

The Conversion of the Ethiopian

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[0 : 01] Welcome here for this Sunday, September 29th. My name is Kent Dixon, and it is my joy to be the pastor here. So we're continuing in our ongoing sermon series, Acts to All the World, and through this series we've been exploring the book of Acts.

I've had a few people say to me over the past few weeks, I didn't realize there was so much to it. I thought it was just a historical account. I didn't realize that there were so many things that could be gleaned from it.

But neither did I, as I dig into it again, to bring it to you. And so we're exploring this book together in some detail because I think it's important. Our focus passage this morning is found in Acts 8, verses 26 to 40.

So go ahead and turn in your Bibles. Grab the Bible from the pew in front of you, if you want. And then I'll read that for us now, so you can also just listen or follow along.

Acts 8, verses 26 to 40. Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, Go south to the road, the desert road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.

[1 : 08] So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake, which means the queen of the Ethiopians.

This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home, he was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The spirit told Philip, Go to that chariot and stay near it. Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. Do you understand what you're reading? Philip asked. How can I? He said, unless someone explains it to me.

So he invited Philip to come and sit with him. This is the passage of scripture the eunuch was reading. He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent.

So he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation, he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.

[2 : 09] The eunuch asked Philip, Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about? Himself or someone else? Then Philip began with that very passage of scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

As they traveled along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of me being baptized? And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and Philip baptized them. Him, sorry. 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.

Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea. Conversion. Conversion is an interesting concept.

The Oxford Dictionary defines it as So we convert water into cubes in our freezer.

[3 : 19] We may convert imperial to metric or vice versa, depending on your leaning. You may even be on a lifelong quest with a higher calling to convert people into believing an important truth, and that is that chocolate chips are way, way better than raisins in a cookie.

And that is certainly a calling of mine. I'm confessing that this morning. But as Christians, we likely ascribe that to the second Oxford definition, and that conversion is the fact of changing one's religion or beliefs, or the action of persuading someone else to change theirs.

See that? Sometimes it's persuasion by relationship. Sometimes it's persuasion by conversation and connection. Sometimes it's conversion by force.

We can recognize all of those things. So we've noted several conversion events in our journey through the book of Acts so far. And the ones we've talked about, maybe we'll touch on these a bit, the ones we've talked about have involved large numbers of people, which is kind of interesting.

Maybe you've noticed, right? In Acts 2, we learned that 3,000 people were converted at Pentecost. That's a big group. In Acts 3, 2,000 people were converted at Solomon's Colonnade near the temple.

[4 : 44] And then over the past two weeks throughout Acts 8, we've taken a close look at the vast conversion of Samaritan people. An entire people group was converted to Christ.

And in each case, the gospel message here that was communicated was basically the same. Christ was proclaimed, and the responses included belief and faith, repentance from sin, and then baptism.

Those were generally the steps that occurred. So this morning, we have an opportunity to examine the conversion of just one person.

Our sermon is titled, The Conversion of the Ethiopian. So as we dig in this morning, let me give you a quick profile of this man scripture refers to as the Ethiopian.

And I was saying to one of my pastor friends, I said, I'm preaching on this passage, and I feel weird saying eunuch, eunuch, eunuch, eunuch, over and over and over. Because I said, to me, that's a partial identifier of the man, but not a full identifier.

[5 : 48] And he said, well, as long as you're not changing it in scripture when you read that. And I said, of course not. But I said, I just feel like referring to him as the eunuch over and over and over is just a partial definition.

So, yes, he was a eunuch. So we're going to talk about that for a second. But you'll hear me say the Ethiopian man more so. So this man was the queen's treasurer, scripture tells us.

And he was a eunuch from Ethiopia. So he's a long way from home. We also know from scripture that it says he was a very religious man who had traveled a long way to worship God.

So he had really made a pilgrimage of sorts, which requires lots of things. First of all, guts, I think. But it requires faith and dedication and certainly commitment.

So with this story, we get an opportunity to both confirm some of the things that we've already learned and also to learn some other things, some new things about biblical conversions.

[6 : 49] So let's look at the details and facts together. Our passage identifies the Ethiopian man as a eunuch. So let's explore that for a minute in case you don't completely understand the term or completely understand maybe the context from scripture here.

So the eunuchs of the Bible were generally castrated males or those who were incapable of reproduction due to a birth defect. So there's a fairly, a little bit broader definition than you might have thought.

A eunuch could also be someone who performed typical work of eunuchs so that they also may have remained perfectly capable of having sex as we would understand it, but they performed duties that required them to be celibate.

So sometimes a eunuch was simply a title. The purpose of intentional castration would have been to induce impotence and remove sexuality.

So you can see that when you're not convinced that someone can control those desires, that would have been the approach they would have taken. And it was a common practice in ancient times for rulers to castrate some of their servants and or advisors in order to subdue and potentially pacify them.

[8 : 11] So not always the greatest, but there you go. There's some context. So not surprisingly, it would have been especially common to castrate men who attended to a royal harem.

That would have been common. So maybe that was the case with this man. We understand he was involved in the queen's treasury. So maybe he was involved in some of her other affairs as well that would have required this kind of approach.

So there's some context. So what about the details of what happened here? As we enter this story, as we've heard this morning, we immediately learn that Philip was given specific directions by an angel to head from Jerusalem down to Gaza.

And along the way, he meets this man sitting in a chariot. So maybe that's not something you would have seen every day, a chariot pulled over by the side of the road. Even back then, it might have not been that common.

We also hear that the Ethiopian man gave instructions for the chariot to pull over or to stop. So he had a driver. So this would have been a big and elaborate chariot. So the man is returning home after worshiping God in Jerusalem, and Philip finds him reading from the prophet Isaiah.

[9 : 23] And then the Holy Spirit directs Philip to go to the chariot and stay near it. Do you read Isaiah in your spare time? Just checking. Philip has been given this very clear mission from God, and then he's being kept on the path to meet this mission head on.

As Philip approaches the chariot, he hears this man reading the words of Isaiah. So Philip would have recognized the words, and the man has stopped by the side of the road. He's reading scripture out loud.

Philip would have known full well what he was reading. So Philip immediately asks him if he understands what he's reading. So Philip has responded to the Spirit's leading to engage with this man.

And it's also important, I find, to note that he recognizes and begins with where the man is currently at. Do you see that? He doesn't approach him and say, yeah, you're reading Isaiah, and FYI, you're reading it all wrong.

So let's start again, and I'll explain what you're doing wrong. He doesn't do that. He approaches him and starts with where the man is at. He doesn't judge his lack of knowledge, maybe his odd pronunciation.

[10 : 36] He recognizes that the man has been drawn to this particular section of scripture, and then he takes it from there. And I love what the Ethiopian man does next.

He recognizes his need to learn, and he wants to fully understand Isaiah's words. He's excited about this passage. He's curious about it. He's engaged in it.

And so he asks Philip to help him understand. Is that something you've done? As you read scripture or come to a context or situation or set of circumstances in scripture that you don't understand or completely grasp, do you ask someone to help you?

Or do you read it and go, eh, I don't know. Bible closed. Devotion next time. Pick up where I was. It's important to ask. That's part of the discipleship journey.

We're on this road of following Jesus together, growing in relationship with him together, learning God's word and God's truth together.

[11 : 40] There's no shame in asking for help. There's no shame in learning from other Christians. In fact, that is the plan. So now, what was he studying?

We come to the passage within the passage this morning. An Ethiopian man was reading Isaiah 53, verses 7 and 8. So let's hear it again.

I'll read it. He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

In his humiliation, he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth. So this passage describes, now hold on to your thoughts of who it describes, but it describes someone being led to their death like a lamb.

It's a very powerful image. To a lamb being slaughtered, no less, whose life was being taken from the earth. So, right, I said, we don't want to jump immediately, but it is really easy for us to draw conclusions about the passage.

[12 : 51] Because we know that Isaiah was a prophet writing about future events. And as a prophet of God, Isaiah would have been writing about the future plans God has for his people and for all creation.

But then, without the context of Jesus, Isaiah's writing would have been a bit confusing, I think, as to the he Isaiah speaks about.

And that's exactly what the Ethiopian man was clarifying. Was Isaiah speaking about himself in the third person? Or was he speaking about someone else?

Who he? He who, right? Being open to the prompting of the Spirit, and starting from this passage, as we talked about, and this has clearly grabbed the man's attention, Philip tells him about Jesus, and that the passage reveals Christ to the reader.

And just like we've seen in other conversion stories, the truth of Jesus changes hearts. It creates a spark of faith. But when sincere, it also spurs people into action.

[14 : 01] And that's what we see with this Ethiopian man. They continue to travel along the road together, and as they come across some water, the man immediately asked Philip, what can stand in the way of me being baptized?

Well, we don't read it in the passage, but we can assume that Philip said to the man, if you sincerely believe what I've told you with all your heart, there's nothing that should stand in the way of you

being baptized, except maybe, for some of my friends, a fear of public speaking. But this also wasn't a Sunday morning baptism kind of situation, right? We recognize the circumstances. The chariot stops, and both Philip and the Ethiopian man's scripture tells us, go down into, it says, into the water.

We can assume that the man confessed his faith in Jesus as the Son of God, and then Philip baptizes him. We read that as soon as the baptism was done, Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away.

Now, I love how we read that passage, Philip leaving didn't diminish the Ethiopian man's celebration. He found Jesus, and he was celebrating.

[15:17] He saw God on his own before he met Philip, and he rejoiced with God alone after Philip left. So we can understand that Philip being suddenly taken away, as scripture says, he didn't just wander off, and it didn't mean away, away.

It wasn't like Philip baptized the man and suddenly dropped dead. That is not what we're getting here. Just that this task that Philip had been given was done.

And Philip was needed somewhere else. That's why we get there. So there's a suggestion here that although Philip was miraculously taken away, like I said, he didn't just wander off, there's a suggestion that he was taken away.

And then he appeared again to complete work in a place called Azotus, scripture tells us. And he continued to preach as he traveled on his way to Caesarea.

So I don't know if this has ever crossed your mind, but it certainly caught my attention. After so many impressive mass conversion accounts that we've seen and read about, why did Luke, remember Luke wrote the book of Acts, why did Luke spend so much time in writing here, describing the conversion of just one person?

[16:34] Listen, I remember this story from Sunday school when I was a child. It's a big deal story that is talked about a lot. And we're talking about it here again this morning. What is the big deal?

Why did Luke think this was so important? Well, it must mean that this event and the details around it are truly significant somehow. They must be. And that there's lessons or principles that we can learn from this historic account?

I think so. So let's consider that. The Ethiopian eunuch was a very religious man. And he traveled, scripture tells us, a great deal, a great distance, pardon me, to worship God in Jerusalem. And he was reading from the scriptures when Philip found him. He knew what the scriptures were. He was familiar with God. He was committed to this. And most accounts of conversion in scripture involve very devout people, people who have sought God.

The 3,000 converts at Pentecost had traveled great distances, scripture tells us, to attend a religious feast. They were committed. And in the weeks ahead, we're going to look at other conversions.

[17:46] Paul, Cornelius, Lydia. All people who were very devout and what we would call religious. Now, religious, in quotation marks, can have very negative connotations.

And I think we all know some of them, unfortunately. But we're going to seek to reclaim that a little bit. The conversion of a devout and seemingly religious person, we need to be honest, clearly demonstrates that just because someone is religious doesn't mean they are saved.

See that? You might be thinking, but how is that possible? Well, we'll look at it in the days ahead. It doesn't mean that someone who's religious and seeks after God necessarily has a vibrant and growing relationship with Jesus Christ.

That's the truth. That's reality. We're going to look at, probably in the future sometime, God willing, the concept of unsaved Christians. And you may be thinking, what?

So I'm pondering. We'll get there. So this idea shows us that religious people, on the plus side, are generally great candidates for hearing the gospel.

[19:00] They're great candidates because they recognize or fear God already, likely. They fear his authority. Later in Acts, we're going to consider that some religious people just needed to be shown the way to God more accurately through Jesus.

We'll see that. And so we can have faith that people who are sincerely seeking after God will one day have the opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel.

And maybe you know people for whom that's happened. Being religious is a good start, generally. So recognizing that the gospel really is about preaching Jesus, what does that mean?

We can likely agree that preaching Jesus involves teaching. Telling someone that Jesus died for our sins and that he was died, resurrected, and was exalted by God.

And just as the Ethiopian man perceived, preaching Jesus involves stressing the importance of baptism. As we've seen and as we will continue to see, baptism is the expected response when someone declares their faith in Jesus.

[20 : 16] Recognizing that baptism plays an important role in the remission of sins. And it also serves as an appeal for us to seek to maintain a clear conscience.

It's an important reminder. Baptism is something that should be prioritized in the life of a Christian. And if you want to talk about baptism, talk to me.

Because as I've said before, I will fill that tank. I will get in that tank again. Anytime. Anytime.

Anytime. Anytime. So when the Ethiopian man asks about baptism, Philip takes a moment to qualify the request.

Because he wants to ensure that the man believes Jesus is the Son of God. That's the important first step. Because without wholehearted and sincere belief, baptism really is a potentially empty activity.

And as a church of Baptists, I didn't hear a sharp intake of breath. But we are not Baptists by name only. We see the value in that. So what is up with baptism?

[21 : 25] Well, it obviously involves water. Right? Right? As we've heard this morning, Philip and the Ethiopian men went down into the water.

Now, I was going to talk a little bit about different kinds of baptism, but that's a huge digression that I'm not doing. So. But the apostles would suggest over and over that baptism essentially amounts to burial in water.

And it results then in a rebirth in Christ. So, are you ready for a controversial statement I read from one commentator as I prepared this sermon?

This is when the sharp intake of breath happens, because I went. Baptism is not a public confession of one's faith. No gasps? Come on.

How does that strike you? How does it strike you? Like a slap across the face? When I first read it, I thought it was crazy. I thought, is this a heretical book I've just picked up?

[22 : 30] Because this seems crazy. But consider that. Some say that the purpose of baptism is primarily to publicly confess a person's faith in Christ.

Right? You've heard that. That's what you know. And others say that it's just a one-time public event that your church family gets to celebrate with you. Right? Right? That's part of it.

But is that truly all there is to it? Because I think as Protestants a lot of times, we have vanilla-ed it quite down to maybe a concerning level.

Okay. Okay. Here you go. Here's my scripture back up. Consider this now. Nowhere. And you can look. Nowhere in the Bible does it state or even imply that these, public confession of faith, and just a chance to celebrate, are the primary or even the secondary purposes of baptism.

Nowhere. Look for it. I'll wait. Honestly, it's not there. So how did we get there? Good question. So if the purpose of baptism were primarily to publicly confess your faith, why did Philip baptize the Ethiopian man?

[23 : 50] Why did he do it? There's no one else around to witness it. Scripture makes that clear. They were alone in the desert. If public confession were the main purpose, why didn't Philip answer the man's question differently when he asked what stood in the way of him being baptized?

The man wanted to know what would stand in the way of him being baptized. So if baptism was primarily a confession of his faith, we should have maybe expected Philip to say, oh, that's a great idea, but actually we need to wait here a bit, and you just keep seeing if anybody comes along, we'll just catch them and get them to hang out and watch.

In the weeks ahead, we're going to see that the conversion of the Philippian jailer also involved a relatively private baptism. The conversion of the Ethiopian, it should impress us with how it demonstrates, and we've talked about this before, the simplicity of salvation, the simplicity of the gospel, and yet how it can change a person's life and their eternal destiny in the blink of an eye.

The power of the gospel. Romans 1.16, you know it, says, For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.

Whether it's preached to large crowds or single people, the gospel is indeed God's power to save.

[25 : 34] When the gospel of Jesus is truly and sincerely preached, Jesus' death for our sins is emphasized. The importance of baptism as commanded by Jesus should be mentioned as well.

Listeners should want to know what hinders me from being baptized, so much so that they will want to be baptized immediately. Fill the tank.

I'd like to do a, maybe in the spring, I'd like to do an outdoor baptism at a lake sometime. Even if it's just one person who wanted to be, I think that would be cool for all of us to gather on the shore somewhere.

When the truth of Jesus is truly and sincerely preached, the purpose of baptism will be understood, knowing that someone could be baptized in private, just as effectively as in public.

The necessity for a wholehearted faith in Jesus will be emphasized, making baptism about so much more than simply getting wet. Was your own conversion anything like the Ethiopian man's?

[26 : 41] When someone preached Jesus to you, were you compelled to ask about baptism? Were you compelled to ask, what's next? Being baptized is about wanting to be counted among the disciples of Jesus.

It's not about performing some kind of ritual or just getting into a tank in a church in front of an audience. Are you wondering what God's will is for your life?

I hope that's a stupid question. Are you wondering what he's asking you to do? If you haven't taken the step of baptism yet, or maybe you didn't fully grasp it when you did it, rather than wondering what God might be wanting you to do, focus on what you for sure know he has already asked you to do.

If you're here this morning and you would call yourself a committed follower of Jesus, but you haven't been baptized, please, I beg you, do not let a fear of public speaking or something else prevent you from taking that important step of obedience in following him.

I will walk that road with you, and your church family will be here to celebrate and support you. Pray about baptism. And if you have been baptized, pray about what it meant at the time it happened and what it should mean for you every day.

[28 : 19] Amen.