

15. Philip and the Ethiopian: Acts 8:26-40

In the first part of Acts 8, Philip had preached to and converted many of the Samaritans. When Peter and John arrived on the scene, they imparted the ability to perform spiritual gifts upon these new Christians (See 1 Cor 12, 13, 14). Simon the sorcerer sinned by seeking to buy the ability to impart this measure of the Holy Spirit upon others. However, he was restored by repenting and praying that the sin be forgiven him (See 1 John 1:8-9). After this, Acts 8:25 says, "25 When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages."

In the second part of Acts 8, Philip returns with his evangelistic effort with the Ethiopian in Acts 8:26-40.

Philip Meets the Ethiopian

Acts 8:26-29

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, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. 29 The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

In this episode of conversion, an angel of the Lord directs Philip: "Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." Then, the Spirit said, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." The subject of this attention was an Ethiopian eunuch, illustrating that the gospel is for people of all races. Most certainly, an Ethiopian in those days would have been an African by race. However, he is also a eunuch, illustrating that gospel goes to men and women no matter how life's circumstances alter them mentally or physically. The man was also an important official in the government, responsible for the queen's treasury, showing that the gospel is also for those of the highest status in this life. Because he had been to Jerusalem to worship and because he was reading from Isaiah the prophet, he was most likely a Jewish proselyte.



In Acts 2:5 Luke had recorded that there were in Jerusalem, on the Day of Pentecost, Jews from every nation, "5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven." Luke had illustrated how the gospel found its way to Judea and Samaria in the first part of Acts 8. Now, the gospel goes to the Ethiopian who can take it all the way down to the Horn of Africa, fulfilling Christ's words in Acts 1:8, "8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian is a wonderful fulfillment of the Lord's great commission in Luke 24:46-47: "The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day,

47 and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”

Do You Understand?

Acts 8:30-31

30 Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

31 "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

When Philip, running up to the chariot, heard the man reading Isaiah, he asked one of the most important questions that one might ask: "Do you understand what you are reading?" This question opens up the discussion with the Ethiopian. The Ethiopian's answer shows the importance of evangelists in the role of conversion. God chose that the gospel should be taught. Without such teaching there can be no belief.

Jesus explains how men come to God in John 6:44-45:

44 "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. 45 It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me.

Paul details the work of preachers and churches in this process in Rom 10:14-15:

14 How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? 15 And how can they preach unless they are sent?

The Lamb of God

Acts 8:32-33

32 The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture:

*"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before the shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*

33 *In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.*

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth."

Isaiah's prophecy of Christ as a lamb speaks to the sorrow and humiliation of the perfect redeemer's death upon the cross. The death of Christ by shedding innocent blood took away the sin of the world, according to John the Baptist, who used the metaphor in John 1:29-30:

29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'"

He repeated it again in John 1:35-36: "35 The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. 36 When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" However, it was Peter who related the blood of the lamb to our redemption in 1 Peter 1:18-20:

18 For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. 20 He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.

The Good News about Jesus

Acts 8:34-35

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

"Who is he talking about?" asked the eunuch, turning the conversation to the good news about Jesus. What exactly Philip told the eunuch has been the subject of great speculation. There are three possibilities. One, Philip could have elaborated on the meaning of Jesus, the Lamb of God, since this relates directly to the passage that the eunuch was reading. Two, he could have expanded on the meaning of the good news about Christ. Three, he could have told him what to do to be saved, since the eunuch learned what that gospel required and asked: "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" Perhaps, they discussed all three subjects

The Lamb of God

The Lamb of God is an important metaphor in the New Testament. In Rev 5:6, 8, John describes the Lamb in heaven:

6 Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, . . . 8 And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb.

In Rev 5:12, they sing a song of the restitution of the Lamb's power, wealth, wisdom, and strength:

12 In a loud voice they sang:

"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!"

In Rev 7:9-10 multitudes so large no one can count them stand before God and the Lamb. The multitudes are pure (white robes), and God and the Lord own salvation:

9 After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. 10 And they cried out in a loud voice:

"Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb."

In Rev 7:14-15, the multitude, that no man can count, are those who washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb: "And he said, 'These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'" This multitude is they who have received the promises of the Lord in Rev 7:17:

17 For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd;
he will lead them to springs of living water.

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Rev 12:10-12 teaches that the blood of the Lamb overcomes the devil. In Rev 13:8, the book of life belongs to the Lamb, and in Rev 2-4, heaven sings the song of Moses and the Lamb. Rev 17:14 calls the Lamb the Lord of lords and the King of Kings. In Rev 19:6-9, the great wedding in heaven is between the Lamb and his bride. The bride, those that no man can count, wears white robes. The white robes make the bride ready for the Lamb in Rev 19:7-9:

and his bride has made herself ready.

8 Fine linen, bright and clean,

was given her to wear."

(Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)

9 Then the angel said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'" And he added, "These are the true words of God."

The Lamb occupies the central role right through to the end of the Revelation. When the angel showed John the bride, the wife of the Lamb in Rev 21:9-14, he showed him the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven. In Rev 22:1-4, the water of life flows out of the throne of God and the Lamb.

The Good News about Christ

One may be certain that Philip "told him the good news about Jesus," since this is exactly what the scripture says. The good news, by definition, is the gospel of Christ; and the gospel of Christ is, by definition, the death, burial, resurrection of Jesus, and the fact that he was seen by many witnesses [See 1 Cor. 15:1-5 and the notes on Acts 2:14-36].

Every sermon, recorded from the beginning in Acts 2 to Acts 8, included the facts of the gospel.

Peter preached in that first sermon in Acts 2:31-32: "

31 Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. 32 God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact.

This grand theme of the gospel repeated itself in Acts 3:15-16: "15 You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this."

During their appearances before the tribunals, Peter and John repeated this gospel message. In Acts 4:10-12, Peter preached this gospel:

10 then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. 11 He is

"the stone you builders rejected,

which has become the capstone."

12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.

Peter preached these same facts of the gospel in Acts 5:29-32:

“. . . We must obey God rather than men! 30 The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead – whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. 31 God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. 32 We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

When Luke's narrative moved to cover Stephen and Philip working as evangelists, he showed them speaking the same gospel as the apostles had spoken. Stephen, on the brink of martyrdom, in Acts 7:52-53, preached the gospel:

52 Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— 53 you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.

Philip also preached that same gospel to the Samaritans in Acts 8:12:

12 But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

Therefore, there is no doubt that when Philip preached "the good news about Christ," he included the facts of the gospel of Christ: How the Christ died for our sins, how he was buried, how that he was raised from the dead, and how he appeared to many witnesses of his resurrection.

What to Do to Be Saved

From Peter's instruction, the Eunuch knew that he had to be baptized. In fact, he asks the question: "Why shouldn't I be baptized?" It is necessary to infer that Peter had taught the entire truth about baptism, even though the scriptures do not tell us what he said. Jesus had commanded baptism in order to be saved when he gave the great commission in Mark 16:16: "16 Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." Peter had commanded baptism on the Day of Pentecost in order to receive the forgiveness of sins in Acts 2:38: "38 Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."

"Look, here is water," said the eunuch, necessarily inferring that he knew that the one baptism that saves is water baptism. Peter taught in 1 Peter 3:20-22:

In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, 21 and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22 who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

Why Shouldn't I Be Baptized?

Acts 8:36-39

36 As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" [The NIV relegates verse 37 to a foot note.] 37 Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." The eunuch answered, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." 38 And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. 39 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.

"Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" shows the urgency and the necessity of baptism. The Philippian jailer was baptized the same hour of the night in Acts 16:33: "33 At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized." In Acts 22:16 Ananias told Saul of Tarsus: "16 And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name." Baptism is never a matter of convenience in the New Testament since one's soul's salvation depends on it.

Philip required the eunuch to make the good confession of his faith as a prerequisite to baptism. These words formalize the requirements and language of the good confession: "'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' The eunuch answered, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.'" Belief in our hearts and confession with our mouths are inseparably bound to the actions that save us from our sins. Paul confirmed the necessity for belief and confession in the steps that we must take to be saved in Rom 10:9-10:

9 That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.

The mode of baptism, which should not be debated since baptism by definition is a burial, is clear by the actions Philip and the eunuch took: they went down into the water; and Philip baptized him; and they came up out of the water. Paul makes clear the action of baptism is a burial. In Rom 6:3-4, he taught:

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

In Col 2:12, he repeated the action of baptism as a burial: "12 having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead."

After his belief and his confession of that belief and after his baptism, the eunuch went on his way rejoicing. There had come to the eunuch what Peter had described in Acts 3:19 as times of refreshing: "19 Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord."

Acts 8:40

40 Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.