

"THE SEEKER OF THE LOST"

Fifty years ago, J.I. Packer published a book entitled *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. He wrote it to confront the notion that says that the belief that God is completely sovereign in bringing people to saving faith is a hindrance to evangelism. As Packer says in the book's introduction,

"There is abroad today a widespread suspicion that a robust faith in the absolute sovereignty of God is bound to undermine any adequate sense of human responsibility. Such a faith is thought to be dangerous to spiritual health, because it breeds a habit of complacent inertia. In particular, it is thought to paralyze evangelism by robbing one both of the motive to evangelize and of the message to evangelize with. The supposition seems to be that you cannot evangelize effectively unless you are prepared to pretend while you are doing it that the doctrine of divine sovereignty is not true." [10]

Packer's book is the classic contemporary rebuttal to that mistaken notion. But you don't have to read his book to see that the duty of evangelism and the doctrine of divine sovereignty are not at odds with each other. You can see this

right here in Luke's account the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. In this passage we clearly see that *the Lord works through the witness of his people to bring salvation to the lost*. As we study this passage tonight, I want to point out how it shows divine sovereignty and human responsibility working hand in hand in the work of evangelism.

Divine Sovereignty in Evangelism

On the side of divine sovereignty, there are a number of things that we could say about of the critical role that God plays in what takes place here. First of all, it is worth pointing out that the command for Philip to leave Samaria comes right in the middle of a revival. It is hard to imagine Philip leaving that city if the angel of the Lord had not come to him and told him to do so. Why in the world would he leave when the Spirit was so obviously at work right where he was?

We also see God's sovereignty in how he had prepared the Ethiopian eunuch for his encounter with Philip. The term 'eunuch' is used in the Bible to describe a man who has been emasculated. In the ancient world, eunuchs were often placed in positions of power because they could be trusted around queens and harems and because they would not be tempted to try to build a dynasty for themselves. Now, this particular eunuch was in a position of great significance.

He was a court official of the queen of Ethiopia, and in ancient Ethiopia the queen essentially ran the kingdom due to the fact that the king was believed to be divine and thus too holy to bother with the mundane matters of government. Somehow, this eunuch had become interested in the Jewish religion, so much so that he made the long trip to Jerusalem in order to be able to worship at the temple. In all likelihood, he was not a full-fledged convert to Judaism but a God-fearer. This meant he would only be able to gain entrance to the Court of the Gentiles in the temple. But he would not even be able to get that far if the temple officials knew that he was a eunuch. Old Testament law prohibited eunuchs and others with bodily defects from entering the temple at all because of how such defects symbolized the effect of sin upon God's good creation.

Now, try to imagine how this man might be feeling as he makes his way back home. Here he is, willing to travel all the way from northern Africa to Jerusalem in order to worship the God of Israel. But when he gets there he is told that he cannot come inside the temple. It would have been very easy for him to take offense at this and conclude that such a religion was not for him. But that is not what happened. Instead, he acquired his own copy of the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and was pouring over it as he returned to Ethiopia. The Lord was so obviously at work in this man's heart!

Now, back to Philip. Not only does God tell Philip to leave Samaria during a time of revival, he also tells him exactly where he needs to go. Were it not for the specific directions given by the angel of the Lord, there is no way Philip would have found the eunuch. And take note of God's sovereignty over the timing of all of this. He knew exactly when Philip would need to leave in order to ensure that he would cross paths with the eunuch.

Once Philip is on his way, God points him to the right chariot at just the right moment. As Philip comes up alongside the Ethiopian, it just so happens that the eunuch is reading a passage of Scripture that presents Philip with a golden opportunity to talk about Christ. Think about that! This man could just as easily have been plodding through an Old Testament genealogy, but here he is reading Isaiah 53 just as Philip comes across him! I'm not sure that you could choose a better Old Testament passage from which to preach the gospel to someone.

To top it all off, while traveling through what the angel of the Lord described in verse 26 as a "desert place," they just happen to come upon water at the very moment when the eunuch is ready to be baptized. What are the odds of that happening? Can there be any doubt that the Lord was in complete control of this man's conversion?

Human Responsibility in Evangelism

At the same time, there is no disputing the fact that Philip played a vital role in bringing this man to saving faith. Of course, God could have sent someone else. For that matter, he could have done what we will see him do with Paul in chapter 9: God could have met the Ethiopian himself and called him to faith that way. But that is not God's usual way of working. Most of the time, he works through the witness of his people to bring unbelievers to saving faith.

The first thing to point out about Philip's role here is that he obeys the angel's command to leave Samaria and travel to the road that leads to Gaza. Philip's obedience leads to the salvation of this eunuch on the way to Gaza. Gaza, by the way, was one of the cities of the Philistines. The fact that this conversion takes place near there is very significant. Philip ministers the gospel to a Gentile near a Gentile city. This further demonstrates that the Gentiles are being brought into the covenant family.

Luke's narrative also gives us the sense that Philip followed the Lord's instructions eagerly. After the Spirit tells him to go and join the eunuch's chariot, Philip *runs* over to it. There is a zeal and an earnestness about Philip's witness to Christ. Where does such zeal come from? It comes from being totally convinced that the message that we have to share is the most important thing in the world.

We need to remind ourselves of this. There is nothing that is more important for any person that you meet than that they hear the gospel summons to repent and trust in Christ alone for their salvation. People need to see that we take the gospel seriously before we can ask them to take it seriously.

Another thing to note about Philip's witness is the fact that he looked for an opportunity and seized it. When he heard the man reading from Isaiah 53, he asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" This is something that we can learn to do as well. We can be looking for questions to ask that might provide an opening for us to talk about the gospel with people. We might ask, 'What do you mean by that?', or 'Why is that important to you?', or 'Why do you believe that?' If you listen carefully, you will often find that people reveal quite a bit about their beliefs even in everyday conversation. This can present us with an opportunity to gently confront those beliefs with the truth of the gospel.

By the way, the fact that Philip heard what the eunuch was reading indicates that he was reading aloud. This was how most people read in the ancient world. It was uncommon for a person to read silently. This was still the case in the 4th century A.D., as we can see by the fact that Augustine tells us that he marveled at how the bishop Ambrose did his reading in silence.

Another aspect of Philip's role in the eunuch's conversion was the fact that he preached a Christ-centered gospel message from the passage of Scripture that the eunuch was reading. Of course, not every Christian is called to be a preacher of God's Word. All Christians are called to be ready to bear witness to Christ, but only some are called to the preaching office. The fact that the preached Word played a central role in the eunuch's conversion points to the fact that preaching is the primary outward means that God uses to call people to himself. As Paul says in Romans 10, "how are they to hear without someone preaching?... faith comes from hearing." In light of this, our efforts in personal evangelism should not only point people to Christ but also to their need for Christ's church and its ministry.

One last thing to point out as we consider the human side of what takes place in this encounter is that this eunuch was the first African to come to faith in Christ. And Luke tells us that after he was baptized, "he went on his way rejoicing." He returned to home to Ethiopia. The gospel came to Africa through this man. This is significant, because some of the most important figures in the first few centuries of church history were Africans, including Tertullian, Athanasius, and Augustine. One meeting along the road to Gaza had an impact on the course of church history.

The true seeker in this passage is not the Ethiopian, but the Lord. God prepared the eunuch for his encounter with Philip. God was the one who orchestrated the encounter. At the same time, Philip's obedience and his preaching were also instrumental in the eunuch's conversion. How would the eunuch have heard if Philip had not been sent? God really does work through our witness to bring people to saving faith. We need to be praying for opportunities to talk to people about Christ. We need to be on the lookout for such opportunities. We need to ask questions that can draw people out and present openings for us to talk about Christ. We may not have many experiences like the one that is described in this passage. We might not see any fruit from our attempts to point people to Christ. But that is not our concern. The Lord is the one who is sovereign over salvation. He is the only one who can pierce a hardened heart and bring about the new birth. We are not called to convert people. But we are commanded to always be prepared to give a reason for the hope that is within us. And the fact that the Lord is sovereign in salvation helps us to do this work with confidence. As J.I. Packer notes,

“so far from inhibiting evangelism, faith in the sovereignty of God’s government and grace is the only thing thing that can sustain it, for it is the only thing that can give us the resilience that we need if we are to evangelize boldly and persistently, and not be daunted by temporary setbacks. So far from being weakened by this faith, therefore, evangelism will inevitably be weak and lack staying power without it.” [10]

It can be easy for us to get discouraged about evangelism. There are not many people who show any real interest in the gospel. But we need to remember that that is not our concern but God’s. And if we bear witness to Christ with the kind of zeal and urgency that Philip exhibits in this passage, I suspect that we will find that there are at least some people who are willing to listen to what we have to say.