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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0:00] Good morning, everyone. It's nice and echoey. My name's David. It's great to be with you here this morning as we look forward to an exciting week, hopefully, that we've all got together, this week of college mission and St Paul's mission.

It's going to be a lot of fun. I guess the question that that raises is, what is it that actually causes a bunch of reclusive Bible students to crawl out from behind the books for this brief week and come out to Chatswood?

Or even more confusing, what is it that causes a bunch of otherwise right-thinking individuals such as yourselves to let us in the door, never mind even inviting us?

Of course, the answer, as we've touched on, is mission, isn't it? I'm sure you've heard a bit about it over the last few weeks. I know we have. You see, at the college, we're convinced, just as you are as a church, that it's incredibly important that we get out and about and tell anyone who will listen this wonderful message of Jesus, of his death, his resurrection, the wonderful message of forgiveness that that brings to us.

But I guess I want to ask, why is that important? Why are we going to the effort this week? And why is it that we'd love as many of you as possible to be involved? Well, this morning, as we consider this meeting between Philip and the Ethiopian there in Acts 8, we're going to find an answer to this question.

[1:19] And I hope that as we go through this story, if you're not convinced of the importance of mission, you will be by the end of it. If you're convinced, I hope that you'll be reminded of why it's so important, maybe reinvigorated for the coming week.

So with that in mind, let's turn to that passage as we wrestle with that question together. You'll find it helpful to keep it open in front of you. And as we turn there, the first thing we can take from it is that God has a message which he wants people to understand.

God has a message which he wants people to understand. Now, to really see this, we've got to start all the way back at the beginning of the book, back there in chapter 1, verse 8. By this point, Jesus has come.

He's lived his life. He's died. He's been raised from the dead. But before he goes back to heaven to wait there until he comes again, he tells his disciples what's going to happen from there, gives them the rundown.

And he says to them, there in 1.8, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

[2:22] And so with those words ringing in our ears as we go through this story, we need to understand God is intending on working through these very ordinary men, his disciples, to bring his message to the absolute ends of the earth.

And so even in this story as we consider it, we're expecting big things from God, aren't we? We're expecting to see that God himself will be at work at making the opportunities happen, at making this message spread, and he doesn't disappoint us.

And so in verse 26, we see him telling this man, Philip, head down to this road in the middle of nowhere in the desert that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza. And Philip goes off, as he's told.

And as he's travelling, he crosses paths with this Ethiopian eunuch there in verse 27. Now, there's a few things we're told about this eunuch. First of all, we're told he's a fairly important guy.

I don't think being the high-ranking official for the Ethiopian Queen is that impressive now, but I take it it must have been a bit more of an impressive thing back then. However, more importantly for what we're saying, what we need to understand today, is that we're told two other things.

[3 : 30] First of all, that he's involved in the Jewish faith and somehow he's just been up to Jerusalem where he's worshipping, and as he comes back, he's reading the book of Isaiah, part of the Hebrew Scriptures, something that we will find in our Old Testament there.

However, jarring with that is the fact that he's also a eunuch. We're told he's a eunuch. Now, I'll assume you know what that is rather than going into it, but suffice to say, gentlemen, you don't want to be one.

Now, the reason that's significant, though, is that if we go back to Deuteronomy 23, verse 1 there, part of the Jewish law, we see that eunuchs essentially can never be full members of God's people. Added to this is the fact that he's an Ethiopian, not a Jew. He's a Gentile. So there's a further barrier there, isn't there? He will always be an outsider simply by virtue of who he is among God's people. Well, as this man's travelling back from Jerusalem and he and Philip cross paths, God tells Philip, look, head over near the chariot. And so he does. And he gets close enough to hear him reading.

[4 : 35] And what he's reading there is from the book of Isaiah in verse 30. Sorry, and in verse 30, he says, Philip says, do you understand what it is that you are reading? Now, it's worth just pausing for a moment here to ask ourselves how it is that God has brought this situation about because he's at work everywhere, isn't he?

We've seen that's what he intends to do back in chapter 1, verse 8. That's what he's telling us. And here we see Philip sent down by God. He comes across this Ethiopian's path.

Sorry. And it's God who has put this book in the Ethiopian man's hands, isn't it? This whole situation, we're seeing God working to make his message known. It's God who's acting here.

And so Philip asks the question of him in verse 31. Or in verse 30, do you understand what you're reading? Which brings the response from the Ethiopian there in verse 31.

Which brings us really to the heart of the passage and then to our second point. That is that Jesus is the message that God wants people to understand. And we see there in verse 31, the Ethiopian replies and says, how can I?

[5 : 45] Unless someone explains it to me. And so he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. I wonder, how did you become a Christian? If we went around this room right now and asked that question to everyone individually, I'm sure we'd have as many stories as we have people in here.

God uses an amazing array of circumstances and of experiences to bring people to himself. But for all these different experiences that we might have, there'd be at least one thing that all of us have in common.

And that is that someone will have taken the time to explain this message to you. To teach it to you. Just think about it for a minute. It may be that you grew up with Christian parents who have taught you the gospel for longer than you can remember.

It may be that you had a friend in school or somewhere else that invited you along to a youth group, to a church service. And it was there that you first heard the gospel. It may be that someone approached you completely out of the blue, just walked up to you and said, let's talk.

Or that you approached them. At the very least, you will have had to pick up a Bible and start reading this message for yourself, wouldn't you? Whatever your experience, whatever your story and the particulars of that, you needed to hear this message and understand it in order to believe it.

[7 : 04] You needed to be told, didn't you? Now the Ethiopian man, he gets this. He knows he doesn't understand what he's reading, but he wants to. And so he invites Philip to come up into the chariot and explain this passage from Isaiah for him.

And as we continue to read there in verses 32 and 33, we see the passage he's reading is from Isaiah 53. It's part of that wonderful, long passage that we just had read to us earlier.

Now we can probably assume that on a long journey like that, he's reading more than the couple of lines that are quoted there. and we'll have read at least the stuff that comes before, including these lines in verses 5 and 6, where Isaiah says, but he was pierced for our transgressions.

He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Now for those of us here today that have been fortunate enough to have been taught well over a long period of time, to have known what Jesus did on the cross, we read that and it just screams out Jesus, doesn't it?

[8 : 16] Just think about it briefly. We have a man here who was, he was pierced, crushed, it was done as a punishment, it was a punishment for sins and it buys us peace with God.

We have here words that were written 700 odd years before Jesus came and walked this earth yet what we were reading could well have been taken straight from the New Testament, couldn't it? Used to describe exactly what Jesus did on the cross and in fact these are words that we see springing up throughout the New Testament which the authors use for exactly that purpose and it's just for the testament to the fact that God is working his plan out here.

He's directing the situation because it's hard to imagine that at this point any other passage of scripture that this man could be reading would point so clearly towards Jesus and yet right at that moment that's what he's reading but the Ethiopian man doesn't yet know what we know sitting here today.

He hasn't heard about the cross, he doesn't know the connection between what he's reading there in Isaiah and what Jesus has only just done and so in verse 34 he asks Philip, tell me please who is the prophet speaking about himself or someone else?

And we're told in verse 35 that Philip starts there and answers him by explaining the good news of Jesus from that passage. That is who the prophet is speaking of isn't it?

[9 : 43] Jesus. You see God has this message that he wants people to understand the message of Jesus and it says Philip takes that chance to walk up to the chariot there and ask a very simple question of this man that that message is explained to a person who would otherwise not have grasped it at this point.

God has used a very ordinary man, Philip, to make this message known. And we see the message spreading just as Jesus says it would in 1.8. This Ethiopian man can understand because someone has explained the message to him.

Well as they travel we see I guess some time passes there between verses 35 and 36 as the two men talk. Who knows how that conversation went? Who knows exactly what questions the Ethiopian's asking?

Who knows what responses Philip is giving? All we know is that Philip is explaining the message of Jesus at this time and by the time we get to verse 36 this man's life has been changed.

They come across some water. Our Ethiopian friend there is baptised. Philip's taken away at that point. Who knows how exactly. But he's able to rejoice isn't he the Ethiopian?

[10 : 56] His life has been changed by this message. Can you just imagine the joy he felt? Imagine the joy he feels as he comes to realise that the fact that he's a Gentile rather than a Jew is not a barrier between him and God.

The fact that he's a eunuch is not a barrier between him and God's people doesn't make him an outsider. Just imagine the joy he feels as he comes to realise Jesus has died in his place.

That whatever his life has looked like he can be forgiven because of that. This is a life changing message isn't it? If you've come to understand this message this gospel of Jesus and all that he has done for you you know that.

You know that it's Jesus and what he has done that changes lives. Jesus is the message that God wants us to understand. But the question we need to ask is how does this help us for mission this week?

And I think the answer to that lies in that question that the Ethiopian asks back in verse 31. How can I know unless somebody explains it to me? As I'm sure you're all aware every few years the government takes a census.

[12 : 06] You've probably all partaken in many of them and that involves a huge questionnaire of all sorts of questions to everyone in the country. Very time consuming and annoying but they do what they've got to do. Now in Chatswood in the last census about 19 or 20% of the people surveyed said they belong to some form of Bible believing Christian denomination.

Someone that takes this gospel message of Jesus seriously. Now the reality is that the number is probably far less than that but even if we assume it's right for a minute that's one in five people.

That's only one in five people at best. Think about what that means just for a minute. It means as you walk out this door today, as you drive home, as you go about your business in Chatswood, you can safely assume that as many or at least 80% of the people you come across do not know this message, do not understand this message.

That's 80% out of the people that you work with, the people that you chat with when you're dropping the kids off at school every morning, of the people you play weekend sports with, the people you socialise with, 80%, a number that likely includes large numbers of your best friends, maybe even members of your family, those nearest and dearest to you.

Many of them that simply just do not know this gospel message, do not know the forgiveness that you know, do not have the hope of heaven that you have. This is exactly why we need to be doing mission, isn't it?

[13 : 34] It's safe to assume the vast majority of the people we come in contact with day in, day out, simply don't know this message. They don't know the gospel. But we do. If we're sitting in this place for any length of time, then I can assume you have heard this gospel message taught faithfully.

Even this morning in just the confessions, the songs, the prayers, it's been everywhere, hasn't it? Now, if you haven't heard of Jesus, if you don't understand all that he has done, then can I please encourage you to talk to someone before you go.

We would love nothing more than to help you understand. But if you do know this message, and if your life has been changed, turned upside down for the best by it, well then we need to ask ourselves, how will the people out there that don't know it come to understand it if we won't explain it to them?

They're certainly not looking, most of them. How will they know if we won't tell? Now, a number of years ago now, my life was changed profoundly. When I went to go and get married, and part of that was sitting down at the local church with a group of people, and we talked about the gospel. And as we went, I'm someone who's always thought that I understood it, but as we went, I realised I'd misunderstood the gospel in profound ways. My wife, on the other hand, came from a background where she knew nothing of Jesus.

[14 : 59] It had never been part of her childhood, and quite frankly, the last thing she thought she wanted to be doing with her Thursday nights was sitting around talking to a bunch of people about Jesus. That was not what she thought she wanted.

But see, as those people explained it to us, and we came to understand this message of Jesus, it's changed our lives immensely. Even if we didn't think we would be, we are now profoundly grateful for the people who took the time and the effort to do that.

We'd never have known had they not explained it. We weren't trying to. This Ethiopian man would never have known this message had someone not explained it to him.

We've got to take seriously the fact that the majority of the people that we're out there with in Chatswood every day will not come to know this message if people like us are not prepared to get out there and tell them.

That's why we're on mission. We have the most important message that anyone could ever need to hear, even if they don't realise they need it yet. That is why this church and many others like it across our world will continue to tell people about this message until there's no world to tell it to.

[16 : 09] That's why we're here this week. That's why we'd love as many of you as possible to come and join us in that work. And to that end will you pray with me? Father, we do thank you for all that you have done in Christ that we might be forgiven.

We ask now that as we head out into Chatswood this coming week and beyond that you would be acting to make this wonderful gospel message known. Please prepare people, soften their hearts so that they might respond and give us courage to take the opportunities that are presented to us to explain this gospel.

And we ask this for your glory. Amen. and we ask this talking about there are questions that you have we have and find this wonderful love