constructed it creates a window into heaven that transcends time. And this holy window remains open forever inviting all to freely relive the event in all the holiness of sacred memory. Every time the poem is read the transcendence of heaven uniting with earth, of friends embracing, of love bursting the breast, breaks in upon us again and again.

Through those intensifying cadences of the poet we were mysteriously drawn to a place and time where we did not want to go, to a forbidden place and foreboding time when memories were marred by the tragic and lacerated by loss. But now the tragic has been transformed into the sacred. And those poetic cadences and rhymes we once dreaded, now fill us with hope and anticipation of life, beautiful life, holy life that we can relive again and again. The poem creates a window into the sacred that transcends time, a widow that remains open...forever.

Where does David's poem leave us? With are left to contemplate a love David describes as "more wonderful than the love of women." When David comes to the depths of his sorrow he somehow embraces an indescribable love. The term David uses to describe Jonathan's love is from the Hebrew root pala' that describes something so extraordinary and miraculous only God could have authored the reality. The kind of love that sacrifices career and family relationships for another person, and finally gives his life's blood that someone else might succeed is a love that describes the character of God.

One of the most painful moments of my life came on Friday, December 2nd, 1976. I had just gotten a call from the hospital to say that Jessica, my newborn daughter, was very sick. One medical test told the whole story. She had the same enzyme deficiency my son had died from a year earlier. I knew Jessica was destined to die. Accompanied by one of our elders, I made my to the hospital to see her for the last time. I could only look at her for a short time before I turned away. I could not bear the pain. As I left the hospital waves of grief came crashing over me. I wanted to weep, but was too embarrassed in front of my friend. I was not there when Jessica died. She died alone, abandoned by her father. When the hospital graciously offered to take care of her body, I welcomed that. I could not bear the thought of laying her little body in the ground. How could we endure another memorial service? The thought was morbid to me.

Sixteen years later, God called me back to the same hospital. Again, it was in December and, just as when both my children died, it was raining. There a precious boy of one of our church families was fighting for his life. I did not want to go, but I was mysteriously yet powerfully drawn to watch as a dear couple loved their son and refused to turn away from the face of death. As he lay dying, we began singing hymns and psalms. When we sang the words of the second verse of the hymn, "It Is Well With My Soul," heaven united with earth and love burst forth from our breasts. There came a transcendent sense of peace, of power and victory over death that I will never forget.

God was gracious to call me back to my Gilboa to see what I did not want to see. I discovered that even when I left my daughter, he was there all along, caring and loving. Following David's example, I wrote a poem for Jessica. Through the power of its images I was able to reconnect with her: to tell her I loved her, to experience holy love and the power of God that transcends death. I have gone back to that time and place many times. It has become a sacred memory. Now I tell my friends who are engulfed in pain, "Do not wait sixteen years to write your poem. Write it now, and turn the tragic into the sacred."

Let it Rain
In appreciation for my daughter, Jessica Lynne
November 30, 1976 – December 4, 1976

O Jessica, nine months we waited
for your precious hidden frame
to break through the darkness
and turn our souls into day.

Unto us it was given,
morning came, its dawn so bright,
it loosed our sackcloth,
and girded us with light.

Your form so pure,
yours the sweetest gaze
a mother's dream,
a father's praise.

Then on the third night
while I slept, you cried;
your mother held you tight,
she knew, but it was hidden from me.

All through the darkness
she cared for you…
then gently laid you upon the altar;
she knelt beside those well-hewn
stones and wept.

Then I heard
the shophar's ringing cry...

Terror struck, "Impossible!" I cried,
"Could it be to walk this way again–
conception to pain, never to regain–
when the first born, has already paid?"

I pulled back, withdrew,
traumatized by the pain I already knew.
I could not stay and watch,
for now I knew.

My eyes could not gaze on your little tent,
which would all too soon,
be broken down and laid to rest,
in the earth, rather than upon a breast.

Waves of grief came crashing down,
heaven was calling through the rain,
"Pour out your heart like water,"
but I turned and left, numb from pain.

O Jessica, nine months we had waited
for your precious hidden frame
to break through the darkness
and turn our souls into day.

O Jessica, O Jessica, where are you now?
Where did the Sower plant the seed?
I long to know,
but it is hidden from me.

O could I now go back,
and that dark hour relive,
when you lay limp and still,
I would be your papa and give.

I wanted to forget,
it is easy to forget,
but I could not forget you,
my first precious daughter,
Jessica Lynne.

Sixteen years past,
and in my wanderings here,
I came across that valley again–
it was raining.

This time I did not turn away,
but obeying heaven's command,
I knelt beside the stones
and stayed until dawn's early light.

O Holy night, angels sang,
The grip of night grew limp,
he appeared
and each soul felt its worth.

He did not turn away
traumatized by pain,
but stretched out his hand
and placed it into the flame.

Beyond his hand I saw
the wrist, impaled by my spear,
pierced so deep with wounds,
yet draws me near.

Beyond the wrist, his gaze,
O that gaze ablaze
with such love it burst my breast,
evoking deepest praise.

O death where is your victory,
O grave where is your sting?

Captured with awe, I stared
and stared, and then I knew,
that when I left,
he had cared for you.

O Jessica,
"Hardly your life clear forth of heaven was sent,
Ere it broke out into a smile and went.
So swift thy days, a gift to us was lent
You, now a daughter and saint inextricably blent,
Will one day teach your father in some heavenly tent."[4]

Endnotes

[1] Warriors used to rub their shields with oil before battle to make them slippery. Here the lack of oil on Saul's shield may also be a metaphorical reference to the absence of God's Spirit that had departed from Saul (1 Sam 16:14).

[2] J. P. Fokkelman, The Crossing Fates, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel (Assen/Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1986), 659.

[3] Tzevi is used as ornament in later texts of Scripture (Isa 4:2; 13:19, 23:9; 28:1,4,5; Jer 3:19; Ezek 7:20), while gazelle is its meaning in earlier and closer contexts (Deut 12:15; 14:5; 15:22, 2 Sam 2:18). The closest occurrence is found in 2 Sam 2:18 where it refers to Asahel, who "was as swift-footed as one of the gazelles which is in the field."

[4] Adapted from George MacDonald's, Diary of an Old Soul, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975), 131. MacDonald also lost a son and a daughter.