

## Minor Characters 1: Mephibosheth. 2 Sam 9. Grenoble 12/1/25. Mike Starkey.

A few years ago, I read through the whole Bible. I'd probably read most bits of the Bible at some point, but I'd never gone through the whole thing, from cover to cover.

After my year of reading the whole Bible, I looked back and reflected on what had stood out for me. I realised that what had stuck in my mind were some of the minor characters. People I'd never thought about much before, but now I couldn't get them out of my head. And the character that topped my list was... Mephibosheth!

Don't worry if you haven't heard of Mephibosheth. I hadn't really heard of him either. And that's one reason I found him fascinating. Suddenly coming across a new person in the Bible, and finding out about his life. So where do we meet Mephibosheth? He's in First and Second Samuel, part of the story of King David. And you've got to understand what's going on at that time, to see who Mephibosheth is, and how he fits in.

First, you've got the Prophet Samuel, who's an old man, and a respected figure in Israel. The leaders of the nation come to Samuel and say they want a strong king, like the other nations have. Up till now, they've managed without one. Samuel can foresee all kinds of problems with this, and tells them it's not a good idea. But the people keep on at him. So Samuel anoints the nation's first king. He's 30 years old, and his name is Saul. And Saul has a son called Jonathan.

To start with, Saul does a good job as king. But after a while he becomes a tragic figure. It becomes clear that Saul has two big problems. First, he disobeys some of God's commands. Secondly, he suffers from some sort of mental illness. As Saul gets crazier and crazier, Samuel is sent off by God to find a replacement king. And the person he's guided to is a youth called David, the youngest son of a man called Jesse. So Samuel goes ahead and anoints David as King-in-Waiting.

Meanwhile, one of Saul's servants has also heard of David. Not as a potential king, but because he's a musician. He's a harpist. And it turns out the only thing that can calm King Saul down during his bouts of mental illness is the soothing music played by David. While David is in the royal court he becomes best of friends with the King's son Jonathan. But eventually Saul realizes David is a rival for his crown, and starts trying to kill him.

So you've got this incredible drama of power, kingship, rivalry, faith and madness playing itself out on the national stage. And it's against this backdrop that the life of Mephibosheth is lived out. But compared to big political and religious figures like Saul, David and Jonathan, Mephibosheth's story is small and insignificant. And maybe that's why I felt I could relate to him. So who is he?

Mephibosheth is the son of Jonathan. In other words, the grandson of King Saul. He grows up in the royal household. But at the age of five something dramatic happens. The turbulent politics of the country reach crisis point. There's a battle, where Saul and Jonathan are both killed. When the news of their deaths reaches the royal household, Mephibosheth's nurse escapes with him. She runs for her life with him, in case all the other members of Saul and Jonathan's family are killed too.

As the nurse hurries away with him, Mephibosheth trips and falls. And the fall's so violent that his ankles break and he ends up disabled in both legs. The young Mephibosheth is carried to a place called Lo Debar, a town on the other side of the Jordan river, in the country we call Jordan. There, he's looked after by a rich man called Machir. Mephibosheth grows up having a quiet life in Lo Debar, and eventually gets married. But he keeps his identity a secret, because his life could be at risk if people found out who he really was.

After many years, David is finally king and the battles are finally over. And there's a time of peace in the land. And at that point, David remembers a promise he made long long ago to his best friend Jonathan, while he was still alive. This promise was that he'd be kind and generous to Jonathan's family for ever, whatever happened to Jonathan himself. David remembers his promise and asks around, to find out if anybody from Jonathan's family is still alive. And that's when a man called Ziba reminds him about this disabled young man called Mephibosheth, who's living over in Jordan.

So David summons Mephibosheth back to Jerusalem, to the royal palace. And Mephibosheth, is scared witless. Why? Because it was normal practice in the ancient world for a king to kill off all the family members of previous kings, so he'd have no rivals. It was a violent and ruthless period of history. So Mephibosheth simply assumes that David's summoned him to be executed.

But his expectations turn out to be wrong. David explains why he's called him. He wants to restore to him the lands and properties of his grandfather and father, and he wants him to live in Jerusalem and eat at the royal table. In other words, Mephibosheth, his wife and kids, are to be family.

So why did I find the story of Mephibosheth so moving and so memorable? I think four main reasons. Let me quickly run through them:

**1) First, the story of Mephibosheth is a story of a nobody.** His life is lived against the backdrop of the most turbulent era of biblical history, where the scene's dominated by he-

roles of faith. Larger than life characters, caught up in warfare, madness and power politics. In fact, the only reason we remember Mephibosheth is because of who his family were. But Mephibosheth grows up with his royal privileges stripped away, anonymous, in a strange country, with a foster family. And yet there he is in the Bible.

His story runs parallel to that of King David. But unlike David, he has no power, influence or armies at his command. He's a nobody (or at least, a nobody in the eyes of the world). But the life story of Mephibosheth is a reminder that God cares for the 'nobodies' of this world. You don't have to be a great king or spiritual leader to matter to God and be loved by God. You don't have to see great miracles or prove yourself in superhuman feats to be loved by God. People like Mephibosheth are part of his family too.

**2) Second, the story of Mephibosheth is a story of a victim.** None of this is his fault. It's not his fault he had to leave the royal court. It's not his fault he broke both his ankles, and was disabled for the rest of his life. It's not his fault he spent most of his adult life worried that a hit squad from the other side of the Jordan might find out who he was and where he was living. He's lost his family, the use of his legs, and his security. He's a victim of a violent period in human history.

It's a reminder that each of us can be caught up in a web not of our own making. Mephibosheth's a victim of circumstances. Maybe like you, or somebody you know. It may be disability, suffering, broken relationships, obstacles in our way, loss, or whatever. Sometimes we're innocent victims too.

But in Scripture there's no dwelling on this theme of Mephibosheth as victim, no mulling over why it all happens. It's as if the writer says: 'Well, these things happen. In war and power politics, in the real world, innocent people get hurt. It happens'.

But remember, the story of Mephibosheth is set in the context of God's long-term relationship with his people. Mephibosheth may be a victim, but he's loved by God. He matters to God. God has a purpose through history for Mephibosheth's family and people. Even while he's in exile, anonymous, disabled and fearful, God's still looking after him, still loving and protecting him. And that's true for us as well.

**3) Third, the story of Mephibosheth is a story of commitment.** David remembered the promises he and Jonathan made to each other. Despite it being Jonathan's father Saul who'd tried to kill him. David had every reason to hate the family of his enemy. But he and Jonathan made a covenant of friendship to each other. And David remembers.

There's something for us here about promises we make. How committed are we to each other? To our husband or wife, to friends, to family members, to people here in church? Are you a person who keeps your promises and commitments? There's also an echo of the commitment God shows to each of us. God remembers his covenant commitments. He never forgets or lets us down. He keeps holding onto us even when we let go of him. He comes and searches for us, even in our exile and anonymity.

**4) Fourth, and finally, the story of Mephibosheth is a story of grace.** Grace is my favourite word in the Bible: God's love and favour to people who don't expect it or deserve it. That's Mephibosheth. When David tells him to come to the court, what does he reply? He literally says: 'What is your servant that you should notice a dead dog like me?'

Now, if one of today's self-esteem counsellors went to see Mephibosheth, she'd probably say to him: 'Hmm, low self-esteem due to your disability. You need to start loving yourself, feeling good about yourself!'

But Mephibosheth really is a victim. He's lived his whole life certain he'll be executed by the very man he's now standing in front of, King David. Instead, this man he has every right to hate and fear, tells him he's restoring his family land and property. And from now on, he and his family are going to live at the palace and eat at the king's table.

It's a story of grace. When the one you fear will bring judgement and death turns around and brings you hope, acceptance and salvation. And if that sounds a bit familiar, so it should. Because that's the story at the heart of the Christian faith.

People today talk a lot about personal identity. The story of Mephibosheth reminds me that my true identity is as a child of the King, part of the King's household... dining at the King's table, a member of the King's family. You might like to think and pray this week about what this story of Mephibosheth tells you about your own true identity. And what difference knowing your true identity will make, to how you live your life.