

THE COMPASS

Messy Endings

Untidy Christianity, Part 10

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2 Samuel 18:19—19:8

This evening we conclude our study of the life of King David.

I've taken comfort in his experiences, in a way, because he was so imperfect, and so am I.

He ran hot and cold. He had victories and failures. He was honorable and he was a jerk. He was lucky, and he was unlucky. He had moments of brilliant insight into people, and he badly misjudged people.

Sometimes he was humble; sometimes he was a pompous ass.

His life doesn't fit into a neat little box.

He did bad stuff, got nailed for it sometimes, got away with it other times.

When he tried to do better, he succeeded sometimes, failed other times.

When he did good stuff, he got rewarded for it sometimes, got nailed for it other times.

Sometimes he went to God for answers; sometimes he blew God off totally.

Morally, spiritually, the record of David's life is a crisscross of zigzags and smudges and globs of White-Out and scribbles in the margins.

Just like mine.

His life was a mishmash of overlapping problems and inadequate solutions and unhappily resolved conflicts and unexpected outcomes and situations that didn't seem to follow any formula of God's design.

Just like my life!

He kept finding himself in situations that didn't make sense. Or situations where he had to backtrack and undo something he had done earlier. Or situations where he had to go back on a promise.

If we spent the rest of the year going through his life in detail, we would come to the day when he got himself in a corner and had to go back on his covenant with Jonathan.

We would come to the day when he defies God's instructions, but other people suffer the punishment for it, and David is forced to stand and watch.

Is there one over-arching theme to David's life?

People always talk about him as the "man after God's own heart" — the prophet Samuel called him this, and centuries later the New Testament apostles were still calling him this — and yet as we've seen during these past several weeks of studies, he wasn't steady in seeking God's heart.

We can't say he was always a winner; he lost, and often.

We can't say he was always merciful, because sometimes he was brutal.

I think if there's one word that's descriptive of David's life from start to finish, it's the word *torn*.

Over and over again, we find David being torn:

He's torn between his own desires and God's desires.

He's torn when someone he loves disappoints him.
 He's torn between various parties having differing expectations of him.
 He's not just torn; he's torn, and he's misunderstood for feeling torn.

David lived a life of torn-ness. Of conflicted-ness.
 Just like me.
 Just like all of us.
 We never get through a day without feeling the internal tug of competing interests.
 We're torn.
 That's how life is.
 And people misunderstand us for it.
 That's how life is too.

King David was more torn and more misunderstood about his kids, I think, than anything else on the long and winding road of his life.
 Amnon, one of his sons, raped Tamar, one of his daughters.
 Then for revenge, another son, Absalom, got Amnon drunk and killed him, and then fled the country.
 The Scripture says David cried bitterly. But he wasn't just weeping for his violated daughter. He wasn't just weeping for his dead son.
 He was also weeping for Absalom. He was the son who was still alive.
 Yes, Absalom had done a horrible thing — but his dad loved him. He missed him. He was torn.
 The day came, 2 Samuel 13:39 tells us, when David got over the loss of his son Amnon, but it says “the spirit of the king longed to go to Absalom.”

After a while, Absalom did come back to town, but then David couldn't bear to welcome him into the palace. He was a killer. He had killed his own brother.
 For two years, even though Absalom was living right there in town, David didn't see him. He was torn.
 Finally, David broke down and sent for Absalom. The Scripture says that David kissed his son. It was a beautiful reunion.

But before long, Absalom was plotting to overthrow the old man and take over the kingdom.
 By the time David realized how he had been betrayed, the conspiracy was out of hand. He had no choice but to head for the hills.
 As he left town, he was weeping again. Weeping for his wayward son.
 But he was also praying as he went. Praying that the guys advising Absalom would give him bad advice.
 In fact, pretty soon he sent one of his guys back to Jerusalem as a spy, to act like Absalom's friend, give him bad advice, and sneak information back out of the palace to David.
 He loved his son, but he was plotting against him at the same time. He was torn.

Eventually it was civil war.
 There were troops loyal to David, and troops loyal to Absalom.
 David gave his soldiers some unusual orders before they set out: he said, “Be gentle

with the young man Absalom for my sake.”
Here he was, the great warrior king, with dozens of military victories under his belt — but he was torn.

The battle began. The armies met each other in a huge, dense forest. It was horrible, bloody day.

By the time it was over, 20,000 men had died.

Absalom was riding a mule and went under the branches of an oak tree.

He was famous for his long hair, and it got tangled in the branches.

The mule kept on going, and Absalom was left dangling in mid-air.

David’s general, Joab, found him hanging there, still alive.

Joab took three javelins and plunged them into his chest.

But he didn’t die.

So ten of Joab’s guys surrounded him — we don’t know from the historical account whether they stabbed him to death or beat him to death, but either way, it was a horrible way to go.

Then they pulled him down out of the tree, dumped him into a big pit in the forest, and piled a huge heap of rocks on his body.

2 Samuel 18:28-33 tells us that two messengers ran to tell David how the battle had turned out.

The faster one got there first, of course.

He was delighted to report that the enemy army had been defeated.

But David wanted the answer to a different question:

“Is the young man Absalom safe?”

The messenger wasn’t sure.

Pretty soon the slower messenger showed up.

He was also delighted report that the good guys had won the battle, and the kingdom was safe under David’s control again.

But David had a different priority. What he wanted to know was:

“Is the young man Absalom safe?”

The messenger said no. He was dead.

The Bible says in verse 33:

33 The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said: “O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you — O Absalom, my son, my son!”

He had won — and yet he had lost. He was torn.

And then — he was misunderstood for it.

When word got back to David’s men that the king was weeping and mourning for Absalom, the victory party atmosphere suddenly changed.

2 Samuel 19:2,3 says ...For the whole army the victory that day was turned into mourning.... The men stole into the city that day as men steal in who are ashamed when they flee from battle.

And Joab, David’s general, wasn’t going for it. He went into the king’s chambers and lit

into him:

5 “Today you have humiliated all your men, who have just saved your life and the lives of your sons and daughters and the lives of your wives and concubines,” [he said.] 6 You love those who hate you and hate those who love you. You have made it clear today that the commanders and their men mean nothing to you. I see that you would be pleased if Absalom were alive today and all of us were dead. 7 Now go out and encourage your men. I swear by the Lord that if you don’t go out, not a man will be left with you by nightfall. This will be worse for you than all the calamities that have come upon you from your youth till now.”

What could David do? He was torn. He had divided loyalties.

He was being challenged to celebrate the most awful thing that could ever happen to a parent: the death of his child.

Here he was supposed to thank the guys who had done this horrible thing.

He was experiencing the ugly truth that mercy sometimes hurts, because we’re called to extend mercy even to the unmerciful.

He was living in the painful reality of that old saying, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

On one hand, his soldiers had succeeded — and they had paid a terrible price for their victory. The casualties were horrific.

On the other hand, they had taken from David the one thing he most wanted to preserve — the life of his son.

On one hand, God had answered David’s prayer; Absalom had gotten bad military advice. On the other hand, that bad advice had cost him his life.

And now, General Joab was all over David’s case.

Who could understand what David was going through?

When you’re torn, it seems like you’re all alone, doesn’t it?

The people around you don’t know what you’re going through — or they have their own opinion, they think your situation is way simpler than it really is.

They don’t sympathize with your torn-ness.

I have been the bad guy in this kind of scenario way too often.

Our lead pastor David G. Brown has what he calls “POM disease.”

POM stands for “Part Of Me.”

He faces an issue in his life, and he says, “Part of me thinks I should do such-and-such, but another part of me thinks I should do so-and-so.”

And as his friend, of course, I’m Mr. Sensitivity. I generally respond with, “Well, what ya just need to do is...!”

He’s torn. I’m not. I can’t feel the torn-ness he’s feeling. I’m not struggling with the competing options the way he is.

When I’m torn the way King David was torn — when I’m misunderstood, when people in my life are insensitive to my inner turmoil — what can I do?

Are there ways to survive torn-ness, and the pain of being misunderstood when I’m feeling torn?

I don't think there are any easy answers; King David's life story demonstrates that. But I do believe there are some practical truths of God's design that we can apply, and maybe understanding these truths will help us.

1. Torn-ness and misunderstanding are inevitable.

These are universal experiences, natural byproducts of this imperfect world we live in. I am going to be torn, and I am going to be misunderstood for it. So are you. I realize this is small comfort, but it does help me — when I'm torn, when I'm misunderstood — to remember that I'm not the only one who ever goes through this kind of thing.

Everybody from King David to David G. Brown goes through it.

In fact, let me give you some even worse news: human beings don't tend to be understanding.

They actually have a tendency to delude themselves.

It's part of our human fabric.

In ancient times, when God sent leaders to help people understand his design for their lives, so they could live more productively, the people responded,

Isaiah 30:10

Give us no more visions of what is right! Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions.

If I am torn about a situation and my friends misunderstand me for it, they're not being abnormally cruel — they're being normal.

They haven't singled me out. They pull this stuff with everybody.

I'm wired for misunderstanding. I am wired for self-delusion!

It's part of the human landscape.

2. This goes both ways; I will misunderstand others when they're feeling torn as often as I am misunderstood myself when I'm feeling torn.

Paul Simon did a song called *One Man's Ceiling Is Another Man's Floor*.

It's a song about a dispute over noise in an apartment building that actually leads to violence.

My floor just seems like my floor to me, but it may be your ceiling.

My perspective will make absolute sense to me. But you may have the opposite perspective, and it will make absolute sense to you.

Misunderstanding isn't necessarily the result of one person being right and the other wrong.

King David lived much of his life in the netherworld between right and wrong, in that limbo between what's good and what's bad.

They were still having struggles with torn-ness and misunderstanding 1,000 years after King David, in the First Century church.

Two of the big shots back then were Paul and Barnabas. In fact, they traveled together and did ministry together.

And yet at one point, in the book of Acts chapter 15, they still misunderstood each other so seriously that they couldn't sort out their misunderstandings, and they parted company. Talk about feeling torn!

It wasn't that one guy was right and the other guy was wrong; each one simply misunderstood the other's point of view, and they couldn't get it together.

If you are feeling torn, I don't have to understand you. I don't have to judge what's right and what's wrong in your situation.

I just need to show you a little grace while you try to sort it out.

3. I can't necessarily solve someone's torn-ness through dialogue; but still, dialogue is our best shot at understanding and being understood.

If you're feeling torn and I want to be your friend, I'll offer to talk about it. Not lecture you; just have a conversation. Hear you out. Maybe hold your hand. Maybe cry with you.

This is not a cure-all — it's just a way to love someone.

If I'm torn about something and you misunderstand me, or fail to sympathize with my torn-ness, and one of us withdraws from the other because of it, you can't give me more input.

We're stuck. We're not talking. There's no chance of achieving greater understanding than we already have.

Or if we have a misunderstanding and I become your adversary, I can't provide you more input.

You'll protect yourself; you'll defend yourself. You won't be listening to me.

So we're stuck. We're not talking to each other. There's no chance of achieving greater understanding.

As difficult as dialogue may be, and as imprecise as human language may be, face-to-face conversation is still the best way to avoid misunderstanding.

Even in a painful situation like King David and General Joab found themselves in, continuing dialogue was their only hope.

More than once, Jesus said, in a situation like this, *talk with the individual you have the conflict with.*

In **Matthew 18:15**, for example, he says:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you....

He says *go*. Don't write a letter, don't send an email.

Get face to face. Hear that person's tone of voice, and let them hear yours.

Read that person's face, and let them read yours.

Open your hearts to each other. Exchange your feelings.

You may wind up still disagreeing, but at least you will have a better understanding of how and why the other person feels the way they do — and they will have a better understanding of you.

4. Sometimes all I can do is trust God in my torn-ness, keep doing my best, and keep being misunderstood.

You would think if anybody could be well understood, it would be somebody who's perfect.

Jesus came to earth as the 100% accurate representation of God's character and God's heart — and yet he was misunderstood in various ways from the time he was a boy.

When he was 12, he went to Jerusalem for Passover — it was his family's annual custom — but when they bugged out and headed home, Jesus stayed behind to hang out with the guys who taught the Scriptures.

They always traveled in a big group; Mom and Dad thought the boy was somewhere in the crowd with their friends.

They get a full day down the road and discover their kid is missing.

They hustle back to Jerusalem and find him knocking the professors out with his insight and his understanding of who God is and how God loves people.

But frankly, his mom and dad don't care about that too much at the moment.

What does his mother say to him when they find him (**Luke 2:48-50**)?

"Why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you."

Jesus just answered that he felt he needed to be in his Father's house.

So did Mom and Dad go, "Oh, I get it! Your 'Father's' house? God is your heavenly Father. Very cool."

No. The Bible says, in **Luke 2:50**, "**But they did not understand what he was saying to them.**"

His own parents! The people who had spent more time with Jesus than anyone on the planet. The people who were more intimately familiar with him than anyone else. Even *they* misunderstood him.

And this was the beginning of a lifelong pattern.

John the Baptist was the famous preacher whose entire ministry was to get people ready for Jesus when he finally showed up, and yet at the end of John's life, he sent a message to Jesus and asked, more or less, "Are you really the guy I thought you were?"

We're all familiar with the phrase "born again" — but the first time Jesus used that term, the guy he was talking to, one of the most highly educated people in the country, said, in essence, "Huh?"

People would misunderstand Jesus and then they'd get *mad*.

Some tried to trick him into getting in trouble with the law.

Some guys tried to run him off a cliff.

Organized crime plotted to bump him off.

And even people who *liked* him tended to misunderstand him!

Over and over again, people would meet Jesus and get all excited, but it kept turning out that they were excited about stuff that Jesus wasn't about.

If you ever feel misunderstood and you need to feel like someone understands what you're going through, pick up a Bible and read just one chapter: in the Gospel according to John, chapter 6.

He feeds the 5,000 — you've heard of that incident? — miraculously manages to feed 5,000 people with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish — but then people thought, Cool! Free food!

Jesus had to say, No, wait. That's not what I'm about.

Then they think he must have come to make himself king of Israel.

Jesus says, No, wait. That's not what I'm about.

Then his best friends don't even recognize him — they think he's a bad guy, and they're freaking out.

Jesus has to say, Hey, it's me; chill.

By the middle of the chapter, Jesus is saying, You know what? You misunderstand me. He uses that famous phrase "the bread of life" — nobody gets it.

Finally Jesus says, The stuff I'm telling you will nourish you spiritually — the way he puts it is: "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life."

And yet even his closest friends were scratching their heads, going "What is up with this guy?"

And the Bible says, in **John 6:66**, "**From this time many of his *disciples* turned back and no longer followed him.**"

Until, by the end of the chapter, Judas Iscariot is saying to himself, You know what? This guy is a problem. Something needs to be done.

Jesus was perfect — and yet he was misunderstood.

Sometimes all I can do, when I'm torn and I'm confused and I'm struggling with a situation and I'm misunderstood, is do what Jesus did — keep on keeping on, keep on asking God to help me, keep on trusting that eventually he will ... and keep on being misunderstood!

Sometimes I have no choice. There are no alternatives available.

Your child just misunderstands you, and you can't get him to understand.

Your ex-wife just misunderstands you, and you can't get through to her.

Your boss just misunderstands you, and nothing you say can make it clear.

So here's King David, weeping over his dead son, deeply torn. And here's General Joab, ragging on him something fierce, totally unsympathetic.

What does David do? He has no real alternatives.

All he can do is keep on keeping on.

Verse 8 says:

8 So the king got up and took his seat in the gateway. When the men were told, "The king is sitting in the gateway," they all came before him.

He assumed his royal position, received his troops, and congratulated them on fulfilling their mission bravely.

He was still torn, still misunderstood — and still helplessly trusting God to help him make it through.

But there's one more truth about torn-ness and being misunderstood — and it's something David came to understand.

It's a truth that many of us miss, in the midst of our crisis of torn-ness and confusion — and yet it's our best real hope:

5. If I let him, God will comfort me.

This may seem like of lame, but when you're torn, when you're in the middle of a conflict, and it seems impossible to sort out, you can actually get the point of just urgently wanting the pain to end, you don't care how.

I can remember times when I've been torn, or I've been misunderstood, I've done everything I know how to resolve the conflict, and I've made no headway at all.

And all I want is for the pain to go away.

I want it to be over, but it just won't seem to end.

That's where God shines. This is where he does his best work.

We human beings goof everything up with our miscommunications and our self-centered biases and all of our other imperfections ... and then when we can't stand the pain anymore, God says, Hey, hi, let me help.

God has given me permission to cry on his shoulder.

King David didn't spend the rest of his life feeling torn. He came to understand the practical reality of God's comfort.

God's comfort allowed David get on with his life.

God's comfort enables me to survive my torn-ness, and survive being misunderstood, and move on.

We know that David came to understand this, because in his 10th Psalm, he wrote these lyrics:

Psalm 10:17 You hear, oh Lord, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry.

He was saying, I have permission to dump my junk on God.

Not because I deserve to use him as my dumping ground.

I didn't earn the right to use him as a sounding board.

I'm still just as imperfect and goofed up as ever — and in fact, I still get it wrong with the people in my life at least as often as they get it wrong with me.

I don't have some extra skill or experience that moves me up to the front of God's line.

He just lets me.

He's crazy that way.

The old-fashioned Bible term for it is "grace."

He comforts me, he gives me a sense of peace, he fills me up with his love when other people are trying to drain it all out of me—

And he does it just because I ask him to.

Just because I let him.

Because he loves me so much.

And this is a gift he offers every person on the planet.

I think he may actually have extra grace left over because there are still so many people who haven't taken him up on the offer.

If you're torn, if you have been misunderstood, if you've been hurt, if you've been wronged, if you've been treated unfairly, if you're in pain, if you're bruised and scarred and feeling like you are never going to feel normal again,

God cares. He knows how you feel, and he will cry with you.

He will sympathize and comfort you and give you enough hope to get through another day — and then another, and another, and another.

If you want him to. If you let him. If you ask him to.

Psalm 55:22

Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you....

In fact — and here's the best part to me — God will go even further than just comforting me.

If I let him, God will turn my turmoil into something of value.

Even in my torn-ness, even in my pain, God is cooking something good. He has promised to!

We see this in the life of Jesus too. Actually, we see it in the *death* of Jesus.

It's appropriate to be landing here tonight, because this weekend is what we call Palm Sunday.

It's not just the Sunday before Easter; Palm Sunday is a remembrance of the day when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, just four days from his crucifixion.

The people lined the streets and waved palms — this was the ancient equivalent of a tickertape parade!

They thought he was coming to take over and run the country, solve their political problems, get them out from under the corrupt government they were stuck with.

But when the parade was over and he didn't make his move — didn't mount a coup d'état, didn't knock off the Roman empire — the crowds turned on him.

They turned on him so completely, so viciously, that within about 100 hours, Jesus was hanging on a cross, being tortured to death, convicted of crimes he didn't commit ... executed for a misunderstanding.

But he did it for you and me. Jesus was willing to be "misunderstood to death" for your sake and mine.

He knew something good was going to come out of it.

He was torn — he prayed that God would let him out of it — but he went all the way to the cross.

For you. For me.

This evening, let's give Jesus our torn-ness. Let's give him our hurt. Let's receive the comfort that he offers us.