

Acts 8:26 Baptism

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Preacher: Rev Iver Martin

[0 : 0 0] chapter 8 and verse 29, 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're reading? And he said, how can I unless someone guides me? And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. And then fast forwarding on to verse 35, Philip opened his mouth and beginning with the scriptures, he told him the good news about Jesus. And then on to verse 38, the eunuch said, what prevents me from being baptized? And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water and Philip baptized him. I want us to see before we even begin the connection between the good news of the gospel and being baptized. What we're doing today is not some kind of cultural or traditional ritual. You'll find it all over the world, not just in Lewis, not in Scotland or Britain or Europe. It's all over the world. Whenever you find the Christian church, you will find people being baptized, baptized as adults, as they come to accept Jesus as their Lord. And in some churches like our own, being baptized as children, believers and children, taking their families with them to bring them into the church and so that they too can hear the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now this baptism falls on the same week as another, very important baptism. The baptism of Prince George. And I'm quite sure that the Duke and the Duchess of Cambridge didn't know that there'd be a baptism in Stornoway this week and arranged theirs to be at the same time. But in any case, their baptism, or should I say the baptism of Prince George, has attracted a huge amount of publicity, probably more publicity than our three babies here. But that doesn't make Prince George any more important than our three babies or any baby that is born in the world.

Wherever there's a baptism service, there's an extra amount of attention and a larger turnout and a special focus. And can I just say something before we begin? Because we've heard a lot about baptism in the last couple of weeks on the news. And once again, it doesn't matter how often you say this, people just don't get this, it's not a christening. There's no such thing as a christening. You don't find it in the Bible. I don't quite know how it came to be. I wouldn't know how to conduct a christening. I don't know what it is. I don't know what a christened baby is and a non-christened baby is. Most of all, the most important thing of all is that I don't see it anywhere in the Bible. Prince George was baptized this week. But then when the news come to, when the people in the news come to talk about it, they talk about his christening. And I sincerely hope, with all due respect, that you don't use that term because there is no such thing. Our babies here today will not be christened. They will be baptized. And I want to, nevertheless, I want us to try to understand today what we are doing.

And I want us to know what the focus of what we're doing is. I'm not going to give any theological argument in favor of infant baptism as opposed to adult baptism or why we sprinkle children instead of immersing. We've done all that before. I want us to be much simpler than that this morning. And I want us to recognize that baptism is a sign. All we're doing here is we're making a sign.

We're not, baptism itself doesn't change anything. The babies here this morning will be the same babies in half an hour's time when they are baptized as they were half an hour before. It doesn't change anything about them. It's a sign that symbolizes something. But like any sign, it's important to know what the sign means. Otherwise, you might as well not have the sign. If you're going down the road and you come across a road sign and you come across a no entry sign, it's important for you to know what that big red circle means. If you don't know what it means, then you'll drive straight on and probably meet with some disaster. It's important to know what the sign means. And that's what my aim is with you today. And I hope that as we do so, that we will not just be sympathetic or that we will not just come in the spirit of these families around whom we come today to pray for them, but that we will be challenged in ourselves as to where we stand in relation to the greatest news in the world. Because for Philip, this sign was all about the good news of Jesus. That's what was happening. And that's why

[5 : 40] I'm coming to this chapter here where we're going to meet with this man. We don't even know what his name was. He was a high-ranking official, a foreign dignitary who had come to Jerusalem in order to worship. He was on a journey. In fact, he was on two journeys. He was on a geographical journey. He'd already visited Jerusalem and he was making his way back to the country he had come from, which was Ethiopia. They didn't have sophisticated transport in those days. And so they had to travel by chariot, no doubt that his chariot was more luxurious than anyone else's. And it appears that like anyone going on a long journey as he was, he decided to take a book with him, just the same way as you would if you were going to Australia or America or anything like that. Long journey. And I can't imagine that it would have been very comfortable trying to read your book and trying, being sugared along and shaken around at the same time by a very uncomfortable chariot with not the best suspension in the world. And yet, somehow or other, he was able to read this book and this book had got to him to the point where he had said to his driver, I want you to stop where you are because I want to read this book again. And I can't read it properly. Maybe I'm mistaking something. Maybe I haven't read this right. Something about this book just really grabbed hold of him, much more so than any novel that you and I might read or any book that we might be interested in. This book was different from anything that he had ever read in his whole life.

This was something unique. He was reading a book that really got through to his very soul. And so he had to stop to tell his driver to stop so that he could, in the peace of the moment, he could sit and read these words again. And that was the moment when God said to Philip, the evangelist, go over and help this man to understand what he is reading. And he went and he started talking to him and he asked him what he was reading. And he said, here's what I'm reading, but I don't understand what it says. See, this man was not just on a physical journey. He was on a spiritual journey.

I wonder how many of us today are on a spiritual journey. Now I know, don't get me wrong, don't misunderstand what I'm trying to say, because it's quite trendy today to be on a spiritual journey.

But if you ask a lot of people what they mean by that, they mean, well, I like the mystery of this life. And I like to think that I'm discovering more and more of the mysteries and the questions and the unknown of this life and the universe and the world around us and what it's all about.

[8 : 33] And well, if that's the case, then you're not really getting anywhere because some people for the journey itself is enough for them. All they want to know is that they're on the journey. They don't want to actually get anywhere. You talk to them and you get the impression that the more lost, then the better, the more confused, then the better. That's the wrong kind of spiritual journey to be on. If I'm on a journey anywhere, I want to know where I'm going and I want to make sure that where I'm going is the right place. Don't you agree with me? Surely that makes sense. Like any journey, you don't just go out in the morning in your car and just, well, it doesn't matter where I'm going. Well, I'm sure you might want to do that on a nice day. That's not what I mean. I'm saying if you're going on a journey, your aim in that journey is not to get lost. Your aim is to get somewhere and to find the right thing. That's what I mean by a spiritual journey. That's the kind of journey I hope you're on today.

This man, his spiritual journey brought him to Jesus. And if your spiritual journey brings you to Jesus, then you're going in the right direction. I hope you get there. But if you're heading towards Jesus, then you're on the right, in the right direction. That's where this man was at. And he was trying to discover more and more about what his Bible was saying about Jesus. That's what I want us to do today, because baptism is not about the baby. Of course it is. It's the baby who's being baptized. But yet the sign, the mark, which is being placed on the, it points us to Jesus.

So that what I hope will happen today is that we will discover what Jesus is, just like this man, what Jesus came to do, why he came into the world, what he came to accomplish in this world. Then we will discover, perhaps even for the first time, what is so important about baptism and someone being baptized.

Now he had started, this man had started to read his Bible. This was the only Bible he had. It's what we call the Old Testament, Genesis to Malachi. That's the Bible he had. And that Bible had prophecies which were written 700 years before Jesus came into the world, and yet they predicted Jesus coming. Not only did they predict his coming into the world, but they prophesied that one day Jesus would suffer and die and rise again. I don't want us to do that today. That was his Bible. We could do that.

But what I want us to do is we are in the position where we're able to look back at Jesus, and I want our starting point to be this. Whenever I speak about Jesus, I want our starting point to be very simply this. Did you know that a real man who was dead, really and truly dead, came to life again? It's always where I start. Whenever I have the privilege of explaining the gospel to anyone, that's always where I start. Here is where the Christian faith is absolutely unique. You see, if I was looking for the truth today, that would be my question. There are plenty of religions in the world that are sincere. There are plenty of them that are well established and old, and they have their rules and their regulations and their rituals and their temples and their priests and everything else. You go all over the world, you'll find hundreds of different religions.

[12 : 31] But if I was wanting to know which one of these was the truth, I would be asking the question, do any of them, do any of them tell me the key to life and death? Has any of them overcome death itself? Because that to me is the greatest problem in mankind, isn't it? It's the final frontier. It's the irreversible. It's the dead end, isn't it? It's what nobody can change, not even the most clever individuals, the greatest scientists, the professors in this world. They cannot reverse death. And so for many people, perhaps you yourself today, religion is a bit of a marketplace. I suppose for many people it is. It's like when I was young. I used to go, I remember the very first time as a young boy, I went to Barrowland in Glasgow. I was brought up in Glasgow and I'd heard all about this place. One day I decided I was going to go by myself, take the bus into Glasgow and go to Barrowland.

And anybody's ever been in Barrowland, this is seriously a long time ago, this is 40 years ago, more than that. And Barrowland was the most fascinating, I don't know what it's like now, I've never been back. But Barrowland in those days was this massive marketplace.

You could buy pretty much anything. You walked in the door and you just went down this aisle, not just one aisle, but several aisles, half a dozen aisles, and there was market stall after market stall on both sides of you. And as you walked down the aisle, everyone was calling for your attention. They're all saying, hey, hey, come over here, look at my stuff. No, come over here, I've got something here. That's all they were there. And you had to, it was like walking the gauntlet, running the gauntlet, because you didn't want to be too interested because you knew that the patter would be so powerful. Before you knew it, you'd be ending up spending a lot of money. For many people, religion's a marketplace. Perhaps for you, it's a marketplace. Perhaps you're like I used to be there, and what you're looking, you're looking for something that is unique. Because for me, a lot of these stalls, most of them, perhaps even all of them, they were all the same, selling the same stuff. So you were looking for something unique. Is that where you are today? Are you looking? I believe there's loads of people in their hearts of hearts, and they're actually looking for something unique. And they've bought into the idea that they're never going to find it, and that all religions are the same.

Can I tell you this? No, they're not. Anyone who has any knowledge of religions will tell you that they are not all the same. And one of them, one, one voice stands out louder and clearer on his own, higher than anyone else. And that is the voice of Jesus Christ. And I'll tell you why.

Because he rose from the dead. I can take you to the grave. Well, I can't. I'm not allowed to. To the grave of Muhammad. And the reason the grave of Muhammad is so special to Islam is because it is the grave of Muhammad. His body is still there. After all these hundreds of years. Same with any other leader of any other religion. But today I can take you to Jerusalem and to the grave where they believe they put Jesus' body in. And it is empty. It has been empty ever since 2,000 years ago.

[16:07] He rose from the dead. Can I ask you, what does that mean to you? You've probably heard it so many times you think, well, I know all this. Can I ask you to stop for a moment? And to really give this, perhaps even the first time in your life. Who knows, maybe today will be the first step in a journey which will take you to discover what Jesus, oh, I hope so. I really want you to have what I have. Those of us who know him today, we want you to have what we have. Because this is so, it's not just fascinating. People think, oh, it's fascinating. It's not fascinating.

Jesus is not just fascinating. Jesus is absolutely essential for every single one of us. Now, let me ask you this. Here is what I said to you. Here is the statement. I've just made a statement.

A man, a human being, a real man, 33 years of age, died, was buried, and he became alive again. Now, what, on a scale of one to five, how important is that to you? Where five is most important and one is not very important. On a scale of one to five, how important is that to you?

Everything is interesting, isn't it? Historical facts are really interesting. Like, for example, if you ever discover why the Calanish stones were there, nobody seems to know. There's all these various theories about it being some kind of religious ritual site and the sun and all the rest of it. But nobody actually really knows. Supposing they discovered, supposing they discovered that this is what the Calanish stones were all about. Well, we'd all be fascinated, wouldn't we?

We'd all be reading it. It'd be in the Gazette. It'd be in Hebrides News. It'd be on the TV. It would be fantastic, wouldn't it? It'd be great. But on a scale of one to five, it has no bearing on my life. Absolutely nothing to do with me. This week, tonight, the whole of the south of England is going to be rocked by an almighty storm. That's what the whole of the south of England is having to discover this morning. Now, I can tell you there's not a single complacent person in the south of England.

[18 : 34] On a scale of one to five, it's five. Why? Because their houses are at stake. Their lives are at stake. Their well-being is at stake. Their safety, maybe even their lives. Who knows? I can guarantee you throughout the course of this day, there'll be people all over the south of England, and they'll be checking their houses and checking their sheds and making sure their garages are closed and making sure their cars are safely tucked inside and making sure that they're all safe. Why? Because this storm that is coming has a bearing on there. Now, let me ask you again. I'm telling you today that Jesus rose from the dead on a scale of one to five. How important is that? I'll tell you. For me, it's five.

It's got to be because it's the answer to the question that I'm looking for. Who has the key? Who has authority? Who can tell me the answer to life and death? You might say to me, ah, yeah, but religion is all about life after death. It's all about where your soul goes. But how do I know?

Do you know how I know? Because this one man, Jesus Christ, has come back to tell me and to promise me and to give me the assurance that he is the way and the truth and the life. That's why we're here today.

That's why the Christian church exists. It's because of Jesus to love him and because we have discovered that he has done what no one else has ever done. Now, at this point, I guess, the big question is, do I believe this or do I not? And if you're in the category of I don't know, then can I please invite you to go to the sources, to go to the book, to go to Matthew and to look and to acts that tell us what happened when the disciples went to the tomb and when they tried to anoint his body and they found that it wasn't there. Read it for yourself and ask yourself, are these the words of people who were deluded or people who were nuts or people who wanted to lie to the world? Are they or are they the words of people who were genuine as to what they were doing? They went on to meet the living Lord Jesus.

Now, what this means is this, that if Jesus has risen from the dead, just think about that for a moment.

[21 : 04] Let's say he did. Does it not change everything? Does it not make the difference to the direction of your life? How can anybody shrug their shoulders and just get on with life as if nothing had happened when you discover that that this man has risen from the dead?

So that's the first thing I want to put before you this morning. If you choose not to believe it, then you're back to the marketplace. I wish you well. But today I believe in all my heart, having read and having been convinced and convicted that this man, Jesus Christ, and the next question is, how can I explain the fact that he rose from the dead?

Well, there is only one explanation, isn't there? Because only God has the authority to give life back to any individual. God is on the throne. It's God who has placed us in this world in the first place.

You are what you are because God has made you what he has made you. That doesn't mean that he's responsible for all the wrongs in our lives, but he has made us the individual that we are. God knows the end from the beginning. He knows the day of our birth and he knows the day of our death.

It's determined for us. The Bible says it's appointed unto man once to die. But for this man, Jesus Christ, it was appointed unto him once to die and rise again, come back to life and to meet with his disciples.

[22 : 37] Now, that puts all the focus on Jesus, doesn't it? What was so special about this man that God chose to raise him from the dead once again? That's the whole question. That's the whole question because that gets us into the person of who Jesus was. Because when you read about him, you discover that his rising from the dead is the last of a long list of the most extraordinary events.

In which he was able to just touch someone and if that person was blind, the eyes were opened. He was able to touch someone and if they were crippled, they rose and they started walking again. He was able to touch someone who was deaf and that person would, their ears would be open. He changed water into wine and all of this was in the presence and in the company of witnesses. Sometimes tens, twenties, hundreds of people. He was the most extraordinary person that ever walked the face of the earth. Don't believe anyone that tells you that Jesus was just anything. There was no just about Jesus. He stands alone. He wasn't even the best of men. He was the only good man that ever walked the face of the earth, which separates him from everyone else. And it begs the question, how can you explain that this one individual had so much power and was so extraordinary and was just so unblameably good?

And the answer to that lies in who he was, God himself. How else can you explain who he was?

And if you take the questions even further, and I would encourage you to ask those questions, those very questions that I'm asking and think about them. Why did God have to come into this world?

Why did God choose to become a human being? Why did he choose to be born? There are plenty of times that God chose to speak to people. You find that in the Old Testament. If God wanted to, he could speak to any one of us. He could meet with us like he did with Saul of Tarsus or Abraham or Isaac or Jacob. He could do anything he wanted, but he chose. Well, it goes all the way back to the very beginning.

[25 : 16] To when God made the world a perfect place. And when our two first parents, Adam and Eve, were made perfect people, sinless, reflecting the glory and the majesty of God in their being. That's what we are supposed to reflect. That's what we are made for, to know and to enjoy God.

And yet when God set before them the challenge as to whether they would obey him or not, they chose to take a different course. I don't know how often you've read Genesis chapter 3. It's one of the most pivotal points. In fact, it's one of the few pivotal points in human history. It goes all the way back to the very beginning of human history to when one man and one woman, they were perfect. There was no sin. There was no tragedy or sickness or cruelty in the world. And all they had to do was to follow the course that God, I'm a bit of a geek by the way, when it comes to navigation. I don't know much about it, but I've just discovered some of those apps that you get for your iPhone that you can actually follow ships and planes. I find them absolutely fascinating. You press this button and you choose a ship. You can do it with the Isle of Lewis. And you find where the Isle of Lewis is. You home in on your map of the

Minch and you press the button and it shows you this is the Isle of Lewis and it's halfway across the Minch. But what it shows you is the line from which it came and there's a straight line from Stornoway to Ullapool and this ferry is right bang on this line and that's where it should be.

It's following the course. There's all kinds of computer-aided navigation systems that keeps it on the right track. That's the way it was at the very beginning with Adam and Eve. All God told them to do was keep on the course, follow the line. What did they choose to do? They chose to go in the opposite direction. And that moment was the moment when all the awfulness came into this world.

The darkness, the fear, the sickness, the tragedy, the accidents, the natural disasters, the cruelty, the abuse, the war, the hatred and all that has made men and women so miserable in this world. You know fine well, don't you, as well as I do, that this world is both a great place and it's an awful place. That right now great things are happening in the world, happy things, wonderful things and at the same time there is a most unspeakable pain and suffering. People dying, screaming in agony.

[28 : 16] Why is it? How can you explain both? I believe that only the Bible explains both to us. And that's when our first forefathers, when they chose that tragic, when they made that tragic choice to go the opposite way from the way that God had commanded them to do, that's the moment when they brought sin and death and condemnation. And you don't need to point the finger at anyone else. It lies within every single one of us. We all stand condemned before God. And what's more, we're not only condemned in this world, we're condemned one day at the end of time. The Bible says we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. It says the wages of sin is death. Now, here's the bit. Please listen to this.

What did God do about it? What did he do? What did he do about a world that had gone the opposite to the way he wanted it to go? What did he do about a world that had brought in such disaster and guilt and condemnation? He could have written it off. But he chose to do the opposite.

He chose to himself become a human being. And he chose to enter into our world by being born as a little, tiny, helpless human being. And he did that for one reason. So that, having grown up, he would die for this world and for our sin. His death was necessary. He was born, born to die in order to die. He told his disciples. He told his friends, ages before he was arrested and when he was killed, that he was going to Jerusalem and that there he was going to be captured and he was going to be arrested and they were going to nail him to a Roman cross.

And three days later, he was going to rise again. It had to happen because on that cross, as he hung and as he suffered the pain and the agony of the cross, he suffered the anger and the condemnation of God that we should have had.

And God accepted his suffering and his death instead of my punishment.

[31 : 05] And because the work that he set out to do became finished when he died on the cross, he completed that work. He completed that work of atonement and sacrifice. He died instead of us.

God said, rise again. He put life back into his body and he rose again on the third day. And that's why Jesus is at the very heart of what we're doing today.

And that's why he deserves your adoration, your worship, your life, your faith.

I don't believe the Christian faith is a figment of anyone's imagination. I believe that the Christian faith, you can go back, you can read the facts for themselves, you put it all together and you know what?

You come up with the greatest story, the greatest fact, the greatest truth that anyone can ever discover. That's what made the difference to this man.

[32 : 17] And when he discovered when the penny dropped and when he all of a sudden got it, he had started getting it when he was reading his Bible. And as Philip explained it all to him, much better than I've explained it to you.

He said, well, that's it. What else is there? How can you stop me from becoming a Christian? I want to follow Jesus. I want his forgiveness.

I want the new life that he can give me through his death on the cross. And Jesus, 2,000 years later, offers you and I that same life and forgiveness, that eternal life that he died to give us.

And with this, I close. Perhaps there are some of you this morning who are saying, well, how can I have this new life? Well, you remember on that one occasion, as we read before, there was the mothers bringing their children to Jesus.

And of course, that's what the parents here are doing. They're bringing their children to Jesus. I hope that they will continue to do so. I hope that what they do here will be a mark of an ongoing commitment.

[33 : 35] Otherwise, it's meaningless. Baptism is meaningless if there is no wholehearted commitment on the part of parents towards their children. It's meaningless as a congregation if we don't pray for those children who we're going to baptize in a few moments' time.

But look at what Jesus said. After he had blessed them, he said this. He said, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child shall not enter it.

I believe that this is why hundreds, thousands of people have refused to follow Jesus. It's not because there's no logic in the gospel. It is because they simply refuse to become little children.

A little child is someone who is helpless. Who is utterly, completely, 100% dependent on their parent.

These little babies, they're incapable of doing anything except making a noise sometimes. That's the way we're to be.

[34 : 44] As we come to God in faith. That's what God demands. He demands our complete surrender. May he speak to each one of us this morning.

And may this baptism service be that moment in our real spiritual journey in which we know where we're going. And indeed, in which we get to Jesus.

Let's pray together. We'll stand and pray.