

The Covenant Pulpit



PURSUING THE HEART OF GOD
"David, a man after God's Heart"

"THE COVENANT HEART"

2 Samuel 9

August 22, 2010

Dr. Robert Petterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church

6926 Trail Boulevard, Naples, Florida 34108

(239) 597-3464

www.covenantnaples.com

Beethoven spent hours playing a crippled, old harpsichord that teetered precariously on wobbly legs. Scratches and stains marred its faded finish. Keys were missing and strings were stretched hopelessly out of tune.

Even so, the old composer would play until tears were rolling down his cheeks. To look at him, you would think that he was hearing the most beautiful sounds from that dilapidated harpsichord.

And perhaps he was.

By now Beethoven was totally deaf, composing symphonies for the ages in a world of utter silence. He was not hearing the music that the harpsichord made, but the music it *should* make. Who would have known that he could make so grand a use of such a crippled instrument?

Do you ever feel like Beethoven's harpsichord? Stretched out of tune? A few keys shy of a full keyboard? The lacquer finish of your soul faded by time, scratched by distress, and stained by sin and failure?

The truth is: we are all as handicapped as that harpsichord. But our God specializes in crippled instruments. When we are seemingly beyond repair, he doesn't junk us. Instead, he uses us to compose a symphony to his glory.

And here's the good news: God isn't deaf like Beethoven. He hears every painfully out-of-tune note. Yet he patiently tunes us until we produce the music he longs to hear. Search the Bible and you will discover a rogue's gallery of crippled instruments used by God:

Moses the murderer.
Rahab the prostitute.
Sampson the womanizer.
Jonah the bigot and rebel.
Cowards like Simon Peter.
Barroom brawlers like James and John.

God has a tender heart for cripples. Today we meet one of them. His name is Mephibosheth. At one time he was in line to be a king. Now he rots away in a dusty speck of a village called Lo-debar. The Hebrew word *Lo-debar* literally means "the place of desolation."

The name *Lo-debar* sums up his miserable life. A childhood accident left him crippled for life. Fickle fortune has stripped him of everything: health, wealth, status, and legacy. Born a prince, he is now a pauper. Destined to sit on a throne, he now languishes on a paralytic's bed. Years of despair and resentment have turned him into an emotional cripple.

But today everything will change. A king will invite this cripple to dine at his table. The cripple will protest that he is a "dead dog" and not worthy of such grace.

But the king will remember a covenant that he made with the cripple's father years before. When you grasp the heart of this covenant, you will understand the heart of your God. In today's edition of *Pursuing the Heart of God*, we learn this principle:

GOD'S COVENANT OF GRACE IS RESERVED FOR CRIPPLES.

When you look at Mephibosheth you are gazing into a mirror at yourself. You are also looking into the heart of God and seeing grace in all its glory.

His birth was greeted with high hopes. His grandfather Saul was the first king of Israel. His father Jonathan was the crown prince, and a war hero adored by the nation. 1 Chronicles 8:34 says that he was christened at birth with the name *Mirab-Baal*, which is Hebrew for "conqueror of Baal." Jonathan was confident that his boy would grow up to destroy the Baal idols of the Canaanites and rid the nation of its perversions. But later his name was changed to *Mephibosheth*, which means "the face of shame." How did the boy expected to topple idols become a cripple with a face of shame?

You can read about the tragic reversals of his life in 2 Samuel 4:4. He was five years old when the news came that his father and grandfather had died on the battlefield. David would soon be the king of Israel, and terror was rampant in the royal house of Saul. In the ancient Middle East, when a new dynasty came to power, all the heirs of the old king would be slaughtered to eliminate any future rivals. Everyone was sure that David would kill young *Mirab-Baal*, the only living and legitimate heir to Saul's throne.

In the rush to flee, the boy's nurse dropped him. He probably fell on his spine or head and was left partially paralyzed. After that, his name is changed to *Mephibosheth*—"the face of shame." We might wonder: did he give himself that name out of self-pity during those bitter years of dragging his useless legs behind him in *Lo-debar*, the place of desolation?

Fast-forward to 2 Samuel 9. Some twenty years have passed and King David wonders if any descendants of Saul are still alive. The answer comes back in verse three: "There is still a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in both feet." Someone reveals the hiding place of Mephibosheth, and David sends for him. Can you imagine the terror this cripple feels when David's soldiers arrive? Since he was five years old he has dreaded this awful day. As rough hands pick him up, he is sure that they are carrying him to his place of execution. But panic turns to raw relief when David says,

"Don't be afraid, for I will show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table."

—2 Samuel 9:7

Listen again to Mephibosheth's reply in verse eight: "What is your servant that you should notice a dead dog like me?" His words drip with the acid of self-pity. Ancient Jews saw dogs as unclean animals. They would no sooner touch a dog than a pig.

Mephibosheth takes his self-loathing a step further when he calls himself a *dead* dog. Dead bodies were also unclean to Jews. To be a dead dog was to be doubly unclean. What good is the carcass of a dead dog except to attract flies and stink up the place? Only a psychologist could unravel all the self-pity that is wrapped up in his pathetic words. This cripple is aptly named Mephibosheth—"the face of shame." Sadly, his embittered soul is more crippled than his legs.

Right now you and I are before the King of kings. Is there any of us who is not crippled in some way? We cannot drag ourselves into his glorious presence without a face of shame. We too have a name: *Mephibosheth*. We would be dead dogs before the throne of this holy King if it weren't for his heart. 2 Samuel 9 says three things about this King's heart:

1. IT IS A RECONCILING HEART

It has been more than two decades since King Saul plunged Israel into a civil war in his personal vendetta against David. No one had been a more faithful servant than David. Yet Saul was so jealous of David's popularity that he wouldn't rest until he destroyed the giant killer from Bethlehem. But God was with David, and the house of Saul was toppled instead.

Twenty years later, David wants to forget old feuds and bury festering grudges. So he asks his advisors in verse three, "Is there no one still left of the house of Saul in whom I can show God's kindness?" By saying that he wants to show "God's kindness" he is extending God's grace to his enemies.

A phrase in his advisors' answer grabs his attention: "There is still a son of Jonathan..." At that moment David remembers a covenant he had made some thirty years before. You can read about it in 1 Samuel 20.

David and Jonathan were inseparable friends. 1 Samuel 18:1 says that after David killed Goliath, "Jonathan became one in spirit with David." In today's language we would call them soul mates. After Saul declared war on David, Jonathan chose to honor his father by remaining at his side. But he still remained loyal to his best friend David.

One night they met in secret. Jonathan knew that the end was near. His father's insanity would destroy his family, and David would ascend to the throne. So Jonathan entered into a covenant with David. He pleaded with the future king, "Do not ever cut off your kindness from my family." (1 Samuel 20:15) David covenanted with Jonathan that he would care for his children. After that night, the two friends never saw each other again. But

when David heard that Jonathan's son was still alive, he had to find him and fulfill the covenant he had made with the cripple's father thirty years before.

Do you see the gospel? Mephibosheth is the name of fallen humanity; a picture of the royal children of the Father in heaven. Adam came forth in righteousness, with great promise: *Mirab—Baal*, the conqueror of idols. He was put in Eden. But he fell into sin. After that, he and his descendents were moral and emotional cripples. Because of his sin, he was dead—a *dead dog*. He tried frantically to cover his nakedness as he hid with his wife behind trees in the Garden. He was now *Mephibosheth*—the face of shame.

But long before this day, in the counsels of eternity past, a covenant was made. This too is pictured in David and Jonathan's covenant. Remember David is the future king. Jonathan is the father of a son who will fall and be crippled, as good as dead, and full of shame. The future king, David and the father, Jonathan are knit together in oneness. In heaven, the future King of kings, Jesus Christ is knit together in oneness with the heavenly Father of all the sons and daughters who will fall like Mephibosheth.

The future King covenants to go to earth, shoulder the sins of the Father's fallen children, suffer their punishment on a cross outside Jerusalem, and pay the price for their salvation. He does all of this because he loves the Father of the fallen children. After his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension to glory, the King of kings remembers the crippled children of the Father and calls them to come to his table and receive his grace.

Mephibosheth, I see you here today. You are the crippled child of a human race that is the enemy of God's Anointed King of kings, as surely as Mephibosheth was of the house of Saul who tried to kill God's anointed, King David. Saul's spear missed the mark when he threw it at God's anointed. Our house is worse than Saul's. Our spear found its mark and pierced the side and heart of God's anointed King of kings.

If it were not for the covenant that King Jesus made with our heavenly Father, we would have no hope. Like Mephibosheth, we were fugitives hiding from the King. But he remembered the covenant. He took the initiative to find us and reconcile us to himself. He washed us dead dogs clean with his blood, and called us to his table. We didn't deserve it. But this is a covenant of grace.

2. IT'S A GRACIOUS HEART

Mephibosheth knows that he doesn't deserve this grace. He knows it when he says in verse eight, "What is your servant that you should notice a dead dog like me?" Maybe in the distant past he dreamed that he could be a king, but those fantasies had to die as surely as stray dogs died in the street. What about you? Have you died to the dreams that you can sit on the throne of your life and rule the affairs of your world? When Mephibosheth calls himself a "dead dog" he expresses an unhealthy self-pity. But there is

also an element of truth in his words. The ancient philosopher Socrates said, "An unexamined life is not worth living." And Mephibosheth has examined his life. He knows that he is unworthy to come into the king's presence, much less to be of any importance to him. But to sit at the king's table and enjoy his fellowship is beyond Mephibosheth's wildest expectation.

Most of us don't appreciate grace. Even bible-believing, evangelical sons and daughters of the Protestant Reformation don't understand grace. If we did, we wouldn't sit around grouching about the bad things that happened in our past. Mephibosheth was dropped when he was five years old. His nurse didn't mean to drop the little boy. But accidents happen. We live in a fallen world where bad stuff happens all the time. Some of you were dropped by your parents. You have been emotionally crippled ever since. Others of you were dropped by a friend, or a spouse, or a job. And the pain has been crippling. Maybe a church didn't handle you with care, and your faith has been paralyzed. Perhaps the economy has dropped you with a painful thud, and you are down on the floor of uncertainty and poverty.

James 3:2 says, "We all stumble in many ways." We might add that we are all dropped in many ways. The real issue is whether we will get up and move on. One verse (2 Samuel 4:4) describes Mephibosheth's fall from his nurse's arms. Imagine that: a single verse describes the event that turned his life into a nightmare. It hardly seems right that God would dismiss a tragic accident with a single verse. But maybe it's God's way of telling us that, no matter how bad our past is, it's only worth a verse. Perhaps God is saying that we shouldn't sing the same verse over and over again; that we ought to get up and move on. By grace, the best is yet to come.

A single verse describes his past. A whole chapter deals with his future. Grace is about our future. Mephibosheth knows who he is: "a dead dog." Life never did treat him unfairly, nor does it treat us unfairly. The truth is: we are all sinners. "The wages of sin is death." Death and hell is all we really deserve. But the King entered into a covenant with our heavenly Father, and we get so much more than we deserve. David responds to the "dead dog" in verse ten: "And Mephibosheth will *always* dine at my table." This is our King's heart of grace. It's time to get up, cast off the "dead dog" sadness, embrace the heart of the King, and celebrate the grace of his table.

3. IT'S A SUSTAINING HEART.

I wish that I could tell you that Mephibosheth's story ended well. But he is a scoundrel, just like all of us who have been invited to dine at the table of our King. Years later times get tough in David's kingdom, but Mephibosheth eats his meals in silence. David's son Absalom plots against his father, and intrigue swirls around the king's table. Still Mephibosheth eats his meals in silence. David's closest advisor goes over to Absalom, the nation rallies to the side of the king's rebellious son, and Mephibosheth eats in silence. We are so like him: we take in all the grace that the King of kings

lavishes on us, but are too often silent when his enemies come against him. We hardly lift a voice to defend him, or praise him, or testify to his goodness.

Civil war breaks out. David is forced to flee for his life. He is now on a hill above Jerusalem when the overseer of Mephibosheth's restored lands rides up to him. David's immediate question is recorded in 2 Samuel 16:3: "Where is Mephibosheth?" Ziba answers, "He is staying in Jerusalem because he thinks, 'Today the house of Israel will give me back my grandfather's kingdom.'" Imagine David's disappointment.

I see another king standing on a hill outside Jerusalem weeping because those he had loved turned against him. Later this king was crucified on another hill outside of Jerusalem because God's people had rebelled against his kingdom too. Was Jesus' heart broken when the disciples who shared his table deserted him in his hour of need? The disciples then and now are so much like Mephibosheth. We feed at our Lord's table of grace, only to shove him off the throne of our lives and claiming his kingdom as our own. Is there any heart more crippled than the one that forgets the King's grace?

Later David returns in triumph. One day the King of kings too will return in triumph. Mephibosheth is the first one to meet him. He is terrified. The day that King Jesus returns will be a day of terror for many. Mephibosheth is full of excuses and rationalizations as to why he didn't side with David during the Civil War. What will we say to King Jesus on the day he returns?

But David cuts off Mephibosheth's ramblings in 2 Samuel 19:29: "Why say more?" David doesn't buy his excuses. The cripple is once again a "dead dog" facing certain death. But the king remembers a covenant that he made with the father. Mephibosheth will not only live, he will continue to eat at the king's table. The covenant of grace is eternal. It's not based on our actions, but on the love that the King of kings has for our heavenly Father. Thank God that his is a sustaining heart that never gives up on us no matter how faithless we Mephibosheths are.

4. IT'S A TRANSFORMING HEART

I am glad to report the best news of all: the story of Mephibosheth *does* end well after all. And so will yours, if you have grabbed hold of the covenant of grace. 2 Samuel 9:12 says, "And Mephibosheth had a son named Mica..." The Hebrew word for *Mica* literally means "he resembles God" or "he shows the glory of God" which is often translated "he is like a son of God."

Isn't this magnificent? Mephibosheth never ceases to be a cripple. You may never get over some things that cripple you. But, out of his handicap was birthed a glorious future. The old man called *Mephibosheth* (the face of shame) produced *Mica* (he who resembles God). Our hope is recorded in 2 Corinthians 3:18: "And we, who with unveiled faces, all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory..."

The "face of shame" eventually "shows the glory of God." And so will all of our faces if we will grab hold of the covenant of grace.

And the best part for Mephibosheth is in verse thirteen: "he always ate at the king's table." One thinks of David's words, "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." (Psalm 23:6) Having been invited to eat at God's table forever, how could David not extend the same grace to Mephibosheth? How can we not extend it to others, even when they disappoint us?

Maybe today you are painfully aware of how crippled you are. It could be that you have been like Mephibosheth, spending your whole life obsessing on past failures that have left you crippled. Remember, the past is only worth a single verse. Admit it, accept it, and move on. The issue is never who you are, or where you have been. It's always who the King is, and where he has been. And he has been to the Cross.

Before that, he entered into a covenant with your heavenly Father. He will always keep that covenant with your Father in heaven because his heart is reconciling, gracious, sustaining and transforming. Pursue this heart, and your "face of shame" will reflect "the face of your God."

And when you are tempted to go back and fixate again on how you were dropped in the past, and how crippled you are in the present, remember Beethoven's harpsichord.

Even crippled harpsichords can play a symphony, if they will put themselves in the Master's hands.