

2 Samuel 9:1-13 (CEB)

David asked, “Is there anyone from Saul’s family still alive that I could show faithful love for Jonathan’s sake?”<sup>2</sup> There was a servant from Saul’s household named Ziba, and he was summoned before David.

“Are you Ziba?” the king asked him.

“At your service!” he answered.

<sup>3</sup> The king asked, “Is there anyone left from Saul’s family that I could show God’s kindness to?”

“Yes,” Ziba said to the king, “one of Jonathan’s sons, whose feet are crippled.”

<sup>4</sup> “Where is he?” the king asked.

“He is at the house of Ammiel’s son Machir at Lo-debar,” Ziba told the king.

<sup>5</sup> So King David had him brought from the house of Ammiel’s son Machir at Lo-debar. <sup>6</sup> Mephibosheth, Jonathan’s son and Saul’s grandson, came to David, and he fell to the ground, bowing low out of respect.

“Mephibosheth?” David said.

“Yes,” he replied. “I am at your service!”

<sup>7</sup> “Don’t be afraid,” David told him, “because I will certainly show you faithful love for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the fields of your grandfather Saul, and you will eat at my table always.”

<sup>8</sup> Mephibosheth bowed low out of respect and said, “Who am I, your servant, that you should care about a dead dog like me?”

<sup>9</sup> Then David summoned Saul’s servant Ziba and said to him, “I have given your master’s grandson everything belonging to Saul and his family. <sup>10</sup> You will work the land for him—you, your sons, and your servants—and you will bring food into your master’s house for them to eat. But Mephibosheth, your master’s grandson, will always be at my table.” (Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants.)

<sup>11</sup> Then Ziba said to the king, “Your servant will do whatever my master the king commands.”

So Mephibosheth ate at David’s table, like one of the king’s own sons.

<sup>12</sup> Mephibosheth had a young son named Mica. All who lived in Ziba’s household became Mephibosheth’s servants. <sup>13</sup> Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, because he always ate at the king’s table. He was crippled in both feet.

*Despite expectations and customs, David will be faithful to long-dead Jonathan by inviting his son to the king’s table.*

While I was in college, I worked in Wyoming a couple of summers collecting samples of underground water for use in uranium exploration. One Sunday, while I was visiting the home office in Denver, I attended Sunday morning services at a large Episcopal Cathedral. I vividly remember the inner-city boys choir that sang a haunting version of “Let us Break Bread Together.” When they finished, there weren’t many dry eyes as we all came forward to receive Holy Communion. It was the “together” that got to me, that all of us were called by

God to the table, his table. I was only eighteen at the time, so what did I really know about the world. But, looking back, that morning was the beginning of a long and meandering education at Jesus' feet.

I know of no story in all of Scripture that better illustrates "coming to the table" and faithfulness better than that of the mighty King David and a frightened, crippled young man named Mephibosheth.

#### *A bit of background*

About a thousand years before Jesus, God's prophet Samuel anointed Saul as the first king of the united tribes of Israel, who quickly proved to be a disappointment. He was disobedient to God and given to making rash decisions. Once, Saul was even ready to kill his own son, Jonathan, for breaking one of Saul's battle orders. Only the intervention of the soldiers saved Jonathan's life. After Saul disobeyed God a second time, we are told that "The LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel" (1 Samuel 15:35). God told his prophet Samuel to anoint a young shepherd named David as the next king of Israel. Not knowing that God had chosen David to be his successor, Saul welcomed David into the royal court as a musician. But after David defeated the Philistine giant, Goliath, the mentally and spiritually deteriorating Saul began to suspect that David might be the one to whom God had given Saul's kingdom. And Saul turned against David.

Jonathan, Saul's son, first met David soon after David's victory over Goliath and the Philistines. Like so many others during David's long life, Jonathan must have been drawn to the charismatic young man. We are told that Jonathan's soul was bound to David's. Jonathan loved David as he loved himself. Jonathan made a covenant with David, even handing over his royal robe and sword. It is important for us to see that Jonathan offered all this to David without even a hint of reciprocity or reward. Jonathan's covenantal friendship was a gift freely given. Indeed, this pretty much characterized their relationship. Twice more, Jonathan would make a covenant with David and only on the third occasion are we explicitly told that the covenant was made mutually. It is this mutual covenant that is the focus of Mephibosheth's story.

#### *A crushing exile*

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 quickly 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, for that was the way the ancient world worked in the royal palaces: death to all potential rivals.

### *At the king's table*

Jonathan's friendship with David had often been pretty one-sided. Twice, Jonathan had pledged himself to David without reciprocation. The pledges were Jonathan's freely-given gifts. But on the third occasion, both men had made a covenant, the pledges had been mutual.

After David defeated Israel's enemies and conquered Jerusalem, he sought a way to keep his covenant with Jonathan and to show respect to Saul. So David asks 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 should always time for mercy.

Ziba reveals to David that Jonathan's son has survived and is living in the home of Makir. By now, Mephibosheth is about twenty.<sup>1</sup> Mephibosheth is old enough to know that to the king, at least to most kings, he is as good as a "dead dog" (2 Samuel 9:8). So, when he is summoned before the king, Mephibosheth perhaps expects that David plans on getting rid of all potential opposition, as was customary with many rulers then and now. 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 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 he 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

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<sup>1</sup>Putting together a chronology is a little difficult, but at least ten years had passed and probably more. Time did not diminish David's desire to be faithful to his covenant.

role in the rebellion, Ziba or Mephibosheth. Instead, David simply divides the estate in two, giving half to each of them.

The story of Mephibosheth at David's table is a story about *covenantal faithfulness*. God made a covenant with his people and would be faithful to it, even if the people would not. David made a covenant with Jonathan and would be faithful to it even after Jonathan's death. It is also a story of *return from exile*, one of the Israelites' favorite stories. It is the story of the Jews' exile in Babylon and their own hoped-for return from exile. It is the story told by Jesus about a father and a prodigal son. It is a story of grace and kindness, as Bruce Birch drives home:

Seen in the light of the hopeful meaning this episode may have held for exiles, a seemingly odd episode of David's loyalty and kindness becomes a testimony to divine loyalty and kindness. We read as those who constantly find ourselves cut off from our full future—existing as remnants with little hope for fullness of life except for the *hesed* of God, a divine sovereign who restores us to wholeness and invites us to sit at table.

Medieval and Renaissance Christian artists sometimes pictured David and Mephibosheth in the paintings, stained-glass windows, and sculptures they produced. Often when they did, the food they depicted on the king's table was the bread and the cup of the eucharistic meal. David's kindness was understood as God's kindness (v. 3), and the king's table to which we are all invited is ultimately God's table.<sup>2</sup>

#### A final look at the Book of Samuel

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel are actually one long literary work. Ancient Hebrew scrolls couldn't hold the entire book of Samuel, so the book was copied onto two scrolls. This is true of the book of Kings and the book of Chronicles as well. However, it is not true of New Testament books such as 1 & 2 Corinthians or 1 & 2 Thessalonians which are all different letters written by the apostle Paul.

The book of Samuel tells the story of Israel's transition from the rule of judges to a monarchy roughly 1,000 years before Jesus. During the time of the judges, the Israelites were organized into a loose confederation of the twelve tribes. Though God was to be the king of the Israelites, the people demanded a human king like everyone else had. Samuel warned the people that they didn't understand the consequences of their demand for a king, but the people would not relent and God let them have a king. The first was Saul. Under Saul, and then David, and then Solomon the twelve tribes were organized into a monarchy with centralized wealth and military power.

Not only do kings emerge in Israel during this time, but also prophets. Israel's kings would not have the absolute freedom typical of kings in the ancient near east. Instead, the kings of Israel were subject to God and to the covenant. Israel's prophets would hold the kings (and the people!) to account. The prophet Samuel brought God's word to King Saul. Nathan did the same for David.

## Scott Engle's Bible Classes

### Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Judges*

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce C. Birch, "The First and Second Books of Samuel," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), 1276.

This class will continue our study of the book of Judges.

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class**

Current study: *Acts*

This class will continue with our study of the book of Acts.

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com). They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

### **Scott's Sunday Class**

This week: Continuing *The Old Testament in Seven Sentences*

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

**Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel.** Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.