Salvation for the Ethiopian

Acts 8:26-40

Let me begin with the big picture in the book of Acts, the main subject and theme of this whole book.

Acts 1:8 "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

In other words, evangelism. The proclamation of the gospel. To the whole world. Not just in Jerusalem. But the whole region. And the whole earth. So today we see that gospel coming to Ethiopia, to a man from Ethiopia. Ethiopia is south of Egypt, about half way down on the eastern side of Africa, across the Red Sea from what is now Saudi Arabia and Yemen in the Middle East.

Here in Acts 8, Luke tells us significant details about this man. He is no common citizen, has great authority under Queen Candace. He was in charge of her treasury and the national revenue, so obviously holding a very important position in her government. Further, he is described as a eunuch, referring to a man who has been emasculated, representing at least in part a profound commitment to government service. The word could actually be used simply to identify government officials, and one commentator suggests that the word doesn't necessarily mean that he had been castrated. But more likely it does, demonstrating that such a man would not be prohibited from the outward fellowship of the community of God's people. As he would have been in the Old Covenant.

Deut. 23:1 "He who is emasculated by crushing or mutilation shall not enter the assembly of the LORD."

So all the details here point to the expansion of the gospel, the expansion of the preaching of the gospel. I should note the Old Testament itself predicts that very expansion.

Is. 56:3 "Do not let the son of the foreigner Who has joined himself to the LORD Speak, saying, "The LORD has utterly separated me from His people"; Nor let the eunuch say, "Here I am, a dry tree." 4 For thus says the LORD: "To the eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths, And choose what pleases Me, And hold fast My covenant, 5 Even to them I will give in My house And within My walls a place and a name Better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name That shall not be cut off."

So here we meet this high official from Ethiopia, a black man to be sure. This meeting is, of course, no accident or coincidence. God has ordered it, directly and immediately.

v.26 "Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is desert."

So the angel told Philip where to go. Remember, this is still the age of the apostles. The special gifts of revelation are still employed by the Lord, primarily to the apostles, to attest to Jesus. To validate Jesus. To expound Jesus.

Heb. 2:3 "…how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, 4 God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?"

So God is bearing witness to the gospel message of salvation, and he instructs Philip personally and specifically. Philip, of course, obeyed.

v.27 "So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a

eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, 28 was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet."

And in case there was any doubt or confusion with Philip, we read,

v.29 "Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go near and overtake this chariot."

The ESV translates, "join this chariot." The Greek word refers to glueing! To stick or fasten together. So what we might call a direct intervention, ordered by God himself. And we are told that this Ethiopian "had come to Jerusalem to worship." Likely that means that he had come to Jerusalem for some Jewish festival or tradition, and given what we are about to read, does not mean that he has yet come to salvation. But he is certainly interested to know more about this great God who has revealed himself in so many spectacular and miraculous ways.

The main point in all of these details is simply this,

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE WORD OF GOD IN EVANGELISM.

When evangelism takes place, the gospel is preached. The word of God is proclaimed. Evangelism is not a matter of creating the right mood, it is not a matter of the right music. It is not an emotional manipulation to try to get people to repeat the right words back to you. The essence of evangelism is setting forth the word of God. And especially, that word as it addresses the whole matter of salvation. So we read,

Rom. 1:16 "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek."

And, 1 Cor. 1:18 "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God…22 For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

What is so amazing in this passage, what must have been so encouraging to Philip, is that when he comes upon this Ethiopian man in his chariot, the man is reading the Bible!

v.28 "And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet."

The obvious starting point to emphasize with that,

A. God speaks in his word through his prophets.

Over and over again we read in the Old Testament prophets, "Thus says the Lord!" Such that when the prophet speaks, God speaks. And you have heard me make this point many times in a variety of contexts, that this is the very nature of biblical prophecy,

Deut. 18:15 "The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me [referring to Moses] from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear…18 I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. 19 And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him."

Similarly,

Num. 12:6 "Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak to him in a dream. 7 Not so with My servant Moses; He is faithful in all My house. 8 I speak with him face to face, Even plainly, and

not in dark sayings; And he sees the form of the LORD."

God speaks through his prophets. He speaks mouth to mouth, literally, putting his words into their mouths. So it is not simply that this Ethiopian was reading the prophet Isaiah. The point is, he is reading God's word. God is speaking to him through that word. But there is a problem. An obstacle. The Ethiopian can't understand what he is reading. So the obvious point is that,

B. God uses teachers to expound his word.

v.30 "So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him."

I have to tell you, there is no greater nor enjoyable experience that I have ever had as a pastor than those occasions when this same thing is taking place, when someone asks me, "What does this mean?", with reference to a particular Bible passage. I'm not talking about the trick questions. I'm not talking about the people who are argumentative or arrogant. I'm not talking about the people who are trying to prove that they are smarter than me, which they might well accomplish. Rather, I'm talking about the conversations I have had with people who just simply, sincerely, earnestly want to understand what the Bible is teaching.

God uses teachers to expound his word. 'How can I, unless someone guides me?" That doesn't mean that you can't learn anything on your own. This isn't the Roman Catholic idea of implicit faith, where you must simply believe whatever the church teaches you. Blessed be the Lord when he gives anyone and everyone an ability to read and to understand the Bible. But still, in his ordinary providence and use of means, God provides not only his word but preachers whose responsibility it is to proclaim that word.

Thus in Romans 10, immediately after the words, "whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved," Paul writes this,

Rom. 10:14 "How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? 15 And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things!" 16 But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "LORD, who has believed our report?" 17 So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

It is still God's work, enabling men to believer, enabling men to hear and to understand. But he uses teachers! And this Ethiopian government official knew that, by the work of the Holy Spirit upon his heart as well. "Do you understand what you are reading?"…"How can I, unless someone guides me?"

So the young preacher, Timothy, was instructed by Paul,

2 Tim. 4:2 "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. 3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers."

Paul would write to the Ephesians,

Eph. 4:11 "And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, 13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to

the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; 14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting."

So the point is the importance of the word of God in evangelism, and, I might add, discipleship. And given that importance, God ordains teachers to expound his word—to explain, to teach, to exhort, to instruct. And, the focal point of all that instruction is Jesus. So we see in our text,

II. THE CENTRALITY OF JESUS IN EVANGELISM.

The teacher isn't supposed to show off how smart he is. The teacher isn't there to emphasize his own wisdom and knowledge. The teacher is there to explain and proclaim Jesus.

v.35 "Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him."

That's the job of the teacher, the preacher! To preach Jesus. Paul said it so clearly,

1 Cor. 2:1 "And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. 3 I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. 4 And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God."

You didn't come to church today in order to hear what wisdom or knowledge have. You didn't come to church in order to find out what I learned this week, or what I learned in my previous training and study. At least, I hope you didn't. You should come, each and every week, to hear what God says about his son Jesus. And if I help you to know that, to know what God has said about his son Jesus, then I've done my job properly. "For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified."

So it was with Philip.

v.35 "Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him."

Let me make an obvious point here, and stress it appropriately. This Ethiopian was reading from the Old Testament, from the prophet Isaiah. And the point is that,

A. Jesus is the subject of the Old Testament.

The whole Old Testament, everything in it, from beginning to end, points you to Jesus. Everything in it, in one way or another, proclaims Jesus.

Do you remember Jesus' own explanation to those two men traveling on the road to Emmaus after Jesus' resurrection? Jesus came to them, unrecognized by them, and in their confusion, even bewilderment about Jesus' death, they said to Jesus,

Luke 24:19 So they said to Him, "The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, 20 and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to be condemned to death, and crucified Him. 21 But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, today is the third day since these things happened. 22 Yes, and certain women of our company, who arrived at the tomb early, astonished us. 23 When they did not find His body, they came saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who said He was alive. 24 And certain of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but Him they did not see." 25 Then He said to

them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” 27 And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.”

Jesus expounded himself to them. He taught them about himself. From the Old Testament, beginning at Moses and all the Prophets. So it was with this man of Ethiopia. Jesus is the subject of the Old Testament, and that is a terribly misunderstood point by many people today, including many professed Christians. They think that the God of the Old Testament or even the message of the Old Testament is fundamentally different that what is in the New Testament. And they fail to understand, they fail to realize, that the Old Testament points us to Jesus, to the Messiah, the Christ. It teaches us about salvation, and about God himself.

Specifically, as we see in our text here, with this Ethiopian eunuch, we see that,

B. Jesus is the lamb who died for our sins.

That’s what the prophecy of Isaiah is all about.

v.32 "The place in the Scripture which he read was this: “He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth. 33 In His humiliation His justice was taken away, And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth.”

Let me read the words just before the ones Luke quotes for us here in Acts, from,

Is. 53:1 “Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? 2 For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, And as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; And when we see Him, There is no beauty that we should desire Him. 3 He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. 4 Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”

Then Isaiah continues,

Is. 53:7 “He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth.”

So not only is Jesus so obviously the reference there, not only is Isaiah openly and plainly proclaiming Jesus there in the Old Testament, I would propose that the truth of the gospel is never made clearer anywhere in the whole Bible, even in the New Testament! The words ring out so clearly. The define the very fundamental, essential truths of the gospel of Jesus. “He was wounded for our transgressions.” In other words, he died for our sins. And, “The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed.” Stripes there refer to the wounds inflicted by a whip, wounds inflicted upon Jesus as he was put to death, dying as the covenant curse and penalty for our sins. So that we might be saved, that we might healed. We have all sinned. “All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way.” And yet here is the gospel. Here is the definition of the only way for those sins to be forgiven, for life to be granted…“the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”

The lamb is the sacrifice prescribed by the outward rituals of the Old Testament, the passover lamb. And the gospel which is proclaimed by that very passover lamb is that Jesus died for our sins. And that is the message of the Bible, from the beginning of the Old Testament to the end of the New Testament. And no doubt, that is what Philip is telling this Ethiopian official. And, as we continue to read, that is what he believed! And so we see,

III. THE RESPONSE OF FAITH IN EVANGELISM.

There is a response. There is understanding. There is faith to believe. When the Ethiopian asks about getting baptized, Philip responds,

v.37 "Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

Such a profound declaration of faith. I believe…and specifically, Jesus is the Son of God. In other words, Jesus is God. I believe in Jesus, all that that means. Jesus is Lord. Jesus is savior. Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for my sins, my propitiation. Jesus is my advocate, my high priest. And that is,

A. The expression of true saving faith.

John writes in his gospel,

John 1:2 "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: 13 who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

So this Ethiopian man was born again, born from above, born of the spirit. He became a believer, granted the great gift of eternal salvation. By faith. All of it, a gift, a gift of grace. Such that Paul would later write,

Eph. 2:8 "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast."

So Philip instructed this Ethiopian about the gift of salvation, the gift of the forgiveness of sins, the gift of eternal life. Just as I proclaim that same message to you. And the Ethiopian believed. And thus, demonstrated outwardly the reality of his faith, with baptism.

B. The outward and tangible testimony of true saving faith.

v.36 "Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?" 37 Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

With such a profession of faith, we read what happened next,

v.38 "So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him."

Luke then adds a rather fascination conclusion to the whole event,

v.38 "So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. 39 Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing."

We believe that the Bible teaches the baptism is appropriately given to children of believers, as children of God's covenant promise not only to be our God but also the God of our children. That separates us from the convictions of those who are Baptist

in their thinking and understanding of Baptism, but when it comes to adult conversions and adults who respond to the gospel with saving faith, having never been baptized, there is no difference. Baptism is the right and proper biblical sign and seal not only of their faith, but of God's promise to save them. And so believers are to be baptized, as was this Ethiopian, rejoicing, we read at the end of verse 39, in his new found experience of eternal life.

For me, that day was now well over 50 years ago, yet I still remember it, the joy of that day. The joy of my salvation. And whether or not you have a specific day you can identify, that joy is to be ours always, the joy of eternal life. The joy of believing in Jesus unto salvation. The joy of knowing, by faith, that Jesus died for your sins.

If you don't yet have that joy in the confidence of your own salvation, then please talk to me, very soon. If you have questions or don't understand the promise of this gospel, then please ask me about it. And I will be glad to expound and explain more fully the message of those wonderful words of the Lord through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah,

Is. 53:5 [Jesus] was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."