

Part 16: Good News in Motion

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November 17, 2024

I wonder how many of you in here today are worried or discouraged. Maybe you're struggling with an illness. Maybe you're frustrated at the way life is going, and you're hoping that whatever is in the church might help you feel better. I've got bad news for a lot of you. Your biggest problem is probably bigger than you think. We are all sinners, and we have a better chance of getting promoted to CEO than we do of ridding ourselves of our sin. But I've got good news for you: Jesus solves that problem. That's why the gospel is good news.

But what if you already believe that good news, and salvation was no magic pill to make your illness go away. While Christ's holiness is imputed to you—the score you needed on the exam to get your internship wasn't. But I've got good news for you: our greatest purpose and most meaningful life is a life dedicated to worshipping Jesus and sharing the gospel wherever we go.

Evangelism is a scary word. Some of us are scared of being evangelized. Some of us are terrified of evangelizing. But in the Greek, evangelism is simply the act of "good news-ing." And what we see today is that it is a life of evangelism which brings purpose to a displaced and persecuted Christian, and it is the message of evangelism that brings peace to a downtrodden soul.

That's why our main point today attempts to encourage the work of evangelism for the Christian and to make clear the message of evangelism to the non-Christian. Our main point today is this: **Evangelism is good news in motion.**

As Luke is writing the book of Acts, he takes a bit of an aside in chapters 8 and 9 to show us the way in which the word of God is at work in the people of God—in paradoxical ways—and how through that means the church is growing.

We will see this in three parts today. First we will see: **Evangelism and the Work of the Lord**, then we will see **Evangelism and the Word of the Lord**, and lastly we will see **Evangelism as the Way of the Lord**.

Acts 8 opens up following a Jerusalem Christian named Philip. We don't know much about Philip—but what we do know is that he wasn't an apostle—he was simply a faithful Christian who was called to serve the church. Yet, Philip, and all sort of normal every day Christians, have now been separated from the comfort of their homes, their families, their leaders and forced to run due to persecution.

And while everything has changed—nothing has changed. There's no existential crisis—there's no loss of identity. The Christians on the run kept doing what the Christians did while at home. Have you ever seen a prank where someone's coffee has been switched out for something else? It's interesting to us because we want to see how they respond.

But the sweet tea of the church had been swapped out for the lemons of persecution—but they just made lemonade. Nothing changed. Why is that? All of us need to work, we were built to. But the abiding purpose of our work is to work for the glory of the Lord. Whether they were flipping burgers in

Jerusalem, or tent making in Damascus, these Christians found their greatest stability when their work was fitted inside God's ultimate work.

In our overly anxious and consumeristic world passages like these remind us of Jesus' powerful words to his disciples in Matthew to: "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things," things like food, lodging, and provision, "will be added to you."

We see that at play here. The more the authorities tried to destabilize the church—the more the church found that their stability was in Christ—and he had promised to be with them wherever they went so that wherever they were they might work heartily at glorifying God and loving others.

Chief and central to this work is the work of evangelism. The missionary William Carey once famously said, "To know God's will for your life, all you need is an open Bible and a map."

And here we see our first point: **Evangelism and the Work of the Lord.**

Look with me at **Acts 8:26-29**, "Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Rise and go toward 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 Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had 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 are reading?' And he said, 'How can I unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him."

When my wife and I were married, like most of us—we had no money. So when our first anniversary came around—I wanted to set the mood for it. But all I could afford was a trip to Spokane and an ordinary run of the mill hotel room. But when we arrived, we were told that we had been upgraded to the Penthouse suite. Inside the room we found flowers, wine and chocolates awaiting us.

Befuddled, my wife looked at me as if I did this. But the truth was—we both knew I didn't have what it took. Someone else went before us and did the work in advance. While evangelism is always hard work, and demands our faithfulness—what this story in Acts shows us is that God always does the work in advance. When we get to the moment of evangelism he has sovereignly and meticulously prepared the whole room.

Did you see God's sovereign hand all over this passage? Philip is led by the Holy Spirit to a desert road the opposite direction of where he was just going. But it just so happens he meets an important figure, from a land far away country, who happened to be reading the Bible out loud, and it just so happened he needed help understanding it, and it just so happened Philip shows up and asks him about it, and it just so happens that the man invites Philip up into his chariot.

In this passage the mood lighting for evangelism was perfect. But Philip didn't do anything to create it. God did. Often times we are so worried about evangelism because we think we need to light the candle of apologetics, find a good album of corresponding circumstances, and fill a glass with a perfectly balanced drink of relational knowledge and a detailed plan of attack.

I don't say this to diminish studying apologetics, establishing relationships or working hard to be clear in evangelism. I say this to show us that you never evangelize alone. God is a better evangelist than you. If

you're a non-believer in here today—I can promise you that you're not the one ultimately in control of your heart. God is zealous to save. I love C.S. Lewis' sentiment reflecting on his desire to never convert to Christianity. He said, "The master angler played his fish and I never dreamt the hook was in my mouth."

Notice what Paul says later on in Acts: **Acts 17:24-26**, "The God who made the whole world, and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything since he himself gives to mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.."

The God who created the whole world by his actions has not removed himself from the world. This isn't an experiment. In experiments, experts work to establish the perfect conditions in hopes that it will reach their desired goal. But when the rubber meets the road, all the scientist does is step back and watch. Scientists run experiments but a Sovereign God directs history. Paul says he made each of us, he determined our time periods, he set the size of your dwelling place. Why?

Acts 17:27, "that [we] should seek God, and perhaps feel [our] way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us."

I've never met a Christian who doesn't desire to share the gospel. But I've met many Christians discouraged and anxious about such a task. But I wonder if you would allow your work to be encouraged by God's work? He has trusted the church with this task—and he is working out in front of you. Jesus is so confident in this that he says this to his disciples in Matthew: **Matthew 24:14**, "And the gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."

If we only look at life through the lens of where we see opportunity to share the gospel—we will always struggle to find the right time. But if we look instead to see where God is working in the lives of those around us—we will find ample opportunities. It is the will of the Father, the message of the Son, and the work of the Spirit—so take heart. Align your work with God's work and ask him to show you how your location, your vocation and your relationships can be used for his glory.

The beautifully good news about evangelism is that because it is the work of the Lord, he doesn't leave us on our own to find the gospel. But he also doesn't leave us on our own to understand or give away the gospel! From start to finish—God is working through the efforts of the church.

This is our next point, **Evangelism and the Word of the Lord**.

I want to point out two specific works here. The first is the word and God's faithful work, and the second is the word and God's faithful workers.

Regarding the **word and God's faithful work**. Notice how just as God ordained the external circumstances of this meet up—he was also orchestrating the inner work in the hearts of both men. How did he do this? Through his word.

If you're here today wondering what Christianity is all about, I'm so glad you're here and hope you continue. But I would encourage you that the best way to know God is to read God's own word. If

you've never read the Bible before, maybe start reading the gospel of Mark, or the letter of Ephesians. God tells us not only that the Bible is his word—but he tells us that his Holy Spirit inspires it—as we try and understand it he labors to help us understand our own hearts.

It is, as the author of Hebrews tells us living and active, sharper than any two edged sword piercing to the division of the soul and of the spirit and of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

I have the opportunity to do some evangelistic teaching outside the church every fall. This past week one of the men who attended pulled me out before hand and told me that he felt his whole life was being turned over. But before I could tell him that I get that response often, he told me how: his wife had given him a Bible and he began to read it. And while he didn't know for certain what all was happening—something had grabbed a hold of him.

This is similar to what this Ethiopian experienced in Acts. Returning from Jerusalem he was reading the Old Testament book of Isaiah and he was captivated by it.

From a theological perspective he was captivated because God was at work in his word. But from his own perspective what grabbed him? Well, to understand this we need to look back at the description of the man in in verses 27-28.

What we know is that he's not Jewish. In fact, he's from Africa, specifically Ethiopia. He's also a man of high importance, he works in the court of the Queen and acts as the Chief Financial Officer of the nation. And yet he has heard about the God of the Jews and is moved by him. He's returning from Jerusalem where he was worshipping God.

But—being a foreigner he would not have been allowed to go any further than the court of the Gentiles. However—there's more here. He's also eunuch—which meant, as was customary to the time for those who served near royal females, he had been castrated. This added another level of distance—the Old Testament law would allow a Gentile to get semi-close, but for someone who was in his state—he was not even allowed in the assembly of God's people.

And it just so happened that in reading from the 53rd chapter of Isaiah—he sees someone who for the first time is just like him. Here is a man who is himself cut off from his own people. Here is a man who is humiliated himself—denied justice. Here is a man whose future life has been taken away from him—and it seems there will be no generations after him.

Whatever this passage is talking about—he needed to know more. And notice his question: **Acts 8:34**, “About whom, I ask you does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?”

Who was this man who was so like the Ethiopian? In verse 30, we see that this man's problem was in his understanding. But what do we need to understand? I wonder what you think the central piece of information you need to unlock your understanding of the Bible is? Because what we see here is that we don't need help understanding what the Bible is saying—that's often self-evident. We need help seeing to whom the Bible is pointing. That's his question—who is this about?

And here, Phillip was given the lay-up of all layups. And here is where we see the **word and God's faithful workers. Acts 8:35**, "Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture he told him the good news about Jesus."

As you get more versed in sharing the gospel you might find more helpful arguments, and more helpful apologetics, but you will never find a different gospel. The work of the Christian is to share Jesus from the Bible. This is so wonderfully encouraging because if you are a Christian you too have met Jesus in the Bible!

Notice how Philip was able to do this from this wonderful passage in Isaiah 53—a passage you can do this from as well.

Who is the man who had the same experience of the Eunuch? Jesus! He was cut off from his people, his life was taken away from him. Why? Philip probably continued teaching from that same passage: He did this because he has "borne our griefs and carried our sorrow;" "he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities," "he poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors, yet he bore the sins of many."

Jesus was not humiliated because he was cut off—he was humiliated because we were cut off. Our sins lead Jesus the Son of God to leave his heavenly heritage for that divine wonder of his incarnation. But he did so in order that all who have been cut off, spiritually and physically might be restored to life.

My guess is that Philip rolled the scroll up a little bit more and showed the Eunuch this: **Isaiah 56:3-7**, "Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people'; 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.'"

Jesus came, and Jesus died so that you however far off you might be—might be restored not only to God but to the people of God and heritage of God. The message of Jesus not only saves physical eunuchs, but it keeps us from becoming spiritual eunuchs.

Our own salvation—as declared to us in scripture—is the seedbed from which we share Christ from scripture with others. It is, unfortunately, that simple.

I love reading. I'm also not a particularly gifted evangelist. So it's all too easy for me to spend my time reading books on evangelism, or apologetics with the idea that those will make a better evangelist. But those are like salt on an empty plate. Salt draws out the flavor that's already there. If we aren't reading our Bibles, if we aren't showing people who Jesus is from the Bible—then you can salt a plate all you want and it will just taste like salt. But the gospel tastes like Jesus.

If you want to be encouraged—look at the work of God in the person of Jesus. He has done what you cannot. He knows you like no other because he and he alone knows your sins—for he has borne them for you in his very person. No one else in the whole world can say that. And as a Christian, be encouraged that you didn't miss the class on evangelism. God is working in history, and he's working daily through his word, and what this passage shows is that he's also working daily through ordinary believers in the context of his church.

This is our last point this morning: **Evangelism and the Way of the Lord.**

I'm sure you've all seen a good comeback movie. Let's say there's a boxer who suffers an injury. But then he rehabs, and there's a thematic montage of him sweating it out, of updated xrays, and finally, a clean bill of health. What if at that moment the movie ended?

Well, if we aren't careful we can flatten our Christian message to that as well. You've been saved not by your sweat, but by Jesus', not by your rehab, but by Jesus'. By his wounds you have been healed. Closing credits.

That's what would have happened if Philip, content that the Ethiopian had his head on straight about Jesus, just hopped out of the chariot and walked away. But look at what happens next: **Acts 8:36-40**, "And as they were going along the road, they came to 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."

Philip here models how evangelism needs its counterpart of discipleship. He stayed in the chariot—and as they were on that desert road—what did God bring about? Water. God always brings us what we need, even when we are seemingly in the desert.

And when the Ethiopian sees the water what does he ask Philip? "What prevents me from being baptized?" Why is that? Well, because as Philip explained the gospel that saves us it appears he also explained how we live as saved people. When we are no longer cut off from God, we are no longer cut off to his people.

Remember Jesus words to the disciples in **Matthew 28:19-20**, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

The Eunuch not only wanted to be restored to Jesus in his faith and repentance, but he wanted to obey what Jesus commanded in terms of being marked off as part of Jesus' people by baptism. And he probably asked the question, "What prevents me from being baptized?" because he understood it was a bit odd given the context.

The baptism preached and practiced in Acts was deeply personal, but it wasn't individualistic. Baptism marked you off to belong to Jesus and to his church. It was the physical portion of the spiritual reality. But there's a problem—there's no church.

But notice what Philip doesn't say, "That's ok—you can only be baptized in the special place of Jerusalem. Just go back there and they'll baptize you." But neither does he say, "Well, why don't you head back home and go to your favorite pond and be baptized there with family and friends."

Baptism doesn't tie you to a special place—the waters of the Jordan are no more special than this pool in the desert. But neither does baptism tie you to an earthly heritage—his family and friends in Ethiopia. Instead, baptism ties you to the place of the cross and to the new family you have with Christ.

And in this instance, as we often see in frontier evangelism our doctrine shines the brightest. Philip's willingness to baptize a man who has no church in a land with no church reminds us that the church doesn't create Christians, baptized Christians create the church.

How would there ever come to be a church into which an Ethiopian would be able to be baptized? Well only if there were baptized believers in Ethiopia who preached the gospel and gathered together as the church in Ethiopia just as the church gathered in Jerusalem.

And what the Bible withholds from us—church history encourages us with. We know nothing more of this Ethiopian man—but what we do know is that from this area the man went back to—Christianity flourished up the eastern and northern coast of Africa.

Ethiopia is often called, “the first Christian nation,” and some of the strongest early churches and theologians hailed from North Africa: Origen, Athanasius, Cyril, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine to name a few. When baptized Christians walk the desert roads of the world—life flourishes in the hardest and driest places.

Why? Because the same gospel we believe that saves us is the same gospel we believe saves others! The joy of new life is new life in full! If you want to be encouraged, look to Jesus. And if you want to see where Jesus is working now—look to the church. Here evangelism and discipleship bear fruit for the world to see.

Here we gather together to rejoice in this Jesus, to encourage each other to walk more faithfully with Jesus in every area of life, and we sent out our dearest friends and our most beloved children to preach Christ and plant churches in every area of the world.

May we be a church who sees good news in motion and as a result put ourselves to such encouragement as well.