

Join us, if you can, in reading this with your family and praying at 10:15 on Sunday, May 24, 2020.

The Spirit's Work, Advancing the Kingdom

Dear First Southern Baptist Church family,

Have you ever experienced a coincidence? We use this word all the time to describe moments when seemingly unrelated or accidental events line up in a way that seem planned. Many people, we here it often in our culture, have experiences of being in the right place at the right time. Perhaps one of the most important instances of coincidence, where things just seemed to line up perfectly, unexpectedly, was the D-Day invasion during World War II. As the allied leaders prepared and built up for the launch of Operation Overlord, the massive invasion of the French coast in Normandy, they took into account every detail. They were overseeing more than 150,000 soldiers, 5,500 ships and landing craft, over 100,000 tons of supplies, and lots of air support, all of which amounted to the largest amphibious invasion in the history. All of this, however, was at the mercy of the weather. The allies needed a full moon and low tide to make it work, along with optimal weather for the sake of the landing craft and air support, which left a very narrow window for success, all while maintaining the element of surprise. The original departure date, June 5th was called off, due to stormy conditions. In the middle of a raging storm, the lone man responsible for the weather forecast, Royal Navy Captain James Stagg, who had called for the June 5th delay, urged a June 6th launch. With Stagg's prediction of a brief break in the weather, in spite of the storm raging outside, General Dwight D. Eisenhower order the operation launch for the next morning, June 6th. The rest is history. Though the weather was less than ideal for the early morning launch, by noon the skies and seas were clear. The Germans were caught off guard and the invasion ultimately led to the fall of Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany. Weeks later Stagg informed Eisenhower that if they would have delayed two weeks, the next proposed dates for the invasion, they would have experienced the worst weather the English Channel had seen in two decades. Eisenhower wrote on the report, "I thank the Gods of War we went when we did." I would argue that this was no mere coincidence. Rather than thanking the "Gods of War," Eisenhower should have rightly thanked the Lord Almighty, who sovereignly reigns over all things, including the weather, military success, and world history.

Last week we saw that even though Stephen's tragic death scattered the church, this served in God's providence to advance the Kingdom of God outside of Jerusalem as the gospel went with the scattered church, Philip specifically, into Samaria. The first part of chapter 8 showed us that the gospel is for all people as the Spirit mightily worked among the Samaritans. This week, we will continue to see the mighty work the Holy Spirit does to save sinners, bringing outsiders into the family of God. Look with me at Acts 8:26-40.

"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. 27) 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 28) and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29) And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." 30) So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31) And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32) Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,

so he opens not his mouth.

33) In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.”

34) And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” 35) Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. 36) 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?”* 38 And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. 39) 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. 40) But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.”

The first section of this text is the setting for the encounter in verses 26-29. Notice in verse 23 that Philip, prompted by an angel of the Lord, went down to the ancient desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza. Gaza was the last oasis providing water on the desert journey from Israel to Egypt. Rather than questioning the Lord’s wisdom in sending him to such a barren place, verse 27 tells us he obeyed without hesitation. He got up and went. Under the Spirit’s guidance, the most unlikely encounter occurred.

On the barren road to Gaza, he happened upon an Ethiopian eunuch. This man was of importance, likely akin to the minister of finance to the queen of Ethiopian. The Greek word for “Ethiopia” is likely referring to the ancient Egyptian kingdom of Cush, south of Egypt along the Nile river, not to be confused with the modern nation of Ethiopia. It was common for ancient slave boys to be castrated and used as keepers of the royal harem and treasury, hence the designation of eunuch given to this man. The text is clear that he had come to Jerusalem to worship and was likely a God-fearer. This is typically a category between Jew and Gentile and is used to describe a person who believed in the God of Israel, but had not undergone the full act of circumcision. Considering his status as a eunuch, this would have been impossible because men entering into the Jewish covenant were required to undergo circumcision as a part of the conversion process, and this eunuch would have been unable to participate in the rite of passage. Not only that, if he was on his way to the temple for worship, he would not have been able to enter in because the Law, in Deut 23:1, forbade anyone with the eunuch’s deformity from entering in to the assembly. Don’t miss the picture Luke is painting as Philip encounters the eunuch. He had traveled over a thousand miles by carriage, or chariot, to worship the God of Israel, likely at the temple, and because of his deformity, something likely that he had no control over, he was not able to enter. He was on the outside, unable to draw near and worship. He was returning home after this experience, when prompted by the Spirit in verse 29, Philip approached.

Verses 30-33 describe the meeting between Philip and the eunuch. Philip approached the chariot and heard the eunuch reading aloud. We shouldn’t assume something supernatural is happening in Philip running up to the chariot. It’s possible that this is not a chariot of war, which would have moved swiftly, but one used for long travel which would have moved slower. He likely also had some sort of guards or an entourage considering his important position, so it is most likely that they were not moving particularly fast and Philip simply ran and caught up with them. It was also very common for anyone reading at the time of the writing of Acts to be reading out loud as it was the common practice. Philip heard the words of the prophet and simply asked if the man understood the prophet’s words. In verse 31, the eunuch replied by asking how anyone could without someone to help. This motif of needing help to understand the prophets runs through Luke and Acts. What is particularly needed is a Christian interpreter. Even the disciples in Luke 24 needed Jesus’ help to understand how the Old Testament pointed to him! Seeing Philip’s willingness to help, the eunuch invited him

into the chariot to sit with him. Notice how providential this moment is when the very text the eunuch was reading was from Isaiah 53, perhaps the clearest text in the Old Testament which described the suffering of the Messiah for the salvation and forgiveness of his people.

In verse 34-38 we see Philip bear witness, in the power of the Spirit, to Jesus the Messiah. The eunuch asked an astute question which contemporary students of Isaiah were asking in the first century. Who was the prophet talking about in these verses in Isaiah 53, himself or someone else? I love the simple, wonderful beauty of verse 35. "Then Philip opened his mouth..." He simply trusted the Holy Spirit in the moment and spoke. He said what he knew. Beginning with that passage, he shared the good news of Jesus with the eunuch. He shared how Jesus was, as we read in verses 32-33, humiliated, killed, and cut off from having descendants. He shared how Jesus suffered this way in the place of sinners, that by his death and the shedding of his blood, like a sacrificial lamb, they might be cleansed of their sin. Philip shared about how he rose from the grave justifying all those who believe in him and place their trust in him. He shared the gospel and the eunuch responded by believing in Jesus. Notice the wonderful providence in verse 36, that they just happened to be passing a pool of water. Don't miss the eunuch's question in this verse. He wanted to know, was there anything preventing him from being baptized as a believer in Jesus? The emphatic answer in verse 38, was a resounding "no." He couldn't enter the temple and he was unable to undergo circumcision to formally enter the people of Israel, but because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection there was absolutely nothing preventing this man from entering into church membership and into God's Kingdom.

You may notice that verse 37 is missing from the text. If you are reading a modern translation like the ESV or the NIV, you'll likely find it as a foot note at the bottom of the page. This verse does not exist in early manuscript body of New Testament texts. Scholars believe that it was not originally part of Acts, but perhaps was later added by copyists and scribes to make the eunuch's conversion clearer. The fact that the Holy Spirit superintended every coincidental part of this account, along with Philip's willingness to baptize him all imply the sincerity of the eunuch's new birth.

Consider the resolution of this text in verses 39-40. They came up out of the water and the Spirit supernaturally whisks Philip away. The eunuch left rejoicing, again evidence of his sincerity and new birth in Jesus. We hear nothing else of him from this point onward. There is some church tradition that implies the eunuch was an early missionary to Ethiopia, but there is no clear historical evidence to support this one way or the other. It is worth mentioning, however, that the Greeks and Romans considered Ethiopia to be so exotic, foreign, and distant that it was considered to be at the ends of the earth. This again points to the expanding nature of Jesus' mission and kingdom, from Acts 1:8, to go from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Philip found himself in Azotus, which had been the ancient Philistine city of Ashdod. Estimates put Philip anywhere from 25-30 miles from where he was with the eunuch in an instance. What did he do when he found himself there? What else would we expect from this man who was a servant with an evangelist's heart? He preached the gospel from Azotus to Caesarea. Which is where we will briefly encounter him, one more time, in Acts 21. This narrative text is so rich, we must consider some ways it applies directly to us, today.

- 1) We must consider the sovereignty of God on display at every hint of the Spirit's supervision in this text. God guided Philip to the eunuch. The eunuch happened to be reading of Christ in Isaiah when Philip found him. They happened to come up on some water as he had believed that he might be baptized. None of this is accidental, rather all of it is providential. There are no coincidences. Consider how God meticulously orchestrated the whole of this event that the eunuch might hear the gospel and believe. My God does not simply do the best with what he has. He knows and declares the end from the beginning, as in Isaiah 46:9-10. All things are under his lordship, past, present, and future, and he shapes all of his creation to create for himself a redeemed people and bring glory to his name. This means that we can trust him under any

circumstances. We, too, can and should be encouraged to do bold and courageous things for the sake of the King.

2) This passage speaks to us about the nature and practice of baptism. Don't miss that the right candidate for baptism in this text was someone who believed in Jesus. Don't miss that in verse 38 they went down into the water and in verse 39 they came back up out. The Greek verb for baptizing used here is a word that simply means to immerse. All of that should speak to the fact that we baptize believers through full immersion in water. Sorry, ya'll. I'm a Baptist, it's in the text, and it needed to be said.

3) Don't miss the wondrous, glorious grace on display here. Like last week, we see here that the gospel is for everyone. This eunuch was not too deformed, too Gentile, too sinful, or too far away for the long arms of our Savior to draw him close. Last week we saw how the half-Jewish Samaritans were welcomed into Christ. Here we see a black man, who is a Gentile God-fearer and radically different from the Jews in Jerusalem welcomed in without exception or hesitation through the providential guiding of the Holy Spirit. Christ overcame every barrier that would separate us from him in his death and resurrection. Anyone who trusts in him by faith and is willing to come unto him is welcome to come. His gentle, kind heart welcomes the outcast. In Christian churches there is absolutely no room for discrimination on any basis other than sincere faith in Jesus.

4) Finally, we should see the sincere, faithful obedience of Philip and be encouraged to trust and obey the Lord in our own walk with Christ. Philip doesn't have a theology degree. He isn't necessarily a gifted public communicator. He doesn't have a large social media platform. Like him, we don't need these things to be used mightily by God. The angel said "go," and he went. The Spirit told him to approach the chariot and he did. The eunuch asked a good question, and Philip simply opened his mouth and spoke. The mission of the church to make disciples of all nations, while baptizing and teaching them all about Jesus from the Scripture, is accomplished by men and women who are simply willing to say "yes" to God. Is your reflexive posture towards God one of obedience or hesitation? Prayerfully consider how the Lord might be calling you to faithfully bear witness to those around you. Maybe the Lord is moving in your life, calling you to head into ministry or off to the mission field. Would you be willing to say "yes" if he was calling? Profound things have been accomplished for the Kingdom by normal people obeying God and doing what they can with what they have. Every soul saved is the complete work of our sovereign God using people as willing instruments for his glory. Will you go? Will you open your mouth and speak? He is worthy of this and much, much more.

Sincerely,

Pastor Bryan McClelland
First Southern Baptist Church, Williamsport, PA