**Jonathan, David and Mephibosheth**

Our Old Testament reading in 2 Samuel 8 & 9 recounts the establishment of David’s kingdom, following the slaughter of king Saul by the Philistines. Once a system of defence and administration had been implemented, David sought to make good a covenant that he made with Jonathan Saul’s son:

“And David said, Is there yet any that is left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan’ sake?” (2 Sam. 9:1).

In the events that followed, one of Saul’s servants, Ziba, brought the king’s attention to Mephibosheth, Jonathan’s surviving son. For the basis of our exhortation today, we propose to examine the circumstances surrounding Mephibosheth – and the story really begins with the unique relationship between Jonathan and David. As we considered in a recent exhortation, following the shepherd boy’s defeat of Goliath the Philistine giant, Jonathan as a mighty warrior in his own right, found a kindred spirit with David: “the soul of Jonathan ***was knit*** with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul” (1 Sam. 18:1). This is the true love that should exist between those of like precious faith: “… that their hearts might be comforted, ***being knit together*** in love …” (Col. 2:2). Seeing his father’s persecution of David, Jonathan strengthened the future king’s hand in the Lord (1 Sam. 23:16), and recognised his own subservient position before him. Giving his royal robes to David (1 Sam. 18:4), he demonstrated that it was David who would succeed Saul, and not himself (1 Sam. 23:17). Again, this is the spirit of true brethren of Christ: “be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another” (Rom. 12:10).

Jonathan rebuked his father, saying:

“Let not the king sin against his servant, against David; because he hath not sinned against thee, and because his works have been to thee-ward very good: For he put his life in his hand, and slew the Philistine, and Yahweh wrought a great salvation for all Israel: thou sawest it, and didst rejoice: wherefore then wilt thou ***sin against innocent blood,*** to slay David without a cause?” (1 Sam. 19:4-5).

Through David, Yahweh brought about “a great salvation for all Israel”, yet those in authority sought his destruction – and so would have sinned “against innocent blood”. In these matters, we have a foreshadowing of the Lord Jesus Christ, the captain of our Salvation. Judas the betrayer “persecuted the poor and needy man” (Psa. 109:16), yet recognised Messiah’s innocence once he had done the deed: “Saying, I have ***sinned*** in that I have betrayed ***the innocent blood*** … and he cast down the pieces of silver, and departed, and went and hanged himself” (Mat. 27:4).

Saul also slew himself, but in different circumstances. The Purpose of Yahweh with Saul was “that he may save my people out of the hand of the Philistines” (1 Sam. 9:16), yet instead the Philistines overcame him - to the extent that he fell upon his own sword. So it was that, as Yahweh said later: “I gave thee a king in mine anger, and took him away in my wrath” (Hos. 13:11). Both Saul and three of his sons were killed by the hand of the Philistines, including David’s beloved friend, Jonathan, who remained loyal to his father until the end.

As a consequence of Saul’s failure, Mephibosheth his Grandson was crippled:

“Jonathan, Saul’s son, had a son that was lame of his feet. He was five years old when the tidings came of Saul and Jonathan out of Jezreel, and his nurse took him up and fled: and it came to pass, as she made haste to flee, that he fell and became lame. And his name was Mephibosheth” (2 Sam. 4:4)

When news of his grandfather’s demise reached the ears of his nurse, she fled to a place of safety, but in her haste, she dropped Mephibosheth, and when he fell, he was injured and became crippled as a result. It would appear that he was taken in by the household of Machir, (2 Sam. 9:4), who evidently cared for him after the death of Jonathan. But this chapter also describes how because of his covenant and relationship with Jonathan, king David gave him an exalted place in the kingdom, eating at the king’s own table:

“David said unto him, Fear not: for I will surely show thee kindness for Jonathan thy father’s sake, and will restore thee all the land of Saul thy father; and thou shalt eat bread at my table continually” (2 Sam. 9:7, 13, see also verse 1).

Before Mephibosheth was even born, Jonathan had made a covenant with David:

“And thou shalt not only while yet I live shew me the kindness of Yahweh, that I die not: but also ***thou shalt not cut off thy kindness from my house for ever:*** no, not when Yahweh hath cut off the enemies of David every one from the face of the earth. So Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, Let Yahweh require it at the hand of David’s enemies. And Jonathan caused David to swear again, ***because he loved him:*** for he loved him as he loved his own soul” (1 Sam. 20:14-17).

So it was, that through Saul’s lack of faith, Mephibosheth became a cripple, but through Jonathan’s love for his successor, he would be blessed by David.

It would appear that Mephibosheth had a wife at some point that we are not told anything about. We read that “Mephibosheth had a young son, whose name was Micha” (2 Sam. 9:12), which shows that he had a small family. But be that as it may, he was granted favour of the king, because of the covenant made with Jonathan: “so Mephibosheth dwelt in Jerusalem: for he did eat continually at the king’s table; and was lame on both his feet” (2 Sam. 9:13).

The Master seems to allude back to this position, in his parable:

“When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompense be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, ***the maimed, the lame,*** the blind: and thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just” (Lu. 14:12-14).

King David carried out the spirit of this, inviting the lame Mephibosheth to eat at his table. But Mephibosheth also showed a humble spirit, but responding to his blessed position in a humble way:

“And he bowed himself, and said, What is thy servant, that thou shouldest look upon such a dead dog as I am?” (2 Sam. 9:8).

In referring to himself as “a dead dog”, he was quoting the words spoken by David to Saul:

“… after whom is the king of Israel come out? After whom dost thou pursue? ***After a dead dog,*** after a flea …” (1 Sam. 24:14).

The difference, of course, is that David was being persecuted, whereas Mephibosheth was being blessed.

The next event of note with regard to Mephibosheth was his role during Absalom’s rebellion. 2Samuel 15 recounts how David fled when his son Absalom rose up against him, with various individuals that supported his cause. But chapter 16 describes how that Ziba, the servant of Mephibosheth also met David with provisions; and he brought up an evil report of his master. Having received his victuals, David asked, “where is thy master’s son? And Ziba said unto the king, Behold, he abideth at Jerusalem: for he said, Today shalt the house of Israel restore me the kingdom of my father. Then said the king to Ziba, Behold, thine are all that pertained unto Mephibosheth. And Ziba said, I humbly beseech thee that I may find grace in thy sight, my Lord, O king.” (2 Sam. 16:1-4).

However, it is evident from the actions of Mephibosheth that Ziba was maligning his master, and was being dishonest. 2 Samuel 19 describes what Mephibosheth did in the king’s absence, which demonstrated his desire and expectation for the king to return. When David had returned following the death of Absalom, we read that:

“Mephibosheth the son of Saul came down to meet the king, and had neither dressed his feet, nor trimmed his beard, nor washed his clothes, from the day the king departed, until the day he came again in peace” (2 Sam. 19:24).

The fact of his personal neglect was a sign to David that his heart was with the king. All the time that David was away, he purposely deprived himself of basic personal attention, even down to not dressing his crippled feet.

Then David asked:

“Wherefore wentest not with me, Mephibosheth? And he answered, My lord, O king, my servant deceived me: for thy servant said, I will saddle me an ass, that I may ride thereon, and go to the king; because thy servant is lame. And he hath slandered thy servant unto the Lord my king; but my Lord the king is as an angel of God: do therefore what is good in thine eyes” (2 Sam. 19:25-27).

Moreover, the fact of David’s safe return was a cause of much rejoicing from Mephibosheth, to the extent that he was happy to relinquish all his goods to his deceitful servant:

“and Mephibosheth said unto the king, Yea, let him take all, forasmuch as my lord the king is come again in peace unto his own house” (2 Sam. 19:30).

In the example of Mephibosheth then, we have an instance of a lame man – crippled through no fault of his own – being blessed by the anointed king. Elevated to eating and drinking at the King’s table, he was willing to lose it all, for his joy at receiving the king again, following a time of departure. We also look forward to the coming again of our King. We look to the future day, when the afflicted, like Mephibosheth shall be healed: “then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. ***Then shall the lame man leap as an hart***, and the tongue of the dumb sing …” (Isa. 35:5-6). Those are the days that we so earnestly long for, concerning which, the Master promised his disciples: “that ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom …” (Lu. 22:30). May that day come soon, when those who love the appearing of the Master will be rewarded with healing and life when he comes again.

*Christopher Maddocks*