

# The Ethiopian Eunuch

ACTS 8:26-40

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Last week, we started our study by looking at the completely messed up relationship between Moses and his wife Zipporah. This morning, I want us to move into the New Testament as we study the baptism of a rather unusual man in Acts 8. And what is a little unusual is this man's family situation. His family situation is that he does not have a family – and it might not have been his choice! So, if you are here this morning or if you are studying this lesson online, and if you think that perhaps your situation is too difficult for God to handle, I would suggest that God has recorded all kinds of dysfunctional situations in his word for a reason. We have these accounts to give us hope. We have these accounts as a reminder that every person is important and that each of us can be used by God if we are willing.

Again, the account I'd like for us to study today is found in Acts 8 (p. 1715). I am referring to the account of the Ethiopian Eunuch. And I would point out that that right there is a little bit weird! When I first started studying this passage, I thought, "Well, maybe I'll just skip over that part." And yet when we look at the text, we realize that he is referred to as a **"eunuch"** five times! That is how we know the man. In fact, that is how God wants us to know this man. We do not even have his name. We know that he is from Ethiopia, and we know that he is a eunuch. If you don't know what that means, ask your parents at home! But at some point in the past, someone had apparently made him a eunuch so that he could serve in the court of Candace, Queen of the Ethiopians. This was apparently the thing to do in the ancient world, so that the servants of royalty would not be distracted and so that there would be no danger of them having children with the queen and thus setting up a challenge to the throne.

And this man does serve the queen of Ethiopia in a powerful position. But, he has been humiliated. Eunuchs were looked down upon socially – sometimes effeminate, with high-pitched voices, and beardless faces. As I was researching this morning's lesson, I did find one possible upside: Modern research has discovered that eunuchs live on average 13-½ years longer than other men, probably because of the lack of testosterone, resulting in much less risky behavior, including violence! These men, then, are somewhat calm, and so we see why they were given such high positions in the ancient world. Socially, though, they were outcasts, always lonely, looked upon as being rather strange, referred to by some in the ancient world as "monstrosities." This man, though, was important to God. And I hope that is of some encouragement to all of us. No matter where we are coming from, all of us are important to God.

Let's notice what happens in Acts 8. Philip, one of those men appointed to serve the widows in Acts 6 is now preaching in Samaria (up north of Jerusalem, he is baptizing thousands of people, but God takes him away from that success to preach the gospel to one man – Acts 8:26-40,

*<sup>26</sup> But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, "Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert road.) <sup>27</sup> So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship, <sup>28</sup> and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah. <sup>29</sup> Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." <sup>30</sup> Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" <sup>31</sup> And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. <sup>32</sup> Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this:*

*He was led as a sheep to slaughter;  
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,  
so he does not open His mouth.  
In humiliation His judgment was taken away;  
who will relate His generation? For His life is removed from the earth.*

*<sup>34</sup> The eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?" <sup>35</sup> Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. <sup>36</sup> As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" <sup>37</sup> [And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."] <sup>38</sup> And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. <sup>39</sup> When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing. <sup>40</sup> But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea.*

In the time we have left, I'd like to make five observations concerning the process involved in this man's spiritual journey. And he is on a journey. He starts off rather confused, and he ends rejoicing. How does he get from Point A to Point B?

- I. **As we look back at this passage, I would point out first of all, that for a person to come to faith in God, he or she must first read and come to UNDERSTAND THE WORD OF GOD.**

We find in this passage that the Ethiopian treasurer had just gone up to the temple in Jerusalem to worship, and he was now on his way home. And what always strikes me is that as an apparent convert to Judaism, he must have known that eunuchs were not allowed in the temple (Deuteronomy 23:1). This is a distance of maybe a thousand miles, and this man went anyway, knowing that he would have to stand outside. Based on this, I would suggest that this man is pretty much a decent human being! Some people have the idea that you need to commit some kind of a really "big sin" to be lost. As far as we can tell, though, this man was not a "big sinner." In fact, he was quite religious. And yet he was lost and in need of salvation. And based on what he is reading here, I have always assumed that he probably purchased this copy of Isaiah so that he could study it for himself at home. And here we need to make a note of what kind of investment this must have been. These

scrolls were copied by hand. So let me ask you: If you were to quit your job, and if you were to start copying books by hand for a living, how much would you charge to make a hand-written copy of a book that might take three or four weeks? In today's economy, we might want to get paid maybe a thousand dollars a week. So we're talking \$3-4000 for a copy of one book – this isn't even the whole Old Testament – this is one book!

I think about going down south for various lectures. Often, I will purchase a book or two down there that I don't have access to up here. And that seems to be what happens here. He travels to Jerusalem, he buys a scroll, and here he is on the way home, and he cannot wait! So he starts reading, and by the time he gets out in the middle of nowhere, he's already made it down to Isaiah 53. And he gets to this passage describing a man of sorrows, someone who was rejected, someone who was acquainted with the deepest of grief, and according to Isaiah, no one would care that this man would die without descendants. And the eunuch starts thinking, "This man, whoever he is, is like me." So, as the Ethiopian officer is confused as to who this suffering servant in the prophecy might be, Philip comes up and asks him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He does not, so he invites Philip to come up and join him in the chariot. One thing I love about this is the reminder that God does not answer people's questions directly. God did not whisper the answer in this man's ear, God did not send an angel, but God sent a Christian! God sent a Christian to explain the gospel, just as he sent Ananias to teach Saul in the next chapter, in Acts 9.

We learn from this, first of all, that faith starts with the word of God (just as Paul would go on to explain later in Romans 10:17). But we also learn that when the Bible is confusing, there is no dishonor in asking for help. In school, we encourage our children to ask for help. If they don't understand something, then need to ask. And for us as Christians, there is great honor in being able to explain a passage that someone else might be having a hard time understanding.

I am also encouraged here that the word of God can be understood! Some people have this idea that the Bible is too confusing, that it is too complicated. But, that is not the case. We might need some help here and there, but the Bible can be understood. In fact, the Bible must be understood if we are to be saved. And that is one reason we do not baptize babies. First of all, babies are not born sinners as some churches teach today – so they aren't even lost and in need of salvation – but instead, we need to be like them, Jesus says. But secondly, babies and little children are not yet capable of understanding God's plan. And understanding is a key part of it. The Ethiopian read the word of God and ultimately came to some understanding of it.

So, I would encourage our guests here this morning especially: If you come across something we do as a congregation that seems a little odd to you, if you see us refer to a passage that doesn't really make sense to you, we would love for you to ask us about that. We don't want to harass you into becoming a part of the Lord's church, but we do welcome questions. We would love to sit down and study – for a few hours, maybe over a few weeks – but it is very important to understand the word of God.

## II. **There is a second observation we make concerning this passage, and that is: PREACHING JESUS NECESSARILY REQUIRES THE PREACHING OF BAPTISM.**

Notice what happens in verses 35-36: We find that Philip started in Isaiah 53 and beginning from that passage ***"he preached Jesus to him."*** That is all we know about what Philip said. But notice the very next thing that happens: Philip preaches Jesus, and the next thing we know, they come to some water, and the eunuch says, ***"Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?"*** Philip started with that passage about Jesus suffering in our place, taking the guilt of our sins on the cross, and he ultimately tied it in to baptism. Of course, looking back on it, we know the connection. Just as Jesus died, was buried, and was raised up, so we

too must die to sin, we are buried with Christ in baptism, and we are raised up to live a new life. But just looking at what we know here: Philip preached Jesus, and immediately after that, this man wants to be baptized. It is impossible, in fact, to separate baptism from the life of Christ. His ministry started with his own baptism, and some of his last words were to his disciples, commanding them to go into all the world and baptize people. Preaching Jesus requires preaching baptism. If we fail to preach baptism, then we have failed to preach Jesus.

III. As we go back to our text, there is something else we notice, and that is: **BAPTISM IS APPARENTLY QUITE URGENT.**

Why? What is the rush? Well, when we examine what the Bible says elsewhere, we learn that baptism saves us. That's what Peter says in 1 Peter 3:21, ***"Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you — not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience — through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."*** So, this isn't just about "joining the church" (the way many people think about it today), but this is about salvation. ***"Baptism now saves you."*** A person is lost in sin, headed for eternal torment, then that person believes in Jesus and is baptized, and that person is now saved. Knowing that, is there any reason why we might put it off? Some churches today have a "baptismal service" once or twice a year, where they save them all up and do them all at once. I remember attending a large Baptist church down in Jackson, Tennessee (just to observe), and on the morning we were there, a young man came to the front after the sermon to be "saved." The pastor asked if there were any objections, the young man was declared to be saved, and then the pastor announced that he would be baptized at their baptismal service in November (several months in the future). How, though, can we wait that long? If I am lost, and if baptism saves me (as Peter says that it does), then why would I want to wait? Baptism is the turning point. Baptism is when we go from being out to being in. Baptism is the line we cross from being lost to being saved. It's like crossing over from Wisconsin to Iowa down near Dubuque – I know when I have crossed from one state into another, because I have crossed that line, the Mississippi River. Baptism is that line.

With this in mind, nothing could hold this man back. He got it. He could see the urgency of it, and so he questioned Philip, ***"See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?"*** And in my mind, I can almost hear those chariot wheels skidding to a stop, gravel popping, dust flying in all directions. He orders the chariot to stop, and he is baptized immediately. He does this because he sees the urgency of it.

In fact, as far as I can tell, from the beginning of the church in Acts 2 all the way through to the end of the New Testament, once a person decided to become a Christian, that person never slept, never ate a bite of food, never did anything else until that person was baptized. We think of the 3,000 in Acts 2 – they were baptized the same day. We think of the Philippian Jailer in Acts 16 – he and his family were baptized immediately, the Bible says, that very hour of the night. We have a record of what Saul was told in Acts 22:16, where Ananias said, ***"Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name."*** If our sins are washed away when we are properly baptized for the right reasons, then that means we are lost before baptism and we are saved after baptism. Since that is the case, we need to understand how urgent it is.

IV. There is something else we need to notice in this passage, and that is: **BAPTISM IS CLEARLY AN IMMERSION IN WATER.**

We start with the word itself. We can look up the word "baptize" in any modern dictionary, and the word is defined as "sprinkling, pouring, or immersion as practiced in the Christian faith." But we aren't looking for how the word is used today. We're looking for how the original word was used 2,000 years ago. And even in almost

all modern dictionaries, they will include the etymology (the history, the origin) of the word. And when we look at the history of the word, even in our modern English dictionaries, almost all will explain that the word baptism goes back to a Greek word meaning “to dip, plunge, or immerse.” And the examples given from ancient literature are often with reference to the sinking of a ship at sea or to the dying of a garment, where a garment is plunged, dipped, or fully submerged in a vat of dye. That is the original meaning of the word.

And we see it demonstrated here in Acts 8 as the Ethiopian pulls the chariot to the side of the road, he and Philip both go down into the water, and the Eunuch is **“baptized”** in the water. I want you to think with me: If sprinkling had been an acceptable option, don’t you think they could have done that right there in the chariot? Anybody smart enough to be the treasurer of a nation certainly had enough water to get sprinkled right there on the spot, without even pulling over. But as it is, baptism (Biblical baptism) is an immersion in water. So many people, though, have been deceived on this issue.

Of course, some will object and will say, “But they were in a desert! They didn’t have enough water for an immersion!” I would point out, though, that the word translated as **“desert”** in most translations (in verse 26) is a word that is defined as “solitary or desolate.” In fact, in a vast majority of times when this exact word is used elsewhere in the Bible, it is normally translated as “wilderness.” So, we are not talking about a Sahara Desert kind of place here, but we are talking about a deserted or lonely stretch of road.

On the church’s Facebook page, I have posted a very brief video of a baptism performed just yesterday by a good brother over in Tanzania. They were out in the middle of nowhere and had nothing but a small stream. They actually had to dig down into the stream, and they then used some of that material to make a small dam, and the hole combined with the dam was all it took to baptize this man in this stream. It is a beautiful video, and I hope that all of you can watch it. I think the entire thing is about 17 seconds long.

So, the Ethiopian officer hears the truth of God’s word concerning Jesus, and as soon as he understands the importance of being baptized, he orders the chariot to stop, and he is immersed immediately, right there by the side of the road.

**V. All of this leads us to one final observation here, and that is: BAPTISM CAUSES THIS MAN TO REJOICE!**

First of all, there is the obvious: His sins are forgiven! The weight has been lifted! And I should point out here: Nowhere in the Bible does rejoicing come before baptism. Instead, wherever we have baptism and rejoicing found together in the scriptures, baptism always comes first, and there is a reason for that – baptism forgives sins! It makes no sense to rejoice in my salvation and then be baptized. It never happens that way in the Bible, because forgiveness takes place at the point of baptism.

But there is something here beyond the forgiveness of sins, and that is: This man has now been added to God’s family. Think about that: This man with no family of his own, now has brothers and sisters, parents, and even CHILDREN, as he is born into the family of God, as he continues home to Ethiopia, to spread the good news there.

**CONCLUSION:**

Philip is carried away at this point, and the man from Ethiopia continues on his way home, rejoicing as he travels. The text does not tell us this, but I would assume that the Eunuch keeps on reading in this new scroll

of his. Remember: He read up through Chapter 53, so I am assuming that after his baptism he gets back to where he was, “Alright! I am a Christian now! Now where was I?” And so he would have kept on reading. I would invite you to turn with me three chapters over, to a passage this man would have read perhaps within minutes of having obeyed the gospel. Turn with me please to Isaiah 56:3-5. As he continued to read, he would have come to Isaiah 56, starting in verse 3,

- <sup>3</sup> ***Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say,  
“The Lord will surely separate me from His people.”  
Nor let the eunuch say, “Behold, I am a dry tree.”***
- <sup>4</sup> ***For thus says the Lord,  
“To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths,  
And choose what pleases Me,  
And hold fast My covenant,***
- <sup>5</sup> ***To them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial,  
And a name better than that of sons and daughters;  
I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off.***

This man without a family has now been born into the family of God, and has been given a family name far above all other names. In Jesus, he is no longer excluded.

This morning, we are looking for people with honest and humble hearts. We are looking for men and women with hearts like the heart of this man from Ethiopia – unfulfilled, but searching for something better. We are looking for men and women who are willing to put God first, even if it means making a break with manmade religion or longstanding family traditions.

And so this morning we ask the question: Does this man’s experience in coming to Jesus match yours? I’m not asking about the chariot, or the road, or whether your preacher’s name was Philip, but I’m asking you to think about your life up to this point. Have you done this? Have you gone through God’s plan in the proper order and by his authority?

- Do you understand the word of God?
- Do you understand the connection between Jesus, and his death burial and resurrection, and baptism?
- Do you understand how urgent baptism really is and why?
- Do you understand that the kind of baptism God requires is an immersion in water?
- And do you understand that true happiness should really only happen after our sins are forgiven at the point of baptism?

If you get this, we would beg you to work this out before we leave here this morning. We have a fiberglass baptistery downstairs that we can fill with warm, clean water in about half an hour – it’s not a stream in Tanzania, it’s not a body of water by some road through the wilderness, but we will make the water deep enough to make sure your sins are covered! If you have any questions, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the good news right now, come talk with me right now as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)