

Acts 8:20-40

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[0 : 0 0] Wonderful. Good morning. My name's Tim and I'm going to be opening the Bible. If you've got Bible with you. If you want to turn to Acts chapter 8, that'll help us out. We're continuing! We're continuing our series through the book of Acts. And as we've seen over the last few weeks, God has been scattering his people. He's been sending them through circumstance sometimes and sometimes by telling them, go over here, to go to different places out from Jerusalem where they started, sending some to the ends of the earth and others to the end of the street, much like we are all sent to. And the believers have gone all over the shop. Last week, Andrew was telling us about Philip who went north to Samaria. And we're going to pick up Philip's story again this week as he goes south towards Africa. So I'm going to be reading in Acts chapter 8, starting at verse 26.

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, rise and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. This is a desert place. And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Kandike, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He'd come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning seated in his chariot. And he was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the spirit said to Philip, go over and join this chariot.

So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, do you understand what you're reading? And he said, well, how can I? Lest someone guides me. And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this.

Like a sheep, he was led to the slaughter. And like a lamb before its shearer is silenced, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation, justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth. And the eunuch said to Philip, about whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this? About himself or about someone else? Then Philip opened his mouth and beginning with this scripture, he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road, there came some water. And the eunuch said, see, here is water. What prevents me from being baptized? And he commanded the chariot to stop. And they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the spirit of the Lord carried Philip away. And the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus. And as he passed through, he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

[3 : 13] This is the word of the Lord. So what's going on? Philip, he's been to Samaria. He's had some surprising encounters there. And an angel appears to him and says, go south. Go on that desert road that's not particularly well traveled. Go that way. And he sees an African man in sort of a big fancy cart traveling along. This would be a man from probably a kingdom called Moreau. Ethiopia in the Bible just means everywhere south of Egypt. But he's likely to be from a place called Moreau, which is roughly where modern-day Sudan is. Famously wealthy. So wealthy that the Romans said, lead there costs more than gold. It's just huge natural mineral resources. And this man, this eunuch, has presumably chosen the quiet road to think. He's clearly a worshiper of Yahweh, the God of the Bible, because it says he's been to Jerusalem to worship. And now he's traveling, well, we assume home again. He's certainly going in that direction. And he's reading the Old Testament. He's an important guy. He's the treasurer to

Candace. He's the queen mother of this country, but she's basically responsible for running it. So he's in charge of all the money in one of the most wealthy countries on earth. And he's taken a journey that would be at least a quarter of a year each way, probably more.

This is significant devotion that this very important man has taken to go all the way up to Jerusalem to worship God and then come home again. And then Philip is nearby and the Spirit says, talk to that guy.

And so he does. Are we responsive to that kind of thing? Do we expect when we're moving around that the Holy Spirit might just whisper in our ears and say, just chat to them? I wonder if we should be. So Philip, he approaches.

Now, this thing will be going at quite a clip. So when it says he runs to it, he probably has to literally run alongside the thing to keep up with it. And it'll be noisy. So he'll be having to shout to be heard.

[5 : 35] But he hears the guy reading. Now, that's not strange. In the classical word, most people read out loud. So that's not a weird thing. But he hears the guy reading Isaiah and he's like, I know what this is. Interesting. And then he asks him, do you get that? Do you know what's going on? And the guy very humbly says, I haven't got a clue. How would I know unless someone explains it to me? And he asks particularly, like, who is this talking about? I mean, talk about an open door for evangelism.

I'm sure if you respond to the Spirit's prompting and chat to that person in the cafe, they are probably not reading Isaiah and going to say, who's this? And you'll be like, it's Jesus. And then you'll baptize them in the river way or something. That's probably not what's going to happen.

But nonetheless, you might be surprised when the Spirit prompts what doors open. But notice this guy's humility. He submits himself to the Bible and its teaching. He wants to know what's going on. And he wants someone to explain it to him. Do we do the same thing?

We certainly, I mean, you all sat here to listen to me open it, so this is a good sign. But we do live in a culture that teaches us to judge this book rather than allow it to judge us.

And then he hears the gospel. Philip opens it up to him and he says, that guy is Jesus. And he tells him about his death on the cross for his sins. And this eunuch says, wow. He trusts in Jesus for the first time. He gets baptized in obedience. And then Philip teleports 20 miles north, which we're not going to talk about, but that's fun. And then the eunuch leaves with joy. This is, as far as we know, the first African Christian in the world. The Saint Irenaeus tells the story that, which is tradition, we don't know if it's definitely true, but it tells the story that this guy returns to Moreau, preaches the gospel, many people get saved. What we do definitely know is, Moreau was very powerful.

[7 : 43] It's sort of on the wane by this point in history. Within 200 years, there's a very powerful kingdom there called Nubia, which is a Christian kingdom in sort of East Africa that is very powerful for about 1,000 years, that influences all of that continent for Jesus. Now, I don't know if this is true, but it is very possible that when the spirit whispers in Philip's ear and says, talk to him, and he does, what happens is a 1,000-year-long legacy of Christianity in Africa.

Maybe we should chat to that person in the coffee shop, because you never know. So Philip, he's alongside the chariot. He hears Isaiah being read. He asks the question. The guy sort of gives him the opportunity to talk about it. And then he explains to him, because he starts here, he explains to him Jesus' humiliation. He explains that Jesus dying on the cross was the most unjust thing that's ever happened in history, because this is the only truly innocent man that has ever been.

And he goes on trial for saying he's God and claiming to be king, both of which are true. But that Jesus submits to this injustice with patience. That he accepts it for, the book of Hebrews tells us, for the jury set before him. That he accepts it. That he allows himself to be humiliated.

He's humiliated. Now this bit is quite hard, certainly for white Westerners, but probably for most of us in the room to really get. Crucifixion is humiliating.

It's easy for us to think about the pain. It's very painful to die. It's essentially being tortured to death. But it's humiliating. Nailed to a beam of wood, naked, where people will gather to watch you slowly suffocate in your own liquid.

[10 : 06] And laugh and jeer, because you are clearly a terrible person. This is a death for slaves. They wouldn't do it to wealthy people. They wouldn't do it to women. This is a death for scum.

And there is deep shame attached to it. You're seen as a curse. It's like you're being cursed.

In fact, that's what the Old Testament says. Cursed is he who dies on a tree. It's humiliating. It's humiliating. And there's...

Like Jesus' pain became sport for the crowd. That's probably the way to think of it. And there's a rejection by everyone who you can see.

And in Jesus' case, a rejection on our behalf. It's difficult for us to grasp. I think we find it probably easier to think, he died for my sins.

[11 : 11] That's true. He took the punishment so that you don't have to. That's true. It's incredibly good news. He was also rejected so that you don't have to be. He was cast far from the Lord so that you don't have to be.

He endured separation and hell so that you don't have to. We find that a little bit harder to get our hands around. But this guy Philip's talking to, this eunuch, he knew shame.

I wonder if he might have found it a little bit easier to grasp. There's a reason that this is the angle that the spirit has opened for Philip to talk to him. So just for clarity's sake, which some of you will be like, oh no, he's going to say it.

Just in case you're not quite sure what a eunuch is, this is a man who's had his testicles removed or crushed. And it would typically happen to a very young man, possibly a child. He may well have been a slave.

We don't know that. It would often be the case. And it would be done so that he is considered to be safe in the presence of important women. So he can be left alone with important women because there's no chance of him in any way assaulting them sexually because he now does not have the relevant apparatus.

[12 : 34] And so this is, he's mutilated, essentially, for other people's benefit. He's an important man. He's, as we've seen, possibly in control of one of the largest treasuries on earth.

And yet, he's rejected in his own way. Something humiliating was done to him, probably when he was very young, and has now defined his whole life.

And he, we've seen, he's gone up to Jerusalem to worship. So he's, in some fashion, come to follow Yahweh, the God of the Bible. But that itself is difficult for him.

He can't, we would be pretty sure that he is not converted to Judaism. He's not a Jew. Because he can't be. So in Deuteronomy 23, it says that anyone whose testicles are removed or crushed is not allowed into the house of God.

And you might think, how would they know? I'm afraid to become a Jew. They would have to circumcise him. Literally have to check. So he wants to worship Yahweh, and yet, he just stands with his face, as it were, pressed against the window.

[13 : 54] He can't actually get in, because of what was done to him. And for Romans to meet a eunuch on the road was considered a bad enough omen that you would go another way.

And Philip, who's come to meet him, we learned a few chapters back, he's a Jewish man, but he's also Greek-speaking. He's immersed in Roman culture. He would have that saying, oh, Holy Spirit, you want me to talk to him?

Okay. It's almost, Philip would be fighting against the shame that his culture would have put on him to do this in the first place. This is a man who understands humiliation.

He understands rejection. And what Philip says to him is, Jesus was rejected so that you don't have to be. I imagine there are many in the room here who understand rejection.

Most of us, probably. To tell you a slightly trite story in some ways. When I was a small child, primary school, I joined the football club.

[15 : 14] Because all of my friends loved it, so I went with them. Now, you guys don't know me super well yet, but I am incredibly uncoordinated, and my limbs do not really go where I want them to. So I wasn't very good at it, but my friends liked it, so I went every week.

And it was the kind of, you know, it's just the primary school football team, it was the kind of thing where you were explicitly told, if you come to training every week, everyone gets to play on the team in a match at least once.

It does not matter if you're rubbish. You can see where this story's going. But, so I did that. I came to training every single week. You know, we'd play games in training. I'd get put in defence because I can't actually control the ball or tackle anyone.

But I could run at people and sort of encourage them to pass the ball to someone else. And I wasn't really enjoying myself. But my friends liked it, so you went. And, of course, everyone gets to play on a match, right?

Except for me. Why'd they put him in? And that kind of gets a small thing. Yeah, it's the equivalent of not being picked at playtime at sport, being the last guy in the row, which, yeah, happened a lot.

[16 : 23] Well, it's a little rejection. It can stick with you. But I suspect many of us in the room know much bigger things than that. Because when someone rejects you, but especially if it's someone who's important to you, particularly parents, actually, so often it's dads, but mums too, or your partner, or a sibling, or a close friend, it sticks, right?

It just sort of sticks in you. It's quite difficult to shake off. I imagine there's lots of people here who can just... You just remember that thing that they said that was belittling, or made you feel small, or made you feel less than you think you are.

It kind of sticks with you. They possibly didn't even intend it, to reject you, but you feel kind of rejected by it. That's what the eunuch lived with every day of his life.

But Jesus was rejected so that he doesn't have to be. Jesus died a death of humiliation so that that does not have to be the eunuch's story. And that's true for you too. It's true for you too.

And then the eunuch, he turns to Philip and he says, there's a pond there. What prevents me from being baptised? And I imagine as we read that, we sort of feel like he's just a sort of slightly odd way of saying, could you baptise me please?

[17 : 54] He's not saying that. He's saying, am I allowed in? Because I couldn't become a Jew. Am I allowed in here? As in, he's really worried when he says, what prevents me from being baptised?

That Philip might go, oh, sorry. Not for you. And then Philip baptises him.

He's washed clean and welcomed in. Because Jesus' arms are wide to open any who would come. To trust him. And then Philip disappears.

He was told he goes on his way rejoicing. I reckon he kept reading Isaiah. I don't know if this is true. But three chapters later, after what he was reading then, Isaiah says this. Isaiah 56, reading from verse 3.

Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord. So that's this guy, right? He's a foreigner who's joined himself to the Lord. Let him not say, the Lord will surely separate me from his people.

[18 : 58] There's quite a lot of negatives there. But you're reading that and Isaiah's saying, this guy, this eunuch is reading it and thinking, oh, I shouldn't say the Lord will surely separate me. Hmm.

Okay. And then he reads on. And let not the eunuch say, and one of his mouth drops, behold, I am a dry tree. But he felt like that.

For thus, says the Lord, to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths and who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house.

Hang on, he's not allowed in this house. I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

And that joke is deliberate. The Bible is earthier than you think it is. The eunuch reads it and he thinks, I have a lot cut off. And it's not just a physical thing. It feels like my life has been cut off.

[20 : 00] Yes, I've got importance, but I'm rejected everywhere I go. And then the Lord says, your everlasting name will not be cut off. You're welcome. And I imagine as he reads this and realizes that he might earlier have thought, but how can that be?

They won't let me in. And then he hears the gospel and he trusts in Jesus. And he realizes that everything is taken from on the cross. Wow. And he gets filled with joy.

That's what we're told in Acts. Philip disappears, puddles off 20 miles north by the power of the Spirit somehow. And then the eunuch goes on his way rejoicing.

Because you see, friends, this is all true for us too, right? We might feel rejected for lots of different reasons in our lives. But rightly speaking, the Lord should reject us.

We have not earned our way into his house. And we can't. Not good enough for that. But that's not what happens.

[21 : 10] Because Jesus takes our rejection on himself on the cross and then rises from death to life to be crowned as king of the world. But takes our rejection on himself.

So that we can just be accepted by God. And whatever things people might have said to us that make us feel rejected in the past get overwritten by Jesus saying to us, You're my daughter.

You're my son. I am for you and I love you and I want you. You're accepted. Do you know that's true? If you trust in Jesus, you are accepted by him.

Yeah, he asks us to change and stop doing all of our sin. Yeah, absolutely. It's not. But you, as you are in your heart, you accept it. So he responds in joy.

That's what happens when you meet Jesus. And he accepts you. You respond in joy. It's a difference. We should be a joyful people.

[22 : 19] You feeling joyful? I mean, it's not. If I stand here and say, Be more joyful and wag my finger at you. Funnily enough, that's not going to be very effective. But we should be a joyful people.

Where does joy come from? Well, firstly, it's a response. It's a response to what God's done.

In other words, get the gospel under your skin. So if, oh my word, I'm not rejected. Jesus has accepted me. It's like inside of you. And there's a hundred other ways you can describe the gospel.

The cross is wide in what it's done for us. But get it under your skin. This is one of the reasons that what we do at church every week. Because you hear the gospel.

What preaching is really is me saying, Have Jesus. Because you need that every week. I need that every week. My soul needs to be offered Jesus from the word every week. That's what we do in our worship, in our contributions.

[23 : 19] This is the gospel. We remind each other of it because we need to get it in us and under our skin. That's what church is for. We worship the Lord, as Hannah was telling us at the start.

Because he's worthy of it. But an added benefit is that we get under our skin the gospel and get to respond in joy. So it's a response to what God has done. Secondly, joy is a choice.

I wonder if you realise that. It doesn't feel like a choice, right? It's an emotion. They're not things that you choose except... I'm not so sure it is an emotion. Joy is not happiness.

Because some of you will be thinking, Tim, I cannot be joyful. You do not know what is going on in my life. It's rough right now. I'm really sorry. I'm sure it is. But joy, you can be feeling joy while you are tear-stained and battle-worn and right in the middle of a fight.

Sometimes in worship, you have to respond in sadness. Because everything in your life is very difficult right now. But joy is the choice to say God is good anyway.

[24 : 30] I believe that God is good despite all of this, what might seem like evidence to the contrary in front of me. That's joy. Sometimes it looks quiet and peaceful. Sometimes it looks like cackling in delight in the spirit.

But joy is the choice to believe that God is good. It's the choice to believe that the gospel is true. It's the choice to respond to that. So it's a response.

It's a choice. And finally, joy is a gift. Yes, we respond to truth. Yes, we get to choose it. But also the Lord by his spirit gifts us joy sometimes that bubbles up inside of us and seems to have very little to do with our circumstances.

It's a gift. It's a gift of the Holy Spirit. So what we're going to do, friends, is the band are going to come. And in a moment, we will worship.

But before we do, I'm going to ask the Holy Spirit to come and fill us with joy. And then we'll worship God. We'll see what happens. We might.

[25 : 33] Lots of different responses might happen in the room.