

## Promise Keeping - 2 Samuel 9

Date: 28 April 2024, 4th Sunday after Easter

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Everlasting Kingdom - 2 Samuel

Texts: 2 Samuel 8-10, Psalm 36

### What is the heartbeat of our moral impulses?

On Easter Sunday Richard Dawkins, the world's most famous atheist, said that he was culturally Christian, although he was quick to add "I'm not a believer." What Dawkins means is explored at length in a book by historian Tom Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind*. In *Dominion*, through a historical survey, Tom traces how the moral sentiments and impulses of Western Culture are basically Christian. Holland ends *Dominion* with an open question: is it possible to sustain Christian morality without Christian theology? That is not to say that people who don't believe the central tenets of the Christian faith, like the virgin birth or the resurrection, cannot love their neighbours. Rather, can our society have the moral fruit of Christianity while being cut off from the root, the core beliefs of the Christian faith? Or to mix metaphors, what is the heartbeat of your moral compass that pumps blood and gives life to your moral sensibilities, as individuals and as a society? Richard Dawkins again provides us with an example, and I have to say I find this very confronting. In 2014 he tweeted that it would be immoral for a woman who knew her baby had Down syndrome not to abort. With this Dawkins takes us back to the pre-Christian world where it was common practice to leave unwanted babies - girls, or those with disabilities - on rubbish dumps to die of exposure.

One of the things I think about is how to explain Christianity to people in simple ways. Here's one summary I've come up with. God is love. He shows his love to us by sending his Son to die for us. Our response is to love God and to love our neighbour. That's it. I confess I'm not optimistic that we can, in the long run, love our neighbour without belief in a God who loves us as demonstrated by his self sacrifice in the cross. That's the infinite well we as Christians draw on, the roots from which we draw the nutrients to produce the fruit of love. The Bible is full of moments where we see how that character of God shapes the behaviour of those who worship him. Our text today is one of those moments.

We're continuing our series in Samuel. Last week we had the high point of the whole book, in 2 Samuel 7, where God promised King David that one day he will have a descendant who will have an everlasting kingdom. This promise of the Messiah shapes the entire rest of the Bible. Today we're looking at chapters 8-10. Before we dive in, let's have a little overview. Chapter 8

presents a summary of David's victories over the surrounding nations. Chapter 10 zooms in on one of those campaigns, against the Ammonites. In between, in chapter 9 that we heard read, we have the much more personal story of David's care for his friend Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth.

One of the key words in the whole Old Testament ties these three chapters together, and that is the Hebrew word *hesed*, which is sometimes translated as love, or kindness, as it is here in chapter 9, but it also has connotations of loyalty and is often paired with faithfulness. *Hesed*, loyal loving-kindness, is a fundamental attribute of the God of Israel. In Exodus, when Moses asked God to reveal to him his glory, this is how God described himself as he passed by Moses,

The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, [and here it is], abounding in love and faithfulness, **7** maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.<sup>1</sup>

This is *the* central description of God's character in the Old Testament, and notice at the heart of it is *hesed*, loyal love coupled with faithfulness. *Hesed*, becomes a key term for how God relates to his people through the covenant he established with them, where he promised to be their God and they to be his people. He would show his *hesed* by being faithful to him. They would show their *hesed* to him by obeying his commands.

These chapters show how God demonstrates his *hesed*, his loyal love to David and therefore Israel. And David then embodies *hesed* in his treatment of Mephibosheth. The character of God, seen in his actions towards his people, then is the motivation and the pattern for them to follow in their relations towards others. Or put more simply, God is love. He shows his love to us in Jesus, and so we are to love others in return.

We'll see how this plays out in 2 points - **The Lord gave David victory wherever he went**, in chapters 8 and 10, and then **Is there no one to whom I can show God's kindness?** In chapter 9.

### **The Lord gave David victory wherever he went** - 8.14

Chapter 8 is a summary of David's victories. There's the Philistines and Amalekites to the southwest. Edom to the southeast. The Moabites to the East. The Ammonites north of Moab.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 34.6-7

The Arameans to the northeast, including a battle all the way at the Euphrates. North of the Arameans is Hamath, and their king pays tribute to David, submitting without a fight. If you look at a map, these are all the nations that surround Israel, with the exception of the Phoenicians, but back in chapter 6 we saw their king Hiram was in a trade alliance with David and helped to build his palace. Chapter 8 repeats the phrase, “The Lord gave David victory wherever he went.”<sup>2</sup>

In 2 Samuel 7 God had promised David, “I will give you rest from all your enemies.”<sup>3</sup> Now it seems that promise has been fulfilled. In fact back in Genesis 15, God promised Abraham, “To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates.”<sup>4</sup> This summary of David’s victories is presented as the fulfilment of that promise, with Philistia and Amalek to the south from the wadi of Egypt, to Hamath and Aram in the north next to the Euphrates. In fulfilling his promises, God is keeping his *hesed*, his loyal or covenantal love promised to Abraham and his descendants, right down to David.

As recipient of God’s *hesed*, his loyal love, Israel and now also David, are expected to respond in kind, loving God by obeying his commands, and loving their neighbours. So chapters 9 and 10 begin with David expressing his desire to show *hesed*, loyal love, to the sons of men with whom he had entered into a covenant. Chapter 9 begins:

David asked, ‘Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show [*hesed*] kindness for Jonathan’s sake?’

We’ll return to chapter 9 shortly, but for the moment, let’s focus on Chapter 10. This begins:

In the course of time, the king of the Ammonites died, and his son Hanun succeeded him as king. **2** David thought, ‘I will show [*hesed*] kindness to Hanun son of Nahash, just as his father showed kindness to me. So David sent a delegation to express his sympathy to Hanun concerning his father.

Unfortunately, Hanun breaks the covenant his father made with David and throws his sympathy back in his face, humiliating his delegation, literally sending them back with the pants around their ankles. This leads to war, and so we see the camera zero on David’s campaign against the Ammonites. They ally with the Arameans. The chapter ends with the Arameans defeated and made a vassal state to Israel.

There are 2 ominous notes of what is to come. First, at the end of chapter 8, David makes his sons priests. This has happened twice in Samuel, and both times have not gone well. First

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Samuel 8.6, 14

<sup>3</sup> 2 Samuel 7.11

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 15.18

Eli's sons, and then Samuel's sons.<sup>5</sup> Second, Israel had asked for God to give them a king to lead them and go before them and fight their battles.<sup>6</sup> God had given them a king, and we've read that God gave David victory wherever he went. But in chapter 10, David at first sends his general Joab out with the army. It's only later that David joins the fight. This in the context of a breaking of *hesed*, loyal, covenantal love. More on that next week. For today, let's focus on chapter 9 where we see David embodying God's *hesed*, his loyal loving kindness, in his treatment of Mephibosheth.

### **Is there no one ... to whom I can show God's *hesed*?**

You may recall that David made a covenant of friendship with Jonathan, king Saul's son. This covenant was not just between David and Jonathan, but also for their descendants.<sup>7</sup> 2 Samuel opened with David's lament for Jonathan and Saul, slain in battle. Now David wants to make good on his promise to Jonathan. He asks,

Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show [*hesed*] kindness for Jonathan's sake?

Saul had a steward named Ziba. He is summoned before David. David repeats his question,

'Is there no one still alive from the house of Saul to whom I can show God's [*hesed*] kindness?'

Ziba answers the king: *"There is still a son of Jonathan; he is lame in both feet."*

As readers we recall this is Mephibosheth, whom we met back in chapter 4 where his nurse dropped him as an infant when she fled on hearing the news of Saul and Jonathan's death. The accident had left him permanently disabled.

Ziba tells the king he has been staying in Lo Debar. It's in the north, across the Jordan. David summons Mephibosheth to him in Jerusalem. When he arrives, despite his disability he bows down and pays honour to David. We can imagine he is wondering what will happen since all the rest of Saul's descendants have been killed.

But David calls him by name, "Mephibosheth!" And says to him,

'Don't be afraid, for I will surely show you [*hesed*] 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.'

Mephibosheth bowed down and said, 'What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?'

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Samuel 2, 8.1-5

<sup>6</sup> 1 Samuel 8.20

<sup>7</sup> 1 Samuel 20.42

I love this. It's the same phrase David used to describe himself to Saul when Saul was trying to kill him. But here, rather than dealing out death, David honours and elevates Saul's grandson. He then gives him Ziba, Saul's steward, and his family and their servants to farm the land for him, so *[he] may be provided for*. And, he tells Ziba, "*Mephibosheth, grandson of your master, will always eat at my table.*"

And just so we as readers don't miss it, we're told a 3rd and 4th time before the chapter ends:

So Mephibosheth ate at David's table like one of the king's sons.

There's 2 things for us to notice in the story of Mephibosheth. And, no, it's not that his name is a tongue twister, especially if you have a lisp. First, how David treats Mephibosheth is an expression of God's own *hesed*, his loving kindness. Did you see it there in verse 3?

Is there no one still alive from the house of Saul to whom I can show God's [*hesed*] kindness

David identifies his actions of *hesed* with God's own *hesed*. The love he shows to Mephibosheth is after the pattern of God's own love.

Psalm 36 has a lovely expression of what God's *hesed* looks like:

Your **love**, LORD, reaches to the heavens,  
your **faithfulness** to the skies.

**6** Your righteousness is like the highest mountains,  
your justice like the great deep.

You, LORD, preserve both people and animals.

**7** How priceless is your unfailing love, O God!  
People take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

**8** They feast in the abundance of your house;  
you give them drink from your river of delights.

David does what someone in the Old Testament with wealth and power is expected to do: use this to provide for the poor, the widow, the foreigner and the orphan, what scholars call the quartet of the vulnerable. Here Mephibosheth is doubly vulnerable, he is an orphan and has been alienated from his ancestral lands. What's more, he has a disability. He cannot provide for himself. But God is the God of *hesed*, loyal loving kindness, who provides for the widow and the orphan. And he does so through his people. This was the kind of just society that the Old Testament law was designed to create, one where people expressed God's *hesed* in their obedience so that the vulnerable would be provided for. David's care for Mephibosheth in this sense is a glimpse of what his kingdom could and should have been. It's a glimpse of the kingdom of God that we work for today.

Second, this is one of the few texts in the Bible that deals directly with people with disabilities. How David treats Mephibosheth provides a beautiful model for how we can care for those with disabilities. First, David **recognises** Mephibosheth as a person. He calls him by name. This is in contrast to Ziba who doesn't name him, but only identifies him by his disability. Second, David **provides** for him. "I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul." Mephibosheth's disability had resulted in his alienation, literally placing him on the margins of society. By restoring his ancestral land, David provides for him so that he is able to participate in community life. Third, David restores to him the **dignity of work**. Yes, with his disability he couldn't farm the land. But David gives him a workforce to farm, and so he can now manage a team and his estate. Fourth, David literally gives him **a seat at the table**. The point is made 4 times! "So Mephibosheth ate at the king's table like one of the king's sons." With this he is brought into the family and given a place of dignity and honour, there equal with David's sons. What a great question for us to ask as a church or in our homes and workplaces, "Is there anyone to whom we can show God's kindness?" And then to follow David's model of recognition, provision, restoration, dignity, and a seat at the table. If there are things that you think we can do as a church to improve in this area, please let me or Parish Council know!

God's *hesed*, his loyal love has been ultimately shown in the sending of his Son, so that we might be called by name, provided with all that we need for life, restored to dignity and honour. In Christ we are adopted into God's family, sharing in his own relationship with the Father such that we can call upon him as our Father. And Jesus invites you and I to share in his table, even today. As those who have received such loving kindness from the Lord's hand, let's be people who ask, "Is there anyone to whom I can show God's kindness?"