

Acts 8:26-40

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

Date: 08 July 2007

Preacher: Neil A MacDonald

[0 : 00] Please turn back with me in your Bibles to Acts chapter 8. Acts chapter 8, I'd like to look with you this morning at the incident that is recounted in verses 26 to 40.

Philip and the Ethiopian. This is a wonderful story of a dramatic conversion.

Conversion stories can be very interesting. A young man called Augustine was one day sitting in a garden in North Africa. As he sat there, he could hear children playing in the next door garden.

And they kept repeating two words again and again. Tolle, legge, tolle, legge, tolle, legge.

These two Latin words mean pick it up and read. Pick it up and read. Pick it up and read. Beside Augustine, as he sat in that garden, was a Bible.

[1 : 21] And as the children's words penetrated his consciousness, Augustine did just that. He picked the Bible up and he started reading.

And as a result, he became a Christian. He was gloriously converted. Augustine went on to become a great theologian of the early church and one of the greatest theologians ever.

Then there was John Wesley. Wesley was a deeply religious young man. He was first of all a student and then a don at Oxford University.

So religious was he that, along with others, he formed the Holy Club, a group of serious-minded young men in the university who were fervent in their religious disciplines.

But Wesley didn't really know God. He was trying to get in the right with God by his own efforts.

That all changed when one evening he went along to a meeting held in a house in Aldersgate Street in the city of London, just next door to where the Free Church Congregation now meets.

[2 : 44] Someone at that meeting began to read a passage from Martin Luther's commentary on the Book of Romans. And as the words were explained, Wesley found, as he later put it, his heart strangely warmed.

And he understood for the first time that it wasn't what he did for God that mattered. Rather, it was what God had done for him through Christ and his death on the cross.

Wesley was converted and he became, under God, one of the two principal agents of the great 18th century revival in England.

William Haslam was a 19th century vicar in Cornwall. He was a religious man, but again he didn't know God.

A fellow clergyman challenged him as to whether he was really born again. That challenge had bothered Haslam. And on this particular day, he felt he ought to go to church.

[3 : 59] But his intention was that when he got there, he would simply announce a hymn and once the congregation had sung the hymn, he would dismiss the people and send them home.

But once they'd sung the hymn, Haslam thought that perhaps he should read a passage of scripture. And so he read from John chapter 6.

But instead of dismissing the congregation at that point, he felt that perhaps he should try and explain the passage a little. And so he began to explain the words of John chapter 6.

And as he did so, he found that he himself understood these words in a new way. And some in the congregation who were themselves converted recognized that something had happened to their vicar.

He had been born again. Three different individuals with three very different stories. Not all Christians are converted in such dramatic ways.

[5 : 07] Not all Christians can identify exactly when they were born again. God works in different individuals in different ways. But it's always with the same glorious result as lives are changed to his glory.

And here in Acts chapter 8, we have the story of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. The book of Acts tells a story of how the gospel spread from Jerusalem all over the Roman Empire.

It begins with the Lord Jesus Christ after his resurrection commissioning his disciples to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and to the very ends of the earth.

In the early part of chapter 8, we see the gospel reaching Samaria. That's the first step beyond Orthodox Judaism. The Samaritans had Jewish blood, but they weren't religiously sound.

Their religion had become confused along the way. And with the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, yet another decisive step is taken in spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth.

[6 : 25] Up to now, Acts has focused on the conversion of large groups of individuals. But here we're dealing with the conversion of just one man.

We're told about this Ethiopian eunuch who was converted as the gospel begins to reach the ends of the known world.

I'd like to highlight two crucial factors in the conversion of this Ethiopian. They're factors that are common to many conversions.

And these are an obedient Christian and an open Bible. An obedient Christian and an open Bible.

First of all then, an obedient Christian. Evangelism, or mission, is the work of God. If you read through the book of Acts, you'll see just how much it is the work of God.

[7 : 28] It's His initiative and power that achieves the work by His Spirit. The Bible says that no one can come to Christ unless God draws them to Him.

And yet, remarkably, the sovereign God, who doesn't need us, chooses to use us. The way the gospel spreads is through God's people.

The Lord Jesus Christ commissioned His disciples to be His witnesses. and He still sends His church out in mission. The question for you and for me is, will we go?

Will we play our part? One man did, here in Acts chapter 8. Philip was an obedient Christian.

We're introduced to Philip back in Acts chapter 6. He was one of the seven deacons who were chosen to help with the practical running of the church. By the beginning of chapter 8, he re-emerges as a preacher.

[8 : 30] And it's Philip who preaches the gospel in Samaria, where many people come to faith. There's a remarkable time of blessing in that city.

And yet, in the midst of all that busyness, Philip receives a surprising instruction. Look at verse 26. Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, Go south to the road, the desert road, that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.

Just imagine for a moment how Philip must have felt. For a start, I suspect, he would have been surprised to see an angel. There aren't all that many instances of angels appearing to people in the Bible.

Such visitations tend to occur at key moments only. And this obviously is a key moment in the spread of the gospel. So Philip would have been surprised.

But more than that, I think he might have been concerned and upset. After all, it was such an exciting time in Samaria. God's power was so obviously at work.

[9 : 43] Philip's preaching was being blessed to many. And yet now, when so much was happening, an angel appeared and told Philip to leave this exciting city and head off into the desert.

Philip was being asked to leave behind a buzzing, thriving congregation to go effectively into the middle of nowhere. I doubt he was leaping for joy at the prospect.

He had some sixty miles or so to travel in dry, hot, dusty conditions. He probably thought to himself, why does God want me to do this? I can see how I can be used in Samaria, but what use can I possibly be in the middle of nowhere?

But Philip was an obedient Christian. Luke tells us in verse 27, so he started out. And on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Camdacy, queen of the Ethiopians.

You see, Philip wasn't the only man on a journey. There was another man on a journey that day, an Ethiopian eunuch, and here was a divine appointment.

[11 : 11] God was behind both their journeys. He was behind the journey this eunuch was taking as he returned to Ethiopia from Jerusalem where he'd been worshipping the Lord.

This man was from the Upper Nile region. He was presumably a black African. He was probably Jewish, either by birth or by conversion.

It seems unlikely he was a Gentile. That distinction, the distinction of being the first Gentile convert, is one that Luke reserves for Cornelius in chapter 10 of Acts.

God was involved in this man's journey, just as he was involved in Philip's journey from that thriving city out into the middle of nowhere.

It was a divine appointment. This Ethiopian was a VIP. He was a eunuch. Many of the courtiers in that time were.

[12:12] He was an official of Candacy, the Queen of the Ethiopians. Candacy was not so much a name as a dynastic title given to the Queen Mother who played a key role in the Ethiopian realm.

It seems that this eunuch was the Queen Mother's Chancellor of the Exchequer. He was a man of some influence. We're told that he had been worshipping in Jerusalem.

Clearly God was at work in his life and he had apparently purchased, probably at some considerable cost, a scroll containing the prophecy of Isaiah which he was reading as he made his way home.

And it was while he was on his journey that God brought Philip to him. As Philip made his way south, he met the man sitting in his chariot. We read in verse 29, the Spirit told Philip, go to that chariot and stay near it.

That's what Philip did. He obeyed. He ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading from Isaiah the prophet. In those days, folk read out loud.

[13:20] it's the sovereign work of God which brought the Ethiopian into the Judean desert and it's the same sovereign work of God which brought Philip there as well.

Their meeting was a divine appointment. There are all sorts of ways in which God overrules and guides his people. Much of the time we don't realise it's happening.

At the beginning of this chapter we're told about a tremendous persecution. As a result of the persecution of the church in Jerusalem the members of that church were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

They probably didn't have an angel telling them exactly where to go. They probably took refuge wherever they could. Here on this occasion Philip received a definite instruction to go out into the desert.

But that isn't always how God works. God uses different means to guide his people. But even in the desert, in the sovereign purpose of God, there was someone for Philip to share the gospel with.

[14:38] Sometimes God takes us to places we wouldn't choose to go to. He may take us out of our comfort zone. God perhaps that's because we can help to further the Lord's work there.

Perhaps there's someone we can share the gospel with in that situation. The Lord may have a work for us to do in that place. Or it may be that just where we are at the moment, there's someone in our office, in our class, in our neighborhood, a neighbor or a friend, someone with whom we can and should share the gospel.

It's worth remembering that each of us has a unique set of contacts. We won't necessarily receive an instruction from an angel of the Lord as to where we should go or what we should do, but the Lord does guide us in his providence and he gives us opportunities for witness.

I wonder if we will be obedient Christians just as Philip was. Will we seize the opportunities we are given to witness for the Lord?

It's interesting, isn't it, that God used a busy man like Philip to speak to this Ethiopian eunuch. I remember hearing many years ago the Reverend John M.

[16:05] MacLeod preaching on this passage. Mr. MacLeod was appointed by the Free Church in the 1950s, I reckon, as an itinerant evangelist and he worked tirelessly in that role.

So what he said had particular relevance in his own situation, I felt. Commenting on this passage, Mr. MacLeod said, God doesn't use idle people.

He uses busy people and gets them to do that little bit more. I think there's a lot of truth in that. If we hang back and refrain from doing what we can, as we have opportunity, then we'll probably never accomplish a great deal.

But if we seize opportunities as they arise, that may well lead to increasing usefulness. It's not so much our ability God uses as our availability.

Philip was available to the Lord. I wonder if you and I, like him, are available to the Lord for him to use.

[17 : 20] things. I recently heard about a girl who knew her life wasn't right, but didn't know who or what would put it right.

One Sunday morning she went shopping in a supermarket which just happened to be next door to an evangelical church. She noticed there were queues of people waiting to go into the church, including lots of young people her own age.

The thought struck her that perhaps this church could be a place where she might find answers, but she'd never been inside a church before and she didn't have the courage to go in.

The next Sunday she made sure that her shopping trip to the supermarket coincided with the time of the church service. Again she walked past the queue waiting to go into the church, but she didn't know anyone.

She felt nervous and she went away again. The next Sunday, the third Sunday, she turned up again and this time an older lady spotted her and asked her if she'd like to go in.

[18 : 46] and she did just that. She went in and sat beside the lady who had invited her in. And over a period of months she kept coming and in due course she came to faith in Christ.

You see, she was a seeking soul, but it took an obedient Christian who seized an opportunity to make the connection. God was a woman.

What that lady did in wasn't terribly difficult in many ways. It wasn't particularly demanding, but it made all the difference. That lady seized an opportunity and it was blessed by God.

I wonder if you or I could be the obedient Christian God uses to bring a seeking soul to faith in his son. Is that something we could be praying for?

We all need to be open to the Lord's leading. Ready to go, ready to wait, ready a gap to fill, ready for service, small or great, ready to do his will.

[20 : 00] An obedient Christian. But then secondly we have an open Bible Bible, an open Bible. An evangelist needs a right attitude, he needs to be obedient and willing to serve.

But an evangelist also needs the right tool. And we have that tool in the Bible. Verse 30 tells us that as he drew alongside the Ethiopian's chariot, Philip heard him reading Isaiah the prophet.

And he asked, do you understand what you're reading? That's a very good question. Do you understand what you're reading?

It must have taken some courage for Philip to speak. After all, he was a relative nobody and this eunuch was a government minister. Someone has said that the encounter was like a member of the cabinet driving down White Hall in his chauffeur driven car when a student riding a bicycle stops at the traffic lights to speak to the minister through the window.

It would take some nerve to do that. You could understand it if the cabinet minister just turned away and ignored the student. But the Ethiopian didn't turn away when Philip asked the question.

[21 : 20] And humanly speaking, one reason for that is the wisdom of Philip's opening gambit. Philip's question is entirely unthreatening, isn't it?

He doesn't put the man on the spot. He doesn't all of a sudden start preaching to him. He just asks him a question and gently draws him into conversation.

I think Philip's example is a good one to follow. Sometimes we may blunder in with the gospel when people aren't ready for it. We should look for signs of interest and build on these things.

Yes, we may have to put a bit of bait down here and there to see if the fish will bite. And if it does, try some more. Questions are a good way to start.

In answer to Philip's question, do you understand what you're reading? The Ethiopian replied, how can I, unless someone explains it to me? What an open invitation to share the gospel.

[22 : 24] Philip couldn't have got a more encouraging response. What an opportunity that was. And so we're told in verse 31 that the Ethiopian invited Philip to come up and sit with him in his chariot.

It reminds me of a conversation I heard about many years ago when I was a student. It was a theological student who was travelling on the train between London and Cambridge.

there was a man sitting across from this student, let's call him Bill, and Bill did wonder when he sat down if perhaps he should strike up a conversation with him.

But he didn't really want to get involved. Perhaps he wasn't being very obedient. And Bill started reading a book. after a while the other man spoke.

And he asked Bill, do you do a lot of reading? And Bill said, actually I do, it's what I do, I'm a student. And the man said, well I'm afraid I don't do much reading at all, I never have.

[23 : 40] and you know, that's a problem. You know, for example, I really don't know what happened 2,000 years ago. And Bill thought, I can't let this opportunity go.

So he explained to the man how it was events that happened 2,000 years ago that were the basis of what he was studying and what he wished to preach as a Christian minister.

He told him about the life death and resurrection of Jesus. Bill didn't know what the outcome of that conversation was, but he was amazed at how it had been so easy to share the gospel on that occasion.

Well, Philip's conversation with the Ethiopian began equally encouragingly. How can I understand, he asked, unless someone explains it to me.

The passage the eunuch was reading was from Isaiah 53, he was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

[24 : 51] It's no surprise, actually, that the eunuch was puzzled. Who was this mysterious figure? God's servant who must suffer and die.

And why is it God's purpose to allow him to endure such terrible agony? So the eunuch asks Philip in verse 34, tell me please, who is the prophet talking about himself or someone else?

The suffering servant of Isaiah 53 is the Lord Jesus Christ. He's the one of whom the Old Testament scriptures prophesied that he must suffer and die for the sake of others.

But why did one who performed such amazing miracles and had such obvious power allow himself to die in such a humiliating way? No doubt Philip pointed the eunuch to that place in Isaiah 53 where it says 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.

[26 : 04] You see it wasn't for his own sins that the Lord Jesus suffered and died but for the sins of all who would put their trust in him. And as a result we have a choice.

Either we pay the punishment for our own sins in which case we will face eternal separation from God or we come to know the Lord Jesus Christ and put our trust in him.

Philip used the Bible to explain the wonderful truth of the cross. The Bible is the essential tool of evangelism. We are not passing on to others our ideas about God.

We are passing on God's truth found in Scripture. We have a message to proclaim. So if we want to see people converted there is an urgent need to put the Bible in their hands.

That is why the work of organizations like the Gideons and Wycliffe Bible translators is so important. But even that isn't enough. Sometimes people are converted through reading the Bible, just through reading the Bible.

[27 : 14] But possibly that isn't all that common. Most people are like the eunuch. How can I understand unless someone explains it to me?

Along with the Bible we need Bible teachers. John Stott comments, God has given us two gifts.

First the Scriptures and secondly teachers to open up, explain, expound and apply the Scriptures.

It is wonderful to note God's providence in the Ethiopian's life. First enabling him to obtain a copy of the Isaiah scroll and then sending Philip to teach him out of it.

some people may be called to be full time Bible teachers. But the rest of us, whoever we are, should at least be able to explain the good news of Jesus Christ from the Bible.

As Philip explained the Gospel, the Ethiopian believed and was wonderfully converted. When they came to some water, he said to Philip, look, here is water.

[28 : 23] Why shouldn't I be baptized? And so Philip administered the rite, which marked this man's formal entry into the family of God.

And when Philip left the unit thereafter, we are told that he went on his way rejoicing. By the Spirit of God, he had come to a living faith in Christ through an obedient Christian and an open Bible.

we need to pray that the same Spirit who worked in this situation would work among us. May we be willing to be obedient Christians. And may we have confidence in the Bible as the living Word of the living God.

But what if we're not Christians? Christians? If that's the case, let's pray for the same Spirit to open our eyes, as he opened the eyes of this Ethiopian, to understand the good news about Jesus.

You see, the Ethiopian eunuch responded to an offered Savior. As Philip explained things to him, he understood that Jesus bore the punishment which our sins deserved.

[29 : 46] The playwright Somerset Maugham heard the Gospel explained on one occasion and stormed out of the room shouting, I shall pay my own debts. Sadly, all those who reject the offer of salvation in Christ will pay their own debts.

But free and full forgiveness is available to all who turn and trust the Lord Jesus Christ. That's what the Ethiopian eunuch discovered.

And that's why he went on his way rejoicing. Will you respond as he did to an offered Savior?

Shall we pray? O Lord, we thank you for this wonderful account.

We pray that we may learn from it. May we be obedient Christians who have confidence in an open Bible. And if we are not yet your people, we pray that we may respond as the eunuch did to the offer of forgiveness in and through the Lord Jesus Christ, who died the death which we deserved, who suffered the punishment due to us for our sins, so that we might go free.

[31 : 21] We ask it in his name and for his sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.