

From Fringe to Family

A Sermon on Acts 8:26-40

Knox @ Faith Tacoma

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Immediately before ascending, in Acts 1:8, the Lord Jesus commissions his apostles, “you will be my witnesses in **Jerusalem** and in all **Judea** and **Samaria**, and to the **ends** of the **earth**.” The **first seven chapters** of Acts showed us the apostles’ witness in **Jerusalem**, climaxing in **Stephen’s sermon** to the Jewish **council** and his **martyrdom** at their hands. Chapter 8 showed us how Stephen’s death became the **providential catalyst** for entering the **second** phase of this mission: **Judea** and **Samaria**. In our **last two sermon** texts we saw early Christians fruitfully bearing witness for Christ in **Samaria**.

This week the scene shifts to **Judea**, but with an eye towards the **ends of the earth**, as the Lord directs Philip to an **Ethiopian** who is returning from a **pilgrimage** to Jerusalem. But in this story the gospel not only expands **geographically**, but **socially and culturally** as well, as a eunuch is brought from the **fringes** of God’s covenant people into the **family**.

As we read Acts 8:26-40 consider what it teaches us about the **grace** of the Lord Jesus displayed in the **gospel**.

This is the word of the Lord...

Acts 8:26-40 portrays **three** aspects of the **saving grace** of Jesus.

Frist, it shows us that the saving grace of Jesus is **sovereign**. Look again with me at this passage and notice how the Lord **seeks out** the Ethiopian. Notice, in verse 26, how the Lord **sends his angel** to Philip, **directing** him to go to a desolate place in the desert. Surely that must have seemed like a **strange** command to Philip, especially when you remember the **context** (*that he was in the midst of a Samaritan revival at the time.*¹) “Lord, you want me to **leave the Samaritan revival** and go to a **desolate place in the desert?**” Nevertheless, Philip obeyed, we presume, because he **trusted** that the **Lord knew best**. Indeed, it was **so**, for in that **unlikely** place Philip found the **entourage** of the **Treasurer** of the **Queen of Ethiopia**. Notice as well, in verse 29, that the Lord directs Philip even **more specifically**, this time to the **very chariot** where the eunuch is sitting. Reading this text, you can almost imagine the Lord Jesus **tapping Philip on the shoulder** and **pointing**, “that one, right there.”

Along similar lines, notice how the Lord **spirits Philip away** as soon as the eunuch is baptized. “And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more.” Many commentators have pointed out how **similar** this action is to the **sudden disappearances and movements of Elijah**.² The connection seems to be that **Philip**, like **Elijah**, is the **Lord’s servant** and the **Lord’s messenger**. **Both** serve at the Lord’s **beck and call**. As soon as **one** mission is complete, the Lord moves him on to the **next** one.

But this passage contains still more **subtle evidence** of the Lord’s **sovereign grace**. Consider the **marvelous coincidence** that this man is reading, **audibly**, from Isaiah **53** at the **very moment** when Philip approaches him. These verses come from a wider passage known as one the “Servant Songs” of Isaiah (*starting in chapter 52*), and they contain one of the **clearest** prophecies of the coming **Messiah** to be found **anywhere** in the Old Testament. The New Testament alludes

¹ Kudos to Toby Sumpter for this insight, found in his sermon on this text. “The Continuing Adventures of Jesus #13” Canon Plus App

² Thanks to Ben Witherington and the Theopolis guys for this insight

to **this** Servant Song several times, especially in the **trial scenes of Jesus** when he remains **silent** before his accusers and when he **unjustly** receives the **death** penalty. This passage **also** clearly teaches the doctrine of **penal substitutionary atonement** (*theological jargon for the idea that Jesus Christ suffered and died in order to pay the penalty for **our** sins*). It is one of the most **well-known** and **beloved** passages of the Old Testament, serving as the inspiration for hymns such as “**Man of Sorrows**,” and “**Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted**” and as the inspiration for contemporary praise songs such as “**By His Wounds**.”

It’s hard to imagine a more **fortuitous** Old Testament text from which to **preach Christ**.³

But even more importantly, notice the Ethiopian’s **approachable, teachable attitude**. Look again at verse 31 and consider the **humility** of his response to Philip “Do you **understand** what you are reading?” and he said, “How **can I**, unless someone **guides** me?” Consider also the **golden opportunity** hidden in his question in verse **34**, “About **whom**, I ask you, does the prophet **say** this, about **himself**, or **about someone else**?” In terms of evangelism, this question is a **fastball at waist level, straight over the middle of home plate**. And this **heart** is one that has been **tilled** and **watered** by the Holy Spirit. All that remains is for Philip to **cast the seed** of the **gospel** and watch it sprout.

But there’s **more** evidence of the Lord’s sovereign grace. Knowing in advance how the Ethiopian eunuch would respond, the Lord even provided the **water** for **baptism**, so that the eunuch could be **formally ingrafted** into the **body** of Christ and have **gospel benefits signified, sealed, and applied** to him.

Put **all** these details together and the **picture** becomes **clear**: the Lord **sovereignly orchestrated this moment of grace**. From the **circumstances**, to the **messenger**, to the **heart condition**, the **Lord** directed it **all**.

In Luke 19:10, after witnessing the repentance and faith of **Zaccheus**, Jesus describes his mission this way, “For the Son of Man came to **seek** and **save** the

³ Thanks to Dr Rayburn for this insight!

lost.” The story of the Ethiopian eunuch is a **beautiful fulfillment** of that mission statement. Just as Jesus sought **Zaccheus**, and called to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today,” so the Lord **here** seeks out the **eunuch** and calls to him through Philip, through the Isaiah, and through baptism.

This story is **also** a fitting illustration of what Pastor **Steven** told us in the **first** sermon of this series on **Acts**: that this book tells the story of what **Jesus continues** to do and teach⁴. Though He has **ascended** to the right hand of God, He **continues** to build His church.

As **Calvinists**, we often emphasize (*and rightly so*) that the sovereignty of God’s grace should **humble** us. As those who are dead in sin, we don’t even have the moral capacity to **choose** Christ and His grace until His Spirit has first **awakened** us.

But, the sovereignty of God’s grace should not only **humble** us, it should also **warm** us. It should increase our **affection** for our Lord and Savior. As the story of the eunuch illustrates so beautifully, **every** conversion is a story of the Lord’s **personal pursuit** of us. He is the **husband**, and we are the **bride**. He sees us from **afar**, sets His **love** upon us, **unworthy** and **unlovely** as **we** are. He **pursues** us and **draws** us to Himself, and though He is **holy** and worthy of our **reverence** and **fear**, He is also **lovely** and altogether **desirable**.

Christian, is **your** heart **warm** towards Jesus this evening? Perhaps **now** is a good time for you to **remember** the way He first drew you to Himself, and the **many** ways He **continues** to pursue you.

The sovereignty of Jesus’ grace should **also** give us **confidence** in evangelism. Ultimately, it’s **not up to us** to **change the mind** of an unbeliever, to **convince** him of his sin and misery, to **disabuse** him of the lies and self-deceptions he has

⁴ Nicoletti, Steven. “All That Jesus Continued to Do and Teach” Sermon on Acts 1:1-5. September 3, 2023. www.faithtacoma.org/acts-nicoletti-gutierrez-white/all-that-jesus-continued-to-do-and-teach-acts-11-5

embraced. Of course, we can and should **reason with** and **appeal to** unbelievers when we have the opportunity. But, ultimately, we are merely **instruments** in the Lord's hands. He is the one who **enlightens, convicts, convinces** and **regenerates**. That ought to be both a **comfort** and an **encouragement**.

The **sovereignty** of grace.

Secondly, our text shows us that the grace of Jesus is **available**. Look at it again and notice that there are **three specific** ways that Jesus **communicates** his grace to the Eunuch.

The first is through his **word**. We've already noted how **felicitous** it was that the eunuch was reading from the **Servant Song of Isaiah** when Philip found him, but consider with me more broadly how the word of God had already been working on this Ethiopian for **some time**. Ponder the significance of the passing comment in verse 27 that this man was **returning from a pilgrimage** to Jerusalem. Scholars debate whether this man was a God-fearing Gentile or a diaspora Jew⁵, but in **either** case, he was clearly a man who had **significant exposure to the Scriptures!** The fact that he **owned** a **copy of Isaiah** was remarkable in and of itself, given how **rare** and **precious scrolls** of **any** kind were in the ancient world.

Humanly speaking, one of the main reasons why this eunuch understood and received Philip's preaching of the gospel so **readily** was that he had been **prepared for it by the Old Testament. Who knows** how many months or years the Lord had **tilled the ground of this man's heart** with His word?

The **second** specific way that Jesus communicates His grace to this man is through **Philip**. Even though the eunuch had one of the Old Testament's clearest prophecies of Christ in front of him, he **still** needed to **hear the gospel** from one of Christ's **messengers**. Look again at verse 35 and notice how Philip **guides** the **eunuch's reading of Isaiah** towards the gospel of Jesus Christ, "Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture, he told him the good news about Jesus." This ought to be a reminder to us that the interpretation of Scripture

⁵ See "Acts 8: Saul, Simon, Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch." Theopolis Podcast on Theopolis App. Apr 6, 2023 or Ben Witherington's commentary

is **never spiritually neutral**, and that the Lord has given us **ministers** to help guide **our** understanding of his word.

The **third** way that Jesus communicates His grace to this man is through **baptism**. Look again at this passage and notice how baptism is the **climax** of his conversion, and results in rejoicing. This is because, as Shorter Catechism 93 puts it, baptism is how “Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are **represented, sealed, and applied** to believers.” In 28.1 the WCF specifically **names** some of those benefits which are applied in baptism, “**ingrafting into Christ, regeneration, remission of sins and...newness of life.**”

This three-fold pattern of **Word, Messenger, and sacrament** should seem familiar to us because it is the same pattern seen in the conversions of **Paul** and **Cornelius**. But even more significantly, it is the same pattern seen in Luke **24** in the Road to **Emmaus**.⁶ Think about it: both episodes both take place in the context of a **journey**. Both involve a **messenger** who helps his conversation partners to see **Jesus in the Old Testament**. Both episodes climax with one of the **sacraments**. Both episodes **conclude** with the messenger **vanishing** and the disciples **rejoicing**.

Noticing the similarities between our **sermon** text and the **Emmaus road passage** helps us to see that this passage **truly is about Jesus’ ongoing efforts to build his church**. Although he is now at the right hand of God, He is still drawing near to sinners in the **same basic three-fold pattern of word, messenger, and sacrament**.

Theologians have a **term** for this idea that the saving grace of Jesus is available to us through **certain means: the means of grace**. SC 85 speaks to this when it says, “to escape the wrath and curse of God, due to us for sin, God requireth of us faith in Jesus Christ, repentance unto life, **with the diligent use of all the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption.**” SC 88 **specifies** those means saying, “The outward and ordinary

⁶ Numerous commentators highlight these similarities, but I am especially indebted to David Peterson, Alistair Robers, and Ben Witherington for these insights.

means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption are, his ordinances, especially the **Word** (*which, I think is intended to include both the written word and the preaching of the word*) **sacraments**, and **prayer**; all which are made **effectual** to the elect **for salvation**.”

As we read about the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, it’s important to remember that saving grace is not only **sovereign**, but **available**. If we **only** emphasize the **sovereignty** of grace, we are in danger of falling into various forms of **hyper-Calvinism**, such as thinking that we cannot make a **free offer of the gospel** to an unbeliever, or that we cannot share the gospel with someone until we have **evidence** that he/she has come under a heavy **sense of conviction**, or thinking that it **doesn’t matter** if we preach, share, pray, or go because, after all, God is sovereign so He doesn’t need our help to save anyone.

Taken to its logical conclusion, the error of hyper-calvinism leads to a **passive apathy** about all things spiritual. It is a kind of **fatalism** in which our actions don’t ultimately matter because **all** that matters is God’s sovereignty.

But that is **not** the **Bible’s** doctrine of God’s sovereignty. Without explaining exactly **how** they fit together, the Bible simply **proclaims both** that God is **sovereign and** that man is **responsible**, that God is **totally in control** of **all** things, including the **heart** of man, and **yet** that man’s **choices** are **real, meaningful, consequential**, and the proper objects of His **judgments**. In other words, the Bible teaches that grace is not only **sovereign** but **available** to those who seek it according to the **means** God has provided.

Look again at this passage and notice that **both** of these truths are represented. We’ve already seen how the Lord sought out the eunuch, but notice as well that the **eunuch** also sought the **Lord**. Remember that he was returning from a **pilgrimage** to Jerusalem, the **city of God**, where he **surely** sought the lord in **prayer** and most likely listened to the **teaching of priests**. Perhaps this was during a **holy festival**, although he was likely excluded from most of the festivities due to his condition as a eunuch. He was diligently **searching the scriptures** when Philip

found him, and he **asked** for Philip's **guidance**! And after hearing the gospel message, he **asked** to be **baptized**!

The **wonder of the means of grace** is that **Christ has made himself available** to **sinners**! Christian, do **you** have a **guilty conscience**? Have **you** been **defiled** by sin, depravity, uncleanness, and death? Then **confess** your sins and **remember** your **baptism**. Paul says that you have been **washed, sanctified, resurrected, and clothed** with Christ. Do you need **wisdom**? Do you need to find the path to **blessing, life, and peace**? Then meditate on His **word**. Do you need help **understanding and applying** His word to your life? Then come hear the **preaching** of His word, and ask His **ministers** for counsel. Do you need **help**? Do you have **burdens, anxieties, and needs**? Then **pray**! Do you long for a closer **communion** with Him, and to be **reassured** of His love for you? Then take the **Lord's Supper**!

The grace of Jesus is **available**.

And, thirdly, the grace of Jesus is **universal**. Now, let me be **clear**: by universal, I do **not** mean **universalism**, which is the **false** doctrine that **every single individual** who has ever lived will ultimately be **saved**. Our confession calls universalism "**pernicious and to be detested**," and, indeed, it is, because it makes **evangelism** ultimately **unnecessary** and so **paves the way to hell**.

Instead, when I say that the grace of Jesus is **universal**, I mean to emphasize **two truths**: 1) that the Lord Jesus intends to save some people from **every tribe, tongue, and nation** (*in other words, that the gospel and the church are not **limited to any one language, nationality, or culture***) 2) that the church should strive to **present** the gospel universally- that is, to present it to **everyone, everywhere, in every age**.

Look again at our passage and ponder with me how **remarkable** it is that an **Ethiopian eunuch** would be brought into the people of God. First, it is remarkable because this man was probably not **ethnically Jewish**. Scholars debate whether this man could have possibly been a **diaspora Jew**- the Ethiopian version of Daniel-

but most agree that this is **unlikely**⁷. Throughout the ancient world, the word Ethiopian **usually** meant a **black African from the Upper Nile**, which is in modern-day Sudan.

As Gentile Christians living in the 21st century, **we take it for granted** that Jesus Christ came to save sinners from **every** tribe and tongue. We take it for granted that the people of God are **not limited to any one nationality, ethnicity, geography, or demographic**. But it's **helpful to remember** that it was **not** always so. **Prior to Pentecost**, with a few notable exceptions like Rahab or Namaan, the **vast majority** of God's people **were** limited to **one** ethnicity, **one** culture, and **one** corner of the world.⁸

In his commentary, Ben Witherington points out that for the ancient Greeks, **Ethiopia** was considered to be **the ends of the earth**⁹. It was on the **border** of their **known world**. Therefore, the conversion of this Ethiopian man was not **only** the first fruits of Jesus' command to be his **witnesses** to the **ends of the earth** (*remember his commission in Acts 1:8*), but also of the many **prophecies** regarding the **inclusion of Gentile nations** into the people of God. For example Habakuk 2:14, "For the **earth will be filled** with the knowledge of the glory of Yahweh, as the waters cover the sea."

It's common to hear our faith **criticized** and **dismissed** as the **narrow-minded hobgoblin** of a particular **time, place, or people**: for example, many Native Americans have resisted Christianity on the grounds that it is "white-man's religion;" the **critical theories** of the **academy** rejects the gospel on the grounds that it is part of an **oppressive, racist system of European colonialism**; **Karl Marx** rejected the faith on the grounds that it was the "opiate of the masses;" **Nietzsche** rejected it on the **opposite** grounds- that it was a morality of **slaves and weaklings**. And right now it is common to hear **evangelicalism** identified as a **power-hungry political movement of right-wing, white, middle-class**

⁷ See "Acts 8: Saul, Simon, Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch." Theopolis Podcast on Theopolis App. Apr 6, 2023 or Ben Witherington's commentary

⁸ Thanks to Dr Rayburn for reminding me of the significance of that truth for this text. Rayburn, Robert "The Next Step" A Sermon on Acts 8:26-40 January 3, 2016. www.faithtacoma.org/category/acts2/the-next-step-acts-826-40

⁹ Witherington, Ben. *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Eerdmans. 1998.

conservatives. Now, I think we should be willing to admit that, at times, there may have been **some degree of truth** to **some** of those criticisms. We, as **Calvinists** who believe in **total depravity**, should be the **first** to recognize that our faith and the church can be **hijacked** by the sinfulness of man.

But, even as we acknowledge that possibility, we can **confidently** say that the **church of Jesus Christ is the greatest, widest, and most enduring society this world has even seen.**¹⁰ **Centuries** before the terms “evangelicalism,” or “White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant” were coined, **the gospel of Jesus Christ made its way to Ethiopia.** The doctrines of our faith and the claims of Christ are **not idiosyncratic, culturally-constructed oddities of history. There are universally binding and relevant truths with a capital “T.”**

Keep this story of the Ethiopian eunuch **in your back pocket** the next time that someone tries to tell you that Christianity is the product of an oppressive, western, white, European imperialism. **There was an evangelist in Northeastern Africa before there was a single Christian in all of Europe.**

But the conversion of this man is not only remarkable because he was an **Ethiopian**, but also because he was a **eunuch**. Although the term “eunuch” was occasionally used to mean nothing more than a **court official**, the term usually meant a court official whose **reproductive organs had been incapacitated**, either by means of **castration** alone, or by means of castration and **partial dismemberment.**¹¹ The reasons for the **connection** between **reproductive incapacity and office in the court** are both **cruel and straightforward**. A eunuch could effectively serve and guard the king’s harem and/or queen because there was absolutely **no danger of him getting them pregnant**. Equally important, eunuchs could not **produce rivals to the throne**, and so they were far more likely to be **loyal** to the throne. Their entire **livelihood** was **invested** in the continuation of the dynasty.¹²

¹⁰ I think there’s a book out there called “God’s Great Society” but I couldn’t find it

¹¹ Witherington, Ben. The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary. Eerdmans. 1998

¹² I can’t remember where I got these helpful insights

This Ethiopian’s status as a eunuch is **significant for his spiritual life** because Deuteronomy 23:1 says that “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD.” The word “**assembly**” there is translated “**ekklesia**” in the Greek version of the Old Testament, which is the same word translated into English as “**church**”. In other words, under the **Mosaic** covenant, no eunuch could be part of the **church’s worship!** Even worse, it’s possible that this man **might** have been **unable to receive circumcision**, the sign and seal of the **covenant**.¹³

For a believer under the Mosaic covenant, these kinds of restrictions presented an enormous **dilemma**. How could you be included in the covenant **people, promises, and blessings** without being **circumcised**? How could you make **atonement** without being allowed to bring **sacrifices**? How could you express your **gratitude** and **loyalty** if you couldn’t bring a **tribute offering**? How could you **keep covenant** if you can’t participate in the **festivals of Passover, Unleavened bread, or the Feast of Booths**?

This was a man that, no matter how sincere, how repentant, how faithful, would always be, at best, on the fringes of God’s people.

But this man was not only excluded from the **blessings** of the **Mosaic** covenant, he was also excluded from the **natural blessings of marriage and children**. Remember the Lord’s **original** blessing on mankind, “Be **fruitful** and **multiply**.”

In other words, this man had not only been excluded from the **family of God**, but from the **natural family** as well.

Several commentators point out how **fitting** it is that Philip finds this eunuch in a **desert**.¹⁴ The **barrenness** of the **desert** reflects the **barrenness** of his **soul**. He

¹³ Witherington, Ben. *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Eerdmans. 1998

¹⁴ Leithart, Peter; Meyers, Jeff; Roberts Alistair. Bejohn, James. “Acts 8: Saul, Simon, Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch.” Theopolis Podcast on Theopolis App. Apr 6, 2023. And Roberts, Alistair. “Acts 8 (Part 3).” *The Book of Acts: Biblical Reflections*. Theopolis App. Mar 21, 2023

has been **cut off** from the **people of God**. He has been **cut off** from the **house of God**. He has been **cut off from the covenant**.

The barrenness of the desert **also** reflects the barrenness of his **body**. His **manhood** has been cut off. He has been cut off from **children**. He has been cut off from **marriage**. His **name** and his **memory** will be cut off when he **dies**.

If a eunuch dies in the **desert** and **no one is around to hear him**, does it make a **sound**?

And perhaps that sense of **barrenness** is what drew him to the **Servant Song of Isaiah 53**, which **also** tells the story of someone who was **cut off**. Speaking of the **Lord's servant** Isaiah 53:8 says, "By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that **he was cut off** out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?"

Like the **eunuch, this servant of the Lord** was denied a **wife** and **children**. Like the **eunuch, this servant of the Lord** was a man of **sorrows** and acquainted with **grief**. Like the **eunuch, this servant of the Lord** was **despised** and **rejected** by the **people of God**, **afflicted** and **smitten** by God's providence.

But **unlike** the eunuch, **this servant of the Lord** was pierced for **our** transgressions, crushed for **our** iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought **us** peace, and with his wounds **we** are healed."

This servant of the Lord could not only **understand and sympathize** with the eunuch's barrenness; he could **redeem** it.

Only **three** chapters after this servant song, Isaiah **56:3-7** says this, Let not the **foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD** say, "The LORD will surely **separate** me from his people"; and let not the **eunuch** say, "Behold, I am a **dry tree**." For thus says the LORD: "To the **eunuchs** who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, 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 the **foreigners** who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name

of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant— these I will bring **to my holy mountain**, and make them **joyful** in my house of prayer; **their burnt offerings** and their **sacrifices** will be **accepted** on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer **for all peoples.**”

Through the **cross**, this Ethiopian eunuch was made **clean, whole, acceptable, and righteous** in God’s sight. Through **baptism** this Ethiopian eunuch was **clothed with Christ** and **adopted** into the **family** of God.

According to church tradition, this man not only become a **son** in Christ, but a spiritual **father** to one of the most ancient and long-standing branches of the church.

Through the **cross** of Christ, the **grace** of God has been made available to **all** people. Hallelujah! Amen!

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