

The Good News of Jesus

Acts 8:26–40

September 2, 2001

“An angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Rise and go toward the south.’” You could never go wrong with instructions like that. It is always good to go south. So Philip rose and went without complaint and without question. He did as he was told as a preacher of Jesus Christ. It raises the question of how obedient we are today. There in the south, on a desert road, Philip met a high ranking official from Ethiopia, a man to whom the queen entrusted all her treasure, a man whom the nation trusted with the queen, a man going home from worship in Jerusalem. He was black and powerful and exotic, probably traveling with a large retinue, having come from what may have been the most far away place of which the people of Israel had ever heard. And riding in his chariot, he was reading aloud, as was the custom of the day, of all things, the book of the prophecy of Isaiah. In fact, he had just come upon the same passage which we read earlier in this service, the fourth of four Servant Songs, telling of the suffering servant of the Lord. The Spirit prompted Philip to pursue this prospect for the gospel. This was not Philip’s idea. It was not his plan. It was not his initiative. He was not trying to be inclusive. He was just preaching the gospel and doing what he was told. So Philip, apparently never the shy one, ran right up to the treasurer of Ethiopia and without so much as a “Hello! How are you?” said, “Do you understand what you are reading?” There was no easing into the situation. There were no introductions. There was no talk about the weather or the last event at the coliseum. Time was wasting. Philip had to get right to the point. “Do you understand what you are reading?”

A lesser man than the Ethiopian would have taken that as an insult. It is not polite to begin a conversation by implying that the other person is ignorant. He could have said, “Of course I understand! Now get off my chariot.” But it is a sign of the Ethiopian’s greatness that he both knew and admitted his shortcomings. He did not understand what he was reading, and he asked for help from this unknown street preacher who appeared in the desert. Are we willing to seek the help we need, or to accept the help we have? In the providence of God, the Ethiopian was not only reading from the book of the prophecy of Isaiah, already well over five-hundred years old then, but also he was reading what may be the most difficult passage in that book: “As a sheep led to the slaughter or a lamb before its shearer is dumb, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken up from the earth.” It was no wonder that the Ethiopian asked Philip, “About whom, pray, does the prophet say this, about himself or about some one else?” And that was all the opening Philip needed.

Of course, that ancient prophecy is about someone else: Jesus Christ. It makes no sense apart from Jesus Christ, and we might even say that he makes no sense apart from it. The passage has to do with the silent death of lamb, and it points directly to Christ’s willing sacrifice of his life on the cross. How could the lamb remain silent? More to the point, How could death on a cross be good news? How could the execution of the Christ be helpful? How could the capital punishment of one more Jew be beneficial to the world? What could Philip say? What can we say today? It is not only the case the Jesus Christ fulfilled this strange prophecy. It is also the case that the early Christians turned to this very prophecy to understand what had happened to their Lord and Master, what he had allowed to happen to himself, and what he had done and

accomplished for them and for us by this strange act. So it was that “Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus.” This is the key. This is the starting point. This is the beginning of the gospel.

There are two main components to this good news of Jesus. Surely you know them. The first is that Jesus Christ gave his life for the forgiveness of our sin. The human predicament is that we have run away from God, and there is no way we can undo that. Designed to be God-centered, we have become self-centered. Even if we realized our mistake, even if we comprehended our misery, even if we wanted to turn back to God, that very desire would itself be self-interested, infected with self-centeredness, subject to the very problem it sought to solve. We cannot heal our deepest disease. Our only hope comes from outside ourselves. The reason the cross is good news for us is that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only one without sin, freely offered himself for us as a sacrifice for our sin. He paid the price for the injustice we did, he served the sentence for our misdeed, he conquered the power of sin and evil by not responding in kind, and he recaptured our attention, lifting us out of ourselves, recentering us upon God, undoing what we had done, restoring us to right relationship with God. Thanks be to God!

The second part of this good news of Jesus is that God acknowledged Christ’s sacrifice, accepted his offering, vindicated his suffering, and raised him from the dead to a new and different life. And this was for us, too. It is not only the case that Jesus died for the forgiveness of our sin; it is also the case that he was raised from the dead for the promise of our eternal life. Life here is fleeting, incomplete, and full of contradiction. There is a life to come which is forever beyond sin, pain, death, disease, and evil. It is a life of love and bliss in the presence of God. This is the second part of the good news of Jesus. Not only has our sin been forgiven, but also we have been promised eternal life. Not only have we been reoriented to God, but also God has reclaimed us as his very own. Not only have we been restored to God, but also we have been restored to God forever. Thanks be to God!

This good news of Jesus calls for a response. The appropriate response is one of gratitude, public profession of faith, and receiving baptism. This is exactly what the Ethiopian did, as an example for us. He could have ignored what Philip had to say. He could have believed in his heart but kept it to himself. He could have rejected the outer signs of the faith. But instead, as a very public figure, as a high official in his nation, he turned away from his nation’s religion, he professed his faith in Jesus Christ, he received baptism, and doubtless he was instrumental in carrying the gospel back to his homeland. And he did after just one sermon! After hearing the good news of Jesus one time, his whole life was turned around. He had been in Jerusalem worshiping God but without understanding; now he believed in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as Lord and Savior. How much more should we, who have heard the gospel our whole lives, who have studied the Bible for decades, who have the advantage of two-thousand years of church history to mediate the gospel to us, how much more should we confess our faith, proclaim the gospel, live new lives, and rejoice in the goodness of God? How much more should we, who have received the gospel by missionary efforts to this far away country, carry the good news of Jesus back to our homes and families, back to our friends and neighbors, and back to our schools and workplaces, for all to know and to believe? How much more should we, who have already been baptized, work for the advancement of, give of ourselves for, bring new members to, and build up the church of Jesus Christ?

Do you understand what you are reading? Do you understand what I am preaching? Do you believe the good news of Jesus?

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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