

Acts 8:26-40

Introduction

This morning, Luke continues to recount for us the “redemptive-historical” expansion of the Gospel outside the boundaries of Jerusalem and Judea. We saw the preparation for this expansion in the selection of six Hellenistic Jews and one Gentile proselyte to Judaism to serve as leaders in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:1-7). We saw the further biblical and theological preparation for this expansion in the testimony of Stephen before the Sanhedrin (6:8-7:60) as he emphasized from Israel’s own history how God was never tied down to the temple in Jerusalem. And then we saw the practical impetus for this expansion in the martyrdom of Stephen and the resulting persecution which scattered the believers throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria (8:1-4). We saw how Philip, in particular (as one of “the seven”), “went down to the city of Samaria [see map on p. 9] and began preaching Christ to them” and how when they “believed Philip proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, both men and women” (8:5-12). Then we saw how when Peter and John came down from Jerusalem and laid their hands on them, they were receiving the Holy Spirit. Here’s the (re)uniting of south and north—of the Jews (Judah [and Benjamin]) with the ethnically and religiously estranged Samaritans (representing the ten “lost” northern tribes). Luke concludes this part of his account with the summary observation: “When [Peter and John] had solemnly bore witness and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were proclaiming the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.” And then Luke continues in verse 26:

I. Acts 8:26 — But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, “Rise up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a desert road.)

Throughout the book of Acts, we see constantly how God is the one guiding and directing and orchestrating this redemptive-historical expansion of the gospel. This “guiding and directing and orchestrating” is often explicit as either the Lord Jesus Himself, or an angel of the Lord (as in our passage this morning), or the Holy Spirit speaks directly to one of the disciples. Especially in the first several instances of this, the direction that’s given is contrary to all expectation. In chapter 5, the apostles are to go back into the temple and continue doing the very thing for which they were just arrested and jailed the day before—preaching to the Jews the name of Jesus Christ (5:19-20; cf. 12:7-11). In chapter 9, Ananias is to go and be an instrument in the conversion of Saul, the most aggressive and dangerous persecutor of the church and the one who has just travelled to Damascus so that if he finds any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem (9:1-2, 10-19). In chapter 10, Peter is to go with three Gentile men to a Gentile household and preach Christ to them even though it was “unlawful... for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him” (10:9-20, 28; cf. 11:5-12). And here in chapter 8, “an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, “‘Rise up [*anistemi*] and go [*poreuoami*] south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (This is a desert road.)”

“Gaza was the last water stop... before entering the desert on the way to Egypt and was 2,400 feet lower than Jerusalem [‘the road that descends...’]” (Bock). [See map on p. 9.] Philip is instructed, then, to leave all the populated centers—even the more remote towns and villages—

and go out into what some might call today the “God-forsaken” middle of nowhere. And this without any explanation at all. Having looked ahead in Acts and with our 20/20 hindsight, we might guess that this will lead to an opportunity for the further redemptive-historical expansion of the gospel. But it would be impossible to guess how. Philip himself had not the slightest idea why he was being sent into the middle of nowhere, or what—if anything—he would find there.

II. Acts 8:27a — [A]n angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, “Rise up [*anistemi*] and go [*poreuomai*]...” **So he rose up [*anistemi*] and went [*poreuomai*]...**

Luke intends this to be a picture of obedience by faith. Philip didn’t require answers before he obeyed. He simply “rose up and went” in believing obedience to the word of God. How often are we unwilling to obey what is commanded in Scripture, because our own feelings or reason (which we may even believe to be sanctified feelings and sanctified reason) are not quite satisfied? But what we need to remember is that all obedience to the word of God is ultimately by faith—or else it’s not a true and complete obedience. “By *faith* Abraham... *obeyed*...,” says the author of Hebrews (Heb. 11:8; cf. 11:17-19). And indeed, “without faith it is impossible to please [God]” (Heb. 11:6). We need God to help us see how dependent our “obedience” often is upon feelings and reason rather than being dependent ultimately upon the authority of His word. *Why* do we obey? May all of our obedience be more and more and more truly by faith.

III. Acts 8:27–28 — So [Philip] rose up and went; and behold[!], a man, an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace [*Kandakes*; a dynastic title (cf. Pharaoh/Abimelech), queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship, and he was returning and sitting in his chariot [wagon/carriage], and was reading the prophet Isaiah.

When Luke says, “and behold,” he probably indicates something of the wholly unexpected surprise that this must have been to Philip. But more than this, when Luke says, “and behold,” he’s highlighting the fact that something of great redemptive-historical importance is about to take place.

“And *behold*, a man, an *Ethiopian*...” Ethiopia corresponds not to the Ethiopia of our day, but to an ancient kingdom in the lands south of Egypt otherwise known as Cush (modern day Sudan; see map on p. 10). We first read about Cush in the “table of nations” in Genesis 10 which outlines how the earth was populated after the flood [see map on p. 10].

➤ **Genesis 10:6–7** — The sons of Ham [one of the three sons of Noah] were Cush [Ethiopia] and Mizraim [Egypt] and Put and Canaan. The sons of Cush were Seba and Havilah and Sabtah and Raamah and Sabteca; and the sons of Raamah were Sheba and Dedan.

We could say that since Cush was the progenitor of all these other peoples, he represents them all. In fact, “[t]hroughout much of antiquity Ethiopia was conceived somewhat imprecisely as all territory south of Egypt. The Greeks, in particular, viewed it as the farthest reaches of mankind... encompassing even Arabia and India” (EBD). One commentator writes: “This remote, advanced culture was an object of endless curiosity for the Greeks and Romans and represented for them the extreme limits of the civilized world... The earliest reference is found in Homer (*Odyssey* 1.23), who referred to Ethiopia as ‘the ends of the earth [cf. Acts 1:8]’” (Polhill; map on p. 11).

In the Old Testament, Ethiopia refers to the land south of Egypt and west of the Red Sea. We see this in the biblical references to “the rivers of Ethiopia” and to a nation “whose land the rivers divide” (Isa. 18:1-2; cf. Zeph. 3:10). These rivers were likely the Nile with its tributaries, the Blue and White Nile, as well as the Atbara River [see map on p. 10]. We see this also in the close association of Ethiopia with Egypt (cf. Ps. 68:31; Isa. 20:3-5; 45:14; Ezek. 29:10) as well as with the Arabs (cf. 2 Chron. 21:16). But even so, Ethiopia, in the Bible, still represents the farthest reaches of the known world.

- Esther 1:1 (cf. 8:9) — Now it happened in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from **[the land bordering on] India to [the land bordering on] Ethiopia** over 127 provinces...
- Isaiah 18:1a — Alas, O land of whirring wings which lies **beyond the rivers of Ethiopia**...
- Zephaniah 3:10 (cf. 2:12) — “From **beyond the rivers of Ethiopia** My worshipers, My scattered ones, will bring My offerings.”
- Luke 11:31 — “The Queen of the South [Sheba] will rise up at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, because she came from **the ends of the earth** to hear the wisdom of Solomon.”

All of this, then, helps us to understand Luke’s exclamation: “And *behold*, there was a man, an *Ethiopian*...”—a man who lived at the ends of the earth.

But that’s not all. “And *behold*, a man, an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace [*Kandakes*], queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure.” In ancient times, castrated males were prized as trustworthy and loyal household servants in the courts of royalty or nobility. Many of them having been castrated as young boys, they generally had no personal ambitions for themselves, independent of their masters. They might hold any number of positions of oversight, but this Ethiopian eunuch was what we would call today the “Secretary of the Treasury.” Why is this man *here*—over 1000 miles away from home by sea and land on a desert road descending from Jerusalem to Gaza? Luke tells us that he had come to Jerusalem to worship—which tells us, in turn, that he was either a Jew from the Dispersion, or a Gentile who had converted to Judaism (a proselyte), or a “God-fearing” Gentile (a Gentile who prayed to and worshiped the God of Israel, but who had not converted to Judaism).

The third option (a God-fearing Gentile) is most unlikely because this would mean that the Ethiopian eunuch was the first Gentile convert to Christianity. But two chapters later, in Acts 10, Luke shows what a big deal it was that Cornelius—who was a God-fearing Gentile—should receive the Holy Spirit *as a Gentile* and be baptized (cf. Acts 10:1-16, 44-47). If the Ethiopian eunuch was the first God-fearing Gentile convert to Christianity, then it’s difficult to explain, on the one hand, why Luke doesn’t make more of this, and on the other hand, why Philip apparently had no reservations at all about baptizing a Gentile.

If the Ethiopian eunuch wasn’t a God-fearing Gentile, was he actually a Jew from the Dispersion who had been castrated in his youth as one born into a slave’s household? Again, this seems most unlikely given the language Luke uses: “And behold, a man, *an Ethiopian*, a eunuch, a court official... [*kai idou aner Aithiops eunouchos dynastes*... (four successive nominative nouns)].”

Luke seems to be emphasizing the fact that this man was, in fact, racially and ethnically Ethiopian.

If the Ethiopian eunuch was not, on the one hand, just a “God-fearing” Gentile, and if he wasn’t, on the other hand, a Jew of the Dispersion, then was he a Gentile proselyte/convert to Judaism? Had he already joined a community of Jews of the Dispersion in Ethiopia or in nearby Egypt? If the Ethiopian eunuch was already a proselyte to Judaism, this would help to explain Philip’s lack of hesitancy about baptizing him. And yet there’s still the fact that he was a eunuch. The word, “eunuch,” can refer simply to a high court official, but this is unlikely given the way Luke writes: “And behold, a man, an Ethiopian, *a eunuch*, a court official...” Luke seems to be emphasizing the fact that this man was *physically* a eunuch (who could perhaps be recognized as such not only by his office, but by his voice and other physical characteristics). But what’s the significance of the fact that this man was not just an Ethiopian, but also a eunuch? Deuteronomy 23:1 says this:

- Deuteronomy 23:1 (Lev. 21:16-23; 22:24) — “No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting shall enter the assembly of Yahweh.”

It’s important to understand that the point, here, is not membership in the covenant community but the privilege of full participation in community worship (in “the formal times and places of community worship” [Merrill, NAC]; cf. Lev. 21:16-23). There were others besides emasculated males who were placed under this same restriction. So we go on to read in Deuteronomy 23:

- Deuteronomy 23:2–8 — **No one of illegitimate birth** [no one born of an incestuous or adulterous relationship or perhaps even of a mixed marriage] shall enter the assembly of Yahweh; even to the tenth generation, none of his seed shall enter the assembly of Yahweh. **No Ammonite or Moabite** shall enter the assembly of Yahweh; even to the tenth generation, none of their seed shall ever enter the assembly of Yahweh, because they did not meet you with food and water on the way when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you... **You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother; you shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a sojourner in his land. The sons of the third generation who are born to them may enter the assembly of Yahweh.**

Again, the point here is not membership, period, but full membership with all of its privileges. These restrictions should make more sense to us when we remember that membership in the Old Covenant community was determined primarily by physical descent from Abraham, through Isaac and Jacob. Man’s capacity to reproduce was therefore not only part of the originally good creation in Genesis 1 (when God blessed Adam and Eve and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth”; Gen. 1:27-28), but also essential to God’s redemptive plan after the fall (God said to Abraham: “I will make you exceedingly fruitful... I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your seed after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your seed after you”; Gen. 17:6-7). We know that ultimately, “the seed of the woman” (Gen. 3:15) and the seed of Abraham is Christ (Gal. 3:16), the one through whom God’s salvation would come into the world. It’s in this “redemptive-historical” perspective, then, that we see why a man who has been emasculated was not to be granted full

participation in all the privileges of membership in the Old Covenant community. To do so would be to compromise the set-apartness of that community as the people through whom the promised “seed” was to come into the world. It’s this redemptive-historical centrality of the physical seed of Abraham which helps us to also understand the restrictions placed upon those of illegitimate birth and their seed even to the tenth generation, and the restrictions placed on Moabites and Ammonites and their seed even to the tenth generation (cf. Gen. 12:3), and the restrictions placed on Edomites and Egyptians to the third generation. While these different types of individuals were not barred from membership in God’s covenant people, and while at a heart-level they weren’t necessarily less pleasing in God’s sight than anyone else (cf. Lev. 21:16-23; Ruth 1:16-17; 2:11-12; 4:11-12, 18-22; Jer. 38:6-13; 39:15-18), nevertheless, in the economy of the Old Covenant they were clearly at a “disadvantage.” They could never be fully participating members of the Old Covenant community. They could never be granted entrance into the worshiping assembly. We could say, perhaps, that they would always be “second-class” members of the covenant people.

What does it mean, then, when Luke says, “and behold, a man, an Ethiopian, *a eunuch*... had come to Jerusalem to worship”? Unlike every other proselyte to Judaism, he would not have been permitted to enter the courts of the Israelite men or women. As a eunuch, that area was closed to him, with no foreseeable time in the future when it would ever be opened. As a eunuch, he would always be restricted to the outermost court of the Gentiles—he would always be denied entrance into the worshiping assembly. The Ethiopian eunuch had come all the way to Jerusalem, then—even if he was a proselyte—only to worship “from a distance.” And yet, just to be able to visit the temple in Jerusalem and pray in the outer court and purchase there an animal or animals for sacrifice (if even that was permitted to a eunuch) must have been counted a wonderful privilege by this man who’s travelled from “the ends of the earth” (a journey of five months and over 1000 miles one way; cf. Bock). As he begins the long journey home, we see more evidence of his devotion. Luke tells us he was sitting in his wagon/carriage reading a scroll of the prophet Isaiah—a scroll that he had no doubt just purchased for himself in Jerusalem at no small cost to himself.

Is a picture beginning to take shape in your mind? While this man is wealthy, and while he holds a high and trusted position in the court of the Ethiopian queen, he knows that outside of her court and apart from her good graces, he has no other prospects in the world. Living, as he does, at the very edge of the civilized world, he’s apparently come into contact with Jews from the Dispersion and has joined himself to them as a proselyte and a worshiper of Yahweh. He knows that as a eunuch, he can never participate fully in the worship of God’s people and yet he makes the long journey to Jerusalem. While he’s there, he searches out and purchases at great cost to himself a scroll of the prophet Isaiah and begins reading it upon the start of his return journey. Here’s a man hungry for God’s word and hungry for His worship, but who will always be a eunuch *and* a foreigner—and who must now turn his back on the temple in Jerusalem to travel again to the farthest ends of the earth. Even if this Ethiopian eunuch was fully surrendered to these realities (and no doubt he was), still, there must have been a certain longing in his heart. To be so distant geographically from Yahweh’s house as a foreigner, and even to be so distant ceremonially and ritually as a eunuch...

IV. Acts 8:29–31 — Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot [wagon/carriage].” And Philip ran up and heard him reading [aloud] Isaiah the prophet, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And he said, “Well, how can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

The secretary of the Ethiopian treasury was an educated and intelligent man. He understood the basic meaning of the words that he was reading and he believed and accepted them by faith, but there was one thing missing. And that one thing troubled him greatly—because he knew it was the key to truly understanding.

V. Acts 8:32–34 — Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: “As a sheep is led to slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So *He* does not open His mouth. In humiliation *His* judgment was taken away; who will recount *His* generation? For *His* life is removed from the earth [Isa. 53:7-8].” And the eunuch answered Philip and said, “I ask you earnestly [*deomai*; ‘I beg you to tell me’], of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?”

Can you imagine the thrill and the joy of what’s about to happen? Can you imagine being the Ethiopian eunuch and not yet knowing the answer to this question? Can you imagine not yet understanding Isaiah 53? We can assume that the Ethiopian eunuch started reading at the beginning of Isaiah and that by the time Philip joined him he was already nearing the end. By the time he came to the passage about the “suffering servant,” then, there was—deep down in his heart—this growing longing to understand. He’d been to the temple in Jerusalem, but due to the persecution that had arisen, we can assume that the believers were no longer meeting there to listen to the Apostles’ teaching. And so the Ethiopian had come and gone without ever encountering any of the disciples or hearing the good news about Jesus. But God knows all about this Ethiopian eunuch. He Himself has planned this visit. He Himself has planted in his heart this longing to know of whom the prophet is speaking. And now He Himself has sent His servant Philip to meet him on the desert road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza just as he’s beginning his journey home. “I ask you earnestly [I beg you to tell me],” said the Ethiopian eunuch to Philip, “of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?”

VI. Acts 8:35 — Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he proclaimed the good news *about Jesus to him*.

To *whom*? “And *behold*,” Luke says, “a man, an *Ethiopian*, a *eunuch*.” A foreigner who had come to Jerusalem from the ends of the earth knowing that even as a proselyte to Judaism he could never be a fully participating member in the covenant community—and perhaps knowing, too, that he might never be able to make this trip to Jerusalem again. And yet now what has Philip proclaimed to Him? The good news about Jesus! The good news that in Jesus and the coming of the Spirit, the special presence of God with His people is no longer restricted to a temple in Jerusalem. Listen to these verses that the Ethiopian would have just read a little while before Philip joined him (cf. Isa. 11:1; 18:1; 20:3-5; 37:9; 43:3):

➤ **Isaiah 45:14** — “**The fruit of the labor of Egypt and the profit of Ethiopia and the Sabeans, men of stature, will come over to you [My people] and will be yours; they will**

walk behind you; they will come over in chains [as willing bondslaves] and will bow down to you; **they will make supplication to you: ‘Surely, God is with you, and there is none else, no other God.’**”

In another place, the Psalmist sings:

- Psalm 68:29, 31–32 — Because of Your temple at Jerusalem Kings will bring gifts to You... Envoys will come out of Egypt; **Ethiopia will quickly stretch out her hands to God.** Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth, sing praises to the Lord.

And then in Zephaniah:

- Zephaniah 3:9–10 (cf. Gen. 11:1-9) — “I will change [the nations] to peoples with purified lips, that all of them may call on the name of Yahweh, to serve Him shoulder to shoulder. From **beyond the rivers of Ethiopia My worshipers, My scattered ones, will bring My offerings.**”

And now Philip can tell the Ethiopian how these words are fulfilled in Jesus. In Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit, the special presence of God with His people is no longer restricted to a temple in Jerusalem. Therefore, now even a Gentile proselyte living at the farthest ends of the earth can claim birthright citizenship in the true Jerusalem that is above. The psalmist sings:

- Psalm 87:2–6 — Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God. **“I shall mention Rahab [Egypt] and Babylon among those who know Me; behold, Philistia and Tyre with Ethiopia: ‘This one was born there.’**” And of Zion it shall be said, “This one and that one were born in her”; and the Most High Himself will establish her. Yahweh will count when He registers the peoples, “This one was born there.”

In Jesus, and by His indwelling Spirit, even an Ethiopian living at the farthest ends of the earth can count himself a homeborn citizen of Jerusalem.

But what about the fact that this *Ethiopian* is also a eunuch? Does he still have restricted access in the Messiah’s New Covenant community? Is he still not allowed full participation in the worshipping assembly? If membership in the Old Covenant community was determined primarily by physical descent from Abraham, through Isaac and Jacob, that’s no longer the case for the New Covenant community now that the true seed of Abraham has already come into the world. The true, physical seed of Abraham is Jesus, and now we who have believed in Jesus are his own *spiritual* seed. In the same section from which the Ethiopian eunuch was reading, just a few lines later, Isaiah says this:

- Isaiah 53:10 — But Yahweh was pleased to crush *Him*, putting *Him* to grief; if You would place *His* soul as a guilt offering, **He will see His seed...**

What kind of seed is this? Not a physical seed, but a spiritual seed. Therefore, now that the “true” physical seed of the woman and the “true” physical seed of Abraham has come into the world, and now that Christ has brought into this world a *spiritual* seed in the New Covenant assembly

(Gal. 6:16), **no longer** is it not fitting that a eunuch (or someone of illegitimate birth, or an Ammonite or Moabite, or an Edomite or Egyptian) should be admitted to full membership in all the privileges of the Messiah's New Covenant community. **No longer** is a eunuch restricted from participating fully in the worshipping assembly. It's hard to imagine, then, that Philip didn't direct the Ethiopian eunuch just a little further ahead in his copy of the prophet Isaiah and proclaim to him the good news about Jesus from these verses:

- Isaiah 56:3–5 — Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to Yahweh say, “Yahweh will surely separate me from His people [not though he lives at the very ends of the earth; not though he lives beyond the rivers of Ethiopia].” Nor let the eunuch say, “Behold, I am a dry tree [with no hope of any lasting remembrance in God's covenant people].” For thus says Yahweh, “To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths, and choose what pleases Me, and hold fast My covenant, to them I will give *in My house and within My walls* a memorial, and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off.”

In Jesus, and by His indwelling Spirit, even this Ethiopian living at the farthest ends of the earth can count himself a homeborn citizen of Jerusalem. In Jesus, and by His indwelling Spirit, even this eunuch can participate fully in the worship of God's New Covenant people. And so we go on to read in verse 36:

VII. Acts 8:36 — And as they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?”

Can you hear, now, the weight of meaning behind this question? And can you hear, already, the joy in his voice—the joy that must be filling all his heart to overflowing? In the Messiah's assembly there are no second-class members. All the restrictions of the Old Covenant have been lifted and taken away and even abolished in Christ. This is why even the Ethiopian eunuch can cry out, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?” And this is why we read next:

VIII. Acts 8:38–39 — 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. 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 [cf. Acts 13:52; Rom. 14:17; Gal. 5:22; 1 Thess. 1:6].

Shouldn't this joy of the Ethiopian eunuch be ours, too, who have all received the same baptism that he did, who all share each week at the same table with one another, who all participate fully in the worshipping assembly. In the Messiah's assembly there are no second-class members, but we all have our access through Christ, in one Spirit, to the Father (Eph. 2:18). So, may we, then, go on our way—every day—rejoicing. And may the fruit of this rejoicing be that we, like Philip (and almost certainly like the Ethiopian eunuch himself), are tools that God uses to bring this same joy to others. Indeed, Luke concludes:

IX. Acts 8:40 — But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through [traveling north along the coast of the Mediterranean] he kept proclaiming the gospel [the good news] to all the cities until he came to Caesarea.





