

Ready, Set, Gospel

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Date: 08 October 2023

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[0 : 00] Service was created in 1968 to connect first responders to those who were in an emergency situation.

And it was a, excuse me, it was designed so that those who had a need, whether it was an emergency that was physical or any other need to be able to have first responders arrive exactly at their location.

It was incumbent upon the operator, the 911 operator, to ask the individual what their problem was and where they were located.

Well, the issue is that when people are in crisis, very often they can barely verbalize what their situation is, much less being able to give the address from where they're calling.

So the 911 service, when it was first created, was a dumb system. Then, excuse me, and just an interesting side note, by the way, the first 911 service was installed in 1968 in Haleville, Alabama.

[1 : 28] Population, about 4,500. If you've never been to Haleville, Alabama, imagine Mayberry. So if you ever have a trivia game and ask where the first 911 service was installed, Haleville, Alabama.

And then in October of 1999, the 911 Act was passed. And it mandated that all municipalities have a service that would include both wireline and wireless devices so that callers could be able to be identified and to be able to connect first responders to callers more quickly.

And what it did was it would pop up the name, address, location, and if a database was interfaced with the police and the fire database, it would bring up to the 911 operator their call history even and notes.

That was about the time that we were living in Birmingham, Alabama. At the time, I was the sales and marketing manager for a communications company. And we sold and installed the first enhanced 911 system to the cities of Homewood and Bestavia, Alabama.

We spent months putting those systems in, and it enabled them to identify the callers. Well, then in 2011, Time magazine wrote an article saying that our 911 system was beginning to go out of date, and there were some gaps within the system because it was still difficult for first responders to be able to find callers.

[3 : 25] If a caller was in a multi-story, multi-dwelling building, first responders had the task of which floor do they respond to.

And they went on to say in that article that what they needed was smart people. Well, we started off with a dumb system.

In 1999, we started to install enhanced 911 systems, which were considered smart systems, but there was still a gap.

And they went on to say that we needed smart people, 911 operators, that could think creatively and quickly to be able to determine the caller's location and be able to find them and get help to them when they really needed it.

So the question is, how do we find people that need Jesus? How do we connect with them and be able to deliver the message of the gospel to them?

[4 : 39] Well, the reality is that our society has changed drastically within the last 50 to 60 years. 50 to 60 years ago, our society was still mainly culturally Christian. People went to church, or at least people realized they needed to go to church.

And I remember when I first started out in ministry, we could go to someone and ask the question, do you believe you're going to go to heaven when you die? And most people had thought about that, and they would either say yes or no, or I don't know.

But times have changed so dramatically that if you ask that same question to someone today who's in their 40s or younger, it's a very good possibility you might get the response, I really don't care because I don't think I believe in heaven or hell.

And so the society has changed to such a degree that we have so many people today that don't even know who Jesus is. And they have not been to Sunday school.

[6 : 09] They have not been indoctrinated. They've never read the Bible. And so what happens is our starting point for the gospel has moved.

So we have the opportunity today to be able to share the gospel in a similar environment that the early church did.

Because the early disciples weren't sharing the gospel in a hazy, comfortable Christian world.

They were in a very decadent, multi-theistic Roman society. So we have that same opportunity today to begin to share with people who Jesus is.

But I believe that we need to begin a little bit before that. Back in the 1940s, after the Blitzkrieg, the bombings of London by the Nazis, C.S. Lewis was asked to do some radio broadcast.

[7 : 23] And he did three series of four broadcasts over three years. And C.S. Lewis was very adamant about how he would begin these programs.

C.S. Lewis did not begin with the gospel. C.S. Lewis said he wanted to begin at the very beginning. And he focused on appealing to people's sense of right and wrong.

It wasn't until his fourth broadcast that he even remotely began to talk about Jesus. And he says, I have not even come close to begin talking about Jesus.

And it wasn't until later that he brought out the gospel. He was doing what C.S. Lewis was doing what he called pre-evangelism.

And we have to think about what are we doing to prepare people to be ready to hear the gospel.

[8 : 33] Now there are many people today who reject that and they say, No, we just need to share the gospel and leave the rest up to God.

Well, the thing is, that's not the way Jesus ministered. That's not even the way Paul ministered. We think back to Jesus when he began to connect with the woman at the well.

Did Jesus come up to the woman and say, Hi, I'm Jesus, I'm the Messiah, and I want to tell you how to get right with God. He did not. He went up to this woman at the well and he began at her point of her most important felt need.

He talked about a thirst that she was trying to satisfy with relationships. As a matter of fact, she had five failed marriages.

And the current cohabitation situation that she was involved in was most likely going to crash and burn before long. And so what Jesus offered was, and he started where she was in her head.

[9 : 50] She was there at a well there to draw water. And so Jesus uses where she was, what she was focused on, and he says, I can give you water that if you take this, you will never thirst again.

Now, obviously, he was not talking about physical water. He was saying, I can meet your deepest felt need. I can meet your deepest longing and provide you something that is going to satisfy you like nothing else can.

He did some pre-evangelism. He started at where she was in her mind. He started where she was focusing on. He started at the intersection, excuse me, of where she was in her mind.

Her deepest longings. And then he went on to share who he was. And then he went on to share what she needed to do.

We think about the Apostle Paul. He comes to Athens. There he is in Athens, and Paul walks around the city. Paul is doing some groundwork before he begins to share Jesus with these Epicureans, with these Stoics.

[11 : 18] And so what Paul does is he goes around the city, and he looks around. He wants to determine the context. He wants to figure out, where are they?

Where do I begin to speak to them? How do I connect with them? Because if I go too far in advance, it will be irrelevant to them.

I won't connect with them. And so we have the account in the New Testament where Paul starts where they were, and he starts with philosophy.

Because they were so concerned about the intellect, they were concerned about philosophical arguments, and that's exactly where Paul began.

And they had many gods, and as Paul was walking around the city, he realized there's a statue to this god, there's a statue to that god, there's a statue to that god.

[12 : 16] Oh, I'm going to make a mental note of this statue. And so as he's talking to them, he is referring to their religiousness.

As a matter of fact, he praises them for it. And then he says, Oh, by the way, you know that statue you've got over there with the inscription to the unknown god?

Would you like for me to share with you who this god really is? And then he begins to share about the creator god.

And then he uses their own culture as a springboard to launch into a gospel presentation.

So this morning, what we're going to do, if you have your Bibles, let's turn to the book of Acts, chapter number 8, and we are going to meet an Ethiopian government official that Philip is instructed to go and to connect with.

[13 : 27] Our question is, how can we seize the opportunity to share Jesus with people as we go through our day? How can we take those God-given opportunities, those God-appointments, to share Jesus with the people we come across all throughout the day?

So in Acts, chapter 8, verse 26, we see, Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, Get up, arise, and go toward the south along the road, which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.

This is desert. So the angel of the Lord tells Philip, I want you to go down to the desert. And he didn't tell him why.

He just said, Get up, go down this way to the desert toward Gaza. And so Philip arose, and he went.

But along the way, it says, And behold, verse 27, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority, under Candacy, the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of her treasury.

[14 : 47] So Philip meets an Ethiopian, a high-ranking Ethiopian government official. He was called a eunuch. By the way, the word eunuch means someone who has been appointed to an office or given a responsibility, or it could mean someone who was emasculated and then given this office.

Either way, this is an Ethiopian, and he was from an area that is not where Ethiopia is today. It was south of Egypt in what was then Nubia.

And so he is going south, and he meets up with this Ethiopian government official, and a little bit of background about this official.

He had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and he's on his way back home. And so here is Philip.

He has been called by the angel of the Lord to go south into the desert, and there he meets a government official in his caravan heading back home.

[16 : 05] And the big idea of what we're going to look at today and see in what we find from Philip is that we need to be ready to share Jesus with anyone, anywhere, anytime.

Be ready to share Jesus with anyone, anywhere, anytime. And so a little bit of more about this Ethiopian official.

he is what we would call a Jewish proselyte. Now that's a fancy term. All it means was when a Gentile wanted to learn more about the Jewish religion, and they would learn more and more, and when they were ready, they would go through a ritual, and they would, for lack of a better way of saying it, they would become a Jew.

They would be indoctrinated, and they would be accepted into the Jewish religion. So what's going on right here is we have a Gentile who from where he was raised was a pagan country, and he heard about God.

He heard about the God of Israel, and he wants to find out more, and so he goes to the synagogue, he goes to Israel, he finds out about it, and he he's on his way back home, and he's still searching for truth.

[17 : 36] He wants to find out about this God, he wants to find out what is really going on, and we have Philip who is coming up, he's meeting this man, he's sitting in his chariot, he's reading Isaiah the prophet, then the spirit said to Philip, go near and overtake this chariot.

So how are we going to be able to connect with people and share Jesus as we go through our day? How are we going to be prepared to share Jesus with anyone, anywhere, anytime?

We have the word overtake here, so the spirit says to Philip, I want you to go and I want you to overtake this chariot. That word overtake means to join with, cling to, and it has a sense of establishing a relationship with someone.

So the Holy Spirit says to Philip, I want you to go and I want you to get connected with this guy. I want you to join him. I want you to cling to him and I want you to establish a relationship.

So how are we going to be prepared to share Jesus, to share the gospel with anyone, anywhere, anytime? And the first is be prepared to connect with those who don't know Jesus.

[19 : 13] We have to be in a state of readiness all the time. How are we going to connect with people where they are?

As I said about the cultural change, 50 to 60 years ago, more people were attending church. More people at least knew they ought to be in church.

So at the least they were going to be in church on Easter and they were going to be in church at Christmas, maybe for a wedding, possibly a funeral.

And so they were going to be able to hear, hopefully, the gospel at some point. But people aren't coming to church to hear the gospel. people.

And as a matter of fact, years ago, people would sit on their front porch and they were talking with their neighbors.

[20 : 23] But it's not uncommon today to drive through a neighborhood and not see a soul. Why? Because we are holed up in our climate controlled castles and so many people don't even want to interact with their neighbors.

So how are we going to reach them? How are we going to connect with them? We've got to figure out new and novel ways to connect with people.

And I think of Billy Graham. When Billy Graham started out preaching, he was preaching in churches. He went out and he began to preach in tent meetings.

That was a little more public. Then he's thinking, radio. If only I spoke on the radio.

And he began to use technology to reach thousands of people. people. And then along comes the invention of the television.

[21 : 28] And Billy Graham is thinking to himself, I can reach more people. I want to get on television. Well, at the time, the religious traditionalists were all down on Billy Graham because he was using something that they considered to be wicked and evil.

people. But in Billy Graham's mind, he was trusting the Holy Spirit. He says, I can use something to reach more people. As a matter of fact, there's more than one person in this building who can trace their spiritual roots back to Billy Graham on TV.

Isn't that right? And so, finding new and novel ways to reach people and connect with them is not new. It's been for ages and ages and ages.

So we're going to have to figure out how do we connect with people. We need to be able to connect with them where they are. So Philip goes, he overtakes this chariot in verse number 29, and then in verse number 30, we see something.

So Philip ran to him and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and then he says, do you understand what you are reading?

[22 : 44] So to be able to be prepared to share Jesus with anyone, anywhere, anytime, we have to be prepared to connect with people where they are.

But we also see that we need to be prepared to reach people where they are, not where we want them to be. Because what does Philip do? Philip runs up to the chariot, and he listens for context before he speaks.

Philip did not immediately launch into a gospel presentation with the Ethiopian government official. He did what so many of us fail to do.

He listened for where this man was in his head. He was trying to figure out where this man is so I can connect with him. I don't want to start on my own agenda.

I don't want to start where I want to start. I want to start where I will be able to be the most effective in reaching him where he is, just like C.S.

[23 : 50] Lewis, just like Jesus, just like the Apostle Paul. And so he listened for context. And obviously this Ethiopian government official was reading out loud.

It was not uncommon for people to read out loud during this time. And so what we see is he did, we see two things here.

The first thing is he ran to him. So what Philip did was he connected with this man where he was geographically.

He went to the man where he was. But the second thing that we see is he listened and he asked a question.

He connected with this man where he was intellectually. he connected with this man where this man was focusing. This man was reading Isaiah and he was thinking about what was being said here.

[24 : 51] He was the Ethiopian government official was reading from Isaiah 53. Isaiah 53 is that chapter in Isaiah that is talking about Jesus, the Messiah, beginning with his birth and his early life, went on to talk about his ministry, his ultimate sacrificial death for us, and his resurrection, his victorious resurrection.

So that is what he was speaking to. So what Philip does is he listens for context and then he begins where the man was.

he asks a simple question, do you understand what you are reading? So he connected with him geographically, but secondly, he connected with him at the intersection of where he was, his interest and his longings.

This man wanted to know the truth. And so Philip asks, do you understand what you're reading? If we notice the next verse, the Ethiopian eunuch answers Philip's question with a question.

He says, how can I unless someone guides me? And then he asks Philip to come up and sit with him. What Philip does is Philip then goes on the journey with the eunuch.

[26 : 30] We know that because in verse 38 the eunuch says, stop the caravan. So what Philip did was he met the man geographically, he got up into the chariot, and now he's going on the journey with him, and he is beginning to share the gospel.

So not only must we be willing to connect with people where they are, we need to be willing to connect with people where they are, not where we want them to be.

We need to be able to launch into figuring out where they are. So what he did was he begins to share the gospel. If we want to be ready to share the gospel with anyone, anywhere, anytime, we need to be ready to share the gospel.

We need to be ready to share what Jesus did for you. You need to be ready to share how Jesus has changed your life. So he gets up into the chariot with him, and the Ethiopian eunuch was focusing on Isaiah 53 verses 7 and verse number 8.

And it's talking about Jesus, the willing sacrifice, willing to die on the cross for your sin and mine, was even willing to give up his own human rights.

[27 : 55] Let's read here in verse 32. The place in the scripture which he read was this, he was led as a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

In his humiliation, Jesus gave up everything for you and for me. Jesus Christ emptied himself of the glory that was his in heaven.

Jesus was God. Jesus became flesh. The theological term for it is kenosis. It's an emptying.

Jesus emptied himself of all that he deserved, all that he experienced, and he humbled himself, and in his humiliation, justice was taken away.

He didn't deserve to die. And who will declare this generation for his life is taken from the earth?

[29 : 12] So the eunuch answered Philip and said, I ask of you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man? Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this scripture, I want you to see that what Philip did was he met the man where the man was intellectually, not where Philip wanted to begin.

Philip started where he was, and he used it as a springboard to launch in to the gospel. So Philip started with explaining Isaiah 53.

He started explaining Isaiah 53 to the man, and then it says, it says what? He began at this scripture, but then he goes on to preach Jesus.

He said, this was talking about the Messiah. This was talking about the Messiah, and what happened to him. And oh, by the way, let me introduce you to the Messiah.

His name is Jesus. And he is the one that died on the cross, that was crucified. He is the one that rose from the grave on the third day, and he is the one that showed himself to all of these people.

[30 : 32] And so he used where the man was, and then he proceeds to present to him Jesus Christ. So we need to be prepared to share the gospel.

But then we go on, verse 36, now as they went down the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, see, here is water, what hinders me from being baptized?

Then Philip said, if you believe in your heart, you may. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. So he commanded the chariot to stand still, and both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.

What we find now is not only was Philip prepared to connect with a man who needed to know Jesus, he was willing and he was prepared to connect with this man where this man was, not where Philip wanted him to be, and then he shares the gospel with him.

What we find next is that Philip was prepared to follow through with this new believer. And he is this Ethiopian official is hearing the gospel.

[32 : 02] By the way, what is the gospel? gospel is the good news, that Jesus Christ, let me begin even a little bit before that.

The Bible says we're all sinners. The Bible says we've all missed the mark, we've all fallen short of God's standard of perfection, the glory of God.

God. The Bible says we are condemned, he says the wages of sin is death, eternal separation from God.

But God, Romans 5, but God demonstrated his love toward us in that while we were still or while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

it was not enough for this Ethiopian official to just hear about Jesus. This Ethiopian official represents so many people today that read their Bible, pray to God, seek the truth, but have never yet accepted Christ and what he did on the cross as all they need for salvation.

[33 : 20] And so what Philip proceeds to do, he's sharing the gospel with this man. Now we ask ourselves the question, how did this Ethiopian official know that he needed to be baptized?

Two possibilities. One, baptism, by the way, did not originate with John the Baptist or with Jesus. Baptism goes all the way back to the Old Testament because when a person, a Gentile, non-Jew wanted to become a part of the Jewish religion, one of the final things they needed to do was to be baptized.

And it was a sign of purification. In effect, washing off all that old stuff and purifying them and being ready to be part of the Jewish religion.

So it's a very good possibility that this Ethiopian is thinking, now I'm associated with Jesus Christ and so I want to make it public and let everyone know.

So he was not a closet Christian. Also I want you to pay attention to what is said here, Philip never gives an invitation.

[34 : 39] This Ethiopian eunuch never prays a prayer. What does he say? He says, what's stopping me from being baptized?

And then what does Philip do? He digs a little deeper for clarification. He says, if you believe with all your heart you can be baptized.

baptized and he answered and said, I believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Sometimes we put too much stock in a prayer.

And we think somebody needs to pray a prayer in order for them to get right with God. They need to walk down an aisle. It reminds me of a pastor a number of years ago whose church was in a university town and he had had a foreign student that wanted to find out more about Christianity.

And so this foreign student would come to the pastor's office and would listen and hear about Jesus. The pastor recounted that one day as he was talking to this foreign student that the foreign student rose and extended his hand to the pastor.

[36 : 09] And obviously the pastor probably looked a little befuddled and the student said, I am now your brother.

The pastor went on to question and sure enough, as this young man was hearing the gospel, he went from unbelief to belief in just a moment.

In just that moment, he repented of his unbelief and believed in the message of the gospel. And so what happened in that moment, that man went from death to life.

and so as he stood up, he knew. He said, I am now your brother. And this is exactly what happens with this Ethiopian eunuch.

They're traveling, they're bouncing along the road, and he's hearing the gospel, and all of a sudden, the Holy Spirit performs a miracle in this Ethiopian eunuch's mind, and he believes.

[37 : 21] He understands, and he believes. And he says, whoa, what's stopping me from being baptized? There's some water there. And Philip says, are you sure? Are you sure you believe?

Yes, I'm sure I believe. And so he goes down, he gets down, and they baptize. And he had the wonderful joy of following up with this Ethiopian eunuch, and helping him in believers' baptism.

Now, this is just a little side note. But it was not uncommon. As a matter of fact, it was common practice in the first century, the early church, was if you led someone to the Lord, you baptized them.

Because what does Peter say? We're all believer priests. We are a royal priesthood. The idea of ministers performing baptism came as the divide grew between the laity and the clergy.

So really, it came about as a religious thing for ministers to baptize. Imagine the joy of a father leading their child to Christ, and then being able to share that joy publicly as they baptized their child.

[38 : 44] There would be nothing that would hold them back from doing that. So this is what Philip does. But what I want us to see here is he followed through. Now, granted, what we find here in the next verse, when they came out of the water, verse 39, the spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, which I find it strange.

Now, like I said, I've said before, my mind kind of works in weird ways. The Ethiopian, it appears, didn't think it was funny. Like, whoop, he's disappeared.

All right, guys, let's go. Anyway, that's another side note. But the thing is, granted, Philip was taken away, and he didn't have the opportunity to disciple this man, but what we see everywhere else in the New Testament is what God expects us to do is we lead someone to the Lord, we make sure they're baptized, and we make sure they grow.

We make sure that we take them from point A to point B to point C. and still allow them to grow. So, you want to be able to reach others for Jesus as you go about your day?

Then you need to be prepared to share the gospel with anyone, anywhere, anytime. How do we do that? First of all, be prepared to connect with people. Then be prepared to connect with people where they are, not where we want them to be.

[40 : 09] See, that's where churches fail all too often. We want to connect with people today like we did 40 years ago. Well, we may have to kind of step back a little bit and say maybe we need to start with some ABCs before we launch into the gospel presentation.

Because, and it's not that, very often today, especially in our area, it's not that people don't believe necessarily in the gospel, they believe it's trivial.

Because when we think about it, we think about we've got a great message, we can share with people how to get to heaven, and we can share with people how to have a brand new life today.

Well, the issue with that is a lot of people are happy where they are. Hey, I'm enjoying my sin. Don't take my sin away. So what's happening is we're starting from a point that doesn't connect with people.

Why would they want what we have when they don't think they need anything? Because they're happy. You know, I'll go have a good job, you know, I'm making money, and I'm not even thinking about this stuff that you guys are thinking about.

[41 : 22] So maybe we start a little bit too far. And I remember Brother I.J. Fontenot, who first came to Opelousas Bible Church in Opelousas a number of years ago, and in the culture that he was reaching, even way back then, because they had never really learned who Jesus was for who he was.

He said he typically started in Genesis. And he said he had Bible studies with people, and he said sometimes it was months before he really ever came to a clear gospel presentation.

He said because they wouldn't understand. They would be, it's like I'd be talking a different language. And so he had to start way back here in order to get here. That's what Philip has done here.

But as we close, let's go to verse number 40. So after the Holy Spirit takes him away, we also find in verse 39 that the eunuch went on his way rejoicing.

Remember, that's what happened in the city of Samaria. Jesus shows up, and everybody's excited. The whole city rejoiced. And after this Ethiopian government official trusted Christ, he goes his way rejoicing.

[42 : 37] But Philip was found at Azotus, and passing through, he preached in all the cities until he came to Caesarea.

The last thing is, if you want to be able to reach people with Jesus, for Jesus, as you go through your day, if you want to be ready to reach people for Jesus, with anyone, anywhere, anytime, never stop sharing Jesus.

That's what we find Philip doing. All of a sudden, boom, he's out, he's at Azotus, and then he's on his way to Caesarea, but what does it say that he was doing on his way?

As he was walking, as he comes to another city, as he sees someone, he says, he preached. Now, what Philip did, Philip didn't prepare a three-point sermon with illustrations and ending with a poem.

This word preached is the word evangelize. So what Philip was doing was, Philip was evangelizing as he went. What did Jesus say in the Great Commission? As you go, make disciples.

[43 : 46] And I want to end with this. God does not call the equipped. God equips the called.

