

September 1, 2013
Church Planting

The Bible Is...
Acts 8:26-39

Opening words: The end has come. This is my thirteenth and final message in my sermon series, *Church Planting*. This summer we are looking at the first eight chapters of the Book of Acts. So much has happened to this point. It is impossible to summarize the whole story. It will have to suffice to say the Holy Spirit was unleashed on the world and the church was created. Lives were being changed. The disciples were transformed into apostles, who began to flex their spiritual muscle. Under their leadership, individuals were healed and thousands were experiencing the power of the resurrected Jesus. The church was growing and Gentiles were being welcomed into the fold. Through the eyes of God, everything is perfect. However, perfection does not last long because the church is comprised of human beings.

This morning we are in the eighth chapter of Acts, verses twenty-six through thirty-nine. The featured Apostle in this chapter is Philip. Persecution forced the church out of Jerusalem and into the world. Each one of the disciples went in a different direction. Philip went to Samaria. His preaching and healing led many people to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. One of those individuals was Simon the Sorcerer, who we looked at last week. This week we find Philip being led by the Spirit to a place on the desert road, where he baptizes an Ethiopian. May God give you ears to hear his sacred story. Let me call this message *The Bible is...*

Acts 8:26-39 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." ²⁷ So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

³¹ "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

³² 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.

³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.
Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth."

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

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?" ³⁸ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ 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.

I love this story. Famed scientist Albert Einstein had one of the brightest minds in the history of the world. However, history tells us this genius struggled with some of life's most basic functions. For example, one day he was taking the train home from work. He took the same train home every day. On one particular day he lost his ticket. As the porter approached to collect it, Einstein rummaged around in his coat, through his pockets, in his shirt, and everywhere else on his person. The porter saw him struggling and said, "That's okay, Dr. Einstein. I know you ride this train every day. I can collect your ticket tomorrow." "That's fine for you, young man," Einstein replied, "However, the problem is not my lost ticket. The problem is, without my ticket I don't know where to get off the train."

That story reminds me of the present-day church. We look like we know where we are going, but we really don't have a clue. Many believe the mainline protestant church is filled with lost people. It is not because they are not nice people. It is not lost because they're not hard working people. They are not lost because they are not devoted to their local church. They are lost for one reason. They are lost because so many people in the mainline protestant church are spiritual weaklings. They are more interested in their opinions and beliefs than they are Biblical truth. How interested are you in Biblical truth? Actor Denzel Washington once said, "*I read my Bible every day.*" Do you read your Bible every day? How often do you read the Bible? Could it be you are a spiritual weakling? Could it be we are nothing more than a collection of spiritual weaklings? I like to think the answer is 'no'. If that makes you think say, "**Amen!**"

Historically, Americans have always had an appreciation of the Bible. It is not just limited to one place or generation. Consider these quotes with me:

George Washington (1732-1799) once said, "*It is impossible to rightly govern a nation without God and the Bible.*"

Patrick Henry (1736-1799) once said, "*The Bible is worth all the other books that have ever been printed.*"

U.S. Grant (1822-1885) once said, "*Hold fast to the Bible as the sheet-anchor of your liberties. Write its precepts in your hearts, and practice them in your lives.*"

Robert E. Lee (1807-1870) once said, "*In all my perplexities and distresses, the Bible has never failed to give me light and strength.*"

Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) once said, "*A thorough knowledge of the Bible is worth more than a college education.*"

Those are some powerful quotes about the Bible. Do you believe America still holds the Bible in such esteem? After all, America has changed in many ways through the years. You know it is true. We have advanced in the areas of transportation, communication and medicine. No one in this room will travel to Florida this winter by stagecoach. Very few do not have an email address, regardless of age. I have never had a parishioner who requested heart surgery using 1020's methods. America is at her peak when it comes to transportation, communication and medicine. I don't want to sound negative, but America seems to be eroding away in other areas. The American family is dissolving in front of our eyes. The mainline American protestant church is in a rapid state of decline. Our federal government has stalled and is divided by increasing partisanship. You know it is true. Our national soul is changing. If you don't believe me, then just look at the way our society views the Bible. The Bible was once viewed as the word of God! Now the Bible is viewed as a curious piece of historical literature, which has very little to offer our modern world. If that last statement bothers you, then say, "**Amen!**" With this in mind, let us look at this morning's scripture lesson.

We are at the very end of the eighth chapter of Acts. We are told an angel of the Lord instructs Philip to go south to the road that runs between Jerusalem and Gaza. That angel is mentioned four times in the Book of Acts. Let me list them for you. Stephen mentioned the angel at his trial in chapter seven. The angel is mentioned twice in chapter twelve. The angel liberates Peter and strikes down Herod. This time, the angel instructs Philip to go to the desert road that runs between Gaza and Jerusalem. The distance between those two locations is fifty miles. Somewhere on that road he finds a unique traveler, an Ethiopian eunuch.

To say the least, he is an interesting person. We know two things about him. First, we know his nationality. How good is your geography? Could you find Ethiopia on a map? In those days, Ethiopia was considered to be in the upper Nile region. Second, we know his occupation. He is in charge of the treasury of the queen of Ethiopians, Candace. He is a eunuch because he works with the queen and fornication will not be tolerated. Gentlemen, can I ask you a question: Would you trade places with him? He has a wonderful job, but his personal life was lacking. In other words, his life is complex. No wonder he is on the side of the road studying the ancient text. His life is filled with questions. This is where the text begins to speak to us. When Philip finds the Ethiopian, he is reading the scriptures, but he does not understand the scriptures. It is one thing to read the words. It is another thing to understand the words. When was the last time you played the part of the Ethiopian? When was the last time you read the Bible but didn't completely understand the words? The good news is, the Ethiopian had Philip to help him. The bad news you are stuck with me.

Today, I want to make three quick statements about the Bible. Each one of these statements is very obvious. Each one of these questions is designed to make you think. My goal is simple. I want you to have a greater appreciation of the Bible. Reading the Bible is not optional to your faith. Reading the Bible is vital. I don't want you to be a spiritual weakling. We need some spiritually mature Christians. So if you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen!**" I will be brief because this is Labor Day weekend.

The Bible is Complex

This is statement number one. The Bible is complex. Only a fool would think the Bible is easy. There is nothing easy about the Bible. You know it is true. Sometimes, it is hard to understand the divine truth found in the Bible. There are sixty-six books in the Bible, thirty-nine in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New Testament. Have you ever read the Bible cover to cover? Have you ever stopped to consider how many different kinds of literature are found in the Bible? Have you ever stopped to consider the age of each word found in the Bible? Have you ever studied the original languages of the Bible, Hebrew and Greek, to expose some hidden meaning? The Bible is complex, but what your mother told you is true. Anything worth having is worth working for. How hard are you working on your Bible skills? Spiritual weaklings don't even try to understand the Bible. If you have some work to do, say, "**Amen!**"

The Bible is Practical

This is statement number two. The Bible is practical. Ronald Reagan once said, "*Within the covers of the Bible are all the answers for all the problems man faces.*" The Bible addresses a wide variety of practical topics. How would your life improve if you applied these Biblical models to your daily life? How many problems you face today would not exist if you would have followed the Biblical model from the very beginning? Are all your relationships healthy? Are your finances strong? Are you still worried about your salvation? The Bible covers these things because the Bible is practical. The Bible can help you with the biggest problem you are facing today! If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

The Bible is Eternal

This is statement number three. The Bible is eternal. The piece of scripture the Ethiopian is trying to understand is found in Isaiah 53, the suffering servant passage. Approximately 700 years before the birth of Christ, Isaiah was talking about Jesus. Martin Luther once said, "*The Bible is the cradle wherein Christ is laid.*" The great reformer understood the real meaning of the Bible. The Bible is all about Jesus, our only hope of salvation. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

In 1989, I was appointed to the Hathaway United Methodist Church in Garfield Heights. I have nothing negative to say about that congregation. They were good to me and we grew together. When I first arrived, I did my best to get to know everyone. I did my best to discover what kinds of activities they would support. In the first few months, I took a survey to learn more about them. On the survey were a wide range of questions.

One of the questions was: do you think this church should hold a regular Bible study? Ninety-eight per cent of the people said, "Yes!" So I planned a weekly Bible study and decided to use the biggest room in the church. After all, 98% of the people said the church should hold a weekly Bible study. On the night I held the first Bible study I learned two things. First, I didn't need the biggest room in the church. Second, I found out that evening I had asked the wrong question. I should have asked, would you attend a weekly Bible study? The survey told me 98% of the people said there should be a weekly Bible study, but less than 2% of the congregation came.

It has been a long time since my unsuccessful weekly Bible study. Do you know what happened to the Hathaway United Methodist Church? It pains me to say it. The church is now closed. They say it merged with other congregations, but a merger is really a closing. Hathaway did not close because the people were bad. Hathaway did not close because the people were lazy. Hathaway did not close because the people were not devoted to their church. Hathaway closed for spiritual reasons. Hathaway closed because the church was a spiritual weakling. Why would God lead people to a church that was spiritually compromised? If you want to find out if we are a spiritual weakling, then just find out how many people attend our weekly Bible studies. If it can happen there, then it can happen here. How important is the Bible to you? Do you read your Bible every day?

Will you please pray with me?