

1. Recognising God-given Opportunities

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[0 : 00] Gracious God and our loving Heavenly Father, we thank you for this time together in the middle of a busy week. We thank you, Lord, that we have time to set our hearts on things that are above, to concern ourselves not with the things of this age, but of the age to come, not of the things of time, but of the things of eternity.

And we thank you, Lord, for your Son, our precious Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you that you have exalted him far above all rule, all authority, all power and all dominion.

We thank you that through him we have boldness to come into your presence, into your most holy place. We thank you that the gospel about him is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world, bringing forgiveness, reconciliation, peace with you and with each other wherever it is preached.

We thank you, Lord, that your gospel is the power of salvation for all who will believe. And, Lord, we find it hard to believe that you would entrust the gospel to us, that you would make us your ambassadors, make us a light to the nations.

But we thank you, Lord, for your grace, that you call us to give a reason for the hope that is within us, and to do so with gentleness and respect.

[1 : 28] And as we think, Lord, today of evangelism, we continue to pray that you will raise up laborers in that great harvest field. We pray that wherever we are, you will open a door for the word, that you will give us opportunity to proclaim it, and to do so clearly and boldly.

We pray, Lord, whenever we acknowledge your Son and speak of him, that the word may speak ahead, speed ahead and be honored, and that other people might in turn come to know the grace, the love, and the peace which you give us through you, our Lord Jesus Christ.

And so it is in his name we pray. Amen. Well, our reading today is taken from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 8, and we're beginning at verse 26 and reading to verse 40.

And over the next three weeks, I wanted to do a short series called Everyday Evangelism. If, like me, you find personal evangelism difficult, I wanted to draw some encouragement from the Scriptures.

I was reading a book this morning by a Randy Newman. He writes a book about sharing your faith with friends. And he has a very amusing quote. He says, Some people are always praying for opportunities.

[2 : 50] When they get on a plane, they pray they'll get to sit next to someone they can share with. And the author says, I'm nothing like that. I pray that I'll get an empty seat so I can enjoy the flight. Perhaps, like me, you feel that reluctance sometimes.

But we recognize, don't we, that personal evangelism is so important. This is a quote from Billy Graham. Mass evangelism is not the best way to spread the gospel, but it is the way God has entrusted to me.

The best way is when there is one person who has good news to share and one who is keen to hear it. So, the words of Billy Graham. The best way to spread the gospel is for one person to share it with another person.

So, with that in mind, let's read these words of Acts chapter 8. Now, an angel of the Lord said to Philip, Rise and go toward the south, to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.

This is a desert place. And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure.

[4 : 02] He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the spirit said to Philip, Go over and join this chariot.

So, Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, Do you understand what you are reading? And he said, How can I, unless someone guides me?

And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now, the passage of scripture that he was reading was this. Like a sheep, he was led to the slaughter. And like a lamb before its shearers is silent, so he opens not his mouth.

In his humiliation, justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth. And the eunuch said to Philip, About whom I ask you, does the prophet say this?

About him or someone else? Then Philip opened his mouth. And beginning with this scripture, he told him the good news about Jesus.

[5 : 07] And as they were going along the road, they came to water. And the eunuch said, See, here is water. What prevents me from being baptized? And he commanded the chariot to stop.

And they both went into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the spirit of the Lord carried Philip away. And the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing.

But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through, he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea. Amen. Well, a few weeks ago, I had to prepare for an exam, and we were in the middle of moving house.

I had Anna, my daughter, crawling around my feet. It was raining. It was a bit hard to concentrate.

And so my dad, who was visiting, drove me to Pollock Shields Library. It's a lovely library.

It's not really set up for studying. There's one table you can sit at. But I sat at that table, and I began to read my books. And after an hour, I had a bit of a break. I went for a walk, and I came back, and I heard noise at the table.

[6 : 18] And as I came to sit down again, I realized the other half of this tiny little table, a young man from Pakistan, had sat there, and he was beginning to study. And I greeted him.

I said, hello. My name's Ewan. What are you revising? And he said, I'm revising chartered accountancy. And he said to me, what are you revising? I said, well, I'm studying the Bible. I've got an exam in theology.

And he said, oh, may I ask you some questions? And I said, of course. And he said, well, I've come from Pakistan, and I've never really met many Christians, and I've got lots of questions about what you believe. Is it okay if I ask you them?

And we had 20 minutes when I was able to explain the gospel to him. As I left the library, I was just so happy because the Lord had just given a golden opportunity to share the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, in Acts chapter 8, we find Philip is given a golden opportunity to explain the gospel to this important Ethiopian official. And today, as we study this passage, I want us just to have two headings in mind.

[7 : 23] Firstly, God is in control of our evangelism. And secondly, the key to worldwide mission. Okay, God is in control of our evangelism.

And secondly, the key to worldwide mission. Acts chapter 8 takes place as a persecution has arisen. Chapter 8, verse 1 tells us a persecution arises in Jerusalem.

And people are sent out from there. into Samaria, into different parts of the Middle East. And they continue preaching. And Philip goes down to Samaria. And in verse 4, he preaches.

There's a little revival. Many people coming to faith. And in the middle of that, God says to him, go. Verse 26, the angel of the Lord says, go towards the south.

And then the spirit in verse 29 says, go over to this chariot. He's called out of a busy city, a busy revival. And he goes into the desert. And what happens?

[8 : 22] Well, he finds a man sitting in a chariot reading the prophet Isaiah. And we might think, well, that's amazing, isn't it? What a surprising thing to happen in the middle of the desert.

Find somebody reading the prophet Isaiah. Well, it is amazing. But I don't think it is surprising.

Because if we believe, as scripture tells us, in a God who desires all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth, and who has entrusted the gospel of salvation into men and women, then it seems very likely that this kind of thing should happen all the time.

Shouldn't be surprising when an Ethiopian happens to meet a preacher walking across the desert. shouldn't be all that surprising when a young man from effectively a closed country finds somebody

sitting across from him in a library reading the book he's never been able to read.

It is amazing, but it's not surprising. And it reminds us that God is in control of our evangelism.

Some weeks ago, Bob preached very helpfully on Psalm 139.

Wonderful Psalm. Describing the care and attention God gives to each of his children. And it has that lovely line, doesn't it? In your book were written every one of them.

[9 : 38] The days that were formed for me when as yet there was none of them. Ephesians chapter 1 has the same idea. It describes God as him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.

God is in control of our lives. And therefore, it is no accident where we live. Whether it's an area we like, whether it's an area we don't like, God is in control and it's him who set us there.

It's no accident where we work or the people we work with. Whether we get on with them, whether we don't, God has set us in that workplace. It's no accident the family we're in, although the relationships may be tough.

It is God who has settled us in that family. And the same God who put Philip in contact with this Ethiopian puts us in daily contact with all sorts of people in our homes, in our workplaces, in our families, on buses, in cafes, with the same desire that these people should hear and respond to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is amazing, but it's not surprising. So the first thing I want to say is this year, a prayer for myself and a prayer for everyone here, is that we will be given opportunities.

[10 : 56] like Philip was given this opportunity. Paul in Colossians prayed that he would be given opportunities for the word. And it's a prayer the Lord loves to honour. Secondly, I'll be praying that we'll be making and taking those opportunities when they come.

That we will, as Peter says, be giving a reason for the hope that is within us, but with gentleness and respect. And thirdly, I'll be praying that we'll be encouraging one another.

It's a pretty tough business, evangelism, and it's a team sport, so we need to be encouraging one another. We need to be saying, how are you getting on? Have you managed to share with anyone this week? We need to be giving thanks when we have opportunities and to be praying for those we meet.

God is in control of our lives and it's no accident where he puts us, giving us opportunities to witness to his son. But of course, you might think, well, that's a bit of a responsibility, isn't it?

That's quite a lot of pressure to put me under. And a few years ago, I was in Hungary and we discovered there was a free concert and obviously, we like the sound of a free concert, so we went along to the town square and this concert was happening and we met some British people and we got talking and we began to explain how we were Christians and one of the girls we were speaking to said, well, I used to be a Christian, but I've stopped.

[12 : 18] And I said, oh, what happened? Why did you stop? And she said, well, I couldn't cope with the pressure of having to try and convert every single person I met. She thought it was easier just to stop and to get on with life.

And the wonderful thing about Acts chapter 8 is though it describes Philip the evangelist, in actual fact, it teaches us that God is the evangelist. You see, it wasn't Philip's idea, was it, to go to the desert?

Twice God has to tell him, go. In fact, the gospel wasn't Philip's idea. It was God who sent his son in order to save the world.

It was the Lord Jesus Christ who sent his spirit into the hearts of his people and who commissioned his twelve apostles and sent them out to preach. And it was he who guides and directs their apostolic mission and he who opens hearts to hear and understand and respond to the message.

So Philip understood that he was entrusted with the gospel but he was just a servant, just a labourer in the harvest field. And it was the Lord God himself who is the Lord of the harvest.

[13 : 29] Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3 we are God's fellow workers. We do not work alone. We are sent out by the Lord of the harvest into his harvest field.

And that's true, isn't it? It's true when things are dramatic. It's true when an angel appears and tells us to go off into the middle of Strathclyde Park. But it's true in our day-to-day business. Philip was told to go.

And Jesus in Matthew 28 tells his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. Philip learned that he was working with God, that God had gone before him.

And in the Great Commission of course, Jesus says, I will be with you always to the very end of the age. Jerome Barr's, in his helpful book, Learning Evangelism from Jesus, has this wonderful quote. Jesus was not only the greatest evangelist when he did his work of ministry on this earth 2,000 years ago. He is still the greatest evangelist today and every day.

[14 : 34] He always works tirelessly without any Sabbath rest, drawing people to himself. He has committed himself to use our stumbling efforts and inadequate words in this great work that he is doing.

It is a liberating truth, isn't it? It is he who sends us, it is he who works with us, and ultimately, it is his harvest. God is sovereign, but he is looking for us to be obedient.

Secondly, the key to worldwide mission. Philip goes over to the chariot and he begins a conversation. And it can be hard, can't it, sometimes to begin a conversation. You have probably heard the story of the young man who invites a young lady out for dinner and he is wondering what he is going to talk about.

And so he asks his big brother and his brother says to him, well, there is always the three F's, food family philosophy. And so he goes out to dinner and he says to the girl, so do you have any brothers or sisters?

And she says, well, I have got a brother. The conversation dries up. And he looks at the menu and he says, do you like spaghetti? And she says, no, no, actually I am allergic to pasta.

[15 : 47] And the conversation dries up. And he thinks, well, I have done family, I have done food, I need to do philosophy. So he says to the girl, if you had a sister, do you think she would like spaghetti?

Starting a conversation can be difficult. But Philip does it very naturally, doesn't he? This man is reading. And so he says, verse 30, do you understand what you are reading? It's a good question to ask on trains, newspapers and magazines.

What are you reading? What are you reading about? But that's what Philip asks. He begins a conversation about something neutral. And the Ethiopian explains and Philip asks a second question, probing his understanding.

So he begins a very natural conversation which very quickly turns to spiritual things. And I found that if you're talking to people, it's often a natural conversation that has to happen.

It's very unusual for someone to start talking right away about the gospel. But if we begin a conversation, the weather, the newspaper, the events of the world, quite often it can be guided into spiritual things.

[16 : 57] And that's what Philip finds here. And the Ethiopian is reading, of course, the prophet Isaiah, these wonderful verses from chapter 52. But he doesn't understand them.

And so he asks Philip a question. About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say about himself or about someone else? Verse 34. And so Philip responds to the question he's been asked.

And he begins to describe exactly who the prophet was writing about. Philip knew scripture. He knew the preceding verses that spoke of one who would be wounded for our transgressions and crushed and crushed for our iniquities.

He knew the following verses that spoke of this one who after his suffering shall see light and be satisfied and that through the knowledge of this righteous one many will be accounted righteous for he has borne their iniquities.

Philip was willing to enter into a conversation with someone and he had a good grounding in scripture. And so beginning with this, he was able then to take the conversation on and to talk about the Lord Jesus Christ.

[18 : 08] It's a wonderful model, isn't it, of personal evangelism. And it's an effective model. This is what people did in the first century. And it's what people continue to do in the 21st century.

Courses such as Christianity explored exactly the same. People gathered around an open Bible asking and answering questions. This year, UCCF, the University College and Christian Foundations, I should probably know what that means.

UCCF, the University Christian Groups, their plan this year is to put a copy of the Gospel of Luke into people's hands, but more than that, to encourage the CU's to offer to read it with one friend in a coffee shop, in a home, in a public place.

And it is quite amazing how many students are agreeing to do that, to read the Bible with a friend in a safe place. Sitting down with another person and an open Bible listening to and answering

questions.

Billy Graham saying it is the most effective way of sharing your faith with someone. So, let me challenge you, friends, and this is a challenge I give to myself.

[19 : 26] Is this something we're seeking to do? Are there people we've known for a long time? Friends or family members, perhaps a shopkeeper, someone we commute with, somebody we see regularly.

Do we have a good friendship with them? And are we willing to take a little risk on that friendship and say to them, do you think we could meet one day for coffee or for dinner and we could spend half an hour with an open Bible discussing what it says?

I would be very interested to know what kind of response you get. The worst that can happen is they say no. But the most that can happen, as in verse 39, is that they can be come to know the Lord and go on their way rejoicing.

So that's my challenge for you. I know many of you do that and it's a challenge for myself as well because I need to be challenged in that area. But just finally, it's worth noticing something about Philip's conversation.

We've seen how he's polite. He asks a question. He invites further discussion. But he treats the Ethiopian as an individual. When I worked in Glasgow Royal, one of the senior nurses told me about a dermatologist long since retired.

[20 : 37] And this man had built in his garage a very special contraption. It was a box and in the box there was a light bulb. And he used to do clinics and patients would come to him and they would describe their problem and he would say, well, put your hand in the box and I'll give you some light therapy.

And they put their hand in the box. He turned the light on for a minute or two minutes and then he sent them home. And whatever the problem was, everybody got a couple of minutes with their hand in this box. He treated everyone exactly the same.

But in Scripture, of course, people aren't treated exactly the same. Philip here listens to this man. He tries to understand what he's thinking about. He begins with the Scripture he's reading but then he leads him on to tell him the message about Jesus Christ.

And in the Acts of the Apostles, that's just what we find when Peter or Paul or somebody is preaching to the Jews. They begin with the Scriptures. They begin with Abraham, with the prophets, with the kings, with God's promises and they show how these are fulfilled in Christ.

But when they're preaching to Gentiles who have no knowledge of the Scriptures, they begin elsewhere. They begin with talking about creation or about God's goodness, biblical truth known from experience.

[21 : 56] But whatever the starting point, they take people where they are but they're always leading them to Jesus Christ, to his life, to his death, to his resurrection, to his exaltation, to what it means to know him, to have the forgiveness of their sins, to have hope and a future.

Philip opens his mouth, begins with the Scripture this man is reading and then tells him the good news about Jesus. Sometimes the Lord gives us golden opportunities and we ought to rejoice in them.

But whatever is happening, we know that God is in control of evangelism, that he is the Lord of the harvest and it is him who sends us out with his gospel. And so we need to trust in him for opportunities and for fruit.

And secondly, the key to worldwide evangelism is to be sharing our faith, to be initiating conversations with people, to be seeking to lead those conversations in a spiritual way and to be inviting those we know and those we love to sit down with us, to begin where they are and then to take them and to tell them the good news about Jesus Christ.

Praise be to God. Let's pray together. Amen. Amen. Father, we thank you for this wonderful gospel.

[23 : 21] We thank you that it is such a thing to rejoice in. We thank you, Lord, that in your purposes you have entrusted it to us. And Lord, we feel so weak and so incapable of sharing it with anyone, but we know what is impossible with man is possible with you.

And so we pray, Lord, we might understand more and more that you are in control, that you tell us to go, but you go with us and that we go out into your harvest field.

And so we pray, Lord, this week that you might lay on our hearts an individual or a couple or some friends with whom we might take a step of faith and invite them to open the scripture with us.

We do pray, Lord, that you will give us a great love for the lost and a supernatural boldness, Lord, to step out of our comfort zone, to take risks and to be willing to speak to people, Lord, about the hope we have, confident that the gospel is your power for salvation and trusting that you will bring others to share in that hope and to come to know your love for themselves.

We thank you for the example of Philip and the way he ran to share the gospel. And, Lord, we pray that you will give us something of that zeal that we might run in obedience to where you send us.

[24 : 46] And so we thank you for our time together. We pray our fellowship might be upbuilding and encouraging and that you will strengthen us as we go our separate ways. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.