

2 Samuel 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 2 Samuel chapter 9 And David said, Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake? Now there was a servant of the house of Saul whose name was Zeba, and they called him to David. And the king said to him, Are you Zeba? And he said, I am your servant.

And the king said, Is there not still someone of the house of Saul that I may show the kindness of God to him? Zeba said to the king, There is still a son of Jonathan. He is crippled in his feet.

The king said to him, Where is he? And Zeba said to the king, He is in the house of Machir the son of Amiel at Lodabar. Then king David sent and brought him from the house of Machir the son of Amiel at Lodabar. And Mephibosheth the son of Jonathan, son of Saul, came to David and fell on his face and paid homage. And David said, Mephibosheth. And he answered, Behold, I am your servant.

And David said to him, Do not fear, for I will show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan, and I will restore to you all the land of Saul your father, and you shall eat at my table always.

And he paid homage and said, What is your servant that you should show regard for a dead dog such as I? Then the king called Zeba Saul's servant and said to him, All that belong to Saul and to all his house I have given to your master's grandson. And you and your sons and your servants shall till the land for him, and shall bring in the produce, that your master's grandson may have bread to eat.

[1 : 3 0] But Mephibosheth your master's grandson shall always eat at my table. Now Zeba had fifteen sons and twenty servants. Then Zeba said to the king, According to all that my lord the king commands his servant, so will your servant do. So Mephibosheth ate at David's table like one of the king's sons, and Mephibosheth had a young son whose name was Micah. And all who lived in Zeba's house became Mephibosheth's servants. So Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, for he ate always at the king's table.

Now he was lame in both his feet. Back in 1 Samuel chapter 20 verses 13 to 17, Jonathan had made a covenant with David, in which David had sworn to continue to show faithfulness to Jonathan's house after he ascended to power. There Jonathan said to David, May the Lord be with you as he has been with my father. If I am still alive, show me the steadfast love of the Lord that I may not die, and do not cut off your steadfast love from my house forever, when the Lord cuts off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth. And Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, May the Lord take vengeance on David's enemies. And Jonathan made David swear again by his love for him, for he loved him as he loved his own soul. In 2 Samuel chapter 9, David is fulfilling this promise by taking regard for Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan. In these chapters, we have been seeing David's establishment of his kingdom by defeating his enemies, capturing his capital, securing his kingdom, forming a well-ordered household, establishing the worship of the Lord, and preparing the material for the building of the temple. At the end of chapter 8, there was a list of David's chief officials and a description of his court. The chapters that preceded this were more thematic and covered material from the entirety of David's reign. We read of the birth of Solomon, and of military victories that have yet to occur in the chronological progression of the text.

There is further dyschronologised material appended to the narrative at the end of the book, but in this section we seem to be returning to something that is ordered more chronologically, and less thematically. The story of Saul dominated 1 Samuel until his death and the death of Jonathan at the end of the book. The shadow of Saul continued to rest over the early years of David's reign.

In chapter 1, David mourned for Saul and Jonathan, and killed the Amalekite who claimed to have killed Saul. In chapter 2, war broke out between Israel under Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, who was appointed king of Israel, and David as the king of Judah. In chapter 3, we read of the defection of Abner, the former commander of Saul, his murder at the hands of Joab, and David's mourning over him. We also read of the return of Michael, the daughter of Saul, to David as his wife. In chapter 4, Ish-bosheth was assassinated, and David killed his murderers. In chapter 5, David was officially appointed a successor to Saul by Israel.

In chapter 6, Michael was rendered barren. In chapter 7, the Lord promised to David that he would not remove his favour from David, as he had from Saul. So the relationship between David's kingdom and Saul's, the legitimacy of David's succession from Saul, the relative fates of the houses of David and Saul, and David's fulfilment of his faithfulness to Jonathan, are prominent and important themes in 2 Samuel.

[4 : 49] We were introduced to the character of Mephibosheth back in chapter 4, verse 4. Jonathan, the son of Saul, had a son who was crippled in his feet. He was five years old when the news about Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel, and his nurse took him up and fled, and as she fled in her haste, he fell and became lame, and his name was Mephibosheth.

Now his thread in the narrative is taken up again. In 1 Chronicles chapter 8, verse 32, and 9 verse 40, Mephibosheth's name is given as Meribael. It was likely changed in the text, much as his uncle's name was changed from Eshbael to Ishbosheth. In both cases, it was probably changed to avoid using the name Baal as part of an Israelite name. Although it wouldn't have been used with an idolatrous sense, the idolatrous connotations seem to have loomed much larger in later history. However, it should also be noted that both Ishbosheth and Mephibosheth include shame, as part of the meaning of their names. Ishbosheth means man of shame, and Mephibosheth, as Peter Lighthouse remarks, means one who scatters shame, or from the mouth of shame. Both men are associated with the aftermath of the fall of Saul and his sons at the Battle of Gilboa. Ishbosheth is Saul's remaining son, doomed to failure, and Mephibosheth is a young man stunted by a fall on the day of the news of his father and grandfather's death. Later in chapter 21, we read of other sons of Saul, who were presumably sons of others of Saul's wives or concubines, but not in line to rule.

As far as heirs of the dynasty go, Mephibosheth is it. We should see parallels here with the story of Eli and Ichabod back in 1 Samuel chapter 4, after the news of the loss of the Battle of Aphek.

There Eli fell, like Mephibosheth, and Ichabod's life was marked by the day of his father and grandfather's death in being called, the glory has departed. Mephibosheth bears the mark of the day of his father and grandfather's death, both in having a name implying the departure of glory, like his uncle Ishbosheth and Ichabod before them both, and in the lameness that resulted from his fall. In these regards, he also symbolises his father's house, and invites us to compare Saul's house with Eli's. Mephibosheth was five years old when he escaped after hearing the news of Saul's defeat. He would have been 12 or 13 when David became king of all Israel. David's summoning of Mephibosheth likely occurred at some point before he was 20. Mephibosheth is living in Lodibar, in the realm of Transjordanian Manasseh. His location, Lodibar, means nothing or no word, and it might suggest the very low profile that he was keeping. This is within the region where Saul's son Ishbosheth had established his kingdom, but it's not central to it. Mephibosheth, as the son of the former king, is a person who represents a threat, simply by virtue of who he is. Even though he himself is lame, and perhaps even disqualified from occupying the throne on that account, he could bear legitimate heirs to the Saulite dynasty. The destruction and extinction of the Saulite dynasty in death and barrenness has been the way that things have been moving for the past few chapters, and there is a fragile remnant left in Mephibosheth. At this point, David holds almost all of the power. If he wanted, it wouldn't be hard finally to extinguish Saul's house, never to have to worry about it rising up again. There are several such attempts to extinguish ruling households in scripture, so David would have had precedent. In the rebellion of Absalom a few chapters later in the narrative, we get a sense of the potential threat Mephibosheth could have represented, even if only as a defector who could grant legitimacy to an opponent of David. It might have been expedient for David not to kill Mephibosheth. Maintaining some peace with the remnants of Saul's loyalists would be a good way to maintain unity in Israel, but ideally he would want to ensure that Mephibosheth was kept very weak and kept under his sight. The fact that Mephibosheth has all of the land of Saul restored to him, and is presumably also given a wife so that he has a son called Micah, is an indication that David is not merely defanging and chaining Saul's remaining heir so that he can keep a potential enemy under his thumb. The fact that Saul's servant Zeba has 15 sons and 20 servants is an indication that he isn't a lowly servant, but a fairly powerful steward, with a number of wives, much property of his own, and a large household. That he will now serve

Mephibosheth as the heir of Saul might suggest the extent of the wealth and power that David restored to Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth is significant, not merely as a remnant of the house of Saul. He is far more significant as the son of Jonathan. David was concerned to keep his covenant with Jonathan, who was David's brother-in-law and closest friend, showing loving kindness to those remaining of his house. Jonathan had recognized that David was going to inherit the throne and completely supported and showed loyalty to David. Jonathan's father Saul also recognized that David would get the throne, but he tried to destroy David on that account. After Saul was judged by the Lord, the Lord has shown considerable mercy to him in bringing his appointed successor into his house as his son-in-law. Saul had the opportunity to support David as his successor and to be blessed on David's account, yet he fought against him instead. Jonathan, by contrast, had supported David. In the raising up of Mephibosheth, Jonathan's reception of the grace that God gave to Saul in his judgment upon him bears fruit. By joining David, Mephibosheth and others of Saul's house could be saved from the death and judgment of the house of Saul. David had been adopted into the household of

[10 : 35] Saul and had presented the opportunity of saving Saul's household. Here Mephibosheth enjoys a sort of adoption into David's house. He eats at the king's table, along with and like the king's sons.

The remnants of the house of Saul are faced with a choice in the posture that they will take towards the house of David. They can oppose it and suffer the Lord's judgment. Michael had formerly joined David, but then suffered judgment from the Lord for her despising of David, being cut off in barrenness.

Mephibosheth is raised up here, although he will later be tested at the time of Absalom's coup. Zeba will also be tested and he will fail as he takes advantage of his position when he sees the chance.

A question to consider. How might David's loving kindness towards Mephibosheth reflect the Lord's loving kindness towards him and illustrate the Lord's loving kindness towards us?