

Acts 8:26-40

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[0 : 00] Acts chapter 8 and verse 29. The Spirit, the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Spirit, told Philip, go to that chariot and stay near it.

Then Philip ran to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. Do you understand what you are reading? Philip asked. How can I? He said, unless someone explains it to me.

So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. There is every reason why Christians in every generation and every century need to rediscover the Acts of the Apostle.

Well, the same can be said, of course, for the whole Bible. But in every century, we need to go back time and again to rediscover the events that took place in the Acts of the Apostles.

Because they were the continuation of Jesus' ministry after he rose from the dead and ascended back to heaven to sit at the Father's right hand.

[1 : 19] That was not the end of the story. The church, the New Testament church, came into being the day of Pentecost. And they were tasked to go out into the world and to preach the gospel.

And as they did so, men and women and boys and girls believed. That's how the Christian faith began. It spread. And it did not stop.

And it hasn't stopped 2,000 years later. There's every reason why, for our own encouragement, we go back to the book of Acts as we're going to do this evening. But there's a wrong way of doing it and a right way of doing it.

The wrong way of reading the book of the Acts of the Apostles is to say, oh, I wish God would do the same things again today. I wish God would act in exactly the same way that he acted in the Acts of the Apostles.

And then you become obsessed with that. And you try to figure out, well, why is God not doing exactly the same thing as he did in the Acts of the Apostles? And you come to the conclusion, well, we must be doing something wrong.

[2 : 25] We've got to put right what we're doing wrong in order to win the favor of God. And so God will do the same thing again. You end up beating yourself up if you do that. The right way of reading the book of the Acts of the Apostles is to take our encouragement from the way that God began the New Testament church and to believe with all our heart that the same God who anointed his church, who filled his church on the day of Pentecost and sent them out into the world is the same God who fills us today.

We have no reason to think that he has abandoned us. I know that we deserve it. At least I do. He has not abandoned us. He has promised to be with us. What did Jesus say?

Lo, I am with you always, always, even unto the end of the world. Now, that always has no time limit.

It means 2,000 years later. It means in every place and location, including Bonacord, including whatever congregation, your church, you come from or represent, Jesus promised, Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.

And that's the reason why I want to go back to the book of the Acts of the Apostles tonight. Because actually, it's not about the apostles. Well, it is.

[3 : 53] They are the characters. They are the players. But the real character, the real center is God.

Just like he is all over the Bible, the real center of the Bible is God. So, we're asking tonight, what do we learn about God in this passage?

That's a question, by the way, you should ask every time you read the Bible. What does this chapter tell me about God? And so, I'm going to take that kind of line of reasoning.

What does this chapter tell me? How does it draw me? How does it reveal God to me? And how does it draw me into a better and a closer and a richer experience and relationship with God? And, you know, God, have you ever asked this question? Have you ever asked the question, why does God make himself known to us in what he does?

[4 : 59] Instead of giving us an incredibly complicated description of himself, which he could do if he chose to, he doesn't do that. He tells us, this is what I'm like.

I'm going to tell you what I'm like in what I have done. And that is the history of God's people. The history of God's people is God telling us what he is like in what he has done.

So, we get to find out about God in a chapter like this. It's all about God. It's all about the Spirit moving and speaking and guiding and convicting and drawing a man to himself.

That's what God is like. God is the great Savior. His purpose, his plan, his desire is to rescue people from darkness and guilt and condemnation and bring them into the light of his gospel.

So, we get to find out about God from this chapter. It's not really primarily about Philip. It's about God and his purpose. This man is transformed.

[6 : 08] He goes away rejoicing because his heart has been turned around. He's a new person. He's been raised from death to life. He's never going to be the same again.

He's going to go back to his own country, a new person. People are going to say to him, what's happened to you when you were away in Jerusalem? Something radical. This is not the Ethiopian eunuch that we knew.

This guy is completely changed. The only answer, the only solution, the only reason that that has happened is because God has worked in this man's life and he has totally, inwardly transformed him.

And that's what God is like. And that's the God we worship this evening. And that's the same God who can transform you if you haven't met him and if you haven't come to faith in Jesus.

I hope you do. I really hope you do. I hope this is an opportunity for you to discover, perhaps even for the first time, what Jesus has done in his death on the cross.

[7 : 20] But nonetheless, God works through individual means, ordinary means, and principally he works through people like Philip.

And what Philip is doing is what I'm going to call, I'm going to use a word that we all think we know, but perhaps we need to be reminded of that, the meaning of that word.

And the word is ministry. Ministry. Now, over the course, God willing, of the next few months, you as a church are going to have to think very long and hard about ministry.

But I don't want to confine it this evening to the man who stands in the pulpit preaching. I want us to be reminded that ministry belongs to all of us.

It may not be preaching ministry, but all of us who follow Jesus have a ministry. We have a responsibility. God has given us a task to carry out.

[8 : 22] And here is a brilliant example of that in Acts chapter 8. Here is God at work through ordinary means, ordinary excellence, an ordinary conversation.

Just like, you remember the conversation that Jesus had. This reminds me so much of the conversation that Jesus had in John chapter 4. with the woman at the well.

That woman, that isolated woman who had all kinds of relationship issues and clearly was marginalized and isolated by her community, having to come out for a drink of water by herself.

When she meets Jesus, her life is transformed through one conversation with Jesus. Here is another conversation. And Jesus is at the heart of this conversation.

And the man is transformed. He goes away a different person. God can do the same thing in 2019 as we come to the end of 2019 and 2020.

[9 : 21] So I am going to ask some questions. I am going to try and try and very quickly, because I promise I won't be long this evening. I promise I'm going to keep my promise and not keep you too long this evening, because I am full of sympathy with anyone who's been on a weekend away.

I remember these days very, very well. Number one, ministry is Spirit-led. Ministry is led by the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit told Philip. The whole of the book of Acts is the leading and the guiding of the Holy Spirit. Spirit, we have to remember, we're reminded right now that God is three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And the work of the Holy Spirit was to be poured out. He was to come down in Acts chapter 2 on the church and to inaugurate, to anoint the fledgling apostolic church that we're meeting in Acts chapter 2 all together in one place and to fill them with power.

The power to go out into the world and to spread the gospel. And in many ways, that sets the scene for the whole of the rest of the book, and it sets the scene for 2,000 years to come.

[10:35] The Holy Spirit's work is to accompany us. He's to dwell with, and by the way, don't ever call the Holy Spirit it.

Holy Spirit is not it. Holy Spirit is he. He is a person in the Godhead, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. Whenever we pray, we need to think Trinitarian.

We're not just praying to Jesus. We're not just praying to the Father. We're praying to the triune God, the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Now, here we get a glimpse of the Holy Spirit's work, which is to dwell within all of God's people and to enlighten them, to educate them, to lead them, and to guide them, to nurture them gently and lovingly in the Christian life, and to give them the power and the wherewithal and the skills to be able to spread the gospel.

So the Holy Spirit is leading and guiding, and you don't know what he's going to do. One of the fascinating things about the book of Acts, I often wonder, I'm one of these people who was brought up with a Bible, so I can't remember not having read the Bible.

I often wonder, if I was to have a memory blank, if my memory was to be erased, God forbid, but if my memory was to be erased, and I was to read the Bible for the first time, what would I make of it, not knowing how the story is going to end?

[12:07] I think I would be fascinated by Acts. I think I'd be so fascinated, I'd be so consumed, but I would never be able to put it down, because I would never know what was going to happen next, and that's the way that God works.

You don't know what he's going to do next. You don't know who he's going to target next. You don't know where he's going to send people next.

You don't know what people group are going to hear the gospel next. But you do know this, that his objective is to bring people to Jesus.

It's always the objective. So you don't know anything about this man. We're not given any information about him, apart from a little bit of information, like, for example, that he was an important official in charge of all the treasury, verse 27, of Candace, Queen of the...

So we get to find out who the Queen of the Ethiopians was, and we get to find out that this man happens to have been charged. He was the chancellor, I guess we would call him, the treasurer, which I guess was a really important job, requiring honesty and integrity and all the rest of it, and he would be like the occupant of number 10, the chancellor of the Exchequer, in today's UK terms.

[13:25] So, yeah, a pretty important guy, a pretty important person, as far as Ethiopia was concerned. But that's it. We don't know his name.

We don't know what his background was. We only know that he came up to Jerusalem. Now, some people have all these stories about, all these theories about, well, this man must have traced his ancestry back to the Queen of Sheba, who apparently came from Ethiopia.

So this was maybe a descendant of the Queen, or something like that, or something associated with him. Maybe in her entourage, as she went back to Ethiopia, she took Jews with her and all the rest of it. It could have been, but we don't know.

And I love the fact that we don't know. God's not going to tell us. We don't need to know. Just like we don't know much about the woman at the well.

God is so focused. He's not concerned with what to us might be interesting information, but is actually trivial when it comes to the main issue, which is this man needs to be saved.

[14:38] And God has a purpose for this man, and he's going to be saved. He's going to be transformed. And that's the way the Spirit does it. So he works in ways that you just don't expect him to.

So God is the God of surprises. And that's what my experience has been in the Christian life.

I could never predict from one year to the next what God was going to do in my life. And I suggest you don't even try. If you are open to the leading and the guiding of God, the Holy Spirit, then be prepared for surprises.

You don't know where you're going to be in 10 years' time. You don't know how God is going to lead. And sometimes that can lead to hardship, because that might be God's will.

Sometimes God has suffering for his people. You think of the many, many people in the world right now who are Christians, who are actually suffering hardship and persecution and even death, torture in some cases, because they are Christians, because they have been open to the guidance of God.

[15 : 59] So while I say that God is a God of surprises, it's not always pleasant surprise. What is it Paul says to Timothy?

Join with me in suffering. It might be that. And suffering, of course, takes many forms. We don't know what God is going to do.

That's so apparent in the previous chapter when Stephen, one of the first deacons, he is put on trial for his faith, and he's condemned.

And it appears as if the opposition to the Christian faith has won the day. They are triumphant. They get to put Stephen to death, and you have to watch as this man is taken out of the courtroom, and he's placed in front of them all, and they throw rocks at him until he dies.

And you think for all the world, this is not going well for the church. Except at the very end of the chapter, where there is this caveat that God just slips in, and God says, they laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

[17 : 28] By the way. That, by the way, is not by the way at all, because that very man Saul is himself converted on the road to Damascus, and he becomes the apostle Paul, who, of course, is responsible for the gospel being taken into many parts of the world.

So God is full of surprise. You don't know what he's doing. We saw that this morning in Pharaoh. While Pharaoh thought that he was triumphant and irresistible, we saw that God is working under his very nose, in secret, under the radar, bringing his own plan to pass.

So ministry is spirit-led. Are you prepared to say tonight, here I am, Lord, send me. Here I am, Lord. Are you prepared not just tonight, but every day? Here I am, Lord, send me. And that brings me on to the second thing I wanted to say, which was that ministry is obedience to the voice of God.

Ministry is obedience to the voice of God. You know, in the background, there's a kind of a two-way communication going on here between Philip and God, where God is simply telling him one step at a time what to do, where to go, what to say.

[18 : 59] And he's not telling him anything about the future and what's going to happen and what the result is going to be. He's just saying, look, here's what I want you to do, and all I'm telling you is what I want you to do now.

I don't, you're not going to get to know what you're going to do tomorrow, but here's what to do now. Go to that chariot and stay near it. So Philip goes to the chariot.

All along, Philip is obedient. And it is through that obedience that God works. And it is through our obedience because that's what the new life in Jesus Christ is all about.

It's a life that has been brought into subjection to God. We have been made his slaves, his children. We have been made subservient to his word because we love his word and we love obedience to his word. The kind of obedience that Jesus expects from us is not slavish obedience.

[20 : 10] It's not like tyrannical obedience. It is loving service to Jesus, but it is service nonetheless.

So here is God and he's saying to people, he's not telling him what's going to happen, and he's saying, here is the step I want you to take. And he simply, his job is simply to take that step. And you notice this, that that obedience means him being taken from one place of service to another.

Now, what I mean by that is if you read back into chapter eight, Philip starts off in a very, very different place. He goes to Samaria. And when he goes to Samaria, he begins to preach to the people and hundreds of people come to listen to him.

There's great crowds of people who are converted and transformed by the gospel. And God does great things in that place. And then in a moment of time, God says to Philip, right, I want you to go somewhere else.

[21 : 20] And this place is going to be entirely different. Instead of preaching to thousands of people, I want you to preach to one man. I want you to just help him understand the book of Isaiah.

Now, that's not very, that's not very big, is it? It's not very demanding, you wouldn't think. It's not a, it's not a, we talk about big ministries and small ministries.

We are wrong if that's the way you think. There's no such thing as a big or a small ministry. Every ministry is important in the eyes of God.

And here is God saying, I'm finished with you in this location. I want you to go to another location. And I'm not going to tell you what I'm going to do in that other location. You just need to be obedient.

You just listen to your next instruction. And I'm going to give you that instruction. So he does every step of the way. That's all God asks of us. Are you obedient to the immediate voice of God?

[22 : 23] Of course, the first thing that God asks of all of us is to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And as he transforms our lives, he brings us into a willingness to obey him and a delight in obeying him.

God does not expect us to do anything reluctantly. He makes us a willing people in his day of power.

But you notice that all thirdly, ministry is word-centered. The task that God gave to Philip was to go and explain to this Ethiopian what the meaning of this Old Testament passage was.

And of course, you know the Old Testament passage. We read it. It's Isaiah 53. He was led like a sheep to the slaughter as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation, he was deprived of justice.

Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth. Now note this. In order to be prepared to do what God asked of Philip, Philip himself had to know what that word meant.

[23 : 41] So it meant that the word had to dwell in Philip's heart, first and foremost, otherwise he wouldn't know what he was talking about. And he would, instead of explaining this chapter to the Ethiopian eunuch, who knows how far astray he would have led him.

So it was important that Philip be a man of the word, which means that Colossians chapter 3, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.

That means you. It means all of us. It doesn't just mean me. It means you. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.

Which means that the word has to be, the Bible has to be, the central feature of our living for Jesus. How central is the Bible in your everyday life?

How much time do you have for it? I don't mean just reading a verse here and there. Are you determined to get to grips with the Bible? To get an understanding of what it means, of its story, of its depth, of its richness, of the center of the Bible, who is, of course, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[25 : 03] Do you understand? As much as we're able to, do you want to understand? That's how Philip, that's the only way that Philip could be prepared to be able to share the Bible with others.

Not good enough to go to somebody who you're witnessing to and say, well, Jesus loves you. That's not good enough. That's not the gospel. The gospel is much richer and deeper and more profound than a one-liner.

Here is a rational, deep, profound explanation that Philip gave him. And we can never do that unless the Bible dwells within us richly, unless we are prepared for that opportunity.

But, of course, the word that the Ethiopian eunuch was reading was Christ-centered. It was about Jesus. It was the prophecy that was made 700 years before, quite apart from the fact that how fascinating it is that Isaiah could predict and prophesy with such pinpoint accuracy the sufferings of Jesus 700 years beforehand.

It's not surprising that when this man read, he was led like a sheep to this. What does this mean? Who's the he? Who's this mysterious person?

[26 : 33] The man didn't have a clue, but there was something about this passage he was reading that just compelled him. He couldn't let it go. He couldn't put it down. He had to know who it was because there was a power in the word itself.

There is a power in the word. That's why I would never hesitate to give somebody a Bible, somebody who wasn't a Christian. Don't ever hesitate in doing that. You say, well, are they going to understand?

It doesn't matter. The Bible speaks for itself. The Bible has its own authority. And it was because of that authority that something got to this.

It was like nothing you'd ever read before. It was just speaking to him personally. He didn't know quite what it was. The pieces had to be put together. Of course, that's why Philip was sent, to put the pieces together.

Yet the word spoke to him with such an authority that just got right through into his heart. He knew that there was a power in this that he could never, he couldn't, he couldn't get over.

[27 : 47] And the person who he was reading about was none other than Jesus. Because that is what the Bible is all about. It's what the Old Testament points to.

It's what the New Testament points back to. The Son of God who came into the world. The Bible is all about his death, which is what the man is reading.

In Isaiah, here's an account written 700 years beforehand that describes the death of Jesus. Why is that so important to the man's salvation?

Because without it, there is no salvation. This is the gospel. The gospel is about what God did in sending Jesus, the second person of the Godhead, into the world.

And so doing him, becoming a man, a human being, in order to die on the cross.

[28 : 43] So that in his death, our sin could be placed on him. He would be made guilty of our sin instead of us.

And he suffered. He chose to suffer the wrath, the anger of God on the cross so that we could be released from the guilt of our sin.

What does Paul say? God made him, Jesus, who knew no sin, to be sin for us so that we could become the righteousness of God in him.

And that's what Isaiah 53 says. He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities.

The chastisement that brought us peace was laid upon him and by his wounds we are healed.

That's what we call the great transaction where God takes our guilt, the horror and the shame of our guilt, and he makes Jesus guilty of our sin.

[29 : 58] And Jesus is willing to be punished, not with men's punishment, but with the punishment of God, the wrath of God.

And it was only by that great transaction that God saved us from our sin.

And he verified it. He confirmed it by raising Jesus from the dead once again. Jesus triumphed over the grave and over death because he died for our sin.

My sin. My sin. Your sin. If you believe in him. You trust in him. And come to him in faith.

See how central this was? See how much this man needed to know and needed to hear? All the pieces came together. Everything clicked. The man's life was changed.

[31 : 03] God did a great work in this man's life. He was baptized. And that was it for Philip. He was taken away to the next job. Doesn't get to find out what the man does.

Doesn't get to find out. That's the last he ever sees of him. You often hear people talking about this passage and say, well, I wonder if this man went back to Ethiopia. Maybe he started a church. Who knows what happened?

And there's all kinds of speculation. We don't know. We don't know what happened. We don't need to know because that's the next part of the story that isn't given to us. What's important is that Philip was there at the right time in the hands of God to be used by God to explain the Bible to him.

That's what ministry is all about. My ministry and your ministry. As you go out, as a light in a dark place, as the light of the world, as the salt of the earth, as living epistles, known and read of men.

Let's be living letters, witnesses. Let's be the light of the world so that by our lives, men and women around us can see by the quality, the reality of our lives that we serve a Savior, a Jesus who has transformed us and has made us into a new creation.

[32 : 27] Our Father in heaven, we thank you for bringing us together this evening. Thank you for what you did in this man's life. And we pray that you will continue to work in the future, in us.

We pray it would be so lovely to be used in some small way as one piece of the jigsaw. That's all we want, Lord.

We want your name to be glorified in us. Our Father in heaven, make us, make us Christ-like people, make us obedient people, make us willing to be led and guided by your Spirit, even today, tomorrow, as we go into another week.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen.