Mephibosheth

Today's lesson is about the life of Mephibosheth (the son of Jonathan and the grandson of King Saul). In order to understand why he's such a tragic character we need to step back and take a look at Israel's history. When God brought Israel to Mount Sinai and gave them His Law, He commanded them to be a theocracy. This meant Israel didn't have a king. Instead God Himself reigned over the nation.

The day came when Israel tired of this arrangement. They no longer wanted to be governed by the judges that God had given them. Instead of being ruled over by a God that they couldn't see, they wanted a human king to reign over them and lead them into battle:

> **1 Samuel 8:4-7:** "Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel unto Ramah, And said unto him, Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now <u>make us a king</u> to judge us like all the nations. But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us. And Samuel prayed unto the Lord. And the Lord said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but <u>they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them</u>."

God wasn't pleased with Israel's request for a king. He commanded Samuel to warn them that a king would do terrible things to them and abuse them. However, Israel didn't care. The nation had rejected God as their ruler and was determined to have a human king no matter what the cost.

So God sent Samuel to appoint Saul as their king. Saul

was everything that Israel wanted – which is to say, he was tall and handsome:

> **I Samuel 9:2:** "And he had a son, whose name was Saul, a choice young man, and a goodly: and <u>there was not among the children of Israel a goodlier person than he</u>: from his shoulders and upward <u>he was higher than any of the people</u>."

Saul was literally the most handsome man in the entire country. He was *exactly* the kind of man Israel was looking for. After all, Israel wasn't concerned about honoring God or having righteous leadership. They just wanted a big, manly king who could lead their armies into battle.

Sadly, Saul was a terrible king. He had no heart to follow God, and his sins eventually cost him his kingdom. His first great sin was committed at Gilgal. Saul was supposed to wait for Samuel to offer the burnt offering (which symbolized dedication to God), but when Samuel was late the king offered it himself. This was a very serious sin because only the priests were allowed to make offerings – and Saul wasn't a priest! After the king did this Samuel confronted him and said that because of this sin, his kingdom wouldn't be passed on to his children:

> **I Samuel 13:13-14:** "And Samuel said to Saul, Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the Lord thy God, which he commanded thee: for now would the Lord have established thy kingdom upon Israel for ever. But <u>now thy kingdom shall not continue</u>: the Lord hath sought him a man after his own heart, and the Lord hath commanded him to be captain over his people, because thou hast not kept that which the Lord commanded thee."

This is the moment when Mephibosheth's life started to go

wrong. Mephibosheth hadn't even been born yet but his grandfather had already committed a sin against God that was so serious it cost him his kingdom. If Saul had been obedient then God would have "established thy kingdom upon Israel forever". Since Saul's son Jonathan was a wise man who loved the Lord, and since Mephibosheth was also faithful, it's entirely possible that Mephibosheth could have been chosen to lead Israel. But thanks to Saul's disobedience that opportunity had been lost. Mephibosheth would never be king.

But things were going to get worse. One day God commanded Saul to attack Amalek and utterly destroy them. God made it clear that He wanted Amalek to be completely annihilated – right down to their animals:

> **I Samuel 15:2-3:** "Thus saith the Lord of hosts, I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how he laid wait for him in the way, when he came up from Egypt. Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass."

Saul did indeed wage war against Amalek, but when he defeated them he didn't utterly destroy them. The king saved the best of the loot for himself, and even spared the life of Amalek's king:

> **I Samuel 15:8-9:** "And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them: but every thing that was vile and refuse, that they destroyed utterly."

God wasn't pleased. The Lord sent Samuel to tell the king that because of this grievous sin, He had rejected Saul as king over Israel:

> **I Samuel 15:22-23:** "And Samuel said, Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, <u>he hath also rejected thee from being king</u>."

Saul's disobedience not only cost his heirs the throne, but it cost him the throne as well. God then sent Samuel to anoint David as king over Israel – but Saul had no intention of stepping aside and following God's will. Even though God had rejected Saul as king, he was determined to hold on to the throne. He spent years trying to assassinate David (who was Israel's rightful king). In the end Saul's sins caught up with him and he died:

> **I Samuel 31:1-6:** "Now the Philistines fought against Israel: and the men of Israel fled from before the Philistines, and fell down slain in mount Gilboa. And the Philistines followed hard upon Saul and upon his sons; and <u>the Philistines slew Jonathan, and Abinadab, and Melchishua, Saul's sons</u>. And the battle went sore against Saul, and the archers hit him; and he was sore wounded of the archers. Then said Saul unto his armourbearer, Draw thy sword, and thrust me through therewith; lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through, and abuse me. But his armourbearer would not; for he was sore afraid. <u>Therefore Saul took a sword, and fell</u>

upon it. And when his armourbearer saw that Saul was dead, he fell likewise upon his sword, and died with him. So Saul died, and his three sons, and his armourbearer, and all his men, that same day together."

Saul wasn't the only member of his family who died that day. Three of his sons died as well – including Jonathan. Now, Jonathan wasn't a wicked man. He feared God and faithfully served Him. Yet because of the terrible sins of Saul, he died in battle fighting the Philistines. Saul's sins cost Jonathan his life.

As you can see, things weren't going well for Mephibosheth. Saul's sins not only cost Mephibosheth his kingdom, but they also cost him his father. The terrible sins of Saul had far-reaching consequences that touched the lives of many other people. Sin affects more than just the sinner! Its effects ripple out and have the power to devastate many lives. Things were going from bad to worse and there wasn't anything Mephibosheth could do about it.

Once Saul was dead, one might expect David to finally start reigning over Israel. After all, God had anointed him as Israel's rightful king and the old king was gone. However, after Saul was killed Abner took Saul's son Ishbosheth and made him king over Israel – leaving David in control of just Judah:

> **2 Samuel 2:8-10:** "But Abner the son of Ner, captain of Saul's host, took Ishbosheth the son of Saul, and brought him over to Mahanaim; And made him king over Gilead, and over the Ashurites, and over Jezreel, and over Ephraim, and over Benjamin, and over all Israel. Ishbosheth Saul's son was forty years old when he began to reign over Israel, and reigned two years. But the house of Judah followed David."

Saul's family was determined to resist David. The Bible

tells us that David fought with Saul's family for a long time:

> **2 Samuel 3:1:** "Now <u>there was long war</u> <u>between the house of Saul and the house of</u> <u>David</u>: but David waxed stronger and stronger, and the house of Saul waxed weaker and weaker."

Eventually David won and became king of both Israel and Judah. Ishbosheth was murdered (not by David, but by an assassins that David had nothing to do with). David was finally anointed king over all Israel.

Meanwhile Mephibosheth was having even more problems. Thanks to the haste and carelessness of his nurse, he was crippled for life:

> **2 Samuel 4:4:** "And 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 <u>his nurse took him up</u>, and fled: and it came to pass, <u>as she made haste to</u> <u>flee, that he fell, and became lame</u>. And his name was Mephibosheth."

The reason this happened is because of Saul. In 1 Samuel 29:1 we're told that Saul was encamped at Jezreel. That's where he fought the Philistines, and that's where he and Jonathan were killed. When the news came out that Saul and Jonathan were dead, Mephibosheth's nurse grabbed him and ran – but in her haste she dropped the child and he was crippled for life.

Why was he dropped? Because Saul and Jonathan had been killed. Why had they been killed? Because of Saul's disobedience. Why had Saul been made king in the first place? Because Israel rejected God and wanted a human king.

Thanks to Saul, Mephibosheth lost his kingdom, his father, and his ability to walk. None of these things were his fault. His

life had been utterly devastated because of the sins of his grandfather.

Mephibosheth had no reason to be hopeful for the future. After all, Saul's family had spent years trying to kill David and seize his throne. Mephibosheth may have believed that it was just a matter of time before David tracked him down and killed him. That would have been the logical thing for him to do – and if you read through the Old Testament that's what kings usually did. Once a king rose to power he sometimes assassinated all of his rivals to make his throne more secure. The last thing a king wanted was to have a potential rival around who might try to seize the throne – and Saul's sons had certainly tried that in the past.

But that's not what David did. Mephibosheth's life was saved by the goodness of his father. Although Saul had been evil and tried to kill David, Jonathan was different. He loved David and protected him:

> **1 Samuel 18:1:** "And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking unto Saul, that the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and <u>Jonathan loved him as his own soul</u>."

He even spoke up for David when his father attacked him:

> **1 Samuel 19:4-5:** "And Jonathan spake good of David unto Saul his father, and said unto him, Let not the king sin against his servant, against David; because he hath not sinned against thee, and <u>because his works have been to thee-ward very good</u>: For he did put his life in his hand, and slew the Philistine, and the Lord wrought a great salvation for all Israel: thou sawest it, and didst rejoice: <u>wherefore then wilt thou sin against innocent blood, to slay David without a cause</u>?"

Jonathan loved David and worked hard to protect him, and David was grateful. When David became king he looked for a way to repay Jonathan's kindness:

> **2 Samuel 9:1-4:** "And David said, Is there yet any that is left of the house of Saul, that I may shew him kindness <u>for Jonathan's sake</u>? And there was of the house of Saul a servant whose name was Ziba. And when they had called him unto David, the king said unto him, Art thou Ziba? And he said, Thy servant is he. And the king said, Is there not yet any of the house of Saul, that I may shew the kindness of God unto him? And Ziba said unto the king, <u>Jonathan hath yet a son</u>, which is lame on his feet. And the king said unto him, Where is he? And Ziba said unto the king, Behold, he is in the house of Machir, the son of Ammiel, in Lodebar."

David then sent for Mephibosheth, who was brought to the king. It's possible that Mephibosheth wasn't happy about having his hiding place revealed, and he may have thought his unlucky life was about to come to an end. Mephibosheth had no reason to believe that this encounter was going to go well for him. All he could do was throw himself at the king's mercy and hope for the best, and that's what he did:

> **2 Samuel 9:5-6:** "Then <u>king David sent, and fetched him</u> out of the house of Machir, the son of Ammiel, from Lodebar. Now when Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, was come unto David, <u>he fell on his face, and did reverence</u>. And David said, Mephibosheth. And he answered, <u>Behold thy servant</u>!"

At this point something unexpected happened: David had mercy upon Mephibosheth. Now, there was nothing forcing David to do this. The house of Saul was David's enemy and they would have killed David if they had the chance. David owed Mephibosheth nothing. Many kings who found themselves in this situation would have eliminated a potential rival. But David didn't do that. Instead he showed Mephibosheth great kindness:

> **2 Samuel 9:7-8:** "And David said unto him, Fear not: for <u>I will surely shew thee kindness for Jonathan thy father's sake</u>, and will <u>restore thee all the land of Saul</u> thy father; and <u>thou shalt eat bread at my table</u> continually. And he bowed himself, and said, What is thy servant, that thou shouldest look upon such a dead dog as I am?"

Once again, David wasn't obligated to do any of this. He could have kept Saul's lands for himself but he didn't. Instead he gave Mephibosheth the land and the wealth of Saul, and Mephibosheth was given the honor of dining with the king himself. Since Mephibosheth was lame, he commanded Ziba to take care of Mephibosheth's new property:

> **2 Samuel 9:9-13:** "Then the king called to <u>Ziba, Saul's servant</u>, and said unto him, I have given unto thy master's son all that pertained to Saul and to all his house. <u>Thou therefore, and thy sons, and thy servants, shall till the land for him</u>, and thou shalt bring in the fruits, that thy master's son may have food to eat: but Mephibosheth thy master's son shall eat bread alway at my table. Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants. Then said Ziba unto the king, According to all that my lord the king hath commanded his servant, <u>so shall thy servant do</u>.

As for Mephibosheth, said the king, he shall eat at my table, as one of the king's sons. And Mephibosheth had a young son, whose name was Micha. And all that dwelt in the house of Ziba were servants unto Mephibosheth. So <u>Mephibosheth dwelt in Jerusalem</u>: for he did eat continually at the king's table; and was lame on both his feet."

David took care of Mephibosheth. Not only did he give him Saul's property, but he also commanded Ziba to till the land for him. Mephibosheth's life had been radically changed, all thanks to the faithfulness of his father Jonathan.

In fact, that faithfulness saved his life on one other occasion. In 2 Samuel 21 we're told that Israel suffered a three-year famine. When David inquired of God about it he was told that the famine was punishment for Saul's murder of the Gibeonites. David asked the surviving Gibeonites what he could do to appease their wrath. They said that since Saul had murdered them, seven of his descendants should die:

2 Samuel 21:3-7: "Wherefore David said unto the Gibeonites, <u>What shall I do for you</u>? and wherewith shall I make the atonement, that ye may bless the inheritance of the Lord? And the Gibeonites said unto him, We will have no silver nor gold of Saul, nor of his house; neither for us shalt thou kill any man in Israel. And he said, What ye shall say, that will I do for you. And they answered the king, The man that consumed us, and that devised against us that we should be destroyed from remaining in any of the coasts of Israel, Let <u>seven men of his sons be delivered unto us, and we will hang them</u> up unto the Lord in Gibeah of Saul, whom the Lord did choose. And the king said, I will give them. But <u>the king</u>

> spared Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan the son of Saul, because of the Lord's oath that was between them, between David and Jonathan the son of Saul."

When David turned over seven of Saul's sons to the Gibeonites to be executed, he spared Mephibosheth because of the oath that was between David and Jonathan. Jonathan's faithfulness saved Mephibosheth's life.

If the story ended here it would be pretty inspirational. Mephibosheth had a terrible life and suffered the consequences of the sins of others. Circumstances beyond his control put him in a terrible place. He had no hope and no way out. There was nothing Mephibosheth could do to fix things. He had no reason to suspect that anything was in his future except for death at the hands of King David.

But King David found him, had mercy on him, and gave him wealth and honor. Instead of living in hiding he lived in Jerusalem and dined with the king! Instead of a life of dishonor he was given both wealth and honor. His circumstances had changed in an amazing way.

Sadly, the story *doesn't* end here. There's more, and it's not pretty. Once again Mephibosheth is going to suffer the consequences of the sins of others.

Later in life David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then had her husband, Uriah the Hittite, killed in battle. God wasn't pleased with what David did and sent Nathan the prophet to confront him. Nathan told David that there would be consequences for his sin. Among other things, God was going to raise up adversaries against David:

> **2 Samuel 12:10:** "Now therefore the sword shall never depart from thine house; because thou hast despised me, and hast taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be thy wife."

True to His word, the Lord stirred up trouble against David. Absalom – David's own son – launched a rebellion against him. When this rebellion started David fled Jerusalem for his life. As he was fleeing, Ziba (Mephibosheth's servant) showed up:

> **2 Samuel 16:1-3:** "And when David was a little past the top of the hill, behold, <u>Ziba the servant of Mephibosheth met him</u>, with a couple of asses saddled, and upon them two hundred loaves of bread, and an hundred bunches of raisins, and an hundred of summer fruits, and a bottle of wine. And the king said unto Ziba, What meanest thou by these? And Ziba said, The asses be for the king's household to ride on; and the bread and summer fruit for the young men to eat; and the wine, that such as be faint in the wilderness may drink. And the king said, <u>And where is thy master's son</u>? And Ziba said unto the king, Behold, he abideth at Jerusalem: for he said, <u>To day shall the house of Israel restore me the kingdom of my father</u>."

Ziba was lying. He told a plausible lie to make Mephibosheth look bad and himself look good. David fell for it and gave the lying Ziba everything that belonged to Mephibosheth:

> **2 Samuel 16:4:** "Then said the king to Ziba, Behold, <u>thine are all that pertained unto Mephibosheth</u>. And Ziba said, I humbly beseech thee that I may find grace in thy sight, my lord, O king."

Thanks to this very clever lie, Ziba stole everything that Mephibosheth owned! Ziba, the man that *David* had appointed over Mephibosheth's property, was both a liar and a thief. When

Absalom's rebellion was defeated and David returned to Jerusalem, Mephibosheth tried to explain what happened. He told David that Ziba had deceived him:

> **2 Samuel 19:24-27:** "And 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. And it came to pass, when he was come to Jerusalem to meet the king, that the king said unto him, Wherefore wentest not thou with me, Mephibosheth? And he answered, My lord, O king, <u>my servant deceived me</u>: 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 <u>he hath slandered thy servant unto my lord the king</u>;"

Mephibosheth was genuinely upset over what happened to king David. He wasn't part of the rebellion and spent the entire time mourning. Ziba lied to Mephibosheth to steal his property.

At this point you might expect Mephibosheth to ask the king to do something about Ziba, but he didn't do that. Instead he humbly threw himself upon the king's mercy:

> **2 Samuel 19:27-28:** "...but my lord the king is as an angel of God: <u>do therefore what is good in thine eyes</u>. For all of my father's house were but dead men before my lord the king: yet didst thou set thy servant among them that did eat at thine own table. What right therefore have I yet to cry any more unto the king?"

Mephibosheth didn't make a scene or even ask for anything in return. He saw himself as a dead man who had been

brought back to life again. He simply explained the truth and asked for David's mercy.

It would be nice if we could end this story by saying that David listened to Mephibosheth, but that's not what happened. Instead the king told him to shut up and that Ziba was going to keep half the property:

> **2 Samuel 19:29-30:** "And the king said unto him, <u>Why speakest thou any more of thy matters</u>? I have said, Thou and Ziba divide the land. 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."

David didn't care that Ziba was lying. He didn't punish Ziba for this terrible crime, *even though the Mosaic Law required him to do so*. Instead Ziba was allowed to keep what he had stolen through his lies, with the blessing of the king. Mephibosheth was once again harmed by circumstances that were out of his control. The sins of others once again damaged his life.

Mephibosheth is one of the most depressing characters in the Bible. Even though he was a good and faithful man, he suffered tremendously due to the sins of others. He reaped the consequences of the failure of others, and his life was full of pain that was entirely caused by other people. The terrible circumstances of his life were out of his control. There was nothing he could have done to make his life turn out any better.

Mephibosheth is a warning to all those who believe that good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad people. The Bible records no wickedness on the part of Mephibosheth but he still had a terrible life. Unlike the case of Job, there's no indication that these things happened as some sort of spiritual test. The only good thing that happened to him (the kindness of David) was just as much out of his control as all the bad things that he was forced to endure. Likewise, the villain Ziba never suffered for his terrible betrayal. His lie about

Mephibosheth enabled him to steal a lot of property, and he got to keep it. Ziba stole a fortune and lived to brag about it. No hero in shining armor rode in to save the day. The bad guy got what he wanted, and Mephibosheth lost.

Some Christians believe that since we're God's children He should take care of us and prevent disasters from happening. We shouldn't have to suffer. Why should financial disasters happen to *us?* Why should *we* be the ones who get sick or laid off? Why should we have to suffer the setbacks of life? We didn't do anything! We've been faithful servant of Jesus. How is that fair?

It's also easy to think that the wicked *should* be suffering. Why aren't *they* experiencing disasters? Why are they leading long and happy lives when they're doing such terrible things? Why are they living to a ripe old age in wealth and comfort? Life just doesn't seem fair.

The truth is that *life isn't fair*. We can see this very clearly in the life of Mephibosheth! God never promised that in this life good things would happen to good people or bad things would happen to bad people. He never said that the wicked would be cursed with bad luck while the righteous would have good luck.

What He *did* say is that He would be with us through all of our trials (Matthew 28:20) and that He would never leave us or forsake us. He said that all things would work together for good for those who love God (Romans 8:28), and that we should cast all our cares upon Him for He cares for us (1 Peter 5:7).

Jesus also said that this life isn't all there is. Those who have repented of their sins and believed in Him will go on to inherit everlasting life and joy (John 11:25-26), no matter how painful their life on Earth may have been. One day all Christians will live in the presence of God in a place where there's no crying or suffering or pain – and those days will never end (Revelation 21:3-4). The lives of all those who are saved will be eternally blessed, and their pain will be behind them forever.

However, those who have *not* repented and believed will one day face the everlasting wrath of God, no matter how happy

their lives on Earth may have been. When they're judged they will be cast into the Lake of Fire, where they'll be tormented day and night forever and ever (Revelation 20:11-15). They will never again experience happiness or joy or peace. Instead they will be faced with endless, unbearable torment in a fire that will burn forever.

So take heart. The trials and pains of this life won't last forever – and Christ's life on Earth wasn't exactly trouble-free either. This world may bring us a great deal of pain but those problems won't last forever. Better days are coming for all those who believe in Christ, and when they arrive they'll last *forever*.