

Becoming a Christian

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[0 : 00] So today we're doing a Lord's Supper, we're doing a communion after the service or after the sermon. And it's also generally a time when we welcome new members into the congregation.

So we link the two traditionally. We welcome new members at a time when we are going to celebrate the Lord's Supper because membership for us is simply people who have made a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ as their own saviour and who wish to be part of the family, part of the congregation and who wish to serve and be under the spiritual oversight of the elders of the church.

And the Lord's Supper, of course, is a sacrament for Christians. It's for those who recognise and who have put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. And therefore it's core to us.

The sacrament is core and membership is core because it's the outworking of what is basic and fundamental to us as a church, the new birth that we are born anew and that we have become those who have a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's also today the first day of seven days of prayer. So at five o'clock today there will be a prayer time downstairs in the hall and that will be then followed by prayer times every morning at 7am here in the church for a week. We'll have it in here.

[1 : 29] And among other things, and your prayer leaflet has information on it, among other things our seven days of prayer has always had this focus on praying for friends who don't know Jesus Christ.

You aren't Christians. People that we love and know, family, friends, that we have a focus of praying for them to become Christians.

But the question is what exactly are we praying? And as we pray, what is our role? You know, when we pray we're engaging God. We're speaking to God.

We are speaking to God though. We're involved in that. Is that simply a role? Does it go beyond that? How will God's kingdom come through us?

Are we involved? Is it something we do, are engaged in, beyond praying for our friends? Is there that sense of urgency and dynamism that comes from recognizing the part we play in the kingdom of God?

[2 : 39] Because can I highlight what I think might be a danger in my life? So if it's in my life, I presume sometimes it might be in at least some of your lives, in your prayer lives anyway, is that we hide behind the sovereignty of God.

And so we think, that paper is driving me nuts. We hide behind, sorry, I've drawn your attention to you. You hadn't even noticed it and now you're going to listen to it the whole time, so please don't.

But it is terrible, apart from anything else. And I hear that all day, every day here when I'm studying. So pray for me. But the danger is that we hide behind the sovereignty of God when we pray for our friends.

In other words, we pray for our friends and we love them and we would love them to become Christians. But we believe that this is God's work. It is God who makes Christians.

It's God who enables people to be born again. And people are born again by the Spirit. And we take that truth which we know and which we believe and we sometimes hide behind that in our prayer life and behind the sovereignty of God.

[3 : 47] So I've done what I've done. I've done what I have to do. I've prayed for them and we feel significant and good and that's important that we feel a good sense of value when we're praying.

But just because they're born anew by the Spirit of God, does it mean they're born alone? That's what we need to ask. Are they born alone?

Ordinarily is it a sovereign work of God where He doesn't involve anybody else? Ordinarily we have to say no, because ordinarily we'll have to say that He usually uses us, and I've said this before here, as part of the answer.

So when we pray for our family members and our friends, the people that we love, that we are connected with, that we have contact with, it usually means that God will use us in the spiritual work that we hope happens in their hearts.

He uses us as part of the answer. And can I say then, we are spiritual midwives in this process of God re-birthing people.

[4 : 57] He uses people. In other words, God's Spirit does bring alone people to life, or they are born again by Spirit, but He usually cooperates at some level with us as He does His great work.

So here we have, and I think it's relevant at the start of seven days of prayer and also the communion, the story of a new Christian in act, the story of someone becoming a Christian, and it's a great story.

We've got this high-ranking black African Chancellor of the Exchequer kind of guy who works in the palace, and his responsibility for all the money, verse 27, tells us that this is an Ethiopian, a Unuch, a court official of Kandasi, Queen of the Ethiopians.

Now, in all probability, he would have been made a Unuch at birth, castrated in a brutal practice, but one that was preparing him allegedly for a life of service to the royal house, undivided and undistracted by family or other issues.

So he was a servant and a loyal servant of the Queen of Ethiopia. It's also probable that he was a Jewish proselyte.

[6 : 18] He had come to believe in the Jewish religion. It may be that he was a mixed-race Jew. We don't know, but certainly this is someone who, from Ethiopia, is travelling up at the time of the festivals to Jerusalem to join with the people of God in worship and to seek out God and to seek out the truth.

We're told that that he'd gone to Jerusalem to worship and was returning in his chariot. And as he's returning in his chariot and he's seeking answers, and we do wonder if he'd been up in Jerusalem at the time that he would have been there, he may well have at least heard of the goings on about Jesus and the crucifixion and the message of the resurrection and various things.

We don't know, but he was reading his Bible. He was reading his Old Testament, and he was reading in Isaiah chapter 53, that great prophetic chapter about the coming of Jesus.

And as he's doing so, we find a second important person coming into the story, Philip. Philip comes into the story. He's led by the Spirit, and he's led by the Spirit out of a prosperous situation where many people are coming to faith into the desert.

And he's led there, and as he does so, he sees this chariot, important looking chariot with important looking someone in it and probably servants as well, and eventually he makes contact with this person who he sees as reading or, and very probably reading aloud, and maybe even a servant reading aloud to him from Isaiah.

[8 : 00] And he takes the opportunity to ask a significant question and the rest is history, as it were. As he explains who this prophet is speaking about, he introduces him to Jesus, the Jesus that maybe he'd heard about in the previous weeks' events in Jerusalem.

And he tells him about who he is, and he says, this is the Redeemer, this is the Saviour, this is the one in whom you must put your trust, and God does His work. And the Ethiopian comes to faith and comes to dramatic faith and is so convinced of that.

Having heard about baptism, he wants, sees water and he says, well, what prevents me from being baptized here and now? And so he is, and then Philip goes his way, and the Ethiopian goes his way, and we don't hear any more about them.

That's the story. That's what we have here. And it's a kingdom story. In other words, it's an important message, a real story, unique individuals involved in it, different times to what we're living in today.

But then our significant and there are broad spiritual principles as to how God works, who God is, and how we are to live as Christians, particularly as we think about our friends.

[9 : 23] And we should think about those who aren't Christians and how we interact and relate with them. We have this great responsibility and great privilege to be integral in what God does in turning people's lives upside down when they come to know Jesus Christ and His salvation.

They get new life, they go on their way rejoicing, but God has done His work and we have cooperated with that. So if I was to summarize this account in one sentence, I would say God used Philip to bring an Ethiopian to faith.

Okay? So I'm going to shorten it even more and just look at the first three words there. God used Philip. And I'm going to take from that the principles that I hope can apply to the way we understand God and also the cooperation and the partnership that we have with Him in sharing the gospel and seeing the kingdom of God grow.

So God, first of all, briefly. God is sovereign. He is sovereign.

That's what we recognize and see because this is part of God's story. An act that we've been studying is part of God's story, written by Luke under the inspiration of the Spirit, telling in an orderly fashion the progress of the New Testament church.

[10 : 54] So it's what we see as something purposeful happening under God's authority. The Book of Acts is not a random collection of human interest stories, human interest, or, I think, stroke religious stories.

It's the outworking of what God has commanded the church to do. And we've had it as almost the foundation of our study of Acts, Acts 1 and verse 8.

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come into you. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Acts beginning to unfold that commission.

So we've seen, Corey spoke about the mega church in Jerusalem, where thousands of people came to faith. And then we looked last week at that, how persecution forced everyone out of Jerusalem, apart from the apostles.

So thousands went out. Where did they go to? To Judea and Samaria. And that's what we have in the chapters in between. And now we come to, almost symbolically, in summary fashion, the gospel going to the ends of the earth, to the African continent, and then at the end of the chapter to the Gentiles, and all the Gentiles represent from Caesarea onwards.

[12 : 16] So there's this progression of the gospel that God is sovereignly revealing how that gospel miraculously is spread. And we recognize his sovereignty in bringing people to faith, in establishing his kingdom in the new birth that he, and the good news that he brings.

So he's sovereign, and because he's sovereign, he knows, doesn't he? And that is crucial for us. It's crucial for us that he is a purpose and a plan. Now I know there's mystery, and I know, and he tells us there's much he doesn't reveal.

And there is much that will not be revealed currently. But by faith, we accept what he has revealed, and we accept what he has done as a great act of love on our behalf.

And we trust in him for the stuff that we don't know, that he knows, and he's good. You know what it's like with parents that you love?

You trust them with the stuff that you don't know, because you know they love you. However difficult sometimes that may be to accept.

[13 : 33] But none of us are victims of random action or impersonal chance in this life.

And as you go from here, that must be a significant reality in your Christian life as a believer. That we are asked to follow and to trust in him, primarily in what he does reveal in his word.

He gives us all we need to know. Not all, sometimes we would want to know. But he gives us what we need to know in his love, his justice, his patience, and infinite knowledge.

And he asks us to be content that he knows and he is sovereign. And we see that in this story as he works, as he works in the story.

So if you just looked at the story, or say you were, there was a camera somewhere, or you were there somewhere in the distance, and you were in the desert.

[14 : 39] And as you saw this story, you would just say, well, here's a chance encounter. Here's a chariot coming along. That looks like someone significant and important in that chariot. I wonder who that is. Oh, and look, there's a hitchhiker.

And he's staying away from the chariot. Oh, but he's running up now to the chariot. Oh, now the two are speaking. Isn't that random? Isn't that amazing? In the middle of the desert, these two people just have come together and all of a sudden they're talking.

Oh, he's getting in the chariot. Oh, they're looking for a Bible or something, a book together. Goes on and you kind of follow it. Oh, the chariot stops.

They're both getting out. Oh, they're heading down to the water. No, don't do it. Oh, maybe it's not so bad. And then there's a baptism. So you look at that and you would simply think that this was a random story of two people.

But what the Bible reminds us and reveals for us is that this is divinely orchestrated. So we have a sovereign God who has a purpose and plan, and he has brought these two people together at this unique and definite time.

[15 : 47] So you've got Philip, long before he comes to the desert, being spoken directly to by God, by the angel of the Lord, who speaks to him and tells him to go down by the desert towards Gaza.

Gaza? Why do you want me to go to Gaza? Things are going well here. Things are really prospering spiritually. You want me to leave it all and head into the desert?

And you're not going to tell me why? No reason why you should do this? Absolutely. Recognize and know. He simply accepts and moves on.

It's not explained. And independently, while the Holy Spirit is speaking to Philip, we've got this black African dignitary who has opened his Bible as he returns home and he's opening it, searching the Scripture.

He's searching the Scripture at Isaiah 53. And we see that all of a sudden from his point of view, this random hitchhiker comes along who asks him the question, do you know what you're reading?

[16 : 52] And this is the guy that can interpret what he's reading, because God has already purposed and plans it and has explained how Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah 53 and the good news that he's been looking for and he invites him to put his faith in him.

And that's the story we have of God at work in both of them. A seemingly random meeting between two people. Did God need to do that?

Did God need Philip in order for the Ethiopian to be brought to faith? No, he didn't. He didn't need Philip. He could do it sovereignly himself. He could have opened up the truth to that Ethiopian member of royalty simply as he spoke to Philip, but he chose not to.

He chooses to use people. He chooses to use you and me. And Philip goes his way and Ethiopian goes his way.

And we don't know what became of them. We don't hear much about either of them, or do anything about the Ethiopian after that. We don't know how much influence they had or how much their lives were changed or what they did.

[18 : 07] But that's fine, because God knows. And we simply see this story. So we see that his will is hugely significant. His will is to use you and me to fulfill his sovereign purpose and will.

He gives us that nobility. He gives us that significance. He wants us to be used to transform other people's lives who are in spiritual darkness.

We are part of his rescue mission, and our lives, therefore, and our contacts, therefore, are hugely significant.

And his plan is to use us for good and for blessing. Yes, I know within that there's mystery and difficult and dark times. But his will for us is that we cooperate and we see God in his sovereignty using us.

So when you pray, remember to whom you're praying and remember who he is. But also briefly, let's look at Philip briefly here in this story, because there are some everyday spiritual principles that lie behind this unique interaction.

[19 : 19] And I'm going to use the word lifestyle here to just think about Philip in a way that might be challenging to us when we think about our lives and our interaction with people who are not Christians and our desire to tell them about Jesus, but our relentless fear to actually say anything in many of us.

Lifestyle. I'm going to break it up to life and style. So we see Philip's life, his life as a life, not specifically in this situation, but generally.

There's two things I want to say about him. One is he's spiritually sensitive. So he's ready and responsive to God's voice in his life.

Now, I know it was in days before the canon of Scripture was completed, and so sometimes God would speak directly into people's lives. But he was listening for God's voice.

He was in that relationship with God where he expected God to guide him and speak to him and lead him. It was it was formational for his whole life. He was steeped not only in a spiritual sensitivity towards what God might say, but also to what God had revealed.

[20 : 34] So he knows the Old Testament, which he did have, back to front. He knew that well, so he knew when he was speaking to the Ethiopian from Isaiah 53 what it was all about.

So he knew God's Word. He understood it, and he was spiritually sensitive to God's leading. Now, we have God's completed Word. We have Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, and that is what we recognize as his revealed will for us, his word to us.

And we have his indwelling Spirit who guides our conscience and who teaches us to respond to him and to his Word. And as we live our lives spiritually sensitive, then we will hear God guiding and leading and showing us how we should live.

As we are prayerful, as we live with an open Bible, and as we are sensitive prayerfully to what he says. It ceases to be a dead, dry, dead historical book of religious fascination or otherwise.

But it becomes more than that. Yes, it is all of these things. Well, it's not dead and dry, but it's a living history of the mission of God.

[21 : 49] God wants us to know about life, about ourselves and about his salvation. So spiritually sensitive. Now, I think I've said this before. I am a little bit cynical when people say God spoke to me and told me to do this, that and the next thing.

Because sometimes I think we just use that to justify doing what we want and just tagging God's will onto it, using God to justify what we want to do, and giving it that kind of infallible authority.

But on the other hand, I think that's maybe one extreme or the other extreme, then we have to be careful as well about never thinking that God speaks to us, or that we are unresponsive to him, and to his words.

It's spiritually sensitive with an unqualified obedience. That's what we see about him. He was sensitive to the word, and his life was one of unqualified obedience to God's command.

He went to Gaza. He didn't sit and ask lots of questions. He didn't wait. He just went forward and responded to what was revealed to him.

[23 : 07] And that, in terms of life for us, is to be the backdrop of our lives. What God reveals for us, what He's made clear, in other words, His laws of love, and that's what the command is about.

They're laws of love, loving Him, loving one another. They're perfectly clear. They're absolutely simple. We don't need a degree or some kind of deep theological understanding to get them. And He wants us to be unqualified in our obedience to His laws of love.

That's what He wants from us. He wants us to be spiritually sensitive and also aware that He wants us to obey His great laws of love, without reservation, that we deal in forgiveness, that we deal with our bitterness, our anger, our separation from our need for purity, that we use the means of grace, all these things that we are servants, lovingly, willingly of our good and gracious God.

That's the backdrop to Philip's usefulness. It's the backdrop. It's the scaffold. It's the key. It's the key that he had this great ongoing developing relationship with his God through Jesus Christ.

He was looking to Christ and he was a servant of Christ. So that was his life. That's kind of the backdrop. So when we ask about our lives and whether we are sharing our faith or whether we have opportunities here at faith, maybe sometimes we need to look within ourselves first and foremost as to our openness to His guidance and also our unqualified obedience to His laws of love.

[24 : 49] Then style, if we're looking at lifestyle, what about his style here as he deals with this Ethiopian leader? When it comes to sharing his faith, so we say, there's three things and I close with this. The first is he's opportunistic.

He might have thought as he walked along the desert, this is not very fruitful place for me to be. There's a carriage over there but this guy is not the same class. He's way above me. I can't come near him.

He's not going to want to speak to me. I've got nothing in common with him. But yet he responded to God, go nearer the chariot. And then as he listened, he was ready and willing and able to ask the relevant question. He didn't know what the response would be, but he had the courage and the boldness to take the initiative. Opportunistic, that's what I mean at that level.

And I think we are to be that also in our lives spiritually. It may not sometimes seem a very fruitful friendship spiritually or it might not seem that this is the kind of person that will speak to me or of anything to do with me.

But as the opportunity arises, we need the boldness to take the initiative and ask the right questions that might open up spiritual conversation.

[26 : 10] Philip didn't just plow into some kind of ABC of steps of faith to bring you to Jesus. He asked a question. That's a great opener, isn't it? We ask questions. What is it? What are you struggling with? What are the things?

So it's opportunistic and sensitive. The second thing is that it's word-based Christ-centered. As he shared his faith, it was word-based Christ-centered. Now I know it was a guilt-edged opportunity because the guy who was reading from Isaiah 53, we might not get that opportunity very often in our lives, we pray for them.

But that's where we want to get people to. We want to get people where we can introduce them to Jesus Christ and His Word and our experience of Jesus.

So Philip shared the good news and that undoubtedly would have involved his own coming to faith as well as who Jesus was. So that's the key. That's one of the keys to us sharing our faith is not really telling people about ourselves.

Yes, maybe our experience of who Christ is and what He's done, but we're pointing them to Him. I think it would be a really helpful thing. I know it would be for me and I'm sure it might be for you.

[27 : 29] If you're getting towards that stage with a friend and a family member who's not a believer, give them the gospel of Luke and say to them, okay, read a couple of chapters, write down any questions you have and we'll come back together over coffee or a pint or something and we'll just discuss them.

Let the Word speak. Let Christ introduce Himself through His Word to them and just do that. Have confidence in the Word. It was Word based and Christ centered and that's where he cooperates with.

Philip didn't bring this man to faith. God did. It was God who revealed Himself, but it was through Philip. And we don't need to worry about making people be born again because we can't do that. That's God's Word.

So it was Word based Christ centered. And I think it was also unselfish in the sense it was more about Christ than it was about Philip. He knew it was God's work and yet he brought him to this point of decision in verse 37. He takes him to that place where he's going to get baptized.

He wasn't precious about that. He didn't take the glory. He didn't worry about his reputation. I don't know if he should get baptized. Maybe he should go through 25 membership classes first before we can do anything like that.

[28 : 46] Or must plug him into a church. No, he just says, right, good, baptize him. It's understated what Philip does himself, but he trusted in God and he never saw, presumably, probably never saw this guy again.

He went to Caesarea. The other went to Egypt. He was sowing the seed. The conversion was God's work, as was the expected fruit. So as we go into this week, can we remind ourselves, as we've said at the Lord's table, the good news that we have.

And that's really what Philip shares in this chapter, as he explains with this scripture. He told them the good news about Jesus. Let's remind ourselves why Jesus is good news for us as Christians as we celebrate the Lord's Supper.

And as we do so, can we think about Philip's usefulness with his friends and as we think of our friends and members of our...

Philip's usefulness in sharing his faith with this man and how we can learn from that with our friends and with our family to understand God's place, God's role, God's character and his willingness that people come and are born on you, not on their own.

[30 : 00] They come ordinarily through God using his people. Can we therefore be expectant as we pray and looking for opportunities to share Jesus Christ with them?

Please take time to hear his voice as we think about our own lives and our own... what we seek to be, a humble walk of faith. Let's bow our heads and pray.

Father God, we ask and pray that you would bless us as we think about Scripture and as we think about God's role and our role in the spreading of your kingdom and your purpose and your plan.

We see many, many hundreds of thousands and millions of people since the New Testament having been brought into the kingdom. And we have seen you use other Christians to share their faith, often imperfectly, often stumbling, often with great fear.

And yet Lord, help us to just be courageous enough to tell people about Jesus and leave it with them and leave it with you to work in their hearts. We pray for that. We pray for our time of prayer this week, that it would be vibrant and passionate and real as we recognise as a community.

[31 : 30] Our longing to see many people coming to faith in this great city that we love so much and that we long to see responding to the good news of Jesus.

Bless us also as we celebrate the Lord's Supper today. For Jesus' sake, amen.