

David: The King and the Man

2 Samuel 9:1–13

David is a man of loyalty (*hesed*). He is not “kind” to everyone, but he is loyal to those to whom he has obligation. To outsiders he can be brutal and ruthless (cf. 8:2, 5), but to those in the scope of his promise he is gracious and steadfast.

We have seen how difficult David’s relation to the house of Saul is. Saul’s continuing party is the greatest threat to David’s rule. The fortuitous elimination of Abner helped (3:26–30), but the old Saulide loyalty did not die quickly in the north. For all David’s trouble about the waning house of Saul, he remains a man under oath. He had sworn *hesed* to Jonathan in perpetuity (1 Sam. 20:14–17; cf. 1 Sam. 23:18; 24:21–22). Thus, in this new literature, David’s first agenda is his oath and Saul’s house.

9:1–8. Three times in this paragraph the word *hesed* is used (vv. 1, 3, 7). David had not only promised *hesed* to Jonathan, he knew Saul’s house traded in *hesed* (2:5). David must discover who it is that still warrants his loyalty.

David and his advisers do not have that information. They know they have elimi-

nated most of the serious contenders for power. Thus, if there is someone left of Saul’s house, it is likely to be some unknown person who is marginal and politically insignificant. The others have all died.

David learns of the nominee for *hesed* from Ziba, a man of Saul’s. There is a son of Jonathan, grandson of Saul, who is “smitten in his feet” (v. 3). He is handicapped. This last detail is probably reported to explain to David why he has never heard of him, or perhaps to assure David that the grandson is no military or political threat. It is noteworthy that the name of the man is not mentioned. He is a no-name. He really does not matter, but he is entitled to the promise of David. No doubt he is also useful to David, rather like a White House media event with a poor family, to show that the government has not forgotten the politically powerless. On all these counts, Saul’s unimportant grandson is summoned to court. He must have been frightened to come to David’s court, because this same David had all but exterminated his family (cf. 21:1–14). But he has no option. The king has summoned. He comes, fear and all.

The meeting between Saul’s handicapped grandson, who is an endangered species, and the strong, ruthless, but oath-

keeping king is a study in deference and power (vv. 6–8). David speaks only one word at first. He utters the name of the man: “Mephibosheth” (v. 6). We wonder that David knew the name, for it has not been told him since he first learned of the grandson’s existence. But David knows. His knowledge of the name of Mephibosheth without being told is parallel to Saul’s knowledge of David’s name without being told (1 Sam. 16:19; cf. 17:58). Perhaps the two occurrences are only according to convention. Or perhaps the narrator intends to show that what Saul has done David can also do. In uttering the name, the king establishes his control over the one he names. Mephibosheth’s answer is appropriate and in keeping with David’s power. He does not answer by naming David or, we may guess, by looking David in the eye (cf. Luke 18:13). He only acknowledges his subservient role (v. 6).

David’s second address to Mephibosheth is a salvation oracle, which begins with a standard assurance, “Do not fear” (v. 7). How incongruous that the words “Do not fear” are spoken by the king who has eliminated the boy’s family! David immediately gives two specific reasons why Mephibosheth should not fear, however. First, David’s oath to

Jonathan is operative, and David speaks the word *hesed* for the third time in this chapter (v. 7; cf. vv. 1, 3). Second, even more concretely, David restores to Mephibosheth the landed property of Saul’s family that apparently had been confiscated and provides Mephibosheth with an honored place at the king’s court. Critics regularly note that this last action is also a way to keep surveillance on the heir to Saul, but the accent is on generosity and the honoring of Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth’s second response, like his first, is one of deference and subservience (v. 8). In both brief statements, he styles himself “servant.”

9:9–13. The remainder of this chapter gives evidence that David is serious about restoring land to Mephibosheth. We do not have any details about why the land of Saul has been lost or taken, but now it is given back by action of the throne. In addition to restoring the land, David authorizes the family and household of Ziba to work on behalf of Mephibosheth. We are not told why Ziba is pressed into service, except he must have been a trusted party in the Saul establishment (v. 2). The fields of Saul must have been extensive, because Ziba’s large work force of sons and servants is assigned to it (v. 10). Ziba is submissive and obedient to

David (v. 11).

The outcome of David's action is that Mephibosheth has secure income of his own, is honored like David's own sons, and does indeed join the household of David. The narrator oddly ends his account of David and Mephibosheth by reminding the reader of Mephibosheth's crippled condition: "He was lame in both feet" (v. 13; cf. v. 3). This concluding line may be a reminder to us that Mephibosheth is disqualified from leading a separatist movement. Or perhaps David is not as magnanimous as he appears, for he honors only a disqualified person. While this chapter seems to settle the Saul question, we have not heard the last of Mephibosheth and Ziba. The crown still rests uneasily on David's head, for the Saul party refuses to disappear (cf. 16:1-4; 19:20-24).