

Loving God by Reaching Our Neighbours

In the 1980's I was on a bus and then a lorry travelling north from Khartoum to Shendi and Atbara. They were unpaved roads at the time, and the journey took about twelve hours. From time to time we stopped to set down a few passengers. I watched as the men and women walked off towards their homes on the sandy horizon. I asked my Sudanese travelling companion, "How many believers in that village?" He replied, "None".

I said, "Who is trying to reach them with the Gospel of Jesus?"

"No-one", he responded sadly.

"Why doesn't someone go and visit every home and speak of Jesus?", I asked.

"They would probably be beaten or even killed", came the reply. These were not Christian villages.

My heart was moved with compassion, as Jesus' heart was touched seeing the lost crowds in Matthew 9:35-36. I believe that was one of several moments God used to speak to me about living and ministering in Sudan.

I discovered later that some concerned Christians were starting up book tables on either end of these transport routes. They wanted to "sow Gospel seeds" into travellers' hearts and lives.

Many times since then I have prayed the prayer Jesus said we should in those circumstances, "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field", Matthew 9:38.

"Compassion" is a love that moves a person into action on behalf of someone else. Jesus often felt it when He saw crowds of individual people with all of their deep human needs:

Matthew 14:14

Matthew 15:32

Matthew 20:34

Mark 1:41

Mark 6:34

Mark 8:2

Mark 9:22

Luke 7:13.

Our Lord Jesus summarised the commands of God into just two things Christians should do:

1. Love God wholeheartedly and

2. Love other people with compassionate action, see Luke 10:25-37, where a Samaritan is the good example. Verse 33 “took pity on him” translates the same word as “compassion”.

The greatest act we can ever do for any of our neighbours is to tell them about Jesus, His atoning death and His life-changing resurrection. Jesus sacrificed His life to make us right with God. And He lives today. Christian disciples experience Jesus living His risen life through them.

Our witness for Him will usually involve us in costly action as well as just simply speaking words.

From the book of Acts chapters 8-13 we will now examine:

Three people and one local church that God used to reach people with the gospel.

Remember as we study, that God Himself is the evangelist!

- God awakens people to Himself, Luke 3:10,12,14; Acts 2:37; 16:14; 16:30.
- God brings conviction of personal sin and He leads people to repentance, John 16:7-11; Romans 2:14-15.
- God shows who Jesus really is, Acts 9:3-6; Acts 17:2-4 read with 1 Thessalonians 1:5.
- God gives saving faith, Ephesians 2:8-10.
- God witnesses to a change of heart in life, Romans 8:1; 8:9; 8:16.

Look for these themes while studying our next four passages. As Christians *we work together with God* in what He is doing. We do not do our own thing and ask God to bless it!

1. **Philip—personal evangelism** Bible reading Acts 8:26-40.

We know Philip was a Holy Spirit filled man, Acts 6:5.

He shared personal responsibility for aid distribution, 6:1-6.

He was capable of preaching Christ to big crowds, 8:4-7, 40.

Are we spiritually able and responsible disciples?

One day God led Philip away into the desert to meet one particular man, 8:26.

The Ethiopian man:

- **was important**, verse 27, probably a black African royal official. He was important to God as well as to people!
- **was interested in God**, verses 27-28, sincerely performing religious duties of pilgrimage and scripture reading.
- **was ignorant of the true faith**, verses 30-31. He was honestly open to help, but he was hopelessly lost without it.
- **was asking intelligent questions**, verse 34.
- but, and this is important, **God was working in him**, verses 29-33. The seed of the word of God, Isaiah 53, is watered by the teacher. God brings Philip to the man where they both have time for a good talk.
- **made an immediate and a positive response**, verses 36-39. He applied what he heard to himself. He was also baptised, a sign showing his commitment.

How was Philip used by God to reach this man?

1. He followed God's whisperings to his heart, Acts 8:26-30.
2. He asked the Ethiopian a relevant question, 8:30.
3. He knew his Bible well enough to speak about it, 8:31-35.

4. He started with what the Ethiopian was interested in, 8:35.
5. He focused his speaking on Jesus, 8:35.
6. He sealed the Ethiopian's commitment, 8:36-38.
7. He trusted Scripture and the Holy Spirit for follow up, verse 39.

Are we regularly listening to what God is saying to us? Do we listen to what other people are interested in? Are we able to be patient, before speaking with Scriptural authority? Do we witness of "Jesus", rather than Church or Christianity? Are we working on our own—or with God?

2. **Ananias—welcoming a new disciple** Bible reading Acts 9:1-19.

Saul was a leading opponent of Christianity. He acted violently against Christians, 8:3; 9:1. He probably appeared the least likely of all people to be converted. But God saved him, verses 4-6; compare with Acts 26:9-19.

When God has born again children He wants them to be carefully looked after, by responsible people (like any parent, He wants the best for His children). God has provided Scripture and the Holy Spirit. He often uses people as well.

How was Ananias used by God to disciple Paul?

1. He was already a disciple, a learning follower of Jesus, Acts 9:10. He lived as God wanted him to.
2. He listened carefully to God speaking to him, 9:10.
3. He recognised the Lordship of Jesus over his life—he would do whatever he was asked to do by God, "Yes *Lord*".
4. He received a commission from God, 9:11,12. God put one person on his heart and shared with him that the way to witness was already prepared. Ananias was called to trust God in a very big way!
5. He shared his concerns with God, 9:13-14. All that he knew about Saul disagreed with what

God asked him to do.

6. He listened to God again, who told him of His sovereign choice for Saul to become a missionary preacher, 9:15-16.

7. In faith Ananias obeyed God and, as he did so, discovered God had opened the way before him, 9:17-19. His first words, "*Brother Saul*", show he accepted what God said.

The name "Ananias" means "God has dealt graciously". It was not easy to do what he was asked to do. But because he did, we have all Paul's New Testament letters to help us today. We hear no more about Ananias, but without his quiet service, Christianity would be much poorer.

Are we willing to face the cost of following Jesus? Can God count on us to obey Him in everything? Are we willing to be a "small" person helping "big" people become what God intends them to be?

3. **Peter—cross-cultural outreach** Bible reading Acts 10:1-11:18.

Cornelius was an army soldier, a member of an enemy occupying force in Israel. Caesarea often experienced trouble between people-groups. Cornelius was a Gentile. The early Christian church people were mainly of Jewish background.

Could the Gospel of Jesus bridge natural human divisions?

The Bible shows that God was working in Cornelius' life:

Acts 10:1-3:

- "devout", means, serious in devoted reverence for God.
- "God-fearing", means determined and very careful not to offend God in any part of his life.
See also 10:22.
- "Gave generously", describes him contributing towards meeting the welfare of all the needy local people.
- "Prayed regularly", he communicated with God.

- God spoke to him through an angelic vision, verses 3-7.

God knew and used his name. God found a man who was seeking Him. So God prompted someone to tell him of Jesus.

How was Peter used to bring this man to know Christ?

1. Peter was a leading apostle, but he kept himself open to God teaching him new things,
Mark 3:14-19; Acts 10:34-35.
He was praying, verse 9; and he was thinking, verse 17.
2. He was humble—not proud—Acts 10:25-26. God alone was worthy of praise and worship, not the servant of God!
3. He faithfully kept to the message of Jesus. The cross of Christ was central, Acts 10:34-48, especially verses 38-40.
4. He baptised Cornelius as a confirmation of new faith, an expression of irreversible commitment to Jesus, verses 47-48.

Pray that God will grant true “fear of the Lord” to people of other religions and of no religion. Do we despise sincerity in others, others God is loving towards Himself? Do we show any prejudice in our evangelism? Avoid it! How can we learn to discover in whom God is working? Remember in evangelism, God’s way is the best way! If we expect God to work in only one particular way, we may miss Him working in a different (even a new?) direction.

4. **The church at Antioch—other races, other religions** Bible reading Acts 11:19-30.
Antioch in Syria was the third largest city in the Roman empire. The first Christian we know from there is Nicolas, one of the first church servants to be chosen. He was a Gentile, converted to Judaism, and then on to Christianity, Acts 6:5.

Why could God use the Antioch church to reach out and to make more missionary Christians?

1. The heartbeat of the believers. The church was a gathering of spiritual men. Acts 6:3 describes Nicolas as “known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom”. They spoke about Jesus to anyone, wherever they were, Acts 11:20. Barnabas was there, 11:22-24. He had a good knowledge of Scripture as a Levite, and he committed himself with his possessions to the Lord’s work, see Acts 4:36-37. Saul/Paul joined fresh from time learning God’s will for his life, 9:28-30; 11:25-26. Two Africans were in the leadership team: black Simeon (possibly the cross carrier, Mark 15:21; Romans 16:13), ministering alongside northerner Lucius. (Cyrene is on today’s Libyan coast).

The mixture of people making up this church and its leadership is a challenge to the single tribe churches of Khartoum.

2. The centrality of Jesus through an effective ministry of the Word. The meaning of the phrase “true to the Lord”, Acts 11:23, can be seen in the sarcastic nickname given to the believers by those outside their number: “the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch”, 11:26. These believers lived so much like Jesus! He was at the centre of all they said and all they did. The Scriptures (Old Testament and oral gospels) were taught and applied to life by Barnabas, a Levite Acts 4:36, and Saul/Paul, a highly trained Pharisee, Acts 22:3. Other gifted, spiritual people shared in the teaching, 13:1-2. More people than just one man could minister! Training may spiritually kill good people! Alternatively, it may sharpen their spiritual ministry. The church in Sudan must discern between good and bad training. Both are offered, within Sudan—and as scholarships to other countries.

3. Keeping the needs of other people in focus. Believers from Antioch sent help elsewhere to relieve famine victims, Acts 11:27-30. They also considered individual needs, such as long term follow up and opportunities to teach being made for Saul/Paul, 11:25-26. The plight of the lost was on their hearts, especially for people who had not yet heard the gospel of Jesus. The local church commissioned some of their most gifted people, and practically supported their mission

trips, Acts 13:1-4; 14:26-28; 15:3-4; 15:40; 18:23. The local church had a worldwide vision of the real church of Jesus Christ.

Sudan is a huge country. The main responsibility for reaching every Sudanese with the gospel is given—first—to Christian Sudanese! Begin where you are, with those around you, and then move further afield, Acts 1:8.

If the people in the church at Antioch had not obeyed God's promptings in these ways, Acts 13-28, plus all of Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy and Titus, probably would be missing from our Bibles! God used them to reach fellow countrymen and strangers. He helped them reach people of other religions. He met their own needs as they gave themselves to the service of others.

Remember some of the last words of Jesus to those who were his first disciples:

"Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you", John 20:21.

Jesus came to, "Seek and to save what was lost", Luke 19:10. May we live (and even die) to do the same.

Take some time and listen to God. Then reach out to the people He puts on to your heart. He knows every one of the Sudanese who are open and responsive to His Spirit.

Discussion guide

Using this chapter and the Scriptures quoted:

1. In all evangelism why is it important to remember that "God Himself is the evangelist"?

Consider any outward appearances alongside deep work in peoples' hearts.

2. Think about how God may use you in personal evangelism, like Philip in Acts 8.

How can you get ready?

What can you pray and look for everyday?

How can your church help?

3. Consider how God may use you in Christian discipleship and follow up, like Ananias in Acts 9.

How can you get ready?

What can you pray and look for every day?

How can your church help?

4. Think about how God may use you in cross-cultural evangelism, like Peter in Acts 10.

How can you get ready?

What can you pray and look for every day?

How can your church help?

5. What are the main lessons you and your church can learn from the church at Antioch which will help in reaching all the lost of Sudan with the good news of Jesus Christ?