

The Gospel Goes Forward

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 September 2024

Preacher: Bob Akroyd

[0 : 0 0] Oh, good morning, everyone. It's a great pleasure to be with you, to speak to the young people, now to speak for a few moments about this magnificent transitional chapter in the book of Acts. If you remember at the very beginning of Acts, Jesus gives his disciples their marching orders. And you know, as a good rule of thumb, if Jesus tells you to do something, you do it.

Jesus says, you are to wait. Wait here in Jerusalem. You will receive power from on high. And he goes on to say, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. A very clear, simple, straightforward marching order that Jesus gives to his people then and Jesus gives to his people now. I mean, we're gathered here in Haddington. We're here in East Lothian. We're in, you know, the greater Edinburgh area. We're not that far from the big city.

We're in the nation of Scotland. We're not that far from England. We've just prayed for a missionary family in Vietnam. That really illustrates exactly what Jesus was saying. Start where you are. Here we are.

We're in Haddington. But don't stop where you start. Go from where you are to the surrounding areas. Go to the neighboring communities. Go to the neighboring districts. Maybe the nearby countries.

But then go as far east as you can go. As far north, as far south, as far west. And in chapter 8, we encounter Philip and his ministry to Samaria. And as we look at this chapter, I want to notice just a few things. We're going to be looking, spending our time this morning looking at the final scene of the chapter, Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. But just want to make a few observations about the chapter that James just read. The first observation is that it does not seem to be a great time for a mission trip. Acts chapter 7, Stephen martyred, stoned to death. The beginning of chapter 8, Saul approved of his execution. And Saul then went on a rampage. Persecution, opposition, arrest, scattering.

[2 : 3 2] So this is how Philip's ministry commences. And you would think that this is not the best time to commence a new work. This is not a propitious age to begin a cross-cultural mission trip. There's persecution. There's opposition. There's danger. There's death. And nonetheless, as we'll see, God knows what he's doing, where he's doing it, and how he's doing it. So even though it doesn't seem to be a propitious time. Here we are in the 21st century, 2024. And you could list all the reasons why planting new churches, seeking to reach people with Jesus in the nation of Scotland seems to be a particularly challenging, if not a pointless task. But I would suggest that there's no better time than the present, no better place than here, to commence this work. Because so few people know so little about Jesus.

So few people have had any meaningful introduction to him. So we're actually back really at the beginning. It reminds me of two salesmen. Two salesmen, they go to the South Sea. They're shoe salesmen.

One salesman looks at the islanders, cables back. It's hopeless. Nobody wears shoes. The other salesman says, this is great. Nobody has any shoes. It's the same situation, the same circumstance. But two people see the, one person sees the problem and goes back. The other person sees the opportunity and says, this is the right place. I'm in the right area, and I've got the right product. Nobody has shoes, and I've got shoes. So if nobody knows, or very few people know about Jesus, and we do, this seems maybe to be the right place at the right time. Now, I'm a history person. I came to this country to study Scottish history, and to study the history of your nation and of your people.

And when I became a Christian, I was fascinated to study the history of the church. And it tends to be the case, God has a way of working at times when you think things are at a real low ebb. In the early part of the 18th century, 200-ish years ago, so let's, yeah, about 200 years ago, 300 years ago, even as a historian, I should know that. So early 1700, so 300 years ago, the situation in England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, Christianity was at a low ebb. One of the local commentators said that the collapse in morality in Britain had collapsed to such a degree that was never known in any Christian country. One famous jurist, a lawyer, went to all the famous churches in London and listened to each of the preachers. And he said it would be impossible to tell whether the preacher was a follower of Jesus, a follower of Confucius, or a follower of Muhammad. So 300 years ago, morality was low, immorality was high, vital Christianity was almost absent. But what does God do? God raises a generation of preachers, evangelists, theologians. It commenced what we now know as the Great Awakening.

The church was asleep, and God woke it up. And when God woke it up, watch out. But at that time, you have now preachers like John Wesley, George Whitfield, great preachers. But the church, you would have thought, hey, there's a new generation of preachers. The church would be delighted. Well, the church was quite strict in how it did things. So like, for example, Allie is licensed to preach in Haddington. But that would mean that he would not be allowed to preach anywhere else. You couldn't preach in North Berwick. You couldn't preach in Dunbar. You couldn't preach in Edinburgh unless the local minister said it was okay. And with these new preachers, the local ministers were saying, no, it's not okay. You're not allowed to preach in the church.

[7 : 06] And there was nowhere else to preach, was there? What are you going to do? Preach in the open air? Well, that's what they did. They preached in the open air. So you see, persecution has a way of doing something interesting. In the 18th century, when the pulpits were shut to the great evangelistic preachers, they went to the people. And they began to speak directly to the people, not in the church, but in the community. And something remarkable happened. Ordinary people heard about Jesus and responded. I'm just going to give you one scene just to prove the point. So now I don't know much about Haddington. I've been here a few times. Mainly, I've been to the sheriff court in Haddington, but I'll tell you about that later. But I don't know what Haddington is like on a Saturday night.

But I'm told that if you want a good night out, get the train south to Newcastle, and that is the party capital of the United Kingdom. You know, if you're looking for a night out. 300 years ago, it wasn't too different. 1742, John Wesley comes to Newcastle. This is what he sees. We came to Newcastle about six, that's six in the afternoon. And after a short refreshment, walked into the town.

I was surprised. So much drunkenness, cursing and swearing, even from the mouths of little children, do I never remember to have seen and heard in so small a compass of time. Surely this place is ripe for him who came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Don't you like the attitude?

I am in a place where I am surrounded by sinners. I am preaching the gospel of Jesus, which is salvation from sin for sinners. So I must be in the right place.

Send more shoes. Nobody has shoes. Wesley says, here is a place where immorality is high and the gospel knowledge is low. That's why I'm meant to be here. And we're told that on the Sunday, that was Friday afternoon, Sunday morning, seven o'clock in the morning, Wesley goes to the poorest part of town. And along with his friend, John Taylor, they begin to sing. They begin to sing Psalm 100, all people that on earth do dwell. And we're told that three or four people came out to see what was the matter. They soon increased to four or 500. I suppose there might be 12 or 1500 people before I had done preaching to whom I applied those solemn words. He was wounded for our transgressions, the same text that we have in Acts chapter eight. He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement of our peace was upon him. And by his stripes, we were healed. Observing the people when I had done to stand gaping and staring upon me with the most profound astonishment, I told them, if you desire to know who I am, my name is John Wesley. At five in the evening with God's help, I designed to preach here again. At five, the hill on which I designed to preach was covered from top to bottom. I never saw so large a number of people together, not in Moorfields or Kennington Common. 20 or 30,000 people would regularly gather to hear Wesley preach in London. He says the crowd was even bigger in Newcastle.

[10:17] What does that say? That says when persecution happens, God is at work. That says when it looks like a difficult time for ministry or mission to us, God is up to something. Because when human ability and capacity seems limited, God shows up to show that he is unlimited, unrestricted, that his capacity is not bound in any way. So it looks like a bad time for mission and God shows up. Second observation is that the gospel breaks down barriers. We see the barrier now between Jew and Samaritan.

They're kind of like cousins. And sometimes you get on with your cousins and sometimes you don't get on with your cousins. Sometimes it's a close relationship. Sometimes it's not a close relationship. There are members of your family that might be a little odd. I don't know about you, but many people have odd members of their family. I might even be described as one of those members by other members of my family. A bit odd, a bit different. Now, I don't know that saying that the West of Scotland is odd, but the West of Scotland is different. I was in Motherwell yesterday for a wedding, and it's so different than Edinburgh. I was there. I was at a wedding reception, and I had a group of people that I knew. I didn't know many people at all, so I wanted to sit at that table. There was no chair.

So I went to the next table, and there was an empty chair, and I said, can I borrow this chair? Well, that commenced a two-and-a-half-hour conversation where I eventually joined that table, sat down, and made a new group of friends. That wouldn't happen in Edinburgh. In Edinburgh, he said, is this chair taken? Yes, it is. End of conversation. It's a two-hour conversation in the greater Glasgow area. So what does the gospel do? The gospel has a way of breaking down barriers, cultural barriers. Barriers that seem to be high, the gospel removes. So no longer is the gospel limited to Jerusalem, where Jesus' last days, last moments of his ministry, his life ebbed away on the cross. He was buried, raised from the dead. Not just the surrounding area of Judea, but now the gospel is going to the neighbors, to the odd cousins called the Samaritans. And you know what? They're responding. They're responding to Jesus. So the gospel, the message of Jesus has a way of connecting with all different kinds of people in all different kinds of places. So it doesn't seem to be a great time for mission, and God has other ideas.

The gospel breaks down barriers. And the third observation, before we get to the Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, is this. Mission loves company. Mission loves company. What happens when something starts going on in Samaria? Verse 14, now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John. So if you have people who are involved, sharing the gospel, inviting people to their homes, inviting people here to church, don't just leave it to one person. Join together in that work. About 30 years ago at Becloot Church, where I'm a member in Edinburgh, we're right next to the Meadows. And we had an American couple that were with us then, and they said, every summer in our church, we do a holiday Bible club. Let's do a holiday Bible club on the Meadows. And you know what? We had tents filled with kids and crafts and activities, and almost everybody was involved. On the Meadows, making food, serving tea, doing crafts, Bible studies, you name it. Because what happened? People joined together. There was a desire to serve, and this mission gave us that opportunity as a church to work together. So head office in Jerusalem hears the report.

Something's happening in Samaria. Let's go. Let's help. Let's take part. So never underestimate the value of what you can contribute, of how you can share in this work. Peter, John moved down to Jerusalem, from Jerusalem to Samaria. They see what's going on. They deal with Simon, the sorcerer. But notice that Philip doesn't step back and say, oh, the big guys are here. I can stop the work. No. Philip continues to do the work. They go back to Jerusalem, and Philip continues wherever he goes to speak the word.

[15 : 08] So these are just by way of observations to set the scene. It doesn't seem like a propitious time, a very positive time for mission. And yet God has different ideas. Verse 26, now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, rise and go towards the south, to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. Same Gaza, same place, same area. So God speaks. God acts. God is up to something. And God expects his people to respond. And this is really, I think, the dynamic here.

God acts. God speaks. And Philip responds. So God says, go. I want you to go. And now this is remarkable. This is unusual. Yes. This is unique. Yes. God is breaking down barriers. So it's not surprising that the spirit is visible, active, audible in this case. But notice the instructions.

Go south. Go to the desert. I mean, there's even a little footnote that says south. The word translated south could be translated in the middle of the day. What an unusual command.

In the middle of the day, go to the desert road, Philip. What on earth? Why would I go there? Why would I go to a remote place at a very unpleasant time? If it's desert, it's the middle of the day.

The sun's right above you. But we're told that he rose and went. God acts. God speaks. Philip responds. He arose and went.

[17 : 28] And of all the unlikely encounters, what does he find on that desert road? What does he find on that unlikely setting?

He finds the chancellor of the exchequer from Ethiopia. And the Ethiopian exchequer has just been on a trip to Jerusalem. And he's seeking to worship God.

He goes to Jerusalem and he gets a copy of one of the major prophets, the book of Isaiah. Sixty-six chapters, a big book. And this unlikely person in an unlikely place is reading an unlikely book.

So what does that say? It says that God knows what he's doing. God knows what he's doing, how he's doing it. And God has a way of orchestrating the impossible.

So we have an Ethiopian, a eunuch court official, Candace, queen of Ethiopia, come to Jerusalem, sitting in the chariot. He's reading Isaiah the prophet.

[18 : 31] The spirit's still speaking. Go over and join this chariot. So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet. God speaks.

Philip responds. God commands. Philip obeys. There is something quite simple about that dynamic. If God speaks, we should listen. If God commands, we should obey.

If God directs, we should follow. This is not Philip's plan of mission, of ministry. This isn't Philip saying to God, here's my strategy, God.

What do you think? God says, Philip, this is my strategy. This is what you are to do. So he's hearing, reading the prophet.

So this is very much an oral community where people speak and read and share things out loud. And this is a community, a time where people's memory is quite good, where they can memorize long passages, books even.

[19 : 32] So the Ethiopian exchequer is reading aloud. Philip asked the question. Do you understand what you're reading? And he said, how can I unless someone guides me?

I'm reading it. I want to read it. I want to understand it. That's why I went to Jerusalem. I want to know God. I want to worship God. But I can't understand what I'm reading.

He invited Philip. Come up and sit. And the passage that he was reading was from Isaiah. Yes. Isaiah chapter 53, which is the fourth of four servant songs, where God introduces a servant.

And this servant is going to suffer. This servant is going to die. This servant is going to give his life so that others might live. This servant is going to take upon himself the sin of others so that they might be forgiven.

Does this sound familiar? Isaiah says, I'm telling you about somebody who's going to come. He's going to come in about 700 years, maybe a bit more than that. He's going to come, and he's going to be a humble servant.

[20 : 44] Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Jesus quickly fled to Ethiopia as a refugee. Jesus spends the first 30 years of his ministry in obscurity.

Then he commences a preaching and teaching ministry. Doesn't live in palaces. Has no place to lay his head. He's an itinerant preacher pastor. He is completely relying upon other people for his sustenance.

And what does he do? He preaches. He preaches the kingdom. He tells people that they must be born again. He tells them stories about the kingdom, like I read to the children about the treasure.

A treasure that you might just stumble upon. You might not know what you've realized until you stumble upon it. Or the fact that there are some people that are looking for this treasure, and they finally find it.

What does he do? He opens the eyes of the blind. He enables the deaf to hear. He enables the mute to speak. The lame now walk. The sick are now cleansed. Even the dead are raised.

[21 : 46] And what thanks does he get? Well, he's betrayed by one of his closest confidants. He's handed over for a series of trials.

Two civil trials. Two religious trials. He's ultimately charged with and condemned of two capital charges. He's charged with the charge of treason, claiming to be a king.

That's illegal in Rome. He also claims to be God. That's blasphemous. And that's illegal to the Jewish authorities. So the Ethiopian is reading this passage.

Like a sheep, he was led to the slaughter. Like a lamb before its shearer is silent. So he opens not his mouth. Remember the scene where Herod, again, if you're ever reading the New Testament, anybody with the name of Herod is a nasty character.

There's not much redeeming qualities in the house of Herod. I'm willing to be corrected. But wherever you see the name Herod, whether Herod the Great in Bethlehem or Herod the Tetrarch at the time of Jesus' death, these are nasty characters.

[22 : 54] And Herod wanted to hear Jesus. Herod had a lot of questions for Jesus. And Herod had the opportunity to meet Jesus face to face. Pilate sends him to Herod. And Jesus spoke not a word.

Said nothing. Completely silent. In his humiliation, justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken from the earth.

What a great point to be reading. What does this show us? This shows us that God is at work in the life of the exchequer of Ethiopia long before Philip comes on the scene.

God is at work long before Philip arrives at the chariot. And what does this say to us? God is at work in other people's lives long before you speak, long before you encounter them.

God always goes ahead. God never leaves himself without a witness. Here we are in this beautiful area of the country. There's a lot of beautiful farmlands, beautiful beaches.

[23 : 57] We're surrounded by the beauty of God's creation, which is a constant reminder. A constant reminder of his goodness. A constant reminder of his mercy. A constant reminder of his grace.

He never leaves himself without a witness. Wherever you go in the service of Jesus, he has gone before you. Philip, I want you to go on the south road.

Go on the desert road. Even go at midday. That's where I want you to go, Philip. He encounters an Ethiopian exchequer reading the book of Isaiah.

He says, I don't understand what I'm reading. I need someone to help me. This is a vivid illustration of life today. People want answers, but they don't have them.

People are looking for direction, but they can't find it. People want to know the meaning of life, but they just don't know. If you're a Christian, you have. Not all the answers, but you have the answer.

[24 : 57] Philip, who initially was, remember, he was commissioned as a deacon. He was commissioned as a practical guy. All of a sudden, he's now the evangelist. Now he's a Bible teacher.

So you might feel inadequate for a task. Well, join the club. Philip was inadequate for the task, but he was enabled by God to say to the Ethiopian, when the Ethiopian said, is this the prophet or is this someone else?

Who's he talking about? Verse 36, Philip opened his mouth and began with the scripture. He told him the good news about Jesus. So if you're not a Christian here this morning, the only reason that we gather here is to celebrate the good news of Jesus.

We sing songs. We pray prayers. We read. We gather together to hear about Jesus. We enjoy each other's friendship and fellowship because he breaks down barriers between us and God and between us and one another.

So if you want to know what this church is about, this church is about Jesus. His good news. It's not bad news. It's good. And it's good news for you and for me.

[26 : 13] The only difference, if you're not a Christian, the only difference is that 30 years ago, somebody explained to me what this message was. Somebody took time to explain what this good news about Jesus is.

God enabled me to see. God enabled me to believe. God put real people into my life, key people who pointed me towards Jesus.

But it was God himself who opened my eyes, God himself who opened my heart. So you might be here because you're curious. You might be here because you've been invited.

You might wish to bring a friend. Now, just like Philip, we have a responsibility and we are to obey God. But notice, from beginning to end, who is at work?

God is at work. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Because God opens people's eyes, they can now see. He opens people's hearts, they can now respond.

[27 : 13] He opens people's minds that they can now understand. And as they're going along the road, they came to some water. The eunuch said, See, here is water.

What prevents me from being baptized? Ali and AJ grant this morning, we have a kid. We want to dedicate this child.

We want him to grow up to know Jesus. What would prevent us from doing that? Nothing would prevent them from doing that. The Ethiopian says, I know Jesus. I want to be baptized. I want to testify to this newfound faith in Jesus.

Is there anything preventing this from happening? Philip says there's absolutely nothing preventing this from happening. So Philip the evangelist, Philip the deacon, Philip the Bible teacher, is now Philip the Baptist.

Whatever he is called to do, he does. He commanded the chariot to stop. They both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch. He baptized them.

[28 : 14] They came 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. So yes, Philip is a key character.

But it's not really about Philip. If you're seeking to share the gospel with your neighbor, your friend, you are a key character in that story. But you're not the critical character.

The key character in all of this is Jesus. Jesus who came down, who lived, who died, who rose again, is the same Jesus who commissions his people to go and to share and to speak and to testify.

And the same Jesus who accompanies his people wherever they go and says, surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. So in his name we gather.

In his name we praise. In his name we pray. In his name we proclaim so that we might know who he is. We might know what he has done.

[29 : 14] And our desire is to share this good news with others. All that he is and all that he has done. So like Philip, if we can be obedient, if we can be faithful, if we can follow where God leads, if we can obey where God commands, where we can speak, when we are given the opportunity to speak, watch out.

Because when God's people take God's word seriously, God has a way of showing up. And when God shows up, you never know what's going to happen. You never know who you're going to speak to.

You never know how they're going to respond. And you're never going to know what's going to happen next. But one thing you know for sure, it's good and it's great. Because our God is good and our God is great.

Let's pray. Father in heaven, thank you for your word and for your work. Thank you for your truth and for your gospel. We thank you that you used Philip those 2,000 years ago.

Help us, Lord, to be used by you today. Speak, Lord, and may your servants listen. Speak, and may we obey. Lead us, Lord, and may we go. Wherever you go, whatever you say, Lord, be with us and guide us and keep us as we pray all in the precious name of Jesus.

[30 : 30] Amen.