

A Conversion in a Chariot

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[0 : 00] Let's turn together now to Acts chapter 8, this passage we read from verse 26 through to the end of the chapter, looking at some of the main points that are raised in that passage, as we look at the conversion of this Ethiopian eunuch.

We've been looking for some time at examples in the Bible, or accounts in the Bible, of conversions of people's lives changed by God, and the result of that in their lives.

We looked last time at the previous passage here, at what we could call a conversion that was not. Somebody who gave the impression to begin with that he had been converted, this man Simon, and yet turned out not to have been at all, and in fact had embraced the things that he saw in Philip just for his own advantage, and to add to what already he had as a repertoire of magic, and was actually still embroiled in that, although he had outwardly given the impression, indeed the confession, that he was a Christian.

So we saw something of the importance of making sure that conversion is indeed genuine, as against that background. Now we come to a very different situation, a very considerable contrast, in fact, to the previous event.

This is a man who was genuinely converted, and we leave the scene of his conversion, finding him going on his way rejoicing. It's a passage that's filled with things that are themselves designed to present great joy, as this man celebrated, as this man rejoiced in his salvation, and in this Jesus that he had embraced through the gospel.

[1 : 47] It is a reminder to ourselves that if there is one place where joy ought to be seen and to be expressed, it's in the Christian life, and it's in the life that knows the Lord as our Savior.

And we'll come to that point just later on in our study. Now this man's not named. The previous one is named Simon. The sorcerer Simon Magus has different names, but his first name was Simon.

This man's not. This Ethiopian eunuch is just described as an official in the court of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. She was probably the queen mother, we might call her, of that nation at the time.

He's not mentioned by name, and very often you find that in the scripture. You find somebody that has come to know the Lord or somebody that's done something, but they're not named.

And from that, we mustn't make too much of that, but it does remind us that it's not who you are that counts. It's what you are. It's not who you are as a person.

[2 : 52] It's not who you are in terms of your personality. It's not who you are in terms of your social status. It's what you are. It's what you are before God. It's what you are in relation to Him.

It's what you are and what you do for Him. It's all of that, rather than being known as someone just for your own sake, who makes a place for yourself or who makes a name in society.

This man goes unnamed, and yet it's such an important event nevertheless, as we'll see, as the gospel, in fact, is here being directed southwards.

We understand that although this man was a Jew, we don't know whether he was born a Jew, whether he had something like Lydia embraced the Jewish religion, and come therefore to be a proselyte, and followed the Jewish religion.

We don't know, but he was certainly at Jerusalem to worship, and he was returning to his own place, to his own country, Ethiopia, having been in Jerusalem to worship.

[3 : 52] And he was busy reading the book or the scroll that would be then. He would have a scroll and reading the scroll of the prophet Isaiah in his chariot on the way back. And Philip, the evangelist, this is, he was directed by the Lord, by the angel of the Lord, we find in verse 26, although also afterwards it speaks about the Spirit of the Lord, the Holy Spirit, directing.

Remember last time we said there were some remarkable things happening, things you don't necessarily expect to be repeated in exactly the same way as was happening in those days. But in any case, the Spirit of the Lord guided Philip to this man's chariot.

And there are two remarkable paths, two paths rather remarkably coming together in this incident, because these two people did not know each other at all at the beginning of this day.

They didn't know, the one didn't know the other existed in the world. The one was being directed by the Spirit of God in the work of evangelism, Spirit directing Philip as to where to go and to preach the gospel.

He had just been in some areas we saw in the previous passage. Now he's directed to go toward the south, to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. That's really all he was told.

[5 : 11] And as he went on that road, he met this Ethiopian. This Ethiopian's path and Philip's path came to meet exactly at the point at which God intended.

Isn't that just so typical of God? When God actually brings things together in his way, in his purpose things happen. And things happen exactly as he has planned and as he has purposed.

Well, this meeting was important. It wasn't just important under the one directorship of God, of the Holy Spirit. It wasn't just important for this man personally, but it was important too, because this was the gospel actually reaching further south.

Remember the whole of the book of Acts is an account of the advance of the gospel, the advance of God's church, the advance of how God's gospel and the news of Jesus, his death and his resurrection and all that's bound up with that, the message of salvation, how that has come to spread itself out from Jerusalem into Europe and into here into the south, into Africa where this Ethiopian would live.

That's such an important thing, because this is an opening up of a door and you can just imagine this man going home as a changed man and bringing the account of his change and bringing the reason of it and bringing the message of the gospel into his home country.

[6 : 42] God is at work through all of that. Well, let's look at the man himself really, because that's what we're mostly concerned to look at this morning. And there are two things about him that we're going to highlight and look at a few points in relation to each of those.

First of all, here is a man who was seriously reading the scriptures. Remember in those days, the scriptures would simply be the Old Testament only. New Testament had not yet come to be written and put into the format.

You have it in now. So he's reading the scriptures of the Old Testament. And we're told that he was reading the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and the part of Isaiah that he was reading was what we know as chapter 53.

We use the phrase being in a good place. And we use that phrase in different ways today about somebody who's in a good place or conversely, somebody who's struggling, somebody who's not doing so well in life, we say he's not in a good place or she's not in a good place.

Well, this man was in a good place. This man was in a good place. Spiritually, this man was in a good place because what he was doing was just not just reading the scripture but reading the scripture seriously.

[7 : 50] He was actually grappling with this passage. He was asking himself, what does this mean? How can I get into the inner meaning of this passage? He wasn't just reading the scripture to pass the time on his long journey home.

He wasn't just doing it because he had nothing else to do. He was doing it because he wanted to get to the meaning of what he was reading. He knew that there was something important about this but he wasn't just quite getting to get the sense of it or the meaning of what this was saying and that's why, as we'll see, the Lord sent Philip to help him.

But there is an important point in that itself. When we come to the scriptures, we have to seek to bring that mind to the scriptures that this man had.

When we come to hear the gospel as you're doing today, when we come to read the Bible for ourselves, we don't come with a mind that is just in a kind of formal sense or just out of a mere sense of duty that we just engage in that and we lay the Bible aside then we've read it, we've come to church, we leave that, we put it aside, we've done our duty, it's been good for us.

Yes. But there's more than that, isn't there? Because we come with a mind, surely, that wants to really understand the meaning, the importance, the significance, the applicability to ourselves of what these passages of scripture contain.

[9 : 24] It's the word of God. It's that rule to direct us, as the catechism says, how we may glorify and enjoy him. And therefore, to do that, we have to come with a mind like this mind, like this man, who was wrestling with this passage and not prepared just to read it without getting to the core meaning of it and apply it to himself.

Now, what a tremendous advantage, of course, to Philippus, an evangelist. What a great thing it would be if you were out today evangelizing and the first person you met on the road was looking at his Bible and actually studying a passage to do specifically with the death of Christ.

Just imagine God actually placing that at your disposal. What an advantage. Whereas most often in the work of evangelism or in witnessing to Christ you come to people who are not bothered about the Bible, who don't really want to read the Bible.

This is an absolutely amazing provision for Philippe that he meets with this man who is just ripe for the taking, isn't he?

He is just there waiting for Philippe to describe the meaning of this passage to him and from that he is going to get this wonderful knowledge of Christ and of salvation in him.

[10 : 45] Such are the ways of God and you can see the way God is involved in that. That doesn't mean that everybody who comes to be converted that every conversion is from somebody who has already started to think seriously about life and somebody that is reading the Bible already for themselves.

Not like that. But in this case it was. A man who was seriously reading the scripture so he was in a good place. And you're in a good place today by virtue of being under the gospel, by virtue of being gathered with others who are coming to hear the meaning of scripture and the scripture expounded.

But you want to be in a good place in a higher sense than that. You want to be in a good place where your mind is extended to considering the importance, the meaning of what you're hearing and what you're reading for yourself.

That brings us to the second thing. He was a man seriously reading the scripture and he realized that he needed help with this. He would be reading aloud.

That was the practice in those days. As his chariot was trundling along he was seated in a chariot and Philip heard him reading Isaiah the prophet as he would be reading it out loud and as Philip came alongside of his chariot this is the passage that he heard this man reading like a sheep he was led to the slaughter like a lamb before his shearers is silent and so on.

[12 : 08] From Isaiah 53. So here Philip when he heard this man reading out he said the eunuch rather said to Philip about whom I ask you does the prophet say this about himself or somebody else.

Now before that he had said Philip had said to him in verse 30 do you understand what you are reading? His answer is important how can I unless someone guides me?

How can I unless someone guides me? Now you mustn't take from that that it's impossible for somebody on their own to understand the meaning of scripture.

And the church during the middle ages made a wrong use of such passages as this where the church insisted all the way through until the reformation broke these chains and burst through the darkness in which people were held because the church during all of these centuries insisted that they really had the monopoly of the meaning of scripture and people weren't allowed to have the bible for themselves you had to depend upon the priest or whoever it was to actually explain the bible to you and you had to take that as the actual sense of the scripture whatever you thought of it yourself now the reformation came and broke through that kind of approach to scripture you have the scripture it doesn't mean that because this man is saying how can I unless someone guides me doesn't mean you can't as you read the scripture by yourself that you cannot have it explained to you by the very holy spirit that you have mentioned in this passage and yet there is in this passage in this verse itself how can I unless someone guides me there's something very important

God has given a mechanism if you like in the preaching of the gospel by which his word comes to be expounded or explained now that's not an accident the church did not invent preaching the church did not invent people who were called ministers or whatever name they're given as people who are appointed over congregations and whose main business it is to explain the meaning of the bible the church didn't invent that that was not something that was seen to be a good idea over the process of time God appointed this and God appoints the preaching of the gospel and preachers of the gospel as they expound the word that's not giving a place of prominence to ourselves we can make a misuse of that too but it's just to acknowledge that this is actually a means that God has established a means that people avail themselves of like you are a means that is considered important it's not the importance of the person it's not the importance of who we are in ourselves but it's the importance of having the gospel proclaimed and expounded by someone that God has specifically appointed for that task that's the reality of it how can I accept someone guides me brings us into that whole area of God appointing the gospel and in fact you find way back in Nehemiah's time you may remember in Nehemiah chapter 8 verses 5 to 8 you find that passage I think in your notes there but you remember that passage where Nehemiah instructing the people through

[15 : 47] Ezra who had come to actually specifically read the law to the people in chapter 8 you find that at verse 5 Ezra opened the book that's the book of the law of God in the sight of all the people and as he opened it all the people stood and Ezra blessed the Lord the great God and all the people answered Amen lifting up their hands and that went on as Ezra read the word of God the law of God for the time that the people were assembled but you then notice that the Levites and they're mentioned by name in fact they're people they helped the people to understand the law while the people remained in their places they gave the sense so that people understood the reading and that's a very interesting passage because it tells us that while the law was being read these people the Levites were specifically commissioned by God to go about amongst the people explaining what was read explaining the meaning of that law to them and that's exactly what you find happening right down to the present day because to

God it's not sufficient that we simply read his word that we have his word read by ourselves or read in church to that has to be added the expounding of the word the explaining of the word the meaning of the word and that's what you find happening with this man here and all the way through the book of Acts and that's in a sense too what we're trying to do when we've further established on the Wednesday evening for example I'll just mention this instead of just having the expounding of the word we still have the expounding of the word we have on every second Wednesday as you know it's been changed so there's a session of dialogue and of discussion following the expounding of the word that's exactly what happened in the days of Nehemiah and that's in fact what you find in principle happening in this chapter in this incident with the Ethiopian he's reading the word for himself he's reading it out loud he's hearing the word himself as he reads it but along comes

Philip the Lord brings Philip to him to explain the word to take him through the meaning of this passage so that he will actually be able to understand it in more detail for himself that's what we need just as this man understood that he needed help with this so we also need help with our understanding of the word that's why it's such a brilliant thing such an encouraging thing to anyone appointed to preach the gospel to have people coming to hear to have people coming and indeed if there is an increase in that that's why we're so excited about it because it is the fact of God coming to bring people and the exposition of his word together for the growth of the gospel and of his church one other thing in this man who was seriously reading the scriptures and it's this this man had a question over this passage what does this passage mean about whom I ask you does the prophet say this about himself or is it about someone else and let's just remind ourselves that there are many people out there today who are not with us in church but they're asking questions and some people have big questions the really big questions what is my life about what will happen to me when I die where can I find satisfaction what is the meaning of life some people are asking those questions they've never been to church they don't know where the answer is but they're looking for an answer but the point is are we ready to face them are we ready to go with the answer to them are we ready to bring the answer to them in the gospel are we ready to find out where they are to make contact with them to bring the gospel to these people not saying that everybody out there is asking the big questions many are not many are not bothered many don't even think that far but there are many that do and you and I as those who belong to the church especially those who are Christians those who have themselves been given the understanding of the gospel and what it is it's our responsibility it's our privilege whether it's too young or too middle aged or too old to go with the answer that

Christ himself is and to show them that this is the meaning of life this is where satisfaction is about it's in him here's a man who was seriously reading the scripture secondly here's a man who was led to Christ from the scriptures led to Christ by Philip from the scriptures when he asked this question about whom I ask you does the prophet say this about himself or someone else then Philip opened his mouth and beginning with this scripture he told him the good news about Jesus you know it's what it's saying beginning with this passage beginning with this scripture it didn't end there he began with it that's just the starting point but what a starting point it is a passage that's a prophecy in Isaiah 3 about Jesus and about the death of Jesus it's to do with that theme in Isaiah of the suffering servant as we usually call it and chapter 53 is really one of the brilliant passages where the sufferings of the servant are made so detailed and so clear to us and yet here's a man who's asking what does this mean who is it about is it the prophet himself is he talking about himself or is it someone else and that's

Philip's starting point that's where he begins to expound to him the meaning of the gospel he began with the scripture and told him the good news the good news is the word gospel the same thing as the word gospel he told him the gospel about Jesus for a start of course it's a proof to us that Isaiah 53 is about Christ and is about his sufferings and is about his death but you notice the emphasis there on the good news he began with the scripture he led him from that scripture to Jesus to Christ to this person who had so recently at that time just died and risen from the dead and was exalted to glory that's the person that he presented to him from this Old Testament passage a direct connection with Jesus Christ and Philip took him on that journey Philip brought Jesus to him in the preaching of the word and his explanation of the word as he began with that scripture he told him the good news about Jesus and it's important that we see the emphasis on the good news that's really the meaning of the word gospel of course as we said and it's important that we see that what Philip did was to strike a very positive note in his message now there are things in the gospel that have to be emphasized on the negative side and this doesn't mean that we are now in a position where we don't really need to emphasize things like sin things like the guilt of sin things like our lostness things that we need to be born again things like the way in which the judgment of God is to be faced by us in which the wrath of God is against us and our sinfulness and our lostness all of that is in the gospel as the background to the good news but the good news itself comes really as these themes and these topics are brought out you meet these negative things these important things you meet these points that the bible brings to us about ourselves and about our lostness and about our relationship with

[24 : 18] God and what it is in that condition but you meet that with the good news you don't actually leave it at the point where you emphasize hell and where you emphasize sin and where you emphasize guilt much as they need to be emphasized because when you leave things at that you leave people with a sense of despair and when you overemphasize that you actually bring to the forefront of ministry of witness that which really is not the positive good news at all but something which is in many respects the beginnings that lead you to the good news you have to finish with this good news that's where the hope relies for human beings like you and I nothing wrong with being told that you're a sinner that you're lost that you face judgment and hell if you die in your sins nothing wrong with being told that because that's what God is telling us but there's everything wrong with not bringing to that the wonderful news that here's

God's rescue plan here's God's rescue provision here is God's answer to your dilemma the good news about Jesus is what he preached the good news about Jesus Christ where there's liberty from sin from its condemnation from its guilt where there is acceptance with God where there is forgiveness and pardon from all our sin it's just wiped clean it's a new beginning where there is joy instead of despair where there is hope instead of despair where there's the prospect of eternal life forever in heaven where it begins and the possession of it in this world so many things you can say are emphasized on the positive side that's what the gospel is that's what God is emphasizing for us today that's the theme of the Bible it's about good news not bad news in other words even if you say it's bad news that

I'm told that I'm lost that I'm told I'm guilty that I'm told I'm going to be in hell if I don't repent even if you say well that's bad news yes you can say to an extent it's bad news but it's not the gospel because against that there's the good news the positive that there is a savior however big a sinner you are the savior is a lot bigger than that however heavy your sins are the savior is adequate and absolutely fully sufficient to bear them for you however great your guilt is the savior is greater by far however shoddy your life is the savior is perfect to represent you before God however needy you are as your life goes on the savior is everything you need to meet that need to always meet that need the good news about Jesus and in passing we could say we're going to be short of time but go into too much but in passage that you can say that there is a study actually here about evangelism about means of evangelism or methods of evangelism and there's a study about especially how the same message the same good news of the gospel needs to be maintained even if it's presented in different ways and in different contexts but still that essential message must remain the same just think about it here two very different constituencies two very different types of people there are Samaritans they're dazzled by the magic of Simon they're duped by Simon until the Lord comes and preaches through

Philip this message of the gospel in their midst and many come to believe that's the kind of background in Samaria that Philip went into here's something very very different this man on his own in his chariot reading the scriptures what does he do in Samaria he preaches Christ what does he do to the individual he preaches Christ the same message the same good news doesn't matter the difference in the background it's the same good news and so this man was then baptized openly he came to receive the sign of his admission into the church and of the cleansing of his sins and of his standing before God I want to finish though by emphasizing by looking at the emphasis there of the joy that he came to experience and to express and when they came up out of the water the spirit of the Lord carried Philip away that's literally what it means the spirit of the Lord carried Philip away whatever you make of that that's actually what the scripture says there's a miraculous element almost to it certainly a supernatural element to it that the

Lord himself deliberately intervened and actually came to bring Philip away immediately from this converted man and you might say well surely that's going to leave the man a bit perplexed after all this Philip is the man that just led him to Christ this Philip is the man that just unfolded for him and explained to him the meaning of scripture and led him from that to Jesus to find salvation in him is he not going to be a bit disturbed by the fact that suddenly Philip is taken away by the Lord he's no longer there he's no longer with him instead of being perplexed however or instead of grumbling at that instead of wondering what am I going to do now you read the you not saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing now in the Greek text of the news of the test new testament there in that verse there's something very interesting because instead of the word and you've actually literally got the word for that makes a difference because what it really says then is the spirit of the Lord carried

[30 : 49] Philip away and the eunuch saw him no more for he went on his way rejoicing it didn't bother him that he saw him no more in fact it's almost saying to him it's as if Philip had never existed because this man was so caught up in his new found embrace of Christ he was so caught up with the salvation that he'd come to possess in Christ he was so caught up with this Jesus that Philip just faded out of his mind and the joy that he was experiencing the joy that he now knew in his heart meant that whether Philip was there or not it didn't really matter what mattered was that he had Christ that he had joy in his heart because he was saved because he had this Jesus with him Philip you see had come up beside him into the chariot he'd been invited to come beside him come and sit beside me tell me about this passage what does this passage mean is he talking about himself is he describing someone else Philip led him to Jesus and this man is back with no

Philip beside him but Christ is in him he doesn't need Philip anymore to direct him he's rejoicing in the Lord why shouldn't we rejoice in the Lord why shouldn't it be for us as if nobody else is there but Jesus even though we value so greatly the company of other people and the company of other Christians even though we value so much and it's so important to us to belong to the church and the church is people even though we know that it's beneficial to us and as we find described in the Bible that belonging to the church is such a privilege and such a blessing and a means of blessing yet we should be taken up with one person and with one person only and it's not always going to be as it was for Philip probably wouldn't be all the time for

Philip either but this is a reminder to us that at those moments when you come to realize just how much you have in Christ and just how much he means to you and just how much you mean to him then you rejoice and in your rejoicing you're so taken up with him that really in a sense nothing else matters and he's the one that's all important and of course there's a question over that do we know this joy today not asking do you know it to the extent Philip knew it do you know it in such fullness as Philip experienced on this occasion not asking that I'm asking do we know this joy to some degree do we know in our hearts what it is to rejoice in Christ to rejoice in salvation to rejoice that we have been saved to rejoice that we have this caliber of a savior that's what it's asking us and then God is asking in a sense is the passage really follows on as it puts questions into our mind it's not just saying do I have this joy but if I don't have this joy well why don't I have it isn't it available to me is it not meant for me as much as for anyone else why should I be without it when other people have it why should I go on looking for joy somewhere else and yet knowing that it's in Christ alone that

I can find it and just in conclusion it doesn't say he went on his way doubting he went on his way asking further questions about the meaning of life or his own relationship to God he didn't go on his way saying okay yes I know that this is where my my salvation lies and I know that and I believe everything now about this passage and about this Jesus that I've been led to from this passage but you know I'm not sure and I'm not sure it's the right time for me and I'm not sure that I'm saved and I'm not sure if it's the right thing at this particular moment he believed in the good news he believed in Jesus period why not nothing else was required of him nothing more was required of him nothing less so we have no need for more than to accept God and his word and to accept the savior that comes to us through the word of scripture have we done that have we stopped asking all the unnecessary questions and really just done the necessary thing in coming to take

Christ to ourselves we have no need for any more but we have no excuse for anything less let's pray Lord our God we give thanks today for the gospel it is your gospel that brings us together to this place of worship it is your gospel that binds us together in fellowship it is that good news in Christ Jesus that brings us hope and enables our lives to be firmly established on a proper and lasting foundation Lord our God bless each one of us here bless this word to us bless this passage of scripture to ourselves help us also as this Ethiopian long ago did to find rejoicing and to find our lives fulfilled in that same savior that he found grant your blessing to us we pray through this day be with us again we pray this evening and all of this we ask with the pardon of our sin for Jesus sake amen you