

### 2 Samuel 4:4 (NRSV)

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.

### 2 Samuel 9:1-13 (NRSV)

David asked, "Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul to whom I may show kindness for Jonathan's sake?"<sup>2</sup> 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!"<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup> 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."<sup>5</sup> Then King David sent and brought him from the house of Machir son of Ammiel, at Lo-debar.<sup>6</sup> 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."<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup> He did obeisance and said, "What is your servant, that you should look upon a dead dog such as I?"

<sup>9</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> Mephibosheth had a young son whose name was Mica. And all who lived in Ziba's house became Mephibosheth's servants.<sup>13</sup> Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, for he always ate at the king's table. Now he was lame in both his feet.

*Kindness. What do we really mean when we use this word? In today's story, we see loving kindness in action and it reminds us of the loving kindness God showered on us in the person of his son, Jesus Christ.*

### *Kind . . . not nice*

We need a little less niceness in the church. So often, Christians mistakenly reduce the Christian life to being "nice" – a word that seems to encompass nearly everything we think is "good" in our dealings with others. Even the word "kind" gets reduced to a synonym for "nice." But Scripture pushes us on this, urging us to a deeper consideration of how it is God hopes we will live with others.

I'm often asked, what is my favorite verse in the Bible. My usual reply is Micah 6:8:

"He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (NRSV).

We'd be making a big mistake if we thought the kindness spoken of by the prophet was no more than a version of being nice to others. "Kindness" translates the Hebrew *hesed*, commonly used in the Old Testament, but difficult to translate into English. For example,

the NIV translates it as “mercy,” the Good News as “love,” and Peterson uses two words, “compassionate” and “loyal,” in his paraphrase, *The Message*. *Hesed* captures notions of love, loyalty, and faithfulness . . . faithfulness to a person or a promise. Perhaps, *hesed* is best captured by “loving-faithfulness,” for *hesed* is one of the most common descriptions of God. God is loving and faithful to his people and to his promises – even when his people go chasing after other gods or no god at all.

Like last week’s story of David and Saul, we get a glimpse today of David’s loving and faithful heart as he remembers a covenant made with Jonathan long before.

### *A crushing exile*

Ahhh . . . to be born the grandson of a king. Little Mephibosheth (don’t you wonder if he had a nickname) was surely the darling of the entire royal household and all the people of Israel. You can bet that he was adored and doted upon.

Yet, the boy’s life soon took a tragic turn. At the age of five, his grandfather, Saul, and father, Jonathan, were killed in battle against Israel’s arch enemies, the Philistines. Fearing that the Philistines would march upon the palace, the royal household fled in panic. One of the nurses grabbed Mephibosheth but accidentally dropped the boy, permanently crippling him in both legs (2 Samuel 4:4). Though they made it away safely, things went from bad to worse, at least from the perspective of Saul’s family. David, whom Saul had tried to hunt down and kill, was made king over the tribe of Judah and eight years later was made king over all the tribes of Israel. He would have the power of life and death. Saul’s family was right to expect that they were as good as dead. That’s just how it was done; the ruthless of elimination of potential rivals was the accepted practice.

#### More on Kindness and Mercy

As noted in the main text, the TNIV/NIV translates *hesed* in Micah 6:8 as “mercy.” This is what God loves, what God expected from the Israelites and still from us. The prophet Micah lived 600 years before Jesus. Even then, God’s people were expected to grasp that God wanted mercy, not sacrifices.

Many Christians have a pretty difficult time with large swaths of the Old Testament. Much of it seems so focused upon sacrifice, blood, warfare, temples, priests and the rest. Such things are strange and foreign to us and can prevent us from seeing that, then and now, God has always been most interested in the state of people’s hearts. In the book of Job, it is Job’s heart that is at issue. “Love your neighbor” is from Leviticus. David was capable of tragic sin, yet he was “a man after God’s own heart.”

It isn’t that the practice of sacrifice, giving to God what is God’s, was unimportant. After all, Jesus was the sacrifice to end all sacrifice – it is the meaning of the lamb in our own Rose Window. Nonetheless, like the Pharisees who confronted Jesus, we mustn’t lose sight of the truth that it is mercy and humility and justice and love that God desires from us.

#### *At the king’s table*

As we saw a few weeks ago, Jonathan’s friendship with David was often pretty one-sided. Twice, Jonathan had pledged himself to David without reciprocation. The pledges were Jonathan’s freely-given gifts, though on the third occasion both men made a covenant, i.e., the pledges were mutual. Jonathan asked David, “If I die, never cut off your faithful love from my house, even if the Lord were to cut off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth.” And David promised to do just that; he would always look after Jonathan’s family.

Years later, David sought a way to keep his covenant with Jonathan and to show respect to Saul. David asked Ziba, a long-time servant in Saul’s household whether any of Saul’s family still lived, so that David could extend mercy and kindness toward them. David might be a busy king, but there is always time for kindness.

Ziba reveals to David that Jonathan’s son has survived and is living in the home of a man named Makir. By now, Jonathan’s son, Mephibosheth, is about twenty. Mephibosheth is old enough to know that to the king, at least to most kings, he is as good as a “dead dog.” David and Saul had fought for a long time and even though years have passed, any of Saul’s

heirs still pose a potential threat. So when he is summoned before the king, Mephibosheth expects that David plans on having him killed. That's just how it was done.

David, however, ensures the continuation of Saul's household by inviting Mephibosheth to eat at David's table, giving all of Saul's estate to him, and asking the young man to live in the royal palace. In so doing, David takes Mephibosheth in like a son.

#### *After the revolt*

In an ironic turn, it is not Saul's household that poses a threat to David's monarchy, but his own. David's son, Absalom, turns on his father after David refuses to take action when another of David's sons (Absalom's half-brother, Amnon) rapes Absalom's full sister, Tamar. Two years later, Absalom would kill Amnon himself and eventually lead an attempted coup d'état against his father. Indeed, David has to flee eastward from Jerusalem where he gathers together forces loyal to himself. As David flees the city, he runs into Ziba, Mephibosheth's servant (2 Samuel 16:1-4). When David asks about Mephibosheth, Ziba tells him that his master has stayed in Jerusalem, expecting that with David's departure, Mephibosheth will get back Saul's kingdom. Not surprisingly, given this word of betrayal, David gives to Ziba all that belongs to Mephibosheth.

David's army puts down the rebellion, though it is a hollow victory. Absalom is killed in battle after getting tangled in the branches of an oak tree. Later, David would weep for him, saying "Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Samuel 18:33).

Upon returning to Jerusalem to reclaim his throne, David encounters Mephibosheth (2 Samuel 19:24-30), who is unkempt and generally filthy. When David asks him why he did not flee Jerusalem with those who were loyal to David, Mephibosheth says he tried but couldn't because Ziba took off with the donkey, leaving the crippled man with no way to leave. Mephibosheth throws himself on David's mercy, reminding him that he had invited Mephibosheth to eat at David's table.

Evidently, Absalom's rebellion and death have taken a huge toll on David. He doesn't even try to sort out who is telling him the truth about Mephibosheth's role in the rebellion, Ziba or Mephibosheth. Instead, David simply divides the estate in two, giving half to each of them.

#### *Kindness, Mercy, and a Covenant Kept*

Like so many stories in Scripture, this simple story of David keeping a promise made to Jonathan helps us to understand that the larger biblical story is one of a promise kept, the gracious extension of extravagant kindness and mercy.

Just as David had promised to look after Jonathan's family, God had promised to rescue all of humanity through the descendants of Abraham, making a covenant with them, asking only that they love God and one another. Still, a millennia after David, the people of God knew that they weren't keeping their end of the covenant God had made with them – they didn't really do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. So the question was obvious: Would God's promises go forever unkept because of his peoples' failing. NO!! As the apostle Paul hammered home time and again, God *is* righteous and kept the promises he had made – through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.

Jesus was the way out of the covenant dilemma. Despite the unwillingness or inability of the Jews to live up to the covenant and to be the light to the world, God had provided the means of covenant-keeping. This means was Jesus, the one Jew who did truly love God and love neighbor without fail. Jesus' own faithfulness all the way to the cross revealed that God is not only the great promise maker, but the great promise keeper. In Christ, God's covenant people had been restored to a right relationship with God. They had been rescued, just as promised.

## The Deaths of Saul and Jonathan

After a long time on the run, David and his men seek refuge with Achish, the king of Gath, one of the Philistine city-states. David seems prepared to do battle alongside the Philistines and against Saul. However, the Philistine lords reject David's help, fearing that he is still loyal to the Israelites, Saul or no Saul.

The Philistines and the Israelites go on to fight a great battle at Mt. Gilboa, which is southeast of Nazareth. The Philistines rout the Israelites, killing Saul and three sons, including Jonathan, who has fought alongside his father.

By the time we get to Saul's death, all of Israel and even her neighbors knew that Saul's "competition" was David. The Amalekite who comes to David to tell him of Saul's death bears the dead king's crown and armlet, believing that he is bringing David good news. But the Amalekite is an opportunist and probably a liar. Certainly, much of the world would sympathize with the Amalekite. Saul's death clears the way for David to finally ascend to the throne for which God had anointed him long before. The Amalekite expects a reward for eliminating David's political opponent, he is killed.

The Amalekite understood neither God nor David. Though Saul, as his madness overwhelmed him, had repeatedly tried to hunt down and kill David, he had spared Saul's life, not once but twice. In Saul's son, Jonathan, David had found a friend to whom his soul was bound (see 1 Samuel 18). David would always acknowledge that Saul was God's anointed.

### *Grief and commitment*

The Amalekite had expected a celebration from David, but instead David responds in unreserved and sincere grief – tearing his clothes, weeping, and fasting. David grieves for himself, for Jonathan, and all of Israel. Things may have been headed this way for a long time, but the death of God's anointed is only an occasion for grief. Yes, good things will come of David's ascension to the throne, but Saul's story is still a tragedy, and David is right in the middle of it.

David's friendship toward Saul would continue after Saul's death. Though Saul's son, Ishbaal, tried to keep the throne of Israel in Saul's family, David would not allow Ishbaal to be humiliated after he was assassinated in his own home. Still later, David would look after Saul's grandson, Mephibosheth.

I wouldn't hazard a guess about the feelings David had toward Saul. Perhaps, David could remember the good beginning of their relationship even as everything came apart. But it isn't really about David's feelings. We see in David a friendship toward Saul and his family that is grounded in grace, in grace-filled deeds, a reflection of David's gracious God.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might look back over today's scripture and my concise retelling of the larger story. Here are some questions to ask yourself: What do these stories reveal to me about God? About humankind? What do they reveal about God's work in this world? About our own relationship with God and one another? This is not so much a process of looking for the "moral to the story" as it is learning to see these stories through the lens of a Christian worldview. For example, when you read about Mephibosheth's eating at the king's table, did it bring to mind Jesus' own desire to share a table with all the wrong sorts of people? How about Mephibosheth the refugee and Jesus' parable of the prodigal son? It isn't that we look for Jesus under every rock in the OT, but it *is* understanding that the God who made a covenant with David is the same God who made a covenant with you and me and who is fully revealed in Jesus Christ.
2. *Hesed* is translated as both "kindness" and "mercy." What does the word "mercy" convey to you? Do you usually think of it as a word dealing with matters of punishment? The Bible uses the word in a very broad sense, which we see in the various translations. To be merciful is to be kind and caring, to extend to others compassion and understanding that we hope would be extended to us. We live in a world that often seems so uncaring and unkind. Why is kindness and mercy so difficult for so many people? I once saw the movie *Crash*. It is a movie about anger, people living so close to the edge of utter rage that they easily slide into violence and pain. Watching it, I couldn't escape the sense that these people so badly needed God. They so needed to extend a little grace and mercy to each other. Why don't we always make time for mercy?

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. In this week's readings, we'll begin reading through the books of 1 and 2 Samuel and even into 1 Kings as we go through the entire David narrative.

<p><b>Monday, 2 Samuel 7</b> This is an important biblical chapter. God makes a promise to David that someone from his family will always sit on the throne of Israel.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, 2 Samuel 8</b> Stories of David's wars.</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, 2 Samuel 9</b> David's kindness to Mephibosheth.</p>	<p><b>Thursday, 2 Samuel 10</b> David defeats the Ammonites and Arameans.</p>
<p><b>Friday, 2 Samuel 11</b> The shocking and inexplicable happens. The story of David and Bathsheba.</p>	<p><b>Saturday, 2 Samuel 12</b> David's punishment for his taking of Bathsheba and the murder of her husband. Also, the conclusion of the Ammonite war.</p>

