

The Privilege of Baptism

Acts 8:26-40

A bit later in this service we will be baptizing ten people. In preparation for these baptisms, I want us to consider an account that describes a specific baptism in the first century. This account really reveals the “heart” behind baptism. It doesn’t communicate the theology behind baptism, but we get that from other passages. This passage communicates how baptism is a joyful expression of faith and devotion on the part of the person who has believed in Jesus.

Our passage today is Acts 8:26–40. This passage explains how God orchestrated a meeting between Philip and an Ethiopian man. Philip was mentioned in Acts 6 as a man with “a good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (see Acts 6:3-5).

26 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.)

In case you haven’t made that trip recently, Luke mentions, “This is a desert road.” In verse 27 we read that when Philip followed the angel’s directive, he found a God-fearing Gentile who was on his way home after worshipping in Jerusalem.

27 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, 28 and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah.

We’re told some interesting things about the man sitting in his chariot. He was “an Ethiopian eunuch.” Ethiopia of that day corresponds to Cush in the OT and Sudan in our day. Eunuchs were employed as attendants to queens because it was (generally speaking) safe for the queen to be alone with such persons (e.g., if Joseph had been a eunuch, Potiphar’s wife wouldn’t have been able to make the charges that she did). This man was in charge of the treasury of the Ethiopian queen Candace; “Candace” was the title given to each queen in the dynasty that ruled over Ethiopia. He was returning home after worshipping in Jerusalem. Luke doesn’t tell us this man’s exact status within the Jewish community. The law (Deuteronomy 23:1) stipulated that an emasculated male was excluded from the assembly; however, Isaiah 56:3-5 spoke of the day when God would accept the eunuch who obeyed Him as fully as anyone else. Whatever his exact status, Philip encountered a man who would soon take the gospel to “the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8) and who was seeking God by reading from the prophet Isaiah.

29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go up and join this chariot.” 30 Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

We see in the Ethiopian man’s answer that he was honest and teachable.

31 And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

God had led Philip to initiate a conversation with this most teachable of persons. He actually had Philip sit with him in his chariot so he could explain the Scriptures to him.

In verses 32 and 33 Luke records for us the passage of Scripture that the Ethiopian man was reading, which was Isaiah 53:7-8. You'll notice some differences in wording between these verses as they are recorded here and what we read in our English bibles in Isaiah 53. That's because the Ethiopian man was apparently reading from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT commonly in use at the time. So, what we're reading here is an English translation of a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures.

32 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.

33 "In humiliation His judgment was taken away;
Who will relate His generation?
For His life is removed from the earth."

Jewish scholars of the day disagreed whether the prophet was speaking about himself of someone else when he spoke about this person being described. The eunuch asks Philip to explain who was being described by Isaiah:

34 The eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?" 35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.

Apparently this was only the first of several OT Scriptures Philip used to "preach Jesus" to this man. We can imagine how Philip explained from verse 32 how Jesus came as the "Lamb of God" – the final sacrifice for sin. As a sacrificial lamb, Jesus was "led to slaughter." Jesus didn't go to the cross kicking and screaming; He went willingly. Remember how Jesus told Peter to put up his sword when he wanted to prevent Jesus from being arrested. Jesus didn't mount any type of defense at His trial; He simply let the wheels of injustice turn because He was laying down His life as a sacrifice for sin. Translations of verse 33 are somewhat confusing, but again, we can imagine how Philip explained how Jesus endured humiliation at His trial and crucifixion. Judgment (or justice) was denied Jesus in the process. Nobody talks about Jesus' generation (i.e., physical descendants) because His life was taken from the earth.

Perhaps Philip went on to cite passages such as Psalm 2 which speaks of rulers and kings plotting against God's Anointed, God's Son. Perhaps he explained how Jesus was the Seed of Abraham through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed. Whatever the specifics, Philip understood the Hebrew Scriptures well enough to be able to preach Jesus. He had a depth of understanding and conviction that God used in his conversation with this Ethiopian man.

Apparently this man was familiar with followers of Jesus being baptized:

36 As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?"

That comment reflects the attitude toward baptism that permeates the NT. He was eager to be baptized because he had believed in Jesus. In our day people are more apt to ask the question, "Do I **have** to get baptized? If I'm saved by grace through faith, is baptism really necessary?" In the NT, baptism was more of "get to" than a "have to." Baptism was a tangible way to declare your identification with Christ. It was a privilege to declare at your baptism "Jesus is Lord!"

In Romans 6 Paul explains that baptism expresses how the believer has died with Christ, been buried with Christ, and has been raised up with Christ. The believer is now just as alive to God as Jesus Himself. Baptism was an acted-out parable of being raised with Christ. What believer wouldn't want to declare that?!?!

37 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."

Your Bible may have a note explaining that verse 37 is not found in many ancient manuscripts of Acts 8. The evidence suggests that this verse was added later to make explicit what is already implicit in this passage, namely that the Ethiopian man believed in Jesus before he was baptized. He accepted that Jesus was the Son of God. According to Jesus' instruction in the Great Commission, Philip was going, making disciples, **baptizing**, and teaching.

38 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.

This man's experience suggests that you don't need to achieve a certain level of maturity to be baptized. The main qualification is that you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who has paid for your sin. If Jesus is your Lord, you have the privilege (and the right) to be baptized. F.F. Bruce pointed out that "the New Testament knows nothing of an unbaptized believer." Being baptized was a natural, joyful, obvious expression of a believer's union with Christ.

39 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. 40 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 flow of the book of Acts, the faith and baptism of the Ethiopian man shows that the gospel had spread to yet another class of person – a eunuch – living in yet another part of the Roman Empire – Ethiopia. And Scripture played a strategic role in this man's acceptance of Jesus Christ.

This morning's baptisms show that the gospel has now spread all the way to the other side of the globe, to northeast Kansas. Each of those being baptized are declaring, "I believe with all my heart that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who died on the cross for my sin."

Those being baptized this morning are:

8:00 Bailey Pile, Charlie Killingsworth, Samantha Killingsworth, and Jay Killingsworth

9:30 Adeline Chang, Audrey Chang, Quentin Pease

11:00 Piper Condra