

2 Samuel 9; 16.1-4; 19.25-33

'The King and the Cripple'

The stuff of Good movies

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel are great books.

They are full of the sort of stuff that makes great movies.

Full of kings and queens.

Adventurers.

Prophets.

Adulterers.

There is sex.

Incest.

Intrigue.

Murder and mayhem.

They are the sorts of books that never let up in their excitement.

They never let up in their analysis of human character.

And the part of Samuel that we are going to look over these next three days is called the succession narrative.

It is regarded as one of the grand pieces of narrative literature in the Bible.

Recalling the past

However, because some of you won't know exactly where we are in the Bible, we need to put it in some context.

So, the first thing I need to do is show you where we have been so far in the Bible

The Bible starts of with God creating the world.

He then creates humans in the world.

Humans disobey God and are therefore banned from his presence.

In Genesis 12 God chooses one man and his descendants as his special people.

They will be the means by which he will bring the world back to himself.

This man is Abraham.

And his descendants are the people of Israel.

And most of you will know the story of the people of Israel in the early part of the Bible.

They are enslaved in Egypt.

God rescues them from Egypt.

They end up in the promised land.

And in the early stages of their life in the promised land they are under the rule of judges.

The book of Judges is followed by the book of Ruth and the two books of Samuel.

The books of Samuel introduce us the whole idea of kingship in Israel.

The first book of Samuel tells us that the Israelites are not especially keen on the system of judges.

The surrounding nations are becoming increasingly powerful.

And the Israelites think that kingship would be a good system for countering them.

And so in 1 Samuel 8 they ask God for a King.

In the same chapter we hear that God is not that impressed by their request.

In essence it amounts to a rejection of him as king.

But he grants their request anyway.

Israel is given a king.

Their first king is Saul.

Now Saul is an odd mixture of a man.
Sometimes he looks like an old fashioned Judge.
At other times he operates like a King.
But his kingship is not really a huge success.
Saul disobeys God.
And God rejects him as king.
He points out to Samuel a young shepherd called David.
David is anointed in secret as the future king of all Israel.
And the rest of the book of 1 Samuel tells of how he becomes king.
2 Samuel begins with the death of Saul and with a civil war between the house of Saul and the house of David.
But by chapter 5, David is established as King over all Israel.
He secures his kingdom by setting up headquarters in the city of Jerusalem and by bringing the Ark of the covenant into the city.
All this is ratified by God in chapter 7.
For in chapter 7 God tells David that his dynasty will be the one that will be blessed by him.
In chapter 8 we are given a summary of David's wars and his officials.
And then in chapter 9 we begin a story that runs almost uninterrupted through to 1 Kings 2.
It is a story set in David's court.
It tells of palace scandal and intrigue.
Of the fight for the succession of David's throne.
It is these chapters that we are going to talk about in these next three days.
As I said, these chapters are among the most exciting chapters in the Old Testament.

And the way I want to start today is by looking at three passages that I think belong together.

They are three passages that occur at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of this long story.

These three passages talk about the same three people.

And each passage gives us a snapshot.

The first snapshot is in 2 Sam 9.

The second is in 2 Sam 16.1-4

The third is in 2 Sam 19.25-31.

An overview of the rest of 2 Samuel

But before we get underway, let me just give you an overview of the story.

You might like to have your Bible open and follow it with me as I give you an overview.

In 2 Samuel 9 David is a secure king.

In 2 Samuel 11 he sees a beautiful woman bathing outside his palace.

He like the look of her and kills and murders her husband to get her for himself.

As a result, he loses the first son who is born to him and Bathsheba.

In chapter 13 David's firstborn son, Amnon, commits incest with his stepsister, Tamar.

In the second half of chapter 13, we meet Absalom, the brother of Tamar and the second born son of David.

He murders Amnon in revenge for his sister's rape.

In chapter 15 he throws his father off the throne and wages war against his father.

In chapter 18 David wins the war.

His son Absalom is killed off by David's general.

David then returns to Jerusalem in chapter 19.

A test of covenant loyalty

Introducing the players

Having given you an overview, let me introduce you to the three major figures of our passages for tonight.

Each of these figures occurs in each of the passages.

Firstly there is David.

Then there is a man called Mephibosheth.

And finally there is Ziba, the servant of Mephibosheth.

Snapshot 1 (2 Samuel 9)

Okay, we've done all the groundwork that we need to do.

Let's now turn to chapter 9.

Now I want you to remember the background to this chapter.

All is well with the David of 2 Samuel 9.

He is in a position of strength.

He has the throne.

He has a capital city.

He has the blessing of God.

He can afford to be generous.

And as he thinks back he remembers Jonathan.

Jonathan was Saul's son.

Jonathan was David's best friend.

He was a friend that had been closer than a brother.

A friend with whom he had made a covenant.

The words still echo in his mind from the day that they faced each other after Jonathan had saved his life.

'May the Lord be with you David.

If I survive then make sure that you show me the kindness of the Lord so that I won't have to die.

And don't cut off your kindness from my family either.

When the Lord cuts off all your enemies from the face of the earth,

Don't let the name of Jonathan be cut off from the family of David.'

But Jonathan is no longer around.

Jonathan is dead.

A victim of the same battle his father died in.

So, look at what Jonathan asks in verse 1.

"Is there anyone left of Saul's family that I might show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?"

I want you to notice something about the words he uses.

Especially note the use of the word 'kindness'.

This word is a Hebrew word that is very difficult to translate into English.

Our English versions use a multitude of English words or phrases.

It is a word that is often used of God.

And it means spontaneous, generous, unobligated, outgoing, love.

David uses it three times in this chapter.

He remembers the covenant with Jonathan.

And he yearns to show spontaneous, generous love to someone for Jonathan's sake.

And this is where Ziba comes in.

In verse 2 we are told that Ziba is the servant of Saul.

David's courtiers summon him into the king.

David speaks a complete sentence to him,

“Are you Ziba?”

The curt reply comes back,

“Your servant”

Now, I want you to notice something.

This man is in the presence of a king.

But he does not bow,

He does not engage in ceremony.

And now, I want you to notice the contrast between this meeting and that with his master Mephibosheth.

Verse 3 tells us that Jonathan is the remaining son of Jonathan.

It also tells us that he is crippled in both feet.

In verse 5 the king has him brought to the court.

The scene is powerful as it is painted in verse 6.

For where Ziba did not bow, this cripple bows to the ground,

David does not give him the full sentence Ziba received,

“Mephibosheth?”

The courteous reply comes back,

“Your servant”

In the ancient world, new kings very often slaughtered the descendants of previous kings.

Perhaps Mephibosheth is afraid.

David urges him not to fear in verse 7.

Instead of death, David promises kindness for the sake of Jonathan.

And his kindness expresses itself concretely.

All the land that belonged to Saul will be restored to him.

And he will be given a place of honour at David's court.

Mephibosheth is overwhelmed.

Again he bows.

He is amazed at the King's generosity.

"What is your servant that you should notice a dead dog such as me?"

In verse 9 we return to Ziba.

David instructs him to oversee Mephibosheth's land.

Ziba agrees with multiple references to serving and being a servant.

And we find ourselves asking.

Does it meet his actions?

Is he just saying it?

Is he really going to be a good servant or not?

Well, the next two stories will answer out questions.

Let's now turn to our second snapshot in 2 Samuel 16.

Snapshot 2 (2 Samuel 16.1-4)

A long time has passed since the first story.

Times have changed.

David is no longer secure.

He is in flight.

His son has made a bid for the throne.

Absalom has taken the place of his father as King.

He has caused him to flee from his capital, Jerusalem.

And so we find David.

Climbing up the Mount of Olives.

Down and Depressed.

His chief advisor has defected.

His son has betrayed him.

And with this behind him, he reaches the summit.

And who should turn up in verse 1 but Ziba.

And a Ziba who is not alone.

He is bearing gifts.

A man who comes with donkeys carrying a heavy load.

David asks about their load.

Look at Ziba's answer in verse 2.

It is well structured.

There are 3 well ordered sentences.

Each names a part of the load and then names who it is intended for/

Donkeys - for the King's household or court.

Bread and summer fruit - for soldiers.

Wine - for those who become fatigued in the desert.

Imagine David at this moment.

He is weary,

Depressed,

Desperate for some sort of encouragement.

This is just what the doctor ordered, isn't it?

It would have encouraged him no end.

But there are some unanswered questions upon his mind.

And so he asks the servant...

"And where is your master's grandson?"

In other words, 'What is his position on all of this?'

In verse 3 Ziba replies....

"He's still in Jerusalem."

And then he explains.

He makes sure that David understands what is being said,

"He is saying in Jerusalem because he thinks that the house of Israel will give me back my grandfather's kingdom"

Look what David does in verse 4.

He is grateful for the food and support.

He is swayed by it.

He believes Ziba.

And he rewards the man.

All the land of Mephibosheth is now to go to Ziba.

It will be his reward.

And Ziba who didn't bow in chapter 9 finally bows.

And well he might.

He has just become a big and wealthy landowner.

And all for the price of a couple of donkeys laden with food.

Snapshot 3: (2 Samuel 19.25-31)

But let's move on to our third snapshot.

Again, time passes.

The tide of the battle turns.

Absalom, the king's son, is defeated and killed.

And we come across Ziba again in 19.17.

Surrounded by a large number of Benjaminites led by a man named Shimei.

Shimei, who had deeply insulted David.

Shimei, who is now trying his hardest to save his neck.

And Ziba is with them.

Not exactly good company.

And then Mephibosheth appears in verse 24.

David questions him.

And he claim that he is innocent and has been betrayed by Ziba.

David is a man faced with a difficult decision.

Before him are two men with contradictory stories.

Now, I want you to stop for a moment and put yourself in David's shoes.

If you were David, what would you do?

Now, before you make a decision, let's see if there is any more information to help us.

And there is.

Look again at verse 24.

The narrator lets us behind the scenes.

He tells us what the cripple did while David was in exile.

He mourned.

He went around barefooted—a sign of mourning.

He didn't trim his beard.

And he didn't wash his clothes.

Each of these things are visible things.

Mephibosheth responded rightly to David's kindness.

The narrator is clearly letting us know that we can have full confidence in this man.

He wants us to know that what this cripple says is the truth.

But he also wants us to know that this is a tricky situation.

Will he be able to convince David of his loyalty?

Will David believe him?

Look at the text again in verse 25.

“Why?” says David.

“Why didn’t you go with me, Mephibosheth?”

In other words,

“Why didn’t you return the kindness I offered you?”

David is not pleased.

He is uptight.

The cripple gives a long speech in reply.

In the original language he uses a play on words.

He claims that what Ziba did was to ‘trip up’ a lame man.

He slandered his master.

And then Mephibosheth throws himself at David’s mercy.

He again throws himself on the kindness of the king.

He dares to put himself completely in the hands of his ruler.

It’s a tight spot for the cripple.

He can’t prove his innocence.

All he can do is turn to the highest authority for help.

And so we have it.

Three snapshots of three men.

Who is the real cripple?

I want you to think on this story.

I want you to evaluate each of these men.

Ziba – David – Mephibosheth.

Firstly, let's think about Ziba.

Ziba is introduced to us as the servant of Saul.

That undoubtedly means that he has seen David in action before.

And David has shown himself to be a winner.

He is a skilled warrior and a shrewd general.

And when he goes out into the wilderness he is in his own element.

My guess is that Ziba anticipates that David will be the ultimate winner over his arrogant and unskilled young son.

And in chapter 16 he lays bets on it.

He is in control of Mephibosheth's household and he takes from it and brings it to David.

Now he may not have predicted that he would get all of Mephibosheth's property.

But he knew that he would not go unrewarded.

But the important thing to note is his motive.

It was not loyalty.

It was not kindness.

It cannot be, for his actions occur at his master's expense.

His motive is self interest.

He responds to David in a material way.

He gives material needs.

And in return he hopes for material profit.

Now let's think about David.

Let's imagine ourselves in his shoes.

Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin.

David had taken his place as King.

Bitterness ran pretty high in the tribe of Benjamin against David.

Mephibosheth was the grandson of Saul.

Chapter 9 told us that Mephibosheth had a son.

This son was no cripple.

What might be going on in David's mind?

Perhaps the tribe of Benjamin is behind all this

Perhaps Ziba was right

Perhaps they are just waiting to get their own back and place one of Saul's children on the throne again

So when David is climbing the Mount of Olives

When he is feeling down and depressed

And when he is told that Mephibosheth has pretensions for putting a descendant of Saul back on the throne it appears a real possibility.

It seems quite plausible.

However, it is not probable.

And David should have known it.

The rebellion had not come from Benjamin.

It had come from David's own popular and proud son.

And there was no way that Absalom would put in such an effort to put a descendant of Saul on the throne.

But David is not in a good frame of mind.

He is in a hurry.

And so he believes Ziba.

He doesn't make a legal decision.

He doesn't call in witnesses.

He doesn't listen to the other side.

The unexpected and unobligated kindness he formerly showed is overthrown with harshness and injustice.

And he makes a rash decision.

And in chapter 19 it catches up with him.

It looks him straight in the eye.

And he is annoyed.

He is curt to Mephibosheth.

He shows no elegance.

No courtesy.

No rewarding of the cripple's devotion.

Listen to him in verse 29:

Why say more?

I order you and Ziba to divide the fields.

It is a painful scene.

David will divide the property 50:50.

Now let me just make an aside here.

You see, I think that the story is clear.

On the one hand - Ziba has been revealed as a slanderer.

But on the other hand - His food was a real help.

Understandably David wanted to reward the servant.

But splitting the land 50-50 is no way to do it.

You see, splitting the land 50-50 means a complete turnabout for David.

It means going back of a previous decision.

It means admitting he had been unfair.

It means admitting that he no longer believes Ziba about Mephibosheth.

David is a divided man.

And he translates these divided feelings into a divided decision.

But in doing so David makes what I believe to be a terrible mistake.

He sets up some scales.

On the one side he puts the immaterial loyalty of Mephibosheth.

On the other he puts the material support of Ziba.

But in doing so he has really put deception on the same level as loyalty.

He refuses to answer loyalty with loyalty.

He refuses to answer loyalty with kindness and Godly love.

And he refuses to confess his previous mistake.

His words show it.

He is fearful of admitting his mistakes.

He is fearful of showing his failings.

He is fearful of being honest.

And he is fearful of losing face.

And so his decision is not that of a brave man.

It is a cowardly decision.

And David feels ill at ease with it.

But now let's have a look at Mephibosheth.

The last word is his.

Listen to it in verse 30,

“Let him take everything, now that my lord the king has arrived home safely.”

In the tension of the past weeks these are probably the most intimate and devoted words David has heard.

Mephibosheth is still loyal.

The safe return of the King is everything to this cripple.

The property is nothing.

Ziba can keep it.

This is a potent scene, isn't it.

The one physically lame is the one morally and spiritually sound.

What a contrast with the corruption of Ziba.

And what a contrast with David's crippled judgment.

Ziba, attached to material gain.

David, bound by frustration and fear.

And Mephibosheth who has risen above these things.

A man of principle.

A man of devotion.

A man of God.

I'm going to wrap up the story of these three men by telling you a story that is briefly recounted in 2 Samuel 4:4.

It is a dark day.

A five year old child lies asleep.

He is a healthy child.

An heir to the throne but a child under threat.

His father has been killed.

His grandfather has suicided.

He is the heir apparent.

His nurse fears for his life.

She takes him.

She holds him.

Together they run.

Running to save the child's life.

He falls.

He lies in a crumpled heap.

A cripple.

Lame for the rest of his life.

And his name is Mephibosheth.

Sentenced to misery for life.

Sentenced to pain.

Sentenced to loss of movement, loss of freedom.

Yet despite it all Mephibosheth enters the fight of life.

He becomes a true man.

His suffering purifies him.

His suffering brings about in him that quality of life used to describe the character of God.

Suffering produces loyalty, kindness, faithfulness, lovingkindness, loyal love.

And while the healthy Ziba is corrupt.

And the healthy David is weak kneed.

The cripple Mephibosheth is like God.

Mephiboseth is the real man.

The person like God.

A larger biblical perspective

Well, this is a wonderful story, isn't it?

But we need to do some larger theological reflecting if we are to see its significance.

So, let's start with the book of Samuel.

You see, this story has been deliberately included in the books of Samuel.

And it has been deliberately included because it fits with a common theme.

You see, the writer of Samuel loves the poor, the needy, and the weak.

His heroes are the unexpected heroes.

Just think about it for a moment.

He starts his book with Hannah, a woman who can't bear children.

She turns to God dependently in prayer and he wonderfully gives her a child ... Samuel.

In chapter 3 of 1 Samuel he talks about how the nation of Israel is spiritually impoverished because the word of the Lord is rare.

But the Lord meets their need.

He takes a small child and gives him the word of the Lord.

And all Israel benefits because of Samuel's prophetic gifts.

Then the Ark of the covenant is taken in war by the Philistines.

Israel is weak and decimated.

And God wages war on the Philistines.

He humiliates and defeats them without their lifting a hand.

Later, the Philistines are on the warpath again in chapter 14.

Jonathan and his armour bearer are alone.

Jonathan wonders if the Lord will bring them deliverance.

He tells his armour bearer that nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few.

And they win a marvellous and spectacular victory against incredible odds.

And then God chooses David to be king.

We are told in the text that he is the most unexpected choice.

He is the smallest and the youngest.

A mere shepherd boy.

And I could show you case after case in this book.

But we need to ask why this is.

Why does the writer of Samuel love these people and these situations?

Well, the answer is that God loves them.

Hannah tells us this in her song in chapter 2 of 1 Samuel.

Because God loves them.

God loves raising the poor from the dust.

He loves lifting the needy from the ash heap.

God can work with people like this.

He loves accomplishing his purposes through the unexpected.

And we know this from a larger biblical perspective, don't we?

After all, what can be more unexpected than saving the world through a beaten man hanging humiliated on a cross outside Jerusalem.

Friends, God does not think as we think.

We are deeply afflicted with the world aren't we?

We look at status.

We look at attractiveness.

We look at outward show.

We look at success and ability. _____

And we measure and gauge people accordingly.

But not God.

God looks inside to the things that last.

And on the last day the prizes go to the people who are like his Son on the inside.

The prizes don't go to the Nobel prize winners.

Nor do they go to the Olympic gold medalists.

Nor to the victors from the AFL or the World Cup or the Tour de France.

Nor to the models on the front cover of Vogue.

No, the medals go to the poor, the lame, the crippled, the slow, the dependent.

The ones who have learnt to call out to God for help.

The ones who are like God.

This is the very first step in thinking about Christian ministry.

The very first step is a determination to be like God.

Are you willing to make this step?

Well, if you are, then I want to urge you to think very seriously about what lies at the heart of God.

You see, the story that we have looked at today is part of a story that begins with creation in Genesis 1.

It is a story that ends with a new creation in Revelation 22.

And the centre of that story is a man on a cross.

It is the story of an act of unparalleled, unmatched, overwhelming love.

It is the story of a man dying for the sins of humanity.

Jesus dying in your place and my place.

Jesus dying for me and for you.

Friends, this is where God is going in his world.

Our God is an evangelist God. _____

He is a God who seeks to save the lost.

This lies at the centre of his being.

This is what he is like and this is what he is doing.

And over this weekend we seriously want to challenge you to be part of this great purpose of God.

We want you to line up with it.

We want you to give your lives for it.

Now if you choose to do this, you are choosing to be like God.

But if you do, you need to be like Hannah.

Like Mephibosheth.

Like David when he is at his weakest.

For then he is at his most dependent.

And this is when God can be God.

Let me close with Paul's reflections on his ministry in 2 Corinthians 4:7-5:17

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. ¹² So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

¹³ It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, ¹⁴ because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. ¹⁵ All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

¹⁶ Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

¹⁶ So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (NIV)