

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGH SOVEREIGN GRACE

Acts 8:26-40

INTRODUCTION

I have, on a couple of occasions thought I was lost while deer hunting. It is not a very pleasant experience. Each time I only thought I was lost but I really wasn't. I shortly found a road or a landmark I recognized or someone in our hunting party. If a person is truly lost it means that he is helpless and cannot find his way. A lost person cannot find himself, rather, he needs to be found by another. The Bible regularly refers to the condition of human beings in their natural state as being lost in relation to God. We have no ability to find our way to God. Most famously we are described as lost sheep who have wandered off from the flock. "We are like sheep who have gone astray, each one of us has turned to his own way," the prophet says about us. Lost sheep cannot find their way back but must be sought and found by the shepherd. So Jesus is regularly pictured as the good shepherd who goes to find his lost sheep.

As we have seen, the book of Acts is the story of how Jesus continues to act and teach after his resurrection and ascension. He continues to act and teach through the church. In the four histories of Jesus' life on earth, which we call the gospels, we regularly observe him preaching to the crowds of people and performing numerous healings and exorcisms. However, we also see him interacting with individuals. We might think of Nicodemus or Jairus and his daughter or the immoral Samaritan woman or Zaccheus, the tax collector. In the gospels we see Jesus gathering the wandering sheep both in groups and one to one. In the same way, in the book of Acts we have observed Jesus, through the apostles, preaching to the crowds of people and performing miracles and gathering the lost sheep of Israel into the church in large numbers. In the first half of chapter 8 we observed Jesus doing this work through Philip, who was not an apostle and among the Samaritan people who are multi-racial, partly Jewish and partly Gentile and highly syncretistic religiously, mixing Jewish and pagan religious practices. But now we are witnessing the first of three examples of Jesus finding individual lost sheep. In rapid succession we are going to see Jesus find three of his lost sheep: the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul, the persecutor of the church, and the Gentile officer in the Roman army, Cornelius. This morning we are going to see how Jesus graciously pursues and saves this lost sheep, this black-skinned, wealthy, royal official of a pagan court. In seeing how Jesus pursues and saves him we will be witnessing how it is that he pursues and saves each one of his lost sheep.

MAIN POINT

Jesus graciously pursues and saves each one of his lost sheep by...

I. Arranging for them to hear the gospel (vv. 26-29)

You will observe in my main point I state that Jesus graciously pursues and saves his lost sheep. In other words, those sheep whom Jesus saves do not deserve to be saved. He does not save any sheep because of who they are or what they have done. While this man apparently has significant interest in God, yet Luke tells us three things about him that demonstrate that he does not deserve to be saved. There are three things that mark him as a man who does not deserve God's favor but God's wrath. First, he is an Ethiopian. Ethiopia is the land in the upper stretches of the Nile River. It is in modern day Sudan. Ethiopia is referred to in the NIV translation of the OT as the land of Cush and the people are Cushites. Throughout the OT these people are fierce enemies of Israel. They are almost always allied with Egypt and regularly make war upon Israel. They were, as allies of Egypt, slave masters of Israel prior to the Exodus. Regularly the prophets include Cush/Ethiopia among the lists of nations that God is going to justly destroy for their wickedness. Anyone with any knowledge of the OT reading this story would be shocked that God is saving an Ethiopian, especially one who is a member of the royal court because Ethiopians are God's enemies.

Second, this man is a eunuch. It was common practice in ancient royal courts that all the male officials and servants had the sign of their masculinity removed so they could serve the king without distraction. In the OT law it is written that a eunuch cannot participate in the worship at the temple. They were restricted from entering into the temple court but had to remain in the outer court with the uncircumcised Gentiles. They were considered unclean. So according to the OT law this man was not fit for God's presence. Third, he was a wealthy, powerful man. We know this because of his position as the chief treasurer of the Queen of Ethiopia, because he was riding in a chariot that was being driven by someone else (he was being chauffeured) and by the fact that he possessed a copy of the OT Scriptures. The only people who could afford to own written scrolls personally were the wealthy. If you will remember, Jesus, as recorded by Luke in his gospel had this to say about the wealthy: Luke 6:24-25, "Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry." Woe means "damned to hell." "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 18:24-25)." The wealthy, from Jesus' point of view, are poor candidates for salvation. Those with adequate financial and material resources, like us, are prone to be self-sufficient, proud and unaware of how lost we really are.

By giving us this biographical information Luke is drawing our attention to the unworthiness of this man for salvation. From a human point of view, if you were going to pick out someone who was likely to become a Christian, he would not have been very high on your list. There is nothing about him to recommend him to God. This is true for all of us. None of us can give to God reasons for why he should save us. In fact, there is a massive list of reasons for why it would be perfectly fair if God ignored us for a lifetime and sent us to hell upon our death. We are God's enemies. We trust and love money way more than we trust and love God. This is why God's grace is such good news to people like us, like the Ethiopian. God delights to give his love to those who do not deserve his love. He freely loves and saves people who can give him no reason as to why he should save them.

Notice that the first way that God acts graciously toward this man is by his sending Philip to preach the gospel to him. The way in which God gets the gospel to him shows how important God views the gospel in saving people. This man is a Gentile convert to Judaism. He obviously takes his faith very seriously because he has travelled hundreds of miles (a five month journey according to one commentator) in order to participate in one of the festivals commanded by the Lord in the law. He did this even though he couldn't actually go into the temple but had to remain outside in the Court of the Gentiles. He has spent a lot of money to acquire a copy of the prophet Isaiah and he is reading it. Yet, for all that, God believes he needs to have someone explain the gospel to him. In order to get Philip to him with the gospel he sends his angel to tell Philip to leave off his fruitful labor among the Samaritans and make the difficult, 60 mile journey on foot from the north region of Israel to the southern desert. If people can be saved without the gospel then this story makes no sense. If God graciously saves people apart from the good news about Jesus then what God required Philip to do is irrational. There are lots of people in the church, probably in this congregation, who believe that people can go to heaven without knowing about and trusting in Jesus. Many believe that "sincere" seekers of God by any name who never hear the gospel will be welcomed by God into heaven. This man has all kinds of knowledge about God and his ways that most of the world does not have and he is very sincere in his faith and yet he cannot be saved without Philip coming and preaching the good news of Christ to him. This story makes absolutely clear that people must hear this gospel if they are going to be saved.

You children who have parents who talk with you about Christ need to see God's kindness to you in sending you parents who know the gospel and are able to explain it to you. There are hundreds of millions of children in the world to whom God has not sent Christian parents to tell them the gospel. God has graciously, contrary to what you deserve, given you parents to teach you the gospel. Do not despise them. Do not treat their reading the Bible to you and talking with you about Christ as a burden. God in his infinite love has sent them to you so you can learn the gospel. Parents, just as surely as God sent Philip to guide this man into an understanding of God's word, so he has sent you to guide your children into an understanding of God's word. All of us who attend churches and bible studies where the gospel is taught and have friends who talk with us about Christ are

to see God's mercy in his sending us teachers to make plain the good news about Jesus. There are untold millions of people who have passed through this life and will pass through this life without God ever sending them someone to teach them the gospel. Just think about it; was this Ethiopian the only non-Israelite worshipper returning home from Jerusalem? God did not send a personal representative to each returning pilgrim. He specifically and graciously chose to tell this man the gospel. You are the recipient of untold kindness if you have ever had anyone explain the gospel to you and so you ought to be attentive and grateful that God has showered such undeserved favor upon you. Treating the teaching of God's word by faithful parents, pastors, bible study leaders and others with disdain and indifference is to treat God's grace with indifference. It is to turn your back on the clearest expression of his kindness towards you.

Jesus graciously pursues and saves each one of his lost sheep by...

- *Arranging for them to hear the gospel*
- *And by...*

II. Preparing and enabling them to believe the gospel (vv. 30-36)

The overwhelming point of this story is that God is the one who has not only brought these two men together but has prepared them both for this encounter. He has arranged this encounter for the salvation of the Ethiopian. I want to focus your attention on the ways in which God both prepared this man to hear the gospel and enabled him to believe it. First of all, in Luke's drawing our attention to the human characteristics that would seem to disqualify him from salvation; he is also drawing our attention to promises God made to save people characterized by these things. While most references to the Ethiopians in the OT are in reference to their enemy status and thus God's hostility to them there are several references in the OT to the fact that God will save some Ethiopians. Isaiah 11 is one of the clearest OT passages describing the Messiah and it is quoted numerous times in the NT in relation to Jesus. Verses 10-11 describe the period of time when the Messiah will "stand as a banner for the peoples, the nations will rally to him and his place of rest will be glorious. In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people from ...Ethiopia..." God has people who live in Ethiopia, this man being one of them. Psalm 68:31 says, "Cush will submit herself to God." Here is a Cushite submitting to God. Psalm 87 describes how the Lord is going to record Ethiopians as having been born in Jerusalem. In other words, he is going to treat Ethiopians as if they were not his enemies but members of his family, born in his city. So this man is born into God's family and made a citizen of God's city through Christ.

The same is true regarding eunuchs. In Isaiah 56 God specifically says that he is going to receive unclean eunuchs into his very presence. They will no longer be excluded from the people of God but will be able to freely enter the temple and worship God. Finally, if you remember that after Jesus says it is impossible for rich people to go to heaven, Peter exclaims, "Then who can be saved?" Peter believed that wealth rather than being a hindrance to the kingdom of God was evidence that you were part of God's kingdom and so he expresses his astonishment when Jesus says that wealth is a barrier to the kingdom. Jesus replies, "With man this is impossible but with God all things are possible." In others words, there will be wealthy people in heaven because God is able to do the impossible which is to give humble, believing hearts to arrogant, self-satisfied, wealthy people. So God has promised in his word that he is going to save those who are his enemies, who are unclean and who are indifferent to his glory. The story of this man's salvation shows that it is his work.

But now, notice also how he has prepared this particular man to hear this gospel in this present moment. The fact that this Ethiopian royal official has come to believe in the God of Israel though being raised in a pagan environment is nothing short of a miracle to begin with. The fact that he has come to Jerusalem at this moment when the church has been born and the gospel is beginning to be preached to non-Jews for the first time is no accident. The man God sends to talk with him is the first recorded Christian to preach the gospel to non-Jews. The Ethiopian is reading in the book of Isaiah in the 53rd chapter which is without question the clearest expression in the OT of the person and work of Jesus. This chapter is alluded to and quoted many times in the NT because of how clearly it sets forth the suffering and death of Jesus for the sins of his people. It is no

accident that at this moment he is curious to know who the prophet Isaiah is referring to as he describes the unjust suffering of some person who suffered silently like a lamb led to slaughter. In these ways we are shown that God has prepared this man to hear the gospel at this time in his life.

But we also can see in this passage how God enables him to believe this gospel. Notice how in v. 29 it is the HS who tells Philip to run up and join the chariot. So it is the HS who is orchestrating this encounter. Notice, when Philip runs up to the chariot he hears the man reading in Isaiah and he asks him if he understands what he is reading. The eunuch says, “How can I unless someone guides me?” (NIV translates it “explains. ESV has “guides”.) The verb that the eunuch uses here is a very rare verb. He didn’t say he needed someone to teach it to him or explain it to him. Rather he said he needed someone to guide him into understanding it. This is the same verb that Jesus used to explain the ministry of the HS in John 16 when he said to his disciples, “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear but when he, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into the truth and will explain what is yet to come.” So when the Ethiopian invites Philip into the chariot and he begins explaining the good news about Jesus beginning with Isaiah 53:7-8 we are also witnessing the HS guiding him into the truth about Jesus by this means. The end result of this guiding is that he trusts in Jesus which is seen in his statement that there is nothing preventing him from being baptized. We know that baptism follows faith because if you look back just a few verses to 8:12 which describes what happened when Philip preached this same good news to the Samaritans you read: “But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized.” This man believes and then is baptized, just like the Samaritans. The final thing we are told about this eunuch, after being baptized is that he went on his way rejoicing. Here is the fruit of faith in Christ, the evidence of the saving work of the Holy Spirit, the joy of salvation.

All who believe this gospel know that it was God himself that not only brought the gospel to us but prepared us to hear the gospel and to see the glory of Christ in the gospel so that we gladly gave up our life in this world in order to have Christ. All who trust Christ as their savior and seek him as their treasure know that they do so by an act of God's free grace. That is why we give thanks to God alone for our salvation. We don't thank ourselves for being smart but we thank God for overcoming our stupidity. For those of you who do not yet know Christ God has not treated you as you deserve but has been kind to you in arranging for you to hear the word of God. It is his gracious work to enable you to see the greatness and the glory of the suffering Lord Jesus Christ so that you will freely and gladly embrace him as your savior and treasure and life. This is the blessing I ask God to add to his word each Sunday and each time I speak with my children or with others about Christ. So you also must ask God to send his HS to guide you into the truth of the gospel. May God the HS enable all of us to see and trust in this Lord Jesus who gave himself as a sacrifice for the sins of all who will trust in him.

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- *And by...*

III. Uniting them to his “flock”, that is, the church (vv. 38-40)

I think that for many of us this baptism in the desert doesn’t make much sense. For most, baptism is not a very important part of the Christian life. What this man’s desire to be baptized shows us is how important baptism is. The NT does not know anything about an unbaptized Christian. This story makes the priority of baptism so clear. First of all the fact that the man asks to be baptized shows that as Philip explained the gospel to this man he also mentioned that baptism is the physical sign and seal of that salvation that is received by faith. Now, let me be clear. We know that baptism is not part of the gospel but rather it is part of the response to the gospel. In other words baptism does not save you, rather if you are saved then you are baptized. Let me just review for you how we know this. In Romans 1:16 Paul says, “I am not ashamed of the gospel for **it** is the power of God for the salvation for everyone who believes...” The gospel is what saves people. The news that Jesus Christ

lived and died and rose again so that we can be forgiven and declared righteous is the good news. This gospel saves everyone who believes it, relies upon it, trusts it to be true for them. In 1 Corinthians 1:17, Paul, in the midst of rebuking the Corinthian church for their divisive spirit says this about himself, “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel...” Notice how Paul separates baptism from the gospel. The gospel saves all who believe, not baptism. Baptism is not part of the gospel that saves. Baptism is not necessary for salvation. However, it is the physical symbol of the salvation that all who believe receive.

Therefore, a person who professes to be a Christian, to be saved by Christ is also a person who is to be baptized. To refuse to be baptized is to refuse to do what God explicitly tells you to do. In every example we have in the NT water baptism is the first thing that people do when they believe the gospel. You hear it, the Spirit guides into its truthfulness, you believe it and then you are baptized. This close association of the work of the HS, faith in Christ and baptism helps us understand why the NT sometimes attaches the benefits of salvation to baptism. It is not normal for people to believe the gospel and not be baptized in water. This baptism in the desert affirms that water baptism is the physical sign and seal of the saving work of the Holy Spirit as he gives us faith.

The NT describes a number of things that baptism signifies. It is a visual representation of the promises of the gospel. It is the word of God dramatized. It symbolizes our union with Jesus in his death and resurrection; the washing away of our sins; our passing safely through the waters of God’s judgment by means of Christ’s death and resurrection. However, there is one thing that this symbolizes that I think would be of great importance to this Ethiopian. In Ephesians 4 Paul commands that each of us “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Then Paul gives the reason for our unity: “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.” This one water baptism that all believers submit to is a physical symbol of the one body and the one salvation of which we all partake. As this Ethiopian man returns to his home country as the only Ethiopian Christian it would be a great benefit to him to know that he has been united to the whole body of Christ as symbolized in that baptism. I think the text leaves us to assume that he goes home and preaches the gospel and others will join with him. But he knows by the work of the Holy Spirit, the promises of God’s word and the confirming sign of water baptism that he and any others who join him in the future are not cut off from God’s people but part of that universal body of Christ, even though they may currently be separated from other Christians by long miles on this planet.

I think of the church in that distant country of Mongolia. Each Mongolian who has truly believed the gospel is united to the worldwide church of Jesus and this unity is symbolized in their being baptized in the name of the Triune God. The same baptism that we who believe here in the U.S. have submitted to is the same baptism our Mongolian brothers and sisters have submitted to. Like us, they are united to Christ in his death and resurrection, they too have been washed clean of their sins, they also have passed through the waters of God’s wrath in Jesus, our ark, they too belong to the one body of Christ. While we are saved individually we are not saved to be independent but rather we are joined to the one, worldwide church of Jesus. We have been brought into the one flock of God so that we are now indeed his people, the sheep of his pasture.

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