

## HOW SHALL WE WEEP?

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**Text: 2 Samuel 18:5–9, 15, 31–33**

The king ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, saying, “Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.” And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders concerning Absalom. So the army went out into the field. The men of Absalom were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword. Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. His head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on. And ten young men, Joab’s armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him. A messenger then went to David, “Good tidings for my lord the king! For the Lord has vindicated you this day, delivering you from the power of all who rose up against you.” The king said to the messenger, “Is it well with the young man Absalom?” The messenger answered, “May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man.” The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!”

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Babs had died. Her partner Bobby was allowed in to see her. He touched her gently, tried to speak to her. In his disbelief he tried to revive her, just in case his senses were deceiving him, just in case it was possible. He tried to get her to eat, thinking that maybe the smell of her favorite food would change the unchangeable. When all had failed, Bobby fell silent and then began to make guttural sounds that grew and grew until he was wailing and banging on the walls.<sup>1</sup>

Harper and Kohl survived a traumatic and abusive environment together and, once saved, were able to continue living together in safety. Kohl had terrible injuries to the legs and Harper was blind in one eye. Unsurprisingly they were deeply distrustful and only truly comfortable with each other. Eventually Kohl succumbed to his injuries and died. When Harper was allowed to see Kohl he laid his head on Kohl and stayed there for several hours. Over the next few months Harper went every day to their favorite spot next to a small pond. “There he would sit. Efforts to introduce him to another potential . . . friend didn’t take, which was especially sad because Harper was now more nervous around people without Kohl. Everyone . . . recognized Harper’s depression. Two months later, Harper died as well.”<sup>2</sup>

David has had a tumultuous time of leadership. One of his sons, Absalom, was greatly loved by David and the people. He was handsome and charming and eventually spoke out against the ways that he felt the king was ignoring the people’s pleas for justice. He eventually turned on his father, thinking he could rule more justly, and started a rebellion. David took up arms against his son’s forces, yet all the while begging that his army not harm the rebellious Absalom. Absalom, while riding his mule in the forest during battle,

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<sup>1</sup>Barbara J. King, *How Animals Grieve* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 130.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 39–40.

got himself stuck in a tree and couldn't get unstuck. Despite David's orders otherwise, Joab, one of David's generals, killed Absalom. When David learned of this fact he was deeply moved, went to a position above the city gate and wept. He proclaimed "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

Where do you see yourself in these three stories? Whom do you relate to? What have you done; what have you witnessed others doing? Do you cry out wishing to bargain your life for the one that was lost like David? Do you burst in grief, bang the walls and let loose screams like Bobby? Do you quietly search for any last remnants of the deceased and feel as if life was no longer worthwhile without them like Harper? How do you mourn? How do you grieve? How do you weep?

There is no right way to grieve, but there certainly seem to be ways that are harmful. It is harmful to hurt others or yourself as a response to your grief. It is harmful to try and rewrite history so that you can avoid the feelings of hurt. There are reactions to the feelings of loss that are certainly harmful, but there are no right ways to grieve. We see that in our three stories. We feel that in our lives.

Our story of David comes from our continued exploration of the books of Samuel and the constantly dramatic saga of David. The first two stories come from a book by Barbara J. King called *How Animals Grieve*. Babs and Bobby are gorillas and Kohl and Harper are mulard ducks. King completes the story about ducks Kohl and Harper by saying, "When there is grief, there was love."

We grieve because we love! If we didn't care, we wouldn't weep. If we didn't love, we wouldn't hurt. It is the very fact of our love that later results in the great loss. My wife is away at a writing retreat right now, and when our daughter feels sad at missing her *mami*, we talk about how missing her is a reminder of just how much we love her. This helps root the sadness back into depths of love. The love and the loss are both part of the same hand.

Philosopher and theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote a book called *Lament for a Son* after his child died at age 25 in an accident. He writes: "But we all suffer. For we all prize and love; and in this present existence of ours, prizing and loving yield suffering. Love in our world is suffering love. Some do not suffer much, though, for they do not love much. Suffering is for the loving. This, said Jesus, is the command of the Holy One: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." In commanding us to love, God invites us to suffer."

Bobby, Harper, and David are all suffering due to the losses of those that they cared for and loved. The gorilla and the duck, though, were innocent in their loss. They bore no responsibility to their loved ones' deaths. David, though, carried great responsibility. He allowed his side of the conflict with his son to reach the point of breakage and then chose to actively fight him. He chose war. And he chose to stay at home while the war was being fought by others. As much as he might have desired for Absalom to remain untouched, one cannot choose both war and safety at the same time.

David, despite his responsibilities—or maybe because of them—weeps hard because he loved his son. And I want to know how this grief, how this loss, changed him. His weeping did not absolve his guilt; he was not able to trade his own life for his son's as he tearfully begged, and he had to live with this loss for the rest of his life. Our grief never goes away, but it does transform over time and it can change us. Wolterstorff again writes: "Grief is existential testimony to the worth of the one loved. That worth abides. So I own my grief. I do not try to put it behind me, to get over it, to forget it. . . . Every lament is a love-song." I want to know what happened to this grief of David's. Did it make him more compassionate, as loss is wont to do, or did it eat him from the inside, which is also possible? Or a bit of both?

How will our losses transform and change us, I wonder? How we will weep together at the losses we have and will bear . . . not as individuals, but as a collective, as a community, as a society? There is much we seem to love together, which means that there will inevitably be much to grieve. How will we weep when

the world as we know it can no longer adapt to the ways that we use (or abuse) it? How will we weep when the disparities that we have learned to tolerate continue to cause great and irreversible harm? How will we weep when there are no more gorillas to mourn each other? How will we weep as we continue to let the power-minded overtake the justice-seekers? How will we weep when many of these things that we love are lost—especially as we all bear at least some responsibility in both the loving and the grieving? How shall we weep?

I no longer know how much of an example David should be for us, but it might be helpful to know what he did after he wept. In the next chapter he is described as going out into the community: “Then the king got up and took his seat in the gate.” (2 Samuel 19:8, NRSV) And the people gathered around him, and they celebrated their success and mourned their losses together. They did not weep alone.

I do not know how we shall weep, but I hope that we don’t avoid the laments, that we don’t do it alone, and that we don’t do it in isolation. The pointing finger of this sermon and seemingly so many others is back to being in community together: not that we always like it, not that we always agree with each other, not that it is always easy or comfortable. Loving with and among each other and grieving with and among each other is the stuff of community. It is life and can be life-giving. It can be where we go after we have raged against the unfairness of the losses we shall bear. It can be where we go to practice our transformations and let us sing the lamentation love songs.

May we be transformed by our weeping and make changes based on our grieving. As Wolterstorff says: “I shall look at the world through tears. Perhaps I shall see things that dry-eyed I could not see.” Just as there is so much to love and celebrate, there is much to weep. May we see anew from our tear-filled eyes and perceive what was before unperceivable. May we build a new understanding and new vision through our tears. May it be so.