

# Invited to Belong

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[ 0 : 00 ] It's really, really good to be with you again this morning. It's about four years since I was here last time, and in that four years, I've forgotten how amazing your worship group are.

They are absolutely stunning, aren't they? So good. So it's great to be back, great to hear them leading us in worship, and great to be here to share God's Word with you this morning.

We had a great time yesterday in the training that we were going through here, and it was great to have folk from here, but also from, I think, three other churches that came along as well.

So terrific to be able to share that message across the area here. We're going to look at some, perhaps, of the themes that we might have touched on yesterday a little bit as we go through our session this morning.

But let's just bring ourselves into God's presence in prayer before we start. Father, we do thank you for this day, for all that you have already done for us today.

[ 1 : 10 ] We thank you for bringing us all here. Just pray that you would help us to just put to one side for a time all those things that are in our minds, so that we can dwell on the things of you.

And we just pray that you would speak to us all this morning, share with us the things that you want to share with us, and help us to hear your voice. And we just pray that you would open our hearts, our minds to all that you want to just share with us from your Word as we think about these things together this morning.

In Jesus' name. Amen. There are many characters in the Bible that we might, perhaps wrongly, skip over as not being particularly important.

They don't come across as heroes like Samson or Esther. They aren't great kings like David or Solomon. They weren't vital to the life and work of Jesus like Mary or Peter.

But some of these often overlooked characters can be really significant in other ways. Showing us and sometimes teaching us something really important through their lives, through the things that happened to them.

[ 2 : 33 ] And how other people engaged with them. And one of these is Mephibosheth. And we're going to be starting to have a look at Mephibosheth this morning.

And if you want to follow with me as we just turn to God's Word for a couple of passages to start thinking about Mephibosheth. Then the passages are on the screen and they're in 2 Samuel.

First of all, a verse from chapter 4, verse 4. And then we'll be into 2 Samuel chapter 9 and verses 1 to 13. Now, I don't know which version of God's Word you brought with you this morning.

I'm going to be reading from the New International Readers version. Which is a version of the NIV. But it's the most accessible and inclusive translation that there is.

It's a much reduced word set from the NIV. So I'm going to read from that. But hopefully you can follow in whichever version you've got. So first of all, from 2 Samuel 4, chapter 4, verse 4.

[ 3 : 40 ] And then turning to chapter 9 and verse 4.

Verses 1 to 13. David asked, Is anyone left from the royal house of Saul? If there is, I want to be kind to him because of Jonathan.

Zeba was a servant in Saul's family. David sent for him to come and see him. The king said to him, Are you Zeba? I'm ready to serve you, he replied.

The king asked, Isn't there anyone still alive from the royal house of Saul? God has been very kind to me. I would like to be kind to that person in the same way.

Zeba answered the king, A son of Jonathan is still living. Both of his feet were hurt so that he can't walk. Where is he? The king asked. Zeba answered, He's in the town of Lodabar.

[ 5 : 04 ] He's staying at the house of Machia, the son of Amiel. So King David had Mephibosheth brought from Machia's house in Lodabar. Mephibosheth came to David.

He was the son of Jonathan, the son of Saul. Mephibosheth bowed down to David to show him respect. David said, Mephibosheth, I'm ready to serve you, he replied.

Don't be afraid, David told him. You can be sure that I will be kind to you because of your father Jonathan. I'll give back to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul.

And I'll always provide what you need. Mephibosheth bowed down to David. He said, Who am I? Why should you pay attention to me? I'm nothing but a dead dog.

Then the king sent for Saul's servant Zeba. He said to him, I'm giving your master's grandson everything that belonged to Saul and his family.

[ 6 : 03 ] You and your sons and your servants must farm the land for him. You must bring in the crops and he'll be taken care of. I'll always provide what he needs.

Zeba had 15 sons and 20 servants. Then Zeba said to the king, I'll do anything you command me to do. You are my king and my master.

So David provided what Mephibosheth needed. He treated him like one of the king's sons.

Mephibosheth had a young son named Mekah. All the members of Zeba's family became servants of Mephibosheth.

Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem. The king always provided what he needed. Both of his feet were hurt so that he could not walk. So we first encountered Mephibosheth there as a young boy of about five years old.

And we read that on the day that his father, Jonathan, and his grandfather, King Saul, were dead, both killed by the Philistines, there was an accident where Mephibosheth was dropped by his nurse, resulting in him having a physical disability in his feet.

[ 7 : 17 ] A terrible day in Mephibosheth's life. An awful set of circumstances that had conspired together.

Mephibosheth was important. He was the grandson of a king, the son of an heir to the throne. He would have grown up in his first five years with privilege and with honor.

But in one fell swoop, his life is transformed. The Philistines have killed his father and his grandfather in battle. His inheritance is gone.

And when the news reaches the royal court, they flee in terror, dropping Mephibosheth, causing him to become disabled, described in the story that his feet were hurt.

Let's just think about that for a moment. Just in those few minutes, Mephibosheth learning of the loss of his father and grandfather, he himself suffering that catastrophic accident as he and the court had needed to flee from the only home that he'd ever known.

[ 8 : 20 ] His entire future turned upside down. He would no longer be a future king. He was just five years old. I don't know about you, but I can't imagine trying to cope with any of that as an adult, let alone having to try and cope with all of that as a five-year-old child.

But what does that part of Mephibosheth's story have as any relevance for us today? Well, perhaps in one way it's relevant in that, sadly, it's not unusual for children to have catastrophic, life-changing events happen to them still.

Refugee children having to flee from war and persecution, for example. Or in a moment, a horrific car crash can result in a child being orphaned or experiencing life-changing injuries.

It can happen in an instant. I remember quite a few years ago now, I'd been on a training trip to Ireland, and I was coming back, I'd caught the ferry across to Anglesey, and was driving across Anglesey.

And as I did so, I was suddenly flagged down by this man at the side of the road. And this man told me that there had been a terrible and appalling accident, car accident, just ahead.

[ 9 : 47 ] And the road was closed, and he was having to turn everybody around whilst the emergency services were trying to deal with this scene. And as I looked ahead, I could see the field next to the road.

And in the field, there were bits of car scattered across the field. And what broke my heart more than anything was that there were children's toys strewn across the field as well.

What had been, no doubt, a lovely family holiday had ended abruptly and fatally and tragically. And the memory of that has stuck with me to this day.

So accidents and tragedies can happen to children and young people today, as they did to Mephibosheth all those years ago.

Maybe that's evoked a memory or a thought of a child or a young person that you know. Are there children and young people that you know who have been affected by accident or by illness, by injury, by disability, by loss, by war?

[10:58] Can you bring those children to mind just for a few moments? Do you have somebody in mind that you can think about? Just for a few moments, if you've got somebody in mind that you can think of, either spend a moment just thinking about them, or turn to the person next to you and just share what you can of their story with the person that's next to you.

Just give us 60 seconds for either that quiet thought or for a conversation with the person next to us about the child that we're thinking of. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Do you keep the thought of that child that perhaps you've remembered, that young person that perhaps you've remembered in your minds as we continue to think about Mephibosheth and his story?

And we'll come back to thinking about perhaps those children, those young people that you've brought to mind in a little while as well. But what of Mephibosheth? Mephibosheth.

[12:46] What happened to him next? Well, in the Bible account, we lose track of him for quite a few years. It seems that a few survivors of King Saul's court went to live in this place called Lodabar.

Lodabar was near to where Mephibosheth's uncle, Ish-Bosheth, who'd been killed by David's men, had lived in a place called Mahanaim.

Lodabar was a place that people seemed to avoid. Its name meant no thing or no place or no pasture.

It's a place where Mephibosheth would have grown up. Now, there's some speculation that links the meaning of the name of the place where Mephibosheth lived with his own disability, which culturally would have left him as the lowest of the low in society, in his culture.

No thing. Think of where he lived for the first five years of his life, in the palace, in a place of honour, and now where he had continued his life, a place called no thing, no place, no pasture.

[14:14] Everything had been lost. But then, as we had our second part of our reading just now, in 2 Samuel and chapter 9, we picked up the story again.

And King David, who's in power and at the height of his powers, inquires if there are any surviving members of the family of his friend Jonathan.

You'll remember that wonderful friendship. That David and Jonathan had. And David, remembering his friend Jonathan, who'd been killed by the Philistines, is inquiring as to any other family members that there are left of that family.

And he's informed about Mephibosheth. He's told that one of Jonathan's sons, Mephibosheth, is still alive. He's told that Mephibosheth's feet were hurt so that he cannot walk.

And David, seemingly ignoring the reference to Mephibosheth's disability, treating it as irrelevant, invites Mephibosheth back into the royal court to a place of honour, restoring the family's land, and doing this in memory of his friendship with Mephibosheth's father Jonathan, and to keep the promise that he'd made many years before.

[15:45] No need to turn to it, but in 1 Samuel, it tells us that David got up from the south side of the stone where he was with Jonathan. He bowed in front of Jonathan with his face to the ground.

He did it three times. Then they kissed each other and cried, But David cried more than Jonathan did. Jonathan said to David, Go in peace.

In the name of the Lord, we've promised to be friends. We have said, The Lord is a witness between you and me. He is a witness between your children and my children forever.

And David was honouring that promise, that moment, that pledge that he'd made with Jonathan all those years before.

Mephibosheth isn't sure what to make of all this at all. He refers to himself as a nothing but a dead dog. And David, perhaps aware of the evident shock and fear that Mephibosheth might have been feeling, remember it was David's men that had killed Mephibosheth's uncle.

[17:00] There'd been conflict between David and Saul. There'd been animosity between those families, as well as the love that David and Jonathan had between each other.

So you can imagine that Mephibosheth, in front of this mighty king, could have been feeling all kinds of shock and fear and anxiety. And so David, perhaps aware of this, finds help for him in the

shape of Zeba, a former servant of Mephibosheth's grandfather, somebody that Mephibosheth would have known.

And now Zeba is a servant of David. And Zeba himself had a large family, plenty of servants. It says that he's had 15 sons and 20 servants, all of whom could be a help to Mephibosheth.

And so Mephibosheth thereafter was back. He ate at the king's table regularly and was treated like one of the king's own sons.

He was welcome because he was wanted, not because of any influence that he had. That's an important learning point for us. He was there, he was included, he belonged because he was wanted, because he was valued for who he was, not for any influence that he had.

[ 18 : 19 ] He was reinstated into the royal court with honour, restored to the same level as David's own sons, given the support he needed and valued for who he was.

David's actions, David's actions towards Mephibosheth had a transforming effect. And disabled people of all ages, including children and young people and their families, can still to this day suffer at the hands of others.

They can be on the receiving end of abuse, discrimination, faultless acts and more. It can leave them feeling marginalised, rejected, isolated, lacking self-esteem.

David's actions showed love. He publicly honoured Mephibosheth and included him. He was generous to him.

He invited him to belong both to the royal court and back welcomed into his own family. What a difference. What a great example for us all.

[ 19 : 26 ] A great way for us to respond to disabled people of all ages and their families today. Let me tell you about Martin. And to tell you about Martin, you have to come in your imagination to my home church down in Bournemouth on the south coast of England.

It's a beautiful July summer's evening and it's the club night for our 9 to 14-year-old group. And I'm stood on the entrance of our church hall greeting the young people as they arrive and saying hello to some of the adults that are dropping them off.

It's a beautiful, hot summer's evening like it's been this year. Can you hear the seagulls? Can you almost taste the ice cream?

And as I'm greeting the young people, I see a car draw up and a mum and her boy get out that I've never seen before. Don't recognise them from church or from the area around.

But as they're heading up the pathway towards me, I can sense a really powerful story that's coming with them. And as they reach me, the mum looks at me and she says, is this club that you run, is it just for church young people or can anybody come along?

[ 20 : 50 ] So I explain that we're open to everyone, what we do, when we meet and all the things that you would normally explain to a new family that's arriving.

And I can see that Martin's mum is building up to something else and suddenly out it comes and she says, I mean Martin has ADHD. ADHD is attention deficit, hyperactivity disorder.

Martin has ADHD and sometimes that can mean that he responds to people and the world in different ways. He can be full of energy and he can find it hard to focus and concentrate on things. And we've tried to get him into other clubs and into other groups and they've always said no. And then Martin's mum tells me the stories of how they've tried to get Martin into other groups or other clubs and what they've been told.

On one occasion, they were told that the group didn't have enough volunteers to include any more children or young people. Now I've spent probably the last 10 years travelling around the country, speaking at churches, training children's and youth groups.

[ 22 : 09 ] I've yet to meet one of those groups or churches that have enough volunteers. We're always looking for more volunteers but the group in question used that excuse.

Another group said that they had volunteers but the volunteers weren't trained in how to support children with additional support needs. So Martin wouldn't be able to come there.

Another group again said that they were concerned that Martin might be a health and safety risk to the other children and young people and leaders and therefore they wouldn't be able to include him in the group.

It's heartbreaking, isn't it? Heartbreaking. My heart was breaking as Martin's mum was sharing these stories with me and 90% of my attention was absolutely wrapped up in what she was saying and if you're wondering what the other 10% was doing that was being horribly distracted by the

absolute chaos that was going on in the room behind me.

There were blood-curdling screams, there were young people climbing the walls. I was wondering where the rest of the team were that were supposed to be organising something for them to do and during one particular scream where I looked behind me convinced that somebody must have just died.

[ 23 : 24 ] Martin's mum used that opportunity to ask me the key question. She said, would Martin be able to come here? But as I was looking behind me and distracted I was relieved to see that nobody had indeed died but I did notice several other young people that we were journeying with who have additional support needs of different kinds.

And I really sensed God whispering in my ear and saying, there's room for one more, you know. There's room for one more. And so I turned back to Martin's mum and what I noticed most about her was that her expression was blank.

She was waiting for another no, another rejection. But I said to her, you know, we would love for Martin to be a part of our group.

Another blood-curdling scream from behind me gave me the opportunity to turn and say, and as you can see, he'll fit right in. And she laughed.

And as she laughed, the light came back into her eyes, the weight lifted from her shoulders.

Somebody had said yes to her boy. Shouldn't have been such a big thing. But so many families like Martin's experience that rejection, that marginalisation, often that abuse, which would have been common for Mephibosheth as he was growing up and is common for children and young people still today.

[ 24 : 51 ] So how does the way that David welcomed Mephibosheth into the royal court challenge us about the way that we should include and welcome children and young people with additional support needs into our churches?

How does Martin's story challenge us? Are children with additional support needs wanted or do we inwardly groan when they arrive?

Do we give them a place of honour as David did for Mephibosheth, helping them to take part in everything? Or do we merely child mind them in a corner until they are collected?

Do we provide them with the support they need or do we leave them to cope for themselves? Do we look past their additional needs and see the person that they are? And do we truly value them for that?

Or just as a problem to deal with? Some real challenges in Mephibosheth's story and in Martin's story too. Mephibosheth doesn't really appear in the Bible again after this other than regarding a slanderous allegation from Zeba about Mephibosheth's loyalty which Mephibosheth himself denies and David ignores.

[ 26 : 06 ] The rest of his story disappears into history except that he had a son Mika. So his line lived on. It's great isn't it that his story in the Bible starts with tragedy with the death of his father and grandfather and his own accident but ends with the reference to the life of his son.

His line lived on. The meaning of Mephibosheth's name was from the mouth of shame. From the mouth of shame.

What were his parents thinking? But by the end of his story he carries no shame only honour. Let all our interactions with children and young people with additional support needs be honouring to them too.

Now I don't know about you but the story of Mephibosheth reminded me of a story that Jesus told and we're going to turn to that and touch on that briefly for a few moments as well.

It's Luke chapter 14 verses 1 to 23. Luke chapter 14 verses 1 to 24 actually. I think we'll read too.

[ 27 : 25 ] One Sabbath day Jesus went to eat in the house of a well-known Pharisee. While he was there he was being carefully watched. In front of him was a man whose body was badly swollen.

Jesus turned to the Pharisees and the authorities on the law and he asked them is it breaking the law to heal on the Sabbath day? But they remained silent. So Jesus took hold of the man and healed him.

Then he sent him away. He asked them another question. He said suppose one of you has a child or an ox that falls into the well on the Sabbath day. Wouldn't you pull it out right away?

And they had nothing to say. Jesus noticed how the guests picked the places of honour at the table. So he told them a story. He said suppose someone invites you to a wedding feast.

Do not take the place of honour. A person more important than you may have been invited. If so the host who invited both of you will come to you and he will say give this person your seat.

[ 28 : 26 ] Then you will be filled with shame. You will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited take the lowest place. Then your host will come over to you. He will say friend move up to a better place.

Then you will be honoured in front of all the other guests. All those who lift themselves up will be made humble and those who make themselves humble will be lifted up. Then Jesus spoke with his host.

Suppose you give a lunch or a dinner he said do not invite your friends your brothers or sisters or your relatives or your rich neighbours. If you do they may invite you to eat with them.

So you will be paid back. But when you give a banquet invite those who are poor. Also invite those who can't see or walk. Then you will be blessed.

Your guests can't pay you back but you will be paid back when those who are right with God rise from the dead. One of the people at the table with Jesus heard him say these things.

[ 29 : 26 ] So he said to Jesus blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in God's kingdom. Jesus replied a certain man was preparing a great banquet.

He invited many guests. Then the day of the banquet arrived. He sent his servant to those who had been invited. The servant told them come everything is ready now.

But they all had the same idea. They began to make excuses. The first one said I've just brought a field. I have to go and see it. Please excuse me.

Another said I have just brought five pairs of oxen. I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me. Still another said I just got married so I can't come.

The servant came back and reported this to the master. And then the owner of the house became angry. He ordered his servant go out quickly into the streets and the lanes of the town.

[ 30 : 26 ] Bring in those who are poor. Also bring those who can't see or walk. Sir the servant said what you ordered has been done but there is still room.

Then the master told his servant go out into the roads go out into the country lanes make the people come in I want my house to be full. I tell you not one of those people who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.

A bit like the story of Mephibosheth Jesus is getting us to think about how we should include and honour everyone disabled people included of any age to invite them to come and join in to serve them to put their needs above our own to create a place where everyone belongs.

Jesus of course was the most inclusive person of all. So many of his interactions with disabled people teach us wonderful lessons about how to do inclusion well.

Bring to mind again those children and young people that you brought to mind earlier. Children and young people whose lives may have been affected by injury or accident or disability by loss by war by so many things that have really impacted their lives in significant ways.

[ 31 : 50 ] Or think about Martin and the story I told. How is what we've been thinking about relevant for those children and young people?

How does Mephibosheth's story or Jesus' words or even the story I shared about Martin change the way that we think about them about what we could do next?

Quite a few years ago I went and did some training at a church in St. Albans just north of London and they invited me to go and do some training for them because they had a couple of children in their children's work that have additional support needs.

So I went and did some training and at the end of it I was chatting to somebody who's their inclusion champion at the church and I sort of lost touch with them for a couple of years or so but bumped into their inclusion champion at another event two or three years later and she reminded me of the training I'd gone and done and the two children that they'd been looking to support at that time and then she updated me and told me that now they support 22 children with additional support needs and the families that they are a part of it had become a really big part of their ministry and mission in St Albans and it had transformed church for them in so many ways so many things that were better in their church as a result of this growth that they'd seen in this area.

What does that stir in you as you think about the children and young people you've been thinking with we've been doing this training yesterday building on the training that we did four years ago and continuing to grow this area of ministry here and it's great to see that and great to have that thought

about coming back and doing something with the whole congregation as well I look forward to doing that at some future point.

[ 33 : 58 ] Mephibosheth's story and the story that Jesus told both included an invitation an invitation to belong and that invitation was an invitation that I had the privilege to give to Martin when he came to join us too.

And perhaps something we can all do is to invite somebody the family of a child with additional support needs or a disabled person to come to church with us to include them to show them that there's a place here where they are loved and valued for who they are, that they can have a place at God's banqueting table and for the children and young people with additional support needs and disabled adults to be a valued and important part of our church family, honoured and blessed by us all.

Let's pray before we sing again. Father we thank you for the story of Mephibosheth. We thank you for how David showed us the importance of valuing somebody for who they are and we thank you for that account of the great banquet where the owner of the house insisted that everybody was brought in, those that could not see, those that could not walk included amongst them.

We thank you for Martin's story and for the inspiration that gives us as we think about how to include children and young people with additional support needs and their families in our church and how we can reach out and invite more families and individuals, disabled people, to come and join us around your banqueting table.

We thank you for all that you do to open our eyes to the ways in which Jesus was so inclusive in all his interactions with people with disabilities and health conditions too.

[ 36 : 05 ] Lord, inspire us to take this further, to keep on looking for ways to invite everybody to belong, to make this even more a place where everyone is valued and welcomed.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to sing again and as the worship group get together, the song we're going to sing, it's one of my favorites, it's Cornerstone and it's one of my favorites for lots of reasons but I'm very briefly going to share a little story.

I didn't know that this song was going to be on the list following the talk this morning but it's great that it is because a few years ago I was serving at a Christian event called Spring Harvest and my role there was to oversee all the inclusion work across the site and whilst that was for all ages it was predominantly with the children and young people and each day would go around to each of the venues where the children and young people were meeting and see how things were going and make sure that children and young people with additional support needs were being supported.

And there was a young lad about 10 years old called Jack who was in one of the settings and Jack's autistic he has some learning disability he's mostly non-verbal almost entirely non-verbal and Jack was sat there building a tower out of wooden Jenga blocks you know those wooden Jenga blocks and he was building a tower and it got about 10 blocks high and then it would fall over and then he'd build it again and it would fall over and I went and sat near to where he was and he glanced at me out the corner of his eye and built his tower again and it fell over in the direction where I was sat so I sort of involved myself and helped him to build his tower again and two of us could build a much bigger tower we built a tower maybe 20-25 blocks high and when it fell down with a big crash Jack had a wonderful belly laugh and it was lovely to hear his laugh coming out of him.

I spent far too long playing with Jack and I neglected all my other duties but eventually I had to drag myself away and as I left the room I glanced back at where Jack was and saw him building his tower once more and I wondered what are we doing to include Jack here?

[ 38 : 34 ] Is all that he's doing being child-minded whilst his family enjoyed the rest of spring harvest? Was he learning anything of the wonder of our amazing God and the gift of the love of Jesus and his sacrifice for us?

And it troubled me. It really troubled me. It made me wonder really will we be doing anything to reach Jack at all? But I needn't have worried because a couple of days later after spring harvest had finished I got a phone call from the team to tell me what had happened for Jack and his family on their journey home.

Jack was sat in the back of the family car and on the way home Jack, remember this boy is almost entirely non-verbal. He started to sing and he started to sing three words from one of the worship songs that they'd been singing a lot during spring harvest.

It was Cornerstone and the three words that he sang over and over and over again were weak made strong. Weak made strong. God had been at work in Jack during spring harvest. God had been ministering to us. Maybe we'd missed the opportunities to include him as much as we could have done and should have done but God was there. Weak made strong. So after the introduction let's stand and sing Cornerstone and when we get to that bit remember Jack.

[ 39 : 58 ] prayer of himself jours in the du■o in the narration to the muerte in the app the dishes weep our world is built Built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.

I dare not trust the sweetest way, but holy lead of Jesus' name. Father God, we give you thanks for what we have heard today.

Father God, not only have we heard it well, we pray that we would remember it well and learn these lessons deeply and with great wisdom. Father God, may this message that we have heard be with us now and for us as a church to really act upon it.

Father, we thank you for your word to us this day. In Jesus' name, amen.