



Fall and Rise

2 Samuel 9

Grace Church | 8.14.22

This morning we come back to examine where in the Scriptures we find an example of another one of our core values. If you were not here last week I want to reiterate that these values are shared language meant to help us define together what it means to follow Jesus' great commission, which is the mission of ours and every church. He commands us to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them. So what are the convictions that will keep us grounded in that mission into the future? Last week we said that that first conviction, that first value, is Biblical, Historic, Christianity. Which just means this: we are grounded in a faith that has been passed down to us. It's our charge then as a church to guard the gospel of grace, and also to guard our love. This week our value is: *Christ-Centered Community*.

Community is the basis of life. The triune God has never been deficient of loving community, as the Father has eternally been loving the Son by the Spirit. From the beginning, God said: "it is not good for man to be alone". And when he decides to showcase his glory in the world, it's a people he calls to himself, not a person. We come to the house of God because we desire community. The question is not then: "Is the church a community?" but rather "what kind of community is the church?". Today in our text we find some answers to that question in the form of a story that is all about undeserved kindness. This small story in 2 Samuel 9 is actually in many ways a microcosm of the much greater story of God. Out of sheer grace and a commitment to his covenant love, he brings needy sinners into his household. What is a Christ-Centered Community? Perhaps we could say many things, but today we will say it is: **1) A community of need; 2) A community of honor; and 3) A community of covenant.**

A Community of Need

Recently a Christian media critic named Brett McCracken wrote that in the last year it seems we have a cultural fascination with a certain kind of story which he called the "rise and fall" narrative. This isn't just rags to riches, but rags to riches *back* to rags.¹ Hindsight being 20/20, more media than ever was produced in the last year critiquing and finding entertainment value from businesses, personalities, politicians, and even churches which collapsed seemingly overnight. One of those chronicles the Elizabeth Holmes, founder of med-tech business Theranos, who lied her way into business contracts she couldn't support. Another is the story of WeWork, the show is

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/rise-and-fall-narratives/>



literally called “WeCrashed”, a company that went from being valued at 47 billion to just 5 billion in less than a year. Why are we so fascinated with these stories? One reason, says Mcracken, is that we get entertainment from seeing “justice” come to those who we think deserve it, especially rich elites or powerful people. “We relish seeing at least some wicked people get caught and punished, even if we’re less enthused by our own deserved judgment.”

The tragedy of Saul is a rise and fall narrative unlike few others. No one rises to prominence among God’s chosen people like Saul, the first king of Israel, and no one crashes quite like him. He crashes so hard, all the way to the point of madness and suicide, that perhaps we feel a sense of pleasure from it. But the tragedy of Saul also includes other tragedies. It’s his entire family that gets the edge of the sword, not just him, including his cunning and honorable son Jonathan. My guess in our exposure to the Biblical story of the first king of Israel, little tears are shed for Jonathan. More riveting is the fall of Saul. But today we find in our story another man whose life was utterly changed on the day when both Saul and Jonathan were killed in battle. If we are not careful, we miss the drama of his life. His name is Mephibosheth, but his story is not one of rise and fall. His story is the opposite: fall and rise. See, his story begins in 2 Samuel 4, which tells of how his whole family perished, save him.

Jonathan, the son of Saul, had a son who was crippled in his feet. He was five years old when the news about Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel, and his nurse took him up and fled, and as she fled in her haste, he fell and became lame. And his name was Mephibosheth.

There is the fall. Not only is Mephibosheth now lame and viewed as useless in his culture, he is orphaned, outcast. As the grandson of the overthrown king, he is an enemy of the state. All the riches of his fathers house are taken, and he grows up in exile. His fall comes not after a meteoric rise like Saul, but at the very beginning of his young life. Mephibosheth’s life was shaped by his accident. When he is first mentioned both in 2 Samuel 4 and here in **9:3**, he is not called first by his name, but by his weakness. I believe it is Mephibosheth who is mentioned in 1 Chornicles 9 as the son of Jonathan and father of Micah, but in that text his name is not Mephibosheth—it’s Meribaal. Mephibosheth means “severe dishonor” or “seething shame”. It’s likely then that this is a nickname. The place whenever Mephibosheth hides out, we are told is in **verse 5**, “**Lo-debar**.” Literally that means “no thing.” He is a nothing man living in a nothing, nowhere place. His whole life, from his physical handicap, to his forced reclusion, to his poverty—it is marked by severe dishonor. His name itself shout’s his shame, preaches his weakness.

David has just been anointed King over not just Judah but over all of Israel. His enemies are scattered. The ark of the Lord has been brought into his new capital. God has reaffirmed his love and covenant for him. Everything is perfect—but there is one thing he cannot forget. He promised Jonathan that he would not forget his family line if he ever became king. But David is forced with a decision. Conventional wisdom would say that the duty of the new king is to finish off the royal line of the last king, to make sure there are no claims to his throne. No one would have batted an eye if



in **9:1** we read that David was looking for the last of the house of Saul in order to destroy him, not show kindness to him.

When David sends for him, he is not naive, and he knows it is likely that he goes to his death. It's why he falls on his face and "pays homage" to David in **verse 6**. He wants it to be incredibly clear that he is nothing, no threat to the king. He fears for his life, which is why David consoles him in **verse 7**. Image though in your mind's eye, the crippled man, perhaps carried in, maybe dragged, painstakingly, into the throne room. He doesn't have to go far to the floor—but when he falls down, he is powerless to rise again. Mephibosheth is the lame, poor, outcast, enemy of the triumphant king. He is the last remnant of failure. He is, in his own words in **verse 8**, "a dead dog". He was once the royal prince, fed and cared for at the King's table. Now he begs for his life.

So our first point comes less from the story of David and Mephibosheth and more from the background that makes the story special. I know we like Rise and Fall stories, because we like justice. But let's put ourselves not in the position of the high king David, nor revel in the tragedy of Saul, but in the place of lowly Mephibosheth. The story of the family of God is not a story that begins with a quick ascent. It's a story that begins like Mephibosheth's, with a fall. Adam, that common ancestor of humanity, dropped us. We are lame, spiritually broken—that is the beginning of the story. And not only that, we are born as enemies of the true king. We are not part of his line, but the line of the fallen king Adam. We don't even have to mention that we are given over to the same sin of Adam to be able to justify God wiping us away and starting afresh. The disobedience of Adam and Eve in the garden was an attempted takeover of God's throne. He would be just in not letting any son of Adam or daughter of Eve ever try again.

In order to rightly see ourselves as a "Christ-centered community", we must first see ourselves as a community of need. Our story is not "rise and fall", but "fall and rise". It doesn't matter if you are able bodied and strong. It doesn't matter if you have to be carried in by a cane, walker, or wheelchair. It doesn't matter if your bank-account is full and your portfolio diversified. Whether you own the deed to your house or barely make rent—none of us can escape our spiritual need on our own. Like Mephibosheth, we were born under the wrong banner.

When I talk about the community of need, some people feel awkward, or get defensive. Aren't you just being a downer, encouraging us to embrace our neediness for God? Where is the joy, the freedom? But friends—we never rise above dependence. Joy is not found first in accomplishing much for God, but in being satisfied in God. And how can we become satisfied people if we never expose our thirst? When was the last time you became "gloriously weak", and confessed not only your dark hearted sin, but those insecurities and fears that keep you up at night? When was the last time you really opened up to a brother or a sister and said: "I am desperate for Jesus"? Or this: when was the last time you received that kind of confession with compassion and gladness and not a sense of dreadful duty?



A Christ-Centered community is a community of need, because when we are emptied of our own self-esteem and begin to esteem ourselves as dependent children of God, our belonging is formed on the basis of the one who meets our needs: Jesus Christ.

A Community of Honor

That leads us to our second point. When we realize all of us are spiritually needy, that none of us start from an advantage when it comes to justification, then it should change the way we act with one another, and change the way we see the gospel of Jesus working in our community. Go back to the decision David is faced with. Will he secure his throne by wiping out Saul's line, or will he honor his promise to Jonathan?

Instead of wiping out his enemies, David welcomes one into his home. He lays down his right to the security of his throne. It's not simply that he waits for the opportunity to come to him, rather, he seeks it out. He asks for it, **verse 1**. And when Ziba mentions Mephibosheth, David is eager to send for him. What is David's disposition towards this lowly man? Perhaps an enemy of a king would demand respect if he were mighty and fearful. But David is dealing here with a lame and worthless enemy. And still, his disposition towards him is not of shame, but honor. I want you to look in the details with me, and marvel here.

Notice the change in pronoun the author makes. When David is speaking to Shiba, he is called "the king". When David turns to speak to Mephibosheth, it is just "David". The text is hinting at a personal touch, of warmth and respect. Notice too how David responds to Mephibosheth's no doubt difficult gesture of laying himself prostrate on the floor in homage. He calls his name. His name, normally a marker of his shame and worthlessness, is now used to honor him. Before he is a servant, an enemy, or a cripple, to David, Mephibosheth is a person, worthy to be called by his name. By calling him by his shameful name, and then honoring him, he is replacing his shame with honor and redeeming his name. His first words after that are to dissuade his fear, an offering of protection, with a three fold honor in **verse 7**, which serves as the climax of the story.

First, the honor of love. He says "I will show you kindness", which is that shapeshifting Hebrew word *hesed*, meaning lovingkindness, covenant love, faithful love, steadfastness. David is under no obligation to show kindness—but he does. He gives love to Mephibosheth, and in doing so says to him: you are worth loving. That is an undeserved honor. **Second, the honor of redemption.** Mephibosheth was born a prince—an inheritor of the throne of ISrael. That inheritance was ripped from him, due to the sin of his ancestor Saul. So what does David do? He restores to him all that he had lost, all that was due him. **Thirdly, the honor of adoption.** Not only does Mephibosheth get back all that he had before the fall, but he receives even more. Before his fall, he was in the line of the wicked king. Now, he is offered a seat at the King's table, the very place where the King's sons sit. But it is not at the table of the failure Saul, but the blessed David he sits. For the rest of his days, he is under the protection of the king. What a reversal—no wonder he can only respond in awe and self-deprecation! This honor makes no good sense, it is beyond belief. In **verses 9-11** we see David



fulfills his promises. The crippled orphan has become the honored son. Even his own son, Micah, becomes like the king's grandson—the grafting of one family line into the other. He is still crippled in his feet, **verse 13**, but now longer is his life defined by shame. He is needy, but he is honored.

Such is the trajectory of the family of God. When we come with our need to one another, we welcome one another. We roll out the red-carpet. We open up our table, our home, our inheritance, our very lives and livelihood. Paul tells us straight in Romans 12:10; “Outdo one another in showing honor.” Is there a sense of above and beyond, of give and take, of true and honest honor, in our church? Some of my favorite stories of our church are when people who are new to town tell me: “I stuck around because I was welcomed. In my need, the church supplied.”

Why? What could cause a community to act in this way? It's not southern hospitality that pushes us to this. It's not guilt, not a desire to prove ourselves. Those things last for a moment. What will truly create a competitive culture of honor is not the shame we feel when we think others more holy than us. What creates honor is when we are overcome with the story of King Jesus that this one is pointing to.

See, when God called us to his throne, we had every right to fear destruction. He is the conquering king. But King Jesus shows us the honor of love. He says: “I loved you before the foundation of the world.” He honors us by loving us while we were his enemies, while we were unlovely. He also gives us the honor of redemption. As descendants of Adam and Eve, we are royal—given a command to take dominion over the Earth, to represent God's kingdom on earth. But our royal line is squandered in sin. In Christ, God restores our rightful inheritance and our created mandate. Jesus tells us: Go and make disciples, and what he is really saying is “go and do what you are created to do”. Not only that, we are shown the honor of adoption. To be grafted into the family line of God is better than to be found in Adam, even if Adam never sinned. The fall into sin was evil, but it was a happy fall, because it created the opportunity for the adoption of God's children into his family, to not just walk with him in a garden of his creation but to sit at his table and live in his house, forever.

Now, we may still feel lame in both of our feet. We may stumble. We will certainly never escape our need. But do not forget that the basis of your entire life is the summons of the King. He sought you, brought you from the place of no thing, from a name of shame. And the gospel is he has honored you, his enemy, to the place of his beloved son. If there is one reality that can melt our hard-hearted selfishness and make us a people who outdo one another in showing honor, it is that one. That is Christ-centered community.

A Community of Covenant

Now we end with the kidden motivation of this great news of the honoring of the needy. What is it that causes a great king to show kindness like this? Think back to when you were a child, or if you are a child in your parent's house now. There are times that seem more wise to approach your parents, aren't there? Especially if you are coming with a request. If you are wanting to watch a



movie on a weeknight, your best chance of success is to ask when they are in a good mood, perhaps right after you have done something to please them or worked up some favor. This is often how we approach the love of God. God honors us, but only when he is in a certain mood. We forget that it is not passions or emotions or even our good works that motivates God's generosity in welcoming us to his table. It's something far more secure—it's covenant.

This passage is all about covenant. Look at **verse 1**. David's desire to show covenant love, *hesed*, is because of his covenant with Jonathan. Because of their love for one another, David and Jonathan vowed in the blood of sacrifice, were either one of them to become king, they would not destroy their family line. So when Mephibosheth is shocked at David's kindness, what does David attribute it to? His covenant love for Jonathan.

It is not pity that causes David to show kindness to Mephibosheth, it is faithfulness. Not only is David showing faithfulness to his covenant with Jonathan, he is showing faithfulness to his covenant with God. Mosaic Law prohibited a lame descendent of Aaron from serving as a priest, but it also commanded that he be provided with the bread of the priest's table. David was applying this concept to the least of these. As one author puts it: "if a lame man was permitted to feed on Yahweh's bread, a lame man was permitted to feed on the king's bread."² Covenant keeping means keeping the covenant law: in Israel, the needy are provided for.

What is it that rends God's heart to save for needy sinners? What is it that stirs the compassion of his people for one another? It is not simply pity—but covenant. God is not reluctant to welcome us into his family in our crippled state—he is eager to show kindness based on the faithful covenant-keeping of Jesus. So neither are we reluctant to communal love, but seeking it out. Better news is that stability of our community is not linked to our covenant keeping, but to Jesus'. When we take the Lord's supper, that is what we are proclaiming: that Jesus kept and will always keep his covenant promise to us in his shed blood and broken body. The work of Jesus is ultimately what unifies us, and creates in us radical love.

Can you imagine the reaction of Mephibosheth, how he conducted himself in David's court after this? For months he must have been living on cloud 9. Forgiven much, love much. We get a picture of his behavior after this. Let's end here in 2 Samuel 19, and notice Mephibosheth's posture, the way he acts and speaks:

And Mephibosheth the son of Saul came down to meet the king. He had neither taken care of his feet nor trimmed his beard nor washed his clothes, from the day the king departed until the day he came back in safety. And when he came to Jerusalem to meet the king, the king said to him, "Why did you not go with me, Mephibosheth?" He answered, "My lord, O king, my servant deceived me, for your servant said to him, 'I will saddle a donkey for myself, that I may ride on it and go with the king.' For your servant is lame. He has slandered your servant to my lord the king. But my lord the king is like the angel of God; do therefore

² Peter Leithart, *A Son To Me*



what seems good to you. For all my father's house were but men doomed to death before my lord the king, but you set your servant among those who eat at your table. What further right have I, then, to cry to the king?" And the king said to him, "Why speak any more of your affairs? I have decided: you and Ziba shall divide the land." And Mephibosheth said to the king, "Oh, let him take it all, since my lord the king has come safely home."

Here it is David that is in trouble, and Mephibosheth mourns. Mephibosheth is deceived by Ziba, his servant, and taken advantage of, but he does not press his rights. He would rather his king's favor than his share of the land. Mephibosheth has his priorities straight. He knows who he owes his life to. And what it does in him is creates a heart of humility, of deference, of love. He outdoes even David in showing honor.

If we grasp our trajectory in the gospel, like Mephibosheth, our hearts will soften too. A normal Community Group, those quiet times you invite a church member to your home, those uneventful times where your kids play at the park together: all of that can be Christ-centered. Not because your brother or sister in Christ is amazing at honoring you and making you feel loved. They will fail those expectations. Our community can be Christ-centered not because we always live up to the standards of Christ, but because you share a common trajectory into Christ. In the new covenant, the story of the people of God is not rise and fall, but like Mephibosheth, fall and rise. You are very needy, you are unspeakably honored in Christ, and you are secure in the covenant. In short, we are a community *in Christ*—and that makes all the difference.

