

A widening vision

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 November 2015

Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0 : 00] This passage shortly, but before we do that, I call this sermon a widening vision.

! We remember those words of Jesus, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you! and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

And we see this beginning to happen and the disciples beginning to sort of take stock of what this actually means in this passage. You'll notice that Philip actually perhaps went slightly in the wrong order. He went to Samaria and then to Judea and that's what we're looking at this evening. But last week we found the Holy Spirit driving the believers out from Jerusalem and preaching that gospel in Samaria. And now we find, as it were, the boundaries being pushed in more senses than one, as though the Holy Spirit is almost being restricted and he's chafing to burst free from the restrictions of just Judea and Samaria. But we find him at work within the ancient land this evening. It's not quite time to go to the ends of the earth yet. First, the vision of the church needs to be expanded. There need to be new ways of thinking and new ways of looking at the gospel and new ways of thinking about how the word of God is spread.

And so I want to look at this passage that we read in this light. And I'd like to, rather than just sort of work through it, linearly as it were, I'd like to look at, in two respects, first of all I'd like us to look at the widening vision in the sense of widening as to who might perhaps, might we expect to be converted. And so we have here what might describe as two unlikely conversions. And we'll look at those.

And then there's a bit of geography in here as well. And I've done a nice map that I'll show you a bit later. And we can see the vision expanding to fill the area of Judea and Samaria at least.

[2 : 32] And so we'll look at the matter of geography. So let's, first of all, look at these two unlikely of conversions. I guess that neither of these people would have been on the church's target list if they'd sort of sat down and done a demographic analysis and think, well, who is most likely to respond to the word, to the new word that is preached?

You probably wouldn't have picked either of these people on your hit list, as it were. They were both, in the loosest sense, Jews, at least people who had some respect for Judaism. But they were opposite ends, really, of the respectability spectrum, looking at it from a Jewish point of view. One was an ultra-Orthodox Pharisee.

The other, the best that could be said, was a God-fearing Gentile. They had something in common. They were clearly both well-educated men. But they had a very different worldview and a different history.

The Ethiopian official worked for Kandachi, or Kandace, however you want to pronounce it, who was queen of ancient Ethiopia. She's not so much the boundaries of the current land, but more Kush, northern Sudan, that sort of area.

[4 : 06] And historians suggest, for instance, in the Lion Handbook, that in fact, Kandachi was the queen mother because the state religion of Ethiopia had the effective ruler.

Her son was a kind of God-king and was guarded as actually too holy to do any actual ruling. So it was Kandachi as the queen mother who really ruled the land.

And this man, this Ethiopian man, was the chancellor of the Exchequer. Notice that he was in charge of the queen's treasury. A man, in other words, who was trusted, obviously, by his queen, trusted with all the resources of the realm.

And we're told he was a eunuch. Now, in fact, the original meaning of the term eunuch just means an official. But he worked for the queen, and the term had come to mean somebody who had been emasculated, somebody who was not a whole man, as it were.

And that's certainly the later significance of the term. We can't be entirely sure what is meant here, but he did work for the queen. So it's possible he was a eunuch in the modern sense. If that was the case, he wouldn't actually have been allowed into the temple, because Deuteronomy 21, verse 1, would actually have excluded him from the temple.

[5 : 38] He was certainly a Gentile. And in one sense, he was a representative of a foreign religion, because, as I say, he was a representative of Kandachi, and therefore the god king of that land.

And he would certainly have been regarded as the lowest of the low by Orthodox Jews. And yet he had gone to Jerusalem seeking God. He was what's known as a god-fearer.

There were those, of course, who had, in the Roman Empire, had already begun to reject the ridiculous pantheons of Greece and Rome, and perhaps said that these Jews had maybe had something going for them.

And there were those who were described as god-fearing, and he'd gone to Jerusalem seeking God. And he was now on his way back, back towards North Africa via Gaza, which is kind of on the corner as you go around into Africa.

I'll show you on the map a bit later. So he wasn't an obvious target. But the Holy Spirit was no longer going to be interested in such distinctions.

[6 : 52] In the old covenant, he would have been excluded. This man would have been excluded from the covenant and from the temple. But no longer.

And this man had got hold of a scroll of Isaiah. It's a little bit surprising in itself. Remember that in those days, books were all handwritten, and they were very expensive.

But maybe money and political clout can buy you some privileges. So somehow he'd got hold of a scroll of the book of Isaiah.

But unfortunately, without help, it wasn't going to do him much good. He was reading it, as we're told in verse 31 of chapter 8, but he was puzzled. He just didn't understand what it meant, what it was about.

He had, as we might say, he had no context to make sense of it. And so the Spirit was going to provide an interpreter, and he was going to provide an interpreter in the shape of Philip, Philip the deacon, Philip the evangelist, as he's referred to later in Acts.

[8 : 06] And notice, that is the way the Spirit works. He didn't provide some direct revelation to the official. He doesn't speak to him directly. Instead, he spoke to Philip and said, You go.

You go and speak to this man. Otherwise, how could the official have known if this was a genuine work of God or not? I mean, all sorts of people have visions and mysterious sayings and things like that.

But something more solid was required than just a vision. And so the Old Testament scriptures, and Philip as their expounder, their explainer, were going to be necessary to convince him.

And so this man had gone to Jerusalem and come away confused. But instead, by the roadside, he found what he was looking for, an explanation of what God was really like and what God was really doing.

And so his journey wasn't wasted after all. Probably he was on the way back thinking, Well, I've come all this way. I've spent all this money for this scroll. And it's a complete waste of time and money, really, wasn't it?

[9 : 24] I haven't got anything. But it turned out his journey was not wasted after all. He did indeed meet with the living God. We don't hear any more of this convert.

But he would take the gospel to North Africa and perhaps on towards Alexandria, that ancient center of Greek learning. And we do certainly learn later on in Acts of believers coming from Alexandria in North Africa.

So the Lord provided an interpreter of the scripture to this man. And one thing I think is worth pointing out here something that's worth remembering is we need to be aware of those who tell you that to be spiritual is to get away from information, to get away from truth, to get away from things expressed in words and to move to some sort of pure experience.

An experience that, well, the word that's used is ineffable. Probably not a word in common use, but it means an experience that can't be described in words.

That's what it amounts to. It's indescribable. An experience that is in the fullest sense without any content or meaning. But Christian spirituality doesn't work like that.

[10:55] And it's very well shown by the work of the Holy Spirit here. There's always been such in the church, those who want to propagate this view.

Mystics, they used to be called, called different things nowadays, but they're still around. But this kind of thinking is quite deadly for the gospel, in fact. The message that the Spirit has to deliver here is one that's embedded in history.

It's embedded in the prophetic testimony. That's where the Spirit starts, isn't it, with this passage of Isaiah. It's delivered with explanation, with logic, with argument.

Philip explains what the passage means and then goes on to say how the prophetic witness was looking forward to the Messiah, the promised King to come.

Let me just remind you of a couple of verses, one from the Old Testament. Isaiah 1, chapter 1, verse 18 says, Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord.

[12:05] Then he goes on to talk about the sins being forgiven. But he doesn't say, there's nothing, in a sense, there's nothing mystical about it. He's saying reason. Let me reason with you.

Let me point out what you need and where you are. Make sure you understand it. And similarly, 1 Peter 3, verse 15 says, In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord.

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that is in you. the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

Philip was there by the roadside. And when somebody asked him, he was indeed prepared to give the reason for the hope that he had.

And this is the work of the Holy Spirit. But of course, we need to remind ourselves also that this message does come with power and with emotional, as an emotional content as well, because we were told that the man went on his way with joy.

[13:12] So that's not, we shouldn't forget that either. But the joy is based on truth. Not joy based on joy.

It's joy based on an understanding of the truth. So let's look at now the second of our converts. As I say, we read really nothing else of this Ethiopian eunuch, but Saul, of course, is going to be crucial to much of the rest of the book of Acts.

But here, we just see him as another convert. His conversion is rather more dramatic, actually, isn't it?

And I might almost say traumatic. He's blind for three days. And in fact, Saul does have a direct revelation. He directly meets the Lord Jesus.

His problem isn't lack of knowledge in a sense or context, but his problem is a willful and fanatic rebellion against what the word of God actually says.

[14:23] In fact, he's one of those who were accused by Stephen. He was literally one of those who were accused by Stephen of resisting the Holy Spirit in chapter 7, verse 51.

His knees, not so much for a change of mind as a change of heart. And yet we find even here even though he does have this direct vision of the Lord Jesus.

It does have content, doesn't it? He's asked questions. In fact, this conversation consists mostly of questions. Jesus says, why are you persecuting me?

And Paul says, in reply, who are you? And then Jesus explains who he is. And so we have a sense of irony here, don't we, as Luke paints the picture.

He reminds us that Saul's actually from Tarsus, which is a cosmopolitan university city. Like Brighton, really, on the coast. Doesn't tell us, Luke doesn't tell us here, but later on we learn that Saul is actually a Roman citizen and that he's clearly had a liberal education.

[15:37] He quotes from the Greek poets and the like. And yet Saul was a Pharisee, an Orthodox Jew.

And really, he could hardly have been more fanatical if he'd been born on the Temple Mount, could he? And yet, I think that there is a sense of irony here as Luke points out. Well, he claimed to be an Orthodox Jew in Jerusalem, but he was actually born in Tarsus.

He wasn't even born in the land. But still, he was a Pharisee and he'd studied in Jerusalem. And he was leading the charge when it came to getting rid of the church, stamping it out.

But God had a task for Saul. This fanatical Jew would find all his zeal and energy redirected to a better, healthier purpose.

And in fact, he was going to be the very one, Luke tells us, who would take the gospel to the Gentiles. It says that in chapter 9, verse 15. This fanatic, this one who was a Pharisee of the most

restrictive of all the Jewish sects, was the one who was going to take the gospel to the Gentiles. [17:02] People say, does God have a sense of humor? Well, I think he certainly has a sense of irony. Not the person you would have picked, I'm sure. And yet, this was the person that God had picked.

And let me remind you again that in spite of Saul's having an actual vision, there is still a preacher involved, Ananias. Ananias is understandably rather sceptical.

Verse 13, when the message comes to him. I often think it's slightly surprising that the Lord isn't a bit sharper with him as he has done on other people, but perhaps his scepticism here was really rather understandable.

You don't really mean to go and talk to Saul, do you? That's suicide. But yes, that is what the Lord means. And in fact, we see that even though Saul had seen the risen Jesus, it wasn't until Ananias had named Jesus and had baptized Saul himself himself, that he was filled with the Holy Spirit and able to preach in verse 20.

And we notice that his head knowledge of the Jewish religion wasn't going to go to waste. In fact, it came in rather handy because, we didn't read verse 22, but if you look forward to verse 22, we see that what did Saul do?

[18:42] he reasoned and argued with the Jews proving that this is the Christ. Again, his message is based on reasoning, showing, embedding it in the history, showing that this is not some newfangled idea, but this is the very man to whom the prophets pointed.

So we have here two unlikely conversions, different in some ways, but in other ways very much the same, and tell us a lot about the way the Holy Spirit works.

Now, let's also have a bit of a look at the geography. We remember that Philip had been in Samaria, which is when the gospel had first been preached in Samaria, and Peter and John had moved up to back him up, but Philip is told, apparently by an angel, it says, to head for the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, in other words, to go back into Judea, to avoid presumably Jerusalem. After all that, he had fled Jerusalem in the first place, so we assume that he didn't go back to Jerusalem, but instead headed for the road between Jerusalem and Gaza. He could have perhaps met up with the Ethiopian in Jerusalem, but that would have been perhaps too dangerous, too difficult.

So, instead, the Spirit sends him to this road somewhere between Jerusalem and Gaza. We don't know exactly where on the road it was, of course, but somewhere on this road he met up with the Ethiopian.

[20:36] And I put a star on the map there to indicate where the Ethiopian was converted. Philip himself, however, doesn't head on down to Gaza, he doesn't go quite that far, which would have taken him more or less out of Judea again, but instead he goes to Azotus, near the coast, not actually on the coast.

Azotus was the ancient Philistine stronghold of Ashdod and it's almost directly due west of Jerusalem. Sorry, I'm going to go to the next six, another arrow, next slide, another arrow there. If you're familiar with the Old Testament history and the time of David, you'll know that these coastal cities of Gaza and Ashdod and the other Philistine strongholds were a great thorn in the side as it were of David and Solomon, well, strictly of David.

The Philistines as a nation, I think, had disappeared years ago, but there may still be, I think, some significance in these that Philip goes to these cities.

the boundaries of the land, the fringes as it were. The boundaries of the kingdom, you could say, are being reconquered, but this time not by military force, but by the word of the gospel.

[22:14] And then Philip proceeds on up the coast, and we're told that he preached in the villages as he went. And so the important thing that Luke wants us to know is that he preached the gospel as he headed north, and his exclusion from Jerusalem was not a barrier for the spirit, but rather an opportunity.

The local churches could be established along the coast there, still in Jewish territory, but free from the, or away from the rigid control of the center of Jewish power in Jerusalem.

And that meant the gospel could spread inwards to Judea from all directions. It was becoming impossible for Saul and the Jews to stamp it out.

But equally, of course, the scene was set for the expansion outwards. he couldn't go any further west because the sea was in the way, but that wouldn't be a problem for very much longer.

But for the moment, Philip stops at the sea, at the Mediterranean. In fact, in the next chapter, in chapter 9, verses 32 and 39, we also find the apostle Peter heads for the coast.

[23 : 45] He goes to Lydda and then on to Joppa. we're not told explicitly that the spirit directed Philip out of Azotus.

We are told the spirit took him to Azotus. But it's clearly the spirit which is propelling him as he found opportunity to preach the good news of Jesus. And you'll notice from the map there that Philip doesn't quite manage a circumnavigation of Judea.

He doesn't get all the way around. He actually stops at Caesarea, a strategic Roman colony, a seaport, still basically just about within the territory of Judea, but certainly within the territory of the ancient kingdom, but on the coast.

And in fact, he seems to have stopped there. Again, we're not told why he stopped there, but he seems to have established his base there because years later, in Acts 21, verse 8, we find that he's visited there by Saul, who's by then, of course, renamed Paul, and by Luke himself.

Perhaps that's when Luke took the opportunity to get his story, but it tells us in Acts 28 that on their way back to Jerusalem, Paul and Luke stopped at the house of Philip in Caesarea.

[25 : 14] So, the gospel has indeed been spread around Judea, as the Spirit had promised. But actually, Luke completes the circumnavigation, if you like, by directing our attention northwards, actually out of Judea and even out of Samaria, to the Syrian city of Damascus.

Damascus, but of course, Damascus, like the Phoenician cities, have been an ancient enemy, an ancient problem for ancient Israel.

And perhaps there's significance that the gospel is also going to Damascus. And we find that there were already disciples there.

We're told that Ananias was there and there were other disciples as well. We're told in chapter 9, verse 19, So what was Saul up to? Well, he realized, in fact, he'd made a strategic mistake.

Of course, he'd tried to eliminate the gospel in Jerusalem, but his persecution had actually caused it to spread. And if you notice the plan in chapter 9, verse 1, his plan was to bring the disciples back to Jerusalem as prisoners.

[26 : 39] He's still trying to contain the situation. he's still trying to prevent the gospel spreading, this message spreading. Perhaps it's still not too late. But of course, King Jesus and the Holy Spirit have a different idea.

And just before he gets to Damascus, Saul is recruited into the kingdom. And the ring around the land, as it were, is completed. The last, the Jews' last hope of containing the gospel is gone.

Way up in the north in Damascus, they've limited power to drain in Saul's defection. There's not much they can do up there to Saul, although they try.

We read on a bit, we find they do try and kill him, actually. There's a last desperate attempt to kill him. And Saul does go back to Jerusalem, actually.

He escapes the plot against him in Damascus and goes back to Jerusalem, but no longer breathing out threats, but rather preaching the gospel of King Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit.

[27 : 52] So let's just briefly to conclude and think about Philip's spirit-guided plan of attack here.

You notice that he doesn't directly confront, actually, the enemies in Jerusalem. He preaches how and where he can.

without directly confronting the hostile authorities, and yet he won't be silenced. His aim is clearly to spread the gospel throughout the land.

And what are we to make of these two conversions? We notice that unless the spirit is at work, unless the spirit speaks, people will not be converted.

And we need to keep that in mind, of course. We wouldn't, as I say, have targeted either of these. two on our hit list of likely converts, but the spirit had them in mind.

[29 : 01] And yet at the same time, the human preachers and exposition and explaining the scriptures are both central to the Holy Spirit's approach. Our preaching is not based on promulgating some mystical experience, as the Eastern religions teach, language, where really the idea is to switch off your mind and your understanding and somehow experience God directly.

But that is not the way that the Christian gospel works. The preaching is based on logic and history. It's based on saying that there is a king, and there is a king who will return.

and it's about objective truth as well as subjective experience. Of course, it must also involve that emotional content and that objective experience.

And of course, we should. There's nothing wrong with using emotion when we proclaim the gospel. In fact, prophets often very much did, didn't they?

Why will you die? Turn, will you not turn? And yet, at the centre of the message is a message of truth. Not an experience, but a truth.

[30 : 27] And the gospel shouldn't be limited by our cultural expectations. I mean, we limit it, of course. We think, well, no point in going there. We don't take any notice. But we shouldn't be.

The spirit can call anyone. What else can we say? We shouldn't think that evangelism is somehow heavily dependent on technique.

It's difficult to say that, well, Philip was an evangelist. I suppose he must have had a certain technique in the way he preached, but his message really was based on the simple explanation of the truth.

and so, in fact, for that matter, was the message of Ananias. He simply said, I'm bringing you the message of Jesus, the one you've been persecuting. So it's not so much a technique, but it is opportunist.

Preaching looks for opportunities. Paul says, be instant in season and out of season, to look out for opportunities. So our task is to witness to Christ when and where we can.

[31 : 39] So let's pray that we might share that wider vision with that's, well, that these are Philip the evangelist had.

Let's pray perhaps before we sing our last hymn. Heavenly Father, we have time a time to have to a time