

The Sovereignty of God in Salvation

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[0 : 00] If you want to make a name for yourself, make good money, have influence, get power, you don't move to Flesherton, Ontario, or Dawson, B.C.

You don't move to Chibougamou, Quebec. You move to Vancouver, or to Toronto, or to Ottawa, or to Montreal. If you're really ambitious, you move to New York City.

That is the strategy to get big and powerful, and to get money, to get influence, to make a name for yourself. And it would seem that the early church, in wanting to see the gospel spread, would employ such a strategy.

And in some cases, they certainly do. But, we come upon a section in Acts chapter 8, where conventional wisdom and best practices kind of go out the window.

And we see that God, in His sovereignty, will save who He wants to save, how He wants to save them, and He will grow His church any which way He wants.

[1 : 15] God, in Christ, and in Him alone, will build His church. We look this morning at Philip, the second part of chapter 8, where Philip leaves Samaria.

He meets this Ethiopian eunuch, this official in the court of Candace. And we gather some very important principles and truths about the gospel, but more importantly, about Christ.

Next, we'll look at three points. I was talking to Christine. This is not about this sermon. But I talked to Christine. I'm like, listen, I do a lot of three-point sermons. And, I mean, I wasn't trying to convince her.

She wasn't complaining to me at all about it. But it's a simple way to break up the text in a way that is digestible.

95% of us think in categories in this kind of way. So if you're just like another three-pointer, yeah, another three-pointer. But listen up. Here are the three points.

[2 : 13] The first point. Christ will rescue using the obedience of His people. This is how Christ grows His church. Christ will save through His Spirit and by His Word.

So He builds His church. And Christ will restore and redeem, not in part, but in whole. So let's look right off the bat. Christ will rescue who He wants using the obedience of His people.

Philip, if you remember from chapter 8, the first part of it, is enjoying great success in Samaria. The crowds that were gathered around this character named Simon the Magician, who deceived the people, so much so that they elevated Him to divine status.

They called Him the Great One. Now, through the proclamation of the Gospel, are embracing Christ as the Great One. Many were baptized.

If you remember last year, I talked about a thousand-year rift between the Jewish people and the Samaritan people were repaired and restored. And that the words of Christ in Acts chapter 1, that the church would spread from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria, was being fulfilled.

[3 : 31] It was a remarkable, remarkable time. And just like that, Philip is commanded to go to a desert road in the middle of the day, the hot of the day, without explanation.

That bit about going there in the hot of the day, we read in verse 26, Rise and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.

Saying go down to the south is definitely to go down to the literal south, but in the original language, it is a turn of phrase that also means at the height of the day, the hottest it would be.

So, Philip leaves Samaria, where there is a boom and revival happening.

People are coming to faith. Words of Christ are being fulfilled. Centuries, millennia-long issues and animosity are being restored.

[4 : 32] It seems like that would be the place to stay and then strategically leverage for whatever was going to happen next. But to leave Samaria to go to a desert road in the heat of the day seems

unbelievably non-strategic and defies conventional wisdom.

But it was an act of obedience. And Philip obeyed. Sometimes we are told the reason along with the command that God gives us.

We read in scripture things to flee from or we feel the Holy Spirit leading us to give or to stand tall or to make very clear decisions for his glory.

And we know the reason why. We're given the command. We're explained in a sense either through scripture or just the Holy Spirit acting upon our intuition. If we do this, this is what will happen.

This is why I'm doing it. We're given answers. That makes obedience quite easy in some ways. I mean, obedience is not easy, but it makes it easier. However, sometimes, and I'd say more often than not, we are called to obey God and he doesn't necessarily give us the reason or does he explain what will happen to us, what the consequences will be.

[6 : 03] He just calls us to obey. We are simply assured that as we seek to obey Christ, by his spirit, we will be provided for in the areas of our need.

But how that will happen, when that will happen, is not necessarily explained to us. It makes obedience very difficult. I got permission from Christine to share this story.

Before we were married, Christine was on a bit of a fast track in a political job. She worked for the Minister of International Trade and she was being considered to be the Director of Policy.

Now, she never gave me permission to tell you about that part, but I'm happy to sing my wife's praises. She was doing pretty well and a few months in, she felt the call to ministry and potentially lifelong ministry and had no idea if this was legit from the Lord or if this was just something that she was potentially feeling at the time.

and in an act of obedience through lots of prayer, made the very career-altering decision to quit before the decision was made about elevating her to Director of Policy.

[7 : 26] And she worked some jobs for about six months and then she decided to go to France for a year to work with a missionary couple in a small, dinky town that didn't even have a bakery, a French town without a bakery.

An hour north of Paris called Le Deluge, literally the flood. Lovely couple and she was going to stay there for a year to see if she was called to ministry.

Now, I kind of ruined that in one way and didn't ruin it in the other because we started dating and she never stayed in France, but that's a part of our story and that's another story.

But Christine made a decision to follow the Lord, to obey the Lord, had no idea what would result and at the time, it cost her very much.

Obedience isn't easy. It can be very scary. It can be something that causes us to have sleepless nights, but it is Christ's will for us to obey him.

[8 : 30] And this is what we see here. Philip obeys Christ and he does not know what will come of it. Again, I mean, put yourself in his shoes. You are seeing some serious success in what you're called to and then you're called away from it, but not to another city center where you could, again, leverage the successes here, over there.

Instead, you're called to a desert road in the heat of the day. The heat of the day here is very hot in the summer. In the desert, in the Middle East, it is unbearable.

And that is what Philip is called to. It doesn't make sense. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to Philip, Christ is at work in this man's heart, this Ethiopian eunuch, this official, this high-ranking official in the court of Canis, who's essentially the effectual leader of all of Ethiopia and the kingdom that stretches from, can't think of maybe modern-day Ethiopia, but it's stretching from the south of Egypt, from Aswan, which is on the Nile, all the way, even past Khartoum in what is today Sudan.

It's a huge area. And God is already at work in this man's life. The narrative continues. If you follow with me, verse 27. And Philip arose and went.

You see that obedience right there. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure.

[10 : 07] 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? I'll just pause there. This is no peasant farmer.

This is this high-ranking official. Like I mentioned, the whole stretch of land from essentially southern Egypt to past Khartoum in Sudan.

He's an incredibly influential and trustworthy person in Candace's kingdom. He has the ear of the queen. It's a bit of a big deal. He also seems to be a God-fearer with a high regard for scripture. He is coming back from Jerusalem. I measured out how long it would take to drive, I mean to drive, how long the journey would be rather from Khartoum all the way to Jerusalem.

[11:14] It would be over 3,000 kilometers this guy traveled to worship the Lord in Jerusalem. As it turns out, he is a very strategic person after all for the spread of the gospel.

His heart is ready to hear God's word. He has influence in Ethiopia and he is reading the scriptures as Philip shows up.

And really we see here not chance, but God's sovereignty at work. The omniscience of the triune God who knows the beginning from the end.

Only he knows how all of these decisions will reverberate. He knows that Philip's obedience will result in him meeting this Ethiopian eunuch on a road that nobody should really be on at that time of day.

Only God is sovereign over all. We would do well, friends, with not telling God what will work and what won't work.

[12:18] That doesn't mean we can't voice our fears and our apprehensions when we are praying to him if he is leading us. But let us not be people to underestimate the Almighty God, how he sets things up, how he works history, how he orchestrates men and women.

Let us not tell God what is and what is not strategic. What we see here is a very, very strategic move. Not in human standards, but in God's standards.

So if we return back to the text, we see the official in his chariot, which would almost certainly be some kind of caravan, some covered wagon, either pulled by horses or an ox.

It would be quite the group of people traveling together. He would have quite the entourage. And Philip, in a sense, by obeying God, also risks much because the people, if you remember the story of the Good Samaritan, such roads are littered with thieves and killers.

And what's to say that Philip wouldn't be mistaken as one? He's just by himself and he just shows up. Could he be mistaken for a killer? But instead, he obeys and he runs up to this official obeying the Lord.

[13:43] And what does he see? He sees him reading the scriptures. And he asks a very simple yet very profound question in verse 30. Do you understand what you are reading? And this leads us to our second point, that Christ will save through his spirit, by his word.

So look with me, verses 30 to 35. Actually, verse 30 to 33 here. 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 the official 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 shearer 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. The scripture passage is found in Isaiah 53 verses 7 and 8.

[14:47] And it's the fourth and final servant song in Isaiah. I mentioned this over Christmas. I forget which sermon but Isaiah has these four servant songs they're called.

And in each song there's this mysterious figure who on one hand seems to represent Israel, God's people but on the other hand seems to have the description more of God.

He does some wonderful things and it comes to a climax in Isaiah 53 where this servant suffers by he suffers on behalf of other people so that other people would enjoy the riches and blessings of covenant relationship with God.

And this is what this Ethiopian official, this Ethiopian eunuch is reading. Specifically he's reading verses 7 and 8 like I mentioned and in verse 33 which is verse 8 of Isaiah 53 it reads this, in his humiliation justice was denied him who can describe his generation for his life is taken away from the earth.

And it describes this suffering servant who before in a sense he can produce offspring and have a legacy he is cut off.

[16:10] And we see a similarity with this suffering servant being identified with somebody that would have in a sense no legacy of his own. Somebody who might be a eunuch.

Somebody who cannot have his own natural children. You see the Ethiopian official is searching the scriptures for Christ but Christ is searching him out.

Is pursuing him. Is looking for him so to speak. So he reads the scriptures but he doesn't understand them. He needs them expounded and explained.

The explanation of God's word is an explanation of God's will and helping us to understand God's character and this is accomplished by God's Holy Spirit and also teachers in the church and this is why we are committed as a church to going through scripture to not have me come up and spout off whatever I've read this week or whatever hobby horse I'm currently on but rather proclaiming heralding sharing God's word and doing my best to explain it and trusting that God is going to bless that.

God reveals himself through his word. Notice that the Ethiopian isn't just merely reading the word of God though he is humble and he is submissive in heart and what does he say?

[17:38] How can I understand unless somebody guides me? and then he invites Philip to explain to him what the scriptures say. Listen, you meet somebody who has a lot of prestige, a very important person.

They don't invite random people to explain to them truth. You don't see that kind of person invite somebody in to explain anything.

There's a gap, so to speak, between Philip and the Ethiopian official. But this Ethiopian official, he is hungry to hear God's word, to know God's touch and he is humble enough to invite Philip in to submit to his teaching.

We see here also that humility is the true currency of the church. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humility allows us to have the right posture before Almighty God so that we may hear, mark, learn, and inwardly digest God's word.

That's from the collect of the second Sunday in Advent. It's a beautiful, very concise way that we ought to approach the scriptures. But we can approach the scriptures if we're not humble.

[18:59] We're not asking God to humble us, help us, give us ears to hear. We must ask questions of the text and of God and not be afraid to voice our lack of understanding and objections.

It helps not for us to read through scripture day in and day out or Sunday in and Sunday out and close the Bible and not seek to understand. Children can understand God's word.

It is simple in that way but it requires for us to use our gray matter, to ask questions, to wrestle through God's word. It's what we're seeing here with Ethiopian eunuch.

Verse 34, the eunuch asks questions of the text after we read Isaiah 53, 7 and 8. The eunuch says to Philip in verse 34, About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this?

About himself or about someone else? Then Philip opened his mouth and beginning with the scripture, he told him the good news about Jesus. The careful reading of scripture makes way for salvation.

[20:08] Here we see something very similar to what Christ did on the road to Emmaus, the risen Christ. He is disguised, he meets the two disciples as they are walking and he begins, it says, with Moses and the prophets to explain about how all the scriptures concern him.

And this is what we are seeing here, the explanation of the scriptures. And we see also that Christ here is the key to understanding everything. The gospel of Christ, it helps us to understand the true purpose of creation, the patriarchs, the exodus, the deliverance, the conquering of Canaan, the judges, the kings, the exile, everything in the Old Testament.

The key to truly understanding it is Christ. Tim Keller, who has gone to be with the Lord, he is the pastor of a Presbyterian church in New York City, he talked about how Christ, reading the New Testament and seeing Christ in the New Testament and then re-reading the Old Testament is like watching the sixth sense for the second time.

If you know the movie, there's a ton of Easter eggs in the movie the first time you watch it, the second time you watch it, ah, that's what this means. And anyways, it opens your eyes to this whole other story that is being played out.

God's word contains life because it testifies to the life giver, which is Christ Jesus.

[21:39] And friends, this Jesus, he saves by his spirit through his word, but he also restores us not in part, but in whole.

And this leads to the third and final point. Look with me, verses 36 to the end. 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 Philip 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 in Azotus, this modern day Ashdod in the Israel. And as he passed through, he preached the gospel to all the towns as he went north until he came to Caesarea.

This official has been searching for God. And he's been making a long and expensive pilgrimage to Jerusalem. And maybe it's his first time. Maybe he's been making it for years.

[22 : 47] It's arduous. It's very expensive. And because he is a eunuch, the best he can do when he goes to the temple is he can go to the court of the Gentiles.

If I had a picture of the second temple, there are various courts or malls that people can go in but go no further.

So if you are a non-Jew, you can go to the court of the Gentiles, but you can't go any farther. If you're a Jewish woman, you can go even farther than that, but you can't go as far as Jewish men. And then if you're a priest, you can go into the holy place. If you're a high priest, you go to the holy of holies. There's degrees here. At most, at most, even if he was allowed to go into the court of Gentiles, that would be it for him.

He didn't have full communion, in a sense, with God, worshipping with God's people. Deuteronomy chapter 23, verse 1 says, It's speaking of eunuchs, and there is more to say about that, and maybe it'll hit the Sunday follow-up on Wednesday when I send it out.

[24 : 02] But in short, eunuchs were barred from fellowship among God's people. He traveled over 3,000 kilometers to worship at the outer gate.

But he did it because he was desperate for God. There is a hunger in this man where he wants to touch God, to know God. With Philip on that desert road in the hot of the day, God comes to him.

The man that could only go to the gate or the court of the Gentiles, who couldn't even hope in his wildest imaginations to go to the holy of holies, where symbolically, but also in a very real way, the presence of God resided, comes to faith, and the Holy Spirit makes his dwelling within him so that he himself becomes the holy of holies, the very place where the presence of God dwells.

It's a remarkable thing to consider that this man, who has no business, in a sense, being in God's presence, becomes the very temple of God himself.

He wanted to touch God. He wanted to know God. Well, God wanted to touch him and know him.

And he is baptized. And he comes into this covenant relationship with God. God answers his prayers, and it is an unbelievably beautiful picture of how God redeems and restores those that are far away and broken.

[25 : 38] Not only that, but this man, as I mentioned before, he could have no children. That's why eunuchs were, in a sense, valued in the ancient world, because there was no chance that they could impregnate anybody, that they had no, in a sense, a legacy of their own so that they could be trusted, I guess, to a higher degree than other people who weren't eunuchs.

He had no legacy of his own. And yet, he becomes the very vessel by which the gospel would then travel to Ethiopia. Irenaeus, in the second century, says that this Ethiopian eunuch, apparently his name was Simon Bacchus, he would go back to Ethiopia and spread the gospel, and that's how it took root.

He becomes, this man who cannot have any children himself, becomes the spiritual father of an entire segment of the church.

One that still exists to this day. We also see that it's a fulfillment of Isaiah chapter 56, and this is what it says in verse 3, continuing on to verse 8.

Let not the foreigner, clearly Simon Bacchus, the Ethiopian eunuch, he's a foreigner. Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, the Lord will surely separate me from his people.

[27 : 02] And not let the eunuch say, behold, I am a dry tree. For thus says the Lord, to the eunuch who keeps my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give him my house, and within my walls a monument and a name, better than sons and daughters.

I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. That's legacy right there. And the foreigner who joins 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 the 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.

Beautiful picture of how very far God's arm of redemption can reach. The Lord saves and restores not in part but in whole.

[28 : 19] In ways far greater than we could ever hope or ever imagine. An outcast man with a disfigured body, whether it was by his own hand or by someone else's, it's not told to us.

However, he's no longer forever outcast. He is not forever somebody without a legacy, but instead finds hope and meaning and purpose in the gospel of Christ. His life is not just restored, but it is a living testimony to the life-giving spirit of Christ Jesus himself.

It's not just that this damaged man, this broken man, this in a sense mutilated man is just given a few scraps, but he is restored and is used in ways that he could never hope that he could be used for.

He is given such a wonderful gift. Earlier this week, I watched a series and it's a longer story to it, a longer explanation, but I'll try to sum it up here.

It had a remarkable scene in it. In it, a Japanese father, he returns home and after he returns home, it's very clear that his relationship with his son is severed, it's broken, it's destroyed.

[29 : 36] In this whole severed, broken relationship, a mug is destroyed and this mug, in a sense, represents their relationship and it's in pieces, it's shattered. So we aren't given much in the way of background, but this is very clear what the mug represents.

And the father, in a moment of clarity, he begins repairing the item, this mug, and presents it to his son as a picture of contrition and restoration. And it turns out, what he is doing is not just a nice prop that the writers threw in the narrative, but it's a Japanese practice called kintsugi.

And this practice is where you take a broken item, a broken vessel, a pot, something ceramic or made of, not necessarily a costly item, but what you do is you repair it with plaster and powdered silver or gold or platinum so that the cracks aren't hidden but are accentuated with precious metal. And you can look it up if you go home this afternoon. Kintsugi dishes are stunning. They're gorgeous. And what is remarkable is that the item is repaired with the cracks not hidden but accentuated with something both beautiful and costly.

The piece ceases to be an object of failure but of restoration and beauty. And it's not common anymore, but it is used for holding something beautiful or you bring it out when there's a special time or occasion.

[31 : 13] So the healing of Christ is similar to this kintsugi for it doesn't discard the broken vessel nor does it pretend that there wasn't real pain or brokenness.

Instead, it is put back together by Christ infused with his very spirit, his very costly self on the cross. This eunuch is going to remain a eunuch his whole life but now he is a vessel used by God to accomplish God's will.

His legacy is forever. It is a wonderful, beautiful picture of God's redemption. Some of us have gone through a lot of brokenness and some here that I've had the privilege to counsel or talk with, I have sometimes said, and this is a confession, a true confession, that's the Lord brings healing but you know what?

Likely we'll have to limp into eternity. And on one hand, that's true. But on the other hand, it surely downplays the power and healing of Christ.

Christ heals to wholeness, not in part. And ultimately, yes, we will not be made completely whole in this life but in the life to come. But in this life, he offers healing and restoration.

[32 : 37] And he doesn't throw a scrap. So for some of us who have gone through stuff, it is almost impossible to think how God can restore it and yet he can.

And he'll infuse you with his very self so you become a vessel of great glory, not of your own but of his. This is great hope for us, of course, but it is especially hope for some of our family or friends or people we know who struggle through deep pain of gender confusion who, God forbid, might have or will go through some kind of medical procedure that will be irreversible.

And almost certainly, there will be regret that follows in the months and years to come. But what this story tells us and what the gospel tells us that in Christ, he will not just repair a little bit but he can

use that life to glorify him in ways that you just would never have if you hadn't gone through the brokenness to where he then puts you together and then you shine for him.

Great, great, great redemption and glory that God will do through people that have gone through some terrible, terrible medical procedures.

Christ is in the business, friends, of restoration and redemption. No situation is so damaged that it cannot be repaired. No person is so far gone that he cannot be redeemed.

[34 : 15] No damage so severe that Christ cannot recover and make beautiful. I'll close with this.

Christ is cut off so that we can be grafted in. He is crushed so that we can be raised up again. He is shamed and punished so that we can go free.

And friends, the freedom that he brings, again, it's not in part but it's in whole. And it is a freedom that you will not be able to achieve in this life apart from him but only through him.

I'll close with this. What immediately follows the servant song of Isaiah 53 is God's eternal covenant of peace that he makes to all those that are called and saved and respond to him.

Hear these words of hope in Isaiah 54 verses 1 to 5. Sing, O barren one who did not bear.

[35 : 19] Break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labor. For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married, says the Lord.

Lord, enlarge the place of your tent and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out. Do not hold back. Lengthen your cords. Strengthen your stakes. For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left and your offspring will possess the nations and will hope and will people and will people and desolate cities.

Fear not for you will not be ashamed. Be not confounded for you will not be disgraced. For you will forget the shame of your youth and the reproach of your widowhood.

You will remember no more for your maker is your husband. The Lord of hosts is his name and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer. The God of the whole world he is called.

Let us pray. Father in heaven, we thank you that no matter what we could possibly go through the deepest depths of hell on earth that we could go through is not too far gone for your redemption.

[36 : 35] Not just to bring us up to a mediocrity but to repair us. Infusing us with your very spirit so that we shine and we are vessels to be used for you given opportunity to shine for your glory.

Lord, thank you for this Ethiopian eunuch and for his legacy. Thank you so much that there is a church in Ethiopia to this day. Lord, we thank you that even when we struggle to trust in your word and we might be cynical towards your promise of healing that doesn't change who you are as the great healer.

Lord, we thank you. help us to know you in greater measures but more importantly to know that you know us in greater measure. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

If you have children, now is the time to sign them out of Messiah Kids and we'll quiet our hearts just for a brief moment as we enter into a time of intercession.

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