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GOOD NEWS FOR DEAD DOGS 2 Samuel 9

A few years back Will Smith starred in a comedy movie called *Hitch*. He played a dating relationship expert named Alex who becomes interested in a woman named Sara. He asks her out and sets up a creative date. He takes her on a jet ski to Ellis Island where he has arranged with a friend who works there to give them a private tour. He has set up a touching, emotional moment for Sara. He takes her to a display case containing a ledger that has the signatures of past immigrants who were entering the United States. One of the signatures was that of her great, great grandfather, Juan. When she sees it she is stunned, then tears begin to flow. But suddenly she shouts and becomes obviously very upset and runs away. Now Alex is stunned, and he says to his friend, “I saw that going differently in my mind.”

The scene didn’t go the way he planned and the audience expected. Her reaction was a total surprise. It turned out that Sara’s ancestor Juan was a vicious criminal who had fled to America to escape punishment for his horrific crimes. It was a part of their history that her family just tried to forget.

Movies often use the unexpected surprise as a plot element. I remember clearly the moment in *The Empire Strikes Back* when Darth Vader said, “Luke, I am your father.” I had the same reaction that Luke had. No, that can’t be. Even after the movie was over that seemed so totally out of left field that I thought that it was not true. Today we are going to look at an incident from David’s life that was totally unexpected. It wasn’t a surprise for David, but everyone else thought, “I saw that going differently in my mind.” The story is not merely ancient history but a reminder of a completely unexpected plot twist in our lives today. Let’s look at 2 Samuel 9.

DAVID LOOKED FOR SAUL’S HEIR

By chapter 9 David was quite secure as Israel’s king. He has established his palace in Jerusalem, he defeated the Philistines and put an end to their threats, he has been told by God that his descendants will rule on Israel’s throne forever, and in chapter 8 he won victories over several other enemies thus establishing security and peace for his kingdom.

David was feeling safe from all threats both foreign and domestic, and had the time and energy to turn his attention to some other important, though less pressing,

matters. Chief among them was a promise he had made to his best friend, Jonathan, many years earlier. In 1 Samuel 20 Jonathan, certain that David would be the next king of Israel, said in verses 14-15, “show me unfailing kindness like the Lord’s kindness as long as I live, so that I may not be killed, 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.”

David had readily agreed to show kindness to Jonathan and his descendants. Now God had cut off every one of David’s enemies. So David recalls the promise he made to Jonathan. Jonathan requested that promise from David because he knew how things worked in the world of that day. In his book, *Looking On The Heart*, Dale Ralph Davis wrote, “When a new regime or dynasty came to power, the name of the game was purge...The new king always needed to solidify his position. It was conventional political policy: solidification by liquidation. Everybody knew it, everybody believed it, everybody practiced it.”

Jonathan, the heir apparent to Saul’s throne, wanted David to spare him and his family out of kindness due to the friendship they had, rather than do what was expected, which was to wipe them out. David gave his word that he would indeed show kindness to Jonathan, and now it was time to fulfill his promise. There was a man named Ziba who had been a high ranking servant of Saul that was still alive. Most of Saul’s family and regime has been destroyed in the civil war, but this guy was still alive. David wanted to know if there was anyone left from Saul’s family and he figured if anyone would know then Ziba would.

When Ziba was called to the palace and asked if there were any Saul descendants still alive, his first thought would have been that David was looking to finish them off. In the thinking of that day if you leave anyone with a familial connection with the previous regime alive it was tantamount to leaving some cancer floating around in your body. Eventually it would come back to haunt you.

So David made it clear that his intent was far from the usual. In verse 3 he said, “Is there no one still alive from the house of Saul to whom I can show God’s kindness?” He wanted to assure Ziba that his intent was purely to do good, not to eliminate anyone he found. He made it clear that it was God’s kindness that he wanted to show. The word that he used to refer to God’s kindness is an important word in the Old Testament. It is *chesedh*. It has no exact English equivalent. It includes the concepts of love, loyalty, covenant, faithfulness, grace and kindness.

David had great love for his friend, Jonathan, and it grieved him that he was gone. I think it saddened him that in the process of God replacing Saul nearly all of Saul's family had been killed. He wished that he could find some way to express his love and respect for Jonathan especially, by pouring out *chesedh* on one of his heirs.

SAUL'S HEIR HAD REASON TO FEAR

It turns out that Jonathan had a son that had survived all the upheaval. His name was Mephibosheth, which I think would make a great name for a rock band. "Put your hands together and welcome ...Mephibosheth!" Maybe not. The most noteworthy thing about this sole remaining child of Jonathan's was that he was lame in both feet according to verse 3.

We learn about how that happened in 2 Samuel 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." The news referred to in that verse was that the army of Israel had just suffered a disastrous defeat inflicted by the Philistines. King Saul and his sons had been killed and what was left of Israel's shattered army had scattered. There was big time fear that the invading Philistines would rampage throughout Israel and no one would be safe. In particular remaining members of the royal house would be high value targets.

I've read a number of books about the chaos that erupts when a city's or nation's defenses have collapsed and an invading army is expected to arrive at any moment. There is confusion, societal breakdown, panic, wild rumors and an overall atmosphere of fear. I've just finished reading a book that described the fall of Manila when the Japanese attacked the Philippines early in World War II. It depicted exactly the kind of panic and chaos I referred to. It is not hard to imagine how in that kind of panic a nanny might stumble and drop the child she was carrying.

That's what happened to Mephibosheth. He was seriously injured in the fall. He was permanently crippled. We are not told exactly what happened to him. My guess, and it is only a guess, is that he broke bones in both legs or feet, perhaps his ankles. Those breaks did not heal properly, likely because the family was on the run and did not have the opportunity for proper treatment. The result was the poor boy was crippled for life.

By chapter 9 perhaps as many as 15 or more years have passed since that terrible day. Saul's grandson, Mephibosheth, now in his 20's has a son named Mica and he is living in a place called Lo Debar. The name Lo Debar means "no pasture." One scholar said you could paraphrase it "barren place." The name sparks a memory for me from when Toby was a senior in high school. His football team had a game on the road against a school I'd never heard of called Lucerne Valley High School. I had no clue where that was. I had seen dairy products from Lucerne dairy and I knew that Lucerne is a picturesque city in Switzerland. I figured this must be a place named after that town because it was reminiscent of it. I pictured a bucolic setting of lush green pastures populated with contented cows. I couldn't have been more wrong. To get to Lucerne Valley you drive 3 hours north to the middle of nowhere then you turn right and drive east for a half hour. There are no pastures there. There is no dairy there. It is as lush and pastoral as the back side of the moon. The weather just isn't as good. It is a desolate, blazing hot desert. It's the kind of place that makes you long for a beautiful oasis like Bakersfield. Yeah, it's that bad. It is Lo Debar.

What was Mephibosheth, a member of a royal family, doing in Israel's version of Lucerne Valley? One theory is that he had convinced a group of investors to create a luxury desert resort there complete with hotel, villas, condos, spa, restaurants and a golf course but the project had failed and filed for bankruptcy. However most current scholars doubt that theory. What he was doing was staying off the royal radar. He was hiding in a place so undesirable he figured no one would ever look there.

Mephibosheth knew that his entire family had been wiped out and that David's people had some involvement in that. He figured his best chance for continued existence was for David to have no idea that he even was alive. If his presence ever became known to David he had a shorter life expectancy than a mayfly, whose typical life span is 24 hours. For him, safety was found in anonymity.

Mephibosheth was watched over by a man named Makir who seems to have been a terrific guy. He shows up later in 2 Samuel 17:27. David was on the run during a second civil war. At the time he appeared to be in jeopardy of losing the war and his life. Three men showed up bringing resources to aid him. One of them was Makir of Lo Debar.

DAVID SHOWED GREAT KINDNESS

It was a really bad day for Mephibosheth when representatives of David showed up in Lo Debar looking for him. At least that's what he thought. This was the farthest

thing from someone showing up at your door to deliver the shocking news that you've won \$10 million in the Publisher's Clearing House Sweepstakes. The poor guy probably figured that he was toast. After all that time of keeping a low profile, staying in the shadows, living in a place he figured no one would ever look for him, protected by people who were keeping his secret, somehow he's been burned. His cover has been blown and he no doubt feared that he was about to meet his fate at the hands of David. He was in for a big surprise. He would never have dreamed of what was about to happen.

What happened was better than winning the lottery. The first thing David said to Mephibosheth was, "Don't be afraid." He knew what the poor guy was expecting and he wanted to tell him he intended no harm for him. Then he made some amazing promises to him. First, all the land that Saul and his family had owned and lost, which would have been very sizable holdings, would be given to Mephibosheth. As of that moment he went from being a powerless, crippled nobody with close to zero resources, a fugitive hiding in Lo Debar, someone totally dependent on the kindness of others and always looking over his shoulder in fear that he would be discovered, to being a very wealthy man indeed.

Second, David promised that he would eat at the king's table. He would be an honored member of the king's court. He would be put in a position of enormous respect and influence. No one, literally no one, ever did anything like that. They would fear if you gave a member of the previous ruling family, a family you had to defeat in a civil war, such a position of influence, there was a great chance they would use it to plot against you. What would you estimate to be the chance that President Elect Trump (boy does that take some getting used to) will announce that because he has developed such great respect for his former rival, Hillary Clinton, he has asked her to join his cabinet and serve as Secretary of State? I would put the odds of that happening at about the same as an ice storm hitting Bora Bora. That's more likely than David's treatment of Bo was.

Bo's reaction tells how flabbergasted he was. In verse 8 he said, "What is your servant that you should notice a dead dog like me?" Dogs in our society are regarded and treated in ways much different than in David's day. We have dog parks, dog beaches, and now many restaurants have patios that allow you to bring your dog with you while you dine. A member of our extended family had to make a 3 plus hour flight that her dog was also going to have to take. She hated the idea of confining her poor dog to a crate in the cargo hold, so she registered him as a companion dog, thus gaining permission to bring him into the passenger cabin with her. It might not have been the smartest thing she's ever done. It turned out the dog

hated the beverage cart and kept trying to attack it. But worse, he didn't like flying, so he howled pretty much the entire flight. Her fellow passengers did not vote her most popular on the plane. Actually they voted her least likely to survive the flight.

None of that would ever have happened in David's culture. There were no dog parks, no dog beaches, no doggie treasure hunts, and had there been airplanes no companion dogs riding on them. Dogs were scavengers. They were not pampered pets. They were often seen as an undesirable nuisance. So Mephibosheth said he was like an annoying nuisance. Except he took it a step further. He said he was a "dead dog." How much value does a dead dog have? Even in our dog friendly culture, if you went to someone's house and found the dead carcass of their deceased beloved dog Rex curled up in front of the fireplace, what would you think? You would get out of there as quickly as possible because those people are out of their ever lovin' minds.

A dead dog is less than worthless. And Mephibosheth knew in David's eyes that's just what he was. We know because he was of the family of the previous king that automatically put him in the category of a dead dog. But to make it even worse, remember that poor Bo was also crippled. Did you notice the last words in this chapter? Verse 13 ends with, "and he was lame in both feet." Um, yeah, you already told us that in verse 3. What happened there? Did the writer have a senior moment and forget he had pointed that out previously? You know, as people get really old they sometimes have a tendency to repeat themselves, telling you the same several times. They tell you the same thing several times. Uh oh.

No, he wasn't making a mistake. He ended with this because he wanted to emphasize it. He said it again because he was marveling at it. Life in those days was considerably more brutal than it is in our culture. There were no wheelchairs. There was no Israel's With Disabilities Act that mandated access ramps and toilet stalls for the physically handicapped. To move from one place to another the crippled Mephibosheth depended on others completely. Most work was physical, so he couldn't do it. He couldn't get a desk job at Aleph Beth Gimel Corporation because such things did not exist. In that culture his disability made him helpless, worthless and utterly dependent on others.

Talk about feeling worthless because of being one armed. Such people were generally not invited into the king's inner circle because they were viewed as a reminder of unpleasantness and weakness that the king should not have to be exposed to. The writer is saying, "Can you believe this? That guy, the one lame in both feet, was invited into the king's inner circle! Did not see that coming."

IMPLICATIONS

I AM MEPHIBOSHETH

Oh no, Rick has either lost his mind or he has decided he believes in reincarnation and thinks he is the reincarnated Mephibosheth. I admit that there is a similarity because he's really lame, but I'm afraid he's lost it this time. No I haven't gone over the mental brink and I surely do not believe in reincarnation. I am not literally Mephibosheth, but he is a picture of me, and of you too.

Review who Bo was. He was royalty, a child of the royal family. But then he lost that position. His entire family lost their noble standing. In one fell swoop he actually was put into the position of being the enemy of the King. To make matters worse, he was crippled, unable to be of any real value because he could not work and produce anything. In the eyes of his culture he was worthless.

You and I in a sense are part of what was once a royal family. We were created in the image of God. We were the crowning achievement of his creation, designed to be noble beings living in his presence. In one fell swoop in Eden we lost all of that. We lost our royal position and ended up as enemies of the King of creation. Unfortunately we also are so spiritually crippled that we are truly worthless before God. We are dead dogs just like Mephibosheth.

Oh that is such a negative view. You obviously have issues of low self-esteem, and you are way too down on yourself and other people. We know that people are basically good. That's what our culture claims, but that is the opposite of what the holy and good God says. The last line of Isaiah 64:5 asks, "How then can we be saved?" The next verse explains why that's a problem. "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away."

Let's start with that "filthy rags" comment. I first think of dirty rags that maybe a mechanic has been using so they are grease stained, dirty and nasty. That's bad, but this is maybe a little worse. The Hebrew word translated "filthy" actually referred to the bodily fluids of a woman's menstrual cycle. So what this actually says is our righteous acts are like used feminine hygiene products.

Some object, claiming that sure maybe they have some sins, but they've never done anything that bad. They've never done any heinous or disgusting sins worthy of that description. That is very possibly true, but it fails to take note of what the verse actually says. It says our *righteous acts* are like used dirty panty liners. It wasn't referring to the bad things we do. It claims the good things we do are so

foul they are like filthy rags. In other words, at our best moments we are abhorrent to God. On our best days we are crippled, dead dogs before God. How can this be?

Jesus explained the problem in the Sermon on the Mount. He said the usual understanding of real goodness is you don't do bad things. You don't murder anyone for instance. But true goodness is deeper than that. If you are really good you don't even get mad at anyone. The usual view of good is you don't commit adultery, but real goodness is you don't even lust. Real goodness is you love even enemies, even people who cheat you, gossip about you and stab you in the back.

In other words true goodness is being so good that nothing but good exists in your mind and heart. Someone rudely cuts you off on the freeway and your instant reaction is to hope that person is having a good day and that he stays safe as he drives. I can choose to think that way, but that is not my initial reaction. A few months ago our daughter-in-law, Anna, was driving down a lane in a parking lot when an obviously wealthy woman in a very expensive vehicle backed out of her parking space without looking and hit Anna's car in the right rear fender. Anna has been greatly inconvenienced because the woman is claiming that somehow Anna was at fault. It is absurd. When I heard this I was angry and wished I could give that horrible woman a piece of my mind. I can choose to have a good attitude about that woman, but that was not what naturally sprang up out of my heart. If I were truly good what would instantly erupt out of my heart would be patience, kindness and desiring good for that person.

Our righteous acts are good things that we should always try to pursue. But at their best Isaiah tells us they are tainted by something within us that is the farthest thing from good. Why does this matter? Because if there is evil within us it can be tapped. All it takes is the right provocation. I just recently read a book titled *Indestructible*. It is the story of aviator Paul Gunn who played a significant role in the battles in the southwest Pacific theater in World War II. The biggest motivation for him was that his wife and 4 kids were put into a Japanese internment camp in Manila, and he wanted to get them out safely. It is the story of what happened in that camp that is relevant here. The people in the camp were civilians, not military prisoners of war. Many were American citizens like the Gunns. How would good people, truly good people, behave in that situation? They would pull together, support each other, care for each other. That was not what happened. It became every man for himself. Some stole from others. Some collaborated with the Japanese guards and informed on their fellow internees. Some preyed upon the weak. They did whatever they could to try to take care of themselves even at the expense of others.

That horror is buried deep within all of us. It touches in some small way even the good things we do. It is dangerous, because given the right provocation it may well erupt, and when it does people will be hurt. Furthermore it distorts how we see ourselves, how we see others, even how we process things that happen to us, and not in a good way. This is why people can be so difficult at times. The conclusion is we are dead dogs spiritually. Like Mephibosheth in the normal course of things we should expect to receive the worst.

I HAVE RECEIVED GOD'S KINDNESS

The most important idea in this story is that idea of *chesedh*. Mephibosheth did not receive what he and everyone else expected. Even though he was worthless and doomed he was given incredible blessing. He was given an abundance of kindness that he had no claim to. David gave it to him because of who David was and because of a promise he had made. He promised he would give Jonathan's family God's amazing love, grace and kindness, and did so even to a dead dog.

We have had the same thing happen. Through Jesus Christ God has shown us limitless kindness that we have no claim to. Expecting death, worthless and deserving of death, we have instead been given life. More than that, we have been given spiritual wealth, every blessing that exists in the heavenly realm according to Ephesians 1:3. Furthermore we have been taken into the King's household as his adopted children where we have immediate access to the King and a noble position.

Ephesians 2:12-13 says, "Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Jesus Christ." In other words, you were dead dogs, but God has showered you with *chesedh*.

GOD'S KINDNESS IS NOT WITHOUT EFFECT

It humbles us

When David poured out kindness on Mephibosheth how did the young man respond? Did he say, "At last I'm getting what I deserve"? Did he think David owed it to him to give him land and a seat in his inner circle? Far from it. He asked why David would do anything for a dead dog like him. He was very clear that both as a member of a rival family that had made David's life miserable for years, and as a cripple who in their culture was counted as useless, he deserved nothing. Less than nothing even, for the expected outcome for him was execution.

When we see ourselves as spiritual dead dogs who have been shown extravagant and inexplicable kindness, it will humble us as well. I once had an encounter with a highly respected Christian man that was unsettling. This man is thoroughly versed in Scripture and theology, he is deeply committed as a Christian, he is eminently successful, lives an admirable life, and is a respected associate of some world renowned Christian leaders. But I encountered him in a social setting in which he totally dominated, he instructed people he didn't even know on how to live their lives in situations he knew nothing about, and I came away with the feeling that he may well have been one of the most arrogant people I have ever met. I was later to be consulted by two different friends seeking counsel who were part of two Christian groups that were being ripped apart by division. In both cases at the heart of the problem was this man and his arrogance.

That most certainly is not how spiritual dead dogs who are very clear that they have received kindness they absolutely do not deserve will be. A man I know once bought a new car that he really liked, but after a short time it developed an irritating rattling noise in the passenger compartment. It was under warranty so he took it in to the dealer and explained the problem. They could not detect the noise, but when he got the car back it was still there. He took it back to the dealer with the same result, yet the rattle was still there. This continued through several more attempts to fix the problem until he concluded that the manufacturer had sold him a piece of junk and their mechanics were incompetent. He wrote a letter to the manufacturer detailing the problem and his futile efforts to get some help, the first step in initiating the lemon law. This provoked an immediate response. The dealer called him and requested that he bring the car in for one last effort. To his surprise when he went to get the car they informed him that they had finally located the source of the rattle. It was the remote control for his garage door opener that he clipped onto a visor. Turns out it wasn't the car that was the lemon, it was the owner. Do you suppose that maybe had some effect on his attitude toward those incompetent mechanics and that maker of defective cars? He became an automotive dead dog.

We mechanical dead dogs look down on no one who has trouble with such things. We empathize with them. And we spiritual dead dogs look down on no failed human beings. We empathize with them.

It frees us from fear

All those years Mephibosheth lived out in a desolate place, hiding his true identity, fearing that David the king might discover him. Now his whole life was radically

changed. He could live wherever he wanted. He was free to openly reveal who he was because he had nothing to fear.

When Jesus began his ministry according to Luke 4:18 he read from Isaiah 61:1-2. "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Jesus came to set the oppressed free, to get us out of Lo Debar, to make us free. Galatians 5:1 says, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free."

We are free from fear of condemnation by God. We are free from the need to hide, from the need to prove that we are not worthless. We are free from guilt, free from the need to somehow convince God to accept us or to impress other people. Last year in September *New York* magazine ran an article about recently released prisoners and their first experiences of freedom. One man who was out after spending 16 years in prison said at first he didn't feel like he was really free. He couldn't convince himself that he belonged out in the world and could truly live free. He felt like someone was going to find him out and take him back to prison. He finally began to believe it when he just sat outside at night and looked at the stars, something he could never do in prison.

It occurred to me that if you were out of prison but believed you didn't belong free, if you lived without the constant concern that at any moment you might be yanked back into jail you would never be free. You might physically be outside of prison, but prison would live in your heart. You would live in a prison of fear. Too often we are like that. We don't believe that we are really free, that we belong in freedom. I suspect Mephibosheth quickly accepted his freedom and did not obsess about going back to Lo Debar to hide anymore. When we understand the kindness of God we will truly be free.

It fills us with gratitude

After all those years of staying under the radar and living in Lo Debar, how do you think Bo felt about suddenly being an honored wealthy man living in the royal court? He was thrilled and grateful. He had gone from being a dead dog to a lucky dog. Do you think when he was sitting at the king's table and they served him filet mignon he sniffed and said, "I've had better at Ruth's Chris"? Do you think he whined because David had more land than he did? I am pretty sure he did none of that. I am sure he was grateful for everything he had.

Laurie and I were in a restaurant a number of years ago when we saw a couple of people we knew. These were close friends, but they were acquaintances. They were just finishing their meal, so we chatted with them briefly before going to our table. We had a nice meal, and when we were done our server asked if we wanted anything else. I said, "No, just our check." She said, "Actually, there was a party here who paid your bill." We were floored. We were also full of gratitude. In addition to being humbled by such an act of kindness, we really felt thankful to those people.

Having gratitude can change your whole mindset. A couple of weeks ago I was 5 days out from having surgery on my arm and though improving was not feeling all that great. There were a couple of other negatives that happened and I was feeling a bit glum. That day Michael was flying out here in a T-45 jet while training a new instructor pilot. They made an intermediate stop in Phoenix. They took off from Phoenix for their last leg, but just after they raised the landing gear the engine began pulsing. He said it felt like getting repeatedly and continuously thumped on the back. They thought they had lost a compressor. He found out later a solenoid that controls engine ignition had gone bad and the engine was repeatedly igniting and going out. It was not producing continuous thrust and their air speed began dropping. They went through emergency procedures and Michael looked around for flat empty land where they could put the jet down or if necessary eject safely. Fortunately they were able to coax enough out of the engine to be able to go back around and make an emergency landing at the airport.

It was interesting that when I learned about that my spirit changed. That was a narrow thing and it could have turned out very different. I realized that if that had gone bad it would have been immeasurably worse than anything else that was happening in my life. I found I was full of gratitude that Michael was safe. That was so much more important, so much better than the other things I was dealing with that I was at peace and joyful.

I have no doubt that Mephibosheth had days where he was frustrated by his handicap. I know he must have because my brief stint having to do everything with one hand, my left hand, was annoying and tedious at times. But I also suspect that he would reflect on the kindness he had been shown and the blessings of his life, and he would mostly feel grateful and joyful.

It makes us loyal

Later a rebellion against David occurs. It was the perfect chance for Mephibosheth to join the rebellion. And he was accused of doing just that. But it wasn't true. He

grieved for David and stayed loyal to him. When David defeated the rebellion Bo said that he didn't care about all the land and riches, he only cared that David had returned home safely.

Isn't that what you would expect? When someone does something that gracious for you, when they save your whole life, wouldn't you expect to be that person's biggest fan forever? Some people wonder where the motivation for obeying God comes from if we are really free and there truly is no condemnation. This is a big part of it. God has shown us immeasurable, incomprehensible kindness. He has freed us. Doesn't it make sense that this will produce a huge loyalty to him?