

What can stand in the way of my being baptised?

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[0 : 00] I think what a vital question that is in verse 36. Did you see? As they travelled along! the road, verse 36, they came to some water and the eunuch said, look here is water, what can stand in the way of my being baptised? What he's saying is, is there any barrier preventing me personally from coming in? Given who I am, where I'm from, what I'm like, what I've done, is there anything about me that means I can't come in? What can stand in the way of my being baptised? We're a mixed bunch of people at St John's Orchard Park. Numbers of us this morning will know from our own experience what it feels like to be excluded, kept on the outside and unwelcome. For some, because of your race, your skin colour, you've been discriminated against, overlooked in business, kept out of social circles, stared at, then ignored, judged and hurt by other people, maybe terribly. For some, maybe because of the way you look, your body, or because of the way you talk, or your social class, you've been given the impression you're simply not welcome in this place, in this group of friends. Or maybe because of what you've done in your life, and the guilt and the dirt that sticks to you, you sense they'd never allow you in. There is something very personally painful, shaming even, about being prevented from coming in. And so the question of verse 36 here, chapter 8, really is so very personal, and also so important. Even more so when you notice this man here, this eunuch, he's not talking about entering just any social circle, he's talking about entry into the kingdom of God, which is what baptism signifies. So today, in the 21st century, are there any barriers that mean a person cannot enter the kingdom of God? Are there any barriers today to Zach or anyone being baptised, receiving forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit and friendship with God for all eternity? In a world where, do you agree, where many suspect they're not welcome anywhere, in a world where people suspect they're not welcome in the church, this is so important.

And for us, even, personally, given who you are, given where you're from, and what you're like, and what you've done, are there any barriers to you entering the kingdom of God? Must you stay on the outside, or can you come in freely and gladly? Just rewind with me to the start of this wonderful encounter on the desert road. Acts chapters 8 and 9 tells how, under God, the good news of Jesus spreads into Judea and Samaria, the regions surrounding Jerusalem, with Philip and others proclaiming the gospel. But in Acts 8, verse 26, the good news suddenly arrows out to the margins, to the ends of the earth, and a personal encounter on a desert road. And follow along with me, verse 26.

Now an angel of the Lord, because this is God's doing, an angel of the Lord said to Philip, go south to the road, the desert road, that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. And the road to Gaza takes you down and away from Jerusalem towards Egypt and Africa, and the margins of the empire and beyond.

And it's a desert road, not many people there, you'd imagine. But the angel said, rise and go. And so Philip does, he started out and went. You think you're going to meet anyone in this barren place? Verse 27, behold, a man, who is described so exactly, an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandike, which means queen of the Ethiopians. Who is he then?

[4 : 29] First, he's an Ethiopian, which means in New Testament language, he's a black African. You travel south from Israel into Africa, you come first to Egypt, an ancient people living around the mouth of the Nile. Travel further south, up the Nile, you come eventually to the land of Cush, it used to be called, and a people physically, ethnically distinct from the Egyptians.

The kingdom of Meroe, it was. It's capital in present-day Sudan. Ethiopians, black Africans, who travel north and trade with the Roman world.

So first, this is a black African man. Second, he's a eunuch. That is, he's a castrated man. It could be he was born that way, his sexual organs deformed, he's unable to father children.

Maybe he'd been castrated for a social reason or a religious reason. But whichever, as a eunuch, he's even more of an outsider to Israel.

In the Old Testament law, in Deuteronomy 23, with people being ritually mutilated for religious reasons, Moses said, no one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord.

[5 : 48] You can't come in. Second, he's an Ethiopian. He's a eunuch. Third, he's an important official. He's one of the rich and powerful in charge of all the treasury.

He's the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The, I had to look it up, Nadim Zahawi, this week, I think. The Nadim Zahawi of his day, the Chancellor. He's directly responsible to the Queen of the Ethiopians. And so, verse 27, can you see him? Here he is on the desert road. As one person puts it, a very strong representative of foreignness within a Jewish context.

He comes from the edges of the known world. He is of the black race, is a castrated male, and probably a Gentile, not a Jew. Do you see he is right on the edges?

And yet, verse 27, this man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, he's a Godseeker, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot, reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. So this is the setup for what happens.

[6 : 56] Philip, a Greek-speaking Jew, directed by the Lord to this desert road, and a black African eunuch in his chariot, going home, reading and seeking.

They've been described to you. Can you picture them? By the way, there are no blonde-haired, blue-eyed white men here. Or in any of Acts so far, as far as I understand.

Because the Christian faith isn't the white man's religion. It really isn't. Okay, now from verse 29, the encounter. Look at this.

The spirit told Philip, go to that chariot and stay near it. Because you see, God has a plan, and he's brought Philip and the eunuch together, and now it's time for action.

Then Philip ran up to the chariot, and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. I don't know if you ever get on the bus, and sit down next to someone reading the Bible, or you get into a taxi, and you see a cross hanging down from the rear wing mirror.

[8 : 03] It's a God-given opportunity, for sure. Which Philip takes? Do you understand what you're reading? Philip asked.

How can I? The eunuch says. Unless someone explains it to me. He's travelled all the way to Jerusalem, over a thousand miles, with his scroll, and none of the religious authorities have helped him.

That's shocking. And so, humbly, and wanting to understand the things of God, he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Okay, now we're in the chariot all together.

Zoom in alongside them in the chariot. Four. This is the passage of scripture the eunuch was reading. It's Isaiah 53 from the Old Testament. Listen. He was led like a lamb 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. And the eunuch asked Philip, tell me please, who is the prophet talking about?

[9 : 12] Himself? Or someone else? Philip, I don't understand. Who is this silent sufferer? Unjustly treated. His life taken. And now, on the desert road, seated in his chariot, Philip began, with this very passage of scripture, and told him the good news about Jesus.

That's because this scripture passage, Isaiah 53, 7 and 8, is part of a larger poem, a servant song, written hundreds of years before the coming of Jesus, which speaks precisely and prophetically about the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

Imagine their conversation, sat next to each other in this chariot 2,000 years ago, pouring over the scroll together. Says Philip, let me tell you about Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

See what's written here? Jesus was led like a sheep to the slaughter. Jesus was treated unjustly as they crucified him. Imagine Philip pointing just a couple of lines up to verses four to six in the scroll. He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

[10 : 39] Listen, Ethiopian man. It was for our sins that he suffered, and by his death, that people like you and me can have peace with God and be healed.

Imagine Philip rolling the scroll just a touch further forward to Isaiah 53, 10 to 12. Look, God raised Jesus from the dead, made him king and lord of all, because he poured out his life unto death and

was numbered with the transgressors.

That's what the prophet said. It's what Jesus said must happen. It's happened. Imagine the eunuch's eyes opening and his mind racing.

I'm imagining, just a touch more, did Philip roll the scroll on to Isaiah 55? Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call on him while he's near.

Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Turn to the Lord and he'll have mercy and to our God and he will freely pardon. In the chariot on the desert road, Philip told him the good news about Jesus, God's open offer of free mercy to all who will turn to him.

[12:00] To which I wonder if the eunuch said, but is it really open to all? To a foreigner? To a eunuch? Could it have been on the road to Gaza that Philip rolled the scroll of Isaiah on just another little bit to Isaiah 56 and verse 3?

Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, the Lord will surely exclude me from his people. Let no eunuch complain, I'm only a dry tree.

Because this is what the Lord says, to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant, I will give them an everlasting name and they will endure forever.

Ethiopian man, in your chariot, look here in the book of Isaiah the prophet and the good news of Jesus Christ. Turn to me, says God. Bind yourself to me and I promise I will give you an everlasting name and joy in my presence.

And so now to verse 36. As they travelled along the road, they came to some water.

[13:13] Of course they did. And the eunuch said, look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptised?

It's such a vital question and so eternally important. What can stand in the way of my being baptised? Is there any barrier preventing me from entering the kingdom of God given who I am, where I'm from, what I'm like, what I've done?

Is there anything about me that means that I can't come in? And the eunuch asks, because now he knows the wonderful answer. What can stand in my way?

Nothing can. Nothing can. In this God-driven encounter on the road, this is what God wants Zach and all of us to know.

There is nothing that needs stand in the way of our receiving the salvation God offers. Whoever we are, there's nothing that stands in the way. Just explore this with me for a moment.

[14:22] First off, whatever your race and your skin colour, your ethnic origin, you are welcome in the kingdom of God as this black African man is.

Got to underline this. It feels like longer, I think, because of all that's gone on, but it's only a couple of years now since the death of George Floyd, which highlighted ongoing racial tensions in the USA and beyond, and then the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement.

More broadly, we live in a world shot through with racial and ethnic strife in Europe and Asia and Africa, and some of us will have seen that and experienced that firsthand.

Racial minorities suffer at the hands of those who are more powerful. And we say that race hatred and racial discrimination is sin in the world and in the church.

Because the Lord God has created every human being in his image with equal dignity and worth. And so not only does our God create Greek-speaking Jews, black Africans, white Scandinavians, Indo-Chinese, Koreans, Sinhalese, he also offers salvation.

[15:45] And a place in his kingdom to those of every race and skin colour and ethnic origin. Look, this Ethiopian, this black African man, God sent Philip to him.

Because his life matters. His salvation matters. And the colour of his skin is no barrier. It's no barrier. And that is true for you and for me.

Second here, whatever you're like, you are welcome in the kingdom of God. This man here with his either deformed or mutilated sexual organs, his body is not whole.

He's injured, damaged, deformed. And the state of our bodies, what we are born with, or what's been done to damage us, can affect us so very deeply.

And when other people stare and then turn away, it can make you imagine that God might be like that with you too. Now think today of people who've suffered as a result of botched cosmetic surgery.

[16 : 59] Or, if I can say this, think of the growing number of people committing to gender reassignment surgery and then discovering regret and pain and isolation with their bodies mutilated and no way back.

Imagining you don't belong with other people, fearing you can't enter the church, let alone God's presence. But the gospel truth is that your physical deformity and the scars you bear are no barrier to your being accepted by the God who made you.

Wherever you're from, whatever you're like, and third, whatever you've done, however far you've fallen from God, his offer of mercy extends even to you because the good news about Jesus from Isaiah 53 is that we all like sheep have gone astray and each of us has turned to our own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Not just my small iniquities but my big sins and the darkest things I've ever done. At the cross the Lord God laid on his son all the sins of all who will repent and turn to him.

and so even your most secret wrongs and darkest things are no barrier to your coming to Christ. what can stand in the way of my being baptised?

[18 : 39] Nothing can. The way's open, there are no barriers, where you're from, what you're like, what you've done, none of that needs stand in the way. It says Peter back in Acts 2 to his first listeners and to Zach and to the world, repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, for all whom the Lord our God will call. And that is why knowing that nothing stands in his way, in verse 38 the black African eunuch gave orders to stop the chariot and then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptised him.

And on that day one Ethiopian eunuch with faith in Jesus Christ now washed and forgiven and part of the kingdom and saved and safe for all eternity with his God.

And so God's work was done that day. When they came up out of the water the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away the work is done and the eunuch didn't see him again but went on his way rejoicing back to his home.

Whereas Philip however appeared at Azotus and travelled about preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea. Let me say this morning in conclusion first to Zachary there is nothing Zach standing in the way of your being baptised.

[20 : 26] Turning from your sins and turning to Jesus Christ you can come. The way is open for you as you are and you are welcome in his kingdom.

Second to those of us who have not yet been baptised maybe you're someone who is coming to believe or does believe but you have felt that baptism is too big a thing for you given what you're like and what you've done.

Maybe you've not yet turned to God and feared for so long he would not welcome you but today maybe you realise even I could come even me and that's right.

What can stand in the way of your being baptised? Come to me today and say this good news about Jesus it's for me and I'll turn to him and we will baptise you not right now today but we will. And third to us all as a church I wonder whether we could be ready with a Bible open to be like Philip and tell all people the good news about Jesus.

[21 : 43] Do you think you could start to learn to show someone how the prophecy of Isaiah 53 is fulfilled in Jesus? Why not get ready for that God-given moment on the bus or in someone's uber chariot?

And last thing this morning will we be the kind of church who follow God's heart and plan? will we do all we can to actively welcome peoples of all races and ethnicities?

Will we include amongst ourselves the crushed and the mutilated the deformed and excluded? Will we like Jesus himself welcome those who have sinned terribly and eat with them?

Will we be together a truly inclusive church for all who will repent of their sins and turn to Christ?

Will we? Because the bottom line is this our great God delights in saving black African eunuchs and he delights in saving white English teenagers and his salvation will reach to the ends of the earth it really will so get on board with him believe the good news about Jesus and know the joy of salvation through Jesus and join in speaking the good news about Jesus to all people to all let me lead us in a prayer let's pray together as they travelled along the road they came to some water the eunuch said look here is water what can stand in the way of my being baptised we praise and thank

you our Lord and God that your gospel is not restricted to one people group one type of person one level of goodness all not person thank you that through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus all people from every nation however they are and whatever they have done can come and find salvation thank you for Zach's testimony and for his being baptised today please make us those who follow you our God and may we be a church full of open armed welcome to all in Jesus name Amen Amen Thank you.