

David and Mephibosheth

2 Samuel 9:1-13

December 12, 2021

We are not scheduled to have Bible Study on December 12. After the service the Women will have their Tea. However, I think this is a particularly interesting subject this week. I've always found the stories surrounding David to be interesting, important, and full of inspiration. So, I thought I'd share a bit about this one. In particular, there's some background and details that are interesting but are often not mentioned when looking at this story.

The first point I'd like to mention is the importance of Jonathan. We often hear of "David and Jonathan" as if Jonathan's only importance is being David's friend, sort of like a trusty sidekick. That fact is, Jonathan was a bona-fide hero before David ever came on the scene. During the prophet Samuel's entire lifetime, Israel was afflicted by the Philistines. The Philistines were the "sea people" who seem to have come from the Aegean area. From there they raided the coasts of the eastern Mediterranean and set up colonies, much like the Vikings two millennia later. Egypt under Ramses II managed to defeat them, but they established a colony of five cities on the coast of Palestine in the region of Gaza. Incidentally, the name "Palestine" is derived from the Philistines.

The Philistines established themselves during the time of the Judges, sometime between Joshua and Sampson. Soon they were trying to establish control over the whole region. That brought them into conflict with the Israelites. Samuel anointed Saul as the first king in response to the Israelites wanting to better defend themselves, a King to lead them in battle like all of the other nations. The tribe of Dan had already given up, and moved out of the areas where the Philistines were, to the far north of Israel. During the time of Saul, war with the Philistines was almost continual, as they encroached further and further inland.

I Samuel Chapter 14 describes how Jonathan, accompanied by just his armor bearer, attacked a Philistine outpost and routed not only the Philistines there, but also their whole army, due to fear and panic. Saul, back in the Israelite camp, set the rest of the small Israelite army in pursuit. He also made a rash but perhaps well-intentioned oath that no Israelite was to eat before the sun went down. The idea was that the pursuit must be vigorous, with no pause. Jonathan, of course, didn't know about that. He happened across some wild honey and ate some. When

God didn't answer Saul's inquiry about making a night attack on the Philistines, a series of questions put to God by casting lots identified Jonathan as the culprit. So, Saul declared that Jonathan would have to die for the sin. The people wouldn't allow that, though. A substitution was made. Jonathan did not have to die.

So, here we see Jonathan with a very profound faith, willing to attack the Philistines two against many, if God gave him a sign. His heroism led to a great victory. Yet, he inadvertently trespassed Saul's oath, of which he had been ignorant. He didn't protest, but accepted that he would have to die to satisfy their and his sense of God's justice, for the breaking of the oath. This defied common sense, and the people knew it. They saved him. They pointed out to Saul that Jonathan had led a great victory. Was that not a sign too?

So, that's the Jonathan, military hero, crown prince, and deeply committed to God, who witnesses David slaying Goliath. In that he sees heroism like, or maybe exceeding, his own. We read in *I Samuel* 18:

18 When David^[a] had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. ²Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. ³Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. ⁴Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt.

This did not go over well with Saul, especially when the ladies took to singing, "Saul has slain his thousands, but David his ten thousands!" (v. 7) Yet, Jonathan persisted in placing David's interests even above his own. Saul began to hate David and tried to kill him. Later when David failed to appear at Saul's table as expected, we read (Chapter 20),

³⁰Then Saul's anger was kindled against Jonathan. He said to him, "You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame, and to the shame of your mother's nakedness? ³¹For as long as the son of Jesse lives upon the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established. Now send and bring him to me, for he shall surely die."

Saul was in a sense right. Jonathan had made a choice to put David before himself. I think this example of love, like God's love, shown by Jonathan to David,

may have been the most important influence in David's life. David went on to make many choices, quite a few bad ones among them. But he never lost his love of God, and willingness to submit to God, unlike most kings of that era. David went on the run and escaped Saul. Saul, Jonathan, and another of Saul's sons, Malchishua, perished fighting against the Philistines at Mount Gilboa. (That is in Galilee, which shows how far the Philistines had penetrated.) Saul's last son, Ishbosheth (or Ishbaal) became king, but was later killed by assassins. After that David was invited to become king of Israel as well as Judah. There were some wars, but eventually David was established. That brings us to today's scripture:

9 David asked, "Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul to whom I may show kindness for Jonathan's sake?" ²Now 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!" ³The 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." ⁴The king said to him, "Where is he?" Ziba said to the king, "He is in the house of Machir son of Ammiel, at Lodebar." ⁵Then King David sent and brought him from the house of Machir son of Ammiel, at Lodebar.

⁶Mephibosheth^[a] son of Jonathan son of Saul came to David, and fell on his face and did obeisance. David said, "Mephibosheth!"^[b] He answered, "I am your servant." ⁷David 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." ⁸He did obeisance and said, "What is your servant, that you should look upon a dead dog such as I?"

⁹Then 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. ¹⁰You 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^[c] shall always eat at my table." Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants. ¹¹Then Ziba said to the king, "According to all that my lord the king commands his servant, so your servant will do." Mephibosheth^[d] ate at David's^[e] table, like one of the king's sons. ¹²Mephibosheth^[f] had a young son whose name was Mica. And all who lived in Ziba's house became Mephibosheth's^[g] servants. ¹³Mephibosheth lived

in Jerusalem, for he always ate at the king's table. Now he was lame in both his feet.

Footnotes: a-h: [2 Samuel 9:6](#) and other places: Or Merib-baal: See 4.4 note

David's intent was to show to Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son, the kind of love that David had received from Jonathan. He refers to what he intends as "the kindness of God." (*II Samuel* 1: 17-27, David's lament over Saul and Jonathan, is worth reading as a deep expression of David's love for Jonathan.)

The story does not end there, though. Fast forward to Absalom's revolt. Later in *II Samuel* David's then-senior son Absalom revolts, and David feels compelled to flee from Jerusalem toward the Jordan River and Gilead, on the far side. As he passed over the Mount of Olives (just east of Jerusalem), we read (Chapter 16):

16 When David had passed a little beyond the summit, Ziba the servant of Mephibosheth^[a] met him, with a couple of donkeys saddled, carrying two hundred loaves of bread, one hundred bunches of raisins, one hundred of summer fruits, and one skin of wine. ²The king said to Ziba, "Why have you brought these?" Ziba answered, "The donkeys are for the king's household to ride, the bread and summer fruit for the young men to eat, and the wine is for those to drink who faint in the wilderness." ³The king said, "And where is your master's son?" Ziba said to the king, "He remains in Jerusalem; for he said, 'Today the house of Israel will give me back my grandfather's kingdom.'" ⁴Then the king said to Ziba, "All that belonged to Mephibosheth^[b] is now yours." Ziba said, "I do obeisance; let me find favor in your sight, my lord the king."

So, Ziba is telling David that Mephibosheth is returning David's kindness by siding with Absalom, and further, seems to expect that Absalom will abdicate in favor of him, Mephibosheth, who should rightfully be on the throne. Whereas, Ziba is loyal to David. Eventually David won the battle, Absalom was killed, and David returned to Jerusalem. We read in Chapter 19:

²⁴ Mephibosheth^[a] grandson of Saul came down to meet the king; he had not taken care of his feet, or trimmed his beard, or washed his clothes, from the day the king left until the day he came back in safety. ²⁵ When he came from Jerusalem to meet the king, the king said to him, "Why did you not go with me, Mephibosheth?"^[b] ²⁶ He answered, "My lord, O king, my servant deceived

me; for your servant said to him, ‘Saddle a donkey for me,^[c] so that I may ride on it and go with the king.’ For your servant is lame. ²⁷ He has slandered your servant to my lord the king. But my lord the king is like the angel of God; do therefore what seems good to you. ²⁸ For all my father’s house were doomed to death before my lord the king; but you set your servant among those who eat at your table. What further right have I, then, to appeal to the king?” ²⁹ The king said to him, “Why speak any more of your affairs? I have decided: you and Ziba shall divide the land.” ³⁰ Mephibosheth^[d] said to the king, “Let him take it all, since my lord the king has arrived home safely.”

The evidence in this case favors Mephibosheth. The extent of his hair grown out shows mourning from the time that David fled Jerusalem. It’s a tough case for David to decide. He doesn’t decide between them. Instead, he split the inheritance. We see that Mephibosheth, even though he was only five when his father was slain, and suffers from the seeming injustice of being lame, accepts whatever David may say with good grace and even generosity, rather than with hatred toward Ziba.

Later, David spares Mephibosheth again (*II Samuel* 21:7), when seven sons of Saul are to be given to the Gibeonites to be killed to satisfy a blood debt, that is, to see that justice is served. It’s a very sad story, in *II Samuel* 21 1-14.

What I see in all of these stories is that the sense of “justice,” even the justice God demands of his covenant faithful, was seen as very different in that day than now. Justice seemed to demand Jonathan’s life. Seven of Saul’s sons were killed to satisfy the blood debt that the Gibeonites held against Saul. Yet, amid that harsh religious understanding, God’s love was able to break through in Jonathan’s self-sacrificing love for David. That was a model that David would take to heart and express in his life, even amid all of the other terrible things happening. David makes that love known to us in our day, through the psalms and through the Biblical record of his life. It may not have been a purely “good” life. But David loved God, and was loved by God. If someone with as many sins and flaws as David can be that close to God, surely we can be too. Jesus came to better show us the way. Maybe we, even in this modern world, don’t fully understand God’s call to do justice. But we have at least now have the perspectives Jesus gives us.

By the way, Mephibosheth’s son Mica prospered and eventually had many children, as recorded in *Chronicles*. So Saul’s line lived on through many generations, likely even to our day, thanks to David.