

October 11, 2020

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

Opening words: In the year A.D. 303, the Roman Emperor Diocletian issued a decree which he hoped would extinguish the spreading flames of Christianity. One of his primary objectives was the seizure and destruction of the Christian Scriptures. Later that year, officials enforced the decree in North Africa. One of the targets was Felix, Bishop of Tibjuca, a village near Carthage. The mayor of the town ordered Felix to hand over his Scriptures. Felix refused to surrender the Word of God at the insistence of mere men. In time, Felix was shipped to Italy where he paid for his stubbornness with his life. Felix chose the scriptures over his very life. Can I state the obvious? The times have changed. Is there anyone here today who values the Bible over their own life? This is the point. The Bible is important.

This is what I call a stand-alone sermon. In other words, it is not part of a sermon series. It stands alone. However, this sermon sets up our next sermon series. Beginning next week, we begin a thirty-one-week study called *The Story*. Over that period, we are going to look at the Bible from beginning until end. The study takes the Bible and arranges it to be one story. In that story, we discover how God has been reaching out to mankind from the very beginning. We will look at key individual stories in the Bible. Today's message deals with the importance of the Bible as a whole. Our scripture reading for today is Acts 8:26-39. 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.

Before I begin today, let me say this clearly. 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. We have advanced in the areas of transportation, communication, and medicine. No one is traveling today by stagecoach. Very few do not have an email address, regardless of age. I have never had a parishioner, who requested heart surgery using 1860's medical practices. America has advanced in many ways, but that is not true when it comes to 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 truly little to offer our modern world. Our Biblical ignorance is at an all-time high.

For twenty-two years Jay Leno (born 1950) hosted *The Tonight Show*. Personally, I found Jay Leno to be entertaining. He had a routine of the show called Jay Walking. He would walk through the streets and ask people simple questions. Sometimes, he would ask people about current events. Sometimes, it was a about politics. One night he asked simple questions about the Bible. He asked the first person to name one of the

Ten Commandments. A young man answered, "Freedom of Speech." He then asked the person to finish the quote. Ye who is without sin _____. A middle-aged woman answered, "Has the most fun!" He then asked who in the Bible was swallowed by a great fish. An elderly gentleman answered Pinocchio. The correct answers are Honor your father and mother; cast the first stone and Jonah. If you did not know those answers than you have a problem.

The other day a friend told me, he and his wife were watching the game show Jeopardy. The final question of the show, Final Jeopardy, was a Biblical question. HE TELLS HIS SON NOT TO WORRY ABOUT THE LAMB FOR THE BURNT OFFERING – GOD WILL PROVIDE. One of the contestants answered JOB. Another answered Jacob. The third contestant answered, "This has been so much fun! Thank You! If you do not know the answer is Abraham, then you have a problem. Our Biblical ignorance is shocking, but you are not alone. I will admit I am guilty too.

When I was in seminary, a friend of mine came up to me with a book he had found in the library. It was a Bible trivia book. He asked he a few questions and I got half correct. I felt good about myself, until he showed me the title of the book, *Bible Trivia for Children Ten Years Old and Younger*. The copyright was in the 1870s. My friend laughed at me. Our Biblical ignorance makes us more like the man in our scripture lesson than we care to admit. If you are ready to look at the scripture reading for today say, "**Amen!**"

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. 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.

We know two things about him. First, we know his nationality. He was Ethiopian. In those days, Ethiopia was the upper Nile region. Second, we know his occupation. He was the treasurer 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,

you didn't completely understand the words? The good news is the Ethiopian had Philip to help him. The bad news is you are stuck with me.

Today, I want to make three quick statements about the Bible. Each one of these statements is obvious. The originally came from James W. Moore (1938-2019). Each one of these statements 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 do not want you to be a spiritual weakling. I want you to be a spiritually-mature-Christian. So, if you are ready to begin say, **"Amen!"**

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. 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 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 do not 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 are you facing 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 kind 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 did not need the biggest room in the church. Second, I found out that evening I 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 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 this church is a spiritual weakling, then just find out how many people attend our weekly Bible study. If it can happen there, then it can happen here. How important is the Bible to you?
