

## Mephibosheth

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish  
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“Now David said, ‘Is there still anyone who is left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan’s sake?’ ... And Ziba said to the king, ‘There is still a son of Jonathan who is lame in his feet.’

“Now when Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, had come to David, he fell on his face and prostrated himself. Then David said, ‘Mephibosheth?’ And he answered, ‘Here is your servant.’ So David said to him, ‘Do not fear, for I will surely show you kindness for Jonathan your father’s sake, and will restore to you all the land of Saul your grandfather; and you shall eat bread at my table continually’” (2 Samuel 9:1,3,6-7).

In the Word, King Saul had at least four sons and two daughters. One of the sons, Jonathan, became David’s best friend, and one of the daughters, Michal, became his wife (at least for a while). In fact the two families were linked together almost from the first appearance of David, who was called to play the harp for Saul, to relieve him of the evil spirits that plagued him, and who was given Saul’s daughter as a prize for killing the Philistine, Goliath.

Very little is said about the other sons of Saul except that they were all living and at least young adults when David entered the scene. Jonathan, you may remember, staged a dramatic battle victory with his armour-bearer against the Philistines after only one year of Saul’s reign. Then things began to deteriorate for Saul, who persistently neglected or disobeyed the Lord’s instructions, and eventually David was anointed king in his place. But so far from accepting this, Saul didn’t even know it, and a long period of conflict arose between them – mainly because of Saul’s jealousy and fear. Finally Saul was killed – or rather killed himself – at the end of an intense battle with the Philistines, and three of his sons, including Jonathan, were killed with him. The story of his death concludes the 1<sup>st</sup> book of Samuel.

It is only then, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel that the fourth son of Saul is mentioned for the first time, and he is called Ishbosheth, which in Hebrew is a construct of two words which mean “man of shame.” And why was shame associated with this man? Well, it isn’t exactly clear in the story, but there were, possibly, two reasons: first, after Saul died David was clearly proclaimed king in his place – at least in Judah. But Abner, the commander of Saul’s army and leader of the other tribes in Israel, refused to concede to David, and he set Ishbosheth up in Saul’s place. Poor guy: he only lasted two years and then was murdered in his sleep by two zealots who hoped to please David by bringing him the head of his enemy. This is the second reason shame is associated with him – not so much that Ishbosheth himself deserved to die (although he had been foolish to go along with Abner) but David condemned the killing as a shameful thing – both in the fact that it was done and in the way it was done.

Now it is in the context of this murder that we first hear of Jonathan’s young son, Mephibosheth. He was, we read, only five years old when Saul and Jonathan died, and it was on the occasion of their deaths that his nurse took him to run away and hide. But as they ran, he fell, and became

lame, and was lame in both his feet for the rest of his life. Now the derivation of the name, Mephibosheth, is not clear, but it is, again, a construct of two words, the second of which – like Ishboseth – means shame. Only the first word in this case isn't clear: it might be a form of the word “to blow,” as in the blowing away or getting rid of shame, or it might have something to do with his lameness itself, which would have been a cause for shame in ancient Israel. In any case, when David became king over all Israel he sought out this lame son of his old friend, Jonathan, grandson of Saul, to honour him and so to make amends for the shameful events of the past. In particular, David wanted to honour the memory of Jonathan, but in doing so he also paid tribute to the representative role of Saul as the Lord's anointed.

So what did he do for Mephibosheth? He was extremely generous, giving him everything that had belonged to Saul, including his land, his servant, Ziba with all his 15 sons and 20 servants to work the land for him and to provide for him, and a place to eat, always, eat at the king's table, just like one of the king's own sons. It was indeed quite an honour, and yet this part of the story curiously ends with the remark about Mephibosheth, “And he was lame in both his feet.”

Now we can't want to review the whole story of David's reign but it is interesting that Mephibosheth comes up again once more after the rebellion of Absalom, David's son. Four or five chapters of 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel are devoted to this revolution culminating in the death of Absalom, during which period David had to flee Jerusalem and go into hiding. And, surprise, surprise, as he made his escape, there was the servant, Ziba, also leaving on saddled donkeys with plenty of the best provisions! Where was Mephibosheth, his master? “Oh,” he said, “he stayed behind in Jerusalem hoping that Absalom would restore the whole kingdom to him as Saul's heir!”

Curiously, we never learn whether that was the truth or not, although when David returned to Jerusalem Mephibosheth was one of the first to greet him – very humbly – saying that his servant had deceived him and run off with the donkeys that he had thought to ride in HIS escape WITH David. At which point David seems to have thrown up his hands, not knowing which one to believe, and said, “You and Ziba divide the land.” But Mephibosheth declined, claiming he was happy enough just to see David return.

Here, therefore, is a little history from an obscure and difficult period in the Old Testament. But what are we to DO with it? What relevance can it possibly have for us today?

Obviously a key feature of the story of Mephibosheth is that he was lame. So what does the Word tell us about people who are lame?

We read from the Arcana about this, and even noted that there is a subtle difference between people who are lame and those who are “halt” or limping. Remember? – the lame are there said to be those who are in good, or states of goodness, but not what is called genuine good “because of their ignorance of truth.” The halt, or those who go about limping, are there said to be the people who are in good, or states of goodness, based on very general truths – but at least they have some truths, which is better than none. And by the way, it goes without saying that the truths referred to are the teachings of the Word, the truths of revelation from the Lord, not just facts, not just stories from the literal sense, but truths, essential principles of life and love and the world of the spirit.

So, speaking generally, what we have in Mephibosheth is a picture of any person who is well disposed and wants to live a good life, but has trouble because he doesn't really understand how; he doesn't really know the Lord or how He works, or how he can co-operate with Him. So he is constrained, limited, and even subject to abuse. In Bible times lame people almost always became beggars, and were pretty much despised by those who had the full use of their faculties, partly because there was an attitude that lameness was a punishment from God for some defect of character. With this in mind it's important to note that when God Himself came into the world He worked persistently to turn this perception around, welcoming the poor, the maimed, the lame and the blind especially into His presence, teaching and healing them, and urging His disciples to do the same. And in the Writings we are even taught that the people of ancient times actually classified their neighbours spiritually into groups identified in terms of their limitations, not in any derogatory way but as a means of identifying how they could best be helpful to them by providing something that they needed. For example, they would have said someone is lame if he is trying to live a good life but needs instruction.

Can we explore this for a minute? What about the husband who wants to please his wife and be responsible toward her, but knows nothing about spiritual life? How can he provide the wisdom that will really encourage and inspire her, and draw out the love she has from the Lord to share with him? Or what about the mother, or the teacher, who wants to raise her children as loving, caring people but who doesn't understand the nature of hereditary evil or the need for discipline – gentle but firm and consistent discipline – to build on what we call “remains” and provide a framework for their growth? And what about the young man in his idealism who thinks that it is no business of ours to try to determine whether or not we should give someone aid, when yet giving aid to someone in disorder may actually encourage the disorder? The truth is all our good intentions need to be informed and educated so that they can be effective and so that they don't “backfire” and do more harm than good. And the primary source of information and education about the good life is the Word, which for us includes the whole new revelation from the Lord in the Writings.

Therefore it is instructive – and prophetic – that Mephibosheth, the lame son of Jonathan, should be invited by King David to sit at his table forever, and eat with him as one of his own sons. For King David represents the Lord Himself in His Word, teaching and providing for our spiritual lives. And Mephibosheth, forced as he was to recognize his limitations because he could not do otherwise, represents every man or woman who recognizes his or her spiritual limitations, and is willing to accept help (in this connection see AC 4955-4958).

The fact that Mephibosheth was Jonathan's son is also significant, as is the fact that Jonathan was Saul's son! For just as each character was derived from the other, so the quality that each one represents is derived from the other. Again, there isn't time for long explanations, but it is pretty clear that Saul stands for the literal sense of the Word in our lives: – tall, handsome, enigmatic, powerful, he was also frequently misleading as king, often judging on appearances rather than on deeper understanding. So, too, the literal sense of the Word can be misleading if we judge it or take its lessons from appearances rather than the deeper meaning in the stories.

Anyway, Jonathan, being a wiser and more stable character than Saul and a courageous fighter, represents that deeper level of understanding that can really help us overcome the enemies of our

spiritual lives. “Nathan” means gift and so “Jeho-nathan,” or Jonathan means gift of Jehovah. And it’s true: real understanding of the Scripture is a gift of the Lord that is derived from the literal sense as we apply our minds to it and work with it.

But now, what about Mephibosheth? Well, after the knowledge of the literal sense comes understanding (if things go well); and with understanding comes a genuine desire to do what is good. But remember, poor Mephibosheth was orphaned when he was only 5 years old and then taken away by a nurse to a place called Lo-Debar. “Lo-Debar” in Hebrew means no word, or no pasture, and clearly represents a place or state withdrawn from the direct instruction of the Lord. Indeed, any orphan in the Word represents the state of being without instruction, and an orphan child represents the innocent state of wanting instruction that just isn’t there. But that doesn’t mean the child is bad, or that it pictures a bad state, rather it represents the **sad** state of someone who has good intentions but who has simply lost his way. Remember, in his flight he stumbled, injuring his feet; so as we run from our spiritual enemies, if we do not have the guidance of the truth, and especially the spirit of truth in our lives we are sure to stumble.

So what is it about the feet? Why is there such an emphasis on the lameness in Mephibosheth’s feet? Well, why did the Lord make such a point of washing His disciples’ feet? Indeed, why are feet mentioned so very often in the Word – including the reference in Luke to Mary sitting at the Lord’s feet? You know, there’s even a prophecy in Isaiah that says, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the **feet** of Him who brings good tidings,” and so on. Well, feet, being the lowest and most external parts of our bodies, represent the lowest and most external aspects of our spiritual lives, and these are the functions of what may be called the natural mind – not that it is natural, but it pertains to things that arise from the natural world: learning, remembering, and doing what is good in so far as we can. With respect to foot washing, a universal custom in Bible times, it suggests a cleansing of external thoughts and actions, so when the Lord said that His disciples needed HIM to wash their feet, what He meant was that they needed Him to teach and guide them in the practical affairs of their daily spiritual lives. “The feet of Him who brings good tidings” also are the practical teachings of the literal sense of the Lord’s instruction when He came into the world.

Poor Mephibosheth! He was lame in both his feet. So he represents our innocent qualities as we seek to live well, **not knowing how**. And there we are, like Mephibosheth in Lo-Debar, just not getting it! We try and we fail, we *limp* along our spiritual path, faltering at every step, doing the best we can but feeling miserable and getting nowhere despite our marvellous heritage, and then, all of a sudden, we get a call. It’s David, Hebrew for “beloved,” and he wants to see us. Indeed, it is the spirit of truth itself, the Divine truth and especially the truth of the Lord’s Divinely Human presence in our lives, urging us to come and stay with Him, and let Him nourish and sustain us. *It’s the truth of the spiritual sense of the Word*, beloved of God for it is the means of our salvation and strength. It is the Divine proceeding from the Lord, offering us everything we need to gain a blessed, eternal life.

Will we come? WHY NOT? We know we’re lame; we know we’re faltering; we know that we’ve been hurt and in a spiritual sense disabled by many sad, unfortunate circumstances in our lives, and we need all the help we can get. What have we got to lose except our spiritual poverty and shame? Let’s go! Let’s go to the Lord in the spiritual sense of His Word and get the

nourishment and strength we need to feel good about ourselves and our place in the Lord's church, His kingdom on this earth. Let's get the instruction we need about our spiritual lives and be grateful that the Lord has provided it for our understanding, freedom and peace.

And one more thing: let's remember that David also gave Mephibosheth Saul's servant, Ziba, who came with 15 sons and twenty servants to do all his work for him. Ziba is derived from a Hebrew word that means plantation, or more strictly speaking, to set in order, as trees would be in a plantation. So it is that the Lord gives each of us the power, and plenty of it through His Word, to set our lives in order as we follow Him, and do as He teaches us.

Of course, all servants in the Word refer to faculties and powers of our external lives, powers of observation, thought and action deriving from our world of experience. If these are ever separated from the spiritual principles or good intentions that are their rightful masters, if they are ever allowed to run off by themselves (as sense experience and pleasure are inclined to do), they can seriously deceive us. So we need to be watchful, and mindful, and careful to keep the things of our sensory life in order. But if we do, why then the story of Mephibosheth reveals one last surprise, and that is that both he and the servant – both our good intentions and the faculties that serve them – will inherit the promised land. ***We will enjoy life!*** We will enjoy the whole experience of living, dining always at the King's table and at the same time claiming our inheritance in will and understanding, freedom and responsibility, love and service.

Amen.

Lessons:      Luke 10:38-42  
                  Children's talk on Mary and Martha

2 Samuel 4:1-7 and 9:1-13  
Arcana Caelestia 4302:4, 7, 8