

## ***“What Prevents Me from Being Baptized?”***

*Acts 8:26-40*

Over the course of this morning seven people will be baptized. Two/three/two of those will be baptized in this service. In a few minutes we will watch a video in which each person being baptized tells the story of how they came to faith in Jesus. After watching the video we will have the actual baptisms.

In preparation for these baptisms, I want us to consider briefly the passage from Acts 8 that was just read.

Can you remember the last time you traveled over a thousand miles to get there? For me, the last time I traveled that far was in February when I went to Phoenix for two days of meetings. It took me about ten hours to get from my house to my AirBnB, mainly because I had to fly to Phoenix by way of Chicago. By the time I got there, I wondered if the trip was worth that much time and energy and money.

The man in Acts 8 might have been wondering the same thing. He had traveled even farther than me, going from Ethiopia to Jerusalem to worship. And he traveled by chariot, which was some type of carriage pulled by an animal, probably a horse. Ethiopia isn't the same as modern-day country of Ethiopia; it was probably a region in ancient Cush, which is in modern-day Sudan. It would have taken him months to get to Jerusalem.

We're told two significant things about this man that would have impacted his worship in Jerusalem. First, he was a Gentile, meaning that he was not Jewish. He would have only been allowed to worship in the outermost court, the Court of the Gentiles. Second, Luke mentions five times (for emphasis) that he was a eunuch, meaning that he had been castrated. In the ancient world men became eunuchs for a variety of reasons. Some became eunuchs for employment opportunities. For example, eunuchs were trusted to manage a harem or be an assistant to a queen. This eunuch was "in charge of all [the queen's] treasure." When it came to his worship in Jerusalem, the Law prohibited eunuchs from becoming "full converts to Judaism" (Deuteronomy 23:1; Keener, *IVP Background Commentary*, p. 344). Because he was a Gentile and a eunuch, he would have been prevented from fully entering into God's presence at the temple. I wonder if he felt like his trip to Jerusalem was worth the time and energy and money.

He was on his way home from Jerusalem and had traveled south as far as Gaza, the last town in Israel before the long journey through the desert to Egypt. He was sitting in his chariot reading from the Old Testament book of Isaiah; but he didn't understand what he was reading. Luke makes clear that God was in hot pursuit of this man. God sent an angel to Philip to tell him to go to Gaza, and the Spirit instructed Philip to "Go over and join this chariot." Philip ran over to the chariot (reminiscent of the prophets who ran to deliver a message - see 1 Kings 18:46).

The Ethiopian man invited Philip to sit in his chariot and explain to him the passage he was reading in Isaiah. Acts 8:32–33 tells us:

32 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.

33 In his humiliation justice was denied him.  
Who can describe his generation?  
For his life is taken away from the earth.”

These two verses are found in Isaiah 53:7-8. There Isaiah is describing the “servant of the Lord” who was like a sacrificial lamb led to be slaughtered; in other words, he submitted to this death. As well, he was humiliated and denied justice. How do you begin to describe the generation that would take an innocent life like that?

34 And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” 35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.

Philip would have explained that Jesus was the sacrificial lamb that was led to the slaughter. The gospel of Luke stresses that Jesus willingly, intentionally went to Jerusalem to lay down his life to pay for the sin of the people. He didn’t curse those who crucified him; he prayed for them. Luke also stresses that Jesus was humiliated and denied justice; he was pronounced innocent by Pilate, Herod, the repentant thief on the cross, and the centurion who looked on. Whereas sinful men pronounced him guilty and crucified him, God raised him from the dead, thus pronouncing him innocent.

Since Jesus fulfilled everything written about the Messiah in the Hebrew Scriptures, Philip could have gone on to preach the good news about Jesus from many different texts. We know that the Ethiopian man received this news because of what we read in verse 36.

36 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?”

Having been in Jerusalem, he would have seen and/or heard about people being baptized as a way to express that they had become disciples of Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20). And so he asks, “What prevents me from being baptized?” He had been prevented from being fully accepted as Jewish because he was a Gentile and a eunuch. He wanted to know if there was anything that prevented him from being a full disciple of Jesus.

You would expect Philip’s answer to this man’s question in verse 37. But you might have noticed that verse 37 is omitted or in brackets in most modern translations, indicating that it isn’t found in the oldest manuscripts of the book of Acts. The best explanation is

that an answer was supplied by copyists at some point to make clear that the man did have faith in Jesus. Acts 8:37 (NASB95) reads:

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."

This is what is taught in the rest of the book of Acts, that if you believe that Jesus is the Son of God who died for your sins NOTHING prevents you from being a disciple of Jesus and being baptized. Perhaps Philip pointed the man to Isaiah 56 which looks forward to the day when both Gentiles and eunuchs who enter into covenant with God will have a permanent place (and name) in his house. If you believe in Jesus, NOTHING prevents you from full fellowship with God.

You may have wondered the same thing as this man. Does my past prevent/disqualify me from being being a follower of Jesus? Maybe you've done things that fill you with shame and you find it hard to believe that God would forgive your sin and welcome you into his household. Or maybe you've been openly antagonistic toward Christ and his followers. If so, read Acts 9 about Saul's experience. He actively hunted down Christians to arrest them and if convicted of blasphemy to kill them (see Acts 8:1-3). Like the Ethiopian man he was fully accepted by God when he believed in Jesus.

38 And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.

He went home full of joy. It turns out that his long trip to Jerusalem was totally worth it because he returned him with assurance that he was **fully accepted by God**. Those being baptized today have the same assurance.