

Changed By The Gospel

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Date: 18 January 2015

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[0 : 00] and my friend is not? Or why am I the only Christian that's in my family? Or maybe it's a little bit closer to home. Why am I not a Christian?

So how is it that people become followers of Jesus? What can we do so that my friend or perhaps my mum or my dad or the person who I work with or go to college with, what can I do so that they too can become a follower of Jesus Christ?

Well, the simple answer is found in Acts chapter 8. The story of the Ethiopian who hears the good news about Jesus from Philip and becomes a Christian.

So let's look at this story as we seek to answer the question, how do people become Christians? The first part of the answer is this. God's gospel plan.

And we see this worked out in three simple ways. First, we see his plan worked out in the world.

The beginning of Acts, no need to look it up, makes it very clear what God's plan is.

[1 : 24] In Acts chapter 1 and verse 8, it says this. Jesus is speaking to his disciples. He says, God's intention was that the gospel, the good news about Jesus, the promise of salvation would be announced to all people.

So God is making it very clear at the very beginning that his gospel doesn't belong to one particular culture or one particular race or people, but it's for everyone everywhere in the world.

So how did people get to here? Well, go back to chapter 8. Chapter 8 and verse 1. Look at what we read there at the beginning of chapter 8.

It tells us there that a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem. And all except the apostles were scattered.

Where? Throughout Judea and Samaria. All of a sudden, families who had trusted in Jesus Christ and who were part of the church in the city of Jerusalem had to move to other places for fear of their lives.

[3 : 02] They had to escape. And what did they do when they moved to other places? Well, look at verse 4. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

And we're told they went into Judea and Samaria. Just as God had said. This was no accident. This was all part of God's working. His sovereign and great plan that the persecution would move people out to different places so that they could begin to share the good news with other people.

So that's the first step. The second part is this. God's gospel plan in the witness is also worked out in Philip's life. Because Philip was in Jerusalem and now he's having to move out to another place.

Look at verse 26 of Acts chapter 8. Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, Go south to the road, the desert road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.

This is a road that goes southeast towards the coast from Jerusalem, about a 60 mile journey. As he started out on his way, he met an Ethiopian eunuch.

[4 : 25] An important official in charge of the treasury. So do you see how God is working in such a way that he brings Philip into contact with an unbeliever?

So God's working in the world. He's working in Philip and he's working in the life of the unbeliever.

Amazingly, God is doing that in this man from Ethiopia.

This unbeliever, we've been told, has been up to Jerusalem to go to the temple. And now he's on his way home again and he's opened up his Bible to the Old Testament.

Well, that's all they would have had then, the scriptures of Isaiah. And he's reading away. Now what would prompt a non-Jew to start reading the scriptures?

Well, it seems God is at work in his life as well. This man is searching. He's not satisfied. What he has isn't enough. So God in his gospel plan is bringing all these people together.

[5 : 39] So that they can hear the good news. Now Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian is really quite humorous. Look at verse 29. The spirit told Philip, go to that chariot and stay near it.

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and he heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. Do you understand what you're reading? Philip asked. Well, how can I?

He said, unless someone explains it to me. So he invited Philip to come and sit with him. You could imagine the scene that's there. What are you reading?

Isaiah. Do you understand it? No. Can I help you? Yes. Any chance of a lift? Come on, get up, come with me.

And I'll explain it to you. Is this a chance meeting? I don't think it is. Do you see how God's gospel plan is at work in the world?

[6 : 44] In his witness, Philip, and in the unbeliever, the Ethiopian. He's working everything together so that people can become Christians.

Mimi tells us in her story, if you read it, that she met her cousin who invited her to a meeting where the gospel was shared.

Philip, in his testimony, he told us how he moved from Congo to Finland and from Finland to Amsterdam. And there he met his niece who explained the gospel to him.

Are these chance meetings? I don't think they were. And for us, it changes how we think about where we actually live, the house that we live in, the place that we work.

And why I happen to be, perhaps, the only Christian in my family or in my college. At one level, we all choose the different places we live.

[7 : 47] We make decisions. We say, I'm going to go to that college and I'm going to do that course. Or I'm going to take that job. But at another level, God has planned out where we're going to live, where we're going to work, and what we're going to study.

And if you are a Christian, God has placed you where you are because there are people just like the Ethiopian who doesn't know the good news about Jesus.

And God has you there so that you can share and live your life amongst the people. So, how do people become Christians?

Well, first, we've got to understand God's big plan. But second, his invitation. We're told a little bit about the Ethiopian in verse 27.

Let's read verse 27 again. So, he started out, that's Philip, and on his way, he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians.

[9 : 01] This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship. Now, in today's language, we might say that he was the finance minister.

He's in charge of the treasury. He's the one who decides what taxes, what the budget is going to be. And he's a very important guy. So important, he's being chauffeur-driven in a first-century stretched limo.

Except for it's a chariot. Now, we're told, verse 28, on his way home, he was sitting in his chariot, reading the book of Isaiah, the prophets.

This unbeliever has travelled literally hundreds of miles all the way from Ethiopia, this great big vast kingdom of which the queen was in charge of, a very wealthy place, and he's travelled all the way up to Jerusalem to go and worship.

Except when he arrives at the temple, he discovers that he actually can't worship. He's not allowed into the temple.

[10 : 11] Well, how do we know that? Where did you read that? What verse was that, Johnny? Well, we are told that he is a foreigner.

He's an Ethiopian. He's come from a different place. And secondly, he is a eunuch. A eunuch simply means that he has been sexually altered or castrated.

Now, for us, that might seem quite odd and quite strange, but in a culture like that, it could be quite common. It was a sign, a way of showing that you were completely committed and loyal to the work and to the service that you were involved in.

So this was a very committed guy. But as far as temple rules go, I might have it there. Yes, in Deuteronomy 23, you can look it up later.

As far as temple rules go, foreigners and eunuchs were not allowed into the temple. You were kept outside. You couldn't get close.

[11 : 18] You were excluded. You were shut out. You're not allowed in. So it seems like his journey all the way up from Ethiopia up to Jerusalem was a complete waste of time.

And so he leaves disappointed, disillusioned. He came to meet God, to know something about God. But now he can't get in. He's been barred.

And somewhere on his return journey, this educated and important man is reading from the prophet Isaiah.

And Philip begins to explain to him. We're told what he was reading. Look at verse 32. The eunuch was reading this passage of scripture, which comes from Isaiah 53.

He was led like sheep to the slaughter. And as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.

[12 : 25] Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth. The eunuch asked Philip, tell me please, who is the prophet talking about?

Himself? Himself? Or is it someone else? Then Philip began with that very passage of scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

You see, Isaiah and the Old Testament is all about Jesus. So what did he explain to them? What was Philip going to say to him?

Well, we don't have it all there, but we can figure out from what he has explained, or what he has read, that he told the good news about Jesus. First, there is freedom from sin's penalty.

Keep your finger in Acts and let's go back to Isaiah chapter 53. Go back with me to Isaiah 53. Isaiah 53 and verse 5.

[13 : 40] The Ethiopian is asked the question as he's talked about this sheep who's being taken off for slaughter, this lamb who's going to be slain, and he's trying to figure out who is this sheep?

Who's this lamb? Is it the prophet or was he speaking about somebody else? Well, look at what this passage has to say, because it is speaking about Jesus.

Verse 5. He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him.

By his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us turned to his own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He, that's Jesus, was oppressed and afflicted. Yet he did not open his mouth. He, that's Jesus, was led like a lamb to the slaughter.

[14 : 42] And as a sheep before our shearers is silent. So he did not open his mouth. You see, Philip was beginning to explain that this is all about Jesus.

And he wanted to make clear to him that, listen, Mr. Ethiopian, It's not your race, it's not your status that excludes you from God.

The reason why you can't come to God is not because of where you come from or who you are. It's because of your sin. And the good news is, Mr. Ethiopian, Jesus has come to deal with your sin.

He's the one who stands in for us. He takes the place of us and he receives what we deserve. He was pierced for our transgressions.

Crushed for my iniquities. The punishment that brings you peace was upon him. And so he began to make clear the good news of Jesus.

[15 : 50] But that was only half the good news. The second part of it was this. That not only was he freed from sin's penalty, but he was now welcomed into God's family.

Look at Isaiah chapter 53 verse 8. A question has been raised. This is what he had been reading in his chariot.

It says there, By oppression and judgment he, that's Jesus, was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? It's a bit of a puzzling question for him because he's saying, Well, if Jesus has died, who is going to be his family?

Who is going to be his descendants? If Jesus is dead, what's his offspring going to be? Well, the answer comes for us in verse 10. It tells us there that it was the Lord's will to crush Jesus and to cause him to suffer.

And though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days.

[16 : 59] And the will of the Lord will prosper in his hands. Do you see what it's saying there? His offspring, even though Jesus dies, there will be offspring, there will be a family.

In other words, all who trust in Jesus, they are his true descendants. They are the ones who become part of God's family. So Philip is making it crystal clear to Mr. Ethiopian that look, instead of

being shut out, instead of being excluded, not only can you be forgiven of all of your sin, but you too can be welcomed in to God's family.

We don't know, but I wonder if he turned the page in his scroll, or rather unrolled it a little bit further, and came to Isaiah 56.

Have a look at Isaiah 56 and verse 3. So thinking of the Ethiopian, a foreigner, a eunuch, not allowed near God, excluded, but look what it says, Isaiah 56 verse 3. Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say, the Lord will surely exclude me from his people. And let not any eunuch complain, I am only a dry tree, for this is what the Lord says.

[18:34] Look at verse 5. To them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name, better than sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off.

Verse 7. These I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Isn't that amazing?

He's saying you're welcomed in. You can be part, you will be given a name. The name of God's family. But there's also a promise.

This isn't just about Mr. Ethiopian. There's a promise for us too in verse 8 of Isaiah 56. The sovereign Lord declares, He who gathers the exiles of Israel, I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered.

God's invitation is not just to one or two. It is to everyone, regardless of their race, religion, status or their past.

[19:45] It is open to members of your family, open to your colleagues at work and your friends. Listen to this from Philippe's testimony.

He said this, I believe that Jesus is the Lord and Saviour, the Son of God, who dies for our sins on the cross. And all of this would lead to, he says, new life and joining the Christian family.

The same experience the Ethiopian had, Philippe has had. Mimi puts it like this, I see that on the cross, Jesus paid for my sins and he is also giving me a loving church family.

This is a wonderful invitation to be forgiven and welcomed in to God's family. So there's God's plan, his invitation, but there's also our responsibility in terms of people becoming Christians.

God plans all these things out, but we have an important part to play in it. The risen Lord Jesus made it very clear that they would receive power, that they would be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

[21:11] And that doesn't mean we sit back and do nothing. In this case, if you go back to Acts chapter 8, Philippe responds with obedience.

It wasn't just a case of, oh well God's going to do it. No, he was fully involved in what God was going to do. So in Acts chapter 8, verse 26, it says, the angel of the Lord said to Philippe, go. And so Philippe went. In verse 29, it says, the Spirit told Philippe, go to that chariot. And Philippe went.

And in verse 35, Philippe began with the very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. He obeyed. He followed.

And it reminds us that for each one of us, if we are Christians, our primary purpose is to be people who pass on the good news. That's why God has us where we are.

[22:13] God's placed us in our particular family, in our sphere of friends, in the place that we work, so that we can share with others.

At the beginning of February, on Wednesdays, we're going to be looking at one life. What's it all about? Christianity Explored.

This is a great opportunity to do exactly what Philip did. To invite someone to say, let me explain to you, or rather, come along and listen and watch, discuss, ask questions, if you have any, about what the good news of Jesus is.

It's a great opportunity and I encourage us all to pass them to our friends. Ask God to give you the courage. I know we'll be quaking, we'll be wondering what they're going to say.

But you know what? All they can say is no. Philippe's niece and Mimi's cousin took their responsibility seriously, didn't they?

[23:24] They simply explained the good news to Philippe and to Mimi and invited them to learn more about Jesus. They took their responsibility seriously.

and passed on the good news. And we are called to do exactly the same just as Philip did in this story. And fourth, how do people become Christians?

Well, we've got God's great big gospel plan. He's made that invitation known where there's our responsibility in passing it on. But then there's our response to the gospel. If people are going to be changed by the gospel, we've got to know what the right response is. And having heard the good news from Philip, look what the Ethiopian does. Verse 36 of Acts chapter 8, As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, look, here is water.

[24 : 26] Why shouldn't I be baptised? And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptised him.

That must have been a wonderful day. And we've got to be very clear that baptism itself doesn't make anybody a Christian. So what's its purpose?

Why did the Ethiopian get baptised? Why are Philip and Mimi getting baptised today? Well, it's very closely connected to the story, the good news about Jesus.

two simple things. First, baptism is a sign that Jesus sets us free from sin's penalty.

As Philip and Mimi very shortly will get baptised as they go down into the water, they are identifying with the death of Jesus. They are saying publicly and clearly to us all that Jesus has taken my sin and that he suffers the judgment and the punishment that I deserve.

[25 : 40] As they go down into the water, they are saying, Jesus died for me. I can't deal with my sin, but Jesus can. And when they come out of the water, they are identifying with Jesus' resurrection.

they are saying that the life that Jesus has given is their life to now live with forevermore. So committing yourself to being baptised is saying, I trust in Jesus.

I trust that he sets me free from sin's penalty. So first, it's a sign. And second, baptism is a seal. baptism. It's this mark upon us that we have been welcomed and that we belong to God's family and that he keeps us in his family. Just as through our faith we are committing ourselves to Jesus, Jesus is committing himself to us.

Our baptism is a recognition of God's approval to us, not because of what we do, but because of what Jesus has done for us.

[26 : 49] So baptism is saying very clearly, I belong to Jesus, I'm a part of his family and that is sealed upon us. That is, we belong to him, part of his family forever and forever.

And that's the only right response to the gospel. And some of you here may say, I'm a Christian, I'm a follower of Jesus, Jesus, but you're not yet baptized.

Well, let me ask the question, why are you not baptized? It's what Jesus has commanded and it's that visible demonstration that yes, I do trust and yes, I do belong.

It makes that statement clarifying and letting everybody know that you are with Jesus. Jesus. Look at verse 39.

When they came up out of the water, the spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away and the eunuch didn't see him again but went on his way rejoicing.

[27 : 57] He had become a Christian. And this, very simply, is how all people become believers. God brings believers and unbelievers together in his gospel plan.

He gives that invitation to come and say, receive this life that I have to give. Come and hear this good news. And in response, be baptized.

Philip and Mimi know that for sure. I hope you know that for sure. And maybe there's the question too about your friends or your family or your work colleague.

Are they Christians? And what part am I going to play in their life so that they too become like the Ethiopian and Philip and Mimi?

Let's pray together. together. Our Father God, we thank you so much for this great story of the way in which you bring people together so that they have new life.

[29 : 12] We celebrate and give thanks today for the way in which you have brought Philip and Mimi to faith in Christ. We thank you for his niece and Mimi's cousin for taking that step of sharing the good news with them and we thank you Father that through your work that you have caused them to believe also.

We pray that we ourselves would be people wherever we are and wherever we go that you would open up opportunities for us as we travel, as we study or as we work to share the good news.

Give us courage, simply one person who we could invite to Christianity Explored.

Give us a door that opens to explain the good news. Father help us we pray in Jesus name.

Amen. Amen.