

Acts 8

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[0 : 00] But the question that I want to explore this morning, the question that I hope to answer this morning is how did Christianity rise? How do we actually see growth?

Where is the answer for the things that are happening in Africa and other places? Or where how can we explain the growth here in this country many, many years ago? So the question to answer that question easily would be to say that the church grows through conversion.

That's how a church grows. It's through conversion. And what we have here in Acts chapter eight is a story, a wonderful story of the first of what we know of the first African converted to Christianity here in the New Testament.

It's a wonderful story that we have here. And I want to explore this story and notice three things in concerning the whole idea of conversion and how the church actually grows.

Three things that I want us to consider. The first is the context of conversion, the context. Secondly, the the secret agent of conversion and final and finally, the key ingredient of conversion.

[1 : 18] Three things that I want us to consider this morning. First, let us consider the context of conversion. Now, in the story before us, the eunuch here asked Philip three different questions.

Three different questions. The first one is in verse 30, 31, where Philip asked him, he says, sir, do you need help with what you're reading? And the eunuch responds with the question.

And he says, how can I unless someone explains it to me? The next question that the eunuch asked is, look, there is some water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?

Now, I want us to explore the first question by simply doing a profile of who this African eunuch is. Who is he? Well, we know from the very beginning in verse 27 that he was an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians.

This man was the national treasurer of his country. He was in charge of all the finances of the nation of Ethiopia. He was top of the royal courts of this day.

[2 : 23] The second thing we know from what we see is that he could read. That was pretty rare back in the fact that a man could actually read. He was educated and very intelligent.

The third thing we see is that he owned an Isaiah scroll, which was extremely rare back then because, folks, they didn't have libraries or books or anything. And for this man to get his hands upon a scroll from Isaiah was pretty unusual back then.

So from what we know, what we can see from the from the text here is that the eunuch is wealthy. He's educated and he's somewhat sophisticated. And his response to Philip, to the question that Philip asked him, is not what we would expect.

And I want you to imagine the scene here with me. You have this man, Philip, this lowly Jew running across the desert and comes across this wealthy, educated, sophisticated man in his own chariot.

And Philip runs and he hears him reading from Isaiah. And he asked him, sir, do you need help with what you're reading? Now, for most of us, if we were to be honest with ourselves, if that was us, we would not say yes.

[3 : 46] Calvin, John Calvin, in his commentary says that that would have been the most insulting thing that Philip could have asked this man, this educated, intelligent, sophisticated man.

But what we see in verse 31 is the eunuch response is, how can I unless someone explains it to me? The Ethiopian displayed modesty, humility, and he invites Philip up into his chariot and says, listen, I'm I'm ignorant of this passage.

I do not know who Isaiah is talking about. Please, can you explain this to me? And sure enough, what we have here is the eunuch and Philip having a conversation about the text in which he read here in Isaiah.

So what do we learn from this? I want to suggest to you folks that conversion takes place in the context of community, takes place in the context of community. The context of conversion is always community.

Look at the last question that the eunuch asked. He says, look, there is some water. Why shouldn't I be baptized? What is the eunuch asking Philip? Folks, he's looking at Philip, his new friend, his new counterpart, saying, examine me.

[5 : 06] Is this experience that I'm having here in my chariot real? He looks to Philip to interpret, to confirm what's actually taking place within the context of his own heart.

And I want us to consider this. When anyone converts to Christianity, they are initially converted into a new community, into a new family.

Think about this. If someone converts to Christianity and they're maybe unfamiliar with Christianity background, they weren't baptized as infants. What do they go and do?

They go and get baptized. Now, do they throw water on them themselves? No, that's not what happens. Baptism is a communal act.

It's a communal act. Does someone come into the church professing their faith to themselves? No, they profess their faith to their new people, to their new family, to the public.

[6 : 07] When someone comes into the church, do they just, does the church let anyone into this church for membership? No. There's the daunting task of going to the Kirk Session.

At least in Smith, then that's the case. Our elders are quite frightening. But people actually go and sit and they get asked questions. There's an examination, a very friendly examination.

But there is somewhat, there needs to be someone there to interpret what is actually taking place. When people are converted, they're converted into a new family, into a new community.

One, to help interpret their experience, but also to provide encouragement for their new step of faith. The eunuch looks to Philip, his new brother, to confirm what's actually taking place.

And all conversion means is turning around and going in a new direction. And the point of that turnaround is what we actually call conversion. And then you spend the rest of your life living out that conversion.

[7 : 16] When you actually live out the implications of the gospel of Jesus, in actuality, you're living out your conversion. But folks, if the context of conversion is community, we need to ask ourselves, what type of community are we?

I think that's a question that we must ask. The early church, the very first church, had a clear sense of their duty and responsibility.

They got it to a degree. In his book, *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark, a sociologist, explores the whole idea of how the Christian message grew.

And he goes back and he begins to explore the whole ideas of the Christian values. And he says that the social services and the whole idea of charity and love that the Christians brought forth brought a certain solidarity within the community.

And he gives a certain account of an epidemic, I think, in about 285. And he begins to explore the Christian response to this epidemic.

[8 : 26] And he reads a letter from Dionysius, the archbishop of Alexandria, describing this account. I want to read this account to you and I want you to hear the community of these Christians.

He says, most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ and with them departed this life serenely happy.

For they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many in nursing and curing others transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead.

The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner. A number of presbyters, deacons and laymen winning high commendation so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.

That's a wonderful account of the response of the Christians. Stark goes on to say that this type of service, this type of love, was most influential in the conversion of many because the Christians were the ones who stayed and took care of the sick, took care of the needy.

[10 : 01] So what can we learn from this? Folks, is this church inwardly focused or outwardly focused? What type of community are we here this morning?

Are we looking to serve others to the extent of hoping to build new relationships? Are we going out and being Jesus to those whom might not ever come across the gospel?

Are we serving the way in which the early church leaders actually served? Folks, I think it's only fair to say that we must examine our hearts this morning and ask ourselves if the gospel of Jesus has actually gone down to the depths of our souls, so much so that we are willing to accept the pains of our neighbors cheerfully, as the early Christians did.

The context of conversion is community. And we need to ask ourselves, what type of community are we? But secondly, I want us to consider the secret agent of conversion.

The secret agent of conversion is simply this, the Holy Spirit. In this story, there is more divine intervention that takes place than we probably care to take notice of.

[11 : 26] Now, I want us to look at how detailed this divine intervention actually is. Look at the instructions that the angel of the Lord gives to Philip and then how the Spirit begins to move Philip.

He first says, the angel of the Lord says, go south to the road, the desert road that leads down to Jerusalem and Gaza. Now, most scholars agree that this road was completely barren, that there would have been no reason for Philip to actually have taken this road unless the Spirit prompted him to do so.

And the reason for that is because no one would have been on that road. It was completely empty. So there's no reason for Philip to have actually taken that road unless the Spirit prompted him.

But what do we see? What does Philip see when he comes on that road? He sees a chariot. What we see here is the Spirit tells him to go to that chariot and stay near it.

Now, I've read this passage many, many times and I've missed this point. Now, if it wasn't for the help of others, I would have missed it again. But I want you to think about this.

[12 : 34] Why does the Spirit tell Philip to go and stay near the chariot? Could it be that the chariot was moving? Now, imagine this, Philip taking a desert road and all of a sudden sees a chariot.

Okay? And the Spirit says, go and stay near it. So you can imagine Philip actually having to run alongside this chariot. And he has to hear and listen to what the eunuch is reading.

I mean, it sounds ridiculous, but that's the context here. Philip would have never done this unless the Spirit had prompted him to do so.

One of the reasons why Philip would have never run alongside this chariot is because back then, Jews and black Africans did not congregate with one another. Philip would have never associated himself with an African eunuch unless the Spirit had prompted him to do so.

Why is this so important? Folks, one of his last statements was the Great Commission. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations.

[13 : 51] The word nations there in the Greek is essentially the same word for ethnic. And what Jesus simply is saying is this, is that my message is not for people just like you.

And when he tells Philip to go, to stay near the chariot of a sexually altered black African, what God wants is for racial barriers to be conquered.

Jesus' message of the Great Commission, therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, of all ethnic groups. There is no one type in Christianity.

His message is for all people. It's not a message of exclusion. Rather, it's an all-encompassing message of inclusion.

Folks, if you're not associating yourselves with people who aren't like you, then you might be quenching the Spirit of God. Have you ever thought about that? If the Gospel has transformed your life personally, then by implication of it, it has transformed your life socially as well.

[15 : 08] Tim Keller, a minister in New York City, says this. He says, If you understand the Gospel, this is what you would do with it. You would consciously and deliberately use the Gospel to undermine the natural gravity of your heart, of your self-justifying little heart, to stay with people who are like you.

And what Keller means is this, is that you are doing everything in your power, everything in your power, to take the Gospel to people who aren't like you.

What a message, huh? You are consciously and deliberately trying to undermine the natural gravity of your heart to not hang out with people who are like you.

Keller goes on to say that if you're doing this, if you're not doing this, then you don't understand the Gospel, therefore you don't understand what the Spirit actually wants.

Folks, at the doorstep of this church is a mission field. I'm sure you've heard that phrase before. At the doorstep, you have many different ethnic groups, right?

[16:25] Many different races. Many different nationalities here in Aberdeen. At the doorstep is a mission field. Do we understand what the Spirit actually wants?

Do we understand the Gospel so much so that we are willing and able to go out and to associate ourselves with people whom we normally would not associate ourselves with?

Calvin says this about the African, his influence that he would have had when he got back to his country. He says, Because he had great authority and power in the whole kingdom, his faith could breathe its fragrance far and wide.

For we know that the Gospel grew from frail beginnings and the power of the Spirit shone the clearer in. The fact that one grain of seed filled a wide region in a short space of time.

Folks, who knows might be at the doorstep of this church. Do not quench the Spirit of God, but rather allow Him to lead you into places of opportunity.

[17:36] And isn't it encouraging to know that if the secret agent of conversion is the Spirit, what a relief for people like us, right?

That it's not how well we articulate our own faith. That it's not up to us how good our presentation of the Gospel is. It's not up to us to save and rescue people, right?

But it's God who saves. And what a relief, and what an encouragement it is for us to know that when we go out and when we begin to talk to people about Jesus, that it's the Spirit who does the work.

That there is more divine intervention in the place of conversion. And that's good news for those of us in here today. I know it's good news for me because sometimes I do not know how to articulate my faith.

A lot of times I'm not courageous. But if I know that it's not up to me, if I know that it's the Spirit that is actually the One who saves, how much more confident will we be going speaking to people about Jesus?

[18:55] We've seen the context of conversion as community. The secret agent of conversion is the Spirit. And lastly, I want us to consider the key ingredient in conversion.

The key ingredient. What makes the about face? What makes the shift in conversion that actually makes the person turn around and go in the other direction?

We know that the eunuch is reading from Isaiah. And once Philip began to explain this passage to the eunuch, the penny dropped and it made sense to the eunuch.

What was the climactic point of change for the eunuch? What was the thing that caused the eunuch's eyes to finally see and for his heart to finally understand?

I want to notice a couple of things here. One, we know that the eunuch is wealthy, highly educated, and a sophisticated individual. But we also know that he paid a pretty big price to get there.

[19:57] We know that he is a eunuch. And if you're not familiar with what a eunuch is, basically, he was castrated. He was castrated. Back then, for a commoner to get into a position of, say, this eunuch to become a treasurer, if he was a commoner not born in the royal bloodline, he had to be castrated.

Because back then, the royal families did not trust any commoner to be around their women and children. So in order for you to get to the top of society in your day, and if you were a male, it was through castration.

Now, I'm not sure if that shocks any of you, but folks, it's not really that different today. I mean, castration may not be the norm, but people will sell their souls to get almost anything, right?

You can think about it through your job, through relationships, money, social status. People will do almost anything to fulfill the desires of their own heart. If it's your job, what price do you pay?

If you've got a family, it's usually that's what's sacrificed, right? You're staying at your work later and later to get more money, to get the car, to get the house, you know, the three and a half kids, all of it.

[21:12] You pay the price, and so does your family. If it's relationship, people will do almost anything to find that one true love, right? Physical appearance, eating disorders, the whole idea of wanting to look like celebrities is rampant, right?

People will pay any price to get what they want to fulfill the desires of their own heart. Folks, castration may not be the norm today, but the principle of it still stands to be true. But we also know that the eunuch is not happy with his life. Look at where he's coming from. We know that he's been in Jerusalem. He's been there to worship. He's left his job because it wasn't satisfying him.

This man was in serious spiritual search mode. He leaves his job, travels this far to go to worship the God of Israel. But what we know is this, is that when he got to Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel, he would not have been allowed in the temple.

Because back then, certain people weren't allowed in the temple to worship for various reasons. Lepers and all sorts of types of people, but also sexually altered men were not allowed in the temple to worship.

[22 : 33] Now, can you imagine this man who's made it to the top? He's paid a pretty big price to get there. He's absolutely miserable with what his life has been like. He takes a very long journey to go and to worship the God of Israel to find out that he cannot enter because of his own physical status.

To hear the fact that people like him aren't allowed in. Can you imagine how deformed, defiled this man felt?

Can you imagine what this man felt like when he would have heard the fact that he would not have been able to come in and worship? At the moment of his life, this man is completely unraveled spiritually, psychologically, emotionally.

He is hit rock bottom. And what we know is this. He leaves Jerusalem to go out a barren desert road. And I'm sure on his way out of town, he picked up a scroll because this was the only thing that he could actually get for himself was a scroll.

And we know this, that the eunuch is reading in the 50s of Isaiah. And most commentators and scholars suggest that he would also, in the same field of vision, would have read in Isaiah 56, which says this, To the eunuch who keep my Sabbath, who choose what pleases and holds fast to my covenant, to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial, and a name better than sons and daughters.

[24 : 12] I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off. Folks, this is a man who has given up the one thing that would have given him an everlasting name.

Descendants. Back then, that is where you got your fame. It was through your descendants. And this man had given up that ability to have families.

And all of a sudden, he reads here that this God gives him something better than descendants. Something better than sons and daughters. An everlasting name.

In Isaiah 53, just before the passage in which Luke records for us here, in Acts, it says this, Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows.

Yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him.

[25 : 18] And by his wounds we are healed. We are like sheep who have gone astray. Each of us has turned to its own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

And now the passage that's recorded for us here in Acts. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter.

And as a sheep before his shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. And who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth. Can you imagine the eunuch's reaction as he is reading this passage wondering who this figure is in Isaiah?

He's wondering is it Isaiah himself? Or is it some other figure? And at the precise moment, Philip comes running alongside the chariot and says, excuse me sir, do you need help with what you are reading?

[26 : 22] The eunuch who is defiled and deformed, who has made it to the top and found it to be an empty place, has traveled this far to come to find out that he cannot go into worship.

At the most climactic point of this man's life comes Philip running alongside the chariot saying, hey, do you need help? Now we understand the eunuch's response is not what we expect because he doesn't understand what he is reading and he needs help.

He wants help and Philip would have began to explain that the figure in Isaiah is Jesus. And when the eunuch heard about Jesus, the penny would have dropped and it would have made sense. He would have heard about the substitutionary act of Jesus. And to the eunuch, it would have been sweet music. When he heard that Jesus voluntarily became a eunuch for him, it would have changed the eunuch himself.

When he would have heard that Jesus voluntarily experienced injustice, that he voluntarily became oppressed, when Jesus voluntarily gave up his own descendants, the eunuch would have been able to relate to Jesus because he would have found out that Jesus voluntarily became a substitute for him.

[27 : 55] Once the eunuch heard the gospel of Jesus, it would have made total sense to him. When he heard that God places Jesus on the cross for us, the eunuch would have heard a wonderful sound.

He dies without descendants, Jesus is, so that we could have an everlasting name. Folks, to the ears of the eunuch, it would have been overwhelming. He would have never heard of a figure like this.

The fact that Jesus voluntarily sacrifices his own life for people like us is great news. I'm not sure if you're familiar with the book, A Tale of Two Cities, but it's a story by Charles Dickens.

It's about two friends, Sidney Carton and Charles Darnay. They're two friends who are in love with the same girl, Lucy. Lucy ends up marrying Charles, and as the story progresses, Charles, at one point, is falsely condemned to die, and he's thrown into prison.

But Sidney and Charles, throughout their entire life, they've been pretty good friends, and they somewhat look alike. And Sidney goes to visit Charles in prison a few days before his death.

[29 : 13] And he tries to convince Charles to take his place. He goes, let me take your place. And Charles is like, no, Sidney, you're not going to take my place. I'm here to die, and I'm going to do it honorably.

But Sidney somehow has Charles knocked out and carried out of prison, and Sidney takes his place there in the prison. And at one point in the book, there's a little girl that comes up to Sidney and begins to have a conversation.

She thinks that it's Charles. And soon enough, she figures out that it's not Charles, but it's Sidney. And she asked Sidney this question. She says, are you dying for him?

And Sidney looks at the little girl and she goes, yes, and for his wife and children. The little girl is somewhat perplexed by this man's response.

And she looks at him and she says, you know what? I'm having a real hard time with my own death. But if you, oh, brave stranger, would just hold my hand, I think that I'll be alright.

[30 : 19] Folks, the wonder of the sacrificial love of Sidney changed that little girl. Folks, how much more so is it with Jesus, the wonder of his sacrificial love?

And I want you to go to him and I want you to ask Jesus this morning, are you dying for me? And I want you to hear the words of Jesus say yes, and I will hold your hand for the rest of your life as well.

The substitutionary act of Jesus would have changed the eunuch. It's what made everything make sense to the eunuch.

The wonder of the key ingredient changes you spiritually, psychologically, emotionally, economically.

The wonder of the sacrificial love of Jesus is the key ingredient in conversion. Let me close with this. How do you know if the Spirit's changed you?

[31 : 31] How do you know if the Spirit has actually come in and done its work? A few things. One, the first thing we see from the text is this. A middle aged Jewish man putting his arms around a sexually altered black man and calling him friend.

Your ideals towards humans shift. You cannot look at people the same way. You don't see them as strange or aliens or different, but you see them as people who need to hear the love of the gospel. is your life involved with people whom you normally wouldn't associate yourselves with. Secondly, we see this. Evangelism is not a duty, but a passion.

A passion. Has the gospel changed you to the degree that you are excited about telling others about the sacrificial love of Jesus? I mean, Philip, as it says here in the last few verses, traveled around preaching the gospel to all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Has the gospel changed you to where you are excited? To where evangelism is not an obligation, but it's a privilege. Thirdly, we see that the gospel has the power to change even the most defiled and deformed of people.

[33 : 03] The eunuch story of conversion brings hope to all people. to all of us, especially those who feel like they're the outcast or pariah of their own society. And this is good news for all of us today.

Even for those who haven't made it to the top yet, right? Because we know from the eunuch, he got there and he wasn't happy. So for those of you who are climbing to get to the top, here's a little bit of a warning and caution that when you get there, you're not going to be fulfilled unless the message of Jesus comes in and gives your life meaning and purpose.

But finally, we see this, that the conversion of one man leads to the growth of the kingdom. Who would have imagined 2,000 years later, people would be speaking about this first African and about his own conversion and how now it relates to 360 million people today who have heard the good news and have been changed by that message.

Folks, building the church begins with the gospel of Jesus. The context is community and the secret agent is conversion. And folks, just as Philip asked the eunuch, do you understand what you are reading?

Folks, there are many people in this community, this country, this world, this environment that need the answer to that question that the eunuch asked. How can I unless someone explains it to me?

[34 : 38] Are we going to be that voice who is going to go out and speak about the sacrificial love of Jesus?

Folks, I would encourage you and challenge you to be that voice to answer that question that the eunuch asked and be the Philip who sits down and explains the gospel in a way in which changes people.

Folks, may we seek to grow the church through the means in which is laid out to us here in God's Word. Let us pray. Our Father in Heaven, we thank you for this wonderful story that we have here about Philip having a simple conversation with an African eunuch.

And Lord, we thank you for the fact that the eunuch heard about the sacrificial love of Jesus. That Jesus became a substitute. He voluntarily gave up his life so that we might have an everlasting name.

Father, it's a beautiful story that we have here in Acts. Lord, we would ask that you would give us a sense of our responsibility if we are Christians today.

[35 : 56] To know that there is a social responsibility to the gospel. And that Father, we would be motivated and excited about going out and seeking to proclaim the gospel to all nations.

Father, give us a sense of your presence. Give us courage and allow your spirit to move us to opportunities and to open up doors to places that we normally wouldn't walk through.

Father, help us to grow your church. Use us, Father, for we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Can we continue to worship God this morning by singing in Psalm 98, the traditional version, which you can find on page 3-6-0.

We'll sing from verses 1 to verse 4. O sing a new song to the Lord, for wonders he hath done. His right hand and his holy arm, him victory hath won.

The tune is Saint Magnus, and we will sing from verse 1 down to verse Mark 4. O sing a new song to the Lord. May we stand to sing. Now receive the benediction of the Lord.

[37 : 30] May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord turn his face toward you and give you his peace now and forever more.

Amen.