

# Acts 8:26-40: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Acts chapter 8 verses 26 to 40. Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.

This is a desert place. And he rose and went. And there was 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. And the spirit said to Philip, Go over and join this chariot. So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and asked, Do you understand what you are reading? And he said, How can I, unless someone guides me?

And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this, Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth. And the eunuch said to Philip, About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this? About himself, or about someone else?

Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture, he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, See, here is water. What prevents me from being baptized? And he commanded the chariot to stop.

[ 1 : 2 8 ] And they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. 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. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through, he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

To this point in the book of Acts, the second half of chapter 8, we have seen the conversion of various groups of persons. The next few stories, however, focus upon three key individuals, the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul of Tarsus, and Cornelius in Caesarea. The story of the Ethiopian eunuch, the second story that focuses upon the character of Philip, is a journey narrative, like that of Saul after it, and like the story of the two travelers on the road to Emmaus at the end of Luke's gospel. Later, in Acts chapter 21, verses 8 to 10, we will discover that Luke stayed for some time with Philip. Presumably, during this period, Philip informed him of the events recorded in this chapter. An angel of the Lord directs Philip to go to the south, to a road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. Being directed here by the angel of the Lord, and in a few verses' time by the spirit of the Lord, we see that God is the one in charge of this mission. This is not a mission that's primarily directed by the apostles. It is directed by God himself, who is sending the messengers where they really ought to go. On the road, he meets an Ethiopian, a eunuch, who's a court official of the queen. While some have suggested that he might just have been a high-ranking official, it's almost certain that he was an actual literal eunuch. Because they had no natural heirs, eunuchs could be of value to courts. As their personal legacy was entirely invested in the health and the continuance of the dynasty, the loyalties of such men could be more certain than those who had children of their own. Eunuchs were sometimes used to guard the harem, whereas other eunuchs like this were high-ranking officials who performed important state tasks. This eunuch is in charge of the queen's treasure. He has come to Jerusalem to worship, which suggests that he is at the very least a God-fearer. Perhaps he's some sort of proselyte. Others have raised the possibility that he might have been a diaspora Jew. One way or another, he has a prior attachment to the worship of God. It's important to remember that when we read of conversions in the book of Acts, many of them are conversions not from unbelief to believe, but from old covenant and the status that belonged to someone within that order, to new covenant and a new status. The eunuch is a very effective illustration of this particular movement. Someone who would have enjoyed little to no status within the old covenant order, now being marked out as a full member of the people of God. The eunuch

would have been restricted in a number of ways. First of all, as a Gentile or God-fearer, when he went to the temple, he would at most have been able to come into the court of the Gentiles. Then we read in

Deuteronomy chapter 23 verse 1, No one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord. The Spirit directs Philip to go over to the Ethiopian eunuch's chariot. There, Philip hears him reading Isaiah the prophet. While modern readers are accustomed to read text silently, ancient readers almost invariably read aloud, or while muttering the words under their breath. We should bear this in mind, as we so often read the scripture without any regard for the ear and its place in receiving the word. There are certain things that the ear will hear in texts that eyes cannot see. The story here is similar to ones that we have read before, particularly to the story of Emmaus. There's a stranger meeting someone returning from Jerusalem on their way. They enter into conversation. They speak to a lack of understanding. They teach them the scriptures, beginning with some part in particular. As we go further, we will see that there are greater similarities binding together these two stories, similarities that might help us better understand the message that they have for us. The fact that the Ethiopian eunuch has a copy of Isaiah probably indicates both his personal wealth and his interest in the Old Testament scriptures as a Gentile God-fearer or proselyte. As the travellers of Emmaus invited Jesus in to share a meal with them, so the Ethiopian eunuch invites Philip into his chariot. The passage he is reading is Isaiah 53, a text that was of importance for the early church as a testimony to Christ as the suffering servant.

However, this particular scripture might have had a resonance for the Ethiopian eunuch beyond its regular readers. Peter Lighthouse observes, When Philip meets him, the eunuch is in a desert place, a setting that mimics the barrenness of his own body. Yet his reading gives him hope. Though the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 is cut off from the land of the living, Isaiah 53, verse 8, he will see his offspring. Verse 10, The suffering servant is a kind of eunuch, but a fruitful one, as his suffering issues in fruitfulness for Zion, the barren woman who becomes a joyful mother of children. Chapter 54, verse 1.

Anyone reading the book of Isaiah beyond this point would also discover a reference to the eunuch that would have been an immediate source of promise to someone like this Ethiopian. It speaks directly to two aspects of his experience and his existence, to the fact that he is a foreigner and to the fact that he is a eunuch. Isaiah chapter 56, verses 3 to 8.

[ 6 : 55 ] 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. For thus says the Lord, To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, 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. 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, 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. The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered. The eunuch then receives a promise that he will have an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

The eunuch, by virtue of the fact that he could not have children, would presume himself to be cut off, his name would die with him. Yet in this word of prophecy, there is a promise of a way in which his name need not be cut off. Through the work of the suffering servant, one who himself was cut off, cut off from the land of the living itself, yet one who nonetheless saw his offspring and gave fruitfulness to others, he might receive a sort of fruitfulness and re-inclusion himself.

The spirit is clearly working on both sides of this interaction. He's brought Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch, but he's also brought the Ethiopian eunuch to these particular texts, to reflect upon those, and then to invite Philip into his chariot. The spirit is a sort of matchmaker, one who's doing the work of forming the kingdom of Christ beyond the walls of the church, beyond the purview of the church. He's bringing life in the wilderness, to people that the church has not yet encountered, so that when the church in people like Philip encounters people like this Ethiopian eunuch, they will discover that the spirit has already been working there. Having been provided his text by the work of the spirit, Philip is well able to speak of the gospel and to explain the meaning of Christ from this

text. And like Jesus teaching the disciples on the road to Emmaus, taking this as his starting point, he goes all the way through to explain what Christ means. As they're passing through this wilderness, they encounter some water and the eunuch's response is to ask for baptism. In certain translations, there is a verse following this, in verse 37, a verse that almost certainly does not belong in the text, but is a later inclusion. Nevertheless, it likely witnesses to widespread early Christian understandings of baptism. The chariot is stopped, they both go down into the water, and Philip baptises him. While they're both going down into the water suggests that this was something more than a sprinkling, it should not be taken as certain evidence of immersion. It could, for instance, have involved pouring the water upon the Ethiopian eunuch while he was standing in the water to his waist. Such a form of baptism would capture different aspects of the symbolism of baptism.

Baptism symbolically draws upon waters from above and waters from below. The waters from below are the waters associated with death, the waters from which we are delivered, that we pass through. And the waters from above are the waters of God's heavenly blessing, most particularly the water of the spirit poured out. Were there these two different dimensions of baptism, it might also help us better to explain how the church's later practice of baptism could involve either full submersion, or the pouring out of water, or the sprinkling of it from above. Both of these forms then would be running with one particular aspect of the symbolism of the water, either the water from above or the water from below, whereas both forms could be included in a single rite. The story of the Ethiopian eunuch might also remind us of other stories. A high court official who comes in a chariot, who is then washed in water. It's the story of Elisha and Naaman the Syrian. There might also be some sort of reversal of the story of the Exodus.

[11:06] Here a Jewish man on foot is pursuing a descendant of Ham in a chariot. This is the reversal of the story of the Exodus, where the Egyptians, descendants of Ham, pursued the Israelites who were travelling on foot in their chariots. And whereas Pharaoh and his men were submerged in the water of the Red Sea, here the Ethiopian eunuch goes down into the water, is washed, comes up, and is cleansed. In a reversal of the story of the Egyptians, this man is delivered through the waters. As they come up from the water, the Spirit of the Lord carries Philip away. It seems to be an instantaneous thing. He is instantaneously moved away from that place and snatched up and placed somewhere else. We read of similar events in the context of Elijah and also in the book of Ezekiel. Philip's disappearing from the site of the eunuch immediately after the baptism is completed might remind us of something. It should remind us of the story of Emmaus once again. Luke chapter 24 verses 30 to 31. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognised him, and he vanished from their sight. In the story of Emmaus, in the story of the

Ethiopian eunuch, and later in the story of Paul, we have three examples of an encounter with Christ in speech or in the words of scripture. In all of these occasions, it is followed by an administration of the sacrament. Christ breaks the bread and is revealed in that act of breaking bread. Here, it is in the act of baptism. And then later on, in the story of Saul, it is baptism once more. The story ends with Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch both going their own ways. The eunuch continues on his way back home rejoicing. According to Christian tradition, he became the father of the Ethiopian church, a very powerful fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah. His name is not cut off. He has many sons and daughters, even though a eunuch. Philip, for his part, finds himself at Zodus, the former site of Ashtod, and then he preaches all the way up to Caesarea.

A question to consider. What lessons might we learn from Luke's three journey narratives about the proper form and purpose of Christian worship?