

PM Acts 8:26-40

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[0 : 00] I'd like us to read together from the Holy Bible, and we've actually got two readings on the sheet, it only says one, but we've got two.! The first is from the book of Isaiah, chapter 56, Isaiah in the Old Testament, chapter 56, and it's on page 745 of the church Bible, the Bible you have there.

So Isaiah, chapter 56, and we'll read verses 1 to 8. Thus says the Lord, keep justice and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come and my deliverance be revealed.

Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil.

Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, the Lord will surely separate me from his people. And let not the eunuch say, behold, I am a dry tree.

For thus says the Lord, to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me, and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name, better than sons and daughters.

[1 : 35] I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord and to be his servants.

Everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant, these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer.

Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar. For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.

And then a second reading from the book of Acts. Acts chapter 8. And we're reading from verse 26 to the end of the chapter.

So just at the beginning of Acts, the risen Lord Jesus commissions his disciples in chapter 1 verse 8.

[2 : 58] He says, You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

And this chapter 8 of Acts kind of takes that forward. In the first part, and we looked at this about a fortnight ago, the gospel goes to Samaria.

And now we read of it going further afield still. So Acts chapter 8, page 1104, reading from verse 26.

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, Rise and go toward the south, to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.

This is a desert place. And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Kandaki, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure.

[3 : 59] He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning, seated in his chariot. And he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

And the spirit said to Philip, Go over and join this chariot. So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, Do you understand what you are reading?

And he said, How can I, unless someone guides me? And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this.

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb before its shearers is silent, so he opens not his mouth.

In his humiliation, justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.

[5 : 04] And the eunuch said to Philip, About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this? About himself, or about someone else?

Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture, he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, See here is water.

What prevents me from being baptized? And he commanded the chariot to stop. And they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.

And when they came up out of the water, the spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through, he preached the gospel to all the towns, until he came to Caesarea. May God bless to us those readings of his word.

[6 : 10] Let's join together again in prayer. Amen. So I'd like us to turn back to the passage we read to Acts chapter 8, from verse 26 to 40.

In the book of Acts, we find all kinds of people encountering the Lord Jesus Christ, through hearing the good news about him.

And all kinds of people coming to put their faith in him as their Lord, and as their Saviour, and discovering peace, joy, salvation, through him.

And here, in this passage, we read of this Ethiopian man, probably the first black African disciple of Jesus, ever that there has been.

And it's sort of, it's layering on, just layer after layer, Luke is doing this, that he's emphasising that the good news of Jesus Christ is for everyone, from every nation, tribe, race, culture, background.

[7 : 31] Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world. He is the Lord of all. He is for high, for low, for those who are in, those who are out, for people to the ends of the earth.

Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world. And he can meet your need. And he can lift your burden. In the first half of this chapter, Philip, and this Philip is not the Apostle Philip, it's Philip who is one of the seven helpers who were chosen in, it's back in chapter six of Acts.

But, well, there he's, his job is to do with distribution of relief for widows and poor people in the community, in the church. He's also a preacher.

And in this chapter, we read of Philip's preaching activity. And in the first half, he's in Samaria, preaching to the city of Samaria. And there's a great response to the gospel there.

Many believe and are baptized. But now, he has a different task, a different mission. And it's a very special task.

[8 : 47] We see that because an angel of the Lord comes to him and commissions him for this particular task. The angel says to him, rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.

Philip, at this stage, doesn't know why he's got to go down there. So he has to step out on that journey in faith. And he's obedient to that. What he has to do will become clear later on.

And then we were introduced to this Ethiopian Unuch. So Ethiopia, we mentioned it in the Old Testament it was called Cush.

So it's in Africa, sort of the eastern part of Africa. And the empire that this man was from was the Nubian Empire.

His capital was in Mero. I'm not sure if that's how you pronounce it. but it's in what is modern day Sudan. And we noted how at the beginning of Acts in chapter 1 verse 8 the Lord Jesus commissions his disciples to be his witnesses beginning in Jerusalem and then to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

[10:14] And this Ethiopian I think represents the ends of the earth from a Jewish perspective and also from a Greek and Roman perspective and there would be many Greek and Roman people who would be the first readers of Acts.

For all of those people Ethiopia was the ends of the earth. It was the furthest reaches. People didn't know. That was as far as people knew about. They didn't even know what there was beyond Ethiopia.

And so this is about the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth which is the purpose of God of the Lord Jesus. And this event also represents the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy about Cush or Ethiopia.

We sang from Psalm 87 about how Cushites being included, registered among the people of God as if they were born in Zion.

Later on we're going to sing at the end of the service from Psalm 68. Cush and we're going to sing from verse 31 where it says that Cush will submit herself to God.

[11:32] And so these passages that speak of Cush, of Cushites coming to believe in the Lord, in Yahweh, are being fulfilled here, right here, in Acts chapter 8.

Cush Well this man, he's an Ethiopian but he's also a eunuch. A eunuch was a castrated male. And he's also a court official of the Kandaki who was the queen of Ethiopia.

Ethiopia was an important kingdom kingdom. And he's in charge of her treasury. So he's like the chancellor of the exchequer, the chief finance minister.

He's the Rachel Reeves of Ethiopia. And so he's a very important high official. He's very obviously wealthy. Only wealthy people would be able to travel that far.

Ethiopia was a huge distance away. And he's traveling in a chariot. He also has the money to buy a scroll. And scrolls in those days were very very expensive because of the labor involved in producing them and the materials involved.

[12:43] So he's a wealthy man. He's a very important high official. And he'd gone to worship in Jerusalem. Now he may have been a proselyte, a convert to Judaism.

Or he may have been a God-fearer. A God-fearer was a Gentile, a non-Jew, who had come to worship the Lord, the God of the Israelites, but hadn't taken the full step of becoming a Jew, which involved circumcision.

And for those Gentile God-fearers, there was a special area of the temple called the Court of the Gentiles. They had to stay in that part. They couldn't go to the areas where Jews could go.

Now, if he was a Gentile God-fearer, he wouldn't be allowed into the main part of the temple.

But even as a Jew, as a eunuch, Deuteronomy chapter 23, verse 1, forbade people who were deformed in that way or in other ways from entering the house of God.

[13:58] So either way, as a eunuch and or as a Gentile, he was barred from full inclusion in the temple worship. And yet he was an earnest seeker after God.

I mean, someone who's going to go all that way, I think it's around a thousand miles. I meant to check that. I should have checked that. But it's a huge distance to go from Ethiopia to Jerusalem.

Someone who does that is an earnest seeker after God. Now we read in Isaiah 56, in verse 3, it says, Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say, the Lord will surely exclude me from his people.

And let not the eunuch complain, I'm only a dry tree. And that's, I'm sure Luke has that in mind as he's recording this.

Because this man is both of those. He's a foreigner and he's a eunuch. He's a double outsider as a foreigner and as a eunuch. And Luke is telling us here, Luke, the writer of Acts, is telling us that the gospel is also for the outsider.

[15:11] You may feel that your family, your background, that everything about you is just far removed from God, from the church, from the scriptures, from Jesus Christ.

Christ. Well, the good news is that Jesus Christ has come for the outsider. There is no one who is so outside that they are beyond his reach, beyond his care and concern.

And we see that illustrated in this man here. Well, he's returning from pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He's been to the house of God, to the temple, to worship.

worship. And it seems that his quest for God is still unfulfilled. He's brought this scroll of the prophet Isaiah, but he doesn't understand it.

When Philip asks him, do you understand what you're reading? He says, how can I, unless someone guide me? And I think maybe we can sense some exasperation here.

[16:14] Here he is, he's gone all this distance, weeks, months of traveling to Jerusalem, seeking God, and yet he's coming back, and there's still a kind of darkness.

He's got the scriptures, he's reading the scriptures, which of course is a great thing to do, and if you're seeking God, then you should read the scriptures, and yet he can't understand them.

He feels his lack of a guide, of a teacher, to help him understand. But he is seeking, and I think here in this man we have a great example of the words of the Lord Jesus that, seek, and you will find.

If you seek the Lord, if you seek him with all your heart, you will find. And to turn that round from another perspective, if you seek, then God will find you. And really this passage is about God finding this man.

He finds him through Philip, through sending Philip to him. God's love. And so, if you are seeking God, if you don't have that assurance of knowing God for yourself, knowing his salvation, keep seeking, read the word, pray to him, and if you keep seeking, he will find you, and you will find him.

[17:31] Well, the Spirit speaks to Philip. Philip, go to, in verse 29, go over and join this chariot.

So, Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, do you understand what you are reading? He said, how can I unless someone guides me?

And he invites Philip up into the chariot to sit with him there and speak with him. And we see here that God is guiding and directing all of this.

He sends the angel in the first place to Philip, and now the Spirit tells him to go and approach the chariot. And we see here this man's need for the scriptures to be explained and expounded.

He needs a guide for the scriptures. Now, there's a kind of balance here that's needed. One of the things about the Reformation was that it was about the right and the responsibility of every believer to read the scriptures for themselves.

[18 : 43] That was why it was so important for people like William Tyndale to translate the Bible into, in his case, English and other languages around Europe so that ordinary people could read the Bible for themselves.

And that's vitally important. And we're not totally reliant on experts to understand the scriptures.

We should all read the scriptures for ourselves. And of course, today that's easier than ever. We have it in book form. We have it in electronic form. And it's easy to do that. But also, on the other hand, we do need teachers and guides to help us understand the scriptures.

That was what Philip's role was here. So, it's important to read the Bible for yourself. But also, it's important to come to a church, to hear preaching and teaching, have the Bible taught and explained.

And of course, for us today, there are many other resources to help us do that. Books and commentaries, etc. So, for Philip, the reason that the angel of the Lord sent him here and why the Spirit told him to approach and go alongside the chariot is now clear.

[19 : 59] He is sent to explain the scriptures and from them the good news about Jesus. And I think we also notice here that God's way of working, that God uses his people, God uses human beings, believers, to spread his word, to spread his message.

Now, if God had wanted, he could have, you know, he sends an angel to Philip. The angel comes to Philip to tell him to go to this road. God could have just told the angel, you know, go and sit in the chariot with this man and explain everything to him.

God could have done that. But God, that's not God's usual way of working. God's usual way of working is to use his people. It's to use us. God's usual way of just by way of an illustration.

This is, I think, probably not a true story, but I'm kind of flagging it up as not a true story. But William Carey was a very famous missionary from England to, he went to India and he was involved in translating the Bible into 30 some languages in India.

And before he went, he was very burdened about India, about the vast numbers of people in that land who had no knowledge of Christ and who were living and dying without knowing Christ and his salvation.

[21 : 28] And he, you know, campaigned and preached and stirred up interest in foreign missions. And there's a story which, and this is the story which I think is not true.

The historians say there's no real basis for this. But the story goes that Carey was, you know, proposing his mission and that a man, I think an elder, said to him, young man, sit down.

If God wants to convert the heathen, he will do it without your help. Now, I'm again sort of tagging that as being probably not happened, but it illustrates, I think, that, of course, that man was half right, this fictional conversation.

He was half right, because God can, God could save any number of people without our help. God doesn't need us. God can, God is powerful to save anybody and to take his good news to people without our help.

But what Carey recognized was that God uses means, God uses his people to take his message to others. God uses us.

[22 : 40] God wants us to take his good news to others, to the nations of the world. And that was what Philip had to do here. That was Philip's task.

God has work for us to do, and we are to be obedient to that call. Well, this Ethiopian is reading from the prophecy of Isaiah, the book of Isaiah, and he's reading chapter 53, a passage about the servant of the Lord.

And I think here also we see the providence of God, that he's reading this particular passage. Of course, at one level, all the scriptures point towards Christ in one way or another. But some parts of the Old Testament, more clearly than others, are pointing towards the Messiah.

And this passage is a prime example of that. So this passage, Isaiah chapter 53, is about the servant of the Lord, this figure called the servant of the Lord.

And in the part that the Ethiopian is reading, it's describing his suffering. And the Ethiopian eunuch asks the question to Philip, who is the prophet talking about?

[23 : 59] Is he talking about himself or someone else? And Philip, we're told, beginning from this very passage of scripture, told him the good news about Jesus.

The answer to his question is that the prophet was talking not about himself, but about the Messiah, who is Jesus. And Jesus is the one who fulfills this prophecy.

It was written all those centuries earlier about him and is fulfilled in him. Now, Philip had learned this from Jesus himself, whether directly or maybe through the apostles.

Jesus himself, in Luke 24, speaks to those two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They are downcast because although some of the women disciples have reported the empty tomb and an appearance of angels, they say, well, you know, he's not there.

They still think that Jesus is dead. And in Luke 24, verse 25, Jesus says to them, O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken.

[25 : 13] Was it not necessary that Christ or the Messiah should suffer these things and enter his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.

So Jesus is there saying that all the scriptures, Moses, the prophets, later on in that chapter he mentions the Psalms too, they point forward. They're preparing the way for the Messiah.

And so Philip has learned that from Jesus. In fact, this very passage, Isaiah 53, is I'm sure one of the examples that Jesus used because in the evening before he was, or the evening just before his betrayal, Jesus quotes this passage, Isaiah 53, and it's in Luke 22, where he quotes the last verse of that Isaiah 53 passage.

I can't just quite find it at the moment. Oh yeah, it's in verse 37 of Luke 22, he says, I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me.

And he was numbered with the transgressors. For what is written about me has its fulfillment. And that sentence, he was numbered with the transgressors, is the last verse of this prophecy in Isaiah 52 and 53, about the suffering servant.

[26 : 43] That passage speaks about the servant's suffering, about how he suffers for others, that for the transgression of my people, he was stricken, that he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities.

The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. And so through his suffering, we receive peace, we receive healing through that suffering.

And of course that chapter also goes on to speak about his vindication, his glorification, how he's exalted, highly exalted, after his suffering.

After his suffering he will see the light of life and be satisfied. Well the Ethiopian believes and requests to be baptized, and they pass some water and he is baptized there.

Baptism of course, the initiation ceremony into the community of God's people, into the church of Jesus Christ. Symbolizing also the washing, the cleansing of sin.

[27 : 57] Well then, at the end of the passage, the Spirit of the Lord carries Philip away. He's transported to Azotus, because this particular task is accomplished.

God's special intervention has characterized all of this from the beginning, from the angel speaking to Philip, the Spirit telling him to approach the chariot.

The fact that the man is reading in God's providence, Isaiah 53, and they pass water for baptism, and now the Spirit lifts, carries Philip away.

And it highlights the importance of this meeting. Earlier in the chapter, the Gospel breaks down the barriers between Jew and Samaritan.

And now we read of the Gospel going to, through this man, to Ethiopia. Ethiopia, as we mentioned earlier, from Jewish and Greek and Roman eyes, to the uttermost parts of the earth, the ends of the earth.

[29 : 02] And so the ripples of the Gospel are going further and further out, towards the ends of the earth. Because the Word of God, the good news about Jesus Christ, is for everyone.

And the last picture we have of this man is of him going on his way, rejoicing.

He has sought, and he has found peace, and joy, and salvation in Jesus Christ. And for you this evening, whoever you are, whatever your background, whatever your race, language, culture, wherever you are from, the good news about Jesus Christ is for you.

And for you too, it can bring you salvation, and the peace, and the joy, the rejoicing, that that brings. May God bless his Word to us.

Let us conclude our worship.