



ELEVATING CRIPPLES

SERIES: KING DAVID

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2 Samuel 9:1-13
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Where does passion for the gospel come from? This is the question we will seek to answer this morning in our study in the life of David, the king of Israel.

Last summer, I spent two weeks in Indonesia, ministering with our missionary, Eli Fangidae. Eli is a man who has a deep passion for the gospel. Whenever he sees a need he throws himself headlong to meet it. He brings to bear whatever resources of heaven and earth are needed to accomplish it. The result is that schools are built, teachers are recruited, books are translated, the poor are lifted up, a radio station is envisioned.

Where does such depth of passion come from? That question haunted me as I spent time in Eli's world. What motivates him? I asked myself. How is it that certain people in God's kingdom expend all so freely? What consumes them with souls aflame? The answer came one night on the balcony of Eli's hotel. As tears of joy poured from his eyes, he told me the secret.

Such a moment of extraordinary passion leaps out of David's soul in our text today from 2 Samuel. Out of all the scenes in the David story, this little cameo does more to shape the ministry of Jesus and the early church than any other. Yet, I have never heard a sermon preached from this text that reveals the greatest work of kings, and unfolds the mystery of how God extracts the very best out of us for ministry.

What unlocks our deepest passions to care for others with abandon? What turns our glib service and rank routine into fiery, joyous, life-giving acts? This story concerning David's relationship with a cripple named Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, will answer these questions. There are three movements to the account, each of which takes Mephibosheth to a deeper level of intimacy with David. In the first movement, Mephibosheth is sought for; in the second, he is embraced; and in the third, he is permanently cared for.

I. Mephibosheth Eagerly Sought (9:1-4)

Then David said, "Is there yet anyone left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness (loyal-love) for Jonathan's sake?" Now there was a servant of the house of Saul whose name was Ziba, and they called him to David; and the king said to him, "Are you Ziba?" And he said, "I am your servant." And the king said, "Is there not yet anyone of the house of Saul to whom I may show the kindness (loyal-love) of God?" And Ziba said to the king, "There is still a son of Jonathan who is crippled in both feet." So the king said to him, "Where is he?" And Ziba said to the king, "Behold, he is in the house of Machir the son of Ammiel

in Lo-debar." (NASB)

The story opens with a burst of resolve gushing up out of David's soul. His passion is like a pent-up geyser that cannot be contained. He is going about the busy life of being king—winning wars, organizing domestic affairs, managing leaders, leading national assemblies—when suddenly he is overcome with a desire to do something. And his desire is not to build a house, fight a war, or lead the nation. It is to repay a debt of love owed to an old friend. Memories of Jonathan which come looming out of the past forcibly engage David's soul, provoking him into action. The time has come to take care of some unfinished business.

The strength of David's desire is so pronounced it is expressed twice, in verses 1 and 3:

"Is there yet anyone left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness (loyal-love) for Jonathan's sake?" (9:1)

"Is there not yet anyone of the house of Saul to whom I may show the kindness (loyal-love) of God?" (9:3)

There is sense of urgency in those words ("yet"). It is apparent that immediate action is required. Ten years earlier, David and Jonathan had met secretly, in a field outside the royal court, to discuss their future. Then, David was running scared. He was but one step removed from death. But Jonathan was naive as to the danger his friend was facing. It took an oath on David's part to convince him that Saul was bent on killing him, and without Jonathan's vow of loyalty he would die. The faithful Jonathan took an oath in turn vowing that David would not die: He himself would stand between David and his father.

Then the realization hit Jonathan that his oath could cost him his life. At that point he and David renewed their covenant. Jonathan requested David to reciprocate in a vow of loyalty to insure the survival of his descendants. In a holy scene, the two men made vows of loyal-love that were stronger than death. Love that is born out of that kind of commitment is very powerful. Once it surfaces it moves inexorably toward its goal. Jonathan kept his covenant, and paid the price in blood.

So the time has now come for David to keep the vow he made to his friend. The search for Jonathan's children goes out. Ziba, a loyal servant to Saul's house, tells David that there is indeed one descendant left. He describes the descendant as "crippled in both feet." The person's name is not even mentioned. His condition overshadows his identity: He is crippled. In one day, Mephibosheth lost both his grandfather and father. In her haste to escape, the nurse who was carrying him dropped him and the child was

crippled in both feet. In one day he lost both his past and his future. Now every day he faced the prospect of living a marginal life, cut off from much of the zest for life that his peers felt.

Mephibosheth was living in Lo-debar (“no word”), “in the land east of the Jordan and north of the Jabbok, evidently in the region of Mahanaim. Jonathan’s son has thus been hidden in the immediate vicinity of Ishbaal’s earlier residence. His host is a certain Machir, whom we meet again in 2 Sam 17:27 as a man who stands by David even in his ill fortune.”¹ How ironic, that Mephibosheth’s city of refuge is called Lo-debar (“no word”). Here dwelt a cripple in the land of silence, one whose name was rooted in “shame” (*bosheth*).

Once David discovers Mephibosheth’s whereabouts he wastes not a moment springing into action.

II. Mephibosheth Personally Escorted and Elevated (9:5-8)

Then King David sent and brought him from the house of Machir the son of Ammiel, from Lo-debar. And Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan the son of Saul, came to David and fell on his face and prostrated himself. And David said, “Mephibosheth.” And he said, “Here is your servant!” And David said to him, “Do not fear, for I will surely show kindness (loyal-love) to you for the sake of your father Jonathan, and will restore to you all the land of your grandfather Saul; and you shall eat at my table regularly (continually).” Again he prostrated himself and said, “What is your servant, that you should regard a dead dog like me?”

David takes extreme care to ensure Mephibosheth’s coming. The man is sent for and personally escorted by the king’s emissaries. A poignant scene follows: “We observe the cripple bowing to the ground with all the difficulty and pain that that entails.”² As David looks upon this crippled son it is a painful reminder to him of Jonathan, who gave everything for him. Filled with warmth and compassion for this son of his friend, David speaks words of comfort: “Do not fear.” These tender words lift the face of one whose own face, buried in shame, cannot even look David in the eye (cf. Luke 18:13).

Then the king emphatically reassures Mephibosheth of the promise of restoration. Notice the doubling of the verb “*doing* I will *do*”; this is loyal love. Apparently, after the death of Saul, all of Mephibosheth’s possessions had reverted to the crown; now they would be restored to him in full. Not only that, Mephibosheth would be fully restored and elevated to the highest position of privilege and intimacy in the kingdom. He would eat at the table of the king “continually” (the word is used three times for emphasis). Mephibosheth is elevated to the status of a royal son, just as if his father, Jonathan, were king.

Mephibosheth is amazed by this news. He says to David: “What is your servant, that you should regard a dead dog like me?” His words so resonate with emotion that David cannot speak. Silent tears well up in his soul as he remembers uttering the same words to Saul (1 Sam. 24:14).

There was a time when David was an outcast, a fugitive, a “dead dog” whom God looked upon and elevated to the table of a king. The crippled Mephibosheth is a mirror to David of his own past.

So Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, is sought for, escorted, embraced, and elevated by king David.

David now turns from the emotions of the moment and starts putting his future plans into action.

III. Mephibosheth Permanently Provided For (9:9-13)

Then the king called Saul’s servant Ziba, and said to him, “All that belonged to Saul and to all his house I have given to your master’s grandson. And you and your sons and your servants shall cultivate the land for him, and you shall bring in the produce so that your master’s grandson may have food; nevertheless Mephibosheth your master’s grandson shall eat at my table regularly (continually).” Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants. Then Ziba said to the king, “According to all that my lord the king commands his servant so your servant will do.” So Mephibosheth ate at David’s (literally “my”) table as one of the king’s sons. And Mephibosheth had a young son whose name was Mica. And all who lived in the house of Ziba were servants to Mephibosheth. So Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, for he ate at the king’s table regularly (continually). Now he was lame in both feet.

David sets his plans in motion with a personal stamp that demands implementation. The servant Ziba is clearly instructed in every detail by the king. There are no loose ends, no ambiguous memos. All directions are given first hand, dictated by the king of Israel. Jonathan’s son shall not only have ownership of the land, but the right to use it for life. Ziba, who is made trustee of this large estate, is instructed to employ a staff of thirty-five full-time workers to cultivate the property on behalf of Mephibosheth. From time to time Ziba must appear in Jerusalem and give an account to David. Later we will discover that Mephibosheth’s elevation will cause Ziba to become jealous and resentful, because he must spend the rest of his days serving a cripple. At last he betrays Mephibosheth by deceiving David as to Mephibosheth’s loyalty (2 Sam 16:1-4).

The story ends with the orders of the king fully executed in every detail. Mephibosheth, once marginalized to the place of silent shame, is now sought for, personally escorted and elevated, and permanently provided for. The cripple dines at the table of the king. The former fugitive now eats by David’s side, having been elevated to the status of son. This is a love that seeks, a love that elevates, a love that is secure. Mephibosheth is valued, accepted, and embraced.

Someone might conclude, “What a lot of resources to waste on one individual! Thirty five employees, a huge estate, all for one place at the king’s table. Couldn’t these assets have been put to better use?” The Hebrew mind-set has a much better understanding of the value of human life than we do. The Jews have a saying: “Save one person and you have saved the whole human race.” The Jewish

perspective always looks downward to the impact of our choices on future generations. One soul is infinitely worthy.

The text concludes by setting out the hope in all of this: “And Mephibosheth had a young son whose name was Mica.” Jonathan’s son, and his line, survived. In one act of loyal-love, David changed the destiny of Jonathan’s descendants.

IV. Reflections on Passion and Ministry

(a) The birth of passion

What motivated David to put aside the king’s business and set out on the salient search for a cripple? What inspired him to so passionately and personally escort Mephibosheth, to welcome him, embrace him, elevate him, and provide for him? The answer is found in the Hebrew word, *hesed*. This is the term for loyal-love, covenanted love, loyal vows. Here is the most important theological term in the Old Testament. It drives everything that God does, yet it is absolutely foreign to us. *Hesed*, the key word in the text, is used three times here and three times in 1 Samuel 20. It is a vow of future loyalty based on a present commitment. It is a binding vow that promises a future of unceasing kindness and care. It is a costly vow that spares no expense. *Hesed* is a word that speaks of a debt of love.

Do you know that Someone made a vow to love you in this way? And that he fulfilled his word by dying on a hillside, outside the city? From that cross, Jesus says to you: “For love of you I was covered with spit, punched, beaten, and affixed to the wood of the cross” (Brennan Manning). Jesus counted the cost, and then he died so that the sword of death would not impale you and me. Today his memory is alive in us, and he wants us to care for his children, the abandoned orphans who live in the silence of shame. Did you know that Christians are Christ’s hands and feet? Here is how the apostle Paul put this in Second Corinthians:

For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf (2 Cor 5:14-15).

Eli Fangidae was a successful businessman once, but then his life began to unravel. He could not handle the shame, and he planned to commit suicide. In his own home he put his neck in a noose and tried to hang himself. His brother, awakened from sleep, found him and rescued him from death. God would snatch Eli from the very jaws of death at the end of a rope, and elevate him to eat at the King’s table. This was the beginning of Eli’s passion for the gospel of grace. And this is what he has dedicated himself to doing for the rest of his life—rescuing the lame, the blind and the homeless and leading them to the table of the King.

If it is love that births our passion for the gospel, what is it that intensifies it?

(b) The intensification of passion

To David, Mephibosheth was a mirror of his own for-

mer life of shame. In the eyes of the cripple, David saw himself, the one who could not eat at the king’s table, but was cast out, a “dead dog,” to find his food in a wilderness. When the mirror of our own life is held up we, too, are brought face to face with our past. We are reminded of our former silent, shameful condition when we could not look the King in the eye. But then we remember that it was he who personally escorted us to eat at his table. Now, with passions engaged, David can usher in a whole new future for Mephibosheth. Love is unleashed, a destiny is changed.

In my work as a pastor I find I do many things out of faithfulness to my calling. But occasionally, everything comes to a halt. I see my own face mirrored in the life of someone else, and my passions are aroused to give, extend, elevate, and embrace. The lesson is clear: The area of our greatest suffering becomes the wellspring of our strongest passions for good.

This is the very thing that Paul is referring to in these beautiful words from Second Corinthians:

Blessed be the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God (2 Cor 1:3-4).

Christ’s death gives birth to passion, and the mirror of our past intensifies it.

Finally, what does passion look like when it is unleashed?

(c) Passion’s personal touch

David’s encounter with Mephibosheth is extremely focused, intimate and personal. Time is given away as if it were free; valuable possessions are spent lavishly; words are crafted with warmth and care; there is the lifting of the face, the personal escort to the table. What does all this tell us? It tells us that when we are at the height of our passions we grant infinite value to every human being. If we save one life, we have saved the whole human race.

It would not be an overstatement to say that this little cameo from David’s life became the driving force of Jesus’ ministry. The gospel stories have nothing to say about strategic planning seminars, committee meetings, bulk mailings, multi-media crusades and mass marketing techniques. The gospels are accounts of the personal, intimate encounters of a Man who was seeking marginal people. On the surface these meetings seem to appear as interruptions to the main plot. At these critical junctures, however, time stands still. The plot comes to an abrupt halt as marginal people are attended to: a hemorrhaging woman is healed; a synagogue official’s daughter is raised; a blind man is given sight; tax collectors are invited to dinner; an immoral woman is offered living water; a prostitute is embraced, an adulterous woman is cleansed. Yes, all of these are interruptions to the story, but to the sensitive eye they emerge as the real story within the story.

The greatest work of kings is seeking out cripples and elevating them by giving them a seat at the royal table.

Last week, the elders honored one of our pastors who is taking a year-long sabbatical. For the past ten years this pastor has been elevating cripples. She ministers behind closed doors, in privacy, seeking them and personally escorting them to the table of the King to be elevated and embraced. Every encounter is personal, deep, rich, and life changing. I have never met anyone with such passion and tears for what they do. Fleeing abuse, Pat Patmor actually spent a night in a cave once. But through those doors of rejection she was healed by the Lord. Now when she ministers, she looks into the mirror of the soul of each individual and sees her own past, and she leads these souls, one at a time, to the table of the King.

I wrote this poem, *My Daughter*, to honor Pat.

MY DAUGHTER

Feminine frames
etched in frailty,
delicate limbs
of Shulammite splendor.

Once lauded as daughters,
courted like sisters
held in arms of costly care,
now crushed victims of despair.

Shechem's crime
abhorrent deeds.
Amnon acts, Tamar shrieks
a brother's silent hate seals her fate.

Now my daughters walk the streets.
Some say wounded
but in naked truth, slain
widowed in despair.

Driven by appalling aches,
dreamless sleep
souls a-bleeding
ever dark underneath.

Who will find them
cowering safe beneath their beauty,
walking briskly, acting kindly
ever speaking, only sleeping in despair?

Who will unlock them
vanquished souls, walking lifeless
languishing in their own abrasive wombs
walled in tombs of heaving, sighing?

Who will listen and with courage
face the onslaught of what is hidden
and cannot be spoken
lest it be known, sheer disgrace?

□

Who will lance the aged wounds
and dredge the deep,
where none dare see
nor feel the surge of consummate grief?

Who will seek them,
find them, wash them?
Who will embrace them,
love them, birth them?

My daughter, O my daughter
'tis the one who touched my wounds
in the raging cave like dampness
seeking shelter from the storm.

She who felt the awful dagger
lacerate soul and seal her fate.
Empty stares and farewell places
place a market on despair.

But there in Adullam splendor
she gazes on Him, an outcast
clothed in naked marks of shame,
etched in madness meek upon his frame.

Golgotha's sighs and midnight beating
infuse her breast,
wash her deeply,
blood and cleansing leap and play.

With one touch of soothing oil
and humble hands to weep and pray,
she's healed, alive and holy rising
held in arms of Boaz's strong embrace.

Now she lives to seek with passion
O what passion
and loyal-love
stronger than death.

And now they come in O, what numbers.
Feminine frames of Shulammite fare
lauded as daughters in bride-like beauty,
held in arms of costly care.

Eve's promised sacred offspring
once wounded in an anguished time
mothers, sisters, wives of others,
now true daughters, solely MINE!

*In Appreciation of Pat Patmor
Ten Years of Ministry
Shepherding the Wounded
PBC Cupertino*

1. Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 300.

2. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*.