

ReStart Week 3: Across Borders Acts 8:26-40

David Bawks - Pathway Community Church (March 21, 2021)

Good morning Pathway! Welcome to our service today. Thank you to Javier and our team for our worship today.

Today we're moving to week three of our series ReStart. As we move through 2021, we're praying and seeing God's guidance as to how we can restart and revamp what we're doing this year. We're going through the book of Acts to learn about how the disciples took the message of the kingdom of God and pioneered a new form of faith and ministry that would reach everywhere in the world.

So far, we've looked at parts of Acts chapter 1 and 2, and I shared this:

- **We are living in a unique time period in which we have an unparalleled opportunity to reach the world for Jesus.**
- 1) Let's restart the right way.**
 - 2) Restarting can only be done in the power of the Holy Spirit.**
 - 3) To restart successfully, we must contextualize.**

Today we are skipping ahead a few chapters to chapter 8. The basic structure of Acts can be seen in Acts 1:8 – You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Samaria, Judea, and to the ends of the earth. The first 8 chapters of Acts focuses on the birth and growth of the church in Jerusalem. People are healed, people are saved and baptized, and amazing miracles are done. Peter is jailed and supernaturally released. Persecution begins against the church and Stephen shares a message before he is martyred.

Chapter 8 relates some adventures of Philip the evangelist. The first part of this chapter describes his ministry in Samaria in an area known for hostility with Israel. Please follow along with me as I read from verse 26 to verse 40.

²⁶Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." ²⁷So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

³⁰Then 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.

³²This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

³³In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.
Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.”

³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” ³⁵Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

³⁶As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” ³⁷³⁸And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. ³⁹When 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. ⁴⁰Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

When God sets up divine appointments with people, it is an amazing experience, and I’m always encouraged by reading this and similar stories. Since we’ve moved here, BG and I have had the experience of talking to our neighbors in the parking lot, or on the sidewalk, and they have said they are looking for a church and we can share what we do and invite them to join us. Looking at what happened to Philip, here are some observations I’ve made about his experience:

1) Follow God’s directions.

Verse 26 relates very specific directions given to Philip by an angel of the Lord: “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” Sometimes when we seek God’s direction, we get instructions that don’t completely make sense. God has told people to wash themselves in a dirty river to get clean, God has told army generals to make their army smaller instead of bigger, and given a lot of directions that are not clear at the beginning.

When I was considering what I should do after college, I felt a strong feeling and interest in moving to Africa, but I didn’t know the details. I was very interested in the growth of the church there, and I read about it, but wasn’t sure if I should look for a place in West Africa or East Africa or where. I didn’t have any family or close friends there to give me more information. But then one day in 2007, I went out for lunch with my boss. I was doing a summer internship with a Christian ministry, and he said I’m meeting someone for lunch, why don’t you join us. As soon as I had introduced myself and said I’m studying theology and I’m graduating next year, the guy we were meeting for lunch, you should go and study at this school in Kenya. I was very surprised, and said why would you say that? I’ve actually been looking for a school in Africa to attend, but I wasn’t

sure where. Why do you recommend this school? He was a professor there, and we spent a lot of the time at lunch discussing this, and I don't even know if my boss ever got to why they were originally supposed to be meeting. But for me that was God's way of providing guidance as to the next step, and ever since then I've had similar pointers along the way.

God provides directions in different ways, but we must be willing to step out in obedience. If we follow God's leading, then God will set up divine appointments for us. Has God been asking you to do anything lately? Many of us haven't gone very far over the last year. As new chances to travel and move around open up, are you attentive to where God would have you go? Or someone He would have you reach out to? You might not even have to go anywhere very far but the question is are you listening to God's directions? Where could God lead you this week? **Being a witness for God requires obedience.**

2) Remember that God does the work of preparation.

After Philip followed the directions and went to the road, he met with someone unexpected: a high ranking official from Ethiopia. He was in charge of the treasury. At this time, Ethiopia was considered the southern most part of the world. It would have referred to a larger area than the current nation of Ethiopia, also including parts of what is now Sudan.

By the way, side note, have any of you ever had Ethiopian food? I love Ethiopian food. When I was first living in Kenya, I must confess that I would get tired of some Kenyan food at times. There was an Ethiopian family that lived near me in the student housing blocks, and they would invite me over and give me dinner every few weeks or so, and I really came to appreciate it. It is very unique, their base food is a fermented spongy flatbread called injera with other stews and vegetables on top of it – totally different from Kenyan food and American food. There are a couple of Ethiopian restaurants in Fremont, so I'd encourage you to try it out if you haven't.

Philip is directed to go up to the chariot, and he hears the man reading from the scroll of Isaiah. God did not direct Philip to just anyone, but specifically to someone who was searching to learn more about God. Philip asks if he understand it, and he says, "How can I, unless someone explains it to me?" Somewhere along the way, for all of us, someone explained it to us. Let's be open to passing that on to the next person.

Philip was reading from Isaiah 53, which describes a suffering servant, a lamb led to the slaughter. This is one of the clearest and most specific prophecies of Jesus anywhere in the Bible. It is no accident that Philip was directed to this place, at this time, when this person was reading a prophecy about Jesus and looking for a greater understanding! Philip took this opportunity to share the good news of Jesus with the Ethiopian, and how Jesus didn't come to be powerful, or to take control, or to build a political kingdom, but instead to suffer and die on our behalf. Jesus went as the lamb to the slaughter so we could be spared, and given life forever.

3) Lead people to take the next step.

After they had a brief conversation, they came to some water, and the Ethiopian eunuch asked, 'What can stand in the way of my being baptized?' Philip agreed, baptized him right away! He didn't require that he take a baptism class, or sign a form. I think at times we can make things too complicated. I was on a zoom call with some pastors this week, and one of them shared that at their church baptism is always available on demand, and if someone requests it during the service they will do it before the service is over. That's pretty cool.

I remember one moment when I was really disappointed by a ministry opportunity that was missed. I was living in Japan at the time, and I ended up having some amazing experiences of God bringing different people into my life who were seeking God. I was tutoring English for a few hours a week, and I got to know one guy and invited him to come to church with us. Most week there were four of us who would go to church together, two of us were Christians and two who were not. He was very interested in learning about faith, and would often stay late after the service asking people questions and talking. Once we got a chance to meet the lead pastor of the church. He went up to him and said, "I'm not a Christian." It was rather an abrupt introduction. The pastor was very welcoming – I'll give him credit for that. He said, "That's great! I'm so happy to hear that." But that was it! He didn't go anywhere from there, didn't follow up or continue the conversation, or direct him to someone else. Sure, let's be glad, but that was an opportunity man, he was asking for something! He came here looking for God, and he wants to know more. I was very disappointed.

When someone is looking to move forward, lead them to take the next step. If you are new here, maybe your next step is **to make a decision to follow Christ or to be baptized** – please talk to me if that is the case. Maybe your next step is to **join a life group** if you are not in one. Maybe your next step is **leadership development** is to go through an intentional growth process of discovering and using your gifts in ministry. We would love to take you on that journey. Maybe it is to serve in some capacity, or to learn more about the spiritual gifts God has given to you. Maybe it is simply to spend one hour a week with someone to share about your journey of faith and to be a witness to them. There is always a next step.

I started this month by looking at patterns of change happening every 500 years since the resurrection of Jesus, including the fall of Rome, and division of the Eastern and Western church in 1054, and the Reformation of the 1500s. Those who have studied these major periods have summarized three aspects of change that came out of them:

1. First, a new, more vital form of Christianity does indeed emerge.
2. Second, the organized expression of Christianity which up until then had been the dominant one is reconstituted into a more pure and less ossified expression of its former self.

3. Third, “the faith has spread—and been spread—dramatically into new geographic and demographic areas, thereby increasing exponentially the range and depth of Christianity’s reach as a result of its time of unease and distress.” (Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, 17)

Times of disruption lead to new areas of growth. Some of the growth in Acts happened because of persecution, because people had to flee for their lives and move into new areas. In what we read today, because Philip followed the directions that God had given to him, he reached across borders and even across continents and sparked a gospel presence in Ethiopia that continues even up to today. One of the earliest churches was the church in Ethiopia that grew out of this encounter. They were one of the first churches in Africa, as well as some others in Egypt and north Africa.

Philip was obedient to reach out and connect with someone who looked very different from himself. Let’s do the same. Philip was used by God to share the gospel across barriers of ethnicity and race, and the amazing thing is that he didn’t even need to travel to Ethiopia. God brought the official to him. Here in the Bay Area, we don’t need to travel to the rest of the world, but people from all over the world have come here. God’s desire is to reach all people, and the gospel breaks every boundary. We’ll continue to see that as we keep moving ahead in Acts.

Speaking of different races & ethnicities, I’ve been deeply saddened by the killings in Atlanta this week, especially that most of the victims were Asian-American. Since the beginning of the covid-19 pandemic, incidences of racism and targeting of Asian-Americans has grown greatly, and this has been happening here in the Bay Area as well as all over the country. We must confront and condemn racism and prejudice in whatever form it takes. Part of our responsibility as Christians is to stand up against injustice and stand with those who are oppressed. We stand with the Asian community today and will continue to call out racial hatred.

As I conclude my message, I’d like to end with this reminder: **God is the one who saves. Our role is to be witnesses of what we have seen and learned.**

God must be at work in people to draw them to Himself. We cannot save anyone. But we can share what we have seen and what God has done. Here is what we have looked at today:

- 1) **Follow God’s directions.**
- 2) **Remember that God does the work of preparation.**
- 3) **Lead people to take the next step.**

Reflection Questions:

- 1) Is God directing you to go anywhere?
- 2) How can you be a witness this week?