



## PART 14 - David's Kindness to Mephibosheth (2 Sam. 9:1-13)

July 19, 2023 - Chris Altrock

Reading: 2 Sam. 9:1-13 (NRSVue)

*1 David asked, "Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul to whom I may show kindness for Jonathan's sake?" 2 Now there was a servant of the house of Saul whose name was Ziba, and he was summoned to David. The king said to him, "Are you Ziba?" And he said, "At your service!" 3 The king said, "Is there anyone remaining of the house of Saul to whom I may show the kindness of God?"*

*Ziba said to the king, "There remains a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in his feet." 4 The king said to him, "Where is he?" Ziba said to the king, "He is in the house of Machir son of Ammiel, at Lo-debar." 5 Then King David sent and brought him from the house of Machir son of Ammiel, at Lo-debar. 6 Mephibosheth son of Jonathan son of Saul came to David and fell on his face and did obeisance. David said, "Mephibosheth!" He answered, "I am your servant." 7 David said to him, "Do not be afraid, for I will show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan; I will restore to you all the land of your grandfather Saul, and you yourself shall eat at my table always." 8 He did obeisance and said, "What is your servant, that you should look upon a dead dog such as I?"*

*9 Then the king summoned Saul's servant Ziba and said to him, "All that belonged to Saul and to all his house I have given to your master's grandson. 10 You and your sons and your servants shall till the land for him and shall bring in the produce, so that your master's grandson may have food to eat, but your master's grandson Mephibosheth shall always eat at my table." Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants. 11 Then Ziba said to the king, "According to all that my lord the king commands his servant, so your servant will do." Mephibosheth ate at David's table, like one of the king's sons. 12 Mephibosheth had a young son whose name was Mica. And all who lived in Ziba's house became Mephibosheth's servants. 13 Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, for he always ate at the king's table. Now he was lame in both his feet*

### Notices

**1. What do you notice? What stands out to you? What questions do you have?**  
(Notice these points of tension)

2. “He is crippled in his feet” is the primary identity given to Mephibosheth (v 3) -- long before he is even named in the narrative. [2 Sam. 4:4 *Saul’s son Jonathan had a son who was crippled in his feet. He was five years old when the news about Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel. His nurse picked him up and fled, and in her haste to flee it happened that he fell and became lame. His name was Mephibosheth.*]

(Other noticings)

3. “Kindness for the sake of Jonathan” (v 1) V “the kindness of God” (v 3)
4. The last line in the story (v. 13) repeats the fact that Mephibosheth is lame.

### Commentary/ Application<sup>3</sup>

1. *Mephibosheth Story #1*: “When Mephibosheth was five years old, news came to Saul’s palace in Gibeon that King Saul and Prince Jonathan had just been killed by the Philistines on Mount Gilboa in the battle at Jezreel. Panic was immediate and total. The Philistines were ruthless--with Saul and his sons dead, the royal house and everyone in it were slated for destruction ... Not knowing what to expect except the worst, all the servants in the palace ran for their lives. Five-year old Mephibosheth’s nurse grabbed him on the run and then tripped. In the fall the boy’s ankles were broken--both ankles (2 Sam. 4:4). He was carried with the troops of escaping household servants across the Jordan River valley to the safety of the small village of Lo-debar. The bones knit badly. Mephibosheth was never again able to walk well. He grew up in obscurity, lame. Mephibosheth was the only living heir of the once great house of Saul, but nobody knew. Because his life would have been in danger if that information were revealed, he grew up with his royal identity suppressed, grew up with all the privileges of royalty denied him; and both conditions were aggravated by his lameness.” (Peterson, 170)
2. *Mephibosheth Story #2*: “The second Mephibosheth story took place years later. Mephibosheth was now an adult, still cruelly handicapped because of the accident. And then a day came when strangers arrived in Lo-debar asking for him. They found him and told him that he was wanted in Jerusalem by King David. The summons to present himself before David could have struck terror in him. Only one interpretation could be put on the summons: David was searching the land from top to bottom, looking for any trace of Saul’s descendants, determined to eliminate any possible future challenges to his kingdom. Mephibosheth was put on a donkey and taken to Jerusalem. Every step brought him nearer to his anticipated doom. The wretched tale of his victimized life would terminate now in a bloody execution. Mephibosheth perceived himself as royal scum. He felt less than human, calling himself a dead dog. He bleated in embittered terror before

---

<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson *Leap over a Wall* (Harper San Francisco, 1997); Robert Alter *The David Story* (Norton & Co, 1999); Robert Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel* New American Commentary (B & H, 1996); Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (John Knox, 1990). Joyce Baldwin *1 and 2 Samuel* Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (IVP Academic, 1988).

David. Observing his terror, David addressed him by name, “Mephibosheth.” What Mephibosheth didn’t know when he was brought into David’s court, and could never have imagined in his wildest dreams, is that he was there to be loved. What Mephibosheth didn’t know was that he was standing before a very different kind of king than the world in which he had grown up had any right to expect. The suspicious paranoia that had characterized his grandfather’s reign was absent here. The maniacal jealousies that had infected Saul’s court were remote here. David emerges into prominence here as a lover. His kingly rule was already marked by justice and fairness. There is, though, an element without which those qualities aren’t complete, and that element is love. Mephibosheth had never, or at least not for a long time, been loved like this. David’s first word to Mephibosheth is the young man’s name. Mephibosheth is recognized as a person. He isn’t a nameless exile. He isn’t a category of a victim. He has a name, and David knows it--Mephibosheth. We can’t love in general. We can’t love by categories. We can’t love by decree or legislation. We can only love a named person who has a past, a present and a future. David put content into the word *love* when he turned over to Mephibosheth all the lands of his grandfather Saul so that he would have an independent income; assigned Ziba, who had once been servant to Saul, to manage the farms and take care of his affairs; and brought Mephibosheth into his household as one of the family. This is the way love *looks*, not *feels*--generous, extravagant, uncalculating.” (Peterson, 171-175).

- a. “Through this narrative the biblical writer portrays David as the supreme Israelite example of covenant faithfulness (Hb. *hesed*), the highest virtue in Hebrew society.” (Bergen, 354).
- b. “Three times in this paragraph the word *hesed* is used (vv. 1,3,7). (Brueggemann, 267).
- c. “David throws the net wider than his promises required, extending his generosity to any of Saul’s surviving sons or grandsons.” (Baldwin, 242).
- d. “Through his inquiry David learned that there was ‘still a son of Jonathan’ (v. 4) apparently living with a wife and a son (cf. v. 12) in a self-imposed internal exile ‘at the house of Makir son of Ammiel in Lo Debar.’ Makir, mentioned here for the first time, was a wealthy and powerful individual living east of the Jordan at Lo Debar ... Later he proved to be one of David’s most loyal supporters (cf. 17:27-29).” (Bergen, 354-355)
- e. “The property of the previous regime would have come into David’s possession, and to restore that property to a member of his predecessor’s family was to turn the risk of encouraging thoughts of usurping the throne.” (Baldwin, 243).
- f. “First, David restored to the disfigured, exiled Saulide ‘all the land that belonged to ... Saul’ (v. 7). This would have meant that the family estate located about three miles north of Jerusalem in Gibeah would be returned to Mephibosheth. Second, David gave Mephibosheth a privilege that seemed to have perished the

day his father Jonathan had died, the right to board as the king's table 'always.' ... Third, David provided Mephibosheth with a large contingent of servants and material wealth." (Bergen, 355).

- g. "His reference to himself as *a dead dog* is unnecessarily disparaging, and reflects what would now be regarded as a morbid self-image, induced perhaps by his disability." (Baldwin, 243).
  - h. "Ziba's fifteen sons and twenty servants ensure that there will be people with the necessary training and skill to manage the estates efficiently." (Baldwin, 243).
  - i. "The kindness of God (v. 3), on which David modeled his kindness, was not limited, but freely given to the undeserving as an act of free grace. Jonathan had given gracious help to David when he was driven from the king's table, and now David has been able to show kindness in return by giving Jonathan's son security and honor." (Baldwin, 244).
  - j. In what ways is this true? *We can't love in general. We can't love by categories. We can't love by decree or legislation. We can only love a named person who has a past, a present and a future.***
3. *Mephibosheth Story #3*: "The third Mephibosheth story took place years later during the Absalom rebellion (2 Sam. 16-19). Mephibosheth had been living a long time as an honored member of the family in David's house, eating his meals there, treated as one of the king's sons. He lived in a house of love. He was the recipient of love. We would like to know whether he himself learned to love. Was Mephibosheth changed? Was he able to recover a sense of dignity and royal pride? Or did Mephibosheth hang on to his victim identity? While outwardly accepting David's hospitality, did he secretly suspect David of bringing him into his household to keep an eye on him? Any of these responses to David's love is conceivable, and the narrative doesn't make it absolutely clear which is true. The ambiguity is intentional, for we mustn't suppose that there are any guarantees that a generous act of love will be rewarded by loyal gratitude. Not all, not even most, love is requited. The Absalom revolt is civil war: Absalom unseats his father from the throne and takes over the kingship. All the odds are against David. He escapes from Jerusalem in disgrace, cursed and maligned, with a few faithful followers. Ziba joins David on the flight out of Jerusalem and when he's asked the whereabouts of his master, he answers that Mephibosheth deliberately stayed behind in Jerusalem, believing that in the confusion and anarchy he had a good chance of being made king. David, without asking questions, accepts Ziba's story as true. Days later, on the return to Jerusalem following Absalom's defeat, David hears a very different story. Mephibosheth tells David that he had been all ready to join him that night in his flight from Jerusalem, but Ziba had betrayed him, leaving him behind, stranded without a mount (and, of course, unable to get about on foot.) So who's telling the truth, Ziba or Mephibosheth? Most readers of the

story side with Mephibosheth, but there's a deliberate withholding of a verdict by the narrator in order to give emphasis to David's response. David doesn't care who's telling the truth. He accepts both men back into his city, back into his household. His love is large enough, expansive enough to handle faithlessness, fecklessness, lies and hypocrisy." (Peterson, 176-178).

4. Questions:

- a. In 2 Sam. 9:1-13, Mephibosheth, the last surviving son of David's deceased and beloved friend Jonathan, has a physical disability (bones that were broken in his feet/ legs when he was dropped as a baby and that never properly healed). He is, according to the text, "crippled in his feet." As an adult Mephibosheth refers to himself in the text as "a dead dog." Most likely this poor self image is the result of his disability. Mephibosheth thinks of himself as "a dead dog" because of his crippled feet. **What are things in our lives today that lead us to think poorly of ourselves (as Mephibosheth did) or poorly of others (as, very likely, the people around Mephibosheth thought poorly of him)?**
- b. King David finds Mephibosheth, brings him to the palace, provides resources for him, and keeps a place at his table always for Mephibosheth. This was how David showed love to a person who did not love himself and who, likely, was not loved by many others. **What are some ways we can express love toward people today who do not love themselves and who may not be loved by others?**
- c. All of this is called in the text "the kindness of God." That is, David is trying to provide Mephibosheth a kindness that looks like God's kindness. **In what ways had David experienced God's kindness? How might this have inspired him to provide kindness to Mephibosheth? How have you experienced God's kindness through the actions of another person?**