

"What Prevents You from Growing Spiritually?"

Acts 8:26-40

At first we might think this passage is mostly about baptism. But that is only a small part of what God is doing here. God begins with Philip and Philip's obedience to God will set us up for the salvation and baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch. Which sets us up for the next step of obedience in Philip's life, which leads to Peter's interaction with Cornelius. Your obedience and my obedience to God is not an isolated moment nor is it disconnected from others. Our willingness to obey God in the moment is always part of a bigger picture. Which also reminds us that our unwillingness to obey God has further implications than just you or I.

If God is committed to conforming us into the image of Jesus one day, then each day is part of the process of spiritually growing to be more like Jesus. And that all depends on our willingness to be more like Jesus. God is committed to helping us grow spiritually. Are we committed to growing spiritually every day to be little more like Jesus this week than we were last week? And if we're not, why not? To borrow the words of the Ethiopian eunuch; What's preventing us from growing spiritually? Because that's what this passage is all about; spiritual maturity in Christ.

Philip is the main character in Ch. 8. One of the seven Greek speaking Jews chosen to assist the apostles in their ministry, God moves Philip into the city of Samaria where he has a successful ministry. All kinds of people are getting saved and being baptized. Peter and John pay a visit and affirm God is working among the Samaritans. The mission of Jesus is starting to be fulfilled (1:8). They have left Jerusalem and Judea and now reaching into Samaria; a traditionally despised people group who have not been very friendly toward the Jews either. But Jesus' vision also included 'the ends of the earth'. Other cultures with people who are not always treated equally and fairly as God's image bearers. This is what Ch.'s 8-10 is all about. God reaching the despised (Samaritans), the unpopular religious people (Ch. 9, Paul), the Gentiles (Ch. 10, a roman centurion) and here, the Ethiopian eunuch, a social outcast.

Philip is having a successful big city ministry. God is good. God is blessing. What more can God do through Philip? Most of our translations begin v.26 with 'Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying ...'. Some translations say 'And' yet the two most literal translations say 'but'. The Greek word 'de' can mean all those things and it is translated by the context. The NASB and RSV translations help us see that this is possibly a change more than just a way to introduce a new paragraph. Why might we see this as something totally different, in contrast to what Philip was doing? After all, an angel has to speak to Philip to get him to go down to Gaza via the desert road, not the main road. He says 'I want you go to Ottawa but don't take the usual way, # 7 through Perth and Carleton Place and then hit the 417. I want you to take the back way to Smiths falls on the 43 and then take county 6 through North Gower where you can catch Prince of Wales drive. Because there's a lot less traffic that way.

Philip obeys the word from God. So then, the Ethiopian eunuch's salvation and baptism begin with the obedience of Philip. His obedience will begin a chain reaction of God arranged circumstances that will result in people's lives being changed. So we need to start here ourselves:

What Has God's Word Been Telling Us to Do Recently
(8:26-29)

Has God been speaking to you about a sin in your life that you need to repent of and move towards Christlikeness? Has God been telling you to connect with someone, affirm them, pray for them? Has God been nudging you to be at church more consistently, to attend a Bible study, to lead a ministry, to get more involved in a ministry? We rarely think about how our willingness to obey or not obey God affects other people. It's not about you. Life is not about you and I individually. We were created and gifted to be involved in others' lives.

Back to the 'but' part about Philip's invitation to obey God. Sometimes God indicates to us that He wants us to obey Him

That seems humanly illogical (v.26; 8:5-8, 12)

Philip has a great city ministry going. He's performing miracles. People are getting saved left and right. The church is growing under him. And God says I want you to go on the Gaza road. He hasn't told him why either has He. We know why. Because God wants Philip to reach one man.

Many times God is only asking us to do something

That seems small (vv.27-29)

If Philip was like us, we would question God 3 typical ways. You want me to do this **NOW?** Samaritans love me. They're coming to Christ left and right. This makes little sense.

You want me to go **THERE?** Like what's down the Westport road? Fermoy? Burrigade? Seriously Lord, you want me to go there?

And you want me to speak to **HIM?** Initially we are given quite a description of the Ethiopian eunuch. First, Ethiopia back then was a general reference to the area south of Egypt. He would have been a Nubian, a black man. I wish I could say that black people were more respected back then, but the historical prejudices against black people even in this past century were no different then.

He was the Minister of Finance to the Queen, an important and wealthy man. He has a copy of Isaiah, possibly the whole Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament), something very few people could afford. He was a God-fearing man, travelling hundreds of miles from south of Egypt to come to Jerusalem, knowing he can't enter the temple to worship. Because Deut. 23:1 says,

No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the LORD.

And notice this is how he is always addressed in the rest of the chapter; 'the eunuch'. Because he served the Queen, it was typical for male servants to be castrated. And eunuchs were harassed and despised because in the world's perspective they had no sexual identity.

God then, wants to reach a man who is a social outcast because of his race and who has sexual identity issues. We don't have to make the Word of God relevant – it is. So if God wants to reach anyone and everyone

Who Has God Placed Around You that Needs to Hear His Word? (8:30-35)

Philip does not know who God wants him to reach and to his credit there is no hesitation on his part to talk with a eunuch who's also of a different race. And who's also a very wealthy and politically connected individual. So let's learn from Philip about encounters like this with people we are afraid of or don't understand or are powerful;

Don't be intimidated by them (vv.27-29)

We are not told Philip's reaction as he approached the chariot – which by the way, is a sign of wealth. And yet, he's taking the back way to Gaza where he'll go south to Egypt and sail down the Nile to go home. So the eunuch is staying away from people intentionally. But Philip, following God's leading, has no hesitation to speak to this man whose despised by many people. And maybe Philip was hesitant but once he hears him reading Isaiah, it's God's sign to Philip that this is going to be okay. Because, sadly, we wrongly assume God is not working in certain people.

Don't presume God is not working ... (vv.30-33)

... in people we are intimidated by or pre-judge are not interested in God. The eunuch very much wanted to know God. He travelled hundreds of miles to come to the temple in Jerusalem knowing he can only get as close as the Gentile court. He has a copy of the Bible. He is searching for the God of Israel because in Him he sees some kind of hope.

How often do we make that mistake? That we assume that people who don't know Jesus are not interested. We don't know their hearts nor the mind of God. We should presume by the Word of God that tells us God loves everyone and wants everyone to come to repentance that He is in fact working somehow in everyone's life. Like the eunuch, that everyone is looking for meaning and purpose and identity and that the only way they will know who they are is if they find their identity in God.

The eunuch is reading Isaiah 53, the clearest Old Testament passage about the suffering of Jesus on the cross. He reads this because, like him, this suffering servant is despised and rejected and humiliated;

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

³³ *In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.”*

The eunuch experienced injustice. How often had he kept his mouth silent to the treatment he had received? He had no descendants. He had lost his ability to create life. So he is fascinated that the Bible talks about God's servant who willingly takes this upon himself. So he asks Philip,

who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?”

And Philip is ready. And so should we

Be spiritually ready to answer their questions (vv.34-35)

We don't have to know all the answers but we do have to at least know how to share Jesus with people. Here Philip had a wide open door and he

began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

“Began” with but also would have used other Scriptures to explain who Jesus was and what He did for them. The eunuch understands that Jesus became despised and humiliated for him on the cross, taking all our sins upon Himself, so that if we confess we are sinners and believe Jesus is the Son of God then we can have forgiveness of sins and find hope and joy in this life but also the next forever.

The best way to be ready to share Jesus with others is to pray every day that God might open a door for us to do just that. If I pray about something I’m going to think about it during the day and I’ll be more prepared if I need to respond. This is what Paul meant about prayer when he encouraged us in Col. 4:2,

² Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. ³ And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. ⁴ Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.

Obviously, in Philip’s conversation with the eunuch, he mentioned baptism. The eunuch seeing water says to Philip,

Why shouldn’t I be baptized?

What can stand in the way of my being baptized?

What prevents me from being baptized?”

Baptism was the next step in his spiritual growth. Which begs us to paraphrase the question to ourselves,

What’s the Next Step in Our Spiritual Growth That We Need to Obey God in? (8:36-40)

The answer to the question ‘What can stand in the way’ or ‘what’s preventing me’ from growing spiritually is obvious; me. I’m the only one standing in my way of growing spiritually. My bitterness can keep me from growing spiritually; my unforgiving attitude is preventing me from growing more like Jesus; my vengeful and critical spirit certainly isn’t Jesus like and my inflexible arrogance certainly is keeping me from growing spiritually. None of those are Christ-like characteristics but they do describe Satan. Satan is certainly bitter, unforgiving, vengeful, inflexible and arrogant. If we’re not growing more like Jesus who are we growing into? Without dealing with our sin we allow our sin to change our character.

Here’s a verse I try and pray a lot for the sins that I struggle with;

Rom. 6:11 In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. ¹² Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.

In v.14 we read Paul says,

¹⁴ For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.

No sin has power over a believer unless we give it power. Jesus died for our sins. We accepted Him as our Saviour. The Spirit gives us the power to be victorious over our sins. Pray, ‘Lord,

do not let the sin of _____ rule in me today because I don't want to obey its evil desires. It is not my master, Jesus is.'

Philip and the eunuch go down into the water. The eunuch is immersed in water as a picture of Jesus' death and resurrection and comes out of the water. At this point a strange thing happens and Philip is miraculously whisked away to Azotos, 20-25 miles N/E of Gaza where he keeps preaching until he reaches Caesarea on the coast. Why is that important? Because through Philip's ministry the gospel will spread to Caesarea where a Roman centurion named Cornelius lives. And God is then going to connect Cornelius and Peter together so that the gospel spreads to even Romans.

By the way, Ethiopia was known in those days as 'the end of the earth'. They did not know there was anything beyond there. Again, fulfilling the mission Jesus gave the vision of in Acts 1:8. For Philip – and you and I and the Ethiopian eunuch,

This [current] step of obedience prepares for another (8:36-40)

Philip obeys God and leaves a successful big city ministry to reach one man – one who is a social outcast – on a desert road, so that Philip will be led to the next place which sets up other people who will be reached. It's never about you and I. Our obedience is always a piece in a larger plan that God is working in and through us. We obey Him, serve one or some people here, making a connection where others will be connected and minister to others.

Because the Ethiopian eunuch, who is now saved, will go back home and spread the gospel himself. And history tells us that there was a strong Christian following in the 3rd and 4th centuries in Ethiopia. The salvation of the eunuch was also a message of hope for all harassed, oppressed, racially prejudiced and people confused about their sexual identity. God led the eunuch to read Is. 53. I'm sure he discovered as he continued to read Isaiah, only 3 chapters later, what God says about the unaccepted people like himself this:

^{56:3} Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely exclude me from his people." And let not any eunuch complain, "I am only a dry tree."

⁴ For this is what the LORD says: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant— ⁵ to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off.

⁶ And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—

⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."

Isn't this what the eunuch came to Jerusalem for in the first place? Now in Jesus, he had hope, identity and purpose. He wasn't rejected by God but accepted. He bound himself to the Lord and God gave him hope.

This is the same message of hope we can give the social outcasts of our day. The confused, lost, purposeless, ashamed who society struggles to accept but God does not. How many more people were reached for Jesus and grew like Jesus because Philip was willing to obey God's Word? Let's make sure we're willing to obey God's Word when He speaks to us so we can be used to meet the spiritual need of others around us and that we will grow together into becoming more like Jesus.

* * * * *
If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us
at olivet@rideau.net