Facing the Lions of Fatherhood

The ‘roar’ of earthly fathers can be powerful and painful, but God’s roar is louder.

**JEFF PEABODYJUNE 19, 2020**



Out of all the big cats, lions have the loudest roar (roughly equivalent to a jet flying overhead). And it’s piercing: *An adult male lion’s roar can be heard up to five miles away.* Adult males of the human species, particularly fathers, find the same to be true: Our roars carry—further than we think or intend. A dad’s voice is powerful. So is its absence. We’re born with a built-in longing for a father’s affection and approval. And even highly flawed dads want to fulfill those longings (Matt. 7:11).

Yet we can’t seem to stop roaring.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a roar as a “loud, deep cry (as of pain or anger).” Our roars consist of the words, actions, and attitudes stemming from our deep places of anger and pain.

We all have them, injured spots where we still feel and act young. Many of them were inflicted by the roars of our own fathers, who were still reeling from their fathers, and their fathers’ fathers. When someone unknowingly bumps against our scars, we react with greater intensity than the present situation warrants. Often, we’re oblivious to what we’re doing or to the cause. We think we’ve left those old hurts and heartaches behind long ago.

But pain left unattended and unexpressed tends to come out sideways. Scripture speaks of “the sins of the fathers” lasting multiple generations. (Num. 14:18) Much of what lingers is the damage caused by sin—damage that compounds and spreads as it gets passed down.

The prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah both spoke of a proverb they heard people quote regularly: *“The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”*

Therapists have labeled this “the father wound.” The term refers to more than outright abuse or neglect. Even the most attentive, well-meaning dads find their actions routinely have unintended consequences for their kids. Strong fathers with high expectations have their own way of setting teeth on edge.

Søren Kierkegaard spent his adulthood unpacking the impact his dad—a stern, devoutly Christian man, trying his best and still stumbling—had on him. Kierkegaard described his father in his journals, saying, “his fault did not lie in lack of love, but he mistook a child for an old man.”

When our oldest son was in high school, I often chose to withhold my opinions when I didn’t share his enthusiasm over an idea. I thought it was kinder, knowing how heavy a negative word felt for me when it came from my father.

I didn’t realize my pattern of reticence created a different anxiety. My son couldn’t tell where he stood with me. What I was trying to do backfired: In attempting to parent well, my roar was right there working against me.

All fall short of the glory of God when it comes to fathering. This would be cause for despair if not for one incredible truth: God’s roar is louder. Ezekiel and Jeremiah made this very point. Ezekiel quotes the Lord:

*What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: “The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge”?*

*As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son—both alike belong to me.”* (Ezek. 18:2–4)

God is insistent. He can reach us *no matter what our earthly dads are like*.

Although not a father-child story, one event during the lifetimes of Ezekiel and Jeremiah illustrates this truth. When King Darius took the throne in Babylon, Daniel quickly gained his favor. Feeling threatened by him, the rest of the king’s advisers manipulated the king into feeding Daniel to the lions.

Darius had no idea what his declaration against worshiping other gods would set into motion. Yet the irrevocable decision left Darius powerless to stop the consequences. Many fathers know this nightmare of wanting to take back something we said or did. We watch helplessly as our families suffer the repercussions of what can’t be undone.

Daniel ended up in the den. Countless paintings have portrayed him bravely standing before the hungry beasts. Yet the artists necessarily leave out one significant detail: Daniel was sealed in with the lions in utter darkness. He couldn’t see the terror he faced. Children are inherently in the dark as to their dads’ roars. They are up against generations of pain they can’t begin to see.

The single, life-altering truth for Daniel was this: He was never alone in that darkness. He still had to endure the torment of the unseen. But salvation stood right at his side. This is the one great hope of fathers and children everywhere. Christ stepped into the den of our iniquities, facing our greatest enemies with us and for us. On the cross, he forever shut the mouth of the lion of sin. His presence does not spare us from walking through the valley of the shadow. Yet he doesn’t abandon us either. And that changes everything.

Psalm 22, one of the great Messianic passages, begins with the words of Christ: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” We can also hear Christ’s voice in later verses: “Roaring lions tearing their prey open their mouths wide against me” (v. 13). Christ not only dealt with the consequences of sin, he experienced firsthand what it is like to be in the hellhole of the den. He can identify with all who bear the impact of the human roar because he felt it himself.

This does not diminish the unspeakableness of atrocities committed by fathers against children. Still—the presence of the Lord in the messes we’ve created means the darkness is not as all-powerful as we fear.

The rescue of Daniel proved also to be the rescue of Darius. He assumed the consequences were inevitable until God intervened. That freed Darius to make new choices—choices that show us a way out of situations our roars create. Here are four practical takeaways:

**Engage when you can.**

The morning after throwing Daniel to the lions, Darius raced back to the den—the location of his horrific failure. Chances were high a grim reality awaited him.

He went straight there anyway.

We would rather not revisit the site of our mistakes with our families. Our shame shouts that it’s too late. But if Darius had not returned to where the harm had been done, he would have missed witnessing Daniel’s resurrection. Courage to stay engaged makes room for the unexpected.

**Own what you can.**

After discovering Daniel alive, Darius lifted him to safety and threw his accusers in the den. The sweeping severity of the king’s justice may strike us as unnecessarily violent, but the point is this: When Darius identified the influences that had poisoned his relationship with Daniel, he took decisive, swift action to own his mistakes.

It’s easier to offer apologies than to change. Anyone can make a show of remorse. But are we willing to tackle the underlying causes? Owning the effects of our roars may require facing our own stories and father wounds, seeking help to unpack what we can’t see ourselves. Family expert Stephi Wagner wrote, “Pain travels through families until someone is ready to feel it.” We serve future generations when we take on the hard work of addressing our pain.

**Celebrate where you can.**

Once Daniel was safe, Darius could have retreated from him, too humiliated to be near someone who reminded him of his terrible error. Instead, Darius shifted his attention to celebrating the miraculous way God had worked. The king entered into the goodness of redemption and chose gratitude over self-loathing and regret. And Daniel thrived in the days that followed.

When God rescues in spite of our roars, we don’t have to be sheepish. We can rise above our role in creating the problem and fully share the joy of restoration. His grace is worthy of our delight.

**Entrust the rest to God.**

When Daniel was with the lions and Darius felt his most helpless, he cried out to Daniel, “May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!” (Dan. 6:16) Some relational dynamics are too broken for us to fix, no matter how much we want it. That’s when we are called to the hard work of entrusting the other person to God.

This is not simply giving up. It is deliberately placing those we love most in the care of the God who will be with them in the den when we cannot. There is no higher, better good we can do than acknowledge our own powerlessness and pray for God’s mercy over our children and us.

What a comfort: The God we call Father is that in more than name. He reclaims the word, healing the deepest father wounds. And he listens to all who cry to him for mercy over their own fathering.

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