

Of Covenant Mercy I Sing

2 Samuel 9

In 1971, Joni Mitchell released a song entitled “My Old Man,” which begins with these words:

My old man, he’s a singer in the park
He’s a walker in the rain, he’s a dancer in the dark
We don’t need no piece of paper from the city hall
Keeping us tied and true
My old man, keeping away my blues

Of course the “piece of paper from the city hall” refers to a marriage license. Why should a man and a woman in love need a legal document that binds them together? Isn’t it better to be bound by their feelings for each other alone?

This song sets in opposition to each other the two ideas of covenant and love. It assumes that the bonds of a covenant are restraining, but spontaneous feelings of love are freeing. And if you take a loving relationship between two free people and bind it with a covenant, you risk messing it up by turning it into something else. But is that idea true?

According to the Bible, nothing could be farther from the truth. In Scripture, the love of God for us, which is the greatest love we can imagine, is a covenantal love. God binds himself to us by covenant promises that he will not break. In the Old Testament, there is a particular Hebrew word that represents covenant faithfulness: *hesed*. The ESV normally translates this word “steadfast love,” and it appears repeatedly in descriptions of the character of God. For example, when God reveals his name to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7, he declares, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love [*hesed*] and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love [*hesed*] for thousands...” Our God is a God of covenant love, a love that is bounded by promises he has made to his people. Just like a marriage, God promises to his people that he will be there for them through thick and thin, no matter what. That is *hesed*.

And *hesed* is the main theme of 2 Samuel chapter 9. Specifically, this chapter is about the covenant faithfulness of King David. It is important to recognize this story in the wider context of the books of 1-2 Samuel. The author tends to focus on different characters as we progress through these books. In 1 Samuel 1-7, the focus was on the prophet Samuel as the leader of Israel. In 1 Samuel 8-14, the focus was on Saul, the first king of Israel. And then in 1 Samuel 15 all the way through 2 Samuel 8, the focus has been on King David’s rise to power and a basic summary of his reign. The listing of officials in 2 Samuel 8:15-18 (a typical way to end an account of a king’s reign) suggests to us that the author’s first major section on David has come to an end. But then there is another section of the book that focuses on David, and that is 2 Samuel 9-20. These chapters tell the story of David’s great failure, repentance, the turmoil that resulted in his kingdom, and his preservation by God. And we will see all that play out especially in chapters 10-20, but before we get there, this new section of the book begins with this story about David’s covenant faithfulness. Why would the author do that? I think it is because the author wants to set a tone here from the outset of this new section. We are about to see David at his worst, and we are going to see him suffer for it. But just before we get there, the author

shows us that David is, indeed, a man after God's own heart. He has his bad moments, even his terrible moments, but David is, unlike Saul, a son of God. And so I think the author wants us to read David's upcoming failure and sufferings in light of that. When we see David fail, and when we see the turmoil in his family and then his kingdom, we must remember that this is the Lord bringing loving discipline on the son he will never disown.

As our church's statement of faith, echoing the Baptist Faith and Message, says, "All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation." Some passages point us to Christ by way of a negative example. When David commits adultery and murder just two chapters over, it points us to Christ the obedient Son of God who never sinned and who, therefore, surpasses David in righteousness. But some passages point us to Christ by way of a positive example. When we see the *hesed* of David on display here, it should be to us a faint echo of the far greater *hesed* that Christ has shown to us. Just as David's steadfast love, in faithfulness to his covenant, gave Mephibosheth hope and security, so does the steadfast love of Christ, in faithfulness to his covenant, give us hope and security.

Meditating on the covenant love of God in Christ for us gives power and texture to our grasp of the love of God. And we badly need that. I remember one time in my hometown driving by a church sign that said, "God's love is equal for everybody." That sounds very American, and that view of the love of God seems to be deeply ingrained into us as Americans. But is it biblical? Give it a little thought. If God's love is equal for everybody, then it means that some people who are currently in Hell are loved every bit as much by God as we are. And if that is the case, it means there is no real security in the love of God. It would mean that my hope for security would have to lie ultimately in something within me that sets me apart from those who end up in Hell. After all, his love didn't keep others out of Hell. Why would it keep me out? We need more than the Americanized, democratized gospel that God loves everybody equally. That is not a biblical teaching, and if we assume it we eviscerate the glory, the texture, the power of God's love for us in Christ. We will have no concept of covenant love, of *hesed*, the love of God that gives us true security and assurance, the love that fuels wonder and gratitude. That's what I want to focus on this morning, and in order to see that, we need first to walk through this story. I'm going to note five distinct sections of the story. I'm also going to alliterate all five points. Not only that, I'm going to alliterate them all with the letter "I," which may be the first time in history a sermon has alliterated five points with "I." Then after we walk through the story we will ponder a point of application together.

Our story begins with an

1. Intention (v. 1)

Verse 1 reads, "And David said, 'Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?'" Let's note the background to David's question. You may recall Jonathan, the son of King Saul who appeared in 1 Samuel, who was a good friend to David. Well, David and Jonathan were not just buddies. When King Saul turned against David out of jealousy, Jonathan sided with David against his own father. Not only that, he sided with David against his own prospects for being the heir to Israel's throne. In 1 Samuel 20, David and Jonathan made a covenant with each other as an expression of their political allegiance to each other. In 1 Samuel 20:14-16, Jonathan said to David about David's future rule over Israel, "If I am still alive, show me the steadfast love of the LORD, that I may not die; and do not cut off

your steadfast love from my house forever, when the LORD cuts off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth.’ And Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, ‘May the LORD take vengeance on David’s enemies.’” So Jonathan had given his allegiance to David against his own father, and in turn David had promised to Jonathan to show loyalty to Jonathan’s descendants once he took the throne.

Here we are probably 15-20 years after that covenant had been made. Jonathan has been dead for years, having been killed in battle against the Philistines on Mount Gilboa fighting by his father’s side. David has been busy navigating the turmoil of consolidating his power over Israel, conquering and then establishing his capital at Jerusalem, and expanding his empire in every direction. It would be understandable, at least on a human level, if he had simply forgotten about his covenant with Jonathan by this point. It might even be somewhat understandable (again, humanly speaking) if he had decided that the messy world of politics required him to be more cutthroat than he had previously realized, and he would have to intentionally go back on his word to Jonathan. Too much seemed to be at stake for him to play around with keeping promises that could ultimately undo his kingdom. You see, it was commonplace in the ancient world whenever there was a change in dynasties for the new king to eliminate every potential rival. You don’t want a descendant of the former king gathering a following to himself that could potentially threaten your power. So politically speaking, it was a risky move for David even to raise the question about whether or not Jonathan had descendants who were still alive.

But David is a man who keeps his word. He is a covenant keeper. Will it be a risk to him to show kindness to a descendant of Jonathan? Yes, it very well could be. But this is the same David who wrote in Psalm 15: “O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill? He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart; who does not slander with his tongue and does no evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend; in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD; *who swears to his own hurt and does not change.*” David proves to be that kind of man by the intention he expresses here to keep his covenant.

So we move on to the next part of the story:

2. Investigation (vv. 2-4)

In order to fulfill his intention, David summons to his court a man named Ziba. Who was he? He was the manager of Saul’s estate in the town of Gibeah. When King Saul died in battle against the Philistines, his estate would have eventually become the property of David’s administration. As such, it was a source of some revenue for the royal treasury. Ziba had been put in charge of it, and it had seemingly become a great source of wealth for him.

So David asked Ziba (v. 3), “Is there not still someone of the house of Saul, that I may show the kindness of God to him?” Why say, “the kindness of God?” Isn’t it the kindness of David? Well, it was kindness in fulfillment of a covenant made in the name of the Lord. And Ziba answered, “Yes, there is a man. He is a son of Jonathan, crippled in his feet, and he lives at Lo-debar in the house of Machir, son of Ammiel.” In fact, this son of Jonathan has been mentioned before. In 2 Samuel 4:4, we read about a five-year-old boy whose nurse picked him up and fled with him for safety upon hearing the news about the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. Tragically, while she was running away there was some kind of accident that left the boy crippled in his feet. In the course

of events this boy ended up in the house of Machir son of Ammiel. Machir is a character who will appear later as a loyal supporter of David (17:27-29), who was apparently a wealthy man who liked to meet people's needs. Lo-debar was located on the eastern side of the Jordan River, away from the main part of Canaan, away from Jerusalem the capital. This son of Jonathan had apparently been taken to a place of exile for protection from David.

So by bringing Ziba before him to ask about any remaining descendants of Jonathan, David doesn't wait for the opportunity for covenant faithfulness to come to him. He actively seeks it out, even at great risk to his own power.

Having seen David's intention and his investigation, we now come to the

3. Interview (vv. 5-8)

Upon learning about this son of Jonathan, a man named Mephibosheth, David sent to Lo-debar to have him brought before him. If you were the grandson of a dead king who had been the present king's greatest enemy, what would you think when that king sent for you to be brought to him? Mephibosheth was almost certainly thinking, "I'm about to be executed." So notice how he came before King David in verse 6: "And Mephibosheth the son of Jonathan, son of Saul, came to David and fell on his face and paid homage." No doubt it was an awkward scene for a crippled man to fall intentionally on his face, but Mephibosheth did it fearing for his life.

David could sense his fear. So imagine the joy that took hold of Mephibosheth when he heard the words of the king in verse 7: "And David said to him, 'Do not fear, for I will show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan, and I will restore to you all the land of Saul your father, and you shall eat at my table always.'" This verse is the heart of the passage, expressing the promise of David's covenant loyalty. Notice that it is in the direct middle of chapter 9. There are six verses before it and six verses after it. Everything before it leads up to it, and everything after it flows out of it. This is a story that cries out the word *hesed*. For by this word of promise, Mephibosheth goes from being a political enemy of David to the status of a son in David's house.

And he is overjoyed by the news. Notice his response in verse 8, "And he paid homage and said, 'What is your servant, that you should show regard for a dead dog such as I?'" When it says he "paid homage," that means he fell on his face again, but this time out of gratitude, not fear. And there is irony in his use of the phrase "dead dog" to refer to himself. The last time that phrase appeared was on the lips of David, who referred to himself as a dead dog before King Saul in 1 Samuel 24:14. David's point on that occasion was to say that it was astonishing that Saul would expend so much time and energy trying to track down and kill David, who is nothing more than a dead dog. Here now a descendant of Saul calls himself a dead dog before King David, but this time it is not because David has tracked him down to kill him. It's because David has tracked him down to show him steadfast love. How the tables have turned, by God's amazing work!

And so the story now moves from interview to

4. Implementation (vv. 9-11a)

David puts into action the promise he made to Mephibosheth. He calls Ziba back in and gives him some instructions: "Ziba, Saul's estate now belongs to Mephibosheth. Your sons and

servants [and Ziba had plenty of each!] will work the farm for him, because he can't do it for himself. And Mephibosheth will live here in Jerusalem and eat at my table as a son."

At this point we don't know exactly what Ziba is thinking, but we can guess he wasn't thrilled at the prospect of losing control of the estate to this crippled son of Jonathan. Nevertheless, Ziba played his cards close to his chest and obeyed the king. We will see in the coming chapters how he will try later to manipulate his way back into control.

And that brings us to the last part of this story:

5. Inheritance (vv. 11b-13)

As promised, Mephibosheth became head of the estate according to the last part of verse 12: "And all who lived in Ziba's house became Mephibosheth's servants." But more than that, Mephibosheth became "like one of the king's sons," taking his place at the king's table (v. 11). Now you might be thinking, "Well, David didn't really take any risks here, because Mephibosheth is crippled. A crippled man would not be able to lead an uprising against the king. This was a completely safe move that cost David nothing." But not so fast. Notice the first part of verse 12: "And Mephibosheth had a young son, whose name was Mica." Yes, it is true that Mephibosheth himself could never take on David, but that does not change the fact that Saul's line continues through him, and as long as it does, that line could potentially become a threat to the house of David. David shows steadfast love to Jonathan's descendants in spite of the great political risk to himself and his own descendants, because he is a man who keeps covenant. And as it turns out, 1 Chronicles 8:34 and 9:40 show us that Mica, son of Mephibosheth (also known as Merib-baal) will carry on the line of Jonathan's descendants that will stretch into many more generations, all because of the covenant faithfulness of David.

In reflecting on this story, notice how nothing in Mephibosheth himself commended him to David. Politically, he was David's enemy who represented a potential threat to his rule and his house. Physically, he had nothing to offer in terms of service. He was crippled. As a man living in exile in Lo-debar, David didn't even know before this that Mephibosheth existed. The one and only factor that gave Mephibosheth a warrant to David's kindness was the covenant David had made with Jonathan. That's it. But it was the covenant that drove David's actions, bringing to Mephibosheth an inheritance to which he had no other claim at all.

In this story, David is a type of Christ. And this story nurtures our faith in Christ by pointing us to his covenant faithfulness to us. And so now we come to a word of application:

The covenant love of Christ for us is our only hope, and it is all the hope we need.

Think about it: What possible claim do you have to sonship in God's house and inheritance in God's kingdom? You have none. Born guilty sinners in Adam, we are all enemies of God, exiles from our home in his house, with nothing to offer him that could commend us to his favor. And yet, according to Romans 5:10: "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life." Our God is one who extends covenant love that turns enemies into sons. You have no hope outside the covenant God has made through the blood of his Son, but in that covenant you have all the hope and security that you will ever need. If you are bound to God by the covenant ratified by the cross of Christ, you have an absolute claim to salvation, sonship, and inheritance.

The love of God for his covenant people is powerfully demonstrated in a way that you wouldn't expect in Malachi 1:2-5. The setting is about 100 years after Judah's return from exile and rebuilding of the temple. Decades upon decades had passed since that time, and yet the great promises of a coming Messiah and a renewed kingdom of Israel remained unfulfilled. As a result, the people had become disillusioned, spiritually lethargic, and doubtful about the love of God for them. Verse 2 reads, "I have loved you," says the LORD. But you say, 'How have you loved us?'" Prove it, God! What have you done to show that you have loved us? His answer is astonishing: "Is not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD. Yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert. If Edom [that's Esau's descendants] says, 'We are shattered, but we will rebuild the ruins,' the LORD of hosts says, 'They may build, but I will tear down, and they will be called "the wicked country" and "the people with whom the LORD is angry forever."' Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, "Great is the LORD beyond the border of Israel!"'" Here's the essence of the Lord's argument: "Do you want to see how I have loved you, Israel? Look what I did to Edom. I have set my face against them for judgment and destruction. And there is nothing, humanly speaking, that distinguishes you from them. Esau was Jacob's twin brother! The only thing that explains why you too have not been destroyed is my covenant love for you." When you take in the weight of that argument, it moves you to a depth of gratitude like nothing else can.

When you ponder the fact that the only thing that distinguishes you from those who will end up in Hell is not something in you, but it is God's covenant love for you, manifested in the death of Christ for your salvation, it overwhelms you with wonder at grace. It fills you with joy of being loved with an effective, saving love. And it gives you a security that nothing else can. I think it is hard for us to let this reality of God's covenant love for us in Christ settle in our hearts. Sin has damaged us, leaving us with trust issues. We are such legalists at heart that we can't fathom a love that takes absolutely no regard for what distinguishes us from others. We don't instinctively trust the love of God for us or the security that it gives. And that is why we need the Spirit of God to minister the Word of God to our hearts. Consider the amazing argument of Romans 8:31-32: "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" Do you hear the argument? If God has already given up his Son to death for us, how will he not also give us all things with him? In other words, giving up his Son is by far more difficult to imagine. It is the greater act. And if God did even that, how much more will he give us every blessing of our inheritance! What this argument is telling us is that if Christ died for you, nothing can stop God's redemptive purpose for you. Christ will not fail to receive the reward for which he suffered: a fully redeemed people.

In the words of August Toplady's hymn:

A debtor to mercy alone, of covenant mercy I sing;
No fear with Thy righteousness on, my person and offering to bring.
The terrors of law and of God with me can have nothing to do;
My Savior's obedience and blood hide all my transgressions from view.

The work which his goodness began the arm of his strength will complete;

His promise is yea and amen and never was forfeited yet.
Things future, nor things that are now, nor all things below or above,
Can make him his purpose forego or sever my soul from his love.

My name from the palms of his hands eternity will not erase;
Impressed on his heart it remains in marks of indelible grace.
Yes I to the end shall endure as sure as the earnest is given:
More happy, but not more secure, the glorified spirits in heaven.

Think of your loved ones who are now with the Lord, having finished the race and kept the faith. Think of the absolute security they have with Christ, free from all trial, suffering, temptation, and sin. In the arms of Christ, the devil cannot reach them, and the sufferings of this world cannot touch them. Now consider this: if Christ is your Mediator, if his covenant love rests on you, then you are every bit as secure as they are. You are not as happy as they are yet, but the grip of Christ around you is no less strong than around them. As Paul says in Romans 8:38-39: "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." And that is the *hesed* that is our only hope. Amen.