

“No one is too far from the love of God” (Acts 8:26-39)

We just started new series “The Dynamic Love Story.” We’re looking at Acts and learning how the Word of God spread through the world, how the love of God was recognized at different parts of the world, how the reconciliation of God was realized in the world.

Let’s review what we learned last time.

God loves the world. The love of God is so great. It can cover the whole universe. It is active, powerful and dynamic. So what did he do?

2 Cor 5:18-19

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

Last time we looked at:

Because God so loves the world,

- the word of the God spread widely. It spread out geographically. Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.
- the word of God grew in power. It transcended social, cultural, ethnic and religious barriers.

As these things are happening, there were two shifts. The work of God’s gospel, the ministry of reconciliation has shifted from a local movement in rural provinces to the large cosmopolitan cities. The other was disciples’ new self-identity. They are called Christians, “Christ-ones.”

Now we have the Bible, and we can read about all these events in order. We can understand each section in the context of the whole Bible.

However, the people in the book of Acts couldn’t do that. They could know the things in the past, but they had no way of knowing what would happen the following day. And so many things happened every day. There was no way for them to know how these events would lead to the future events.

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out. The Church was started at Jerusalem. "So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly" (Acts 6:7).

But up to cp.7, the work was still within Jerusalem.

In cp.8, people were scattered by a persecution to various regions. The gospel was preached in Samaria too. But at that point, it was mainly preached to the Jews.

At that point, how could disciples dream about the expansion and shift of the gospel? Let's think about their situation. They are persecuted. Stephen was killed. They are forbidden by the authorities to preach in the name of Jesus. Some were thrown into prison. Not many could stay in Jerusalem. And they were still in the box of Jewish tradition. In such a situation, how can they imagine that the Word of God is going to spread to the ends of the earth and grow in power, transcending all kinds of barriers, social, cultural, ethnic and religious barriers?

In cp.10, Peter saw a vision. And in Ceasarea, Cornelius got saved. Gentiles received the Holy Spirit. This is where the great shift began. We have seen it in the previous message.

Before that, there is a small incident. In the later half of cp.8, there is a short article of just 14 verses. That is a story of an Ethiopian eunuch. It's short, but it has a very significant meaning. It is just like a trailer of "The Dynamic Love Story." It indicates the expansion and the shift of the work of the gospel, which is about to start.

1. A greater plan

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 Candace, 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 The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the 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. Why shouldn't I be 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.

Let me start with what happened before this section. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and preached the Word of God. People there listened to his message. There was a mighty work of deliverance and healing by the Holy Spirit. So there was great joy in that city. People believed in Jesus. Men and women were baptized. The apostles in Jerusalem heard the news and they sent Peter and John. And the people in Samaria received the Holy Spirit. (Acts 8:5-8, 12, 14-17)

From a human perspective, Philip could have said "The foundation of the church is built. Now let's focus here and build on it!" But, the Lord's plan was different. An angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road--the desert road-- that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. (v.26)" But remember, Philip's work was bearing fruit in Samaria, not Gaza. Samaria, and its surrounding areas still had a lot of need for expansion and deepening of the work. So it's extremely inefficient to bring Philip to somewhere different and desolate deliberately. It doesn't add up with human calculations. But, the Lord had a much broader view, and a much greater plan.

The work of the gospel, the ministry of reconciliation doesn't just stay in Jerusalem. It doesn't just stay in Samaria. It will reach to the ends of the earth. And God will use people for this purpose.

An angel of the Lord appeared to Philip, and told him to go to Gaza. If he could do that, then why did he not go down to Gaza by himself, instead of sending Philip all the way? Why didn't the Holy Spirit appear to the Ethiopian and speak to him directly so that he would believe in Jesus? Why not?

One principle of the gospel mission is that God's Word is proclaimed through people. Especially for those who don't know Jesus yet, God uses a person to speak, teach and explain His Word, instead of the Holy Spirit or angels.

God can make angels speak or the Holy Spirit himself can speak. But God chose to use Philip. God uses a person, not because angels are so busy for other things or there is no other way, but because it is God's way.

We can see the same pattern in the case of Cornelius in Ceasarea. He saw an angel in a vision. The angel told him to send men to Joppa to invite Simon Peter (Acts 10:3-6). We may think, "The angel can talk, so he can explain about Jesus directly. Why does he need to send for Peter all the way for that? Peter can come when Cornelius have believed in Jesus, and just baptize him. That's so easy! More efficient! More economical! Less work more fruits!" But God used Peter and made him proclaim about Jesus, made him preach Jesus' death and resurrection. So Peter explained salvation through Jesus. Because that is the way of God (Acts 10:34-43).

2. Philip met an Ethiopian eunuch

Acts 8:27

So Philip started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch. He was an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians.

Philip told the Ethiopian eunuch the good news about Jesus. If you just read it, it is as simple as that. But, if you stop and think, this is such an extraordinary incident.

In those days they told the message only to Jews (11:9).

In cp.10, we see the incident in which Peter visited Cornelius in Ceasarea. He saw a vision and heard God' voice, which said, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." And this happened three times. But Peter still couldn't get it. The Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

Then finally, Peter got moving. He knew in his head that all the prophets testified about Jesus, that everyone who believes in him will receive forgiveness of sins through his name (v.43). But in reality, it was beyond expectation for him to visit the gentiles and preach the gospel to them. For the gentiles to receive the

Holy Spirit is like a dream within a dream for the Jews. This scene with Philip happened while most Jewish people had this kind of mindset.

The Holy Spirit was shifting the church to bring the Word of God to the whole world, minister the ministry of reconciliation to the whole world.

Whom did the Holy Spirit lead Philip to? An Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians (v.27).

And because this Ethiopian eunuch had faith in Jesus and went back to Ethiopia, the word of God started to spread powerfully.

It spread beyond ethnic barriers. He is a gentile. And he is not Greek, not Roman, but African.

It started to spread geographically. Judean to Ethiopia, to Africa. This is recorded before Antioch in cp.11, which is the gateway to the eastern world. It's before Athens in cp.17, which is the center of Greek culture. And it's before Ephesus in cp.19, which is the capital and leading business center of the Roman province of Asia.

It spread socially. He is the queen's treasurer. Candace is the title of the queen of Ethiopia. It's like we call the king of Egypt, Pharaoh. He gained queen's confidence and was managing her whole property. Through him, the word of God was brought to the community of elite government officials.

It spread beyond religious tradition. He is a eunuch. If the word "eunuch" here doesn't simply mean a person in high position, an officer (The word for "eunuch" at Isa 56:3-4 is also used as "officer" at Gen 39:1), but literally means a castrated male, then based on Leviticus 21:18-20 and Deuteronomy 23:1, he is considered impure, disgraceful, forever cut off from the covenant community.

But he was saved by Jesus! The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of exactly everyone who believes (Rom 1:16). There is no one whom God's grace cannot reach. There is nothing which can separate us from the love of God (Rom 8:39). No one is too far from the love of God

God's Word, the message of reconciliation spread geographically. And it powerfully transcended social, ethnic, cultural and religious barriers.

3. Went to Jerusalem to worship

Acts 8:27-28

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.

He traveled from Ethiopia to Jerusalem to worship. The distance is about 1,500miles, 2,500km. It is about in the straight line from Ho Chi Minh City to Calcutta, or Paris to Moscow, or Seattle to Oklahoma City. I hope you can feel how far it is.

And it wasn't just far. It could also be a dangerous journey. There weren't any ATM machines or credit cards in those days. It's possible that in his chariot, he had money and goods that would cover the cost of about a half a year's journey. He could fall a victim to robbers. He knew the risk, but he still went to the journey.

After he worshipped at Jerusalem, he went back to Ethiopia through the same distance.

On his way home, he was reading the book of Isaiah in his chariot. There weren't any books and tablets like today. It was long before the printing machine was invented. So it was a hand-written manuscript. It was very rare, precious and costly. We don't know where and how he got it and how much he paid. But anyway, he had it in his hand and he was reading it aloud. We can feel his passion for worship, and his thirst for God.

This is about 22 or 23 years ago, I was pastoring a church in Japan. There was a man named Kawamura, he was just over 60 years old. He worked for a roofing tile factory. Sometimes he was on night duty on Saturdays. After night duty, he directly came to Sunday morning service from his factory. He drove about 30 km of narrow winding mountain paths to the church. He was usually sleeping during my message. Sometimes I thought, "It would be better for him to go home if he knows he will sleep here." His wife was feared he might cause an accident in his tiredness. Why not rest this Sunday, and come on the following Sunday? But he said he wanted to come to the worship service. Though he might fall asleep, he still wanted to come to worship. I often spoke softer and slower and a bit longer on the day like that.

4. Who is the man?

Acts 8:32-34

³² The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the 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?"

He was reading Isaiah 53:7-8. He was reading it by himself, but couldn't understand it well. So he asked Philip to teach him.

Let's pay attention to his question. What did he ask? He wanted to know, "Who is the man the prophet is talking about?" He didn't ask him to explain the situation or the meaning of the passage. But he wanted to know, "Who is the man?"

When you read the Bible, it is important to understand the meaning of the passage logically. But if it just remains as the head knowledge, it doesn't have power. Studying the Bible itself can be a hindrance to know Jesus. It gives us joy when we receive intellectual satisfaction through intellectual activities. And it can be a great temptation.

Acts 8:35

³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

"In the beginning was the Word, ... and the Word was God... ¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1, 14).

We read the Word, study the Word and understand it. Then we meet Jesus because he is the Word! We must come to know Jesus through experiences. Our relationship with him become deeper. Our faith in him grow stronger. We come to know the power of the Word of God in our lives.

This Ethiopian eunuch didn't just believe in the abstract concept of God and his nature, but he believed in Jesus as a person. And he received Jesus as his joy.

5. Taking Water baptism

Acts 8:36-39

³⁶ As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be 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.

Now let's go back to the incident at Pentecost.

Acts 2:36-38; 41-42

[Peter said] "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

³⁷ When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

³⁸ Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Do you notice that this Ethiopian eunuch is following the instruction of Peter's message?

He came to know about Jesus. He understood that Jesus died on the cross as a ransom for his sin. Then he received water baptism by Philip.

Philip would have known this message from Peter, so there is no doubt that this Ethiopian eunuch would have first repented, as Philip had baptized him.

When Philip baptized an Ethiopian eunuch, they both went down into the water, rather than he went to the river to bring the water and sprinkled on him.

The English word "baptize" is a transliteration of the Greek word "baptizo." Baptizo means to make whelmed or fully sunk. And it comes from the root word "bapto", meaning to cover wholly with a fluid, as in "dip."

One of the gifts of water baptism is that you experience to be totally clothed by water, which is used as the symbol of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-38).

“You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Gal 3:26-27).

Water baptism shows not only death and burial with Christ, but also resurrection with Christ, living new life in Christ (Rom 6:3-4). So water baptism is not just one-time religious ritual, things like “I did it. Done.” It’s not like that at all. It actually declares what kind of life you will live. It’s like a public demonstration of your new life style.

We were saved by the grace of God through our faith in Him. Receiving water baptism is the proclamation of what has been happening inside of you and me. You cannot see the changes inside of you from outside: In our physical eyes, we cannot see that we are forgiven, the blood of Jesus took away our sin, we have been reconciled with Jesus, Christ lives in us, or we’re children of God, and so on. When you and I receive water baptism, our actions proclaim publicly “I’m following Jesus, I’m living with the Word. I have a new life!”

After he received the water baptism he went on his way rejoicing.

6. A continuation of the story

The Bible doesn’t show us what happened to this Ethiopian eunuch after this. But it provides us enough material for us to imagine what may have happened.

Does God really save the Gentiles? Is it an exception that this Ethiopian eunuch was saved? Is the Holy Spirit poured on the Gentiles too, as it is promised in cp.2? As if God knew our questions, cp.10 shows the salvation of Cornelius and his family, and how they received the Holy Spirit in detail.

The incident of this Ethiopian eunuch is in cp.8. The accounts after that seem almost as if to describe how the Word of God spread in Ethiopia through this eunuch. The settings are different, and the people in the settings are different. But the power of God’s Word expressed are the same everywhere. The principle of the expansion of God’s kingdom never changes.

In Ceasarea, Antioch, and Athens, the word of God spread widely and grew in power, transcending various barriers. Ephesus is the city which has all these barriers together. In Ephesus, all these barriers were experienced together. The word of God grew in power. It transcended social, cultural, ethnic and religious barriers. Was it because it was in Ephesus? The power of God’s Word

can be diminished in other cities? The Word of God has the same power in Ethiopia too.

The Word of God echoed in Ephesus. People realized their sin, and repented. They stopped their black magic, left the goddess Artemis, and turned back to the true living holy God. The disciples received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The Church was started! The Word of God didn't stop there. It spread further, powerfully throughout Asia, as Ephesus as its foothold.

The principle of the expansion of God's kingdom remains the same in Ethiopia, in Africa and anywhere in the world. Because God so loves the world. The dynamic love story never ends but continues. No one is too far from the love of God.

For Lifenet groups and personal reflection

1. Read Acts 8:26-39. Philip's ministry in Samaria was just started. It seemed to go very successful. Then he was told "Go south to the road --the desert road- - that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. (v.26)". If you were him, what kind of thoughts might you have?
2. It was believed that a eunuch, castrated male was impure, disgraceful, forever cut off from the covenant community (Lev 21:18-20, Deut 23:1).
 - 1) What hope might the Ethiopian eunuch have on the way to Jerusalem to worship?
 - 2) Can you see the similar kind of belief or mindset in our days? If any, how does it affect church?
3. What and how does this story of an Ethiopian eunuch indicate in terms of expansion for the Word of God, the ministry of reconciliation? How can it be applied to church today?