



## **Sovereignty and Wideness in the Mercy of God**

*Series: Acts -- Worldwide Witness to the Worth of Jesus Christ*

Acts 8:26-40

March 9, 2014

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As I was studying this week and preparing to preach this text, beloved, I sort of took an opportunity to step back and look at the big picture of the advance of the gospel, the sweeping waves of the gospel of grace throughout the world. And as I was doing that, I was struck by the way that the events on the day of Pentecost serve as such a perfect preview of the rest of the book.

Back on Pentecost, when the gift of the Holy Spirit was given to the disciples and God manifest His presence in such a powerful way with His people, there were three things that stood out, remember? There was the mighty rushing wind, the supernatural fire, and speaking with other languages. These three phenomena serve beautifully and symbolically represent what we see taking place before our very eyes in the book of Acts. The speaking in tongues, in other languages, a picture of the scope of the gospel -- that it will be preached to people of every tribe, nation and tongue and will bring forth fruit from every people group of the world. The fire, a symbol of the purifying presence of the Holy Spirit with God's people, empowering and energizing the people of God, making us faithful, a holy people unto Himself, making the true church pure and, as a result, powerful in this world. Then there is the mighty rushing wind, a symbol of God's sovereignty through His Spirit, directing all things for His glory and for the expansion of His rule in this earth, directing everything, not according to human wisdom but according to the invulnerable wisdom and power of God. This, in microcosm, is what we see played out before our eyes continually as we see the relentless march of the gospel through the known world.

And we especially see it in the text that we are looking at this morning. This is one of the strangest stories in Acts. Philip is in the midst of an incredible revival when God calls him into the middle of the desert to witness to a most unlikely convert. And as we look at this text today, two themes are going to figure very prominently -- the sovereign working of God in

salvation and the wideness in God's redemptive mercy. So let's get right into the text this morning and I want you to see with me first,

A Peculiar Assignment from the Sovereign King (26) Look first at verse 26 again: "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." (Acts 8:26, ESV) Now I want you to try to imagine what is going on here. Philip is in the midst of a powerful work of the Holy Spirit in bringing revival to the people living in Samaria. Those who were considered to be half-breeds and hopelessly outside of the covenant people of God, a people who were destined, it seemed, to eternal destruction – these people are hearing the Word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit and are being saved. God is at work among them – healing people, delivering them from the power of Satan, granting eternal life to all whom He has chosen. Like He did with the church in Jerusalem, God is purifying the body – Simon Magus was exposed as a false disciple – and He is giving indisputable evidence to the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ to save sinners, to bring reconciliation with God and with man. It is a glorious and wonderful season in Samaria. The vision for the gospel mission to the world is even capturing Peter and John like verse 25 says: "Now when they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans." (Acts 8:25, ESV)

I don't know any preacher that would want to leave what was going on in Samaria. God-honoring, Christ-exalting ministry is taking place. There was still much to be done – a church to be organized and established, discipleship and training the Scriptures that needed to be accomplished. There were still threats from false teachers, like Simon Magus, that needed to be exposed and subdued. And yet, God, through an angel, tells Philip to leave this amazing ministry and to go to a seldom used road in the middle of a desert – to go to the middle of nowhere.

You need to know that Gaza, which was once one of the five great cities of the Philistines, was now a ruin having been destroyed by Alexander the Great in the first century BC. The Romans had rebuilt the city, more toward the coast, and had also constructed a new southerly road that served as the main north-south artery, and for that reason the old road from Jerusalem to Gaza had fell into disuse and disrepair. It really was a nowhere place in the middle of the desert. From a human perspective this command wouldn't have made sense at all. Leave a place where God is clearly at work to go to an uninhibited place out in the middle of nowhere and yet that is exactly what God commands.

Now let me just say something here. This is one of those proof texts that people and preachers will often cite and say that the way that you know something is of God is that it doesn't make sense. The stranger it is the more you can be assured that it is God's will. That is how they know it is from God. Don't buy that garbage. I have seen plenty of people run off the rails and crash, getting themselves into all sorts of spiritual error and spiritual shipwreck by thinking that. This text does not teach that we should look for something that is the most outlandish and makes the least sense and that that is proof that it is God. That is not the heart of the text. It is more about how far God will go to save His elect. Still, it is a peculiar command, so how will Philip respond to this assignment from the Lord?

He responds exactly as you would expect that a man who attuned to God, a man full of the Holy Spirit, a man full of the wisdom that is from God, would react. He obeys and in his obedience, he encounters:

A Most Unlikely Convert (27-35) Starting in verse 27, Luke writes: "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." (Acts 8:27-28, ESV) So Philip obeys the Lord and goes out into the desert on this deserted road and, lo and behold, he encounters one of the most unlikely converts any of us could imagine – a black African, a Gentile, an Ethiopian, a eunuch. He wouldn't rank very high on a list of evangelism prospects. When we think of Ethiopia today, we think of a nation of drought and hardship, of turmoil and starvation, but that was not the Ethiopia of Philip's day.

Ethiopia was the land south of Egypt; and in Philip's day, it was a prosperous and culturally rich one. Because the king of Ethiopia was viewed as a divine ruler, he would entrust the administrative details of his kingdom to the queen - giving her the title "Candace" (which meant "ruler of the children"). The man that Philip saw was a man of great importance, because he was an official of the queen - entrusted with the management of the vast Ethiopian treasury and entrusted with the king's harem of women – concubines and wives – entrusted with them because he was castrated.

What else do we know about him? Luke tells us that he was on his way back from Jerusalem after having gone there to worship. It is a simple statement but if we think about it, it is filled with things for us to consider. How would the eunuch have come to know of the One True God? Certainly creation testifies to His existence, "For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse." (Romans 1:20, ESV) The knowledge of the God of Israel may have spread to his nation some 900 years before when the Queen of Sheba returned from her pilgrimage to meet Solomon and there was also a large Jewish colony in Alexandria, a few hundred miles up the Nile and the truth about God could have spread from there to his country. At any rate, he has heard of the God of Israel.

This man is filled with a desire to know who this God is and so he embarked upon a lengthy and difficult journey north to Jerusalem, to the city of the temple, to worship God. It is not hard to imagine how disillusioned, how disappointed, how discouraged he would have been by his trip and for a couple of reasons. First, think about the horrible condition of religion in Jerusalem. Judaism was bankrupt. The religion over which the Pharisees and Sadducees presided was powerless, lifeless, without majesty, without wonder, without God. It was some politicized, legalistic, ritualistic mess. It had nothing to do with true worship and had nothing to do with spiritual truth. The condition of religion in Jerusalem was horrific and filled with spiritual death.

But the second reason that he would have been disillusioned would have been his own condition. As a Gentile, the furthest he would have been able to go would have been the Court of the Gentiles, the place that had become a house of merchandise and a den of thieves. But he was also a eunuch and because he was, he would have been denied access even to the Court of the Gentiles. Deuteronomy 23:1 tells us that no eunuch shall enter the assembly of the LORD. This meant that a eunuch could not enter into the temple whatsoever. But it means even more than this. The phrase, "assembly of the LORD" is a term used to describe those who are the covenant people of God, those in fellowship with God, the worshippers of God. Now certainly at this time in Jerusalem, the Jews themselves were not a part of God's covenant people because they had rejected Christ, but their sin does not change the reality of this command.

As a eunuch, this field would have been denied entrance to the assembly of the LORD, excluded from worship, excluded from God. Now in doing some study on this prohibition of eunuchs, in

digging a little bit, the reasoning behind the command in Deut. 23 becomes pretty clear. This command was not given to exclude those who had some physical deformity or had suffered an accident. No, this command was given to exclude those who had voluntarily become eunuchs as part of a pagan religious ritual and for service to that false god. This man would have fallen into that group. Remember that the king of Ethiopia considered himself divine, just as pharaoh did. Just as circumcision among the Jews was originally to be a sign of being set apart to God, becoming a eunuch was a sign of being set apart to a pagan deity—in the is case the king of Ethiopia and his gods. He was forbidden from temple worship because he was set apart to a false god.

This would have seemed like an amazingly fruitless trip, worthless even. The eunuch had travelled all this way and at best he may have been admitted to one of the synagogues of the Freedmen, where he certainly would not have heard the truth expounded at all. He came all this way and did not find what he was looking for. But, though he would have been sorely tempted to give up, shamed by his condition, disillusioned by what he found in Jerusalem. But he did not.

God will not give him rest and so on the way out of Jerusalem, because he had the money to do so, he bought a copy of the scroll of Isaiah and began reading. Of all the books of the OT that he could have purchased, by God's providence, he buys Isaiah and he doesn't wait to get home, he starts reading it immediately. He must know the truth. He is not easily put off. I think of what a contrast he is to so many today. He has to know the truth. He wants a true understanding of God. You know, in our own age and in our culture especially, people do not seem to care what kind of faith they have, whether or not what they believe is true, as long as they have some kind of faith. They are content to invent things to believe in, content to imagine God as they want Him to be, without any concern for whether or not what they believe is true according to the Word of God, even in and especially in our churches. Not this man. He wants the truth. And so he begins reading the scroll of Isaiah, this incredible prophecy of Jesus Christ, the gospel of the OT, trying to understand the truth of God revealed in His Word.

Now the obvious question -- Why is he doing this? What is behind his hunger for the truth. God is drawing Him by His Spirit. Sovereign grace is at work in his soul. As Jesus said: "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out... No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day." (John 6:37, 44, ESV) We know that no man seeks after God on his own accord. Scripture

testifies to that clearly: “as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God.” (Romans 3:10–11, ESV) There is only one explanation. God is at work in his heart and in all of the circumstances to draw this unlikely convert to Christ. And His work is about to come to fruition.

Luke writes: “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. 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. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.”” (Acts 8:29–33, ESV) There is Philip, sent to this remote region by God, and he sees a caravan heading south. The Spirit of God speaks to Philip to go and speak to the man, to join himself up with them. Ordinarily, you wouldn’t do this. This is obviously a high-ranking official and you don’t just go running up to his chariot, but Philip is faithful and he is attuned to the will of God and so he goes and he hears the man reading aloud from Isaiah 53. He asks the man, “Do you understand what you are reading?” That word “understand” is an important one. Philip is not just asking the man if he comprehends the words that he is reading, he is asking him if he perceives what they mean. Philip hears him reading the Word of God, but he knows that means nothing if he doesn’t understand what he is reading. Philip does not make the mistake that we so often make, especially with people who say “God words” or spiritual jargon. He does not make the mistake of thinking that everyone knows the gospel – they don’t. They seldom even have the most basic facts straight. They do not understand who God is, what He is like, what sin is, its wickedness and seriousness, who Jesus is and what He has done, they don’t even understand how to respond.

Philip asks the question and the eunuch displays amazing humility here. He confesses that he doesn’t understand what he is reading at all. “How can I, unless someone guides me?” In essence he is saying: I don’t really understand this. How can I? I have heard the rabbis talk in Jerusalem but all they do is argue. No-one knows anything with certainty. And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. How do you explain that? How do you explain a man of power inviting an itinerant evangelist in the middle of nowhere to come and instruct him from the Word of God? The sovereign work of the Spirit, that’s how.

Reading from the Isaiah 53, the gospel of the OT, reading of the suffering of Christ, he turns to Philip and: “And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.” (Acts 8:34–35, ESV) This, beloved, is what you call a “softball.” This is a “can’t miss” opportunity for Philip. He starts there and beginning with this Scripture, he tells this hungry heart the good news about Jesus.

Again, what takes center stage in this text? As we have seen repeatedly in the book of Acts, it is the preaching and the teaching of the Word of God in the power of the Spirit of God. Never underestimate the power of God’s Spirit-empowered word to bring people to salvation “since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;” (1 Peter 1:23, ESV) It is the Word of God which the Spirit of God uses to bring forth spiritual life. How quick the modern church is to abandon the very means appointed by God by which he saves the lost. How quickly the modern church will jump on every modern fad, woefully absent the presence of the Spirit-empowered Word of God, to try to win converts. Philosophy, human wisdom, psychology, presentations meant to appeal to the senses, movies that butcher the gospel, entertainment, emotional appeals, promises of fleshly satisfaction – all these things minus the one thing that makes for true conversion – the Word of God. The truth of God was going to bear fruit in the heart of this man, because God had ordained that it would, because the Spirit of God was striving with him. The Spirit and the Word are an unbeatable combination. Like Charles Spurgeon wrote: The gospel is preached in the ears of all; it only comes with power to some. The power that is in the gospel does not lie in the eloquence of the preacher; otherwise men would be converters of souls. Nor does it lie in the preachers’ learning; otherwise it would consist of the wisdom of men. We might preach till our tongues rotted, till we should exhaust our lungs and die, but never a soul would be converted unless there were mysterious power going with it—the Holy Ghost changing the will of man. O Sirs! We might as well preach to stone walls as to preach to humanity, unless the Holy Ghost be with the Word to give it power to convert the soul.

This man needed the truth. He needed to comprehend the truth that penetrates the human soul, that answers the deepest needs of the heart, truth that transforms. Philip gave him just that. Beginning in Isaiah 53, he preached the good news of Jesus to him and it wouldn’t have been very hard. Going back into Isaiah 52, he would have started with these words: “The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.” (Isaiah 52:10, ESV) How will God bring His salvation to pass?

“Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. As many were astonished at you— his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind— so shall he sprinkle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand. Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.” (Isaiah 52:13–53:12, ESV)

It is all there isn't it? The good news about Jesus. Jesus is the Son of God... but also the Son of Man. Fully God and fully man. But we didn't esteem Him as we should. He came bear our griefs and sorrows... our sin and shame upon His own body. He was pierced through for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. The punishment we deserve for our sin fell upon Him. By His stripes... through His death... we are healed. He suffered, the just for the unjust, for our sin, for our idolatry. He died for all the ways in which we have cut ourselves off from God. He died to pay the debt of our sin, to extinguish the just wrath of God against us, in



our place, so that we might live in perfect fellowship with God forever. He perished and rose again so that we might be saved and be part of God's people for all eternity. It pleased the Father to do this. That is the gospel. That is the good news. And this is the message which Philip preached to him... beginning right where he found him.

We shouldn't be amazed by this. It is something all of us should be able to do. This is not something unique to Philip or to a preacher; this is something that every blood bought, Spirit filled believer ought to be able to do, ought to be eager to do. This was the greatest of news that the eunuch could have ever heard, because in Philip's Spirit-driven explanation of the gospel, this man came to know...

The Wideness of God's Mercy (36-40) Look at verse 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?" (Acts 8:36, ESV) They come to water and the eunuch, this man who had been searching for God, but only because God had been searching for him and drawing him to Christ, asks the question, what prevents me from being baptized? What prevents me from being baptized and numbered among the people of God? I want to belong to Christ. I want to be counted among His people. I believe the Messiah of Israel died for me! What keeps me from being His disciple? What keeps me back from the identifying with Him in baptism – his life, His death, his resurrection? And the answer is, nothing.

I don't know if Philip read the words of Isaiah 56 to this man or not. It seems that he would have. It is as if they were written for him. "Thus says the Lord: "Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed. Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil." Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, "The Lord will surely separate me from his people"; and 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. "And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant— these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all

peoples.” The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, “I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.”” (Isaiah 56:1–8, ESV) What prevents this man? Nothing. Jesus has suffered and died for his sin and has opened the door so that this man who was once far off can be brought near by the blood of Jesus, to receive a monument within God’s house, everlasting life in the presence of God. Verse 38 says: “And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.” (Acts 8:38, ESV) This man believes and Philip baptizes him. He was lost but now he is found.

You may notice that in the ESV, the text skips from verse 36 to verse 38. That is because verse 37 is not original to the text. Some manuscripts add all or most of verse 37: And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he replied, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” It was added later to make sure that we know that this man was truly saved and Philip was sure of it. No matter, it is obvious that Philip called on him to repent and believe and be baptized or the eunuch never would have asked the question in verse 36. Good theology, but not a part of the original text.

No matter, because what we need to see, Beloved, is that the Ethiopian eunuch’s conversion and baptism is the very fulfillment of what God promised He would do in Isaiah 56. God’s word cannot fail, His word cannot return to Him void, and it will accomplish every purpose God intends for it. It was always God plan, God’s purpose, God’s glory from the creation of the world, to save sinners of all types and all ethnicities, the most unlikely of people in order to put upon display the great wideness of His love and mercy and kindness and grace. He is a glorious picture of the wideness of God’s redeeming love. He is also the answer to the question we sometimes hear: “What about those people in deepest, darkest Africa who have never heard the Gospel? How will they be saved?” They are saved the same way everyone else is saved! God sends someone to them with the Gospel!

What became of this man? We don’t know for certain. We do know this. “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.” (Acts 8:39, ESV) Of course he went on his way rejoicing. His soul was unburdened. His heart was set free. He was restored, whole in way he could never have imagined.

As for Philip, his mission in the desert complete, he was carried away, snatched up by the Spirit of God. Miraculously he disappears and we won't see him again until Acts 21.. There isn't much more that we can say about that. It is a miracle. But Philip doesn't sit around waiting for another miraculous intervention of God. "But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea." (Acts 8:40, ESV) Philip was right away about the business of preaching the gospel and declaring the good news of Christ.

What an incredible text and in it are some

Important Truths To Live By

The first one is made so clear by this text. God is sovereign over salvation. That truth is written in big bold letters over this whole affair. If the sovereign hand of God is not extended toward us in mercy to redeem us from our sin and death, we are without hope and forever lost. But God does move to save sinners, orchestrating our lives and the events of our lives according to His sovereign will that we would be saved. That is why the Scriptures make so much of the mercy and grace of God in Jesus Christ. We were all in the same predicament as this Ethiopian eunuch. Like Paul writes: "For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life." (Titus 3:3-7, ESV)

The second is this: God is deliberate about what he uses to reach His people with the gospel. First of all, he uses the Spirit of God. The Spirit draws men to Jesus Christ. He convicts them of their sin and convinces them of their need of a Savior. Second, God uses the Word of God. There can be no true evangelism without the Word of God. "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." (Romans 10:17, ESV) Third, God uses men and women to proclaim the gospel. We are to do the work of an evangelist and be witnesses in this world.

God, in his sovereignty, has determined to use us to proclaim the truth and to be the instrument by which men and women are saved.

The last truth I want us to see is this: God delights to save the most unlikely. And let's face it – that's all of us. This eunuch was about as unlikely a convert as you could imagine, but nothing and no one is beyond the mercy and the grace of God. No matter who they are or what they have done... no one is beyond salvation. God delights to save the most unlikely and I, for one, am glad that He does.

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