

A RELENTLESS FATHER

Between 1991 and 2001
the country of Sierra Leone endured a bloody civil war
that took tens of thousands of lives,
and displaced hundreds of thousands,
if not millions,
of its citizens.

The Revolutionary United Front,
attempted to overthrow the government it considered to be corrupt and
guilty of misusing the country's vast natural resources including
its diamonds.

That is the setting for Blood Diamond.

There are many topics we could use this film to address.
But, the theme I have chosen is:
A Relentless Father.

Here's a simplified summary of the story line in case you haven't seen the
movie.

The RUF attacks Solomon Vandy's village.
His wife and two of his children escape to a refugee camp.
His son Dia is captured by the RUF
and turned into a child soldier,
taught and forced to kill men, women and children.
Solomon is also captured
and sent to work in the diamond fields
where he discovers a huge 100 carat pink diamond
which, if he can escape,
may provide the funds he needs to find and free his family.

Solomon hides the diamond
but is captured in a government raid
and must leave it where he buried it.

Danny Archer is a former mercenary turned diamond smuggler.
 He discovers that Solomon has found the diamond
 and convinces him that he needs someone like himself
 who has the contacts necessary to sell such a stone.

Danny's plan is to take his part of the proceeds
 and leave Africa.

The two men form an uneasy alliance
 as they trek through the killing fields of Africa
 back to the place where the diamond is hidden.

The movie contains many story-lines,
 but the one that provides the foundation for all that happens
 is Solomon's determined search to find and rescue his son.

The film opens with a couple of scenes that show Solomon's
 love, affection and emotional investment in his son, Dia.

Clip

Scene 1 0.53 – 3.13 edited

Here's the first thing I want to tell you this morning.

1. You matter to God.

As you watched that clip,
 you may have identified with Solomon.
 You may have thought I know what it's like
 to love a child and
 to take pride in a child and
 to want to be close to a child
 the way he does.

If that's what you felt as you watched,
 you missed the point.

In that clip,
 you are not the father.

You are the child.

God is the Father.

Your Father.

The way that Dia matters to Solomon,
 you matter to God.
The way Solomon loves his son,
 God loves you.

The way Solomon dreams of a good life for Dia,
 the joy he experiences when he sees his son's face,
 the heart that Solomon has for Dia,
that's a beautiful picture of God's heart for you.

We Christians believe the most remarkable things.
Incredible things, really.

We believe that God exists.
That's our most important belief.
But it's not the most surprising we hold to be true.

We believe that God came to earth as a human being
 and that as a human being He died on a cross.

All of those beliefs are beyond our comprehension.
True – but more than we can fully understand.

But most incredible of all: we believe God came to earth,
 took on human flesh inside a woman's womb,
 experienced hunger and thirst and pain,
 grew to be a man,
 and finally died on a cross
because we matter to him.

You matter to him.
And I matter to him.

In his book “Prayer Does It Make any Difference?” Philip Yancey writes;

Philip Yancey: If the Milky Way galaxy were the size of the entire continent of North America, our solar system would fit in a coffee cup. Even now two Voyager spacecrafts are hurtling toward the edge of the solar system For almost three decades they have been speeding away from earth, approaching a distance of 9 billion miles. When engineers beam a command to the spacecraft at the speed of light, it takes thirteen hours to arrive. Yet this vast neighborhood of our sun – in truth the size of a coffee cup – fits along with several hundred billion other stars and their minions in the Milky Way, one of perhaps 100 billion such galaxies in the universe.

The God who created the universe –
 His power,
 His wisdom,
 His imagination –
 He must be enormously, amazingly beyond our understanding.

And the Christian faith tells us that we,
 that you matter to this kind of God.

The psalmist who didn’t know a millionth of what we know about the universe wrote:

Psalm 8.3-4: When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him?

The great Christian mind of G. K. Chesterton put it this way: "All men matter. You matter. I matter. It's the hardest thing in theology to believe."

The God who is big enough to speak the universe into existence
 and hold it in the palm of his hand,
 the Gospel says: you matter to him.
 And you matter the way
 a child matters to a father,
 the way Dia matters to Solomon.

The reason we say this is because it's what Jesus taught about God.

We could look at many examples, here are two.

Matthew 6.9: This, then, is how you should pray: "Our **Father** in heaven ..."

Matthew 7.9-11: Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?
Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are
evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will
your **Father** in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

God could have chosen to relate to us in any number of ways.

Master to servant.

Commander to soldier.

Employer to employee.

But he chose to relate to us
and care for us
and love us
the way a father loves his child.

Take all the affection, all the concern, all the patience, all the commitment,
all the love the best parent has ever had for his child
and you don't come close to the love and concern and commitment
God has for you.

Go back to Solomon's relationship with Dia –
the smile you saw as he looked at his son,
the pride he felt as he walked beside him,
the joy in his heart as he chased him around,
the dreams he had as he envisioned Dia's future,
in all those moments you saw his father's heart,
and if you look closely you'll see the Father's heart for you.

I'm going to show you another scene that tells you something else about the
Father's heart.

We're fast forwarding nearly an hour into the movie.

Solomon and Danny and an investigative journalist named Maddy have come to Tassin Camp where a million refugees have been gathered, and where Solomon believes he will find his wife and his three children.

Clip Scene 54.50 – 57.11 edited

When a son is lost,
 when a son is taken,
 a father's heart is full of pain and rage and determination to get him back.

And that's what you just saw.
 And that's the Father's heart for you
 and for every one of his children who becomes lost from him.
 And we all do.

That's the second truth I want to share with you from this movie.

2. We all get lost from God.

In one way or another,
 sometimes it's against our will,
 sometimes we're complicit in how it happens,
 but we all get lost from God
 and become captive to forces and powers that would demean and destroy us.

It may happen when we're young or it may be later in life,
 but all of us get lost from God and from ourselves.

Considered one the great works of Western literature,
 Dante's Inferno begins this way:

Dante Alighieri: Midway upon the journey of our life
 I found myself within a forest dark,
 For the straightforward pathway had been lost.

Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say
 What was this forest savage, rough, and stern
 Which in the very thought renews the fear

I cannot well repeat how there I entered,
 So full was I of slumber at the moment
 In which I had abandoned the true way.

Dante says that he woke up mid-way through life
 and realized he was lost.

Lost from God,
 lost from himself,
 and lost from the way that was true and right.

Somewhere along life's way, he says,
 I became lost
 and life became dark
 and I despaired of finding my way back.

At some point in our lives,
 that's where we all find ourselves:
 lost,
 far from where we wanted to be,
 uncertain where to go.
 And deep down we sense that we have become lost from God.

How does this happen?
 How do we become lost from God?

Three ways.

A. We become lost through our sins.

Isaiah 53.6: We all, like sheep, have gone astray; each of us has turned to his own way ...

We ALL, like sheep, have gone astray.
EACH of us has turned to his own way.

It's the universal story that applies to all of us.
We have all chosen ourselves over God
at some point in our lives.

We have all chosen to go our way
instead of God's way.

And the result is we end up separated and lost from God.

At the heart of sin is the belief that we know better than God.
That the path put before us by the Father
is somehow lacking.
That God's way for us doesn't provide
enough pleasure or
enough ego fulfillment or
enough of what we consider to be real life.

And so we leave that path
and we go our own way.

And we end up lost from God.

There's another way that many of us get lost,
and this picks up on what we talked about last week with The Dark
Knight.

B. We become lost through our pain.

Every man is wounded –
that's a theme we have spoken about many times
over these past twenty years in Quest.
And that's how many men get lost from themselves and from God.

We suffer a devastating loss.
We are the victims of a gross injustice.

We make a mistake,
or we fail in some way that we think is significant,
or we can't fix a problem that causes great pain to someone we love,
and often the result is shame or despair or anger.

And we turn off, emotionally and spiritually.
Often alcohol or drugs or pornography or food
are used to help us numb the pain.

We close down,
we turn off,
and we shut God out.
We go into our cave
where it's dark and we're alone,
where no one will follow us,
and we become lost to ourselves and to life and to God.

The loss of a child can do it.
Betrayal by a spouse can do it.

When we're young
physical and verbal brutality,
the absence of a parent's love,
never measuring up,
never being wanted.
There are many ways a man's pain can cause him to end up lost
and alone.

There's a third way we become lost from God.

C. We become lost by believing the lies we are told.

There are two kinds of lies in particular that cause us to become lost from
God.

One is the lies we are told is about who God is.

When the RUF wants to turn young boys into killers,
 what's the first thing they do?
 They lie to them about their fathers.

This is a brief scene,
 but it's telling that the rebels know that to win the boys' hearts
 they must alienate them from their fathers.
 And to do that they lie.

Clip Chapter 9 34.50 – 35.32

Here the lie is: your fathers are weak.
 Your fathers are the reason our country is suffering.

The lies we're told about our heavenly Father
 by the world and by the one that Jesus referred to as the father of lies
 are many.

Sometimes, it's your Father doesn't care about you.
 Or your Father won't forgive you.
 Or your Father is too far away and too weak to help.
 Or your Father shouldn't have let this happen to you.

If the enemy can cause you to believe a lie about your Father,
 he can turn you away from his heart, and
 cause you to end up lost and alone.

**The other is type of lie that is particularly destructive is
 the lies we are told about who we are.**

Our wounds try to name us.
 Often they tell us we are weak and unwanted.
 They tell us there's something shameful about us that made us
 unlovable.
 That we are the reason
 our father left or
 our mother is always angry.

What we see in Blood Diamond is a different kind of lie.

After telling the boys about the weakness of their parents,
they are told they are not like their parents,
weak and afraid.

They are strong and they are men.

And after they are made to kill,
these boys are given new names,
names that glorify their brutality and their ability to destroy what is
innocent and good.

Clip Ch 16 107.32 – 1.08.45

What's happened here is not just that they have adopted new names
they have adopted new identities.

And that's the point of the lies we are told about ourselves –
to attack our true identity;
to make us see ourselves and think of ourselves differently than we
truly are.

These lies may try to define us by
our weaknesses,
or by our sins,
or by the events and the failures that shame us,
or by our brutality
or even by our successes –

but the goal is to place on us an identity that attacks our true selves
as sons of God with the result being that we will act as something
other than the sons of God.

And when we do, we become lost from our true selves and from God.

Our sins,
 our pain,
 and the lies we've been told about ourselves,
 they combine in such a way that most of us end up captive and a long way
 gone
 from our true selves, from God and
 from the path that will lead us to him.

What is the hope for men who are lost?

1. A relentless Father who will come looking for us.

Clip Ch 23 1.35.26 – 1.36.44

Here's how Jesus described his mission after he reached out to the despised tax collector Zacchaeus.

Luke 19.10: For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.

However we get lost,
 the Father wants us back.

Whether it's by believing the lies we're told,
 or through our pain,
 or even when it's because of our sins and our independence –
 our rejection of God doesn't change his heart for us.

He remains committed to us.
 His father's heart still cries out for us.

And even though we have rebelled,
 he refuses to turn his back on us.

Luke 15.4-6: Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'

We all like sheep have gone astray,
we looked at that first earlier.

Every man here at some point in his life
has gotten lost from God because of
his self-centeredness, and
his determination to run his own life his own way,
and his sins.

But the heart of God is a heart that searches for lost sheep
and for lost men even when the reason they are lost
is the wrong choices we have made.

Professor Mary Poplin grew up going to a Methodist Church
but her life changed when she attended college.
She came to see Christianity and the state and the family
as authoritarian and restrictive,
and she committed herself to a life of freedom and self-discovery.

She found herself attracted to radical ideologies,
postmodernism, deconstructionism and Marxism.
She embraced an Eastern, pantheistic New Age spirituality,
seeking happiness and self-fulfillment,
through philosophy, alcohol, drugs and sexual freedom.
All the while, she was absolutely convinced of her own "goodness."

And yet in certain moments, she said,
"I could see glimpses of who I really was. I was not growing freer. My
heart was growing harder, my emotions darker, and my mind more
confused."

Seeking freedom,
she began to feel trapped.
Seeking life,
she began to feel empty and barren inside.

A tenured professor at an elite private university,
at the age of forty-one,
one night she had a vivid dream.
She found herself standing in a long line,
dressed in grey as was everyone else in the line.
The sky was dark and foreboding.

As the line moved forward she saw a scene
reminiscent of Da Vinci's last supper.
The disciples were seated at a table,
wearing, beautiful colored robes.
But Jesus was not at the table.

In a moment she saw him standing beside the line
and she realized that she would soon stand before him.
When the moment came,
she looked into his eyes.
And she felt,
she said, in every cell of her body,
how lost she was,
how wasteful she had been of the life she had been given, and
how far away she was from life
and all that was good and true and right.

Overwhelmed with the feeling that she was unworthy to look at Jesus,
she turned her eyes away,
fell at his feet
and began to weep.

Then she felt two hands upon her shoulders.
His hands.
And immediately she was filled with indescribable peace.

She began to read the Bible,
and one Sunday sitting in a small church
she went to the altar to pray,
wondering if what she had experienced in her dream was real.

Her prayer was,
 Jesus, 'if you are real, please come and get me.'
 And again she felt the same peace and acceptance
 she had experienced in her."

Today Dr. Poplin is a faithful follower of Jesus,
 an insightful critic of secularism, and
 a powerful apologist for the Christian faith.

Men,
 God has come looking for you.
 Some he has already found and you know it.
 Others of you,
 he's found but you don't know it.

But he's come looking for you.
 That's why you're here this morning.
 Because God has been moving in your heart so you would want
 to know more about him
 or to be a better man
 or to find out if there's anything to the Christian faith.
 You may not recognize it,
 but that's God, stepping into your life,
 calling you home.

Here's the other part of our hope.

2. A Relentless Father who will Reclaim and Rename Us.

Jesus told a story about a lost boy,
 who squandered all that his father had given him.

And when this rebellious, wasteful son returns and says,
 "I don't deserve to be called your son, accept me as a servant and let
 me live as one of the hired men."

Look what the father says and does.

Luke 15.10: Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.

He reclaims him – that's what the robe and the ring and the sandals are about.

And he renames him – this son of mine.

This last clip, it's really the reason I wanted you to see the film. We're putting two together and leaving out a good bit in between, but you'll get it.

In the first part, Solomon finally finds Dia and is rejected and captured. Later, the next morning, an airstrike gives Solomon and Danny an opportunity to escape with the diamond.

And what you'll see is a boy who is lost, a long way gone; and who has believed the lies he's been told about himself and his father.

And in a most magnificent way,
you will see a relentless father reclaiming his son from a cruel world
and giving him back his true name and his true identity son.

Men, watch this.
You are Dia, the boy.
And Solomon is the Father who loves you.

clip 1.44.27-1.45.49 fade out/in 1.56.28 – 1.58.32

One final story.

I wonder if you know the name Joe Eszterhas.

He was once the highest paid screenwriter in Hollywood,
receiving as much as \$3 million per script.
Together his films have grossed over \$1 billion.

His movies were usually dark, violent and sexually graphic.
Some of the titles you might recognize are;
Basic Instinct,
Jagged Edge,
Jade,
Sliver, and
Showgirls.

He titled his first memoir “Hollywood Animal,”
a salacious tell-all in which he described his sexcapades with
Hollywood actresses and nasty, ego-driven battles with film
executives.

Simply stated,
if you can think of it,
Joe Eszterhas probably did it.

Wealthy,
powerful,
in demand,
with a large home in Malibu –
he had it all.

The only problem?
It wasn't working.

He was drinking a fifth of gin
and smoking four packs of cigarettes a day.
He was diagnosed with throat cancer
and 80% of his larynx was removed.

The surgeon told him that the only chance he had of surviving
was to stop smoking and drinking immediately.

By this time he had realized that he had become,
his own words: cold, self-absorbed, and soulless.

A month after surgery,
he reached a breaking point.

Jittery.

Trembling.

Angry.

His entire being screaming for a drink and a cigarette.

He went for a walk,
unable to speak because of his operation.
Bugs began to circle around his tracheotomy tube.
Sweating and shaking,
he reached the end of himself.

He fell to the curb,
and did something he had rarely done as a boy
and never as a man.

He began to cry.
He couldn't believe it,
but there were his tears,
hitting the cement beside his feet.

And then he heard a voice.
It was praying.
"Please God, help me.
I've lived so wrong.
I don't deserve it, but please forgive me.
Please try to forgive me."

And he realized it was his voice,
and he was praying,
something he hadn't done since he was a child.

This went on for five minutes,
and suddenly,
he stopped sweating and twitching,
and, his words:

“This is hard to explain to people who don’t have God in their hearts,
 but ... I felt strong and at peace, and I felt a sense of solace.
 I felt different than I ever had before.”

In The Washington Post in an article titled My Base Instincts and God’s
 Love , Eszterhas wrote:

Why did God save the life of a man who had trashed, lampooned, and
 marginalized Him most of his life? Why did He take the time and the trouble
 to save me? ...

I didn't at first understand why He did. I didn't deserve His help. ... I was
 unworthy. I ignore Him for forty years and then suddenly I ask Him to help
 me and He does? It took me some time to understand that God helped me
 because He loves me. Because even though we don't deserve God's love,
 God loves us - all of us.

Now on Sunday mornings,
 you’ll finding Joe Eszterhas in church,
 leading the processional,
 lifting high the cross of Jesus
 which is his joy and his strength.

His first memoir,
 his first identity: Hollywood Animal.
 His new memoir, its title, his new identity:
 Crossbearer.

From one who lived for self and for pleasure
 to one who lives to lift up Jesus
 and the new life he offers to all.

Men,
 I don’t know how you have sinned,
 or how you’ve been hurt,
 or what lies you’ve believed and acted on.

But I know this:

There is a Father who loves you,
and he's come to find you,
and he wants to bring you home.

Men,

I don't know what name you've been living with.

Failure.

Unwanted.

Unworthy.

Self-made.

Proud.

Angry.

Ashamed.

But this is your true name:

Son of God,

loved by the Father, forgiven and free.

Simply confess your need,
admit your mistakes,
ask for his grace and
trust in Jesus.

He has come

to find you,

to forgive you, and

to bring you home.