

DEALING WITH THE “DEAD DOG” SYNDROME

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There is a serious subject that we have finally begun to talk about in society but rarely talk about in the church. This issue is a matter of life and death for so many in our society and especially in our community. We have pretended that it was an issue that affected other folks and not us. When we do bring it up, we whisper about it or over-spiritualize it. We do everything but deal with it head on. Well today, we’re going to deal with it head on.

Let me begin by telling you about a biblical character whose name is Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth was the son of Jonathan, grandson of Saul, and he was also called Merib-baal. His trials begins when his father and grandfather are slain on Gilboa; he was an infant—five years old. At this age, he also met with an accident that deprived him for life of the proper use of both feet. After this, he found a home with Machir ben-Ammiel a powerful Gadite in a town called Lodebar. Machir ben-Ammiel reared Mephibosheth and while in Lodebar Mephibosheth became married. Later in his life, Mephibosheth was invited by King David to live in Jerusalem.

In 2 Samuel 9, Mephibosheth makes a statement that warrants our collective attention and is the bridge on which we will walk to get to the major issue that needs to be addressed.

Mephibosheth is offered the benefits of the King’s household in Jerusalem. He responds to the kindness of King David by saying, “What *is* your servant, that you should look upon such a dead dog as I?” His words seem to articulate the sentiments of a heart that has been forever been broken by the circumstances of life. Mephibosheth refers to himself as being a “dead dog” in spite of his being on the cusp of a blessing that would give him access to the King’s palace.

I am well aware of the dual interpretations of Mephibosheth’s “dead dog” statement. One historical interpretation suggests that this was a common method of rhetoric in that day; Mephibosheth meant no more than to express great gratitude, and to acknowledge the disparity

of rank between him and the king. This scholarly perspective makes Mephibosheth's statement one of humility and gratefulness for the gracious acts of King David.

Another school of thought concerning this statement sees it as Mephibosheth's literal evaluation of himself. Mephibosheth is articulating the inward damage that stems from an outward disaster that he suffered. The literal interpretation of this statement suggests that his emotional state parallels that of his crippled physical stature. Some scholars suggest that his statement is one of extreme self-humiliation that forces the reader to look upon Mephibosheth as a pitiful creature in whom early misfortune and physical deformity had combined to open the door for depression.

I choose to utilize the literal interpretation of the text, which suggests that his expression is a literal depiction of his evaluation of himself. I believe we can use Mephibosheth's statement of identifying himself as a dead dog to speak to the sensitive and serious societal issue of depression.

Depression is manifested in various ways when it reveals itself through human behavior. In younger children, symptoms of depression may include sadness, irritability, hopelessness, and worry. Symptoms in adolescents and teens may include anxiety, anger, and avoidance of social interaction. In children and teens, depression often occurs along with behavioral problems and other mental health conditions, such as anxiety or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Changes in thinking and sleep are common signs of depression in adolescents and adults.

In older adults, depression may go undiagnosed because symptoms such as fatigue, loss of appetite, sleep deprivation, or loss of interest in sex may mistakenly seem to be caused by other factors. Older adults with depression may say they feel dissatisfied with life in general,

bored, helpless, or worthless. They may express a disinterest in adventurous or socialized settings. Suicidal thoughts or feelings in older adults are a sign of serious depression that should never be taken lightly, especially in men. Of all people with depression, older adult men are at the highest risk for suicide.

One could easily make the argument that Mephibosheth's statement is also tinged with the notion of suicide. The fact that he refers to himself as a "dead dog" is noteworthy because Mephibosheth is still alive. The thought of being alive while referring to one's self as being dead speaks volumes about the lack of value a person places on his or her life. The contradiction of his statement may indicate suicidal ideations (he's has considered the idea of not being alive).

It is upon noticing this behavior by Mephibosheth that I rhetorically diagnosed him as suffering from a severe case of *Dead Dog Syndrome* (which is my shorthand way of saying he is extremely depressed). The symptoms of depression are very visible in Mephibosheth's defeated dialogue. His life's hardships have combined to create an inferiority complex; he feels as if he is as worthless as a dead dog. Not just any dog but a dead dog. I believe that Mephibosheth allowed his circumstance to convince him that all of his life's value was lost when he lost so much that was of value to him. He makes the tragic mistake that many in our contemporary age make. They allow their inward value to be determined by outward circumstances.

In the Beatitudes in Matthew chapter 5, there is constant use of the word *blessed* and it refers to deep-seated joy that is not affected by outward circumstances, but remains the same no matter the circumstance. My admonition to everyone who reads this message is to never allow your context to confine your composition (who you are), because your value as a child of God does not change when life changes for the worse. Our value is found in the *Imago De*; we are created in God's image. Thus, our value comes from the workmanship of our Creator, and not

the wavering nature of our circumstances. This means that our attitudes can remain lifted when we keep our eyes lifted and focused on the one who made us. We are divine creations; that is our starting point.

But also, I find it interesting that he is crippled as an adult, but his emotional dysfunction stems from childhood disasters. Perhaps this is the predicament of someone who is reading this article. You experienced the horrid victimization of child abuse or molestation, and now you find yourself as an adult crippled in the area of trust or you are unable to control your anger. Some victims of child molestation develop severe control issues as adults because their greatest fear is again being as vulnerable as they were during the time of their childhood molestation.

Perhaps someone has experienced in their childhood the abuse suffered by one parent at the hands of another parent, and now that image has been etched into your psyche as the means by which true love is expressed—love occurs amidst violence is what you learned. Maybe you endured a verbally abusive parent or guardian and that has impaired your self-confidence. Due to the emotional damage of a parent or guardian that only spoke negatively and demeaned you as a child you now struggle in your pursuit for self-worth. That struggle for self-worth has also caused you to seek significance in places, people, and things that only provide temporary satisfaction.

That same childhood trauma can even affect whether you believe you have the ability to excel. If as a child, you were not taught that God has put great talents and gifts inside of you, then accepting that reality can be difficult as an adult. As a result of not being made aware of this from your childhood, you are less likely to attempt great fetes because you do not possess enough self-esteem to live life with fullness and gusto. As a song says, “You never stray too far

from the side-walk.” You want safety and certainty, not new adventures and challenges which are what we all need to learn and grow.

I am reminded of the New York Bestseller book and movie, *The Help*. One of the leading characters, Aibileen, a 53 year-old housemaid, raised 17 children who were in her care. Although a black woman in the South, Aibileen discovered her voice and the courage to defy the conventions of the early 1960s. One of the things that I remember from the movie was the scene when Aibileen was caring for a Caucasian child. She would make the little girl recite a very simple yet profound statement. The recitation was, “You is smart. You is kind. You is important.” While grammatically incorrect, this recitation is powerful for everyone to know and internalize.

Apparently, Mephibosheth does not believe that he is smart, kind, and powerful. There were events in Mephibosheth’s childhood from which he had not recovered. He was dropped as a child which caused him to be crippled for the rest of his life and he lost significant relatives when only a child. Some of our adulthood emotional handicaps stem from childhood hurts that we have never addressed. They can be addressed they just have not been addressed. We can change and grow if the ghost and goblins, the hurt and pain of our past are addressed. Also, please know that if you are dealing with depression that stems from your past or present, you are not to blame. In fact, no one may be to blame. What happened to Mephibosheth was an accident. And even if someone is to blame, nothing will be fixed or gained if all you do is determine who is to blame. Instead, the work that must be done is to make sure that you get better, that you are healthy and whole.

Further, in this text, I also find it interesting that had God not ordained David to be the second king in the history of Israel, Mephibosheth would have been in line to become king. In

the Orient, the death of the king would afford his remaining descendants an opportunity to rise to the throne. Some scholars suggest that had God's plan never been for David to be the next king, then Mephibosheth's handicap would have denied him the opportunity to be king. His condition would have caused him to have to forfeit the right to become king because he was lame in both of his feet. I'll come back to that later.

Now, I must admit that my initial title for this message was *Defeating the Dead Dog Syndrome*. But I am transparently admitting that I changed the title because I did not want to be guilty of being a preacher who was simplistic or reckless by suggesting that every issue will always be defeated by every child of God. As I thought of the constant battle that the *Dead Dog Syndrome* can be for anyone who suffers from its wrath, I was clear that there is a demographic of reader who may never fully defeat this syndrome, so, I had to change the title.

However, I believe that a sign of faith is not in the defeating of the complex, but it is in our ability to deal with it, to address it honestly. So in light of this truth, I chose to entitle this message *Addressing the Dead Dog Syndrome*. True faith is also demonstrated by our ability to maintain faith in God's ability to handle whatever in our lives that we cannot handle and to let God deal with our situations as God sees fit. In some cases, it is not in the will of God that we be delivered from our various illnesses and dysfunctions. Such was the case for the Apostle Paul who spoke about his "thorn in the flesh. Paul was never healed from the presence and pain of his thorn. However, God's grace sustained him in the midst of his predicament. It is not lost on me that God made David King when it could have been Mephibosheth.

Grace being operative in our lives is not only seen in us receiving an unmerited healing or deliverance from our circumstance. But the grace of God can also enable us to live with the thorns and become better as a result of having the thorn in our lives.

How else can we deal with this *Dead Dog Syndrome*? At this point, let me say, parenthetically, that I truly believe that God is able to heal us from any infirmity that plagues our lives. I also believe that God's deliverance can be both instant and permanent. Much as in the case of the woman with issue of blood in the Gospels. As soon as she touched the borders of Jesus' garment, she was instantly and permanently healed from her infirmity. So, God can give us grace to deal with our thorns or God can choose to heal us from our thorns.

What other principles can we find in the story Mephibosheth that will aid anyone who is in a constant battle with depression? Well, the text suggests that we can deal with the *Dead Dog Syndrome*—depression—when we understand that life does not stop because of horribly bad moments. The text says that Mephibosheth had a son and a wife after he had experienced his hardships of being dropped and rendered lame in his feet. This speaks to the fact that while life was low for Mephibosheth, he did not become an unproductive person. In ancient times, having children was a sign of being blessed by God and having a progressive life. Thus, Mephibosheth was being productive in an unproductive environment even if he did not realize that he was being productive.

Often, depression has a way of rendering persons unproductive or making them believe they are not moving forward. There are many people who live beneath where God has ultimately designed for them to live because they are emotionally drained by the *Dead Dog Syndrome*. The lesson that Mephibosheth teaches us is that we must learn how to be productive even while in a pastureless place. He did not allow his reality to quench, dictate, or lessen his productivity. When we engage in battle with the *Dead Dog Syndrome*, it is important for us to maintain our productivity in spite of depression. Our lives are too important and God's call on our lives is far

too critical for us to allow our depression to render us impotent in life. We must resolve to maintain a steady pace of productivity no matter the circumstances of our reality.

For some, this will require medication and maybe counseling too. Whatever is required, get the help you need to be productive and stay productive. And don't fail to give yourself credit for the things you have achieved instead of focusing on what you have not. Mephibosheth had moved along in life in spite of being crippled; perhaps he just didn't realize how much.

Maybe the fact that Mephibosheth was living in Lo Debar with Makir son of Ammiel before he got to David's house had been lost on him. Remember, Lo Debar literally means *a place where there is no pasture*. Mephibosheth lived during the age of an agricultural economy; a place of no pasture could be interpreted as a place of low economic worth or value. Makir was a wealthy and powerful individual living east of the Jordan at Lo Debar. The blessing of Grace was that Mephibosheth still lived in a prosperous house in the midst of living in a pasture-less place.

While Battling The *Dead Dog Syndrome*, one needs to take a closer look at his or her life to see how God's Grace is already working on his or her behalf. Depression can cause tunnel vision; one is only able to see a limited perspective of his or her situation. Victims of the *Dead Dog Syndrome* may never fully see how all around them God is working on their behalf and that more progress is being made than they think.

Also, we can deal with *the Dead Dog Syndrome* when we understand that the Grace of God sees our future in spite of our fractures. Many times, we think that Grace is only operative when God is showering upon us His rich and bountiful blessings. That is the preferred experience with Grace that most of us want to enjoy. While the Grace of God does operate that way, there is another aspect of the Grace of God that we need to appreciate. Grace was operative

in Mephibosheth's life before he experienced the disaster that left him lame. Grace had the answer before there was ever a problem. A promise or covenant was made between Mephibosheth's father, Jonathon, and David before Mephibosheth was born. The covenant the two men formed eventually led to David graciously seating Jonathan's son Mephibosheth, a cripple, at the royal table instead of eradicating the former king, Saul's, family line.

The promise requested that David would show kindness to any of the descendants of Jonathon. This clearly shows that God was proactive on Mephibosheth's behalf as opposed to being reactive to his problems. It is interesting that he makes the transition from Lo Debar to Jerusalem. The name Lo Debar means no pasture and Jerusalem means habitation of peace, which is to say God allows him to move from a place of problems to a place of peace. Mephibosheth was given a lifetime membership to the king's table and was given every advantage that previously belonged to his deceased grandfather and father.

A healthy way of dealing with the *Dead Dog Syndrome* is to come to the realization that God had a plan for your life before you experienced the problems in your life. The blessing of God's plan is that He sees your problems before your problems see you. God's Grace is proactive not just reactive.

We can also address the *Dead Dog Syndrome* when we understand that our tough emotional moments are only a part of life not all of life. Mephibosheth was living in Lo Debar and his life had seemingly fallen apart following the death of his father and grandfather. While being crippled in Lo Debar was a part of the story of Mephibosheth, it was not his entire story.

The *Dead Dog Syndrome* would have us think that where we are is a permanent abode, but God has something greater and better waiting on us. The Psalmist says, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you *are* with me; your rod and

your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over.” The challenge hidden within these two verses is that we need not to give up while life is in the valley, because as verse five says, a table is being prepared for us in the presence of our enemy—even if the enemy is depression. We must learn never to allow the *Dead Dog Syndrome* to convince us that life is over; God has more for us beyond the valley.

My favorite childhood television show was Batman starring Adam West. During each episode, both Batman and Robin would always seem to find themselves in a precarious predicament at the end each episode. At that point, of the show, the following words would appear on the screen, “to be continued.” That meant that where they were at the end of that episode was not the end of the story. That also meant that the current episode was not the last episode!

That is a hopeful word for anyone dealing with a depression your current episode is not the finale. Though life may seem as if it is over, God can still say, “To be continued.” T. Boone Pickens battled depression for years. But God said, “To be continued.” Now, he is an oil tycoon and worth 950 million. Alec Baldwin, star of the TV show *Thirty Roc* and the man on all those commercials who ask, “What’s in your wallet?” had depression. But he took medication and therapy. Then, God said, “To be continued” and now, he’s a movie star and millionaire. T.I., the rapper, battled depression and ended up in jail. He went into therapy and is now on medication. God said, “To be continued” and T.I. is still making music, had a TV show, and is now speaking to kids about staying out of trouble. Ray Charles, who Frank Sinatra said, “was the only true genius in show business,” suffered with depression which led him to become an alcoholic. But he overcame it with medication and help from friends. To Ray, God said, “To be continued” and

that's why we can now sing, Georgia On My Mind. Beyoncé and Alicia Keyes suffered with depression. Both took medication and counseling. In spite of all of that, God said, "To be continued." Now, they're both mega music stars known around the world. Oprah Winfrey suffered with depression and sent a suicide note to her friend Gayle King in 1981. It took years of therapy for her to get better. God said to her, "To be continued" and the rest is history. That's God's important message to everyone suffering from depression hold on. Your life is "To be continued."