

Week 10: Acts 8:26-40
Following the Work of the Spirit

What's up, everyone. Today's a big day - we're on our last week of Acts for a bit. We're gonna take a break in the summer to hit up some other things that I'm pretty excited about - but for now let's get it. If you have a Bible we're going to be in **Acts 8:26-40**.

I'll just go ahead and let you know as you're turning there - this is a crazy story. And it seems like in previous weeks and sermons we've highlighted some pretty wild events - from the Holy Spirit descending on people like fire, to people talking in different languages all of a sudden, to people being healed, this one is another radical account of how the Jesus movement gets started and what we can learn from it.

Last week we talked about the first-ever Christian martyr, Stephen in **Acts 6-7**. At that point in the story, the early church is only in Jerusalem but then when Stephen dies, a bunch of people flee from the city in fear of their lives. Which, if you're reading Acts for the first time it almost sounds like a hiccup in the story. Like, "Oh no how is the early church going to advance is everyone is scattered now in Samaria and Judea?" And yet, what we're gonna see is that this is all part of God's plan. If you recall from week 1 of our series, remember what Jesus says to His disciples before He leaves -

Acts 1:8

...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

It's not just a command, it's a promise. This is going to happen no matter what. And when suffering and persecution happens, and y'all scatter, it's all part of the plan for you to be witnesses wherever you go.

So we pick up on the story in verse 26:

Acts 8:26-27

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. **27** And he rose and went

Now to fill in the details a bit. Philip is one of the deacons we saw raised up in Acts 6. And he's one of the many folks who leave Jerusalem to go to Samaria and continue being faithful witnesses to Jesus. No matter what happens, he knows what he's called to do - yo, I'm in Jerusalem so I'm gonna tell people about Jesus. Ok, I'm in Samaria now, so I'm gonna tell people about Jesus.

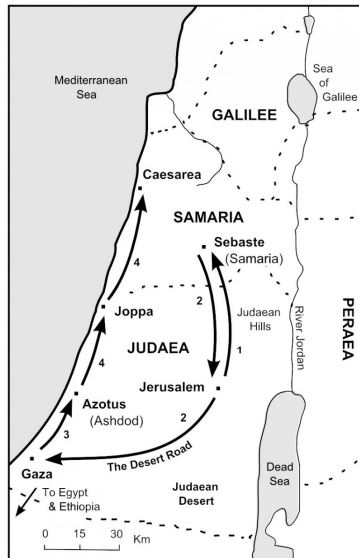
It's also important to note - Philip is not one of the original 12 apostles. He didn't roll with the OG crew. He's an ordinary guy who comes to faith in Jesus through people witnessing to him.

So he's out witnessing for Jesus and out of nowhere, an angel shows up. No real explanation other than he gives Philip some instructions to go to this road leaving Jerusalem on the way to Gaza, and the author wants to make really clear to the reader - this is a desert place. Nothing really poppin or exciting there. It's about 60 miles worth of road. It's worth noting here too that this place on the way to Gaza is not a very

Jewish/Christian friendly territory either. This is a place where a lot of Philistines live, which for those of you who know their Bibles, the Philistines do not like people from Jerusalem.

To help us grasp just how out of the way it is, I've got two images for us:

First, I've got a map. [Explain]



The second image is more just to put this into modern terms for us. About 60 miles from Columbia, I don't know if you've been on 95 you'll notice a run-down haunted-looking place called South of the Border.



Now that image doesn't do it justice, but when you're driving and you cross that exit there's this sense of, "Wow I'm really in the middle of nowhere now, huh?" Fwiw, as someone of Mexican descent, let me just say - South of the Border - not that accurate.

All this to say, this place the angel calls Philip to is no small task. This is incredibly out of the way. It's dangerous territory with dangerous people in the middle of nowhere. And yet - Philip is quick to say "Hey, God wherever you lead me, I'm all in."

And so in the next verse, we see Philip on that road - some time has elapsed in between these two verses and now he finds himself in this place. And check out what he sees:

Acts 8:27-28

And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship **28** and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

So Philip's been traveling on foot for days and days on end now and he sees this guy pulled over on the side of the road. And a couple of details to note of this man:

1 - We're told **he's an Ethiopian**, meaning he is not ethnically Jewish. He was likely a part of the Ancient Nubian Kingdom of East Africa. Just to spell that out for us really quick - this means he is African and black. And the reason I want to highlight that point before moving on is, over the course of 200 years in American Christianity there have been times when the Church has been complicit in the racism and mistreatment of people of color - AND YET - if you just read your Bibles you notice that the Gospel doesn't go first to white Europeans, it goes from Middle Eastern brown Jewish people to black Africans. And it is absolutely beautiful. God here is fulfilling his promises to draw the nations to Himself. Heaven will be filled with redeemed image-bearers from all walks of life, all skin colors, all languages - this is the family that God is drawing to Himself

2 - The second detail I want to draw out is that **this man is a eunuch**. Which, to keep in PG in here, basically means the man has undergone a particular surgery to where he can't have children. And this was likely done to him given his position as the head of the queen's treasury. Typically in ancient near Eastern cultures, if a man was to serve the queen of a particular nation, he was to become a eunuch to ensure no sexual promiscuity would happen between him and the queen.

And so you have this interesting **dichotomy** here - he holds this high position of honor and authority of this kingdom and at the same time because he is a eunuch he's considered marginalized by the Jewish people. The Old Testament makes it really clear that anyone with any physical deformity whether born or done to them - they're not allowed to enter into the temple of God to worship.

He's both an insider and an outsider. With lots of fame and power and wealth. And at the same time, he's physically broken, he lives in this sexual gray area, he's not allowed in certain religious settings and places.

And yet, if you look with me back at v.27, what's it say:

Acts 8:27

He had come to Jerusalem to worship

So we see this man had just left the city. And because he was a eunuch, the doors were quite literally shut for him. On the outside looking in. He doesn't look like everyone else. He doesn't have the same status as everyone else.

And what we see here in this passage is that this guy is searching for something.

He had come to Jerusalem to worship **28** and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

He's reading his Bible on the side of the road. Feeling perhaps rejected and alone. Hearing that the God of the Bible is full of love and grace only to find out that he's not welcomed into the house of God. Maybe he's frustrated by the situation, maybe he's embarrassed at himself - to have traveled so far to Jerusalem only to be turned away. But even in spite of that, this man has not fully given up hope. He's reading the book of Isaiah and he's looking for answers. He's trying to figure it out.

And in the midst of his longing and his searching, look at v.29:

Acts 8:29-30

And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." **30** So Philip ran to him

Which, pause, don't you love that detail? Philip's been walking for who knows how long, sees this chariot and the Spirit gives him a little nudge and says "Hey psst..see that guy? Go over there." And Philip just bolts.

and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

Now again, I'm one for humor. But imagine the Ethiopian reading out loud alone in his chariot. And then behind his shoulder comes Philip, "Oh hey, whatcha got there?"

[Which side note, I know I'm being silly with that, but for real for this series in Acts we've really been pushing for being witnesses and I've personally found that a great way to start a conversation with a stranger at a coffee shop or wherever is sometimes to just simply ask, "Hey whatcha readin?" And go from there. It could be they tell you and their body language doesn't wanna talk - but more often than not, I've found people like talking about what they're reading. And extra points, if they're reading the Bible - you can be like, Oh that's a good book, you get to the ending yet? It's nuts.]

Anyways back to the text. Philip asks "Do you know what you're reading?" The eunuch replies in v.31:

Acts 8:31-33

And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. **32** Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter

and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he opens not his mouth.
33 In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.”

Alright now, this is coming straight out of Isaiah 53 - this was written some 800 years before Jesus was born, and is sometimes called the Suffering Servant passage. The text describes a man who will be humiliated, who is mutilated, who is an outcast, and an outsider.

Now we aren't told explicitly about why this man is drawn to this passage in Isaiah but based on everything we know about the eunuch I think we can infer why. Perhaps this Ethiopian man sees something in this character in Isaiah that he can relate to. Perhaps, in his search for God, he finds a friend like the Suffering Servant and is curious as to who this could possibly be about, and if this Suffering Servant might give him any hope.

Acts 8:34-35

And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” **35** Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.

Now talk about something being set on a tee for you. God says, “Hey go talk to this guy.” And it turns out he's reading his Bible. And you say, “Hey that's a good book, do you know what that's about?” And he says, “Sure don't. Can you help me?”

Ooo baby. Talk about a slam dunk.

And Philip seizes the moment and shares with the Ethiopian how Jesus is the one whom Isaiah was writing about. How Jesus is the Suffering Servant. Jesus is the one who was mutilated on the Cross for sin. Jesus is the one who was left abandoned and alone. Jesus is the one who was ultimately rejected...but it's through His death and resurrection He is now victorious overall and is inviting now everyone - no matter what they've done, or what they've been through - can be a part of what God is doing. Where the outcast is brought into the fold. The rejected are drawn into the family of God. Jesus the Suffering Servant is the victorious king who is for all people.

Acts 8:36-38

And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” **38** And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.

So we can infer this man becomes a Christian right then and there! Philip and the eunuch see a stream of water and he gets dunked. Keep reading:

Acts 8:39

And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away,

This again, is another odd detail in the story. Because it sounds like, Philip just teleported out of there. And we have no other mention of that in the New Testament ever again. I know we just saw someone baptize someone else this morning and no one got teleported so, not a normal thing that happens here. And then I love this detail:

and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

So the eunuch sees Philip go zap, shrugs it off, and goes about his day.

Acts 8:40

But Philip found himself at Azotus, (which was up the road the other direction) and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

He just keeps telling people about Jesus wherever he finds himself.

Now like I said at the beginning, this is a wild story. And there's a number of things we can talk about, but I wanna draw our attention to two things this morning:

1 - The providential love of God.

One thing that just jumps off the page to me is how much God loves this Ethiopian man - that God goes to extreme lengths to make sure he hears about Jesus.

How God specifically calls out Philip to leave his fruitful ministry in another place entirely to go out of his way to this inconvenient place just for him.

Not to mention the fact, that this Ethiopian somewhere along the way in his life had told him about the God of the Bible. He was searching in the Scriptures which means someone would have told him about Jerusalem and the God of the Jews to set him on this path - and that is by no means an accident, but it's all part of God's providential love to seek out those who are far from him.

I'm reminded of Luke 15, the parable of the lost sheep -

Luke 15:4-5

“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.

This is exactly what Jesus is doing here in Acts 8. Going out of his way, through His people, leaving the 99 to find even the lost one.

At this point in the story of Acts, we're seeing lots of things happening with the crowds. Literally, thousands upon thousands put their faith in Jesus. Small groups meet in homes left and right. And that's great, and God loves the crowds and the numbers for sure, AND God also loves each individual person and face that gets drawn in, and the Kingdom of God grows one person at a time and God rejoices in Heaven over each and every one.

And if that's true and God loves even the one, that means He loves you too and God has gone to great lengths to make sure you know and hear about His unending love for you. That in the hands of God's providential love, it is no accident that you are here this morning. Maybe you were excited to get here this morning or maybe you were dragged out of bed. Maybe you had second thoughts about coming this morning. Maybe you were invited by a friend, or maybe based on the last week or weekend you had you came in this morning feeling exhausted, worn out, and tired.

And God through His providential love wants to tell you this morning that you are loved. No matter what. You are loved by the King and He is calling you to live in His Kingdom and that there's no one too far away from Him or too much of an outsider to experience what it means to be a part of the family of God.

In fact, I would argue, this is why the details of the Ethiopian matter. Because in a lot of ways, the Ethiopian is a lot like many of us. He's sexually broken. He's marginalized. He's successful but empty on the inside. He's searching. He's longing for hope.

And if this is how God loves the Ethiopian then this is also how He loves you. Just like God orchestrated all these things so that this man might come to know Him, God in many ways is doing the same for you:

- And if you're here and you're a follower of Jesus, maybe you've never thought of that before but consider all the variables that led you to become a Christian. It may have happened through ordinary means but behind it, all was God's loving hand working through all the seemingly insignificant details so that you might be drawn in.
- And if you're here and you're not yet a follower of Jesus, just so you know, this is who God is and this is what He does

The second thing to draw out from this passage is...

2 - The way that love reached him.

Now I know that seems obvious but notice the way God reached the Ethiopian..it was through Phillip. Philip was not an apostle, or anyone with a big platform or anything. He had God's Spirit, and was simply faithful and asking where God might be leading him. And that's it.

To be a witness for Jesus does not mean you need to have this big platform, or all this knowledge, or experience, or anything like that. To be a witness means we are simply faithful and attentive to where the Spirit might be leading us day in and day out. Because more often than not, our daily ordinary faithfulness is the means by which God reaches out to tell people to talk about His love for them.

And God could have done it literally any other way. He could have sent an angel to the Ethiopian eunuch to tell him about Jesus...but He didn't. He chose Philip to do that work because God's people are God's Plan A to tell others about Him.

And if you're a follower of Jesus that automatically means you are a missionary. And being a missionary is not just reserved for those who go overseas or plant churches, it's for all of us. And through God's Spirit, all of us are now commissioned by the Spirit - wherever you go, wherever you are, whoever you're with, to make the love of God known.

And while I don't know the particulars of your life, I do know with full confidence that God's will for your life is to reach others with His love. I've got verses. There are people in your life even right now that God has put in front of you that God loves and He's placed you there so that others may hear the good news of Jesus.

The question is though, are we like Philip with ears ready to listen to the Spirit? Do we have the eyes to see opportunities that God might be putting in front of us right now? Do we have the expectation that whether you show up in LifeGroup or at a Sunday Gathering or at work throughout the week or with your kids day in and day-out that God wants to use you to make Him known?

And I'm not saying that every morning when you wake up, the Holy Spirit is going to talk directly to you and say "You should talk to person [fill in the blank]," it could happen, in which case great, but that's not the normative picture we see happening in Acts. What often happens is God uses our everyday faithfulness in our everyday circumstances and gives us those moments to make God's love known to others...

And I would argue the thing that keeps most of us from being faithful missionaries is a lack of seeing the work of the Spirit in us and around us. Maybe we're just caught up with the distractions of daily life, or perhaps the monotony of work at times, or whatever that we might actually miss out on some miraculous things that God has set before us if only we had the attentiveness to just look and pay attention.

So the question remains, do we have the eyes to see it?

Are we expectant? Are we hopeful? Are we confident God is putting such opportunities our way? Because it may be getting into conversations that you didn't expect or being sent to places you didn't think you'd find yourself in like Philip, but this is the call. This is what it means to be a missionary. We take the eyes off ourselves so we can get our eyes onto seeing what the Spirit might wanna do in us and through us.

And so I'd encourage you as a quick practical way to get this into our thinking. I'd invite you to pray each morning this week to be attentive to the Spirit. Pray and ask, "God how might you use me to make your love known to others whoever that is and wherever they are?" [To make it really simple, on this week's sermon page we have a guided prayer that even if you don't know what to pray, you can read that prayer out loud to help yourself get into that posture.]

Because the thing is...everyone ultimately is searching for God whether they know it or not. Everyone is searching for something to hope in, something to worship, something to restore them to wholeness and joy ... and underneath every desire, every decision, every struggle, and pain, is the search ultimately to ultimately be fully loved and known by God.

And I cannot say for certain that the Ethiopian read this portion of Scripture, but I can't help but think it's highly likely that at some point in his journey through Isaiah's scroll he hit this portion that comes a little later in the same passage he was reading...

Isaiah 56:3-5

Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people"; and let not the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." For thus says the LORD: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

Can you just imagine what might be running through His mind if he stumbled across those verses? Could this actually be true? Could this promise be for me? Could healing and wholeness and something beyond all my lost hopes and dreams actually become true? Can this hope be real?

And for the record, this is the question underneath all the other ones that the world around us is asking. Is there hope for me? Is there rescue? Is there the promise of something more, something that will satisfy me, give me peace, make me whole?

And the answer to that question is YES. That is Philip's response to the Eunuch and that is the response for you and I and the whole world, too - yes, it can and it *is* through Jesus.