

A Cold Call

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[0 : 00] Thank you Philip for reading the story about Philip.

And one of the therapeutic advantages of getting up here and talking on occasion is that I can deal with some of my own paranoia.

I would like you to think of this as you or me. And I'd like you to recall the story of Aladdin and his lamp which went like this sort of.

And then out of the lamp came this huge genie here that would do the bidding of this little person here. Now, I started to think of my life this week in terms of this kind of thing happening.

And I realized that I'm surrounded by a lot of little lamps and a great many of these huge people as I think of them.

[1 : 11] You see, when I wake up in the morning, the first thing I have to do is to sort of rub the lamp of the Argonne, I think, corporation in Edmonton, Alberta, which owns the building that I live in.

And then I move from there to the General Motors Corporation who own the car I drive and I rub their lamp a little bit. And then I launch out onto the streets of the city of Vancouver, which is another one of these.

And then I pull out my Visa card, which is another one of these things. And so I am served by these huge things that tower over me. And, well, one of them is Rogers Cable TV, you know, and they come along and promise you heaven on earth.

I'm being a bit vindictive here, as you will see. But I want to tell you on the basis of personal experience, if you don't keep their lamp well rubbed, they'll turn your heaven into hell.

So that one of the things that we're talking about today is that I'm thinking about is how this little person here continues to be in charge of these massive corporations, which are there to serve him.

[2 : 47] And then, of course, when somebody comes along and threatens the existence of something like the General Motors Corporation, they, you know, that great panic strikes because you suddenly find out that there's something has twisted.

And instead of this being to serve this, this has to serve this. And so you, your whole world gets turned upside down by this process.

And the reason that you come here on Wednesday is so that these can get back into the lamp and you can assume your full stature and recognize who you are as a child of God.

And that you are really in charge. And these really are organizations which exist for no other reason than to serve your purposes.

And if they don't do it well, too bad for them. That's brave, isn't it? But it may just be brave, but it's also true, I think.

[4 : 13] And we tend to lose that perspective. Now, what happens when you get to a story like this ancient story from the eighth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, which has been part of history for 2,000 years, a very familiar story, but a very important story, written, as you will remember, because Luke was trying to explain to some senior empire official in Rome the reality of the new kingdom, which was a spiritual kingdom, which was not going to overthrow the Roman Empire, but which in effect, the Roman Empire, which you might consider as one of these geniuses, that the Roman Empire owed its existence to a far greater empire that accomplished, that had a far greater goal.

So you have that kind of reality in the story, and Luke tells Theophilus about it.

It's a very interesting story, because in the annals of the Christian faith, this tells the story of the first black man who becomes a Christian.

His name isn't given to us, but he is known as the Ethiopian eunuch.

And before the story is over, he is to be baptized. I want to warn you now, though, that I'm dealing with this story today and next week and the week after. So this is just the first part.

[6 : 02] This is the cold call which introduces us to the Ethiopian eunuch and the man that he was. So that he is in a peculiar category.

This isn't funny, I want you to know. But being a eunuch, he was a senior sort of cabinet member of the royal court of Ethiopia, which is upper Egypt.

And what they saw fit to do when people achieved senior positions or were trained for senior positions in government, they reduced the complexity of their life by castrating them.

You could see how that would work. And the media would be at a total loss most of the time to know what to talk about next.

But that's what happened. That's how they trained people to hold high office and deal with some of their personal lusts and desires at the same time.

[7 : 24] So this was a eunuch. Eunuchs were, according to the Old Testament, not to be made welcome in the assembly of the people of God.

And you can debate why they were not. But you have a very interesting reference to eunuchs in the book of Isaiah, where it says that members of the kingdom are to be recognized, not in terms of the possible defects of their physical body, but in terms of their condition of heart, heart's obedience to the Lord and the law that he has made known.

That it's the condition of the heart that is the basis of your membership in the kingdom. So that becomes a kind of preliminary to the remark that Jesus makes in the Gospel of Matthew when he talks about eunuchs and says that some are born eunuchs, some are made eunuchs, and some are eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of God.

So you get a kind of two ends of a spectrum in a way. The assembly of the people of God in the book of Deuteronomy are not to be defective because on the assembly of the people of God is the responsibility of generating the continuing people of God through procreation so that this nation will grow and flourish.

But by the time you come to the New Testament, the thing that is to grow and flourish is not a particular nation, humanly speaking, but is a spiritual kingdom.

[9 : 28] And therefore it is entirely possible for an honored member of the kingdom to choose to be a eunuch in terms of sharing in the growth and development of the kingdom of God rather than the generation of the human species.

So it's a very interesting thing that this man is a eunuch, that he is identified primarily as a eunuch, and that he is one of the sort of great figures in the New Testament as being one who, despite his rank, despite his race, and despite his religion, becomes a Christian believer.

You wouldn't expect a man of his rank, you wouldn't expect a man of his race, and you wouldn't expect a man of his religion to come to this place.

So that here he is, and you have this main road leading from Jerusalem down through Gaza, which we know a lot, simply in current news you hear a lot about Gaza.

and then of course it leads on into Egypt and then down into the upper Nile area, which is where this man came from. And Philip was the one whom you read in the story that an angel of the Lord said to Philip, rise and go toward the south to this road because there is someone I want you to talk to.

[11 : 13] Now, that's how the process begins. It begins by an angel speaking to Philip and having him go down there.

When you get there, the subject of the cold call is really that it's back in Toronto in the old days. it used to be possible that if you looked through southern Rosedale of a morning about nine o'clock, you would see the big, shiny, chauffeur-driven limousine driving one of the bank presidents down to his office in the downtown part of the city, sitting in the back of his car with a reading lamp coming down over his shoulder and reading the financial section of the Globe and Mail.

I want you to have that picture in mind. He comes up to an intersection where he is stopped by a red light and somebody steps down from the curb, knocks on his window and says, what are you reading?

Now, you can imagine, humanly speaking, what the reaction to that would be. But this is what I mean by the cold call. Philip does it, in a sense, as a cold call, but he does it because he's been told to do it.

[12 : 46] And the Ethiopian eunuch surprises him very much as such a bank president would surprise somebody on the street corner if he said, no, I don't know what I'm reading.

Do get in here and explain it to me. You know. I know. There's that surprising element in the story which I think you need to be aware of.

And when he gets in, Philip asks him this basic question, do you understand what you are reading? And the thing that I want you to sort of get hold of today is that the Ethiopian eunuch said, no, how could I unless somebody would explain it to me?

Now, most people's religious convictions are at about that level. They have the text in front of them. They read it because they think there must be something there, but they frankly don't understand it. [13:53] There was a wonderful editorial yesterday. I mean, I found it stimulating in the Globe and Mail yesterday, which talked about moral values. And it said that the difficulty with moral values is either ignorance or bias.

In other words, and they used the example of abortion. They said, a Roman Catholic priest can't say anything about abortion because he's ignorant of what it means to bear a child.

And a pregnant woman can't say anything about abortion because she has an interest in the question that gives her a bias. So the Roman Catholic priest is ignorant.

The pregnant woman is biased. How do you know the truth about abortion? You know, and that's the debate that goes on and on and on. I won't tell you what he concluded, but that it was, it's very interesting here that most people, when confronted with the question about the content of the Bible or the claim on their life to submit their lives to Jesus Christ will either hide behind ignorance, which they won't acknowledge, or bias, which they won't acknowledge.

And they find it very difficult. And the problem is illustrated here by this man who is aware that he is ignorant and acknowledges it and could be aware of his own biases and allows them.

[15:39] So that you have the motivation of Philip in approaching him in the first place, you have suddenly the barriers of race, religion, and rank are dropped and suddenly you have a man who is open to hear what the scriptures say.

Now I'm in, you know, that I, I'm the, I'm a minister in a congregation and very often people turn up in that congregation.

But the, the barrier, if you ask somebody to, if you ask somebody if you would be interested in joining a small Bible study group, a great many people, I suspect, are so ignorant of the Bible and so guilty about their ignorance of the Bible that they would say, well, I don't, I don't like that kind of thing in order to defend their, their ignorance and not, not acknowledge it, which this man acknowledged.

And so that, and then a lot of people that you approach about their personal faith in Christ have an enormous bias against institutional religion and therefore won't even look at the issue.

You know, that they know that if there is any compromise with the content of the Christian faith, they're going to be confronted with membership in the institutional body, which is the church, and their bias against that sometimes is part of their earliest upbringing and that they can't, they can't even begin to think of overcoming that.

[17:33] And so it's quite a surprising thing to see how God has prepared this person to acknowledge his ignorance and overcome his bias and invite this man to come up and sit with him in the coach and explain to him this passage of scripture that he's reading.

And of course, I dare say that many people. Here, right now, if I was to ask you to stand up and say how you became a Christian, you would tell the story of how God in his grace helped you to overcome the ignorance of which you were ashamed and the bias which you couldn't acknowledge. And that it was only when those things were broken that you were willing to hear. And so this man comes and he is wide open to hearing what Philip has to say.

And the result of it leads to his baptism. there is a real, there's something really missing in the story and that is that he wasn't signed up for church membership at the end of it.

But I, but we'll deal with that two weeks from today and see if we can handle it. What, what this means then, and I think it's particularly true, one lady in, in this city spoke of having volunteered to go overseas as a missionary teacher.

[19:27] And she went to a distant country called Japan. She got there among Japanese students whom she was to teach and they were very interested to know about her religion and what she believed and how she had come to believe it and how she understood it and what it meant to her.

And of course, coming from Canada, nobody had ever asked those questions before. What does it mean to you to be a Christian? And so those children, in a sense, by their question, forced her to

face questions she had never heard of before.

one lady whom I'm sure some of you may know, Dr. Helen Houston, went as a missionary to Nepal. And her story is that she didn't become a Christian until she got there as a medical missionary and people started asking her about her faith.

And she recognized that she didn't have one. and was able in that foreign culture to look at the questions of ignorance and bias, which had kept Christian faith at arm's length for her all her life.

[20 : 50] And she was given the opportunity to drop those barriers and that, of course, led to her faith in Christ. You see, that's what happens.

And this amazing story of the Ethiopian eunuch is that he somehow was open to receiving this man along the side of the road into his chariot to sit with him and explain this central passage of scripture to him.

Now, I want to talk about the central passage of scripture next week. But the reason I put in that, the reason I put in that excerpt from Psalm 119 is because it, in a sense, shows you what happens once you've got over your embarrassment about your ignorance and your bias against religion, whatever it may be, what happens to you.

that there is a new hunger and a new heart's desire. And that is beautifully expressed by Psalm 119, which I will read, I mean, I want you to look at it, but you see how it says, teach me, give me understanding, lead me in the path, incline my heart, turn my eye.

That's what it means to be open to something new, because the gospel is something new. It's not something most people know and have dismissed, it's something that most people simply don't know.

[22 : 42] They know about Christian morality, they know about the institutional church, they know about a lot of religious things, but they don't know what is at the heart of the gospel.

And to sit down with somebody and explain to them, be given the privilege, where they will allow you to tell them what is at the heart of the gospel, tends to fill their hearts with wonder and amazement.

Why didn't somebody tell me this before? My carefully nurtured ignorance and my strongly held bias have kept me from ever hearing this.

And once that's overcome, then Psalm 119 comes into effect with a heart's desire to be taught, to be given understanding, to be led, to have your heart inclined to hear rather than disinclined to hear, and to turn your eyes from the distractions of the vanities of this world to the things that are important.

And when this is translated in the Jerusalem Bible, instead of teach, it says, expound to me what this is.

[23 : 59] Explain to me what it means. Guide me as to how I should respond. Incline my heart to hear it and to obey it, rather than to reject it and disobey it.

I mean, one of the great things about being an Anglican, I'm sorry to tell you this, but when I was a choir boy, and on Communion Sunday, they used to read the Ten Commandments one by one.

No short forms, just one by one. And the choir boys used to have to be prepared to stand in.

Immediately, the commandment had been read and to sing, incline my heart to hear this law.

And, you know, because it didn't take you much to realize that your heart was not inclined to hear it.

But it was, and that's where I guess this verse comes from, incline our hearts to hear your love.

And then focus my eyes, because you know how easily our eyes distract us, and how they wander.

And with them, our thoughts and the whole structure of our life wanders all over the map without any sense of direction or purpose.

[25 : 31] And so, you can pray that such a gift might be given to you, and that such a gift might be, that such a gift might be given to others as they hear the gospel.

That the barrier of their ignorance and bias will be let down, and they will come to a place where they suddenly are filled with a new awareness, that they want this thing expounded to them by the Lord, explained to them by the Lord, they want to be guided by the Lord, they want their hearts turned and their eyes focused.

and that's a wonderful gift, isn't it? And that was the gift that this man had. Peter Medowar, who won a Pulitzer Prize in botany, I think, spoke about how scientists make discoveries.

And he said what scientists have to do is that they have to be able to look at an issue or a problem with the same kind of eyes that a child has.

Because by the time you've done your undergraduate work and your graduate work and your doctoral work and your postdoctoral work, your concept that you know pretty much everything there is to know has hold of your mind and you can't see this thing.

[26 : 55] And Peter Medower says when you come to that place, the gift you need is the ability to look at a problem in a new, fresh way. Without being inhibited by your ignorance which you won't acknowledge and your bias which you won't acknowledge.

Let me pray. Our God, we thank you that it is your purpose to expound, explain, to guide, to turn, and to focus our eyes and our hearts and our minds on your gospel.

And we ask that you will grant us grace by your Holy Spirit to hear the things that we have so long resisted and without a sense of fear or anxiety to be able to know that your word brings life.

We ask this in Christ's name. Amen. Amen.