

What Can Stand in the Way Series  
Week 1  
Acts 8:26-40: Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch  
March 12, 2017

Welcome/intro/vision

Last week I gave you great news as we closed out our capital campaign series that our goal had been \$300,000 for the land up in northern Chatham and we'd gotten commitments for \$395,000—which was awesome!

We said that we thought more folks were likely to make commitments who just hadn't quite gotten around to it

Which, I'm excited to report, several more folks did—and so over this past week our total has gone up from \$395 to \$427,115! Praise God and thank you again!

Now if you've made a commitment and if it's at all possible, we'd ask that you give some portion of it in March—if you're going to make a monthly payment, that's easy to set-up online or if you're cutting a check, if you could start the process in March that'd be great

If we can develop a track-record of great follow-through on our commitments, that puts us in a great position to negotiate a better deal when we go them in a couple of years for a larger construction loan for a building

Plus, our goal is to pay off that land as quickly as possible. We negotiated a zero pre-payment penalty clause so we can pay the land off whenever the money comes in without any additional cost for us, which means we're paying less interest on the loan

So thank you for your pledges and please, if it's possible, if you could get started in March it sets us up for a better process.

We're starting a brand new series this week

And for the past several weeks we've been looking at this promise that God gave to Old Testament Israel during a very difficult time in their history

They were a conquered people but God said to them, "I'm going to take you and rebuild you—I'm going to take this small sprig that you are, I'm going to plant you and make you into a NOBLE CEDAR, a strong tree with big branches and lots of fruit

I'm going to make you strong so that all the birds of the air, all the people's all around you, might find shelter and shade and rest in your strength

This is a great and wondrous promise of restoration given at about the lowest point in the history of the nation

it'd be like you're back in high school and your first real girlfriend or boyfriend breaks up with you and you're crushed because at 17 you thought you had life all figured out and you'd never love anyone else ever again

But in the midst of that drama, this would be like God giving you a vision of your wedding day—you won't be crushed forever!

So God speaks to the people of Israel this wonderful promise during a dark season but a strange thing happens: it never fully comes to pass.

Over the next several HUNDRED years, there are brief periods of renewal or rebuilding like we've been looking at with Nehemiah, but it never quite all comes together

Israel remain pretty much in a constant state of occupation for well over 500 years as the Babylonians and then the Persians and then the Greeks and then the Romans all vie for power

And Israel never quite becomes that promised noble cedar.

But then Jesus comes along. And from the beginning, we see Jesus intentionally re-enacting Israel's story.

This is going to get a little Bible nerdy for a minute, but stick with me and if you're not a Bible person just strap in and this will land in a minute, trust me!

Back in the Old Testament book of Exodus, Israel as a nation is essentially created through a water event—the parting of the Red Sea as they escape from Egypt—maybe you've read it or seen the Disney movie

And then they walk through the desert to the promised land where their faith is tested and they fail that test and spend 40 years in the desert wandering until they come to the promised land

Fast forward a couple thousand years and Jesus's ministry starts with a water event, just like Israel's story.

He is baptized in the Jordan river by his cousin John, and Sunday school kids, time to shine where does he go immediately after that water event?

Into the desert! Just like Israel went into the desert.

And what happens there in the desert? He's tempted, he's tried, just Israel was, but unlike Israel, Jesus passes his testing and his temptation

And then, when he comes out of the desert, he calls 12 disciples—Sunday school kids, one last question, how many tribes or families were there in Israel? 12!

So you've got Jesus, intentionally re-enacting Israel's story, taking up Israel's story, saying in effect, that he has come to be TRUE ISRAEL

taking up what Israel was supposed to be for God and for all the nations and Jesus is succeeding where Israel failed in their story

And at one point as he's teaching, Jesus takes that noble cedar promise that God gave to the people back in Ezekiel and he re-mixes it

And he says that the kingdom of God that he's come to inaugurate and to build is going to look kind of like that noble cedar, only it's going to start a little differently

***<sup>31</sup> [the Kingdom of God] is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. <sup>32</sup> Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."***

***-Mark 4***

Compare that with the promise we've been looking at:

***"I myself will plant it... that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest."***

***-Ezekiel 17***

Jesus is taking this Old Testament promise and declaring that the fulfillment of that promise is happening through the kingdom he has come to establish

And if you fast-forward the messy but beautiful picture of the church over the past 2,000 years, you know what? All kinds of birds of the air *have* found their rest and made their nest in it

Over the past 2,000 years, no one's built more hospitals around the world, fed more hungry people, cared for more orphans

thousands of relief and service organizations have been started by Christians—Habitat for Humanity, World Vision, Salvation Army, World Relief, Bloodwater Mission, International Justice Mission, American Red Cross just to name a few and those are just in our generation

Meanwhile literally hundreds of millions, perhaps even into the billions of Christians over the past 2,000 years have given time, money and energies to help serve the least of these and people in need

And ultimately the noble cedar, mustard seed church of Jesus has brought more hope and redemption to more different types of people all over the globe

through the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus: his life, death, resurrection, and offer of forgiveness and reconciliation with a God who loves them

The church of Jesus starts with him and 12 of his followers and over time, as messy and imperfect as it is,

that movement has fulfilled the promise of God that God would take a small sprig and grow it up to be a noble cedar, a noble mustard tree, where all the birds of the air might make their nest and find their rest.

But if you rewind the tape back 2,000 years, at one point it looked like it might not quite happen

See, just before Jesus leaves his 12 disciples, Jesus gives them a set of instructions:

***“...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”***

***-Acts 1:8***

There's this sending out of Jesus's disciples so that the mustard tree noble cedar thing might spread to the ends of the earth—there's a compelling call to GO!

But my kids are studying Isaac Newton in science class right now and his very first law of motion is that an object at rest tends to stay at what? Rest! Like me during March Madness!

And for what scholars estimate to be maybe as long as a couple of years, they get comfortable in Jerusalem and they become an object at rest—the church is growing good things are happening in Jerusalem

there doesn't seem to be any NEED or any URGENCY to GO anywhere

UNTIL the very first martyr in Christian history is killed for his faith and in Acts 8 we get this:

***On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.***

It take persecution before they're finally doing the mission Jesus gave them.

And over the next 5 weeks, we're going to watch how the early church in Acts fulfills that noble cedar vision and lives it out fitfully and faithfully together

Because our temptation is very much the same as their temptation was: most of us will settle for a life of comfort rather than a life of mission any day

Most of us, whether you're a Jesus person or not, whether you're a church person or not, just generally speaking

most of us if given the choice between our own personal comfort or the possibility of being a part of something that could be costly or risky

most of us will choose the couch over risky call to be on mission any day

And what we see throughout the Scriptures is that God wants for his people to be on his mission to bring the good news of what God has done to bring healing to all the nations and there are thousands and thousands of different ways that can look, as different as all of our different personalities

So here's the premise for this series that I want to propose to you in a mathematical term:

**Mission > Comfort**

And this is one of those places where what the Bible says we were made for and what our culture says we should pursue can go in very different places, because here's the mathematical premise of our culture:

**Mission = Comfort:** that your mission in life is to get you to the place where you're as comfortable as you can be.

This is essentially the American dream: own your own home, preferably one that's bigger and more comfortable than other people so they can see on Facebook how you've made it

And then get as much stuff into that home as you can: cram closets full of clothes you don't wear and garages so full that you can't park the super-comfortable cars that you own

A large and loud part of our culture says that your mission in your life is to make you as comfortable as you can be for as long as you can be

and I buy into this all the time, often without even realizing it. So pervasive, so everywhere, so just the assumption and the norm of what we're told

Don't get me wrong--comfort is not a bad thing! Comfort is a tremendous gift and in this broken and weary world and ultimately comfort is what God offers us in this life and in the next!

Comfort can be a great gift to us IF and ONLY IF it will stay in its place in the service of the more important work of mission.

comfort can serve as an aid and place of re-fueling to get us back into mission

But comfort has a way of over-running its banks and lulling us to sleep with lazy promises of cheap rest and smaller lives

And so God has to shake things up in Jerusalem to get them moving as he intended and we're going to spend these next several weeks looking at how wonderfully God shows up in his people's lives when they're willing to live as he designed us to live

And as the church gets scattered, we get stories of a man named Philip whom God puts to work immediately and has a couple of incredible adventures

So if you've got a Bible turn with me to Acts 8:26

***26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." 27 So he started out,***

Okay, so here's a map: Philip is fleeing for his life away from Jerusalem, he spent some time up in Samaria, we'll talk about that next week

and then after that work is done, an angel shows up and tells him to go to this south road, south of Jerusalem

And that's all the info he gets. Now if I'm Philip, I might have a few questions for the angel

what am I going to do there? should I just pack an overnight bag or am I going to be staying for a few days or a few weeks or a few months? Should I bring my kindle to kill some time or are you going to be keeping me busy?

It doesn't look like Philip gets any of the information that I would have felt I needed to be ready for this trip and it doesn't look like he even asks for it—in faith, he just goes exactly where the angel of God tells him to go

Now if you're not a church person or a God person, you might not know that those of us who are Jesus people experience this kind of thing all the time.

Well, except for the angel part, that part is a bit more unusual

But in terms of getting some initial direction without all the information that we would like to have, God seems to delight to do that

God delights to give us just enough information to take initial steps and to start in the right direction as an invitation to walk by FAITH, without all the details

And implicit in that invitation to take those steps is the promise that more information and explanation will become clear if and only if we're willing to take those initial steps of faith

Which is exactly what's going to happen with Philip in this story.

My friends, perhaps some of you are here this morning with a clear sense of what you need to do, but without a clear sense of why you're supposed to do it or what's waiting for you on the other side

And maybe you're still stuck bartering with God, asking your very good and important questions of God looking for a little more info so that you can be fully prepared for the road ahead

But maybe this morning the invitation from Philip's story in Acts is to recognize that sometimes you've just got to take that first step with whatever partial information or understanding you currently have

And then to trust that more will be made clear to you as you go—and ONLY as you go.

Philip gets partial information and he acts on it, here's what happens next:

***and on his way he met an Ethiopian<sup>[a]</sup> 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,<sup>28</sup> and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet.<sup>29</sup> The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”<sup>30</sup> Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet.***

So Philip obeys the prompting of God, he goes all the way from Samaria to this south road south of Jerusalem on very partial information

and he meets a foreigner whom he likely would have never talked to if they'd just passed on the street in Jerusalem, because a good Jewish man didn't talk to non-Jews in public

But here's why he's been sent here.

God is orchestrating this meeting that would have been much harder for them to have back in Jerusalem where Philip was more comfortable, there needed to be neutral ground for this conversation to happen

And once Philip got moving, he met the work that God was preparing in advance for him to do

And so the Spirit prompts him to run up alongside the chariot, apparently either the chariot is going at an easy pace or Philip was in good shape or both

And he hears this guy reading the old testament book of Isaiah, on the way back from worshiping in the temple in Jerusalem

It is nearly 2,000 miles from Ethiopia to Jerusalem, and this guy is making THAT trip, he's either REALLY seeking after God or he just really LOVES bumpy road trips on chariots

And this is the man that God calls Philip to go to the south road to meet

See, Philip got sent on mission by God to meet someone only to find that God got there first.

If you want comfort before you plunge into mission, here it is: God will not send you anywhere that he's not already gone to work first.

A couple of weeks ago I was talking with a teacher who had been working in a Christian school for many years and had loved it and had loved the opportunities she had to talk about her faith very openly with her students and their families

But in the past year or so she had made the jump to a public school, and while she's certainly got to be much more careful about how and when she talks about her faith

What she has found is that God got there first.

And God has put her there to meet several families and students whose lives are in very, very difficult places

and she is simply, faithfully, and in honoring ways bearing witness to the healing work of Christ and inviting people to consider how faith might be a part of transforming deeply broken situations

This woman has taken the step from something that was much more comfortable into something that had a different level of opportunity for mission, and she's finding that God got there first

In your workplaces, in your schools, in your neighborhoods, with your co-workers, in the issues and problems in our world that you feel compelled to wade into, the good news of the Scriptures is that you never go alone—God always gets there first

We are here as a church to connect all kinds of people to God and to each other in and through the power of Jesus and to engage our world for good and to see people flourish

And as we grow and as we pray and as we take risks and as we invite neighbors to come and join us who are not church people and as we serve our neighbors and go out into our community together and individually

our confidence is that God got there first, and we are coming alongside His work and what he's already doing

We have started a new campus in Pittsboro in order to more effectively and more deeply connect people to God and to each other across central Chatham, and our confidence and our hope is not that our church is so great or that we're so awesome

Our confidence and our hope is that God got here first.

And in those places where we're in long-term, ongoing relationships with people who are far from God and who are far from faith, we love, we pray, we wait, and we hope that God will open hearts and help people to be more receptive

Because all of us go through seasons of greater and lesser openness to spiritual things

Some of you have been here on the edges of faith or considering faith for many months, you're welcome here.

Our hope is that at some point the work of God in your life will move you to the point where you're able to see and receive the wondrous and utterly unique, utterly unexpected, and utterly perfect work that God has done in Jesus to redeem and heal all that is wrong in this world

Philip goes, but it doesn't start with Philip—God got there first, and he's orchestrating this great meeting for his purposes in both of their lives as this Ethiopian official is reading this wonderful Old Testament text.

And as Philip is jogging alongside the chariot, he hears this man reading and he opens up the conversation with a wonderful, wonderful question: ***“Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.***

Philip doesn't launch into a sermon, doesn't take it upon himself to insert himself in a rude or obnoxious and self-aggrandizing way.

God got there first, Philip is going to graciously come alongside what God's already up to, he's not going to be a bull in a china shop, so he starts with where this man is and what God's doing in him already

And he asks a delightful, wonderful question, meeting him right where he is and taking him seriously.

I want to suggest to those of us who are Christians that if we spent the last 2,000 years leading with questions that engaged with what God was doing already before we got there rather than leading with our own agendas and our pre-packaged answers, the word evangelism would not be a hated word in our culture.

Philip asks the man if he understands what God has said in the Scriptures, <sup>31</sup> ***“How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.***

Let's just let the story unfold now as Philip comes alongside the work of God in this man:

<sup>32</sup> ***This 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.***

<sup>33</sup> ***In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.***

***Who can speak of his descendants?  
For his life was taken from the earth.”***

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

He starts where the man is, with where God has him, and roots his conversation in the place where God already had him and where God was already at work.

<sup>36</sup> ***As 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?”*** <sup>38</sup> ***And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.*** <sup>39</sup> ***When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.***

Philip gets driven *from comfort into mission through persecution*.

As he's moving, *he gets direction but not full information*, which he acts on faithfully

Upon arrival, he discovers that God there first and was orchestrating this cross-cultural, way-outside-his-comfort zone meeting with an Ethiopian official

Philip asks a question, starting with where God was working already and springboarding from there

And as God moves in this conversation, they see a body of water and he asks "what can stand in the way of my being baptized?"

Of course the answer is "nothing"—so they stop and this man is baptized, and he goes on his way to Ethiopia

And the church in Ethiopia today traces their history back 2,000 years to this man and this incident, a straight line from here to millions of our brothers and sisters in Christ all across Ethiopia who have gone before us on a Sunday morning have already worshiped Jesus

And our title slide for this series pulls this quote, "what can stand in the way?" with a dam bursting and it's true on two levels

First, what can stand in the way of your faith becoming the life-giving, transformational energy in your life? Nothing. Except you.

Whether you've been a Christian your whole life or this is your first time ever in a church environment

the good news of a God who loves you enough to send his Son to die for you has the power to bring more joy and hope into your life than anything else on this planet

and it includes an invitation to step into a life where you get to live out that Mission > Comfort.

And sometimes we try to put up dams and walls and God in his grace and mercy will sometimes burst right through those to pour grace and mercy on us even when we didn't want it!

For some of you, the sheer fact that you're at a church at all is evidence right here, right now, that in spite of all the resistance and attempts to pull away from God or resist faith, he's pursuing you, here and now, with his great love

The dam you've built to keep God out is starting to leak and our prayer is that you'd allow it to burst and wash over you with rivers of life

If you're ready for that today, you've come to the right place. Welcome home. If you're even just kind of open to that today, you've come to the right place. Welcome home. If your dam is still holding up against the pounding of God's great love, that's alright, God's patient, you've come to the right place. Welcome home.

The second level where nothing can stop this from moving forward is the bigger thing called the church. Over the past 2,000 years, do you know how many different dams have been built to try to stop this thing from spreading?

Do you know how much money and how much R&D and how many people have dedicated their lives and all their resources to damming up the message of Christianity to try to keep it from going any further?

And do you know what keeps happening? It keeps going. It keeps spreading. Nothing that humans have ever invented have kept this Christianity thing from being the single biggest global movement in all of history.

And we're here in this community first to declare that we're a part of this noble cedar, mustard seed movement that's been unfolding for the past 2,000 years

And we're here to align our own lives with what his looked like  
that life on mission is greater than life whose mission is merely our own personal comfort

And then we're here to ask the question: "God, what are you already up to? Where are you already working? Where are you making a difference somewhere and how would you have me to be a part of it?"

God, how are you already at work in Pittsboro, in Northern Chatham, in this community, with my neighbors, in my co-workers lives?

Because you're working and nothing can stop you or come in the way of your good news going forward

So we pray and we worship and we live with eyes wide open and antenna up for what God is doing all around us

Philip does so many things so very well that we can learn from in this passage, but to start off this series I want to give you **one Take-WITH, one Wildly Important Take-Home question for you to pray about this week**

And since this is week one, your wildly important take-home for this week to pray about and consider is simply this: **which of these two equations is at the center of your life right now?**

Are you living with **Mission > Comfort** or are you living with the default settings of our culture where my **Mission = Comfort?**

And if you're willing to start to move into a life on mission, on purpose, what if you just prayed this little prayer every day this week: "God, where are you already at work today? How might I join you?"

Pray that prayer this week, even if you're not a Jesus person, test drive that this week and see if God doesn't start to show up in some surprising ways, just like he did for Philip.

Pray