

How inclusive is Jesus?

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- [0 : 00] Acts chapter 8 verse 26. And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.
- Now the passage of 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. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe this generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.
- And the eunuch said to Philip. Philip, about whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this? About himself or about someone else? Then Philip opened his mouth.
- And beginning with this scripture, he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, see, here is water.
- [1 : 52] What prevents me from being baptized? And he commanded the chariot to stop. And they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.
- And when they came out of the water, the spirit of the Lord carried Philip away. And the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus.
- And as he passed through, he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea. Well, good morning, everyone.
- Will you pray with me as we come to God's word? Father, through my planned words this morning, I know that they are weak, these plans.
- And so I pray that you might use my words to help us understand your word. And that you would speak powerfully through your word and meet each one of us here this morning.
- [3 : 04] In Jesus' name I pray. Amen. Well, a man named Laman from Gambia, West Africa, moves to Newcastle.
- And Laman, he works at Newcastle Uni, Callaghan Campus, as a professor. He goes through the gruelling process of getting his permanent residency, and then he becomes an Australian citizen.
- He's allowed to wear his traditional African dress to work. His colleagues smile and accept his strange-smelling lunch in the common areas.
- He struggles a bit with cultural differences, like how individualistic we are here, like how private people are. Like he never gets invited to have a meal at someone's home.
- He finds that a bit strange. But there's something else. The Laman's colleagues and his students keep saying, as if it's self-evidently obvious, that it's just subtle sometimes, and sometimes it's just outright ridiculing.
- [4 : 18] And it makes him feel that he doesn't truly belong, and he never will. Because people say and imply that empirical science is the only capital T truth, that what is material is all that there is.
- And it mocks. It mocks. It mocks his Africanness. Because I'm basing this off a real man, not at Newcastle, but Lamin Sana, before he died in 2019.

He's a professor at Yale University in the US. And he says in his book, Whose Religion is Christianity? At the heart of Africanness is to see the world as a supernatural place.

Good spirits, evil spirits. And the problem of evil spirits is they can seduce you, they can defeat you. So our secular society, the West, says, come, you can live here, you can eat your food, you can dress how you want, but to fully belong, the message is, you need to become an individualistic, anti-supernatural Westerner.

How often do you hear the word inclusive? We say it so much in our society. But imagine someone like Lamin, how he feels.

[5 : 59] He's not seen. He's mocked. So how inclusive is Jesus? What would a man like Lamin find if he rubbed shoulders with you at work?

If a lady like Lamin came to playgroup, if they came into our church, what would they find?

Let me quote Lamin in his book. African sense in their hearts that Jesus did not mock their respect for the sacred, the way Western secular people do, nor their clamour for an invincible saviour.

So they beat their sacred drums for him until the stars skipped and danced in the skies. And after that dance, the stars weren't so little anymore. Christianity helped Africans become renewed Africans, not remade Europeans.

That's how inclusive Jesus is. He doesn't mock. But he does renew. Jesus is truly inclusive of all races, but precisely because he's exclusive.

[7 : 26] He says, I am the way. I am the truth. I am the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

No one. No one. No Anglo-Saxon whites who have a lovely house and family and have grown up in the church. No one. Comes.

Except through me. He requires totally renewed Aussies. He's totally inclusive precisely because he is exclusive.

I am. So we meet another African in the story here today and his story is so powerful, not because it's easy to belong to God, but precisely because it is so difficult to fully belong to God.

We've seen in the story so far this mass conversion, this revival, this amazing reconciliation between north and south in Samaria.

[8 : 31] And Luke now, he tells us about three individuals. So we've gone big picture. We're introduced to three people. We're going to meet Saul next week in chapter 9, Saul the enemy.

Chapter 10, Cornelius the Roman. And here, we have a nameless African eunuch foreigner.

All three individuals show us this unstoppable Jesus who leaves the 99 sheep to go after the one, who breaks any ideas you and I have of who is in and who is out.

He's determined to go to the ends of the earth. So we've met Simon, the great one in Samaria.

He's a somebody. He's at the top of his society, but he has some sort of conversion. And how genuine that is, we're not really sure. He gets baptised, but it's superficial at best because we find that his heart is not right with God.

[9 : 42] He is still in love with his own name. He's still in love with power and money and success. And now we meet another great man. He is at the top of his society.

He's at the top. But this man is sincere in his search for God. And so I think he presents to us as a model of what true faith in Jesus looks like.

So what do we know about this man? He's from Ethiopia, which is modern day Sudan, just below Egypt. He's racially on the edge of the world that Philip would have known.

Like he's, as we talked about in our small group, he's a Gentile Gentile. He's out there. He's in charge of the treasury of the kingdom. He's this chief financial officer, if you will.

He's got the big bucks. He's got the power. But he's also made a 1,000 mile journey on horse and chariot, which would have taken weeks, one way, to come to Jerusalem.

[10 : 45] He might be risking someone back home usurping his position. I don't know. Give me some poetic license here. Maybe he's risking someone taking his top spot while he's away.

Maybe. Maybe. He's definitely risking danger on the road. We think our roads are dangerous. It was much more dangerous to travel back then, mainly from people trying to rob you and hurt you.

So he's made this huge journey. But Luke is so not PC here. Five times he just says the eunuch.

Like, it's pretty rude. Like, what's represented by the name David Bott? Everything.

Sorry, not everything in the world. That came out wrong. All that I am is in that name. What's in a name? All I am. If you just call me Shorty.

[11 : 48] Look. Luke. The eunuch. Five times. The eunuch. We never learn his name.

What is a eunuch? Well, in ancient royal courts, we find it in the book of Esther, Daniel, when they're in exile, successful men holding high positions in the royal family are castrated.

So that there's no threat to the female royalty, to the bloodline. It's a high price to be at the top.

And what's motivated him for such a journey? Well, we're told in verse 27, to worship.

He's come to worship. There's plenty of religion where he's from. The Ethiopian king was thought to be the son. Let me read this.

[12 : 50] Child of the son. There's plenty of religion. But he wants to change his allegiance. He's searching for the true God of Israel.

He's studying. He's owning an expensive copy of the Bible. Not everyone had a Bible. Not everyone could read it. How privileged we are today. But he is searching.

It suggests this great and powerful man at the top. He's got some sort of inner emptiness. That he's motivated to come all the way to Jerusalem, to the temple, to find God.

But he would have been turned away. The temple doors would have been shut for him. Like we saw earlier in Acts, in chapter 3, the beggar sitting by the temple doors.

It would have been shut. Because Deuteronomy 23.1 says, no one whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord.

[13 : 58] He can't receive the physical sign of conversion, of circumcision. He can't become a full member of God's people, even if he desperately wants to.

He embodies someone under God's curse, who's cut off. He's nameless. No future. No place. He's excluded. So I think it's likely he'd been returning home incredibly disillusioned and more lost than ever before.

Now why, I think we need to pause to consider why might God have forbidden eunuchs from accessing him in the temple to worship.

It seems harsh, doesn't it? Well, I think one thing to consider is how harsh other nations were, how brutal, how depersonalising that other nations would castrate their servants.

Socially, this law was very good. It prevented Israel from being like the nations, treating people like that. But more than that, it's not just eunuchs who are excluded.

[15 : 35] We won't go into all the laws, but those with physical defects, it teaches us that God requires wholeness to be in his presence.

But the physical laws are really just representing we need to be whole morally. We need to be whole people spiritually to be in God's presence.

We need to be whole people We need to be whole people We need the law to show me that someone who's broken the Ten Commandments, how difficult it is to belong, that I deserve to be cut off.

I'm with the eunuch outside. God requires, he wants wholeness. Now that's a good thing. He wants wholeness.

He wants us to be whole people. Spiritually, morally, physically. And so his exclusion actually points, it gives us a yearning, a crying out, God, remake, remake me, remake this world.

[16 : 45] And that's exactly what he's promised to do. So there's very good reasons for this law, but the law also pushes us forward.

And this eunuch is reading Isaiah 53. Maybe he's reading there because he's read a few chapters later in Isaiah 56 what God has promised.

He says in Isaiah 56, 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'm a dry tree. For thus says the Lord, to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give you 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. These I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer.

[18 : 02] For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. The Lord God who gathers the outcasts of Israel declares, I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.

I wonder, I just, I wonder if he had read that promise and that's why he's searching Isaiah. Now someone in my small group this week who shall remain nameless, let's call him Jamion.

Jamion rudely interrupted my Bible study plans and he pointed out this story isn't about the eunuchs searching for the Lord.

Not primarily, it's about the Lord searching for him. That's why we're told so much divine activity going on here.

It's the Lord Jesus who sends his angel to Philip. How Philip heard this? Was it in a vision? Was it the angel showing up?

[19 : 15] I don't know. But don't get hung up on that. What's most important, angels only turn up in scripture at very momentous occasions. This is a huge occasion and it's for this foreigner.

This one foreigner. Angels are turning up. Philip, leave Samaria, this ministry and movement that's going gangbusters and I want you, here's a plan for evangelism, go where you don't expect anyone to be, go to the desert.

Okay? We're meant to be seeing Jesus driving this story. He's the one, he's the hero, not Philip. And then this Jewish man brought up on purity laws, he sees this foreigner, he sees this sexually altered man racially from the edge of the world and then Philip thinks, wow, what an opportunity God, I'll take it from here.

No, Philip's not the, the spirit has to prompt him again, go over and join this chariot. Get close to this man. I'm reading between the lines here so take this with a grain of salt but maybe Philip needed that push to cross everything inside him that kind of had a disgust for this man.

Spirit is sending him. Go join this chariot and if the chariot's moving it's kind of a funny image of him just running along.

[20 : 53] Been reading anything interesting lately? I don't know, maybe it wasn't moving. I'm going, I'm going to get in trouble for the poetic license I got in here today but there's no such thing as chance in God's world.

What's he reading out loud? Like if you wanted to start in the Old Testament there's a few places where you could easily point to Jesus. Isaiah 53. Wow. This is not a coincidence.

In that very moment for Philip it's over here. This eunuch thinks he's searching for God but even his failed pilgrimage, his struggle to understand the scriptures, all of that is really the Lord preparing him to hear his word and the Lord sending his word through his people to meet him at the exact moment that he had planned.

It's the Lord searching and sending for him. I find great encouragement from this in terms of when I just feel like there's an opportunity right now in where this person is saying something that their heart is yearning and I don't know what to say.

I don't know what to say but the sovereignty of Jesus here in orchestrating this moment I find so much encouragement that I don't know what to say but I do know he's so sovereign he's got me in this moment.

[22 : 36] He's been working in this person long before I got here. He'll be working in them long after I'm gone. It gives us confidence to open our mouth I think.

We don't know what to say but we know that Jesus is the one who's really searching. I don't know about you if you're a believer but I can look back on my salvation and go yeah it was Jesus finding me.

It wasn't me finding Jesus. The more we grow in love for Jesus recalling how he found us his search for the outsider it's going to become our search.

Well this eunuch he found the full belonging he craved in the exclusive claims of Jesus. he saw the pictures of Isaiah 53 this servant this someone sent by God who entered my suffering someone who actually willingly chose to become like me a eunuch because who can describe his generation who can describe his offspring because he was cut off and he did it willingly in service of God who is this figure how is he connected to the promise a few chapters later so that me a dry tree can receive a name better than sons and daughters who is this who is pierced for my transgressions who is this who is crushed for our iniquities with his wounds we are healed we are made whole and

Philip says well let me tell you about him brother I've been wondering what everlasting name did this nameless eunuch receive that day and why don't we get his name at this point once he's converted Luke keeps calling him the eunuch I think the eunuch's question and then Philip's response tells us what name he got what prevents me from being baptized I don't know about your baptism if you're a believer but when I got baptized looking back I think I was just thinking about myself really I thought it I kind of thought about it as a way of declaring my commitment my faith which it is that scripture says it's so much more than that

[25 : 56] I think I thought of it as like well it's commanded I should do it which isn't like we should obey God's commands but often God gives us way more motives than that imagine what this man's baptism meant for him try and put yourself in his shoes because if we do we will start to feel the wonder of what baptism means and symbolises because it symbolises or imagine imagine if the eunuch asked who wanted to be converted to the God of Israel what prevents me from being circumcised now I know that's a bit crass but everything prevents him he can't and here he's asking the covenant physical symbol of belonging to God's people what prevents me from being baptized if this suffering servant has taken my place what prevents me because baptism is a physical symbol of what the spirit has already done in creating faith in

Jesus we know what baptism is from the earlier chapters of Acts it is not just baptism in the name of Jesus it's actually into the name of Jesus what's in a name everything in this case everything all of Jesus is yours you are baptized into the name of Jesus you belong to him fully I'm not my own his death is my death his resurrection is my resurrected life I'm not my own I now belong to all who are united to Jesus by faith I'm part of the assembly imagine what this meant to him Philip goes down with this eunuch Luke's language here is almost confusing but I think he might be trying to emphasize how united this Jewish

Philip and this foreign eunuch is now it almost sounds like they're going down into the water together I'm not sure if it actually means that but it pictures this eunuch is fully a brother now this sexually altered foreign man fully belongs to Jesus and his people simply by faith so what name did he receive he received a name that's above every name I think he's received a risen name that will never die so how inclusive is Jesus of us here today when I'm not sure how how much you feel on the edges of the assembly of God's people I think lots of things can make us feel on the edge a stained conscience of the sin that we do this week that we did last week if people knew we know

God knows maybe you've got same sex attraction and you're fearing what would happen if you told someone you love Jesus but what would happen maybe you know your motives when I my zeal for Jesus and trying to serve him gee every step I take I know there's so much self centred in there but here in this in this story of of the eunuch that we learn there's no levels there's no degrees of belonging to God's people we all share fully in the one name we're all baptized by the spirit that inner renewal into the one body his body we're the one people across all races we're the one new people there's no levels there's no degrees if you love the fact that

Jesus was cut off to bring you in you're in you can't add to that and nothing can take away from that what prevents me from being baptized from fully belonging to the Lord and his people forever and ever nothing nothing at all I think when Jesus returns we'll learn this guy's personal name like he's eternal we'll meet him he's going to be a monument he already is a monument he's the first what an honoured place he's been given in scripture he had no biological legacy on earth but don't you wonder who became a child of God through his testimony when he got home how many people have been touched by God because of this story but maybe

[32 : 08] God is speaking to you today through this story and in a way all those people are the offspring of this man so I want to say a word for those who are struggling to feel complete maybe in your singleness maybe you're struggling to have children don't say I'm a dry tree Jesus has searched for you and found you he's given you his name an everlasting name even better than sons and daughters no you have a special honoured place in his household in his kingdom and I think you have a unique opportunity in your struggles to say

Jesus is enough I fully belong he's enough how much this man fully belongs I think even the ending of this story points to what are we to learn that the spirit whisked Philip away at the end Emma reminded me that there was this church in Sydney we didn't go to this church that they were teaching the spiritual gift of teleportation it's sad that they were actually taking that seriously that is not what we are to learn here the word here is just seized so maybe it was very supernatural and just plonked but maybe it was just a conscience filled with just spirit go here now we don't know permit me one more poetic license after this sweet moment of baptism

I'd be surprised if there wasn't tears this is a sweet moment of full inclusion in God in Jesus with his brother Philip embracing him this is a sweet moment and then Philip is taken away I think it almost seems cruel to leave this man on his own because Luke says he sees him no more but it's not cruel the eunuch didn't think it was cruel outwardly he's alone again but something has radically changed he goes he goes on his way rejoicing that whatever prompted him to search to come to Jerusalem something has changed his emptiness has been filled he knows he fully belongs to the assembly of the Lord

Jesus Christ and so he can he can go on his way rejoicing the search is over he's been found do you is your search over do you know you've been found we're going to sing in a moment and it's the act of singing together is as we learnt on camp it's actually an expression of that belonging to the assembly of Jesus by faith so we're going to it's going to be a beautiful expression of the fact that Jesus has brought us into his family simply because he was cut off to bring us in but before we sing can I ask the muses just to wait a few minutes and then come on up and lead us in song can I just encourage us all to personally reflect on what you think is holding you out of

God's people I'm not sure it's going to be different for each one of us so which is why I'm just going to ask you to reflect for a moment if you already trust Jesus reflect on how fully you belong to him and if you sense that God is finding you searching you out right now do some business with God I suppose so why don't we do spend a few minutes just reflecting and then we'll sing oh let's see him again everyone is going to be love me so we'll be going to Y create a show