

## Gospel Triumph: The Unexpected Way – Acts 8:26-40

Some people respond quite well to the unexpected, I do not. I tend to like things to go according to plan without a lot of rabbit trails or deviations. This is unfortunate, because some of the best gifts in our lives are unexpected blessings.

God certainly seems to take delight in moving His plan forward through the unexpected. It seems like no one saw God becoming man by being born in a manger in an out of the way village. No one anticipated Him dying on a Roman cross to atone for our sins and win the victory over sin and death. Hardly anyone thought that He would rest the entire plan on the shoulders of a strange assortment of Jewish men from fisherman to a tax collector to a Zealot. And who would have guessed that the man who actively tried to destroy the early church would become its greatest missionary and theologian?

But when we stop to consider why God so often works in unexpected circumstances and ways, it begins to make sense. If everything went according to our plans and purposes, we would be tempted to take credit for it. “Our church pressed all the right buttons and growth happened.” Instead, God shakes things up and His plans crisscross ours all the time and when people come to Christ and change happens, He gets the glory for it.

I think we need to make room in our lives and in our church for God to work in unexpected ways and our passage for this morning certainly highlights this aspect of God’s work in moving the Gospel forward. How do we recognize God’s unexpected movement? That’s the question we want to answer in our passage. So, in Acts 8:26-40 we will see **3 Factors in the Unexpected Progress of Gospel Work.**

### **1. Sovereign Government (vv. 26-29)**

While God’s work is often unexpected to us, it’s perfectly within His sovereign plan. God governs all things by His wisdom and power. This does not cancel out human responsibility, but it does tell us that God is ultimately in control. And we see that clearly in this passage.

Last time we looked at the beginning of Acts 8 and saw the Gospel spread to Samaria because of the persecution that came on the church in Jerusalem as a

result of Stephen's death. Philip played a major role in the expansion of the gospel to Samaria and now God has other plans for him. Look at verse 26.

Let me put a map on the screen for you to look at. You can see Jerusalem in the middle with the arrow point toward it and Samaria in the general area of the red circle. The arrow over the Mediterranean Sea is pointing right at Gaza. It's quite out of the way and Luke wants to make sure we understand that this road that God directed Philip to is quite unexpected and seemingly random. But, of course, it's not random. Look at the first part of verse 27.

This was not a quick jaunt to the store for bread and milk. It's a long journey through wilderness terrain. But God intends to arrange a divine encounter for Philip. On this same road there's a man who is described in some detail here. He's an Ethiopian. This is not modern Ethiopia, but is just north of it in what would be Sudan today, just south of Egypt. This region is mentioned fairly frequently in the OT and is called Cush. We'll return to this point in a few minutes.

He's an important court official for the Queen of his country and he's a eunuch, which means he has been castrated in some form or fashion and is unable to have children. It was common in this time to have Eunuch's as court officials for a variety of reasons. The fact that he's a eunuch matters immensely for this story and God's work, but we will return to this in a minute as well.

There's a reason he's on this road. Look at the rest of verse 27 and verse 28. He had traveled all the way from Cush to Jerusalem to worship and had clearly not found everything he was looking for. He had purchased a scroll of Isaiah, which would have been quite costly, and is sitting in his chariot reading it out loud. Now, this chariot may have been very different from what you see in movies. It may have been more of a cart and could have been moving quite slowly. Regardless, God arranges a meeting. Look at verse 29.

Now listen, don't expect God to whisper in your ear to approach a moving vehicle and share the gospel with the driver. That's not the point here. The overall point is God's sovereign government and involvement in the advancement of the Gospel. We play a role in this by His grace, but God is the mover, and we can rest in that truth. Without His sovereign government of the world, the Gospel would not advance. And under His sovereign hand it advances through our second factor.

## **2. Scriptural Engagement (vv. 30-35)**

The Bible, and the OT specifically, continues to play the central role in the Gospel's movement forward. Look at verses 30-31. This passage helps us to see that God's plans involve interpreting and teaching Scripture. God fully plans for human beings to open their mouths and teach others from His Word. God arranged this meeting so that Philip could interpret the Scripture. But which passage specifically? Look at verses 32-33.

The Ethiopian Eunuch is reading from Isaiah 53 and He's no doubt reading from the Greek translation of the OT. He quotes verses 7-8 here but no doubt he has the entire passage in view and probably the entire section of Isaiah. Isaiah 53 speaks specifically about this character called "the servant of the Lord" and this servant is mentioned in several other places in Isaiah. But it's often hard to tell exactly who the passage is about. In some places the servant is clearly the nation of Israel and in other places it seems to be an individual person. This brings up this very logical question in verse 34. Philip is ready to answer. Look at verse 35.

Now, Philip probably knew that Jesus quoted this passage, Isaiah 53, about Himself in Luke 22:37. Philip also learned how to read and interpret the OT as pointing toward Jesus from the Apostles, who learned it from Jesus. And this is why verse 35 says "and beginning with this Scripture" he told the Ethiopian the good news about Jesus. What might this explanation have looked like?

The servant passage in Isaiah 53 begins in Isaiah 52:13-15 and it mentions that this servant's work will extend beyond Israel to many nations. Cush would have been one of these nations and it is mentioned multiple places in the OT as a clear sign of God's end times judgment and salvation. Psalm 68 describes God's victory over His enemies in the future as like His victory over Egypt. And listen to what will happen in verses 28-31. And how will the nations stretch out their hands to God? Back in Isaiah it will come through the servants sprinkling of the nations by taking on their sins.

Listen to 53:4-6. It continues in verses 7-8 with the passage the Ethiopian quoted and finishes in verses 11-12. But it's important that you understand that Philip began in this passage but that he built from this passage toward Jesus. I don't think he stopped here. If you continue reading, Isaiah 54 builds on the work of the servant of the Lord and shows the results. Look at verses 1-3. Through the work of

the servant so many people will come to God that the tents need to be enlarged to hold them all. In fact, notice verse 3 that the nations will come. This growth of God's people to the nations will be tied to a New Covenant that God will make. Listen to 54:10 and 13.

But I don't think Philip stopped there. Isaiah 55 continues to show us the results of the work of the servant and the offer of salvation is extended to many. Look at verses 1 and 5. This will happen as God's Word goes forth. Listen to verses 10-11. And then look at how the new creation is described in verses 12-13.

So, follow what has been building here. The servant of the Lord will suffer for His people's sins and bring forgiveness and atonement, Isaiah 53. This will bring the nations to Him and inaugurate a new covenant, Isaiah 54. And God's Word will work and ultimately bring a new creation, Isaiah 55. But I don't think Philip ended there because of what we read in Isaiah 56:3-8. Can you imagine being this Ethiopian Eunuch after this?

Listen again to Acts 8:35. The good news is that all that these passages in Isaiah promise and expect has found fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth and the offer is made to this Ethiopian to receive a name better than sons and daughters, an everlasting name that will endure forever.

This is the sort of Scriptural engagement that provides the heart of God's unexpected work. The Gospel "works" as people are shown the entire biblical story and how it all fits and connects. The Gospel "works" as it is shown to be truly good news, and it gives real and tangible hope for the future. The Gospel "works" as we keep the person and work of Jesus Christ central.

This story about the Ethiopian Eunuch is ironic because in some ways it's so unexpected, but it's also a shining example of the same stuff happening over and over again. Christ is proclaimed and change happens, and the same pattern is followed. And that's our third factor.

### **3. Systematic Movement (vv. 36-40)**

What have we seen in Acts so far when people hear about Jesus and turn from their sin and trust in Him? They are baptized. Look at verse 36-38. Clearly the Ethiopian had heard of the importance of baptism from Philip or maybe seen it in Jerusalem, but he knows what he needs to do after turning to Christ.

He's baptized according to the pattern of the Great Commission and everything we've seen so far in Acts. God's work is unexpected but not haphazard.

And once he's baptized, we see the continuation of the spread of the Gospel. Look at verses 39-40. The Eunuch departs in joy and God's sovereign hand moves Philip on to the next place. Azotus would have been along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea north of Gaza and Caesarea was well north. Philip continued on his way preaching the gospel.

So, here's what I would say in closing. Embrace the unexpected work of God because it brings God glory. We can trust that He knows what He's doing and why and we can be faithful, as Philip was, to participate as we have opportunity. Let's pray.

### Sermon Reflection Questions – 2/9/25

- Describe an unexpected circumstance in your life that turned out to be a major blessing.
- How have you seen God work in unexpected ways to advance the gospel?
- Do you enjoy or dislike unexpected circumstances? How do you typically respond?
- How do we see God's sovereignty demonstrated in Acts 8:26-40?
- Should we expect clear, verbal guidance from the Spirit like we see with Philip in verse 29? Why or why not?
- What other passages in Scripture point to the importance of teaching in the life of the church and advancement of the gospel?
- What does Isaiah 53 teach us about the work of Jesus? How do we know this passage is talking about Jesus?
- Describe the movement of instruction from Isaiah 53 to the passage concerning the eunuch in Isaiah 56.
- What is the promise to the Ethiopian Eunuch in Isaiah 56?

- What are some ways our church could be more open to the unexpected work of God? How do we balance this with commitment to the systematic pattern given to us in Acts of Gospel, Repentance and faith, Baptism, life in the church?