

This is the first message in a six-week series called, Reroute. All of us are going somewhere. We have plans to reach a certain stage in our career, a pathway for our marriage or who we hope our children will become, or we just dream of what the future holds. But what happens when you find yourself in a situation where you need to reroute? Maybe you made a decision that didn't turn out how you hoped, and you need to pick up the pieces.

Or maybe you're just going through a change or transition — what we might call a passage. This might be brought on by the death of a parent, a career change, or a move to a new location. There are joyful passages, like moving from single to married. And there are painful ones, like the change from married to single. Some passages are part of growing up: starting school, adolescence, first date, first job, moving out, getting married, or having children. As we grow older, we don't call this growing up; we call it aging. In his book, *Aging Matters*, R. Paul Stevens writes,

Aging is a process of relinquishment: first we give up the omnipotence of youth, then perfect health, then family members and parents (who die), usually remunerated employment and our careers, followed by our driver's license and physical strength as frailty increases." That sounds pretty rough, but I love what he says next about our final passage: "In the end, we're left with the only treasure we can take with us, Jesus, and the forever family of God.

The bottom line is all of these changes require something of a reroute. In this series, we're going to consider how to navigate through these times by looking at key moments in the second half of the story of Israel's King David. We're picking up his story at the start of 2 Samuel when David is 30 years old. When David was just a teenager, the prophet Samuel anointed him as the would-be king. But since then, David has lived as a fugitive, fleeing from Saul and hiding out in the Judean wilderness. When we come to 2 Samuel, David and his men have been hiding in a town called Ziklag for 18 months under the protection of the Philistines. But now David, and the entire nation of Israel, will be thrust into a major passage and a reroute. In 1 Samuel 31, King Saul, and his son, Jonathan, are killed. How would David manage this passage in his life? What might it look like to walk with God through a time of change and transition like this?

Acknowledging the Past: Grieving Saul and Jonathon's Death

You'd think the death of Saul would finally allow David to move forward and fulfill his destiny to become Israel's King. We can't

help but rejoice that Saul has finally got what was coming to him. We're ready to leave him behind. We can't wait for the story to move ahead with David's bright future. But starting in 2 Samuel 1, when David first hears about the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, instead of moving forward, the story pauses.

Here's what happened: A young man runs to David from the field of battle and reports to him on what happened to Saul. He falls to the ground before David and tells him he himself killed Saul because Saul was already mortally wounded and asked him to put him out of his misery. He even brought Saul's crown to David, implying he'd like to make David the new king right then and there. He clearly expects to be rewarded for his actions.

But David's reaction is the opposite. Look at his reaction.

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 for the nation of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword. 2 Samuel 1:11-12.

David mourned and wept and fasted for Saul, Jonathon, and all of Israel. He later executed the young man who killed Saul. David firmly believed Saul was the Lord's anointed king, and this young man had violated him. You'd think David would be happy and grab the throne, but he recognized something much larger than his own political future was at stake.

So, David stops and leads the nation in a time of mourning. Verses 17-27 are the public record of a poem he wrote as he mourned for Saul and Jonathan. In it, there's a repeated refrain, "How the mighty have fallen" (vv. 19, 25, 27). This is a cry of anguish. He said,

Saul and Jonathan—in life they were loved and admired, and in death they were not parted. They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. v. 23

Later, he especially remembers Jonathon as his best friend.

"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." vv. 25-26

Let me reflect on this poem as it relates to passages of our lives, especially when we're dealing with grief and loss. David teaches us that in order to successfully reroute, we must:

First fully acknowledge the pain of the past.

This is especially relevant when we're dealing with loss. We need to pause and mourn. Unfortunately, we're not encouraged to do that in our world. Instead, we're told to move on, get over it, to look to the future and make the necessary adjustments. Eugene Peterson wrote, "Denial and distraction are the standard over-the-counter prescriptions of our culture for dealing with loss."

When my mother died suddenly at age 63, it was a shock to my father to lose his wife of 45 years. In the days that followed, I was at his side as we both grieved. I noticed as he wept, all this grief surfaced in him for his mother who'd died decades earlier. My father, an only child, was 18 years old when he enlisted in the Army during WW II. Within a few months, he was off to fight on the front lines of the Pacific campaign. Some months later, he received news his mother had taken her own life. He asked for permission to go home but was denied. He had no choice but to suppress his grief and go on fighting. But his grief didn't go away. After 47 years, it came out when his own wife died. If we don't learn how to stop and mourn and acknowledge the past, chances are we won't really move forward. As we look at David's song, notice a few things about how he acknowledged the past.

Notice how appropriate words are very important. David found the right words, even poetry, to express his and the nation's feelings. Mourning the past is often a matter of finding the right words, words that allow us to remember, to experience, and to process what we've lost. Did you know that seventy percent of the Psalms are laments? Here, David laments, and his words are brutally honest! Notice God isn't mentioned even once in the poem. In the midst of pain, we tend to try and gloss it over with God-talk — to spiritualize what's happened, to refer to the tragedy as "the will of God." But David won't allow his raw humanness to be muted by clichés and slogans. There's a time and place to simply say, "I hate what's happened! This is hard. I'm in pain!"

Second, remember what's best and noblest in people.

How do we grieve for someone who's lived a tragic life? How do we grieve for a parent who's hurt us, or for a politician who lived an immoral life? For David, knowing the worst of Saul didn't keep him from remembering the best of Saul and what he meant to the nation Israel. This repeated refrain, "How the mighty have fallen," recognizes the heroism not only of Jonathan but Saul as well. David even speaks of the love between Saul and Jonathan when we know they had a strained relationship. Saul had caused so much pain in David's life, but David focused on what he meant to the nation. I think of a man like JFK. He was far from a perfect man, but we still remember him for the great things he accomplished and what he represents.

Third, we must learn to grieve in the context of community.

David wrote a song for the whole nation to sing, and they were to teach it to the sons and daughters of Israel. Families and churches and communities that don't learn to process their pain together, that just pretend everything is all right, later on, explode under the pressure of their denial. When we grieve fully, in the context of community, God will meet us in the midst of our grief.

You might wonder, "Why should we dredge up all those negative feelings?" Here's why: If we don't give expression to our grief, we never give God the opportunity to meet us at that place of our deepest need. Not only that, but pent up grief will keep us from whatever new thing God might have for us. We end up "moving on" with an entire area of our existence shut down to the Lord. And so, we end up emotionally numb to both God and others.

Discovering the Future: David Moves to Hebron

The first thing we learn from this song of lament by David is when we're going through a passage, we should stop and fully acknowledge the past. The second thing has to do the discovering the future. Look at the second chapter.

In the course of time, David inquired of the Lord. "Shall I go up to one of the towns of Judah?" he asked. The Lord said, "Go up." David asked, "Where shall I go?" "To Hebron," the Lord answered. So David went up there with his two wives, Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail, the widow of Nabal of Carmel. David also took the men who were with him, each with his family, and they settled in Hebron and its towns. Then the men of Judah came to Hebron, and there they anointed David king over the tribe of Judah. vv. 2:1-4a.

We don't know how much time has elapsed, but David is ready to move forward. Before he does, he seeks God's guidance for what he should do. The Lord tells him to go up to Hebron, an important city in the southern part of Palestine, and part of the area originally allotted to the tribe of Judah. This is an area where David's popularity is well established.

David does as the Lord directs him. This must have been quite an event. The entourage must have numbered over a thousand people. But what I want you to see is as David moves to this next stage in his life, he exemplifies what we might call a submitted ambition. There's no question his going up to Hebron would be a clear statement he's ready to assume his role as king. And he wants to be king. He believes this is God's will for him. This is the moment he and so many others were waiting for.

David wasn't a man void of ambition. He didn't kill a Philistine giant without ambition. Even the mention of his two wives here indicates he was a little full of himself, and this would eventually get him in trouble. But, still, it was a submitted ambition; an ambition primarily for the glory of God. So, before he goes up,

he inquires of the Lord. David knows the moment has come, but he's unwilling to take a step without God's direction.

We see the same submitted ambition with Jesus when he made the transition from his quiet life as a carpenter to his public ministry. After his baptism, he was led out to the wilderness by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil. Ambition was one of the issues that came up then. Satan "showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor." He said to Jesus, "All this I will give you, if you will bow down and worship me" (Matthew 4:8-9). Satan tried to get him to grasp for his crown, his glory, apart from his Father's appointed process of suffering on the cross. But Jesus resisted. During a critical passage in his life, Jesus exhibited a submitted ambition.

In experiencing a transition in life, it's critical to not make any assumptions about the next step. This is especially challenging when a transition involves a move up or a move into a situation we've been waiting for a long time. We mustn't push ahead too fast. We can be honest about our desires and ambitions, but we need to wait for God's timing. This is true even if the circumstances seem perfect. From a human perspective, there's nothing to delay David here, but he still won't move ahead without the Lord's direction.

This is a difficult area for me. I'm an ambitious person, and not always for the right reasons. I grew up in a home disrupted by alcoholism. In many ways, I'm typical of adult children of alcoholics: I get my self worth from performing, from achieving and being known. Before I met Christ, my ambition was to be the best athlete. After I met the Lord, my ambition simply got redirected towards being the best pastor, but it wasn't always a submitted ambition. As a result, much of what the Lord has done in my life is to bring a surrender to whatever he has for me. I spent most of my thirties chafing under some limitations on my life I could have done without. And a big part of that meant waiting on God for direction, wanting to move out from underneath certain situations.

How can we know in the midst of a transition whether or not our ambition is submitted to the Lord? One way we can know is by determining whether we're leaving room for God to shut the door. Are we open to that, or are we pushing ahead so fast, with such determination, that we're not even open to a "no" from God. David exemplified a submitted ambition throughout his life. Later, he told the Lord he wanted to build a temple for him, a magnificent edifice that would last forever. But the Lord said no. It turned out he had something better in mind for David. But David was willing to accept the Lord's no. That is submitted ambition.

Accepting the Present: David Lives with a Rival

We've learned, first, the importance of fully acknowledging the past, and second, as we discover our future, the need for a

submitted ambition. But David also has to learn to accept the limitations of the present. Remember, at this point, David is only king over the tribe of Judah. As we'll see, the rest of Israel is still loyal to the house of Saul. Look at the next few verses.

When David was told that it was the men from Jabesh Gilead who had buried Saul, he sent messengers to them to say to them, "The Lord bless you for showing this kindness to Saul your master by burying him. May the Lord now show you kindness and faithfulness, and I too will show you the same favor because you have done this. Now then, be strong and brave, for Saul your master is dead, and the people of Judah have anointed me king over them." vv. 2:4b-7.

The people of Jabesh Gilead in the north were loyal supporters of Saul and his family. David wants to honor them for treating Saul with dignity in his death by making sure he had a proper burial. But David also saw this as an opportunity to make some political inroads in the North. That's why he said, "Saul your master is dead, and the people of Judah have anointed me king over them" (v. 7a).

But, again, there were still people in the North loyal to Saul. And one of Saul's military generals, a man named Abner, saw to it that one of Saul's sons was put on the throne.

Meanwhile, Abner son of Ner, the commander of Saul's army, had taken Ish-Bosheth son of Saul and brought him over to Mahanaim. He made him king over Gilead, Ashuri and Jezreel, and also over Ephraim, Benjamin and all Israel. Ish-Bosheth son of Saul was forty years old when he became king over Israel, and he reigned two years. The tribe of Judah, however, remained loyal to David. The length of time David was king in Hebron over Judah was seven years and six months. vv. 8-11

So, while David reigned over Judah, Saul's son, Ish-bosheth, reigned over the rest of Israel. So David had to settle for a half-way reign. And this wasn't a short-lived situation; it went on for seven and a half years! In fact, that whole period was characterized by civil war between those loyal to David and those loyal to the house of Saul.

The point is this: Despite his ambition to unite and reign over all Israel, David spent a long time as a half-way king. What a bitter pill to swallow after all the years of waiting for God's promise to be fulfilled and being chased around the wilderness by Saul!

As we move through various transitions in life, we often think the next stage will be free from tension, struggle, and difficulty. We idealize each stage. The adolescent idealizes what it would be like to move out and be on his own. The single person idealizes what it would be like to be married. The couple without children idealize what it will be like to have children. The couple with children idealizes what it will be like when the children are

finally grown and gone. This is true, especially if our situation has been hard like David's in the wilderness. We dream of the next stage as being idyllic, but it never is.

Those who don't accept this, live for the future and never get down to the difficult business of living today to its fullest. As we move through life's passages, we have to learn contentment in the present with all its limitations. David had to accept what God gave him for now and live to the fullest. Sooner or later, we learn there's no passage in life that will deliver us into a perfect situation. It's then that we learn the Lord himself is the one who stands with us at every stage in life, and he's enough.

Frederick Buechner writes profoundly on this very thing in a way that we can all relate to:

A child on Christmas Eve or on the day before his birthday lives for the presents that he'll open the next day. And in this sense, we all live like children. There are so many presents still to be opened, tomorrow, next month, next year. And in a way, it's our looking forward to the presents that keep us going. The unexpected friendship, the new job, seeing our name in the paper, falling in love, the birth of a child, all of these are presents that life gives if we want them badly enough and if we're lucky enough. And in a way, every new day is a present to be opened, just as today was and tomorrow will be. The old saying is that "Where there's life, there's hope," and I think the hope there is that if not tomorrow or the next day, then some fine day, somehow, life will finally give us the present which, when we open it, will turn out to be the one that we've waited for so long, the one that will fill the empty place. But one by one as we open the presents, no matter how rich and wondrous they are, we discover that no one of them by itself, nor even all of them taken together, is the one of our deepest desiring; that ultimately, life by itself doesn't have that final present to give.

Ultimately, there's only one passage that will usher us into a perfect situation. That passage, of course, is our death and resurrection. Only then will all our longings will be fulfilled. All other passages merely lead to a half-way reign. In a very real sense, that's exactly the condition we're in, wherever we are. We know Christ, but not face to face. We wait for the day when he'll rule over all with justice. David's reign is just foreshadowing of Jesus' reign. As theologians like to say, we live in the "now and not yet." We can taste the glory of the future with Christ, but we can't swallow it yet. The kingdom has come, but not in its fullness.

And so, like David, we need to learn to wait and accept the stage we're in, with all its limitations.

How do we navigate our way through the passages and subsequent reroutes of life?

We have to fully acknowledge the past.

We must keep our ambition in submission to the Lord and his will.

We must accept the place the passage brings us, with all its limitations.

Jim Elliot, the martyred missionary to Ecuador, was a fine wrestler in his college days. Once he was asked if he really liked wrestling. He replied, "Before the match, I'm terrified; during the match, I'm in agony; and after the match, I'm exhausted. But, yes, I love wrestling."

Facing different passages and reroutes in life is a lot like that. Before, we're terrified; during, we're in agony; afterward, we're exhausted. And at every point along the way, we experience our own helplessness. But at each stage, the Lord meets us in our deep need. Jesus Christ, who passed through every passage, stands with us as we acknowledge the past, submit our ambition regarding the future, and live contentedly in the present. He's already been at every point along the way, and he's provided a way for us to make it home, and he stands at the end of our journey.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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