

The Necessary Process

Upside Down

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I want to encourage you to open your Bibles this morning to the book of Acts 8. Now as you're turning to Acts 8, we're actually going to begin toward the latter half of the chapter in verse 26, but if you're a guest or visitor with us this morning, I want to kind of share with you a little insight. We don't just happenstance on Acts 8 this morning, in fact, in this season of our life, we are somewhat taking of a journey very strategically through the book of Acts asking a very important question: how is it that this group of early believers, how is it these that were significantly outnumbered, definitively out-resourced, how is it by the time you get to chapter 17, it says that they've turned the world upside down? I mean, how is it that we live in a world today with lots of numbers and lots of resources and oftentimes feel like the world is being turned upside down on us, how did they see the opposite of what you and I often experience each and every day of our lives?

As we've been walking through the book of Acts, of course, we went through that famous Pentecost event, we saw their desire for boldness, their standing firm for the truth of God and his word, but today when we get to chapter 8, we're going to deal with the process and this is an important issue to discuss, how is it that God turns the world upside down, and what we're going to see in Acts 8 is a very unique situation. At Pentecost there were at least 3,000 people there because it says 3,000 got saved. There when they prayed for boldness, the house was overflowing. When Stephen was martyred and his clothes were laid at Saul's feet, we know a large crowd had gathered. Here in verse 26 of chapter 28, it's just one individual, a man by the name of Philip and a conversation with a man whom we don't know his proper name, he simply goes by the Ethiopian eunuch. And here is the key to it all, that the Lord turns the world upside down not in "mass movements," not in large demonstrations but hear me clearly, by reaching and touching and transforming and giving victory to people one-on-one. Now there are times that thousands of people will experience this one-on-one transformation and victory at the same time, but what we see here in Acts 8 is the means by which the Lord overwhelmingly brings victory in our lives, taking a person who is struggling, who is without hope, who is confused, who is bothered, and bringing victory to their lives.

As we turn to verse 26 of chapter 8, just a little bit of warning. When we get to verse 37, some of your Bibles will actually have that verse either below the line or between the lines, but I'll kind of cue you when we get there. Verse 26 of Acts 8, it says,

26 And the angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert. 27 And he arose and went: and, behold, a man of Ethiopia, an eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who had the charge of all her treasure, and had come to Jerusalem for to worship, 28 Was returning, and sitting in his chariot read Esaias the prophet. 29 Then the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot. 30 And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest? 31 And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him. 32 The place of the scripture which he read was this, He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth: 33 In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth. 34 And the eunuch answered Philip, and said, I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man? 35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus. 36 And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? 37 And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. 38 And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. 39 And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing. 40 But Philip was found at Azotus: and passing through he preached in all the cities, till he came to Caesarea.

Here we have the story of an individual, he is that telling microcosm of humanity, in fact, you may be surprised in just a moment to discover that his struggles in life, his heartaches in life, his difficulties in life emulate our current culture more than you can ever imagine.

But I want to begin as we discuss the process with the providence not just of this story but every one of our stories. Providence is one of those big Bible words, one of those theological terms that oftentimes we presume we may know what it means and oftentimes have, shall we say, erroneous definitions, so allow me just to very simply share what the word providence means. It means that God is working in the background oftentimes unbeknownst to the principal characters. Now providence does not mean that God is orchestrating things such as we do not have any decision-making capacities, we do not have any control over the situation, in fact, you've experienced providence whether you've realized it or not. Maybe it's a project at work, or maybe it's a goal in life that you have been very slowly, strategically, passionately working toward and you find out that there's a key ingredient that is missing or maybe there's a piece of the puzzle that is left to complete the picture. You've worked for months or maybe even years and all of

a sudden that person or that situation or that project comes to fruition and you discover that the other individuals had been working without your piece, they had been struggling, they had been working and all of a sudden they were working toward a goal, you were working toward a goal, and God brought those pieces together to create a picture that honors him. That is an illustration of what providence is.

Why is that important? Because this is a story of providence. We see the characters that are involved. Let me begin with the obvious: God. We see that God orchestrated this conversation. I mean, after all, he told Philip, "I need you to go and meet this guy." The Lord knew that Candace had on her itinerary to go to Jerusalem at a certain time and so he specifically knew that this man who had been struggling for many years, and Philip who had been faithful and obedient for at least a short time in his relationship with Jesus Christ, would meet together at a strategic moment.

Why is that important? Because according to 2 Chronicles 16:9 it says the eyes of the Lord are looking to and fro to those whose hearts would be perfect toward him. In the gospel of Luke 15, we have a very famous story, it's the story of the prodigal son. It's the story of an individual who even though he acquired his inheritance at an early age, even though according to the Bible he wasted it in riotous living, that his father who, by the way, is a picture of God in the story, is consistently and constantly looking at the end of the field each and every day. What is his desire? What is his hope? What is his purpose? He wants his son to return to the home. He desires his son to be where he is and this is what's critical to the story in Luke 15: that son did not find his way back home until according to the Bible he came to his senses. He realized, "I'm headed nowhere fast and this is going to be uglier than it already is."

You notice that God is seeking and he is searching just not after the prodigal son, not just after those whose hearts are perfect toward him, he sought after this Ethiopian, he is seeking after us, but I want you to see the other side of the script. What's the Ethiopian eunuch doing? He's seeking God. He is searching. He is not – this is very important – he is not justifying his rebellious life, he is not rationalizing his poor decisions, he is not celebrating his wayward life. He has in our equivalent of a Bible open saying, "I don't know what this means. I really don't understand the principal characters but somehow, somehow I know there's a God out there and I really would like to know him."

What do we see? The same story happens in the next chapter. God ordained a providential meeting between himself and Saul on the road to Damascus. We see it in chapter 10 where Cornelius, here is this man who prayed often, in fact, the Bible says he gave alms, which means he financially contributed to what we might call godly endeavors. He cries out to God, he says, "God, I just want to know who you are." Do you remember what the Lord does? He taps Peter on the shoulder. He says, "Peter, I need you to go to Simon the tanner's house. I need you to go down for there's a man named Cornelius who will meet you there." And there in chapter 10 he shares the gospel with him.

You see, the Lord is orchestrating this. Whom we know as the Ethiopian is seeking answers but, oh, the obedience of Philip. Do you notice what happened when the Lord called him? According to what we just read in verse 27, it says he ran. He ran when God called. Now I want you to hear me very clearly this morning. I think a lot of times we say, "Oh, I want to be a part of what God's up to." But we think somehow just sitting on our sweet pew doing nothing, the Lord will say, "Oh, let me tap you." What was Philip doing right before this story? He was in Samaria with Simon the sorcerer. In fact, you get to Romans 12 it says that we're seeking that which is the good, the acceptable, the perfect will of God. Let me tell you two things God doesn't do. He doesn't call you out of dormancy into service, and he doesn't call you out of rebellion. Who does the Lord call to be an impact like Philip? He calls those to the best of their ability are doing whatever God's called them to do. And you may be walking right now in the acceptable will of God, he says, "Guess what I've got good for you? I've got perfect for you?" What we see here is that God always utilizes those a part of his providential plan who are already desiring to be his hands and feet wherever they find themselves. Now hear we clearly: we all as believers make a mess of things but making a mess of things with our heart in the right place is different than sitting doing nothing, saying, "I just don't want to mess it up."

And we see Philip doing on behalf of the Lord, the Lord taps him, he runs and this amazing story takes place. But it's the person of this Ethiopian that I want to spend the majority of our time on today. As I mentioned, he is the poster child for our culture. When we talk about the power of the gospel, when we talk about victory in Jesus, here's one of these individuals, if Jesus can save this guy, he can save anybody. We also see that if Jesus is the answer to this individual, then he's the answer to every individual.

Allow me to address three qualities of his life that you might not have given much thought to but actually are very much contemporary concepts. Let's begin with his financial lack of well-being. Now we just read that he is in charge of Candace's treasure. You do realize that's not his, it's somebody else's bank account, and the position that he holds, he's basically an indentured servant whose job is to facilitate everybody else but himself. In other words, in our culture today because of the position he held, we would have said that he did not possess economic equity. In other words, if we can only make it to where he has as much as everybody else, then somehow, somehow his issues and his problems will go away. Somehow he's been disenfranchised, somehow he's not been allowed the opportunity that others have. He is literally in what we would call a slavery situation forced to work probably simply just for his necessary means in living.

Today we live in a world where it seems like every time we have a news story, everybody is talking about how everybody is doing comparatively when it comes to economics, but that's just the tip of the iceberg. I want you to notice where he's from. Ethiopia. You say, "Well, that's obvious." That's a part of it, yes it is, but Ethiopia is on the continent of Africa. That is significant to this story. So Candace is there, this queen, because back in Solomon's day, one of her predecessors had an encounter with him and so there's a connection to the worship, there's a connection to the travel. But because he was an Ethiopian, because he was African by descent, he lived in a world that was reigned by Rome.

Why is that important? Because what we know as Ethiopia in his day would have been annexed by Rome. Why is that important? You remember the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as they're making their way to Mount Calvary, remember Jesus under the weight of the cross he cannot bear, he falls and they, the Roman men, they pull a man to bear his cross. Remember what his name was? Simon of Cyrene. Cyrene is modern-day Libya. Why is that critical? Because in the Roman mindset and in the Roman world, you only bore a cross if you were cursed. That's it. That's why Jesus, the crime that he was claimed to have committed was bearing a cross. He was cursed. Why did they pick Simon? They could have picked anybody because in Roman days 2,000 years ago, if you had the outward appearance of somebody from Libya or Ethiopia, they thought you were cursed. You guessed it, he was racially profiled. He sure was. Because of how he was born, he was considered a sub-standard species. He was considered somebody who was cursed by the Romans and only worthy to drive a chariot or to bear a cross.

Oh, it gets even better than that. He's a eunuch. Now I know there are young ears in the room and so, parents, forgive me in advance but we're about to talk about this for just a moment as best I can. According to the Bible, in Matthew 19:12 Jesus defines what his "status" was. Jesus says that a person who is a "eunuch" can be made one by three different means. It says that some men have chosen to not have a family, some men had decided not to have a wife and children for the kingdom of heaven's sake. In other words, they made a volitional decision that, "I'm not going to experience the pleasures nor the distraction of a home. I'm just going to singly sell myself out to the things of God." That's one. He says there are some people that have actually been made eunuchs from their mother's womb. In other words, we know there are means and ways by which some people are unable to have a family and others so choose and never have their entire life, they just don't have that desire. But then there's a third group. He said some men have been made eunuchs by other men.

That would have been who this man was. Why? Look at what he's in charge of. He's in charge of Candace, the queen, her travel and such, and you know that in the history of leadership and monarchies, you cannot have a bloodline that is "not pure." So what would they do? They would take all the young men who were qualified for this indentured servitude and they would physical alter them so that they could not experience all that we've spoken of. Can I just go there this morning? He would have had an identity crisis. He would have. Here is a man who was born a man, had the hormones of a man, had the desires of a man, but then somebody else took it away from him. Can we agree he would have had an identification crisis?

Does this sound like the headlines today or what? You've got a guy who's struggling with his income, you've got a guy who is struggling with his outward appearance, and you've got a guy struggling with how he identifies. Why is that so important to the story? Find for me anywhere where Philip addresses any of those issues. Find for me where he says, "We need to sit and talk about this." Find for me where he says, "Do you know what we need to do? We need to gather other people in the same problem as you've got and we need to tell the whole world y'all are struggling." What does he do? It says and he opened

up and he preached to him Jesus. Hear me clearly, church: all the issues that we've got going on right now, they're only solved by Jesus. They're not solved by talking it down. They're not solved by working it out, distributing, all those things. He never addressed it.

Here's the beauty of this passage. You've got a man who walks up to the prototype of our American culture today and says, "I don't care where you're from, I don't care what you're struggling with, I don't care what you're bothered by. We're not going to talk about that. You, my friend, need Jesus and that will take care of all the rest that you've got going on." Wow. What a process. We discover just to quote to earlier days in our culture, this is the "magic bullet," is it not? If we just tell people about Jesus, then they'll understand that all the struggles can be or have victory over, they can have hope now. Jesus said in his very first sermon in Luke 4, "I have come to set the captives free. I have come to give hope to the hopeless." Every one of these "sub-categories," every one of them combined in this man produces a life of futility and distress and frustration and a lack of hope and purpose and what does Philip say? He says it's all found in Jesus.

Now I want you to see the process. How does the Lord actually do this in this story, take this man and change his life forever? The first thing I want you to notice about the process is this: the power of the word of God. Now I agree that the Ethiopian already had Isaiah opened. I mean, can we just say that was a softball, so to speak? I mean, it was already there. But notice what it says, he began there and preached unto him Jesus. Find for me some creative strategy. Find for me some alternative means. Why is that important? Because hear me, church, we have a world today, an environment similar to this with broadcasts very much a parallel to this, that we've got crowds, we've got congregations, we've got music, but we're not talking about Jesus. We're not talking about sin. We're not talking about heaven. We're not talking about hell. We're talking about all the issues and how we can solve them. You solve them with Jesus, that's how you solve them and he said, "Guess what? I'm going to preach unto you Jesus."

Now we're not told all the story here but I get the idea that he kind of came back with a, "Who is that? I need to know who this guy is." And I know what some of you are thinking, well, everybody in our culture has heard about Jesus. Oh, not so fast. I've known people, what we would consider middle-aged, to be presented with what we know as the gospel of Jesus Christ and go, "I've never heard this before." I've known people in their 30s to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Bible belt and say, "I've never heard this before."

I want you to notice very strategically how this happens in his life. The first thing is this: he hears the word. He hears the name of Jesus. We must be focused on who Jesus is and not get distracted on what the issues may or may not be, and I've got news for you, given enough time and the issues will change. Given enough time and the focal point of our culture will move on to the latest, greatest whatever it may be. The issues change, Jesus never does.

He heard the truth. What was the truth? That he was a sinner like I'm a sinner and you're a sinner and only Jesus could solve the sin problem. The second thing is this, this is

where verse 37 comes into play. What does he do? He says, "I believe." He doesn't just cerebrally acknowledge it. He doesn't just check off a box and say, "Yeah, I'm from the South. That's who we talk about around here." What does he say? He says, "I believe." What does that mean? Well, he preached unto him Jesus. What's the message of Jesus? We have a sin problem. He was willing to live a sinless life, die a sacrificial death, raise victorious so that our sins could be forgiven and our soul could be saved.

And last but not least, verse 38, he's baptized. He's actually willing to tell others. Now again, all we know about is Philip and the Ethiopian. We don't know who else may or may not have been there. These are the two principal characters but I want you to see that process. You're not going to end up like this individual until you hear the truth, you've got a sin problem only Jesus can solve. Until you believe and confess your sin problem and ask him to save you, and then even though it doesn't "save you" but it's a testimony, you go in front of others and say, "Guess what? Jesus changed my life." Do you know what the beauty of that baptism is? When we put somebody in the water and, by the way, we're putting two today, we never talk about the issues Jesus saved them from. Have you ever thought about that? We never talk about the mess that's been unpacked. There's only one story that's ever spoken out of that baptism, that whoever walks in, age, stage, it doesn't matter, that Jesus saved them.

The process. If we really want to see our world turned upside down, it doesn't mean we ignore the issues, it doesn't mean that we somehow discredit the issues, but we must acknowledge that Jesus Christ is supreme over each and every issue and until he is proclaimed and believed, none of the issues will ever truly be solved as the Lord has the capacity to solve them in our lives. There truly is victory in Jesus.