

As we have seen multiple times as we have worked our way through the first part of the book of Acts, one of Luke's purposes in writing this account of the early church is to show how the gospel was spread according to Jesus' mandate by the power of the Holy Spirit from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. Of course the call to bring the gospel to the end of the earth is still not completed, but we do see in Acts how the gospel came to places that were considered the end of the earth in those days from the perspective of those living in and around Jerusalem. In the first part of chapter 8, we see how the gospel came to Samaria and in the second part of chapter 8, we get a hint at least how the gospel was brought to one place that was considered to be the end of the earth.

This story is about the conversion of an Ethiopian who was on his way back to Ethiopia. The Ethiopia of Bible times was not the same as the Ethiopia of today. But it was in Northern Africa, south of Egypt. It was a long way from Jerusalem and its people were black. The conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch was the conversion of a black man. And the assumption of the text is that he brought the gospel to Ethiopia.

So the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch was a confirmation that the gospel was meant to go to all nations and all people-groups and people of all skin colors. That is a significant theme in the message of the Bible – that the gospel is intended to be preached to all the people of the world regardless of what distinguishes people from one another. And that is rooted in the fact that all people are equally valuable to God. All human beings are equally made in the image of God and any talk of some races being inferior to others is inconsistent with biblical teaching. It is a fundamental part of the message of the Bible is that God's purposes of salvation extend to all the people-groups of the world. Think of how important the inclusion of the Gentiles is in the unfolding of the gospel message in the NT. This is a major theme. And this passage contributes to that theme.

This particular Ethiopian is an interesting character. He was a eunuch which means he was castrated. It was a common practice in those days to require that court officials be castrated so that they would not be tempted to lust after the women among whom they worked. Even today men's sexual drive is often a cause of trouble in workplaces and the ancient way of preventing those problems was to require that certain officials be castrated.

The fact that this man was a eunuch seems to be part of the reason that Luke chose this particular story to include in the book of Acts. It is prominent in the story and it meant that he would not be allowed to enter the temple. Deuteronomy 23:1 says, "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD." And yet this man had come to Jerusalem to worship. It seems he was one of those Gentiles who were attracted to Judaism. This man was so attracted to Judaism and Israel's God that he had made a very long journey to worship that God. But at the same time there were certain barriers that he could not cross as a eunuch and as a Gentile and so he would not have been able to enter fully into the worship of Israel's God by worshipping in the temple.

But notice what God had promised foreigners and eunuchs in Isaiah 56:3-5, <sup>3</sup>“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.’” <sup>4</sup>For thus says the Lord: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, <sup>5</sup>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.” Whatever else this means, it at least means that God is promising a time when eunuchs who worship the Lord will no longer be restricted because they are eunuchs. Further in Isaiah 56 God promises all foreigners who join themselves to the Lord that he will accept their burnt offerings and their sacrifices on his altar and he continues in verse 7, “for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” And then verse 8 says, “The LORD God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, ‘I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.’”

It seems reasonable that Luke was thinking of this passage when he chose to include the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in his account of how the gospel spread after the ascension of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Luke is also stressing throughout his account how the good news in Jesus is the continuation of the OT story and the fulfillment of its prophecies. And here the great emphasis is on the inclusion of people who were excluded from the worship of God before the coming of Jesus and the fulfillment of his mission.

The transition from OT to NT had a lot to do with the removal of barriers. Those who formerly were far off are brought near. Those who before were hindered because of certain physical characteristics are now welcomed into the family of God. Paul writes of this in Ephesians 2:13, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” This eunuch could only worship God from a distance, but in this story we see how one who was far off as been brought near by the blood of Christ.

This shows how the gospel is about inclusion. Not in the sense that the ungodly the world often use that term, but in the biblical sense that there are no ethnic barriers to coming to Christ. There are no physical barriers in the sense of the brokenness of our bodies. The only barrier is an unwillingness to repent of sin and trust in Jesus. Other than that all are invited to come to Christ and be brought near to God – all races and colors and ethnicities – all with bodies which are broken and distorted by sickness or accident or self-inflicted mutilation. The gospel is about bringing people near who are far off for whatever reason because through Christ they are brought near and included in the body of Christ and the family of God.

Something else that Luke wants to show us in this story is one of the ways that God pursues his purposes. This is a story about how the gospel came to Ethiopia. In the context of the book of Acts it is clear that this story is not just about the conversion of an individual, but how Jesus is pursuing his goal of bringing the gospel to all the nations. It is significant that north Africa became an important place for Christianity in the centuries that followed. Some of the most important church leaders in the first few hundred years of the Christian church were Africans – men like Cyprian, Tertullian, and Augustine. No doubt this Ethiopian eunuch was not the only

one to bring the gospel to Africa, but he is the first and this passage marks the beginning of God building his church in Africa.

This passage shows us how Jesus begins to fulfill his plan to bring the gospel to Africa. We see the conversion of one man in a desert place. From the perspective of human expectations, a high ranking Ethiopian eunuch was not a likely candidate to be the first to bring the gospel to Africa. And yet that is exactly what happened.

It is very clear from this story that the conversion of this man was part of God's plan. Philip is told by an angel of the Lord to travel south on the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. He had been in the midst of a fruitful ministry in Samaria and God calls him away from that ministry to the middle of nowhere – a desert place – an empty place – a place where you do not expect to meet a lot of people. Then God arranges this meeting with an Ethiopian eunuch. The Spirit of God tells Philip to join himself to the Ethiopian's chariot. The man happens to be reading from the prophecy of Isaiah. He happens to be reading from Isaiah 53 one of the most important OT prophecies concerning the suffering of Jesus. Clearly God is orchestrating this meeting and the conversion of this man and clearly God is doing this as part of his plan to bring the gospel to Africa.

This is an important part of the message of Acts and a great encouragement for us who long for the coming of God's kingdom and the growth of his church. God is using people, but he is in charge and it is ultimately his mission. Acts begins with Jesus ascending into heaven and from there sending his Spirit and the story told in Acts makes it clear that Jesus through his Spirit is guiding and causing the growth and spread of his church. Earlier in chapter 8, it is clear that God used persecution to scatter many of the believers to bring the gospel to "the regions of Judea and Samaria." In the story of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch it is clear that Jesus through an angel and the Holy Spirit is behind this conversion and that his purpose is to bring the gospel to Africa.

This is a great encouragement for us because it shows how Jesus is at work building his church. This story shows us how one relatively minor event can be the beginning of something very significant for the growth of the church. There are many things that can be discouraging when we think of the church in our part of the world in our day and age. But we must remember that Jesus has promised to build his church. And in this story we get a glimpse of one of the ways that he does that.

So the Ethiopian eunuch is riding in his chariot on his way home from worshipping in Jerusalem. He was a high ranking official in the court of the queen of the Ethiopians. He was her chief accountant. He was in charge of all her treasure. He is clearly well off. He is riding in a chariot which few people could afford. He was reading which few people were able to do. He had a scroll of Isaiah in his possession which was also unusual. Few people had their own scrolls in those days. Mostly scrolls would be the possession of a synagogue. So this guy was well off. Jesus had said "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." In the case of the Ethiopian eunuch we see the truth of what Jesus said next, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God" (Mark 10:25 & 27)

The man is reading out loud from the prophecy of Isaiah. That is how people read in those days. Philip is running alongside the chariot and hears the man reading and asks him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And the man replies, “How can I, unless someone guides me?”

A couple of things are noteworthy here. The first is the fact that God had been working in this man long before sending Philip to preach the gospel to him. The man had come all the way to Jerusalem to worship Israel’s God. The man was reading the Bible. He was drawn to Israel’s God. He was reading God’s word seeking to know more about him and his ways. We do not know exactly what was on his mind, but it is clear that he wanted to worship God and he wanted to learn more about this God. And in his desires we see that God was at work in him long before he met Philip. As far as evangelistic encounters are concerned, this was an easy one. The man was searching. He was reading his Bible. All Philip had to say to open the conversation was to ask him whether he understood what he was reading.

This story shows how God can prepare someone to hear the gospel and we can pray that he will so work in the hearts of unsaved people around us so that there will be an openness – a readiness to hear the gospel message. This is not the only way that God works. Sometimes he will use something that a Christian says to spark an interest in the gospel. But however it goes, observing how God was at work in this Ethiopian man drawing him to himself is an encouragement for us to pray that he will do the same thing in the hearts of many in our day.

The second point of significance in this first interaction between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is Philip’s opening question and the Ethiopian’s answer. “Do you understand what you are reading?” “How can I, unless someone guides me?”

This shows us something important about the Bible and how God intends for it to function in people’s lives whether in bringing them to faith or in bringing them to spiritual growth and maturity. The Bible is written in such a way that it needs to be taught – it needs to be explained. That does not mean that an individual reading the Bible cannot profit from it without a teacher, but it does mean that God has written the Bible in such a way that having the Bible explained is an important part of God’s design for both conversion and spiritual growth. Christianity is not designed to be a do-it-yourself religion and the Bible is not designed as a master-it-yourself book.

The experience of the Ethiopian eunuch is something that we all experience when we read the Bible. “How can I, [understand] unless someone guides me?” We all need teachers and we all need guidance when it comes to understanding and profiting from the Bible.

This point needs to be properly understood. One of the issues of the Reformation was that the Roman Catholic Church required the people to blindly follow the teaching of the church and the Reformers saw from the word of God that believers are to test what their teachers taught them by the Bible itself. It was an important point

of reformation teaching that every believer had the Holy Spirit and were equipped to read and interpret the Bible and profit from it.

But the reformers did not teach that teachers were therefore unnecessary. The Bible makes it very clear that there is a very significant role for teachers in the church and that therefore there is a very significant place for learning from teachers in the Christian life.

Jesus was a teacher. The apostles were teachers. One of the gifts that Jesus gives to the church are pastor-teachers. One of the qualifications for elders is the ability to teach. But also church members are to teach one another. Paul wrote to the Roman believers in Romans 15:14, "I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another."

The Bible is a very interesting book that way. Most people can understand the basic message of the Bible by just reading it themselves, but there is much in the Bible that most people will not be able to understand without a teacher. The Bible has many things in it that are not likely to be understood without a teacher. And those who are called to be teachers of the Bible are equipped to be teachers by being taught by other teachers. Think of what Paul says to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2, "[W]hat you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also."

What this highlights is that Christianity is not a do-it-yourself religion and the Bible is not a master-it-yourself book. It is God's design that we are dependent on others both in conversion and in living the Christian life. And in this passage we get a glimpse how that works in regard to understanding the gospel and the message of the Bible. When Philip asked the Ethiopian eunuch whether he understood what he was reading, the answer was "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And that is true of all of us. And that is why teaching the Word of God is and must be such an important part of church life.

Now the passage that the Ethiopian was reading from Isaiah was Isaiah 53 which is one of the key OT passages for understanding the significance of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. The part that is quoted in the text is Isaiah 53:7-8, "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."

You can understand how the Ethiopian could not understand the significance of what he was reading. The question he asks is "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or someone else?" So the Ethiopian was puzzling over the text and wondering who it was referring to. Verse 35 is a key text in this passage. "Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus." This text is clearly meant to remind us of something very similar that we read in Luke's gospel. In Luke 24 we read the story of Jesus' meeting with the two disciples travelling to Emmaus. They had been discussing the death of Jesus and the reports of his resurrection. They did not understand the significance of Jesus. And

in verse 27 we read, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” No doubt Philip was passing on some of the things that Jesus had taught the men from Emmaus. Jesus own teaching from the OT concerning himself was passed on by the apostles as is clear from many of the sermons recorded in the book of Acts. The OT was their Bible and from it they preached the message of salvation in Christ.

What might Philip have said on the basis of the passage from Isaiah that is quoted in this text? No doubt he explained that the sheep that was led to the slaughter was Jesus. No doubt he told the story of the crucifixion and told how Jesus did not open his mouth. No doubt he explained that justice was denied to Jesus because he was sinless, but that he died to atone for the sins of his people.

Philip told the Ethiopian the good news about Jesus from this and other OT passages. He would have spoken about Jesus as the fulfillment of the OT sacrifices for sin. He would have spoken of Jesus as the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Likely he referred to other parts of Isaiah 53. “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wound we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – everyone – to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:5-6). No doubt he made it clear that the good news of Jesus was meant for all people.

Perhaps he referred to Isaiah 56 which we looked at earlier – a passage that speaks about God promising to take away all barriers for foreigners and eunuchs to the worship of God. Isaiah 56:7, “[T]hese 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 Ethiopian eunuch travelled to Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel. As a foreigner and as a eunuch he would have experienced barriers, but now as he travels back to Ethiopia continuing his search for God, the gospel of Jesus is preached to him by Philip and he learns that in and through Jesus Christ he can be accepted by God and embraced as a full member of the family of God.

No doubt there was much more discussion and teaching that happened in that chariot. No doubt Philip spoke about believing in Jesus and being baptized. So when they come to some water the eunuch says, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized.” If you look carefully at the verse numbers you will notice that verse 37 is missing. The footnote in the ESV tells us that some of the manuscripts have the words “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.” The reason that those words are not in the text is that the scholars who translated the ESV believe on the basis of the textual evidence that Luke did not write those words and that they were added later by scribes. We do not have time to get into that, but the study and comparison of all the different manuscripts is a sophisticated business and there are many good reasons to accept the main conclusions of that study which are reflected in a responsible translation like the ESV.

Anyway there is no question that Philip did speak with the Ethiopian eunuch about believing in Jesus and being baptized whether that is in the text or not. And so the Ethiopian commands the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.” The Ethiopian eunuch was baptized and became part of the people of God. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:13, “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” Before hearing about Jesus, the Ethiopian was an outsider. After hearing the gospel and believing in Jesus he was baptized into the body of Christ. His sins had been washed away and he received the sign of belonging to Jesus Christ and his people.

He went on his way rejoicing. He had come to worship God. He was seeking for God. And God sought him out and made him part of the people who belong to God.

This story is told as an encouragement to us. The gospel is good news – the good news of salvation in Christ. And it is for everyone and anyone who hears it. The only barrier is an unwillingness to receive it. And for those who receive it, there is great reason for rejoicing. We rejoice because of the forgiveness of sins. We rejoice because we are right with God in Christ and that all barriers between us and God are removed and we rejoice because we belong – we are part of the body of Christ. We are part of the people of God.