Chapter 21: The Ethiopian Eunuch

Acts 8:26–40

In the previous parts of Acts 8, we saw Philip (one of the Seven; Acts 6:5) bringing the gospel into the region of Samaria. Driven into Samaria by persecution, the Lord used Philip to open up Samaria to evangelization, and then the apostles sent Peter and John from Jerusalem to lay hands on Samaritans so that they too might receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14–17). After this apostolic errand was completed, Peter and John "returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans" (Acts 8:25). Just as the Lord did not limit the gospel's reach to Jerusalem and Judea, neither did he limit the gospel's reach to Samaria. Rather, *the gospel of Christ crucified announces salvation to the end of the earth.*

A Sent Servant (Acts 8:26–31)

At this point in the narrative, then, the spotlight falls again on Philip, whom an angel of the Lord directs to "rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza," which "is a desert place" (v. 26). As some have noted, this kind of instruction about where to go—along with providential encounters upon arrival—sounds like some of the Old Testament stories of the itinerant ministries of Elijah and Elisha.[1] Also similar to those two prophets, Philip is sent to those outside the house of Israel (1 Kgs. 17:8–24; 2 Kgs. 5:1–14; 8:7–15; see also Luke 4:25–27), so that he meets "an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah" (vv. 27–28). Not only did Philip open the region of Samaria to evangelization, but this man would become "*the first Gentile* converted to the Christian faith."[2] More than that, "Ethiopia was considered 'the end of the earth' by the Greeks and Romans, and Philip's witness to the Samaritans and the Ethiopian comprises a 'foretaste' of the completion of Christ's commission (1:8) by the whole church in the subsequent chapters of Acts."[3]

Regarding the "Ethiopians," Polhill writes this:

> The Ethiopia referred to is in all probability the ancient kingdom of Meroe, the ancient Nubian empire that lay south of Aswan between the first and sixth cataracts of the Nile. It is not to be confused with modern Ethiopia, or Abyssinia, which is in the hill country to the east of the upper Nile. The ancient kingdom of Meroe was a flourishing culture from the eighth century B.C. until the fourth century A.D. Referred to in the Old Testament as the Kingdom of Cush, its population consisted of blacks. This remote, advanced culture was an object of endless curiosity for the Greeks and Romans and represented for them the extreme

[1] Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 186.

[2] Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 335.

[3] Polhill, *Acts*, 222.

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> limits of the civilized world. Their kings were viewed as incarnations of the sun god and held a primarily ceremonial role. The real administration of the kingdom was in the hands of powerful queen mothers who had the title of "the Candace."[4]

Although the church would subsequently be forced to wrestle with the question of whether, how, and "on what terms" Gentiles should be incorporated in the church, "in this case Philip was relieved of hesitation or difficulty. The Lord had sent him through the word of an angel and was even now directing him."[5]

Even more than being a Gentile from "the end of the earth," this man was a "eunuch." Although being a eunuch qualified him for special office as treasurer for the Candace, the law was clear that also he was not permitted to "enter the assembly of the LORD" (Deut. 23:1).[6] So, this man "could visit the temple in Jerusalem, as he had done, but he could never enter it."[7] Even so, just a few chapters after the passage this man was reading when Philip encountered him, the prophet Isaiah declared extraordinary promises to eunuchs specifically:

> [3] Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people"; and let not the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." [4] For thus says the LORD: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, [5] I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. [6] "And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant— [7] these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." [8] The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, "I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered." (Isa. 56:3–8)

As Polhill writes, it was "probably not by accident" that "the eunuch was reading from a scroll of the prophet Isaiah," since "in all the Old Testament, Isaiah holds forth the greatest hope for the eunuch….Little did the eunuch know that he was about to experience the fulfillment of those promises. And little did Philip know his own role in their fulfillment."[8]

After the Spirit directed Philip to join the chariot, Philip "heard him" as he was reading from Isaiah (v. 30a), since "reading in ancient times was almost invariably aloud."[9] When Philip asked the man, "Do you

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[4] Polhill, *Acts*, 223.

[5] Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 337.

[6] Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 338–39.

[7] Polhill, *Acts*, 223–24.

[8] Polhill, *Acts*, 224.

[9] "Why this should be so will be apparent to anyone who tries to read a copy of ancient manuscript; the words require to be spelt out, and this is done more easily aloud than in silence. In addition, beginners

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understand what you are reading?", the man responded, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" (vv. 30b–31a). Polhill observes that this answer highlights "a basic principle that runs throughout Luke-Acts concerning the interpretation of the Old Testament prophetic texts—the need for a Christian interpreter. The disciples themselves had needed such guidance, and Christ had 'opened...the Scriptures' for them (Luke 24:45). They in turn sought to explain the Scripture in light of Christ to the Jews in Jerusalem. How indeed would this Gentile pilgrim from a distant land understand the real meaning of Isaiah's servant psalms without a guide?"[10] Philip did not hesitate to join the man to help him interpret the Scriptures that he was reading (v. 31b).

The Suffering Servant (Acts 8:32–35)

By an obvious providential arrangement, the eunuch was reading from the Song of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 52–53 (specifically, Isa. 53:7–8). It is possible, as Polhill suggests, that, in "addition to the silent suffering and humiliation, the question concerning descendants likely was a point of identification that attracted the eunuch to this text."[11] Indeed, the specific passage makes a point of connecting this figure's unjust death with his "generation." The question, "How can a dead man raise up generations after him?" lines well with a question from three chapters later in Isaiah: "How can the Lord raise up "a name better than sons and daughters…an everlasting name that shall not be cut off?" (Isa. 56:5).

Whatever the point of interest, the eunuch asked, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" (v. 34). This was all the introduction that Philip needed, so that he "opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus" (v. 35). This "gospel" (the "good news") necessarily involved the message of Isaiah 52–53, in that God's only Son "was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed" (Isa. 53:5). Moreover, although this Servant would die, so that "they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death" (Isa. 53:9), by his resurrection from the dead "he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand" (Isa. 53:10). This gospel that had spread through Jerusalem and Judea, and then into Samaria, was now reaching a representative of the "end of the earth" from Ethiopia!

Saving Faith (Acts 8:36–40)

Although Luke does not explicitly narrate for us exactly how this man came to faith in Jesus, the result makes his new-found faith clear:[12] "And as they were going along the road they came to some

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regularly read aloud; it requires considerable experience (not to say sophistication) to read silently, though this stage is reached more quickly with modern print than with ancient manuscript." (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 187.)

[10] Polhill, *Acts*, 224–25.

[11] Polhill, *Acts*, 225.

[12] Whereas some manuscripts include a v. 37 ("And Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' And he replied, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."), this is almost certainly not part of the original book of Acts, since it "is not found in the early manuscripts of Acts and seems to be a later scribal addition." Yet, Polhill notes that "the added verse, however, has considerable value. It seems to embody a very early Christian baptism confession where the one baptizing asked the candidate if he believed in Christ with all

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water, and the eunuch said, 'See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?'" (v. 36). By this request, he was moving from having "embraced that willingly which he heard concerning Christ" into "a godly zeal into the external confession of faith" by baptism.[13] By asking "What prevents me from being baptized?" he seems to recognize that his baptism would be unprecedented as a Gentile (from the end of the earth) and a eunuch. Yet, "The verb indicates that barriers have been removed, hindrances to the spread of the gospel to all people. In this case a double barrier of both physical and racial prejudice had fallen."[14]

The narration of the baptism itself is simple and recorded without many details as to the form used. Some have tried to see the language of "went down into the water" and "came up out of the water" as suggesting baptism by immersion; however, the language is very clear that "they" (i.e., both Philip and the eunuch) *both* went down into the water, and *both* came up out of the water. While they were in the water, Philip baptized the man, but we are given no further details to identify how he was baptized. Lenski expresses well the dilemma of trying to read too much into this language: "Take your choice: *to* the water, *from* the water; or stepping *into* and against stepping *out of* the water; or *down under* the water and again *up from under* the water. Total immersion if you prefer, but for *both*. Not we but Luke combined them."[15] The Scriptures simply do not put much emphasis on the *form* of baptism. The *Westminster Confession of Faith*, then, notes that "Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but baptism is rightly administered by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person" (WCF 28.3; for sprinkling, see Ezek. 36:25; Heb. 9:11–28; 10:22; 12:24; 1 Pet. 1:2; for pouring, cp. Acts 1:5 with Acts 2:33; see also Isa. 44:3; Joel 2:29; Acts 10:45, 47–48).

At this point, the two separate suddenly and miraculously: "And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing" (v. 39). Polhill compares this story and the story of Jesus meeting the travelers to Emmaus in Luke 24:13–32, by noting parallels with "the presence of travelers, the sudden appearances of Jesus and Philip, the opening of the Scriptures to a new understanding of Christ (Luke 24:27; Acts 8:35), and the disappearance of Jesus in the breaking of bread and of Philip on completion of the baptism."[16] Yet, although the travelers returned to Jerusalem to report what had happened (Luke 24:33–35), the Ethiopian eunuch continues on his way, rejoicing. He prepares the way for the later mission into the Gentile world; however, before Luke narrates that mission, he will first turn his attention to the conversion of Saul in Acts 9.

As for Philip, Luke writes, "But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea" (v. 40). Much will happen between now and the next mention of Philip in Acts 21:8. Bruce writes:

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his heart, to which the candidate would respond by confessing Jesus Christ as the Son of God. This old confession is of real significance to the history of early Christian confessions and would be appropriate to the baptismal ceremony today. To that extent we can be grateful to the pious scribe who ascribed to the eunuch the baptism confession of his own day." (Polhill, *Acts*, 226.)

[13] Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:362.

[14] Polhill, *Acts*, 226.

[15] Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 347.

[16] Polhill, *Acts*, 227.

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> Philip next appeared at Azotus, the old Philistine city of Ashdod, some twenty miles north of Gaza. From there he headed north along the coastal road, preaching the gospel in all the cities through which he passed, until at last he reached Caesarea. There he seems to have settled down; at least, it is there that we find him when he makes his next appearance in the narrative, twenty years later (Ch. 21:8). By that time he had become a family man, with four daughters all old enough to be prophetesses—worthy daughters of such a father.[17]

Not only is Philip known as the father of four prophetic daughters, but he is also there identified as an "evangelist," a fitting title for the gifting and labors of this man into Samaria and even to a single Gentile eunuch.

Discussion Questions

1. How did Philip serve in the context in which we first met him (Acts 6:1–7)? By God's grace, what had Philip accomplished in the first part of Acts 8? How does Philip discern his next ministry (v. 26)? What were the barriers that kept the Ethiopian eunuch Philip met from full inclusion into the worship of Israel? In what ways do we see the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of this Ethiopian eunuch before Philip arrives to meet him?

2. What is significant about the broader passage of Isaiah 52–53, from which the Ethiopian is reading? What is significant about the two verses specifically that he is reading in vv. 32–33? What promises did God make to foreigners and eunuchs in Isaiah 56? How does Philip preach the gospel of Jesus from the Old Testament (v. 35)? Does this gospel differ from the gospel that the apostles had preached in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria?

3. What "prevented" the Ethiopian eunuch from going into the temple courtyard in Jerusalem for worship? Why do those same barriers fail to prevent him from being baptized (v. 36)? Why is the joy of this eunuch so significant in v. 39 (cf. Ps. 67:4; 97:1; 98:4)? Where and how does Philip go after this encounter (vv. 39–40)? Where is Philip when we meet him next in Acts 21:8?

4. How does this conversion of a Gentile court official begin to open up the nations of the world to the gospel? When we go into all nations to make disciples of Jesus, what needs to remain the same in our message and method? What might look different from culture to culture? How does this story emphasize the universality of the gospel of Jesus? How might the Holy Spirit use you to further the gospel around the globe?

[17] Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 191.

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