

Acts 8:26-40

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 May 2023

Preacher: Rev. Jordan Senner

[0 : 0 0] We've been all over the place in the book of Acts, jumping forward, jumping backwards, going to the middle, beginning, end. But the whole book of Acts tells us a story about how Jesus builds his church. And more specifically, the book of Acts tells us a story about how Jesus fulfills his promise to his church, the promise that he gave in chapter 1, verse 8, that his church, filled, empowered, guided by the Holy Spirit, would be his witnesses in the world, starting in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. And Mark, especially in his early chapters, or not Mark, sorry, Luke, still stuck in the gospel of Mark. It was just so good. I'm basking in his glory. Luke has been careful to give us like a numerical unfolding, a record of how the gospel is going forward into the world. So he tells us specifically in chapter 2, verse 41, that 3,000 were saved after Peter's first Pentecost sermon. He tells us in chapter 4, verse 4, that 5,000 were saved after Peter's second sermon. That's a pretty successful preacher. In chapter 6, verse 7, he tells us that there was a rapid increase of the number of disciples. He uses that language, the number of disciples in Jerusalem. And then in chapter 8, verse 6, he tells us that crowds of Samaritans are listening to the gospel that Philip is proclaiming. And so you get a sense of the numerical record of the gospel's growth in the first eight chapters. But it's in this story that we look at this morning, that Luke turns the spotlight from the crowds to just one person.

God leads Philip away from the crowds. I mean, a revival is going on. Philip has been at the center of it. And God says, no, I want you to go to the desert and talk to this one person.

He takes him from the crowds of the Samaritans to one Ethiopian. He takes him from mass evangelism to personal evangelism. He takes him from revival in the city to Bible reading in the desert.

So what we see here is no little thing. Luke is wanting us to see that the maker of heaven and earth and everything in it pays attention to the individual person. No one is just a number in the pew. No one is just a nameless face in the crowd to Almighty God. And I wonder, I don't know who you are, but I wonder, I suspect someone may be here who needs to hear that word this morning.

Each one is seen, heard, known by God. Each one precious to God. God is the one who seeks and saves. Now we're told in verse 27 of chapter 8 that this one person was an Ethiopian, a eunuch in particular, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure.

[3 : 0 6] So this was a man of great wealth, great importance, and great power. And he had gone to Jerusalem to worship. And he was returning to Ethiopia with the scroll of the prophet Isaiah in his hands.

And I'll just pause here. Isn't it interesting to reflect on the story in light of the fact that the vast majority of the Christians live in the global south now? Or in light of the fact that there's millions of Christians in the global east? So Christianity's geographical center of gravity is literally in Africa right now. Jesus said that a time was coming, this was John chapter 4, when people would no longer worship the Father in Jerusalem, but that the true worshipers would be those that worship the Father in spirit and in truth. And the Father is seeking such people to worship him.

The eunuch had gone to Jerusalem to worship, but it was on his way back to Ethiopia, away from Jerusalem, that he discovers the true heart of worship. The Father is seeking him. The Father is wanting to reveal to him the cross of Jesus Christ who died for him and who gave his life for him and who loves him.

Like a sheep, he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb before its shearers is silent, so he opens not his mouth. This is what the eunuch is contemplating. The suffering of the Son for the life of the world. You think of John the Baptist who said, Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

So the main point of Acts chapter 8 verses 26 to 40 is this. The great missionary in the world is God himself. The great missionary in the world is God himself. God is seeking for himself a people from all over the world. He's saving a people from all over the world. He is making and gathering a people to worship him from all over the world. And he leads people like Philip and like you and me to join him in his work, in his way, in his timing, to the people and places of his own choosing.

[5 : 26] So there's four reflections I want to share with you this morning from this passage. And the first is this. It's that God seeks and saves the lost. Or in this case, God seeks the seekers.

From bending to the end of the story, it's God who takes the initiative. Look at verse 26. It was an angel of the Lord who said to Philip, Rise and go. And then he goes. Verse 29, it was the spirit who said to Philip, Go over and join this chariot and talk to this man in particular. And Philip runs up to him and breathlessly asks him a question. It's in verse 39 that once the man has been baptized, he, Philip is carried away. He's taken away by the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel somewhere else.

So I think what Luke is trying to remind us from beginning to middle to end in this passage is that the great missionary is God himself. God chooses Philip. God directs him to the right place at the right time. God prepares the Ethiopian and God grants the Gentiles repentance unto life.

The Ethiopian may be seeking God, but even more fundamentally, God is seeking this Ethiopian. And that's true for each of us. Each of us here may be seeking God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, but it is even more fundamentally true that God is seeking us with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength. He has a lot more strength than we do.

So the message is clear, I think. God's heart is for the lost. And any church or Christian that ceases to have a heart for the lost ceases to be fully Christian.

[7 : 08] Archbishop, English Archbishop of the 19th century, William Temple, he said the church is the only society that exists primarily for the benefits of those that are not its members.

The church is the only society that exists primarily for the benefit of those that are not its members. And this is one of the things that is so dynamic about Jesus' ministry, is when he came and said, I am the good shepherd, you also have these parables of a shepherd leaving the 99 sheep in order to find the one.

And I was reminded of how radical this is in a conversation with my neighbor a couple days ago. Our kids were playing outside, and she asked me, knowing that I was a church leader, she said, so how are you navigating all the kind of woke issues in our culture?

How do you navigate that? And that's the language she used. That's not the language I'm choosing to use. And so I just said, well, why are you interested in that? Like, what's behind your question?

And she shared with me about how she sees at work in our culture, in North America and Canada, culture wars in our society that are polarizing people, that are being toxic for relationships, and that are turning people against one another.

[8 : 21] And she says, everybody assumes that they're righteous, that they're the righteous one, and they point the finger at everybody else. And she's wanted to know, how can we find common ground together anymore?

She said, what do you think? You don't get these opportunities very often, you know. So I'm sitting there going, oh, I don't know. I told her that I thought it came down to what we do with Jesus' simple message, that I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

I shared the image of Jesus as a doctor, who said he came for the sick, which cuts against all our attempts at self-justification and others' blaming.

Because Jesus says, everyone is lost. Everyone is sick, has a disease, a spiritual, moral, relational disease that they cannot cure, meaning everyone is in need of his saving and healing grace.

So I said, it just evens the playing field. Jesus explodes the left and he explodes the right with the gospel, and he says, all of you are those who need a doctor.

[9 : 43] So I said, grace is what the world lacks right now. And grace is precisely what Jesus came to give. Grace upon grace.

So the first thing is that Jesus comes to seek and save the lost, to give grace upon grace. And the second is that this gospel, this gospel grace changes lives.

And it really does change lives, and it really does make people joyful. In chapter 8, we get two episodes of Philip going out an evangelistic journey outside of the boundaries of Jerusalem.

And in verse 8, we are told that there is a response in the city of Samaria to the message that he is proclaiming. We are told in verse 8 that there was much joy in that city.

And then in verse 39, we are told that in the middle of the desert, now outside the city, this Ethiopian who has been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ comes up and he goes on his way rejoicing.

[10 : 44] So the common response to both in the city and in the desert, to Philip's announcement of the gospel is joy. The gospel is good news of great joy for all people.

The kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. And even Paul, in the midst of all his weakness and sufferings and trials and tribulations, can say, I am sorrowful yet always rejoicing.

Why? How? I think it comes right in the middle of the passage, what he's reading in verses 32 and 33.

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter. Like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. Talking about Jesus' voluntary suffering, his innocent suffering.

In his humiliation, justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life was taken away from the earth. So right at the center of our passage is this description of Jesus' voluntary and vicarious suffering on our behalf.

[11 : 58] It's substitutionary atonement. It's this great exchange where the gospel of Jesus Christ brings liberty to the captives because Jesus was willing to suffer.

It brings truth to the seekers and forgiveness to the guilty. It brings honor to the shamed and righteousness to sinners. It brings life to the dead and hope to the hopeless.

And it brings comfort to the poor in spirit and rest for every tired soul. Because Jesus has done this. So part of our ongoing conversion and ongoing journey of sanctification is, I think, we are to learn having our hearts fixed where true joys are to be found.

Having our hearts fixed where true joys are to be found. And if you're like me and there are times in your life where you say, I feel like I've lost the joy in all this.

And we have David's words. Restore to me, O Lord, the joy of your salvation. And I wonder what changes might have happened to this Ethiopian stewardship of the treasury based on his newfound gospel joy.

[13 : 15] I wonder what changes might happen in your life and your ministry based on this spirit-given joy. So God seeks and saves the lost.

The gospel changes lives. And third, words really matter in all of this. Words matter a lot. Notice how four times in this passage it is emphasized by Luke that the Ethiopian was reading.

Four times. Verse 28. Returning, seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then verse 30, we get it twice.

Philip ran and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet. Asked, do you understand what you are reading? And then in verse 32. Now the passage of scripture that he was reading was this.

You get that? It's like Luke is saying, he was reading this. This is what he was doing. He was reading. And then it says in verse 35 that Philip opened his mouth. So to the written word there corresponds verbal words so that the Ethiopian can understand the written word.

[14 : 20] The written word is under... The Ethiopian is asking about the meaning or the referent of the words he is reading. There is a veil over his eyes. And so he asked to be able to understand it.

And it's this scripture, the words of scripture plays a key role in his conversion. But the spirit-breathed scriptures require a spirit-guided interpreter for him to understand how they proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to him.

So I think this kind of incident refutes two common attitudes that we can have as Christians. On the one hand is the attitude of the silent Christian, and on the other hand is the attitude of the solo Christian.

The silent Christian says, God is sovereign. I'm going to let him do the work of evangelism. I'm just going to let my life do the talking. Or loves the phrase, preach the gospel at all times, when necessary use words.

But the silent Christian ends up resisting speaking. And here we see that it is desperately important for this person to have somebody speak to them about who the Christ is.

[15 : 32] But on the other hand, there's the attitude of the solo Christian. The person who says, it's just me and Jesus. I don't need a church. It's just me, the spirit, and the Bible. I can read it.

I can understand it. And I don't need any teachers to help me with it. And that person cuts themselves off from listening. So the silent Christian cuts themselves off from speaking.

And the solo Christian cuts themselves off from listening to faithful teaching. And both in this passage are addressed as not being God's vision for anybody. Because the Bible knows no such thing as either a silent Christian or as a solo Christian.

And yet notice that Philip's method is not to shout the gospel at people. It's not to argue people in the kingdom. It's not to force upon people a prescribed four spiritual laws. It's simply to ask people a question.

Do you understand? Do you understand? It's a question that invites further conversation and communicates sensitivity to where a person's at.

[16 : 35] It's a question that acknowledges that God is already at work in that person's life. And is just trying to help that person take the next step towards Christ. And it's a question, I think, that honors the sufficiency and the efficacy of Holy Scripture.

And so we get Jesus, we get God seeking and saving the lost. We see how the gospel transforms lives. And then we see how words are really, really important.

Both what we read and what we say to how God brings about transformation in people's lives and seeks and saves the lost. And fourth and finally, we discern throughout this passage that it is the Spirit of God who orients our hearts to God's heart for others.

It is the Spirit who orients the heart to God's heart for others. Notice how Philip is not depicted as an evangelistic guru or as a charismatic personality.

He's not somebody that's depicted as somebody who has a really great evangelism strategy and comes up with the best methods and resources. He's just depicted as somebody who's responsive to God's leading.

[17 : 49] That's it. Like, notice how every time it's Philip's responsiveness that's emphasized. The angel of the Lord says to him, do this, and he just does it.

The Spirit of the Lord speaks to him and he follows. The Spirit moves this way and he follows. And so there's this sense in which every step of the way, Philip is sensitive to the guidance and the voice of the Spirit in his life and ministry.

And that is the power that is guiding and motivating him. Now, it's important to remember that Philip was elected in chapter 6 to serve as a deacon. So his actual official job in the church was to administer daily food to widows in Jerusalem.

That was his daily job. And yet when he hears the Holy Spirit say, go outside of Jerusalem and take the gospel to others, he goes where God leads him to find those that God has prepared for him.

And so a question that often comes up is, how is it that we become sensitive to the Spirit in our lives?

[18 : 56] Am I sensitive to the intersections in my own life? Am I open to Spirit-led conversations in my life?

Because personally, when I come across conversations, I often feel really unprepared for what God is placing before me. I mean, just like a couple days ago, I had no idea what I was doing.

So how is it that we attune our hearts to the rhythms and the appointments of God's grace, not just for ourselves, but for the sake of others?

That we might bear faithful and fruitful witness to others who are searching and seeking. And I just want to commend to you two really concrete prayer exercises.

I'm told this is an application sermon series, so I should probably make some sort of application. Just two simple prayer exercises, one for the morning and one for the evening.

[19 : 55] In the morning, run through your schedule before the day, before you begin it. Activities, meetings, appointments, tasks, drawers. And pray briefly for each person or group of people that you were intersect with in that day.

And then when you meet them, you will have already prayed for them and sought to attune your heart to God's work in them. And then the second thing is in the evening, prayerfully review your day, the people, the events, the conversations that you had, and ask yourself these questions.

Who was I able to bless today? And point towards Christ. How did God answer my prayers from this morning? An opportunity to give thanks to him. And then what opportunities did I miss or overlook or feel completely ill-equipped and unprepared for?

An opportunity to ask for grace and trust God with your fears and your failures. And then ask, with whom may God be inviting me to follow up tomorrow?

Just a quick text or a quick email might do. You see, this isn't works righteousness. This isn't about trying to earn our salvation. It's a way of asking the Spirit to orient our hearts to God's heart for others.

[21 : 17] Because the main message of the story of the Ethiopian eunuch is that the great missionary in the world to the ends of the earth is God himself.

God is taking his gospel to the ends of the earth. God is saving thousands and pursuing individuals. And God is leading us to join him in his work, in his way, in his timing, to the people and places of his own choosing.

So to follow God's leading, it might make us a little uncomfortable at times. It might be costly. But it's a gift and it's a privilege to be entrusted with this good news.

To be placed in this church and this city. To be given these neighbors. And to be asked to hold out Christ to seek to people who are seeking and searching.

So friends, it's with this truth in heart and mind that I would like to end with this prayer for mission from the book of Common Prayer. Almighty God, who by your Son, Jesus Christ, gave commandment to the apostles that they should go into all the world and preach the gospel.

[22 : 35] Grant to us, whom you have called into your church, a ready will to obey your word, and fulfill and fill us with a hearty desire to make your way known on earth, your saving health among all nations.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Amen. Amen.