

All are welcome

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[0:00] Father, thank you for your words. Thank you that you are the speaking God. You speak words of love and power. Pray that you would speak to each one of us, to our hearts, words of welcome, words of grace.

Pray that Celeste reads your words and then as I try to say a few words, would we hear you speak to us? Would we hear your voice? Would we hear what you say? Help me to be faithful.

And yeah, would you encourage us today and send us out with the great news of Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen. Celeste. Good morning. Scripture reading today comes from Acts chapter 8, verses 26 to 40.

If you don't have a copy of the Bible, I encourage you to grab a copy from the front and also at the back. If you're using the church Bible, it's at page 862.

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.

[1:16] 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.

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 the scripture that he was reading was this. Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb before its shearer it's 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.

[2:20] And the eunuch said to Philip, About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this? About himself? Or about someone else? Then Philip opened his mouth.

And beginning with this scripture, he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road, they came to some 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 down 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.

This is the word of the Lord. Great. Thanks, Celeste, for reading. Let's keep that passage open as we'll look at Acts.

[3:25] Acts, and some other passage later as well. All right. Now, Hong Kong, it's a wonderful city. Many great places to go. But one thing that I only found out in the past few years, because people took me there, there's all these clubs, right?

All these places where not everyone can go. You need to be a member, pay a lot of money. But then, yeah, you have this, the Hong Kong club, or the China club, or the, what is it? The golf club and the yacht club.

And, yeah, most people can't go in there, because, yeah, it's only for members. Only if they invite you, which is kind of fun. It's a nice place. I sometimes think, of course, clubs here are, there's even

more exclusive clubs than in Hong Kong.

I try to have a look online. What's the most exclusive club? Probably the yacht club of Monaco. Of course, you need to have a, you know, two people who are members need to recommend you. You need to write a handwritten letter.

You need to have an interview with the Prince of Monaco, right? Prince Albert II. And he needs to see if, you know, you've made a recognized contribution to yachting. And if you want, if you're a captain, you need to have at least five years experience being a captain.

[4:37] And then, you can only go there with a blue blazer with the club logo and those kind of things. So I guess this is just funny, right? Most of us don't really care about it because it's not something we need.

But what if you, there's something you need, but you are not eligible? I don't know. You want to go to a certain country to see family or to see a friend and you don't get a visa because, you know, you're, yeah, someone like you can't get a visa.

That's really hard, right? Or there are certain medical treatments and you're not eligible for that because of whatever reason. You don't meet certain criteria. Then it's a lot more difficult, right?

That it's not, it's not for everyone. Or even worse, what if you couldn't get to be with God? I mean, God is the one we need most, right? We want to be able to pray.

We need help. We need forgiveness. We need all those things. But what if you couldn't get in? And certainly in the Old Testament, that was often the case, right? If you wanted to be one of God's people, well, you had to be Jewish.

[5:41] The men had to be circumcised and you had to be ritually clean. So you had to keep all these rules. You know, those 10 commandments are easy, but how about the 603 other ones in the Bible, right?

That's quite a few. The temple symbolized it so clearly, right? You have this, yeah, this is what the temple looks like. Of course, if you were not Jewish, you couldn't even go in.

But then you can see on the left the court of women because that is as far as women could go and only the men could go further. But then to go into the building, you had to be a priest and to go into the innermost place, you had to be the high priest, right?

It's basically the deep truth there was, it's very difficult to be with God, with someone who is infinite and perfect and holy. How can you be with someone like that?

We can't just walk in. We're not welcome. But if you want to get in, then it's tough that you're not welcome, right? I guess some of us really feel that. We really know, okay, yeah, I want to be with God, but how can I, given who I am, given how unworthy I am?

[6:48] And yeah, well, that is why this passage and indeed so much of this series that we're doing in Acts is such good news for those who think they're not welcome.

Now, yeah, we're doing this series in the book of Acts, seeing how the gospel expands. Yeah, you may, it's a, well, it looks like the human hero is this guy called Philip, who is, yeah, a deacon of the church.

He plays a key role. Although you may wonder, actually, why is it called the book of Acts? People call it the book of Acts. It's short for the Acts of the Apostles, right?

The things that the apostles did. Although the first thing that I notice here that I think, well, what we see so clearly in Acts is that it's really, actually, it's not about the people, right? So, when we heard this story, it is so much God's initiative, again, right?

It is God doing this. All through this section, God is sending visions and he's sending angels and he is, the Holy Spirit is giving explicit directions. I think this passage is pretty wild, right?

[7:55] I mean, verse 26, now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, rise and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. This is a desert place, right? So, here's just Philip and he's doing evangelism and then an angel shows up and says, okay, go to that desert road over there.

Go and stand in the middle of nowhere. Why would you do that? Well, of course, there's a plan, right? Because then this guy comes along in his chariot and again, the Spirit, okay, the Spirit said to Philip, verse 29, go over and join this chariot and as you've heard, yeah, it's great, right?

Because here's someone who wants to know about Jesus and he explains the gospel and he gets baptized. Verse 39, 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 and Philip found himself as a resultist, right?

You know, the Spirit just teleports Philip away to his next kind of gospel conversation. I think this is pretty, pretty wild. I mean, even for the book of Acts, right? Where sometimes these things happen. It's especially in this section, all these wild things happen. I guess this is where people are being pushed out of their comfort zone and so God needs to do a lot of pushing, right? And so it's so clear that this is God being active.

[9:10] God wants to, the gospel to go somewhere and so Philip is being pushed, right? God is active. Now, does this happen today? It could, but I guess it's unlikely.

I mean, I've never been teleported. Anyone here has been teleported by the Spirit? No. No, I think, I mean, I wish this was true, right? It would make evangelism so much easier.

Just an angel, hey, go and stand on that street corner, third person, they will be wearing a red jacket. They want to know about Jesus. Tell them about Jesus. Right? I wish many of us are shy. It would be so much easier if God just would do that for us.

Now, of course, that's not how it works. That's not how we should apply this passage, but it does show God's heart, right? God wants the gospel to go out. He wants to save people and in some ways some of these things do happen.

I mean, I remember one time, you know, we can take risks. When I worked in London for a church, one time we were having lunch as a staff team and I kind of felt convicted.

[10:14] Why are we sitting here inside when people outside need the gospel? And so, I decided to just go out to take my lunch and sit on a bench and try to strike a conversation.

So, yeah, I saw a guy sitting alone on the bench, so I kind of just sat next to him and, you know, try to, hey, it's cold, isn't it? It was January. That's what British people do.

They talk about the weather. But, you know what? We started talking and what is your job? Oh, yeah, I work for that church over there.

Oh, wow, that's interesting because I really want to know about Christianity. Last week I bought this Bible. Can you help me read it? Like, wow, nothing to do with me, but, you know, God just put me in that place and, yeah, you know, let me encourage you to speak up.

Let me encourage you to invite. I mean, sometimes it will be very ordinary. Sometimes God can do extraordinary things, but God is, his heart is to invite people, right?

[11:18] There's an alpha course coming up, as you may know, you know, trying to invite someone. Be surprised at God being at work, at God already having taken the initiative to prepare people.

But, that's wonderful, but that's not just, that's not the main point, right? Because the person that Philip is sent to is not just anyone. It's a very special person, because this is God's initiative, but, yeah, to do what?

And I think what we should see is to welcome outsiders. This guy is very interesting. Look at who this guy is. Verse 27. And Philip 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.

He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning. So, I mean, this guy must have been pretty important and wealthy, right? If you are over all the treasure of the, you know, the royal family of the queen of Ethiopia, I don't know, was he a minister of finance or something?

He was a pretty important official. He was very religious, right? He had come to Jerusalem to worship, right? So, that's months of travel all the way from Ethiopia to Jerusalem.

[12:39] And he was reading a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Now, back then, not everyone could read, and certainly, I don't know, these days, you know, we can buy these Bibles pretty cheaply.

A handwritten scroll of Isaiah, 66 chapters, that's expensive. Right? So, this guy is pretty wealthy, but he can buy a whole scroll of Isaiah just for his own reading.

That's amazing. My guess is he was a Jewish convert. It says he was a foreigner, he was an Ethiopian, so certainly ethnically not Jewish. But in chapter 10, we get kind of Cornelius, the first

Gentile, and this guy, you know, why not this guy?

I guess because he wasn't a Gentile anymore. He, you know, he had converted, he'd become a Jew. But the main thing that you heard that gets repeated is that he is a eunuch, right?

Five times it says the eunuch. I mean, surely Luke could have said the Ethiopian, said, and the Ethiopian rejoiced, or the official said this. Why does he keep saying the eunuch?

[13:41] I think that's the thing that he wants to draw attention to. And the thing is, eunuchs, they, yeah, the Bible says things about eunuchs. And one clear thing that it says, I mean, maybe you don't know, maybe what is a eunuch?

Well, here's a verse from the Bible. It's a bit graphic. No one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord.

This is the Bible. Yeah, this is one of the rules in the law. Yeah, eunuchs are not allowed into the assembly of the Lord. I don't know exactly the reason.

Maybe be fruitful and multiply, increasing the people of God. That was a very key command. And someone who couldn't do that, yeah, obviously something wrong with them. Maybe they were not allowed in.

But this guy, yeah, he traveled all the way to Jerusalem, but this means he couldn't go into the temple, right? He had to stay on the outside. He wasn't allowed in.

[14:38] Can you imagine how sad that was? Right? After all this travel, yeah, he could buy a scroll of Isaiah, but for the rest, he couldn't get into the temple. I'm not sure if he was born a eunuch, or maybe, you know, if he wanted to work for the queen, yeah, only Eunice could do that.

Had he made a big sacrifice for his career? I don't know. But, yeah, he was excluded from the people of God. He was an outsider. And, you know, he couldn't do much about it, right?

Under Jewish law, many people were like that because of their nationality, or the jobs they did, or just because they were unclean, because it's so hard to approach God, right?

He is holy and pure, and we are not. And so often we just can't do anything about it. I mean, the eunuch, he couldn't really just try harder, right? He couldn't just, I mean, he really tried, and he couldn't change who he was.

He couldn't change, a bit like we're saying just now, if the leopard who can't change his spots, we can't. but then what happens on the road to Gaza?

[15:45] That's amazing, right? So he's got his new scroll, he's reading in his chariot, he doesn't really understand what he's reading, and then suddenly he's got this guy running along his chariot, hey, what are you doing?

How are you? And, yeah, do you know what you're reading? No, I've got no clue. Hey, come and sit next to me. So he invites Philip up, and, yeah, he happens to be reading Isaiah 53, and if you're a Christian, you probably know, ooh, that's a great passage, about this individual who is silently going to his death like a lamb to the slaughter.

We will talk about it more in a moment, completely unjustly going to his death. Who is this about? asked the eunuch. Well, Philip knows, and so, and Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture, he told him the good news about Jesus.

Wonderful. And guess what? The eunuch gets it, and they come by some water, and he asks a very good question, verse 36. See, here is water.

What prevents me from being baptized? And baptism, the sign of inclusion, the sign that you are a Christian, the sign that you're part of it. What prevents me? That's the thing, right?

[16:59] In the past, something prevented him. In the past, he couldn't go in. But, yeah, nothing prevents him. So, Philip and him, they go into the water, he dunks him, and he is an official Christian.

Wonderful, right? He is now part of it. Such wonderful news, right? After this disappointing temple visit, he is now, he is really now part of it. And the spirit takes Philip away to his next appointment, the eunuch goes away rejoicing.

Here is an outsider who is welcome. And I think that's the big point, particularly with the Old Testament background, because, you know, if you know the Bible, if you know Isaiah, you know,

certainly if you read Acts, you notice a lot of Isaiah.

It's like Luke's favorite book. It's quoted all over the place. This prophet who promises this great rescue, a new exodus. But there's a reason, I think, that Philip, you know, the spirit sent Philip to an Ethiopian eunuch that we get this story.

Why don't you come to page 577, Isaiah chapter 56 in the church Bibles, or in whatever Bible, Isaiah chapter 56, yeah, page 577 if you have the church Bibles.

[18:14] And Isaiah talks about a great rescue, but who is part of that? Who gets to be part of that? And then, yeah, it's a wonderful passage, 56 verse 3. What is God saying to people?

Verse 3, let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, the Lord will surely separate me from his people. And let not the eunuch say, behold, I'm a dry tree, right?

I can't bear fruit. For thus says the Lord, to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me, and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters.

I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. Right? So here were foreigners and eunuchs who used to be excluded, but now God says, well, this eunuch, he will come into my house, in my walls, and he's got something even better than having a family.

he's got me, he's got this great salvation, right? Same with the foreigners, foreigners, they'll come to my holy mountain, they'll pray, right?

[19:23] Verse 8 summarizes it, right? The Lord God who gathers the outcasts of Israel declares, I will gather yet others to him, besides they was already gathered. God is gathering outcasts.

Because of this great rescue, he is bringing outcasts in, and great example, foreigners and eunuchs. So what better to illustrate that? Okay, here's a foreign eunuch, right? And the Holy Spirit brings him in, and we have it here in the Bible to really see this is happening, right?

God is fulfilling what he promised. He's bringing outcasts in. If they believe, right? People who join themselves to the Lord, they're welcome. How does that speak to us?

I guess some of us surely, we were still on the outside, right? We wouldn't call ourselves a Christian. I think the eunuch asks the question, right? What is preventing me?

What is preventing you? Maybe that you don't believe. It's maybe that you have doubts, that there's things you don't find hard to believe in the Bible, like the teleporting, I have no idea.

[20:28] But maybe you wonder if you are welcome, if you're welcome, maybe because of what you've done, maybe because of who you are, maybe, you know, your background, your nationality, you have a certain impression, this is what a Christian is like, and you don't need that.

Well, look at this passage, look at this Ethiopian eunuch. Next time he comes to Jerusalem, he won't go to the temple, he will go to a church service, and he can come in, he is welcome, he is, you know, he would really stand out, right, from Ethiopia, and yet he would be fully part of it, he is welcome, nothing stands in his way, it's the same for you, whoever you are, if you're still on the outside, you can come in, nothing stands in your way, I mean, your lack of faith, that stands in the way, right, you need to believe, right, you need to say yes to Jesus, but that's in a way that's on your side, right, from Jesus' side, there's nothing that prevents him from welcoming you in, no matter what you've done, no matter who you are, no matter what you think is wrong with you, you can come in, so if that's you, let me encourage you, I guess as a church, how does this apply to us? I guess in some places the church can stand in a way, right, maybe the church gives the impression that, you know, the gospel is only for a certain kind of people, that's, yeah, you come to Watermark and I guess most people, they're ethnically Chinese and they're educated professionals, so maybe that's who I need to be if I want to be a Christian, I guess it's a, you know, if all are welcome, that should be seen ideally in the church, right, last week the Samaritans, these dirty half-breeds, they were welcome, and now this Ethiopian eunuch, who, I'm not sure if they thought he, what they would think of him before, but he is welcome, so it would be great if Watermark, yeah, I think in many ways we are like this, mission trip, a lot of different people, all being, you know, serving together, would be great if we see that here as well, we have a, you know, a growing number of people from, especially the Philippines, that's wonderful, would be wonderful if we, yeah, if we're a real community, where people know that, hey, whoever you are, you're welcome, and not just on Sundays, maybe in our community groups,

I know that's not always practically easy, maybe you have a young mom and a young professional, and they're never free at the same time, it's hard to be in a group together, some people can afford to live on the island, and other demographics can't, and that makes CG sometimes difficult, but hey, can we do as much as we can, that to show that all are welcome, that the gospel's for everyone, and therefore church is for everyone, although you may wonder, but how can God do that, I mean it's wonderful that outcasts are welcomed in, given they were excluded, but I don't know, maybe you have ever been to a club, and someone invited you, and you're early, and you kind of, can I come in, what is the reason I can come in, you're always afraid that you're being found out, I mean one thing that's really hanging over these chapters is the temple, if you were here two weeks ago, I started preaching on that, and I said that, yeah, God doesn't need a temple, but again, how can God do that, right, the temple had sacrifices for sin, the temple had forgiveness, sin is the big problem, right, ultimately all these things about people not being allowed in, is about sin, but does God ignore that now, well Luke wants us to see, hey, this is why everyone is welcome, and it is through

Jesus' sacrifice, sacrifice, so I guess you're still in Isaiah chapter 56, let's go to the chapter that the eunuch was reading, just on page 574, a little bit back, Isaiah 53, a very famous chapter, I mean the eunuch was reading about the sheep going to the slaughter, I don't know what you think of a sheep going to the slaughter, maybe you think of lamb steak, I think of lamb steak, if you were in the Old Testament, you would think of sacrifices, sacrifices, the big thing is, we need a sacrifice for sin, and this song that Oscar preached on two years ago, it's full of allusions to sacrifice, already, you know, it's framed, it's like a chiasm, at the beginning and the end, I mean what will this servant do, well 52 verse 15, just before chapter 53, it says he will sprinkle many nations, if you look for sprinkling in your Bible, that's all over

[25:12] Leviticus and Numbers, sacrifices for sin, at the end, 53 verse 10, when it was the will of the Lord to crush him, he's put into grief, when his soul makes an offering for guilt, guilt offerings, again, Leviticus and Numbers, I mean what is a sacrifice, I don't know what we think of sacrifice, we're thinking of giving up something costly, in some ways that's true, well you had an animal, an animal that was innocent, an animal that was blameless, no defects, that would be a substitute, the priest would take this animal and he would do something with that animal, he would take hold of its head and confess all the sins over that animal, and he would basically, he would lay the sins on that animal, that's what God was doing through this priest, he was putting the sins on that animal and basically the sins are no longer on you, they're now on that animal and what will happen to it, well it gets slaughtered and its blood gets poured out and its body gets burned, it's pretty gruesome and that's kind of what our sin deserves, right, if we, what is sin, well it's all our law breaking as we talked about, our offenses, our living our own way, all those things, they deserve judgment, they deserve death, but this animal would take that in our place, it would be so cleared, our sins are put on this animal, the animal gets killed and so the sin is taken care of, the judgment's taken care of, it's wonderful grace, of course with these animals it was not very effective, every sin a new sacrifice and of course is an animal really a very good substitute, now the real substitute would come one day,

God promised, he promised, you know Isaiah has this, this servant, this spirit anointed king who is a servant of the Lord and he would take, this is what would happen to him, right, what would happen in verse 6, 53 verse 6, all we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all, same as with a sacrifice, all our iniquity, all our sin laid on this king and what would have, and then what happened, verse 5, he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace and with his wounds we are healed and you hear the interplay between him and us, he and we, we deserve punishment but he got punished in our place for our transgressions, and that is the beauty of this chapter and yeah,

Luke, you know, Acts doesn't mention the cross very much but it's there in the background, right, and this is why people are welcome because all our sin is paid for because the ultimate sacrifice for sin has taken place, so we don't need a temple anymore, it's all done and that is why you get great chapters including this chapter 56 with a eunuch being welcomed, a foreigner being welcomed because in through the cross, yeah, everyone is welcome, that's the wonderful truth, right, and this is what you need to know, again, so think of yourselves, you're in that club, isn't it good to know, okay, my name is on the guest list, someone has put my name on the guest list, someone has done something so I could get in, or someone has paid for a ticket for me so I can get in, so I don't feel like an imposter when I'm waiting for at the American club or something, right, that's the idea, and many of us as Christians, okay, yeah, we are

Christians, but maybe you still have doubts, right, I know God welcomes me, I know I can pray, and yet you often feel like, what am I doing really here, right, how can I be sure that God will welcome me, well, why would he welcome someone like me, well, that's why you need to look at the cross, right, the cross says your sin is paid for, you are welcome, you know, even though there's so many reasons you shouldn't be welcome, right, so many things you've done, so many things you are, and you've got nothing to offer to God, and you don't belong to God, but it doesn't matter, Jesus took care of it all, he's put you there, he's included you, he's welcomed you, and that is so wonderful, right, it doesn't give you peace, I don't know, you know, maybe you've had this week off tomorrow, you're going to go to work, you're going to go to your normal week, and maybe something terrible will happen, you know, something will go wrong, that's your fault, or someone else's, isn't this great that God, that God is there for you, that you are welcome with him, you have access, because you know Jesus died for you, right, there's nothing that will, that can stand in the way from you coming to

God, there's nothing preventing you, in those moments you can always find peace and grace and help, isn't it so assuring, you know, again, it's a church thing, right, you have a church community where you belong, where you can find help, where you can find comfort and encouragement, and again, if you believe, you know, a church, everyone who believes should be welcome, doesn't matter who you are, you don't need to pretend, isn't that wonderful, right, you're welcome with Jesus, then you're welcome in church, whoever you are, that's so liberating, now that's, yeah, and that is, that is for each of us here, especially though if you feel you are not part of things, Jesus has welcomed you, right, he has died for you, and so everyone can come in, and again, let's share that hope, won't we, in the Old Testament, there wasn't much sharing your faith, because most people couldn't come in anyway, New Testament, so much spreading the gospel, why, because everyone is welcome, let's be doing that, let's rejoice in the access we have, let's rejoice in the welcome we have, let's make sure we spread that welcome to others, why don't we pray together, oh Jesus, we thank you that you made this ultimate sacrifice, that's the thing that kept us away from you, our sin, and you're rough against our sin, that's all that is taken care of, that you pay for everything on the cross, there could be no greater payment than the life of the son of God, so we are welcome no matter who we are, no matter what we've done, help us to know that, help us never to doubt our access to you, help us never to doubt the basis of our relationship with you, that we would have peace and rest in that, that we would be a church that reflects that in our joy, in our welcome of each other, welcome of others, and in our spreading, we want many people to know this, many people to experience this great welcome that we have received, that some of us here still need to receive,

[32:41] Lord, draw each of us here to you today, we ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.