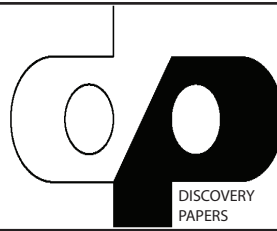


# EMBRACING SORROW

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



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2 Samuel 15:1–16:14  
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*2 Samuel 15:1–16:14*

## **Absalom steals hearts**

**1 Samuel 15:1-12:**

**After this Absalom got himself a chariot and horses, and fifty men to run before him. 2 And Absalom used to rise early and stand beside the way of the gate. And when any man had a dispute to come before the king for judgment, Absalom would call to him and say, “From what city are you?” And when he said, “Your servant is of such and such a tribe in Israel,” 3 Absalom would say to him, “See, your claims are good and right, but there is no man designated by the king to hear you.” 4 Then Absalom would say, “Oh that I were judge in the land! Then every man with a dispute or cause might come to me, and I would give him justice.” 5 And whenever a man came near to pay homage to him, he would put out his hand and take hold of him and kiss him. 6 Thus Absalom did to all of Israel who came to the king for judgment. So Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel.**

**7 And at the end of four years Absalom said to the king, “Please let me go and pay my vow, which I have vowed to the Lord, in Hebron. 8 For your servant vowed a vow while I lived at Geshur in Aram, saying, ‘If the Lord will indeed bring me back to Jerusalem, then I will offer worship to the Lord.’” 9 The king said to him, “Go in peace.” So he arose and went to Hebron. 10 But Absalom sent secret messengers throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, “As soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then say, ‘Absalom is king at Hebron!’” 11 With Absalom went two hundred men from Jerusalem who were invited guests, and they went in their innocence and knew nothing. 12 And while Absalom was offering the sacrifices, he sent for Ahithophel the Gilonite, David’s counselor, from his city Giloh. And the conspiracy grew strong, and the people with Absalom kept increasing.**

I heard the word no son wants to hear. My mother had cancer. When she was diagnosed, she was expected to live for five to ten more years, but the cancer spread faster than expected. She was in and out of the hospital for several months until finally, when she was checked in again, I knew it would be for the last time. She was sixty-one years old. For me, it was a crisis. I didn’t know what to do.

David heard what no king wants to hear: his son was betraying him. For David, it was a crisis. What would he do?

The narrative in 2 Samuel 15:1-16:14 is one of three in the David story that I particularly wanted to preach (along with 1 Samuel 22, where David meets with the Lord in the cave of Adullam, and 2 Samuel 7, where the Lord enters into a covenant with David). It’s been a meaningful text to me for many years. I once spent two days reading it and meditating on it during a personal retreat.

When David heard that his son Absalom was staging a coup, he left Jerusalem for the wilderness. First he descended Mount Zion, on which Jerusalem sat, then he ascended the Mount of Olives, and finally he descended the Mount of Olives and arrived at the Jordan River. When David had brought the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem, he danced before the Lord with all his might. When he left Jerusalem, he wept with all his might. Indeed, he was a man of passion, holding nothing back. Thus we have called our series “A Life of Passion.” A life of passion, as we will see, embraces sorrow.

As David made his way toward the wilderness, he had a series of encounters that reminded him of prior scenes from his life. The Lord in a sense gave David a tour of his life as he left the throne behind.

What do you do in a crisis or when you’ve suffered loss or when a dream dies? Let us walk this road with David.

David, as a younger man, won the hearts of the Israelites with his faith. Once he became king, however, he abused his power, violating Bathsheba and ordering the death of her husband Uriah. Then he shirked his responsibility, failing to discipline his son Amnon for the rape of Tamar, failing to discipline his son Absalom for the murder of Amnon, and failing to reconcile with Absalom. The hearts of the Israelites now belong to Absalom, David's resentful, power-hungry son. Having misused the kingdom, David loses the kingdom.

## David takes action

**2 Samuel 15:13-22:**

**And a messenger came to David, saying, "The hearts of the men of Israel have gone after Absalom." 14 Then David said to all his servants who were with him at Jerusalem, "Arise, and let us flee, or else there will be no escape for us from Absalom. Go quickly, lest he overtake us quickly and bring down ruin on us and strike the city with the edge of the sword." 15 And the king's servants said to the king, "Behold, your servants are ready to do whatever my lord the king decides." 16 So the king went out, and all his household after him. And the king left ten concubines to keep the house. 17 And the king went out, and all the people after him. And they halted at the last house.**

**18 And all his servants passed by him, and all the Cherethites, and all the Pelethites, and all the six hundred Gittites who had followed him from Gath, passed on before the king. 19 Then the king said to Ittai the Gittite, "Why do you also go with us? Go back and stay with the king, for you are a foreigner and also an exile from your home. 20 You came only yesterday, and shall I today make you wander about with us, since I go I know not where? Go back and take your brothers with you, and may the Lord show steadfast love and faithfulness to you." 21 But Ittai answered the king, "As the Lord lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king shall be, whether for death or for life, there also will your servant be." 22 And David said to Ittai, "Go then, pass on." So Ittai the Gittite passed on with all his men and all the little ones who were with him.**

David, passive for too long, finally takes action. He's decisive again. What snapped David out of it? First, he hears that Absalom is planning a coup and that "the hearts of the men of Israel have gone after Absalom." A crisis is upon him, one that he is at least in part responsible for. Second, David recognizes that his leadership is needed when his servants say to him, "Behold, your servants are ready to do whatever my lord the king decides." In order for them to do what he decides, he has to, well, decide. On the one hand, David is culpable. On the other hand, he's needed. Therefore, he takes action.

Recognizing the urgency of the hour, David makes a hasty departure from Jerusalem. David is on the run again, not from Saul this time, but from his son.

Although time is of the essence, David stops at the "last house" in Jerusalem, on the eastern slope of Mount Zion. He wants to make sure that everyone who is with him escapes, so he has all the people who are with him pass before him. David has become a shepherd again! Among those who pass before him are a collection of foreigners, Cherethites, Pelethites, and Gittites, who had attached themselves to him.

## The new Jonathan

Among the foreigners is a newcomer, Ittai, an exile from Gath. David tells Ittai that it would be better for him and his people to return to Jerusalem than to face an uncertain future in the wilderness. David, without using Absalom's name, calls him "the king" but Ittai calls David "the king" and pledges to stay with him wherever he goes, even unto death.

What inspires such loyalty in Ittai, a man of Gath, for David, the deposed king of Israel? What Ittai says to David sounds like what Ruth, a Moabite, David's great-grandmother, said to Naomi, an Israelite, who had urged her to return to Moab. Ruth answered, "For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you" (Ruth 1:16-17). What Ittai says also sounds like what Jonathan, the son of Saul, said when pledging his loyalty to David (1 Samuel 18:1-4, 20:4, 17, 21, 42).

Ittai, apparently without knowing it, awakens both Ruth and Jonathan. In a sense, he becomes the new Ruth; he becomes the new Jonathan. At David's lowest point, both emotionally and geographically, at the last house, at the bottom of Mount Zion, David sees the loyalty of both his great-grandmother and his friend in Ittai.

What inspires such loyalty in Ittai? The better question would be who inspires such loyalty in Ittai? The answer, taking in the not only the narratives of 1 and 2 Samuel but also the narrative of Ruth, is the Lord, who sends Ittai David's way in his hour of need. Ittai thus reminds David of God's faithfulness.

## The earth weeps

2 Samuel 15:23:

**And all the land wept aloud as all the people passed by, and the king crossed the brook Kidron, and all the people passed on toward the wilderness.**

David called his son the king. Ittai called David the king. Who's right? The narrator settles the issue in verse 23: he calls David the king. The departure of David and the people loyal to him is so great an event that the all the land, literally "all the earth," is said to weep aloud as they pass by. The king, in solidarity with the people, crosses the brook Kidron toward the wilderness and the Jordan River. But wait, didn't Israel cross the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land? Indeed. This would seem to be movement in the wrong direction.

David goes into exile. Again. David has to wander about in the wilderness. Again.

## David lets go

2 Samuel 15:24-29:

**And Abiathar came up, and behold, Zadok came also with all the Levites, bearing the ark of the covenant of God. And they set down the ark of God until the people had all passed out of the city. 25 Then the king said to Zadok, "Carry the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me back and let me see both it and his dwelling place. 26 But if he says, 'I have no pleasure in you,' behold, here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him." 27 The king also said to Zadok the priest, "Are you not a seer? Go back to the city in peace, with your two sons, Ahimaaz your son, and Jonathan the son of Abiathar. 28 See, I will wait at the fords of the wilderness until word comes from you to inform me." 29 So Zadok and Abiathar carried the ark of God back to Jerusalem, and they remained there.**

The priests, carrying with them the ark of the covenant, which represents the throne of the Lord on earth, remain loyal to David. David, though, instructs them to take the ark back to Jerusalem. He seems to be coming to terms with his failures. He will not presume upon the Lord. By sending the ark back, he recognizes he has no right to the human throne through which the Lord channels his reign. David leaves his fate in the hands of the Lord. The Lord may bring him back to see the ark, and the tabernacle that houses it, but he won't take the ark with him. If David is to be restored as king, it will be on the Lord's terms, not David's. David lets go.

David not only sends the ark back, he also sends the priests back. He is intent on depending on the Lord without the priests. He will take no props, neither ark nor priests, with him into the wilderness. This is naked trust. Naked trust, though, is not incompatible with cunning strategy. David sends the priests back to Jerusalem as spies and runners, and he will await word from them in the wilderness regarding Absalom's movements.

## David mourns with all his might

2 Samuel 15:30-31:

**But David went up the ascent of the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went, barefoot and with his head covered. And all the people who were with him covered their heads, and they went up, weeping as they went. 31 And it was told David, "Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom." And David said, "O Lord, please turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness."**

Sending the ark back to Jerusalem must remind David of when he brought the ark into Jerusalem in the first place. When David brought the ark into Jerusalem, he "danced before the Lord with all his might," wearing a linen ephod, a priestly garment (2 Samuel 6:14). Now as he sends the ark back to Jerusalem he mourns with all his might, weeping as he begins his ascent of the Mount of Olives. He chooses to go barefoot, feeling every stone—feeling on the outside what he feels on the inside. Instead of covering himself with a priestly garment, he covers his head as a sign of mourning. David must be wondering if he will see the ark again. Will he dance again?

David had made haste to make it to the point of departure, but once he leaves the city, he takes it slow, magnifying every step. For David, time is no longer of the essence, even if Absalom is hastening his way to Jerusalem. For David, mourning is of the essence. The people embrace the sorrow of the king, mirroring his steps, weeping with heads covered.

As if there weren't enough to weep over, David receives news that his counselor, Ahithophel, has joined Absalom's conspiracy. David squeezes out a prayer of desperation, asking the Lord to thwart Ahithophel's counsel.

## **An answer to prayer**

**2 Samuel 15:32-37:**

**While David was coming to the summit, where God was worshiped, behold, Hushai the Archite came to meet him with his coat torn and dirt on his head. 33 David said to him, "If you go on with me, you will be a burden to me. 34 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 now I will be your servant,' then you will defeat for me the counsel of Ahithophel. Are not Zadok and Abiathar the priests with you there? So whatever you hear from the king's house, tell it to Zadok and Abiathar the priests. 36 Behold, their two sons are with them there, Ahimaaz, Zadok's son, and Jonathan, Abiathar's son, and by them you shall send to me everything you hear." 37 So Hushai, David's friend, came into the city, just as Absalom was entering Jerusalem.**

Finally, David reaches the summit of the Mount of Olives. The narrator inserts the comment that the summit is "where God was worshiped." Nothing is known of this custom, but the narrator's inclusion of it in the story of David's departure from Jerusalem reminds us that David is, especially now, in his sorrow, a worshiper.

Indeed, Hushai's appearance at the top of the mountain would seem to be an answer to David's prayer regarding Ahithophel. David sends Hushai back to Jerusalem as a double agent, and Hushai would indeed "turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness" (2 Samuel 17:7-14). Thus the friendship of Hushai counters the betrayal of Ahithophel. At the summit of the Mount of Olives, the Lord wants David to know that he's still with him.

During David's ascent, his visitors were supportive: Ittai and Zadok. At the summit, Hushai is supportive. The other side of the mountain, however, is a different story.

## **David is used**

**2 Samuel 16: 1-4**

**When David had passed a little beyond the summit, Ziba the servant of Mephibosheth met him, with a couple of donkeys saddled, bearing two hundred loaves of bread, a hundred bunches of raisins, a hundred of summer fruits, and a skin of wine. 2 And the king said to Ziba, "Why have you brought these?" Ziba answered, "The donkeys are for the king's household to ride on, the bread and summer fruit for the young men to eat, and the wine for those who faint in the wilderness to drink." 3 And the king said, "And where is your master's son?" Ziba said to the king, "Behold, he remains in Jerusalem, for he said, 'Today the house of Israel will give me back the kingdom of my father.'" 4 Then the king said to Ziba, "Behold, all that belonged to Mephibosheth is now yours." And Ziba said, "I pay homage; let me ever find favor in your sight, my lord the king."**

Ziba, like Ittai, Zadok, and Hushai, appears to be supportive, bringing fresh donkeys and supplies. Ziba was the servant of Saul, but David appointed him to be the servant of Mephibosheth, Jonathan's invalid son. Mephibosheth, however, hasn't joined David for his departure from Jerusalem. Why not? Ziba has the answer: Mephibosheth remains loyal to his father and hopes that the current uprising will result in a return of the throne to the house of Saul. Ziba benefits from the supposed defection, for David grants him Mephibosheth's estate.

But is Ziba telling the truth? As readers, we may have suspicions, but we don't find out for sure until 2 Samuel 19:24-30. At that point, Mephibosheth tells his side of the story, and it's decidedly different from Ziba's story. The narrator means for us to believe that Mephibosheth remained loyal to David.

David is taken in by Ziba, an opportunist. Why? Given his emotional state, David may not be on top of things. Moreover, if your son were disloyal to you, and you were told that another person is also guilty of disloyalty, wouldn't you be susceptible to believing such an accusation? David has a blind spot.

Ziba uses David. But didn't David use Bathsheba? David reaps what he has sown.

## David is abused

**2 Samuel 16:5-13:**

**When King David came to Bahurim, there came out a man of the family of the house of Saul, whose name was Shimei, the son of Gera, and as he came he cursed continually. 6 And he threw stones at David and at all the servants of King David, and all the people and all the mighty men were on his right hand and on his left. 7 And Shimei said as he cursed, "Get out, get out, you man of blood, you worthless man! 8 The Lord has avenged on you all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned, and the Lord has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. See, your evil is on you, for you are a man of blood."**

**9 Then Abishai the son of Zeruiah said to the king, "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and take off his head." 10 But the king said, "What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah? If he is cursing because the Lord has said to him, 'Curse David,' who then shall say, 'Why have you done so?'" 11 And David said to Abishai and to all his servants, "Behold, my own son seeks my life; how much more now may this Benjaminite! Leave him alone, and let him curse, for the Lord has told him to. 12 It may be that the Lord will look on the wrong done to me, and that the Lord will repay me with good for his cursing today." 13 So David and his men went on the road, while Shimei went along on the hillside opposite him and cursed as he went and threw stones at him and flung dust.**

Another man with connections to Saul approaches David as he continues his descent. Whereas Ziba falsely accused Mephibosheth of being loyal to Saul and disloyal to David, there is no doubt where Shimei's loyalties lie. Shimei twice calls David a "man of blood" for supposedly bringing down Saul and his family, even saying that Absalom's rebellion is divine vengeance for "all the blood of the house of Saul."

Is this accusation true? Decidedly not. David was exemplary in his dealings with Saul, refusing to seize the throne and refusing to kill Saul when he had the opportunity. No, David has not reigned in Saul's place.

But he has slept in Uriah's place, violating his wife Bathsheba. And he is a man of blood, not Saul's blood but Uriah's blood, having arranged for his murder. David is innocent of Shimei's accusation, but Shimei's accusation reminds him that he is not innocent of all accusations.

David identifies Abishai as one of the "sons of Zeruiah." Abishai's brother Joab killed Abner, Saul's strongman, after David had negotiated a settlement with him. Now Abishai wants to do away with another of Saul's loyalists.

David will have none of it. David concludes that the Lord has sent Shimei to curse him. He accepts responsibility for Absalom's rebellion: he understands why his son would want to seek his life. He understands that his failures that led to this. David will absorb the curses and the stones without retaliating, because he understands that he is rightly suffering for his sins, even if Shimei is wrongly accusing him. Just as David walked barefoot to feel the stones against his feet, he will feel the stones pummel his body if Shimei's aim is true.

David Roper, a former pastor of our church, observes that criticism often comes when "we least deserve it," "from people who are least qualified to give it," and "in a form least helpful to us." Such could be said for Shimei's criticism of David. Yet David receives it—and receives it as coming from the Lord.

## David refreshes himself

**2 Samuel 15:14:**

**And the king, and all the people who were with him, arrived weary at the Jordan. And there he refreshed himself.**

Finally, David and his people arrive at the Jordan River, where David refreshes himself, presumably with more than just water from the river. David refreshes himself in the Lord. Psalm 3, which is connected to his flight from Absalom, was likely written at this point, as was Psalm 63, which begins:

**O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;  
my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is  
no water.**

What do we learn as we walk this road with David? What do you do in a crisis?

## Take action

A crisis can rouse us from passivity. Suffering loss can rouse us from passivity. The death of a dream can rouse us from passivity. Becoming aware that people need us can rouse us from passivity. What do you do in a crisis or when you suffer loss or when a dream dies or when you become aware that people need you? Quite simply, you take action.

Sometimes, people don't take action because they're afraid: they're afraid because they don't know what to do or because they might make a mistake at a critical time. Do not fear! Why not? Because in a crisis, God will show up. He will be with you as you walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

If it's critical, God will show you what to do. At certain points, David just knew what to do. If it's not critical, you may make some mistakes, but those mistakes will not be fatal. "He will not allow your foot to be moved" (Psalm 121:3). David made at least one mistake: he was taken in by Ziba. God is not as concerned with mistakes as he is with faith. Those who step out in faith will make mistakes. Those who step out in faith also please God (Hebrews 11:6).

When my mother entered the hospital for the last time, I didn't know what to do beyond visiting her each day. This was before I became a pastor, by the way. At first, I was afraid of going to the hospital. I was afraid that I would be in the room when she died. Then something clicked. I was the oldest of three children. Moreover, I knew the Lord; I possessed the Spirit of God. Leadership was needed. My mother needed me. The family and my mother's friends needed me.

I began to take action. Once I took action, God showed up. Strangely, I knew what to do and when to do it. One of the things I knew is that I had to set up a vigil for my mother. She was in and out of consciousness, both because of sleep and because of the pain medication. I did not want her to wake up in an empty room or even in the presence of strangers, even nurses, orderlies, or doctors. So I enlisted family and friends to sit with her around the clock in four-hour shifts.

## Embrace sorrow

First, take action. Second, embrace sorrow. On the one hand, decisiveness may be called for. But decisiveness and sorrow are not incompatible. Look at David. He was decisive and sorrowful. Ours is a culture that is mostly

uncomfortable with sorrow, especially public expressions of sorrow. Many people, for example, apologize if they shed tears in front of other people.

Denying the pain, stuffing it, or minimizing it will not make it go away. Feeling it, embracing it, and expressing it are critical parts of the healing process. Sorrow magnifies the senses and purifies the soul. It helps you identify with the sorrow of others. Don't try to defeat sorrow. Instead, befriend it. Instead of minimizing sorrow, maximize it. Isn't that what David did? During his ascent, he felt stones under his feet, and during his descent, he quite possibly felt stones pummel his body. Take it slow. Go barefoot, so to speak. Learn not only from the story of David but also from the psalms of David, especially his laments. To lament—to embrace sorrow—is to worship. The summit, where God is worshiped, is a place of sorrow.

At first, I was afraid of visiting the hospital. But as I took action, and as God showed up, I began to feel differently. I even began to pray that I would be with my mother when she died. I began to embrace sorrow.

## Watch for gifts

First, take action. Second, embrace sorrow. Finally, watch for gifts. In a crisis, God shows up not only by being with us as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death but also by sending others to walk with us. Ittai walked with David. The priests, Zadok and Abiathar, came to David's aid. In a crisis, watch for the people whom God sends your way as signs of his faithfulness. They may not know they're being sent, but you'll know. Watch for answers to prayer. Watch for someone like Hushai, who shows up as an answer to prayer at just the right time. Watch for God to move heaven and earth, and even for all the earth to weep with you, so to speak.

Especially, watch for God to send others to embrace you in your sorrow. If you embrace sorrow, then you give others permission to embrace you in your sorrow. Paul does not command us to weep with those who do not weep, with those who don't express their sorrow. On the contrary, he commands us "to weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). If you weep, you give others permission to weep with you. If you embrace sorrow, watch for others to follow your lead.

After leaving my mother's hospital room one day, a woman I had never met, who worked with my mother, was coming to visit her. I don't remember what she said, but whatever it was, it triggered something in me

and I began to weep. I bowed my head and wept on her shoulder, and she put her arms around me. When I needed someone to weep with, God sent me someone whom I had never met, whose name I did not know. Now, though, I think I know it. Her name was Ittai.

God's final gift was to answer my prayer. I woke up one morning and just knew I had to visit the hospital. When I arrived, I knew that my mother was in her final moments. She died in my arms.

## Jesus goes where David can't go

If we embrace sorrow, we're in good company—not only the company of David but also the company of Jesus, called the Son of David because of his descent from David. Jesus embraced sorrow. More than that, he embraced our sorrow. He was “a man of sorrows,” and he has “borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (Isaiah 53:3-4).

A thousand years after David and his people fled from Jerusalem and from his traitorous but beloved son, the Son of David left Jerusalem with his men as he was being pursued by a traitorous but beloved friend, Judas Iscariot. As Jesus crossed the brook Kidron and began to ascend the Mount of Olives, he was walking in the footsteps of David. Although David went beyond the summit, Jesus stopped at a place called Gethsemane, at the foot of the Mount of Olives, to seek the Father.

When David prayed, the Lord answered with Hushai. When Jesus prayed, his men fell asleep. So Jesus stayed in Gethsemane and he waited—not for supporters such as Ittai but for “a great crowd with swords and clubs” who took him back to Jerusalem. There, the priests, unlike the priests who supported David, spit in his face. A crowd of Israelites embraced David; a crowd of Israelites cried for Jesus to be crucified. Instead of being embraced by foreigners such as Cherethites, Pelethites, and Gittites, Jesus was crucified by foreigners, the Romans. He absorbed not just the curses of an individual but also the curses of passers-by, the chief priests, the scribes, the elders, and even those who were being crucified next to him. When David left Jerusalem, all the earth wept in a metaphorical sense; when Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem, darkness fell over all the earth in a literal sense (Matthew 26-27).

Indeed, the Son of David stayed in Gethsemane to go where David couldn't go: to a hill outside Jerusalem to bear our griefs and carry our sorrows.

In a crisis or when you suffer loss or when a dream dies, take action, embrace sorrow, and watch for gifts. If you embrace sorrow, you will be embraced by the man of sorrows who carries your sorrows. That may be the greatest gift of all.