

Sermon 51: 2 Samuel 19:9-43: The King's Gracious Return

OUTLINE

Grace
Faithfulness

INTRODUCTION

In Christianity there are two types of happily ever afters. There is the final happy ending where Jesus will return and all enemies will be put under foot. All evils will become undone and there will be no taint to our eternal joy. And then there are happy endings under the sun. These are resolutions from conflict that bring about good but not ultimate good. These are the sorts of victories that you and I enjoy as Christians whether it is in our sanctification, church growth or preaching the gospel. We make head way but we are harassed. We take 3 steps forward but one step back. We gain victories but they are not pure and free from all sin and defeat is often close on the heels of victory. Here the realities of the fall are like flies in the ointment of our success. Last week we looked at how God working out His purposes and moving the plot line forward does not necessarily square with our idealistic and romantic notions of progress. Well today we get to consider how victories are also to be stripped of their romantic and idealistic notions when won under the sun.

David has won the victory over Absalom and is returning as King. You would expect to see this homecoming as a happy time but it is tintured with disappointments, delays and deceit. Against this dark background we are given a good vantage point for observing David returning with grace. David is a man who knows God's grace and patience. And as he returns to Israel we see him operating on the basis of grace. The chapter divides in to two parts revolving around four conversations with Judah, Shimei, Mephiboseth and Barzillai. The first two are those who resisted David and supported Absalom and the second are two friends. Grace dominates this portion as we see grace extended to those who don't deserve it and the faithfulness of David's friends.

Grace

We see in verses 9-10 that the nation is a little undecided about bringing David back as King. And the general consensus is that it makes good sense to bring David back as He has done great things for them in the past and the king they anointed is dead. In particular our attention is directed to Judah who seems to be last in coming round, v11, 'And King David sent this message to Zadok and Abiathar the priests: "Say to the elders of Judah, 'Why should you be the last to bring the king back to his house, when the word of all Israel has come to the king?'

Let's try and understand this situation. Judah has just supported Absalom in his attempted coup, Absalom had been crowned the new king in Hebron in Judah. Ahithophel was from the tribe of Judah. Amasa the general of Absalom's rebellion force was from Judah. There can be little doubt that Judah was fearing a backlash from all of these things now that David had returned. Here is Judah the largest tribe in Israel and David's own tribe not showing public support, how should David handle this situation? Some might interpret it to be a smooth political move that would be wise given the circumstances, but I see David applying grace. The first thing he does is assure them of his familial affection towards them calling them brothers. This is strengthened by a reference to them being of his own bone and

flesh, words similar to Adam's to Eve. V12, 'You are my brothers; you are my bone and my flesh. Why then should you be the last to bring back the king?' the next thing he does is swear that one of their own, Amasa will replace Joab as the general of his army. Instead of punishment for disloyalty there is a promotion. And as a result the people are swayed and the king is invited to return, v14-15, 'And he swayed the heart of all the men of Judah as one man, so that they sent word to the king, "Return, both you and all your servants." 15 So the king came back to the Jordan, and Judah came to Gilgal to meet the king and to bring the king over the Jordan.'

Hard hearts, fearful hearts melted by grace. I cannot help but think of God's grace in the gospel which wins the sinners heart. We like Judah have been rebels, our idols are defeated, but that does not mean that we are ready to throw in our lot with God. We are fearful of the consequences and not sure we want His rule. But then we see His love and His willingness to forgive. We see the extent to which a holy God has gone in serving us by giving His Son to forgive unworthy criminals. We see that He is a good king, that He is willing to forgive, that He is not tricking us to later destroy us and with confidence we go to God and take Him again as our King. These overtures of David to Judah are the overtures of Jesus through gospel ministers to the unbelieving world. He invites them to come; He questions you about why you are delaying receiving Him as your King.

Next we have Shimei. He was the one from the household from Saul who threw earth and insults at David as he was leaving Jerusalem claiming that God was punishing him for a blood debt against Saul's house. What does Shimei do? He eats humble pie, and he brings a token portion of the tribe of Benjamin to show that he is working to gain support for David and is not working against him. We see him falling on his face, confessing and repenting of his sin, asks for forgiveness and pledges allegiance. Before David can utter a word Abishai calls for his death, v21, 'Abishai the son of Zeruah answered, "Shall not Shimei be put to death for this, because he cursed the LORD's anointed?"'

Now it is true that Shimei deserves to die, and some have argued that it is political expedience that motivates David to spare Shimei. But it appears that David is genuinely set on mercy and not justice, and he is thoroughly against the exacting spirit of Shimei. Shimei's comments are the voice of law, not the voice of grace. Perhaps Abishai despised Shimei and wanted revenge for the public shaming, whatever his motivation the letter of the law is serving as camouflage. Once again the fresh breeze of grace blows upon us from the text because we see David not dealing with Shimei according to what he deserves but according to mercy. Once again we are reminded of the gospel. Here we are the guilty slanderers of God. We have levelled unfair accusations at God. We have rejected the anointed one, the true king. We joined in with any public resistance to Christ. But David here reminds us how the true King is. If we humble ourselves before Him, He is willing to save. He is slow to anger and ready to forgive. He does not delight in the death of the wicked and a cold logical application of justice. He wants to save sinners. Here we see David emulating this sentiment.

But there is another lesson we must draw from this. It is the matter of forgiveness. When we have been hurt, our unforgiveness can hide behind the letter of the law as Abishai did. When we are confronted with a situation where we can make those who have hurt us pay, which way do we go, are we like David or Abishai? David has been forgiven much and so forgives. This is what experiencing the grace of God teaches us.

Faithfulness

We come now to the portion that focuses our attention on David's friends. The first is Mephibosheth. He is the son of Saul, his life exists because of David's grace. In ordinary circumstances this blood descendant of the former king would be put to death so he could make no claim on the throne. David had reinstated his title to Saul's property and Ziba who had been living like a king was reinstated as a servant to him. When David fled Jerusalem Ziba rushed to provide food and support and when asked where Mephibosheth was lied and said he was taking to be made king in David's absence. David had made a rash and unjust judgement and gave it all to Ziba. Now we get a true picture of Mephibosheth's faithfulness, v24, '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.' When David asks him why he had not gone with him he shares the story of Ziba's betrayal, v26-27, '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. 27 He has slandered your servant to my lord the king. But my lord the king is like the angel of God; do therefore what seems good to you. 28 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?"'

Important in this response is the recognition by Mephibosheth that he was a man who deserved to be dead, yet had been invited to eat at the king's table. In the king's absence, although he had been betrayed, Mephibosheth though lame and limited was loyal with all he had. We cannot help but see here a model for our own service of the Lord. One commentator comparing Mephibosheth with the woman who anointed Jesus for burial talks about that phrase in the gospels, 'She has done what she could' (Mark 14:8). He shares another example, 'It was the same with Orop, a boy who lived near Akobo (Sudan) mission station. Missionary Don McClure tells how Orop loved to come to school. But he couldn't learn anything; he couldn't even write the letters of his own name in the right order. So he had to give up his place in the school for another child. He would still come, however, and sit outside the school window to listen to the bible stories. Then he would round up a group of boys and retell the bible stories. But he would get them all mixed up; so McClure had to forbid Orop to tell stories about Jesus. But then Orop received his call. Dr McClure told him that when he went out to a village to preach Orop could carry God's book (McClure's Bible) for him. So every day when the sun came up Orop would be waiting for McClure and carry God's book to the village du jour. He did what he could. One day a bunch of small boys were playing in the river when a crocodile latched onto one of them. All ran. But Orop jumped in to fight the croc. He succeeded in freeing the boy but the crocodile grabbed Orpo instead. They only recovered one arm and one leg to bury. He did what he could. Orop had told his mother that he was not afraid to die, because Jesus would come to take him by the hand and lead him home. After his death this testimony stirred his mother to seek Jesus. He had done what he could.'¹

Mephibosheth publicly mourned for David while Absalom was king, he could not fight, he could not flee but he could grow his toenails and not wash his clothes. Many of us would count our strength as small and insignificant, but like Mephibosheth we ought to do what we can. Think on his motivation. He deserved to be dead, yet the king not only spared him but invited him to eat at the royal table treating him as one of the family. Mephibosheth fulfilling a debt of gratitude did all he could to show loyalty to David. Here is a wonderful picture of how we ought to respond to God's greater grace to us.

¹ David p200-201.

Barzillai is an opposite but an equal to Mephibosheth, where Mephibosheth had little and gave his little, Barzillai had much and gave his much. If Mephibosheth had 2 talents and Barzillai 10, both gave 100%. The best part of Barzillai's testimony is his attitude to the things of this world. We see him using his wealth in the service of the king, and when he is offered the things of this world as a reward he puts no value on them. Where many are concerning about amassing riches and building a personal empire we see Barzillai disinterested in these things. It should be pointed out how being eighty and not able to enjoy all the pleasures of this world helps. It seems that the process of ageing has at least this one benefit, we can allow age to prepare us to become disinterested in the pleasures of this life that consume us when we are younger. Barzillai is not pretending youth or trying to get all he can out of this life, he has learnt contentment. This is a good model for how to be a king's friend.

David, a man who has experienced grace gives it to those who were against him. He gains a victory but it is under the sun as the book of Ecclesiastes says. And just to put a damper on the whole thing the chapter ends with the various tribes squabbling over who the king belongs to. We are reminded of the nature of our victories, that a life that has received grace should bestow it, and how to be a friend of the king.