

The Ethiopian Eunuch Story

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks, Georgie. Let me thank you for your welcome tonight, particularly Paul, whose home we've been staying in while we're in Melbourne.

And it's been good to spend some time with him. I was reminded this morning at St. Hillary's that people can sit there while I'm preaching and be focusing on where does that accent come from rather than focusing on the Word of God that they're listening to.

So let me put you out of your misery before I start because you won't figure it out. I'm a New Zealander but I grew up in India as a missionary kid in an American boarding school.

And then I went and did my theological training in the United States. Actually, I grew up with a girl who was one year behind me. There was not many SPACs at high school but after we both went home, Barbie to the U.S., myself to New Zealand.

We wrote letters for five years. And I noticed the plaque out there that David Penman did a foundation stone or something. It was actually at the end of those five years, Barbie came out to New Zealand and my father was concerned that we would be traveling around New Zealand together.

[1 : 1 9] So he arranged for all his mates to host us. And it was in David Penman's home in Palmerston North where, I don't know why, but he suddenly decided that it was time to warm up my cold feet.

And he said, go on, off you go, ask her to marry you. So under David Penman, after, you know, later an archbishop, what else could I do even as a Baptist boy? Off I went upstairs and asked Barbie to marry me.

So I'm very grateful for David Penman. We come now to God's word, having explained all that. This is a passage that, over recent months, has been a passage that God has been using in my life, particularly in this big transition from 25 years focused on New Zealand, now focusing on these countries of the majority world.

And this has been a significant passage for me in that transition. So I'm wanting to share it with you. Just four things tonight. Something about God, something about people, something about the Bible, and something about mission.

So let's pray as we begin. Lord, thank you for this passage that Georgie has read for us.

[2 : 4 6] We're so grateful for your word. And we're conscious of its capacity when, under the Spirit's influence, it wings its way into the hidden depths of our hearts and brings about transformation.

And so we pray that that might be so tonight. Be at work in our lives. Give us listening and attention.

Give us understanding. And open up a whole new world of obedience and help us to walk in that way, we pray. In Jesus' name.

Amen. So firstly, something about God. I wonder, as Georgie read, to ask ourselves, you know, who is actually making things happen in this story?

Who is taking the initiative? Because in verse 26, it's an angel of the Lord that tells Philip to go to the desert road on the way to Gaza.

[3 : 53] And then three verses later, it's the Spirit that tells Philip to chase down a chariot. And when the chariot chat is over, we read in verse 39, right at the end, that the Spirit of the Lord suddenly snatches Philip away.

It would be a great scene in a movie. So it is actually God who is driving this story. It's God at decisive points who's taking the initiative through his angel and by his Spirit.

And this is the case, of course, right through this book of Acts. We like to call it the Acts of the Apostles. But that's barely a half-truth because these are the Acts of God through all kinds of men and women.

And this is what we learn about God here. He acts. He acts. He intervenes. God is like a project manager who enlists all sorts of subcontractors to help him get his work done.

And as with most project managers, you may not see them that much. But they're very important to the task. They're running the show. And this show here runs from chapter 1 right through to chapter 28.

[5 : 17] This story in Acts 8 fits into a much bigger story of God getting his word, getting his message, getting his gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, through and in and around, all kinds of obstacles.

In fact, when Luke wrote the book of Acts, the very last word in the book is the word unhindered to remind us that God's word cannot be stopped when he decides to move it from Jerusalem to Rome.

Now, I know it goes without saying, but sometimes things that go without saying need to be said. This church is God's church and you are participating in God's mission, in God's world, at God's initiative.

And one of the dangers that we all face is that as ideas begin to swirl and as projects begin to proliferate and as vision kind of comes to the boil, we lose sight of this.

In our energy and enthusiasm and excitement, a subtle change can occur from God commandeering us to join him in his mission to us commandeering God to join us in our mission.

[6 : 43] A very worthwhile mission, no doubt. But still, we become the project manager and God becomes one of the subcontractors that we use. You ever notice the repeating phrase in the book of Nehemiah?

Nehemiah, as you may remember, is in Babylon. He's in exile and he hears about his home in Jerusalem being in ruins and chapter one is full of real, charged with emotion as he is really torn inside by this news of Jerusalem and ruins.

And so there he is pretty much a slave and he goes to the most important man in the world at that time and asks for a visa to go home.

And the phrase appears. And then just ten verses later, we find him back in Jerusalem. It took much longer than that.

And there he is in Jerusalem surveying the broken down walls, hanging out with this demoralized people, engaging this huge challenge that he faces. And the phrase appears again.

[7 : 57] What's this phrase? Nehemiah 2, 8 and 18, easy to remember. The gracious hand of my God was upon me.

It's beautiful. The gracious hand of my God was upon me. God was quietly providing, taking the initiative, acting. And Nehemiah saw this.

He recognized this. He acknowledged this. And as communities of God's people, there is nothing we need more. There is nothing we should value more than to know without a shadow of doubt that the gracious hand of our God is upon us, quietly leading and providing and caring and taking the initiative and acting.

And in an era of church life which is so besotted with leadership, one of the ways to keep the initiative with God and not with us is to recalibrate our understanding of leadership to be the art of finding God's gracious hand and then taking people to live under it with us.

And to do that takes wise spiritual discernment, not just cutting and pasting management techniques, although that has its place. It takes time in prayer and in the scriptures.

[9 : 30] It takes time discerning God's values and owning them as our own. It takes time learning where God hangs out and hanging out there as well in our small groups, in our families, in our workplaces, in our churches.

And coupled with this first observation comes the second one because this passage doesn't just say something about God to us.

It also says something about people. A project manager without subcontractors can't get a lot done. So there's something here about people as well.

Take Philip. Ordinary Philip. Philip is not an apostle. He is one of the Acts 6 servant people drawn in to wait on tables so that the apostles can get on with speaking and preaching and sharing the gospel.

He is a common bloke. He is so very ordinary. But let me tell you something about Philip.

[10 : 38] He kept it simple. He was a trust and obey there's no other way kind of person. In fact, he was a trust and obey God will open the way kind of person.

He is in the midst of a very successful ministry in Samaria and an angel appears to him. Go to Gaza Road in the middle of the day. A place and time known to be uninhabited.

Why would you do that? Well, actually, Gabriela, things are going swimmingly well here in Samaria. Thank you very much. I'm not yet quite ready to move.

No, no, no, no, no. Philip just gets up and goes. Philip is so responsive to God. And then there's the Ethiopian.

The marginal Ethiopian. No name. Philip is a man from the southern edge of the earth at that time. The first down under, one might say.

[11 : 40] A castrated male. And the Old Testament makes his place in the world very clear. You belong on the fringes.

He's most certainly a black man. A new ethnic group is being reached. And so in terms of identity, geography, ethnicity, sexuality, spirituality, he is a man on the fringes.

It is the marginal Ethiopian. But the plot thickens because while all this may be true in a Jewish context, back home in his own working world, he is the man.

The world revolves around him. He ain't no marginal person. He's at the heart. He's at the core. He is huge. He's like the minister of finance. What have we got going on here?

I cannot wait to meet this Ethiopian eunuch in heaven. In his own world, he is a person of prominence. And yet, and yet he hops in his chariot and travels a thousand miles to the north so that he can worship the very God headlined in the very religion which marginalizes him.

[12 : 57] Why would you do that? It's because there's a kind of a God space inside that is aching to be filled. There's a restlessness that only can find its rest in God within.

And he's willing to endure the marginalizing just to give it a shot. And so in this passage, we see something about people, ordinary people, marginal people, Philip and the Ethiopian, and yet in their own ways so open to God.

You know, they respond. And look what God does with their responsiveness. Ordinary Philip finds himself in a story where there are deliberate echoes of the great Elijah.

Angels chat to him. He runs and chases down chariots. He flies air spirits. But he ain't a frequent flyer, but he does still fly air spirits.

And not just Elijah comparisons. Philip is drawn into the fulfillment of prophecies given from the great Isaiah himself. And not just Elijah comparisons and Isaiah fulfillments.

[14 : 16] There seems little doubt that Luke retells the story in a way that parallels his telling of the story of Jesus on the road to Emmaus.

So what do we have here? We have ordinary Philip. Ordinary Philip with reminders of Elijah, Isaiah, and Jesus running across the page.

What about the Ethiopian? The marginal Ethiopian and his responsiveness to God. Well, God project manages.

God engineers. God moves people around spectacularly just so as to create a divine appointment for him. God takes someone from a successful ministry with heaps of people coming to faith so that he can reach one person on some until now God forsaken piece of road.

Why would you do this? Well, it's because God had his earlier words to Isaiah in mind. Words about a time to come for eunuchs.

[15 : 31] Isaiah 56. And my blessings are also for eunuchs. They are as much mine as anyone else. For I say this to the eunuchs who choose to do what pleases me.

I will give them a memorial. Eunuchs. And a name far greater than the honor they would have received by having sons and daughters. And God is saying that time is this time for eunuchs.

You see, God has on his mind his earlier words to Zephaniah. Words about a day to come for Ethiopians. On that day I will purify the lips of all people so that everyone will be able to worship the Lord together.

My scattered people who live beyond the rivers of Ethiopia will come to present their offerings. And that day is this day says God for Ethiopians.

Something about God he acts. Something about people they respond. Marginal people.

[16 : 45] Ordinary people. God has a field day with them. Seriously, friends. tonight. Prize. Hold precious.

The ordinary and the marginal among you in this community and in this global village. Prize.

Treasure. The ordinary and the marginal. The people the world puts at the fringe. God's initiative so often expresses itself through such people.

Through such people. When we are the project managers our energies go into the most strategic and the most gifted and the most talented. We invest in the most skilled and there's some sense to that.

But when God project manages we find that he likes to put more energy into the ordinary and to the marginal.

[17 : 44] Mother Teresa used to speak of Christianity as an anti-statistical proposition. It's always good to meditate on what that means for us in our spheres of service.

I mean think of Jesus. What is it that could possibly have prompted Jesus to preach the greatest sermon ever told to a congregation of two on the road to Emmaus?

How daft is that? How unstrategic? How silly? Wasting all those words on two people. Christianity is an anti-statistical proposition.

And here in Acts 8 God uses an unlikely person to reach an even unlikelier person in an unlikely place at an unlikely time.

We must leave space for God's partiality for unlikeliness. There's another feature of this story.

[18 : 56] Something about the Bible. As we find the Ethiopian wrestling with what he is reading, we discover that a sequence of four questions lie at the heart of this passage.

Philip joins him in his chariot and the text says he heard him reading from the book of Isaiah. Do you understand what you are reading? Question number one in verse thirty.

How can I? Unless someone explains it to me? Question number two in verse thirty-one. And they read the passage together. The silence of a sheep being slaughtered, the quietness of a lamb being sheared, and then some odd verses at the end.

This Ethiopian is longing for understanding. The Old Testament is just not explaining itself. It's troublesome.

It's difficult. He has questions about the Bible and he wants answers. He is on a quest. And Philip affirms that quest. He sees it to be important.

[20 : 04] Goodness, he makes the effort to chase down a chariot. He is committed to this Ethiopian. He joins him and he sits with him. He reads with him and he listens to him.

He follows the question trail wherever it may lead and he becomes the answer to this question number two. how can I unless someone explains it to me?

Philip is the someone who explains it to him. He is the guide that is needed. Like many of you, I'm sure, I got involved in leadership in the church in my late teens.

And I had a group of 11-year-old boys and I stuck with them for five years. They became my good friends. We used to gather on a Friday night. For those of you who are my vintage, we used to watch chips on TV and then we would do a study together.

Today I have no real contact with them and as far as I know, none of them are walking with Jesus. I know it's not my fault and yet I still have deep regrets as I look back on those years because even as younger teenagers, I did not wrestle hard enough with the questions behind or the quest behind their questions.

[21 : 33] I did not really join them in their chariots like I should have. And now 30 years later, Barbie and I have a young adults home group and guess what?

Above all else, we're trying to affirm their quest. We're trying to provide a safe place for them to raise their questions and their doubts and their cynicism and to litter the conversations with, do you understand what you are reading?

To join them in their chariots. This year we're studying the book of Acts and we're also reading Tim Keller's book, The Reason for God, in which he engages the skeptical questions of the 20 somethings in Manhattan where the church that he pastors is based.

Last week we were in chapter 7, the final skeptic question. You can't take the Bible literally. Tim Keller reminds me of Philip.

He listens and he respects. He is up there in the chariot with his 20 somethings. He aims at being full of grace and not just full of truth.

[22 : 54] He affirms their quests and he explains things to them so that they can understand. It's a great book. But we haven't finished with the questions in the text because after the Isaiah passage is read comes question number three.

In verse 34. About whom is the prophet speaking? Himself or someone else? And verse 35, wonderful verse. Philip opens his mouth.

That's important. Philip begins with the scripture, the question at hand. That is important. And Philip tells him the good news about Jesus.

Simply Jesus. Just Jesus. That too is important. Then Philip began with that very passage of scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

Something about God, he acts. Something about people, they respond. Something about the Bible, it leads.

[24 : 04] Jesus. And it leads to Jesus. Philip affirms the quest and then Philip takes him to Jesus. Because Jesus is the key which turns the passage and the ultimate destination of the quest.

Here he is committed to joining the Ethiopian, affirming the quest in the conversation, and being creative enough to take that conversation to Jesus.

Because until you reach Jesus, the quest is still unfinished. The mission task cannot be complete until Jesus is reached. And we see this in this Ethiopian's quest where for him there is one final question, number four in verse 37 which makes Baptist very excited.

look, there is some water, why shouldn't I be baptized? And like so many other quests in the Gospels, the Emmaus Road, the woman at the well, Nicodemus, on and on and on, each time the quest is affirmed and each time the quest remains incomplete until Jesus is reached.

There is one further observation I want you to see in the plot of the story. And here we kind of need to stand back and reflect on the bigger story in which this one is placed in the book of Acts and in the story of God's mission in the world down through the centuries and across the time zones because there is also something here about mission, something about mission that we need to see.

[25 : 49] You know, when stuff happens in our world, increasingly, it's like throwing a stone in a lake and things ripple out from that event.

You could argue that, you know, the current financial crisis was like a stone thrown into the lake. You could argue that the swine flu virus is like a stone thrown into the lake and its impact ripples out.

There was that lovely YouTube video a couple of weeks ago about the bridal party coming down the aisle boogying to Chris Brown's forever. And it just went everywhere in a matter of hours.

You know, he had no idea. He posted it on YouTube and all of a sudden the whole world was watching it. like a stone thrown in the lake with its ripples. Events have a way of rippling through the world.

The life and death and resurrection of Jesus is such an event. It created ripples, two ripples. There is this ripple occurring in the book of Acts.

[27 : 03] It's kind of like a geographical ripple. It's about from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth. And each stage of this ripple, this is fascinating, each stage of this ripple is found actually in Acts chapter 8.

It's as if Acts chapter 8 is the entire book of Acts in miniature. And it's not about Peter and Paul. It's about Philip. It's great. He's in Judea.

He's in Samaria. He's on the road to Gaza. And he's sharing the gospel with someone from the uttermost parts of the earth at that time. And then there is the ripple down through the centuries.

It's linked to the first one, the geographical one, but it's more of a historical one. And I think we see something of it in this passage as well. It kind of wakes us up.

Here is a person who meets Jesus on the way to Gaza, where a war was fought just in January. We're reminded of this historical ripple.

[28 : 11] Here is a person from Ethiopia being baptized. Well, actually, the scholars sort of think it's not quite maybe Ethiopia. It could be more southern Sudan, you know, not far from Darfur.

Wouldn't it be cool if he was from Darfur? Doesn't that wake us up to what's going on in history? Here the gospel reaches Africa, reaches Ethiopia, reaches the southern Sudan before it reaches Europe.

That's quite fascinating. In fact, when you study this historical ripple, there are actually a few surprises. Philip Jenkins is one person who has given his life to doing this.

His books, I know of four, are full of startling statements that would embarrass many a history faculty or a religious studies department in a western university.

Let me give you some of them. Christianity has never been synonymous with either Europe or the West. Never. Ever. What about this one?

[29 : 20] In terms of the number and splendor of its churches and monasteries, its vast scholarship and dazzling spirituality, well, what country do you think he's about to talk about?

You wouldn't guess it in 50 guesses. You might now because I just told you that, but in terms of the number and splendor of its churches and monasteries, its vast scholarship and dazzling spirituality, Iraq was through the Middle Ages at least as much a cultural and spiritual heartland of Christianity as was France or Germany or indeed Ireland.

Another one. The Christian faith has established itself in China on at least four occasions and the first three missions ended in ruin. The Nestorian, the Jesuit, but the latest venture started in the 19th century and although this too seemingly suffered total defeat when the communists took over in 1949, we know otherwise.

Millions of believers in China. In fact, when I'm there, I'm sure I'll hear about things like the Back to Jerusalem movement. Again, Jenkins, where restoring the Silk Road as a highway for Christian missions is taking place.

It was the Silk Road that was used when the gospel first came to China, going from the Middle East to East Asia along the Silk Road. Well, now the Silk Road is being restored as a highway for Christian missions but now going back towards the Middle East with missionaries from East Asia gaining this vision and this passion for re-evangelizing the Middle East.

[31 : 11] Now that is a staggering example of the ripple because the ripple has rippled out and now the ripple is coming back. In fact, Philip Jenkins, if you sum up his thesis of his books, it is this.

He says that people tend to think that the center of gravity of the Christian church moved to Europe in about 500 A.D. And he writes his books to demonstrate how people are 1,000 years out.

A millennium is quite a long time to be out. The center of gravity of the church didn't really move to Europe, he argues, until closer to 1500 A.D.

And in the intervening millennium, it was doing rather nicely in places like Asia and Africa. Thank you very much. And so he looks at the recent growth of the church in Africa and Asia and Latin America where so much mission is focused including Langem.

And he speaks of how it is like the reopening of old minds. The reopening of old minds. And I quote, far from being a daring innovation, the globalized character of modern Christianity is better seen as a resumption of an ancient reality.

[32 : 36] As I said, I've been in this work for four months. In June, I spent consecutive weeks separated by a 50-hour trip. I spent consecutive weeks in the Melanesian Solomon Islands and then in Muslim Pakistan.

Now, there's some diversity for you. And this comes on the back of having fulfilled God's call on my life in New Zealand for 25 years in theological education.

So for 25 years, I've been thinking all about the post-Christian West. And now, one month from my 50th birthday, God is filling my head with post-Western Christianity.

It's quite a transition. And I'm learning things about life in post-Western Christianity. there is something we can learn about mission.

In fact, the very same things we find in this passage. It ripples. It really does ripple to and fro. But the similarities do not stop there.

[33 : 52] There is something we can learn about the Bible. You know, while we can be, certainly in New Zealand, about hearts and hands in the Christian experience, you know, it's about feelings and pragmatic ways of doing whatever works, in post-Western Christianity, we often hear a hunger for explanation, for understanding, for knowledge, for the head to be engaged and to be led to Christ.

There is also something about people that we can learn. While we are committed to the talented and the gifted and the influential, in post-Western Christianity, we often watch people whose only option is to be marginal and ordinary and oppressed.

The only thing they can do is just respond to God. And there is something that we can learn about God.

While we are so competent and so over-resourced and so independent in post-Western Christianity, we often find such a poverty and such a powerlessness that the only obvious option is to allow God to act.

And so they do. let's pray together. Oh God, for this church at Holy Trinity, about to confront significant transition, I pray that the God who acts through a people who respond with a Bible that directs and leads to Jesus in a mission that ripples around the world will continue to be their testimony for Jesus' sake and in his name.

[36 : 21] Amen.