

Acts 8

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[0 : 00] Good evening. May I add my welcome to Rob's. My name is Jack. I'm a ministry trainee here at St Silas. I'm delighted that you were able to join us on this Sunday evening live stream.

As we start, I'm just going to pray for us. Father God, thank you for your words. Please, in your mercy, speak to us now as we come to it.

Please show us truth about yourself and who you are and what you have done for us. In Jesus' name. Amen. Here is our question for this evening.

Is God just for moral VIPs? I'd like you to imagine a scene with me. The scene is a nightclub queue and the celebrity making a guest appearance in the club is God.

And the question for the people in the queue is, are you good enough? The people who are the best, well, they're at the front. The people who are a bit so-so, they're in the middle.

[1 : 11] And then you've got the real bad ones at the back. Bouncers are there to let the right people in and to keep the wrong people out. Because to let the wrong sorts in would be to spoil it for everybody else.

Perhaps this is what you might imagine the entrance criteria to be. You can join if you don't gossip. You can join if you don't get drunk. You can join if you don't lose your temper. You can join if you're not having sex with the wrong person.

Once you're inside the club, you can all congratulate each other on how good you are. Is God like that? Does God prefer some people to others because of how good they are?

Today in Acts, we meet an outsider. We meet someone at the back of the queue. We meet someone who doesn't tick the boxes when it comes to belonging to God.

[2 : 22] What does God have to say to people who know that they are not good enough for him? Very quickly, I'm just going to bring us up to speed on where we've got to in the book of Acts.

The message of Jesus' resurrection has been preached in Jerusalem, but it has not gone down well at all. One of the Christians called Stephen gets killed.

And this sparks a huge wave of persecution, and Jewish Christians have to flee Jerusalem. We are focusing in on one guy who flees Jerusalem, and that is Philip.

Luke, the author of Acts, who also wrote Luke's Gospel, zooms in on one encounter from Philip's life to teach us about God, and about who he wants to include in his kingdom.

So, if you've shut your Bible, please open it back up to Acts chapter 8 and verse 26, and we'll take a look at it. So, take a look with me at verse 26.

[3 : 26] An angel of the Lord, God, says to Philip to go to a desert road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. He does so, and there he meets our main character.

Verse 27, let's read Luke's introduction to him. Like all main characters, he deserves a proper introduction.

Let's see what we learn about him. He's an Ethiopian. That means he has travelled about 600 miles from the kingdom of Kush. That is just south of Egypt. Not quite what we think of as modern-day Ethiopia, but just to the north of that.

Then he's an important official. He's high up in the court of the Queen. He's in charge of all of her money. He's an ancient chancellor of the Exchequer. He's Rishi Sunak, 2,000 years ago.

And then here, there are perhaps the two most important things that we learn about him. Number one, he's a eunuch. And number two, he has just been to Jerusalem to worship.

[4 : 53] If you don't know what a eunuch is, don't worry. I had to Google it. But it's someone who has had their testicles removed. Often people who served in the courts of ancient queens may have had that for obvious reasons.

Luke goes to great pains to emphasise to us that he is a eunuch. We don't get his name. We don't get his age. But Luke tells us that he's a eunuch six times.

It's how he refers to him for the rest of this passage. Verse 32, the eunuch. Verse 34, the eunuch. Verse 36, the eunuch. And so on. So, why do his genitals, or lack thereof, matter so much?

Well, it's the second important thing we learn about him that makes them matter. He has travelled to Jerusalem, and Jerusalem is not famous for its nightlife, or its sun-drenched beaches, or as being a kind of forum for international trade deals.

He's come to Jerusalem for one reason. Look at verse 27 again. This man had come to Jerusalem to worship. He has come to Jerusalem to meet God.

[6 : 13] He's keen. He's authentic. He's a seeker. He believes in God, and he wants to worship him. And Jerusalem is the place to do that. It has a temple where God dwells.

But he has a problem. That problem is that God has said no. God has said no. You cannot come in. There's no need to turn it. The verse should come up on the screen, but it's Deuteronomy chapter 23 and verse 1. Let me read it out for us. No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the Lord.

Because he's a eunuch, he would not have been allowed completely into a temple where he meant to meet God. I don't know exactly how this works.

Maybe he already knew, but just wanted to try and get close anyway. Maybe he had to go through the excruciating experience of asking someone, How do I join?

[7 : 17] I want in. I want to know God. Where do I sign up? You can imagine the conversation.

Well, sir, let me take you through the list of things you need to be if you want to join this club.

They flick through the pages of God's law. Do you worship idols? No. Have you murdered? No. Have you committed adultery?

Well, no. And then we get to deuteronomy 23. Sir, do any of these apply to you? There's something really tragic about the keen person who really wants something but can't have it.

There was a film my biology teacher used to love showing us when I was in secondary school. It was called Gattaca. It's set in a world where people are separated into two groups based on their genes.

You've got the valids on the one hand and the invalids on the other. Very clever. The main character called Vincent is conceived without his parents using genetic selection.

[8 : 27] And as such, he's born with a huge disadvantage. He's born with the wrong genes. Because the whole of their society is based upon genetic discrimination, he will only ever be allowed to work in menial jobs.

And that's a problem because, of course, it's a sci-fi film, and all Vincent wants to do is to go into space. But he can't. He's got the wrong genes. He's excluded.

There's nothing he can do about it. And you can see the agony that this causes. He trains relentlessly to get his body into shape to try and change his destiny.

The eunuch can't even do that. There's absolutely no way he can get himself to be acceptable to God. It's almost an insult that Luke keeps on referring to him as a eunuch.

The very thing that Luke defines him by is the thing that separates him from being really part of God's people. He can't change it.

[9 : 34] There's nothing he can do about it. So what do we learn from this? Well, our second point.

The first point was meet the ultimate outsider. Our second point, point two. God says no to us too. Although we might not share his physical disability, we do share the same fundamental problem. The problem of God saying no. The laws given to God's people thousands of years ago, the ones that say no eunuchs allowed, we're meant to show that humankind has a profound problem when it comes to God.

It's likely that the reason that eunuchs weren't allowed to be part of God's people was because castration was a typical way of the way that foreign nations worshipped false gods.

But what we know is that these physical markers are representative of a problem that is inside of us. Our hearts are in myself, who we are at our core, has a defining disability.

[10 : 51] And that defining disability is that we are rebellious against God. This is a problem that we call sin. The eunuch might have a physical imperfection, but we have an imperfection of the heart.

We are in a state of constant rebellion against God. We think things, do things, say things that are unacceptable to him, and so he has to say no to us.

What is true symbolically of the Ethiopian eunuch is true of us all. So in answer to our opening question, is God for moral VIPs?

Well, yes, God is an exclusive God, and he has very high standards. But the mistake we made in our opening scene is that we pretend that anyone is going to get in at all.

Every single person listening to this live stream shares this problem, including the person speaking to you on it. We all have a problem that separates us from God.

[12:01] Everyone you have spoken to in the last day, in the last week, in the last month. Think of the best person you know, the person you think is the most generous, the most kind, the most loving.

Because of their sin, their rebellion against him, God says no to them as well. And I wonder, do you agree?

Do you really think that you have a sin problem? Do you feel it? Do you look at yourself and think, there is no way that God could accept me?

And if you all knew what I knew about myself, what I know about myself, then you would agree with that statement too.

Philip has good news. Philip has amazing news for the Ethiopian eunuch. And if you know, like him, that God says no to you, then this could be good news for you as well.

[13:05] So, point three. Outsiders welcome. Outsiders are welcome. We know, and the eunuch knows, that this is a club that's worth being in.

And the stunning news here is that this club, God's kingdom, is open to everyone. To everyone who wants to, God says you can come in. This is for you, no matter who you are, or what you have said, or what you have done.

But how? How can that be the case? God hasn't changed. It's not just a case of throwing the old rule book out and writing a new one to suit modern taste.

Luke wants to show how the death of Jesus means that nothing can stop anyone from being included in God's kingdom.

Let's take a look at how Luke shows us that. Let's get our heads back into the story. If you've put your Bible down, pick it back up again. So, verse 30.

[14:10] Philip runs up to the chariot, and he hears the man reading Isaiah the prophet. Isaiah was writing 700 years before the birth of Jesus.

And sometimes reading Isaiah, I think I might respond the same way to Philip's question that the eunuch does. So, Philip asks him, verse 30, do you understand what you are reading?

Verse 31, the eunuch says, how can I, unless someone explains it to me? What doesn't he understand? What is baffling him? Well, let's look at the passage of scripture that the eunuch was reading.

I'll read it out. Verses 32 and 33. He was led like a sheep to a slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

In his humiliation, he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth. He asked another question, which clarifies his first.

[15:20] Verse 34, who is this prophet talking about? Himself or someone else? Philip needs to explain who this passage is talking about.

And the answer is that it's not the prophet Isaiah, it's Jesus. Verse 35, Philip began with that very passage of scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

What I wanted to do, I wanted to join Philip as he connects Jesus with Isaiah to bring good news to an outsider and good news to us if we think that we share his problem.

I think he would have said that Isaiah is talking about a death. Look at verse 32. This is a man who was led like a sheep to a slaughter.

Verse 33, his life was taken from the earth. It's not just a random annual death. There are some key features, some really important things about this death.

[16:29] Firstly, whoever dies, dies unjustly. Look at verse 33. In his humiliation, he was deprived of justice. This is the death of someone who does not deserve to die.

Philip would have said this talks about Jesus because Jesus died an unjust death. In his account of the crucifixion of Jesus, in the Gospel of Luke, Luke cannot emphasise the innocence of Jesus

enough.

Maybe take some time out. Later we see him to read Luke 23, which records Jesus' trial and death. And time after time after time, he said there was just no basis for the charges against him.

There were no legitimate grounds for him to be executed. Pilate, the one running the trial, sees it. The criminal executed next to him sees it. And the centurion who oversees the execution sees that Jesus was a righteous man.

One who had done nothing wrong. He dies unjustly. But why does it matter that he died this way? Well, all Philip has to do is to reach over to the scroll and unroll it either one verse forward or one verse back.

[17 : 48] And we can see with the eunuch the significance of Jesus' unjust death. Hopefully, Isaiah chapter 53, verse 5 and 6 is on your screen.

This is directly just before the quotation that we have in Acts chapter 8. Let me read it out for us. You can see there Isaiah says one thing about us, He was crushed for our iniquities.

The punishment that brought us peace was on him and by his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to our own way.

And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. You can see there Isaiah says one thing about us and one thing about Jesus.

The one thing about us is that he says that we are straying like sheep. We have gone astray from God. We have disobeyed God. We have transgressions and iniquity.

[18 : 52] That is, just other words for sin. That was our point one and point two. We have a sin problem, a problem with God. But then he says one thing about Jesus.

We might have gone astray. We might have sinned. But God has put our sin onto him. Look at the end of verse 6 on the screen.

The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. So when Jesus dies, he takes the sin.

He dies the death that our sin deserves. Jesus dies an innocent death. He takes a punishment that our sin deserves so we don't have to.

His suffering, his death, is the way that God takes our sin away. His death is unjust because he is innocent.

[19 : 53] But it is necessary because it removes this barrier between us and God. There's an illustration for this that I heard when I was in a youth group.

It's got everything you need for a youth group talk. It's cheesy, it's visual, it's simple. But we're going to go through it anyway. Here we have me.

This is me in my hands. And here we have everything that I have done wrong to offend God.

Everything I've ever done. Everything I've ever said.

Everything I have ever thought which has offended God. Here is me. And here is my sin. On me.

Like this. And here, in my other hands, this is Jesus.

Jesus is perfect. Jesus has no sin. And what happens when Jesus dies is that he takes a sin. He takes a punishment that my sin deserves so that I don't have to, so that God can treat me as if I was innocent and that I have no sin because Jesus has dealt with it for me.

[21 : 05] Our question is, why is this good news for the eunuch? Well, it's obvious, isn't it? He can be included.

The eunuch in verse 36 asks one of the best questions, I think, in the New Testament. Take a look at it. What can stand in the way of my being baptised?

What can stop it? What can prevent it? What are the barriers between me and being baptised and being included in God's people? What can Philip say?

Philip can only say nothing. Absolutely nothing stands in the way. The real barrier between you and God has been removed if you put your trust in him.

Because of the death of Jesus taking our sin, nothing can stop anyone from being included in God's kingdom. What's so brilliant about this happening to the Ethiopian eunuch is it's not as if he can just change who he is.

[22 : 11] He doesn't need to, he can't gain a new qualification. He can simply come to Jesus, believe in him, and be included in God's people. And he does gain the most important qualification, which is forgiveness through the death of Jesus.

And so he can go on his way with joy, rejoicing, knowing that he is in. He has found the thing that he travelled 600 miles for, not in the place he expected to find it, in the temple.

But he has come to find it in the desert as he hears words about Jesus and understands Jesus' sacrifice for him so that he knows his sin is completely dealt with and that he can be in a right relationship with God.

Well, what does this mean for us? If you're watching or listening to this and you wouldn't say that you are a follower of Jesus, Jesus says that you can come in.

You might look at church and think that people have things together and they're good people or think they're good people and you might not think of yourself that way. But what this says is that there are no barriers.

[23 : 27] It's not that God simply changes the rules. It's that through Jesus, you can have costly forgiveness for free if you trust in him. And you might think, thanks, but no thanks.

But this is really important because the rest of the message of Acts is that God has raised Jesus from the dead and he will judge the whole world and being unforgiven before him is a terribly dangerous place to be.

Being forgiven by him means you get eternal life and a physical body free from sickness and death. And for those of us who are listening who are believers, I think I want us to understand that being a Christian isn't just ticking a box of intellectual understanding.

Yes, Jesus, Jesus died for my sin. I know that. It's a process by which our thinking and actions are transformed and changed. whether you've been a Christian for three months or for 50 years.

So the question I'd like us to think about a bit now, and I hope that you will continue in discussion afterwards, is what does it look like to live with this as true?

[24 : 44] I think, I say this from experience, that I think it's so easy to forget that this applies to you. That outside of Christ, we are sinners cut off from God.

And that's not to say that since you became a Christian, you haven't managed to make some positive changes to how you live. It is possible for Christians to successfully live to please God. But we never stop needing God's forgiveness to an extraordinary degree.

It wouldn't do to pretend that the way we were kind of let in was by Jesus' death for us, but now we can go on. We don't really need that. We've moved past it. Jesus' death for us is the only qualification we have.

We don't have anything else. We bring nothing to a table. Well, we bring our sin to a table. And Jesus deals with that. How do we pretend that we don't have this problem?

I think we pretend by never talking about our sin. We assume that if everyone else knew what we knew about ourselves, then they wouldn't accept us. We need to stop pretending.

[25 : 53] And we need to seek help from the people around us. And then I want us to turn this outward. Do we believe this to be true, that anyone can be included in God's people?

God is including outsiders. His gospel is a message that goes out. It doesn't just stay at home due to the coronavirus. We have to stay at home at the moment, but his word does not want to.

It brings glory to God to welcome sinners into his kingdom through the blood of his son. When we look at friends and colleagues and neighbours, do we see people and think, no matter how far away from God you might look, God is able to forgive you and to include you in his kingdom.

And the way he is going to do that is by you hearing the message of Jesus' death for you, and by you believing it. I think the litmus test for us believing that is telling them.

Let me pray. Father, thank you that by the blood of your son you can include anyone in your people. please reassure us when we feel guilty and are aware of our sin before you that we have forgiveness through Jesus' death.

[27 : 18] Please help us to live lives transformed by your grace. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.