

A Successful Conversion

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Preacher: Jonathan de Groot

[0 : 00] Well, today's reading is about the conversion of a man, the Ethiopian man, to Christianity. And Christianity is essentially about converting people.

But because we live in a multi-faith and multi-cultural society, any talk of conversion doesn't really go down too well these days. Right now, of course, you'll be aware that the Scottish government have plans for a new law on conversion therapy.

And so the current consultation is even called Ending Conversion Practices in Scotland. And of course, as Christian believers, we should respond because this is a threat essentially to the ordinary work of churches when it comes to any talk of conversion.

And it's also a threat to how parents bring up their children. But when it comes to any mention of conversion, people often say that you shouldn't be trying to convert people.

You shouldn't be trying to change what people believe or trying to change how other people choose to live their lives. Isn't that arrogant? Isn't that intolerant? Nobody's got the right to tell anybody how to believe or how to live.

[1 : 14] Of course, you're allowed to do what you want to do. You can believe what you want to believe. But don't try converting anybody else to it.

And I'm sure we've all heard this. But, you know, when somebody speaks like that, guess what they're doing? They're trying to convert people to.

Trying to convert people to their way of thinking where they think their particular belief or their particular worldview is the right one. Where they believe they hold the right values.

And so they want to convert people to believe exactly what they believe and to think exactly how they think. But without getting too philosophical, the point is that everybody's trying to convert people, right?

And so rather than saying you shouldn't be trying to convert people, far better asking what is true. What is the right thing to believe?

[2 : 14] What is the best way to live your life? So Christianity is about converting people to Jesus Christ. Because as Christians, we believe Christianity is good news.

We believe it is the best news that the world could ever hear. And yet it does sound very exclusive. And that's because it is. But what we see in our passage this afternoon is that as well as being exclusive, Christianity is also inclusive.

In other words, it is good news for everyone. Which is what we see in this second half of Acts chapter 8. As one individual, one man is converted to Christianity.

And so I'd like us to look at this passage under two headings this afternoon. First of all, we see a working God. And second, we see a welcome message. Let's think first of all about a working God.

You'll notice that as we read this passage, God was working to bring this one man, the Ethiopian eunuch, to himself. Now, if you've been tracking with us through the book of Acts, up until this point in Acts, what we've seen is mass conversions.

[3 : 28] As the good news of Jesus advances and spreads throughout the world. But now, Luke, the author of Acts, he focuses on a series of individual conversions.

And each one is very different. So today, in chapter 8, we've got the Ethiopian eunuch. And that's a successful conversion. Chapter 9, in Acts, there's a Jew called Saul who became Paul.

And that's a surprising conversion. And then in Acts chapter 10, there's a Gentile called Cornelius. And that's a significant conversion. It's more like Google Maps on your computer.

You know, when you start with the whole world, and then within a few clicks, you can get right down and see your back garden. And it's like that here, where the author is saying, God is at work.

The Lord Jesus Christ is building his church. It's spreading throughout the world. And loads of people are being converted. And yet, God is interested in individual people.

[4 : 31] And in pursuing them, so they come to believe in him. And that's what happens here with this one man. The focus now narrows in on him as he travels in his chariot back to his home in Ethiopia.

And that's why this encounter is a supernaturally driven one. Because God connects an Ethiopian man with a Christian evangelist in an unusual way in order to convert the man to Jesus Christ.

And so let's get the big story first of all. Verse 26 says, Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, Go south to the road, the desert road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.

Interesting, Gaza, where our news is focused today. And so what God is doing here is he is relocating Philip. So Philip had just been involved in seeing many people converted to Jesus Christ in Samaria.

But then God then tells him to leave this thriving ministry and go to the desert. He's got to desert for the desert. It's like going off to some way off place, some off-road trail somewhere in Perthshire in Scotland when there's a revival happening in Glasgow.

[5 : 49] And yet what God is doing here is orchestrating everything to reach this one man. Because I mean, how is Philip to know that he'd bump into a bloke in a chariot in the desert?

Who just happened to have been in Jerusalem where he'd gone to worship? Who just happened to be reading the scriptures in his chariot? Who just happened to be looking at a passage that is explicitly about Jesus?

Who just happened to want somebody to explain it to him? Who then just happened to be heading back to his home in Africa? What are the chances of all of that happening?

So this is no coincidence. This is what we might call divine providence. God is ordering all of the circumstances so that these two men can meet, so that one man will hear about Jesus.

So verse 29 says, It's a clear instruction, but it's a strange one. I guess Philip must have been a fast runner.

[6 : 55] So it's a bit like running alongside a car, which is not something I guess we should ever advise anyone to do, especially our children. Not a good idea. And yet Philip does exactly as the Spirit tells him to do.

Because God wanted Philip to speak to this man. And so the same Spirit who directed Philip to the man in verse 29 then took Philip away again in verse 39.

So just skip to the end of the story. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away and the eunuch did not see him again.

It's literally saying that he was seized or he was snatched away. If you're a fan of Star Trek, it's got a bit of the beam me up Scotty about it.

A supernatural thing happening as Philip comes, does the job that God wants him to do, and then he's snatched away again. And yet all of the details of this story essentially are highlighting for us that God is a working God.

[7 : 59] And as he brings people to himself, as people are converted, or as people find and discover salvation, from first to last, it is a work of God.

And so Jesus here is fulfilling his mission through his people, through Philip. And it's a cross-cultural mission. Because what is the conversion of this man doing?

Well, in a small but significant way, it is enabling the message of Jesus to spread out to the ends of the earth, just as Jesus said it would.

And so whilst Christianity is exclusive, saying that people must be converted through the message of Jesus Christ, Christianity is also inclusive. It is the most inclusive of all religions.

Because here we see that Christianity was never meant to be tied to one place, or to one people group, or to one language, or to one culture. Because God wants everybody, the world over, to hear and respond to the good news of Jesus Christ.

[9 : 07] He wants people from every nation to come to him. Because God's plan, the story of the Bible, is how God gathers a people from all nations to himself, to be his family, where people are welcome.

And he reenacts the story of how the risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ is drawing people from every nation to himself to grow his church through the preaching of the good news about Jesus and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

And that's what's happening here with the Ethiopian man. So while all other religions, of course, would proclaim the way to get to God or the way to earn your salvation is through working hard, Christianity is proclaiming that God has come to us.

And he offers us salvation for us to take and receive as a gift. And so can we see how in the conversion of this one man, God is working by directing his spirit and pointing to his son, Jesus Christ.

So God arranged for Philip to meet this particular man in a particular place at a particular moment in time who happened to be reading a particular part of the Bible and then heading back to a particular place.

[10 : 34] It's a plan that only God could conceive. And Philip, of course, didn't know he'd be engaged in cross-cultural mission or that through this man's conversion, the message of Jesus was spreading to the ends of the earth.

He had no idea. And yet what we can see is that there is a significance to everything that God does. And so all the seeming random events in this story are brought together by God in order to convert, to save this one man.

And today, God still works through people and circumstances to draw people to himself. And we heard that as Laura told her story of how she came to believe in Jesus Christ.

And God is always drawing people to himself. And perhaps you're here this afternoon and you sense he's doing that for you. You know that you're not a Christian, but you're interested in finding out more.

Well, is God drawing you to himself? So first of all, that's what we see is a working God. Secondly, let's think about a welcome message because the message came from the scriptures that this man was reading.

[11 : 55] But let's just meet the man first because we'll see why the message this man receives and reads was so appropriate for him. So verse 27 to 28, were introduced to him.

So he started out and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandaki, which means queen of the Ethiopians.

This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship and on his way home he was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. So he was from Ethiopia, a black African, and he was a eunuch.

What's a eunuch? Well, a eunuch describes somebody who has been castrated. So he was sexually altered. And apparently this was a common thing for people, males, who had access to royalty because it was a reassurance that the queen would be protected if he was working for her.

And it was a reassurance that the royal line would also be safe. And so it's possible that this man had made this sacrifice for his career because he was in charge of the queen of Ethiopia's treasure.

[13 : 08] So he was a powerful and an influential man. But it's the fact that he is a eunuch that is emphasized more than anything else. Five times these verses tell us that he is a eunuch.

That's the main defining factor in how he is described to us. So it's a significant detail in the story. But why is it significant?

Well, this man, we read, had gone to Jerusalem in order to worship. So that would be a journey of at least two and a half thousand miles up the River Nile and then through the desert.

So he must have traveled for months in his chariot in order to get to the temple in Jerusalem. His chariot would have been the equivalent to his own private jet.

So he was flying off, you know, before Taylor Swift ever was. So he was a man of wealth, status, income. He owned a scroll of the prophet Isaiah, which would have been an expensive thing to have.

[14 : 11] But he had his own private copy. He was educated enough to be able to read what it was saying. And the fact that he took a few months off work to go on some kind of spiritual pilgrimage indicates to us that he was seriously seeking.

Can you imagine asking your boss for a few months off work to go on a spiritual search? What would your boss say? But here, it's on this man's way home that God directs Philip to him.

But before we get to what Philip says about Jesus, there's something else that we need to know that is interesting in this story. And it is that the eunuch, this man, wouldn't have been allowed entry into the temple.

And this was a rule in God's law in Deuteronomy chapter 23, verse 1, and Leviticus 21, verse 20. And so we can infer by the fact that he's now on his way home and it says nothing about him worshipping at the temple, we should infer probably that his visit there must have been a disappointing one because he couldn't enter the assembly of the Lord.

There's no way he could, because he was a eunuch, participate in temple worship because as a eunuch as well as as a Gentile or as a foreigner, he was banned.

[15 : 38] He was unable to join with God's people. And so it's likely he had gone all of this way in what turned out to be a spiritual wild goose chase.

And yet the very fact that he is on his way home and he's reading his Isaiah scroll indicates to us that he's still seeking. He's still wondering what this is all about.

So look at verse 30 and 31. Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. Do you understand what you're reading?

Philip asked. How can I? He said, unless someone explains it to me. So he invited Philip up, he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. So this reading from Isaiah chapter 53 is about the suffering servant, prophecy about Jesus.

And this is the center point of this whole passage because it's no coincidence that what he's reading in this text is about Jesus Christ and what Jesus came to do.

[16 : 44] And yet the eunuch didn't realize this. And that's why God sends Philip to help him understand. And despite this man's powerful position, he's humble enough to admit that he needs help in understanding what he's reading.

He needs somebody to explain it to him. Which can be a hard thing to do. It's never easy to admit any kind of spiritual ignorance, especially if you've made a success of your life like this man clearly had.

So he's a serious seeker. But what he didn't realize is that actually God is seeking him. So listen to the words he read from Isaiah 53, verse 32 and 33.

This is the passage of scripture the eunuch was reading. He was led like a sheep to the slaughter and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth. Speaking of Jesus, the suffering servant was humiliated and perhaps this man was humiliated when he was denied access to the temple.

[18 : 01] And then there's the question in these verses about the descendants of the suffering servant. And so as a eunuch, of course, he would have no descendants.

And yet he doesn't know who is being spoken of in these verses. So verse 34, the eunuch asked, Philip, tell me please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?

Then Philip began with that very passage of scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. Philip starting in Isaiah 53 to tell him the good news about Jesus.

And so before we see why this was such good news for this particular man, let's just have a think by way of application about Philip's approach, which is useful for us as we try as followers of Jesus to speak to other people about Jesus.

Notice here that Philip was willing to be led by God. He just dropped everything and did what God told him to do. Philip was also willing to be inconvenienced.

[19 : 08] He obeyed the Spirit's promptings. He was willing to overcome embarrassment by doing something crazy like running alongside a chariot. Philip approached somebody I guess he would never normally talk to, but he did it because God wanted him to.

And then he explained the good news about Jesus. Essentially, what Philip's done here is set up a one-to-one Bible study with a complete stranger after about 30 seconds.

And before we feel overwhelmed and think, that's never something I could do. I would never be able to go and speak to a stranger and help them understand from the Bible what it says about Jesus.

Well, don't let all of this supernatural work of God in this story put us off doing what is basically a straightforward thing. because despite the amazing work of God in bringing these two men together, what essentially happens is that Philip opens up the Bible and points the man to Jesus.

And it's not rocket science, is it? And that is our way to make stuff up. We've already got the message in our Bibles that we have to share with somebody over a coffee, in a cafe, at work and point them to Jesus.

[20 : 34] Help them see how it is all about him, who he is and what he came to do. And that's God's means of converting people.

The Spirit does the work, but we are merely the instruments. And so we should be sensitive to the opportunities that God brings our way when we're with friends and we meet them, when we're with classmates in conversation or when we're with colleagues at work or even when we travel on the bus or the train or the subway.

We don't know the opportunities that God is going to open up for us. But of course we want to be ready when they come. Okay, so back to the scroll that the eunuch was reading about the suffering servant in Isaiah.

because Philip tells him that the suffering servant the prophet was talking about is Jesus. And we read that this servant willingly gave up his life and died.

And here's why this was such a welcome message for this man. Because Luke notes that Philip began with this passage in Isaiah, which we now know as Isaiah 53.

[21 : 52] But what is fascinating is that if they rolled the scroll up or down a bit more, they would come to words which are now Isaiah 56. And in Isaiah 56 we get this passage that outlines what the suffering servant achieves and the salvation that the suffering servant brings.

And so just listen to these words from Isaiah chapter 56. It's worth looking up. It's on page 744 of the church Bibles. Isaiah 56.

Verse 3 to verse 8. Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, the Lord will surely exclude me from his people. And let no eunuch complain, I am only a dry tree.

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, 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 endure forever. And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it, and all and who hold fast to my covenant, these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer.

[23 : 24] Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations. The sovereign Lord declares he will gather the exiles of Israel.

I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered. That's a passage where the Lord God is pointing to the time of his salvation.

But did you hear the words used? Did you hear the people who were spoken about in that passage? Foreigners, eunuchs. And so for this man, these words must have jumped off the scroll and hit him like a brick in the face.

Because Isaiah 56 is looking to a time when foreigners and eunuchs will no longer be excluded from God's people. Eunuchs, we read, are promised an everlasting name and shall not be cut off.

And foreigners will be brought to worship with God's people because God is going to gather the outcasts of Israel. And so through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord is saying that those who are excluded from Israel will be welcomed in as his people.

[24 : 45] And so it's now happening as Philip tells this man the good news about Jesus. He's speaking about the suffering servant of the Lord and this message is being proclaimed to the world and the eunuch is there listening.

And this is why it was such good news for him. Because as Philip explained the good news about Jesus, he realized God wanted him in his family.

That there was a place for people like him. And so see what happens. Verse 36. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, Look, here is water.

What can stand in the way of my being baptized? And he gave orders to stop the chariot. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.

See what's happening? In seeking to be baptized, the eunuch was saying, I believe this. I believe what you're saying, Philip. But more than that, he's saying, I want this.

[25 : 58] I want to respond to this God who invites me into his family. I want to be welcomed as one of God's people. So if he was excluded when he went to worship at Jerusalem, the good news of Jesus now means he is included in God's family.

Being a eunuch meant having no family, no sons and no daughters, no future generations to carry on your name. And yet what we're hearing here is that in the gospel of Jesus Christ, eunuchs are promised a name better than sons and daughters because they get an everlasting name in the family of God.

As we're being told here that the way to salvation is open for all in Jesus Christ. The good news about Jesus is that anyone from anywhere, no matter what they've done, can be welcomed into the family of God.

So in Jesus Christ, all the barriers are gone and all are equal. Professor Richard Boichum, a New Testament scholar, picks up on this when he says, almost certainly Christianity exhibits more cultural diversity than any other religion and that must say something about it.

And when he wrote that, he was responding to statistics like these, which are really interesting. So over 90% of Muslims live in a band from Southeast Asia to the Middle East and Northern Africa.

[27 : 35] 90% of Muslims. Over 95% of all Hindus are in India and immediately surrounding areas. Some 88% of Buddhists are in East Asia.

However, get this, about 25% of Christians live in Europe, about 25% in Central and South America, 22% in Africa, 15% in Asia and 12% in North America.

So Christianity, in comparison to all the other religions, is really the only true world religion that encompasses people from all nations.

And so the working God used Philip to tell the Ethiopian eunuch about Jesus so he could be welcomed into the family of God, that the message of Jesus would spread to the ends of the earth.

And it was all God's work and it still is today, all God's work. Because God's salvation is by grace alone. We all deserve to be excluded from God because of our sin.

[28 : 49] But God welcomes us into his family by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. How? How does he do it?

Well, remember that Jesus is the suffering servant and we read, he was led like a sheep to the slaughter. He was silent before his killers. He was humiliated and deprived of justice.

His life was taken away. Essentially, Jesus became like a eunuch for eunuchs. In other words, Jesus was cut off.

Jesus willingly went to the cross and cried out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? So, Jesus was separated from his father, God, because of our sin, so that we can be accepted by him.

Jesus was excluded on the cross, so we can be included. Jesus gave his life as the suffering servant, so we can be welcomed into the family of God as sons and daughters and given a new name that is an everlasting name.

[29 : 59] And that's why Christianity is a about converting people. It is exclusive, but it is also inclusive. It's got to be, because the good news of Jesus Christ is the only hope for humanity.

And that is why Christianity is the only true world religion. And so urging conversion to Jesus is never arrogant or intolerant.

Do you know what it is? It's loving. It's the most loving thing that you or I could ever do for anyone is to tell them to believe in Jesus Christ. Because it is an invitation to receive the best gift ever, which is salvation.

Every other way says, work hard, try hard, maybe if you're good enough, you'll be accepted and you'll receive salvation at the end of the day, but who knows? It's all based on you and your performance.

Christianity says, no, Jesus has already done the work on the cross. Your salvation is based on his performance because he died for you. And when he takes your sin, God accepts you and welcomes you.

[31 : 10] You're no longer an outsider and excluded. You're welcomed in and you're part of the family. And no matter who we are or what we have done or where we're from, God will take us.

None of us deserve salvation in Jesus Christ. And yet all of us can find it. All of us can find it.

And when we do find it, then there is only really one response to make. And it's there in verse 39. See what the eunuch did? He went on his way rejoicing.

And if that's not your response to the good use of Jesus Christ, then the question is, are you truly converted? Because when we have received God's salvation, then we will go on our way rejoicing.