

LIFE OF DAVID (11): MEPHIBOSHETH 2 SAMUEL 9:1-13
תִּחַן (hesed): Lovingkindness, mercy, steadfast love, covenant love

INTRODUCTION: Have any of you seen or heard about the Emmy, Bafta, Golden Globe winning TV show Succession? **SHOW PIC** Some have called it the best TV show ever! The main character is Logan Roy (played by our own Brian Cox currently starring in the Fringe). Cox/Logan Roy is a Rupert Murdoch on steroids type character. The Roy family owns the massive media conglomerate Waystar RoyCo. Logan is the ruthless patriarch, whose health is declining and he's looking to hand over the empire to one of his four children. This black humoured drama (to quote) *"delves into the complex and often cutthroat relationships within the family as his children compete for succession to the throne."*

A large part of the family dysfunction is that they are all desperate for validation and acceptance from their unscrupulous father who happily plays each child off against each other. They stop short of killing each other but they are ruined in the process. It digs deep into the inner workings of the human heart.

Not all empires and fights for the throne stop short of killing. Our own Scottish and British history testify to this brutal reality. When there is a regime change, heaven help the outgoing family and house and offspring! **SHOW PIC**

Take Elizabeth I and Mary Queen of Scots who were first cousins once removed. Henry VIII was Elizabeth's dad and Mary's great uncle. Elizabeth was of the house of Tudor and Mary the house of Stewart both with claims to the throne!

Cousin Elizabeth ended up ordering Mary's execution and Mary Queen of Scots had her head chopped off. The reason – Elizabeth didn't want Mary being a rallying point for people who would seek to overthrow her. Elizabeth, in order to keep the throne and consolidate her power, was ruthless in her dealings with Mary and those in the house of Stewart.

This is not just a thing of the past. It continues to happen around the world. For example, in Nepal on 1st June 2001 at the royal palace, nine members of the royal family including King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya were gunned to death by the crown prince Dipendra.

While less common now, in some parts of the world, this way of treating a rival to the throne was the norm in the Ancient Middle East.

In a world of warring clans, tribes, factions and houses - dynasties were established and ensured by wiping out the enemy even if they were cousins or friends.

In today's passage (the 11th instalment of our Life of David sermon series) we read about Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth was of the house of Saul - grandson of Saul and son of Jonathan. They were of the tribe of Benjamin. David and his father Jesse were of the tribe of Judah.

Just after Saul and Jonathan die on Mount Gilboa fighting the Philistines the news breaks and we read this from 2 Samuel chapter 4 verse 4.

4 (Jonathan son of Saul had a son who was lame in both feet. He was five years old when the news about Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel. His nurse picked him up and fled, but as she hurried to leave, he fell and became disabled. His name was Mephibosheth.)

Mephibosheth's nurse understood very well what normally happened to the offspring of an overthrown king. That's why they ran and hid. That's why they headed for the hills in Lo Debar. **SHOW PIC** Lo Debar was 70-80 miles away from Jerusalem on the other side of the Jordan south of the Lake of Galilee. Lo Debar translates as 'place of no pasture'. Now to the passage. This is the word of God.

BIBLE: 2 Samuel 9:1-13

9 David asked, 'Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan's sake?'

2 Now there was a servant of Saul's household named Ziba. They summoned him to appear before David, and the king said to him, 'Are you Ziba?'

'At your service,' he replied.

3 The king asked, 'Is there no one still alive from the house of Saul to whom I can show God's kindness?'

Ziba answered the king, 'There is still a son of Jonathan; he is lame in both feet.'

4 'Where is he?' the king asked.

Ziba answered, 'He is at the house of Makir son of Ammiel in Lo Debar.'

5 So King David had him brought from Lo Debar, from the house of Makir son of Ammiel.

6 When Mephibosheth son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, came to David, he bowed down to pay him honour.

David said, 'Mephibosheth!'

'At your service,' he replied.

7 'Don't be afraid,' David said to him, 'for I will surely show you 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.'

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

9 Then the king summoned Ziba, Saul's steward, and said to him, 'I have given your master's grandson everything that belonged to Saul and his family. 10 You and your sons and your servants are to farm the land for him and bring in the crops, so that your master's grandson may be provided for. And Mephibosheth, grandson of your master, will always eat at my table.' (Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants.)

11 Then Ziba said to the king, 'Your servant will do whatever my lord the king commands his servant to do.' So Mephibosheth ate at David's[a] table like one of the king's sons.

12 Mephibosheth had a young son named Mika, and all the members of Ziba's household were servants of Mephibosheth. 13 And Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, because he always ate at the king's table; he was lame in both feet.

So, here's David, years after Saul and Jonathan's death at the height of his power and reign and success. He's holding court in the palace in Jerusalem, and he says...**Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can... show kindness for Jonathan's sake?** And I wonder how the advisors react to this. I wonder how those who have warred with David against Saul and the Philistines react? *Kindness to those on the house of Saul! Given what Saul tried to do to you! Given what left over offspring of a rival tribe and house might mean!*

Maybe that's how they reacted? Maybe not. Maybe they knew that David's rule and reign was different and meant to be different.

But I'm not sure Mephibosheth knew that. Servant of Saul, Ziba is consulted and says there is a descendant of Saul left, Mephibosheth – son of Jonathan. A delegation is sent to Lo Debar to summon Mephibosheth. Even if Ziba and the delegation shared that David was well disposed to him, Mephibosheth would have been petrified. *Which king wouldn't take a rival's head off! Why on earth wouldn't David do this! It was his right, it was the common practice, he would be politically foolish not.*

So, Mephibosheth comes to Jerusalem, and years have passed. He's not 5 but a father. I imagine Jerusalem and the palace and royal court would have impressed. He's brought in to see King David and we are told he is afraid. No wonder! Our translation says he bowed down – the literal translation from the ancient Hebrew says he fell flat and face to the ground. Who wouldn't be terrified! David sees his fear and says...**7 'Don't be afraid'** and David goes on... **'for I will surely show you 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.'**

This is best of the best of David here. We'll get to the worst of the worst of David soon enough. But here in this passage, King David not being like all the other kings. This is man after God's own heart David. Here we see David reflecting the character and nature of God. David for the third time in the passage uses the word hesed (חֶסֶד). Hesed means kindness and much, much more.

Hesed is the word used for God's loving kindness, mercy, steadfast, rescuing and covenant love.

Exodus 15:13 Moses and Miriam in response to God's great rescue sing...

¹³ In your [hesed] unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed.

Jeremiah 31:3-4 **³ The Lord appeared to us in the past, [a] saying:**

'I have loved you with an everlasting love;

I have drawn you with [hesed] unfailing kindness

⁴ I will build you up again,

Psalms 36 **⁵ Your [hesed], 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...**

⁷ How priceless is your [hesed] unfailing love O God!

Hesed is much more than being nice. Hesed communicates a steadfast, gracious, rescuing, never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking always and forever covenant love.

It sits in stark contrast to a transactional or consumer type of relationship.

That's a relationship that goes like this...

I'll be kind to you if you are kind to me.

I'll do nice things for you if you do nice things for me.

I'll give you this as long as you give me that.

I'll respond in kind. Like for like. Equivalent for equivalent.

I'll reward you, if you provide the service I want, the way I want it.

I'll bless you if and when I feel that you deserve it.

Transactional or consumer relationships with the likes of Tesco or Sainsburys work ok and can even be a good thing. *I'll be in relationship with you if you meet my needs. But I'm willing to sacrifice my relationship with you if my needs are not met. When they are not met, I'm out!* And we can move from Sainsburys to Tesco because they are cheaper or better or more convenient. This can be good for competition but it's not good in terms of knowing where you are with someone or that relationship being secure.

However, in a covenant relationship (thank you Tim Keller for this) you sacrifice your needs to sustain the relationship. You serve and maintain that relationship even when it's not meeting your needs. That's covenant Hesed love and that's what all of us deep down need and are looking for and struggle with.

Committing to someone or something is hard.

It means giving up certain freedoms and 'rights'.

Not committing also means not being let down or hurt.

Revealing your true self and sharing not just your best highlights but your secrets and shames is risky business.

In some ways superficial and disposable relationships are easier.

But the best kind of relationships, the most life-giving ones are the ones when you know the person is in the relationship for the long haul. For better or for worse they are committed to you, love you and are not going to back off. I'm not just talking about husband-and-wife relationships.

What makes hesed type relationships tricky too is that it means accepting and receiving love that is gifted or given with no expectation of repayment. We thought about this last week and how this doesn't come naturally. Because who likes to be beholden to and in the debt of someone!

The hesed covenant relationship David has in mind here is twofold. There is human hesed covenant relationship with his deceased friend Jonathan. There is the divine hesed covenant relationship God has with him. Let's take these in turn.

Verse 1 **David asked, 'Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show [hesed] kindness for Jonathan's sake?'**

Verse 7 **'Don't be afraid,' David said to him, 'for I will surely show you [hesed] kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan.'**

David here is remembering Jonathan. I wonder if you remember this from 1 Samuel chapter 18 verses 1 to 4. **18 After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. ² From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return home to his family. ³ And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. ⁴ Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt.**

We read Jonathan saying this to David in 1 Samuel chapter 20 verse 14-17 **¹⁴ But show me unfailing kindness like the Lord's kindness as long as I live, so that I may not be killed, ¹⁵ and do not ever cut off your kindness from my family – not even when the Lord has cut off every one of David's enemies from the face of the earth.'**

¹⁶ So Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, 'May the Lord call David's enemies to account.' ¹⁷ And Jonathan made David reaffirm his oath out of love for him, because he loved him as he loved himself.

David was so moved by Jonathan's hesed steadfast love and friendship. David years on is still moved by David's steadfast love and friendship.

And what both Jonathan and David do is recognise God's hesed steadfast, covenant love and friendship. They realise that that is God's kind of love and that it is life giving and life transforming.

So much so that when David meets with Mephibosheth from the rival tribe of Benjamin, the rival house of Saul, he treats him not as he might, or could or even should. Remarkably he treats Mephibosheth not as an enemy but as a friend and as family. David has every right to treat him as an enemy. David could come in the spirit of vengeance and control and power and domination but instead in hesed he reaches across the tribal divide, he reaches out to what should be a sworn enemy.

I'm not sure anyone in David's court would have held him to his covenant to Jonathan. I could imagine them saying...*Hesed/covenant love is all well and good in theory David, but we live in the real world. Better to do what's needed. Better to use or be used. Better to take than be taken for a fool. Better to use your power and this opportunity to your advantage. Better to firm up your power base and kingdom.*

But David here does not do that. David experiencing and recognising something of God's radical, rescuing, merciful, steadfast covenant love has affected his heart. Hesed love has a way of re-ordering the heart. Knowing that God extends his mercy and grace to you not because you deserve it or have earned it but because he is kind effects change. Knowing that you've been rescued by God because of his goodness not because of yours and that he is faithful even when we are not makes withholding grace and mercy really challenging.

Not only does David not treat Mephibosheth as an enemy, he adopts him into the royal family. **13 And Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, because he always ate at the king's table;** That's what the hesed love of God does in the person of Jesus.

God had every right to come to the world he created and the people he lovingly made to call us to account for saying "No!" to Him and Him being God and "Yes" to ourselves being the centre of the universe. He had and has every right to deal with us as enemies.

At the age of 26 after my close friend died, amidst all the grief, confusion, anger and questions, I remember realising for the first time that I could die. I remember having a sense that if I were to die and ended up standing before my Maker it wouldn't be as friends. It couldn't possibly be as friends because I hadn't given him the time of day and I'd lived like an entitled consumer sticking two fingers up at him. I remember thinking why on earth would God love or want to be my friend given all I've done. I remember having a growing sense that God would have every right to treat me as an enemy.

That doesn't just apply to wild, rebellious, reckless hedonistic types. It applies to, judgemental, hypocritical religious types who feel they are entitled because they are better than others. Types who may be 'very good' but aren't very nice. Types who harbour all kinds of bitterness and resentment that can stay hidden some of the time or most of the time but not all the time. Types like Paul, the Pharisee of Pharisees. Ungodly religious types need God's hesed, saving mercy and loving kindness just as much ungodly reckless types.

Apostle Paul comes to realise that in Jesus we see and receive the hesed love of God and are welcomed home and adopted into God's family and called to sit at the family table. This hesed love of God...this Jesus comes to us while we are still sinners, while we are enemies! This came as quite the shock to me as one struggling to see how I could make things right with God.

This is what Apostle Paul in Romans chapter 5 writes. And it came as quite the shock. ⁶ **You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.** ⁷ **Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die.** ⁸ **But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**

⁹ **Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!** ¹⁰ **For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!** ¹¹ **Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.**

Jonathan reaching across the tribal lines of Benjamin to Judah is moving.
Jonathan giving his earthly throne and risking his life for David is moving.
Even more moving is the hesed love of God in Christ.
Jesus reached across the great divide from heaven to earth.
Jesus gave up his heavenly throne and risked his life for you and me.
God died not on Mount Gilboa but on the mount of Calvary.
Even though we were and are sinners, Christ died for us.
Even though we were enemies, Jesus sought us as friends.
Our sin and rebellion weren't just ignored; they were paid for fully.
God demonstrated his hesed love on the cross, declaring *I'm not taking your life, I'm giving mine! Your forgiveness, our friendship is worth me putting my life on the line!*

That's the kind of love that changes us and the world. It's the kind of love Jesus is talking about and calling his children to in the sermon on the mount.

Matthew 5:43-45 ⁴³ **'You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbour^[1] and hate your enemy."** ⁴⁴ **But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,** ⁴⁵ **that you may be children of your Father in heaven.**

It's worth noting that loving your enemy doesn't mean not addressing sin or pursuing justice in the here and now or trusting someone who isn't trustworthy or putting yourself in harm's way. But it does mean being willing to reach across from your tribe to another's. It does mean looking to bless rather than curse. It means looking to humanise not demonise.

It also means steeling-manning rather than straw-manning people's points of view. Straw manning is when we don't accurately or fairly represent the position of a person or a tribe. It's really easy to dismiss a caricature of an argument or a person. It's much more difficult to steelman a differing point of view from a person or tribe and represent what's at stake for them fairly and accurately. But in the steel-manning we show respect and love and that we are listening and engaging and reaching out even if we strongly disagree.

Here's four sets of questions worth pondering...

1. Have I recently or do I deliberately misrepresent a person or a tribe I dislike or disagree with? What does God think about that?
2. Is there a person or tribe that I would rather be God-damned rather than God changed and God blessed? What does that reveal about my heart and my view of Jesus? Do I need to repent? Do I need to ask God for help to change?
3. When was the last time I prayed God's blessing on a person or a tribe that has very different ways of thinking and I find difficult to relate with?
4. When was the last time I reached out to someone from another tribe to bless them no strings attached and not to score a point? Am I willing to ask God to put someone on my heart to bless in this way?

It's good for us to think about how we can reflect the hesed love of God. But that's not where I want us to finish. I want us to finish beholding the hesed love of God. David gives song to the hesed love of God in Psalm 103.

⁸ the Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.

⁹ He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour his anger for ever;

**¹⁰ he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.**

**¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who revere him;**

**¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.**

**¹³ As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who regard him;**

Jesus gives us the picture of God the Father's hesed love in Luke chapter 15. God the father is depicted running to his wayward reckless younger son to embrace him and bring him home. God the father is also depicted as the loving father who goes out to the older bitter, ungrateful, judgemental, very good but not very nice pharisee-like son who feels entitled and superior to invite him into the family to celebrate with him.

God is not like Logan Roy from Succession. His love is not transactional or conditional. His love, affirmation and affection is not withheld to ensure performance or withdrawn because of failure. He is not a ruthless patriarch. God Father, Son and Holy Spirit is so very different. He is the hesed, rescuing, merciful God of loving kindness, steadfast and covenant love that endures forever.

PRAY