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On Tough Texts

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The King and Mephibosheth: A New Testament Portrait

2 Samuel 9

THERE ARE MANY GREAT BIBLE STORIES WE ALL know and love. There are wonderful stories of triumph, such as: Creation; God's providing the ram in place of Isaac; Joseph and Potiphar's wife; the Exodus from Egypt; David and Goliath; Daniel in the lion's den; and many more. There are also sad stories of tragedy: man's fall in the Garden; Cain and Abel; Sodom and Gomorrah; Samson and Delilah; David and Bathsheba; and others. Such is the great value of the Old Testament, where we read stories that are "for [ex]amples . . . written for our admonition" (1 Cor. 10:11)

We all have our favorite Bible story, but mine is one that is not very well known, one that is rather obscure, in fact. It is recorded in 2 Samuel 9. Please pause and read that passage.

In my humble opinion, there is no Old Testament story of greater beauty than this one. I've preached this several times over the years in several churches, refining it a little each time, and did so again recently (you can listen to this message online). This is, in fact, my favorite message I have ever preached in over 36 years of ministry. While an *Old Testament tale*, we find here absolutely amazing illustrations of many *New Testament truths*. This story paints a graphic picture of salvation and service, of how God deals with man and how man should respond. King David is representative of God in His place and power, and Mephibosheth is a vivid portrait of man in his helplessness. Here is a story of mercy, grace, and love that illustrates what God has done for man through Jesus Christ. Let us make **12** observations.

I. Mephibosheth Was Crippled by a Fall

Back in 4:4, we read: "And Jonathan, Saul's son, had a son

that was lame of his feet. He was five years old when the tidings came of Saul and Jonathan out of Jezreel, and his nurse took him up, and fled: and it came to pass, as she made haste to flee, that he fell, and became lame. And his name was Mephibosheth." The news that came from Jezreel, of course, was that David's dear friend Jonathan had been killed in battle and Saul had taken his own life to prevent being captured by the Philistines. Out of fear that the Philistines might destroy the rest of Saul's family, especially an heir to the throne, the little boy's panicked nurse dropped him and either broke a bone that didn't heal properly or caused some other debilitating injury.

The first feature we note in our story, therefore, is that *Mephibosheth was crippled by a fall*. That, too, is what happened to all humanity—it was crippled by Adam's fall. Because of that fall, man is lame and totally helpless; he is sinful and will forever fall short of what God demands. As Romans 3:10 declares, "There is none righteous, no, not one." Verse 23 goes on to add, "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." Paul goes on to conclude in 5:12, "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned."

What is worse, just as Mephibosheth could do nothing in himself, man was left with his own paralyzing inability. Romans 1:21 sums us this state: "When they [fallen men] knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened." "Vain" is *mataioō* from the noun *mataios*, "devoid of force, truth, success, result; speaks of that which is futile, without result or success." This word refers to the unsuccessful attempt to do or be anything. How did Solomon put it?

“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity” (or “Futility of futilities, all is futile,” Ecc. 1:2). So, the plight of the human race is that in refusing to glorify or thank God, it became futile (unsuccessful) in all its thoughts and reasoning.

All this is further intensified by where Mephibosheth lived. **Lodebar** literally means “pastureless,” which as one expositor puts it, pictures “an unconverted soul living in a barren land” (BBC)

So, just as David intervened on Mephibosheth’s behalf, God must do the same. Why? Because we “were [spiritually] dead in trespasses and sins” and unable to help ourselves, as Paul makes clear in Ephesians 2:1–4. That leads us to our second observation.

II. King David Desired to Show Kindness

Verse 1 again declares, **Is there yet any that is left of the house of Saul, that I may shew him kindness.** The word **kindness** is the key word of the whole story. The Hebrew word here is *chesed*, which is “one of the most important [words] in the vocabulary of Old Testament theology and ethics” (*Vine’s Expository Dictionary*, “Loving-kindness” entry), appearing some 240 times. It speaks of kindness, loving-kindness, mercy, goodness, faithfulness, loyal love, and acts of kindness.

It was likewise God’s desire to show kindness to man. If there is a single word, in fact, that could summarize God’s dealing with His men, it would be the word *mercy*. One example, and by far the most notable appearance of *chesed*, is in Psalm 136, where the psalmist declares twenty-six times of God, “His mercy endureth for ever.” This psalm is a study in worship, with God’s mercy at the forefront, displaying what wondrous works He has done. Mercy is at the *foundation* of His character (vv. 1–3), the *function* of His creative work (vv. 4–9), the *fountain* from which all His blessings flow to His people (vv. 10–25), and the *force* behind His Rulership in heaven (v. 26).

The whole point of mercy, therefore, is to relieve the affliction that man suffers (just as David relieved Mephibosheth) because he cannot relieve it himself. Mercy is always to the helpless, to the crippled, to the dead, in fact. This again leads to another observation.

III. Mephibosheth Did Not Earn David’s Kindness

This fact is also clearly indicated in verse 1 and implied in the whole passage. Nowhere do we read that Mephibosheth did anything to earn the king’s kindness. He had nothing to do with any of it. After all, what could he possibly offer the king? He was a helpless cripple. Likewise, while every religion of the world claims that salvation comes by works that we do for God, that is not what we see in God’s revelation. “Surely I can do enough that God will have mercy on me,” it is claimed. “Surely I can do enough good works to merit salvation.” No, man cannot earn salvation; he is dead, worthless, and totally at the mercy of God.

Paul made this clear in Titus 3:5, “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.” Even more direct was Isaiah when he graphi-

cally pictured the sinfulness of man and what his good works amount to: “But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away” (Isa. 64:6). The Hebrew behind “filthy rags” literally refers to “a menstrual cloth” (Lev. 15:33; 20:18). Think of it! All of man’s good deeds and good intentions are as useless and offensive to God as a menstrual cloth is to us. Isaiah adds that all we might do will simply wither like a leaf and blow away.

No truth is clearer in Scripture, in fact, than that salvation is apart from any merit or works of men, that works cannot save. Writing again to the Romans, Paul declared that if salvation is “by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work” (Rom. 11:6). To the Ephesians he made it clear that “by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8, 9). Verse after verse declares this truth (Job 9:20; Rom. 3:20, 28; 4:5; 9:11, 16, 30; Gal. 2:16; 3:16–21).

IV. David’s Kindness was for Jonathan’s Sake

Recall a moment the closeness of David and Jonathan. 1 Samuel 18:1 tells us that their souls were “knit with” each other. Here was one of the closest friendships in human history. So, the kindness David wanted to show was for the sake of Jonathan and was to be toward *Jonathan’s offspring*. Now for the parallel. How God loved Adam, and how God loves Adam’s offspring, that is, *us*. But even more than that, as Jonathan typifies the first Adam, he also typifies the second Adam (Christ), for “as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor. 15:22). How often we think that God showed us grace primarily for *our* sake, when actually He showed grace toward us primarily for *Christ’s* sake, because of the love He has for His dear Son, the Creator.

Why did kindness come to Mephibosheth? No, it wasn’t his works, it wasn’t what he could do for the king. It was because of who He was related to. The same is true for us. It is only because of our relationship to Jesus Christ that God bestows mercy and grace.

V. The King Summoned Mephibosheth

Verse 5 tells us that **king David sent, and fetched** Mephibosheth. We often hear it said of certain people that they are “seeking God.” Many church ministries, in fact, have been specifically tailored to appeal to what are called “seekers.” But such so-called seekers are seeking a wide range of things, such as: philosophy, debate, religion, morality, political correctness, religious toleration, or just plain entertainment. Such people are not seeking truth at all, for when they are confronted with Christ, who *is* “the way, the truth, and the life,” they reject Him.

Romans 3:11–18, in fact, categorically declares that man in no way seeks God, does nothing to please God, and actually runs away from God. Adam is a proof of that. Knowing he had sinned against God, he and Eve “hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden” (Gen. 3:8). Jonah, even as a prophet, tried to hide from

God. Jesus sought each of His disciples; they did not seek Him. In the Last Days, men will try to hide themselves from God's judgment (Rev. 6:15–17). And it is because of man's natural tendency to run from God, that Jesus had "to come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Lk. 19:10).

We can also add that if any one appears to be truly seeking God, it is only because God, through His sovereign grace, is drawing him. As our Lord Himself declared in John 6:44: "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him." Such an effectual call is absolutely necessary simply because man's depravity makes him run from God.

VI. The King Sent Messengers to Fetch Mephibosheth

Verse 5 also tells us that David used others to actually go get Mephibosheth. Could David have done this personally? Certainly. But he chose to use others to carry out the task.

The application could not be clearer. There is no better picture of evangelism in the Old Testament than this. God could certainly save anyone without using what we might call "a middle man," but He has chosen to use us as His messengers. He has declared all believers, in fact, to be His witnesses, as we read in Acts 1:8: "ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."

"Witnesses" is the Greek *martus* (English *martyr*), which was a legal term, just like today. The witness gives solemn testimony to that which he knows and offers evidence. The Christian, therefore, is one who testifies of Christ and gives evidence through his or her life. So, it's not just that we witness for Christ with our *lips*, but rather what we also do through our *life*. It's not so much that the local church evangelizes through "programs of evangelism" or "evangelistic campaigns," but rather individual believers are the outreach.

VII. Mephibosheth Reverenced the King

Verse 6 tells us that **when Mephibosheth . . . was come unto David, he fell on his face, and did reverence**. The word **reverence** is the Hebrew (*shāchāh*) that is commonly used for worship, but it's primary meaning is simply "to bow down." This is important because Mephibosheth was undoubtedly bowing not out of worship but simply out of **fear**. In that day, being summoned before the king was not a good thing, especially in this case. Mephibosheth was a member of a deposed royal family who could claim throne rights, and it was common practice to destroy the household of one's predecessor. That is why David says in verse 7 **fear not**. This further underscores David's mercy and grace.

It is such **fear**, in fact, that must be the starting place for man. "The fear of the LORD," Solomon wrote, "is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7) and "the beginning of wisdom" (9:10). In other words, *true knowledge begins with a fear of God*. If we are to know anything, we must begin with the presupposition of God. How, for example, can an intelligent person believe (and then brag about believing it) that the universe sprang from nothing and then evolved? How can

truly brilliant people say something so absurd and irrational? Simple: because they do not start with God. Without Him, we can know nothing. Such knowledge begins with the fear of God.

It is then, and *only* then, that we can truly worship. It is a sad fact that "worship," as carried on in many churches today, is based almost exclusively on man-centered methods and on the feelings of the worshipper. Just as Mephibosheth undoubtedly was thinking only of all the king had done for him and not himself, so should our worship be. This leads to another observation.

VIII. Mephibosheth Responded as a Servant

Verse 6 tells us something else about Mephibosheth's response; he answered David with the words, **Behold thy servant!** I am blessed by that statement every time I read this passage. Let us get the picture. Handicapped people of that day were often carried by some kind of litter. Unlike such folks today who, because of modern technology, can live very productive lives, that was not the case in ancient times. Begging or some very simple trade was all they could possibly imagine.

To further underscore his worthlessness, he asks in verse 8, **What is thy servant, that thou shouldst look upon such a dead dog as I am?** The words **dead dog** reflect the attitude of the day that such were useless, contemptible. Dogs were nothing but scavengers and merited no kindness. But still Mephibosheth says, **Behold thy servant!** What could he possibly do for the king of Israel or for the furtherance of the Kingdom? Well, if nothing else, he was and still is today a challenge to others to be servants of the King of Kings. He is still proclaiming that we as crippled individuals can be useful to the King. While we can not help ourselves, when we give ourselves to the King, He will find a way to use us.

Today we tend to think only certain people can serve to the fullest, only those with great talent and natural abilities. But what we need are more Mephibosheths who realize their worthlessness (and even contemptibility) until the King comes along to use them for His purpose.

IX. Mephibosheth Received Riches

In verses 7 and 9 we read David's promise, **I will surely shew thee kindness for Jonathan thy father's sake, and will restore thee all the land of Saul thy father; and thou shalt eat bread at my table continually. . . . Then the king called to Ziba, Saul's servant, and said unto him, I have given unto thy master's son all that pertained to Saul and to all his house**. Mephibosheth didn't have to go back to his old home, his old world. He was now in a new world with a new inheritance. The same is true of each of us, who now "know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints" (Eph. 1:18) and "the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus" (2:7). Oh, what we have in Christ! Salvation, sanctification, eternal life, spiritual gifts, a heavenly home, and more. We also, like Mephibosheth, have daily provision, knowing that "God shall supply all [our] need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19).

X. Mephibosheth Had Absolute Security

Again verse 7 declares, that from that day forward, with no interruption or possibility of loss, Mephibosheth would **eat** at David's **table continually**. Here is one of my favorite parts of the story. After supper, David did not say, "Well, Mephibosheth, it's been a nice evening, and I'll have you back sometime, but it's time for you go now." Indeed not. He said, in effect, "You are here to stay," and words like that from the king were absolute security.

I still recall preaching an early version of this message on Mephibosheth many years ago in a church that did not believe in the security of the believer and was promptly asked to leave and not finish the rest of the scheduled services. There are few things sadder than rejecting the security of the believer because it demonstrates a total ignorance of grace. The same unmerited favor that saves us is the same unearned kindness that keeps us. God doesn't say to his adopted sons and daughters, "Drop over once in awhile for a meal," rather He says, "You will now eat at my table forever." And it is that very thought that leads us to another observation.

XI. Mephibosheth Became One of the King's Sons

Verse 11 is the true capstone of the whole story: **Then said Ziba unto the king, According to all that my lord the king hath commanded his servant, so shall thy servant do. As for Mephibosheth, said the king, he shall eat at my table, as one of the king's sons.** Here is a subtle but crucial point. Mephibosheth was not David's son before this incident. *He became a son only when King David declared it so because of Jonathon's sake.*

We hear countless people today say, "Oh, all people are God's children, all fellow members of the family of God." But that is a lie that Satan is thrilled with. John 1:12 makes it explicitly clear, "As many as received him [Christ], to them gave he power [i.e., the right or privilege] to become the sons of God." The Apostle echoed that truth in Galatians 3:26: "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus."

This is, in fact, the foundation of the biblical doctrine of adoption. We who were once "of [our] father the devil" (Jn. 8:44), have now been "predestinated . . . unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will" (Eph. 1:5). Indeed, through Christ we are forever King's sons, which again demonstrates our security. That leads to one other observation.

XII. Mephibosheth's Crippled Condition Was Hidden

Verse 13 provides us with a beautiful parting shot before our story "fades to black": **So Mephibosheth dwelt in Jerusalem: for he did eat continually at the king's table; and was lame on both his feet.** Once again, there is no better way to grasp this principle than to get a mental picture of the scene. In the earliest Old Testament times, a **table** was no more than an animal hide or rug spread on a floor or even the ground. Royalty, on the other hand, often used a low table, around which were stools or low chairs. In the latter case, then, when we imagine Mephibosheth seated at the king's **table**, we can easily picture that his crippled condition was hidden. Besides, as everyone ate and communed together, no one cared anyway. So, as long as Mephibosheth was at the king's table, his crippled condition was hidden.

When this thought occurred to me years ago, its application struck me profoundly. As long as the Christian is seated at God's table feeding on His Word, no one will know our crippled state. While we are certainly lame in ourselves and will fall on our face if we try to leave the table, God's Word will hide our condition. We must **eat continually at the king's table**. This is why I "nag" about the importance of church attendance, because it is critical that God's people are constantly being fed the Word.

Well, we have come to the end of our story. One expositor sums it up this way: "Here is a striking picture of salvation by grace. Grace [gives] kindness to a helpless one (vv. 1-3; Eph. 2:1, 4-7) . . . gives a place of privilege to its recipient (v. 11; Eph. 1:3-6) . . . and sustains and keeps him (v. 13; John 10:28-29)" (C. I. Scofield).

Let us each ask ourselves, "Now that I know this story, am I familiar with it by experience? Do I know God's grace for salvation? In my helpless state, am I depending upon God's mercy and grace alone? Am I committed to His service even though I have nothing to offer? Am I seated at His table and feasting on His Word?"

In a day of almost cultish emphasis on self-esteem and an arrogantly, even narcissistically, high view of man, this story should humble us. Let us not consider ourselves as a King David, but rather as a Mephibosheth.

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