



“Come to the Table”

2 Samuel 9:1–13 (NRSV)

Who will you invite to the table?

On Wednesday night, January 16, 1991, I sat in my apartment in Durham, NC, alone, watching US and Coalition Forces bomb Iraq. Four days later, I found myself standing in the chancel of the magnificent Duke University Chapel, serving Holy Communion. I vividly remember the Chapel Choir singing a haunting version of “Let us Break Bread Together” during the

distribution. When they finished, there weren’t many dry eyes as we all came to the table to pray. It was the “together” part that got to me, that all of us were called by God to the table, his table. I was only twenty-five at the time, afraid for my friends and classmates in the military—and our world. Looking back, that morning was the beginning of a long and meandering education at the table with Jesus.

I know of no story in all of Scripture that better illustrates “coming to the table” better than that of mighty King David and a frightened, crippled young man named Mephibosheth.

A bit of background

About a thousand years before Jesus, God’s prophet Samuel anointed Saul as the first king of the united tribes of Israel, who quickly proved to be a disappointment. He was disobedient to God and given to making rash decisions. Once, Saul was even ready to kill his own son, Jonathan, for breaking one of Saul’s battle orders. Only the intervention of the soldiers saved Jonathan’s life. After Saul disobeyed God a second time, we are told that “The LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel” (1 Samuel 15:35). God told his prophet Samuel to anoint a young shepherd named David as the next king of Israel. Not knowing that God had chosen David to be his successor, Saul welcomed David into the royal court as a musician. But after David defeated the Philistine giant, Goliath, the mentally and spiritually deteriorating Saul began to suspect that David might be the one to whom God had given Saul’s kingdom. And Saul turned against David.

Jonathan, Saul’s son, first met David soon after David’s victory over Goliath and the Philistines. Like so many others during David’s long life, Jonathan must have been drawn to the charismatic young man. We are told that Jonathan’s soul was bound to David’s. Jonathan loved David as he loved himself. Jonathan made a covenant with David, even handing over his royal robe and sword. It is important for us to see that Jonathan offered all this to David without even a hint of reciprocity or reward. Jonathan’s covenantal friendship was a gift freely given. Indeed, this pretty much characterized their relationship. Twice more, Jonathan would make a covenant with David and only on the third occasion are we explicitly told that the covenant was made mutually. It is this mutual covenant that is the focus of Mephibosheth’s story.

A crushing exile

To be born the grandson of a king. Little Mephibosheth (don’t you wonder if he had a nickname) was surely the darling of the entire royal household and all the people of Israel. You can bet that he was adored and doted upon. Yet, the boy’s life quickly took a tragic turn. At the age of five, his grandfather, Saul, and father, Jonathan, were killed in battle against Israel’s arch enemies, the Philistines. Fearing that the Philistines would march upon the palace, the royal household fled in panic. One of the nurses grabbed Mephibosheth but accidentally dropped the boy, permanently crippling him in both legs (2 Samuel 4:4). Though they made it away safely, things went from bad to worse, at least from the perspective of Saul’s family. David, whom Saul had tried to hunt down and kill, was made king over the tribe of Judah and eight years later was made king over all the tribes of Israel. He would have the power of life and death. Saul’s family was right to expect that

they were as good as dead, for that was the way the ancient world worked in the royal palaces: death to all potential rivals.

At the king's table

Jonathan's friendship with David had often been pretty one-sided. Twice, Jonathan had pledged himself to David without reciprocation. The pledges were Jonathan's freely given gifts. But on the third occasion, both men had made a covenant, the pledges had been mutual.

After David defeated Israel's enemies and conquered Jerusalem, he sought a way to keep his covenant with Jonathan and to show respect to Saul. So David asks Ziba, a long-time servant in Saul's household whether any of Saul's family still lived, so that David could extend mercy and kindness toward them. David might be a busy king, but there should always be time for mercy.

Ziba reveals to David that Jonathan's son has survived and is living in the home of Makir. By now, Mephibosheth is about twenty.¹ Mephibosheth is old enough to know that to the king, at least to most kings, he is as good as a "dead dog" (2 Samuel 9:8). So, when he is summoned before the king, Mephibosheth perhaps expects that David plans on getting rid of all potential opposition, as was customary with many rulers then and now. David, however, ensures the continuation of Saul's household by inviting Mephibosheth to eat at David's table, giving all of Saul's estate to him, and asking the young man to live in the palace. In so doing, David takes Mephibosheth in like a son.

After the revolt

In an ironic turn, it is not Saul's household that poses a threat to David's monarchy, but his own. David's son, Absalom, turns on his father after David refuses to take action when another of David's sons (Absalom's half-brother, Amnon) rapes Absalom's full sister, Tamar. Two years later, Absalom would kill Amnon himself and eventually lead an attempted coup d'état against his father. Indeed, David has to flee eastward from Jerusalem where he gathers together forces loyal to himself. As David flees the city, he runs into Ziba, Mephibosheth's servant (2 Samuel 16:1-4). When David asks about Mephibosheth, Ziba tells him that his master has stayed in Jerusalem, expecting that with David's departure he will get back Saul's kingdom. Not surprisingly given this word of betrayal, David gives to Ziba all that belongs to Mephibosheth.

The Book of Samuel

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel are one long literary work. Ancient Hebrew scrolls could not hold the entire book of Samuel, so the book was copied onto two scrolls. This is true of the book of Kings and the book of Chronicles as well.

However, it is not true of New Testament books such as 1 & 2 Corinthians or 1 & 2 Thessalonians which are all different letters written by the apostle Paul.

The book of Samuel tells the story of Israel's transition from the rule of judges to a monarchy roughly 1,000 years before Jesus. During the time of the judges, the Israelites were organized into a loose confederation of the twelve tribes. Though God was to be the king of the Israelites, the people demanded a human king like everyone else had. Samuel warned the people that they did not understand the consequences of their demand for a king, but the people would not relent, and God let them have a king. The first was Saul. Under Saul, and then David, and then Solomon the twelve tribes were organized into a monarchy with centralized wealth and military power. Not only do kings emerge in Israel during this time, but also prophets. Israel's kings would not have the absolute freedom typical of kings in the ancient near east. Instead, the kings of Israel were subject to God and to the covenant. Israel's prophets would hold the kings (and the people!) to account. The prophet Samuel brought God's word to King Saul. Nathan did the same for David.

¹ Putting together a chronology is a little difficult, but at least ten years had passed and probably more. Time did not diminish David's desire to be faithful to his covenant

David’s army puts down the rebellion, though it is a hollow victory. Absalom is killed in battle after getting tangled in the branches of an oak tree. Later, David would weep for him, saying “Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Samuel 18:33).

Upon returning to Jerusalem to reclaim his throne, David encounters Mephibosheth (2 Samuel 19:24-30), who is unkempt and generally filthy. When David asks him why he did not flee Jerusalem with those who were loyal to David, Mephibosheth says he tried but couldn’t because Ziba took off with the donkey, leaving the crippled man with no way to leave. Mephibosheth throws himself on David’s mercy, reminding him that he had invited Mephibosheth to eat at David’s table.

Evidently, Absalom’s rebellion and death have taken a huge toll on David. He doesn’t even try to sort out who is telling him the truth about Mephibosheth’s role in the rebellion, Ziba or Mephibosheth. Instead, David simply divides the estate in two, giving half to each of them.

The story of Mephibosheth at David’s table is a story about covenant. God made a covenant with his people and would be faithful to it, even if the people would not. David made a covenant with Jonathan and would be faithful to it even after Jonathan’s death. It is also a story of return from exile, one of the Israelites’ favorite stories. It is the story of the Jews’ exile in Babylon and their own hoped-for return from exile. It is the story told by Jesus about a father and a prodigal son. It is a story of grace and kindness, as Bruce Birch drives home:

Seen in the light of the hopeful meaning this episode may have held for exiles, a seemingly odd episode of David’s loyalty and kindness becomes a testimony to divine loyalty and kindness. We read as those who constantly find ourselves cut off from our full future—existing as remnants with little hope for fullness of life except for the *hesed* of God, a divine sovereign who restores us to wholeness and invites us to sit at table.

Medieval and Renaissance Christian artists sometimes pictured David and Mephibosheth in the paintings, stained-glass windows, and sculptures they produced. Often when they did, the food they depicted on the king’s table was the bread and the cup of the eucharistic meal. David’s kindness was understood as God’s kindness (v. 3), and the king’s table to which we are all invited is ultimately God’s table.²

Daily Bible Readings

More on family and table from the story of David

Monday	2 Samuel 11-12	David’s adultery with Bathsheba
Tuesday	2 Samuel 13-14	The rape of Tamar; the murder of Amnon
Wednesday	2 Samuel 14	Absalom’s return to Jerusalem
Thursday	2 Samuel 15:1 – 16:14	Absalom’s revolt is born, and David flees Jerusalem
Friday	2 Samuel 18:1 – 19:8b	The defeat and death of Absalom; David’s grief
Saturday	2 Samuel 19:8b-34	David’s return to Jerusalem and his encounter with Mephibosheth

² Bruce C. Birch, “The First and Second Books of Samuel,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), 1276.