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REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

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THE BOOK OF ACTS

Sermon Notes

Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

Acts 8:25-40

July 1, 2007

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I. The LORD leads Philip to a Desert Road

- This passage begins, in **Verse 25**, with Luke stating, ‘So, when they [Peter and John] had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.
- Then, Luke states, in **Verses 26-27a**, ‘But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, ‘Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (This is a desert road). So he got up and went...’
 - Gaza was one of primary cities of the Philistines. The others were Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, and Gath.
 - There were two primary roads that went from Jerusalem to Gaza. It appears the LORD leads Phillip to the one least traveled.
 - Notice Luke’s note that this was a desert road. He includes this, no doubt, to underscore how counter-intuitive it would be to go from a ‘fruitful’ ministry in Samaria, to a place where few or no people would be.
 - Interestingly, in **Verse 26**, the phrase translated ‘Get up and go south...’ can also mean ‘at noon’ in the original Greek.

- Therefore, as I. Howard Marshall notes, if this is the case, that interpretation would ‘make the divine command to Phillip all the more unusual and perplexing: at noon the road would be deserted of travelers because of the heat.’
- What makes this account so beautiful is that Phillip would have never gone to this desert road, apart from the sovereign leading of the Spirit. Yet, the LORD ensured that Philip and the Ethiopian would meet just at the right time in order that the LORD’s purposes in salvation would be fulfilled in the life of the eunuch.
- We must never forget that God’s ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8). Simply because God’s commands do not always make sense to us; however, does not mean that they are illogical or irrational.
- Also, we must remember that God is not a utilitarian, that is one who always seeks to accomplish the greatest good for the greatest number of people.
- In other words, in our Christian walk, the ends never justify the means. We often justify our actions in churches by saying things like, ‘Yes, but look how many people are being saved...’ Or, ‘God must be blessing what we are doing because our attendance is up 50% in one year.’
- Statements like this tragically miss the mark of authentic Christianity: simple obedience.
- Phillip did not try to rationalize why he should remain in Samaria [after all, he had a fruitful ministry there], he simply obeyed and went where there LORD lead him.
- The question we must always ask ourselves is, ‘Are we being obedient to the Scriptures?’ That is it. If we allow worldly metrics to in some way ‘measure’ our success, then the authority of Scripture will **inevitably** become secondary.
- This account, once again, underscores the truth that God sovereignly ordains the ends and the means, and He uses His people as His instruments to proclaim the Good News of Salvation by Grace through faith in Christ alone [Acts 2:4, 14; 4:8, 31; 6:3-8; 7:55; 8:17; 10:1-48; 16:25-34).

Read 2 Timothy 2:20-21: ‘Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.’

- It will become evident soon that God is drawing the Ethiopian eunuch to Himself; in accordance with John 6:44: ‘No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him.’ However, it is amazing who everything that had to happen **did** [the Eunuch had been to Jerusalem, he was on the road at the right time, he had the Scriptures open to the perfect place, at the time that Philip came up to him, he was wondering what the identity of the Servant in Isaiah 53 was...], for God was in sovereign control.
- Phillip was simply obedient to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

- The Spirit still leads and guides us today. However, it is always in accordance with the Word of God. We must remember that during this point in the Early Church, the Scriptures had yet to be completed. The Spirit of the LORD worked in a unique way during this unique time. However, today, we DO have the completed canon – all 66 books of the Bible. This is the inerrant, all-sufficient Word of God, and it is the instrument that God always uses to speak to us and lead us.

II. Philip Meets the Ethiopian Eunuch

- Luke states, in **Verse 26**, that as Philip went to where the LORD called him, he encountered ‘an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship...’
- James Montgomery Boice writes, ‘This was the moment Philip saw the chariot and approached it. There are no accidents in the life of God’s people. Philip came at precisely the right moment, the moment the Ethiopian had reached what most people regard as the very heart of this prophecy...’
- The Ethiopia referred to in this context is not exactly the same as the country of Ethiopia today [although it is quite close]. The Ethiopia spoken of here was most likely the ancient kingdom of Meroe, the empire that existed between Aswan [in modern-day Egypt] and Khartoum [the capital city of Sudan].



- The Kingdom of Meroe flourished from the eighth century B.C. until the fourth century A.D.
- It is also referred to in the Old Testament as the Kingdom of Cush [Psalm 68:31; Zephaniah 3:10].

- ❑ The inhabitants of this land were dark-skinned. John Polhill writes that ‘its population consisted of blacks...Many scholars see Isaiah 18:7 as a reference to the ‘tall and smooth-skinned’ Ethiopians.
- ❑ This was also the land from where Moses’ wife, Zipporah came from [Numbers 12], as well as the Queen of Sheba.
- ❑ The Greek Poet Homer, in his *Odyssey*, sometime between the 8th and 6th Centuries B.C. references Ethiopia, referring to it as ‘the ends of the earth.’
- ❑ To the ancient Greeks and Romans, Ethiopia was the outer-edge of the civilized world, indeed the ‘ends of the earth.’
- ❑ Therefore, viewed in light of Acts 1:8, ‘...you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth’ and Acts 2-7, and Acts 8:1,4: ‘...and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles...’ Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.’ Acts 8:27 is evidence of God’s faithfulness to his promise of Acts 1:8!

- ❑ According to F.F. Bruce, ‘The king of Ethiopia was venerated as the child of the sun and regarded as too sacred a personage to discharge the secular functions of the royalty; these were performed on his behalf by the queen-mother, who bore the dynastic title Kandake.’
- ❑ Bion of Soli (*Aethiopica* 1) wrote, ‘the Ethiopians do not reveal the fathers of their kings, but hand down a tradition that they are sons of the sun. They call the mother of each king Kandake.’
- ❑ In other words, the one that actually ‘ruled’ in ancient Ethiopia appears to be the Queen Mothers, who all held the title Candace [just as the Egyptian rulers were Pharaoh and the Roman rulers were Caesar].
- ❑ Luke, then, says **Verse 27** this Ethiopian eunuch ‘was in charge of all her treasure...’
 - In modern terms, the eunuch was the Minister of Finance or possibly the Treasury Secretary.
 - In the ancient world, young slave boys were often castrated and placed over the royal harem and treasury.
 - Eunuchs were also known as loyal and faithful servants of the crown in terms of guarding the treasury – so much so that in ancient literature the term ‘eunuch’ was used interchangeably with ‘treasurer.’ In other words, the royal treasurer was often referred to as ‘eunuch’ even if he was not a physical eunuch.
 - However, given the context of this passage, there is no reason to believe that this man was not a physical eunuch – no doubt he was.

- Luke states that the eunuch ‘had come to Jerusalem to worship...’
 - It is unknown how the eunuch had come to know of the God of Israel; however, it has been suggested that it was the legacy of the Queen of Sheba, who had visited Jerusalem during the time of Solomon centuries earlier.
 - However, it seems that this eunuch was a ‘God-fearer’ similar to Cornelius.
 - In other words, he believed in the God of Israel but did not become a full proselyte or convert to Judaism.
 - Interestingly, this also demonstrates a possible fulfillment of Psalm 68:31:

‘Envoys will come out of Egypt;
Ethiopia will quickly stretch out her hands to God.’

- Yet, for the eunuch, as a eunuch, full conversion and participation in Temple worship [in Jerusalem] was not possible. The reason for this was because **Deuteronomy 23:1** forbade it:

‘No one who is emasculated or has his male organ cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD.’

- The basis of Deuteronomy 23:1 is often debated, however, A.D.H. Mayes offers a convincing explanation, referring to ‘the inadmissibility of physical mutilation as contrary to the design of God’s creation’ and to ‘a specific rejection of any action which destroys the procreative power of Israelites.’
 - In other words, Mayes argues, because eunuchs could not engage in the most sacred acts of Jewish procreation, they could not ‘enter the assembly of the LORD...’
 - Therefore, with respect to the Ethiopian eunuch, **he could visit the Jerusalem Temple; but he could never enter it.**
- Therefore, from a First Century Jewish perspective, there could have been no one more ‘undesirable’ than the Ethiopian eunuch:
 - He was a **Gentile**.
 - He was a **dark-skinned African**.
 - He was a **eunuch**.

□ Yet, these three points are essential in understanding the main point of this text!
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- Then, Luke writes, in **Verse 28**, ‘and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah.’

- It is likely that the eunuch was reading the Book of Isaiah because, possibly more than any other Old Testament book, it offers hope for the foreigner and eunuch, those forbidden, in the Old Covenant, from worshipping in the assembly. **Isaiah 56:1-5** reads:

Thus says the LORD,

‘Preserve justice and do righteousness,
For My salvation is about to come
And My righteousness to be revealed.

‘How blessed is the man who does this,
And the son of man who takes hold of it;
Who keeps from profaning the sabbath,
And keeps his hand from doing any evil.’

Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say,
‘The LORD will surely separate me from His people’
Nor let the eunuch say, ‘Behold, I am a dry tree.’

For thus says the LORD,

‘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.

- Luke, then writes, in **Verse 29**, ‘Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go up and join this chariot.’
 - Once again, it is the Spirit who guides Philip.
- Luke writes, in **Verses 30-31**, ‘Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ And he said, ‘Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.’
 - When Philip ran up to the chariot, Luke writes that he ‘heard him reading Isaiah the prophet...’
 - F.F. Bruce writes, ‘Reading in antiquity was almost invariably done aloud. Why this should be so will be apparent to anyone who tries to read a copy of an ancient manuscript: the words need to be spelled out, and this is done more easily aloud than in silence. In addition, beginners regularly read aloud; it requires considerable experience (not to say sophistication) to read silently, though this stage is reached more quickly with modern print than with ancient handwriting.’
 - When Philip ask the eunuch ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ the man responds, ‘Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?’

- Calvin draws a contrast between the Ethiopian’s humility, in that he ‘acknowledges his ignorance feely and frankly,’ and a person who is ‘swollen-headed with confidence in his own abilities.’ Calvin continues: ‘This is also why the reading of Scripture bears fruit with such a few people today, because scarcely on in a hundred is to be found who gladly submits himself to teaching.’
 - So it is today. Rather than simply submitting to the Scriptures [as Philip submitted to the leading of the Spirit], we feel we are justified to ignore, deny, or even fundamentally change the meaning of passages that we do not particularly like.
 - Yet, the eunuch reads the text and sincerely wants to know what it means.
- From Verse 32, we see that what the Ethiopian eunuch is reading is the Septuagint [the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament] version of **Isaiah 53:7-8**.
 - Isaiah 53 is one of the great Suffering Servant passages from the Book of Isaiah [possibly the most well-known].
 - It is in this passage that the Lord Jesus Christ is revealed as the Lamb of God who dies a humble death as a ‘sheep’ who led ‘to slaughter.’
 - Alec Motyer writes [commenting on *And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He does not open His mouth.*], ‘Animals go as uncomprehendingly to slaughter as to shearing; the Servant who knew well, went to his death with a calmness reflecting not an ignorant but a submitted mind. What for them is the nature of the beast was for him a thought-out, voluntary course.’
 - Christ Himself applied Isaiah 53 to Himself [Mark 10:45; 14:24; Luke 22:37].
 - In **Verse 34**, Luke writes, ‘The eunuch answered Philip and said, ‘Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or someone else?’
 - This is one of the most powerful scenes in all of Scripture where we afforded the privilege of seeing how God uses the Word of God as the instrumental cause to draw one of His people to Himself. However, this is how God always works. It is the Word of God that God always uses as the imperishable seed of salvation [1 Peter 1:23].
 - Few of us will ever experience such an opportunity, where someone is reading from the Old Testament prophets and asks, ‘Who is the prophet speaking of?’
 - However, Philip was given such a privilege, and it is important that we see what he did.

III. Philip Preaches Jesus to the Eunuch [from the Scriptures]

- ❑ Luke then simply states, in **Verse 35**, ‘Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.’
 - Notice that Philip does not ‘beat around the bush’; he does not teach the eunuch about the virtue of humility, he simply **preaches Christ**.
 - We can never hear enough the truth that ‘faith comes from hearing...the word of Christ.’ (Romans 10:17)
 - This account powerfully parallels the encounter that two disciples had with the resurrected Christ on the road to Emmaus:

‘And He said to them, ‘O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.’
Luke 24:25-27

- ❑ From this passage, in Acts 8, as well as the words of Jesus in Luke 24, it becomes clear that the Old Testament points to Christ. It is a book about **Him**.

‘I want...to emphasize a basic principle...It needs to be stressed, contemplated, worried through, analyzed, and acted upon if we want our preaching from the Old Testament to be Christian. The principle is simply this: Jesus says that the Old Testament is a book about him.’

Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, p. 20

- ❑ In other words, if we are teaching from the Old Testament, and we don’t teach Christ, we have taught wrongly and missed the point of the text.
- ❑ If we read the Old Testament and we don’t see Christ, we have read wrongly.
- ❑ The Old Testament is not simply a book of good morals and virtues, but tragically, this is what the Christian church today has reduced it to.
- ❑ Read most Children’s Sunday School material, and this is what you get: the story of David and Goliath teaches us to have courage. NO! The story of David and Goliath points to Christ!
- ❑ Aesop’s Fables points us in the right moral direction, the Old Testament points us to Christ! [Certainly we do learn morals and virtues from the Old Testament; however, the primary focus is Christ!]
- ❑ As Dr. Jim Hamilton of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary says, ‘The Old Testament is a messianic book written from a messianic perspective with a messianic hope.’
- ❑ In short, the Old Testament is Christian!

- Therefore, it should not surprise us in the least that God uses the prophet Isaiah as the means to draw the Ethiopian eunuch to Christ.

IV. The Ethiopian Eunuch Believes and Obeys

- Immediately, after Philip ‘preaches Christ’ to the Ethiopian eunuch, Luke writes, in **Verse 36**, ‘As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?’ And **Verse 38**, ‘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.’
 - Notice, it does not appear that Philip had to beg or plead with the eunuch to be obedient to the Lord’s command. Rather, Philip simply preached Christ. It was the Ethiopian eunuch, not Philip, who suggested that he be baptized.
 - When we faithfully proclaim the Gospel, and God uses it to save His people, then these [newly saved] individuals will naturally [because of their change in nature] pursue a life of obedience to the Lord’s commands [albeit, not perfectly].
 - This is why our focus should always be on faithful proclamation of the Word of God. For it is the Word of God that God uses to both save and sanctify. The Word of God effectively calls all God’s people to salvation; and all saved people to obedience.
 - We must certainly embrace the faithful proclamation of the Gospel rather than techniques that seem to guarantee certain responses that we would like to see.
- Then, **Verse 37** states, ‘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.’’
 - Most scholars believe that this was a later edition to the text. However, most certainly such a confession likely occurred. Further, from early church records, these two sentences seem to belong to an early baptismal liturgy, where the minister asks the question and the newly converted believer confesses.
 - This also seems to place the Ethiopian eunuch in contrast with Simon Magus whose heart was far from God.
 - Recall Stephen’s speech before the Sanhedrin. He noted that Abraham was called ‘while he was still in Mesopotamia’ and Moses was called in the desert in Sinai. Similarly, the first Gentile convert, an African, was saved **in the desert**, NOT Jerusalem.

V. The Eunuch Departs Rejoicing

- Luke writes, in **Verse 39**, ‘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.’
 - After Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, Luke states that the Spirit of the Lord ‘snatched’ Philip away.
 - It is unknown exactly what Luke means in this Verse.
 - Some have suggested that this was a miracle; that Philip basically ‘disappeared’ before the eunuch’s eyes similar to the way Christ did in Luke 24:31.
 - One of the reasons for this understanding is that Greek word translated ‘snatch’ in Verse 39 is from the same root for the word translated ‘caught up’ in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. The passage in 1 Thessalonians 4 is used by many to defend a rapture of the church prior to a literal millennium reign of Christ.
 - However, this passage most likely means that the Holy Spirit simply led Philip away and the eunuch never saw him again. Campbell Morgan rightly said, ‘It is not at all necessary that this should be accounted a miracle. I am never anxious to read miracles in, where they are not; any more than I am anxious to rule out miracles, where they are in.’
 - Either way, ‘miraculous’ or not, this passage bears close similarities and parallels to Elijah (1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 2:16) and Ezekiel (Ezekiel 3:12, 14; 8:3).
 - However, the **true miracle** here is that the eunuch ‘went on his way rejoicing.’
 - Throughout the New Testament, joy is the mark of a true believer (John 15:11; 17:13; Acts 13:52; Romans 12:12; 14:17; 15:13; Galatians 5:22; Philippians 1:25; 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 1 Peter 1:8; Jude 24).
 - No doubt the joy of the Ethiopian eunuch is the same joy that the Apostle Paul speaks of in Romans 14:17: ‘for the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Spirit.’
 - Also, in Galatians 5:22, joy is right next to love in the ‘fruit of the Spirit.’
 - **The miracle is that another individual has been brought from spiritual death to spiritual life!**
 - Not only this, the Ethiopians was, from the Jewish perspective, unworthy beyond words:

- First, he was a **Gentile**.
- Secondly, he was a **dark-skinned African**.
- Thirdly, he was a **eunuch**.
- However, what his conversion demonstrate is what Paul explains in **Romans 10:12-15:**

‘For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; for ‘WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED.’ How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, ‘HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THE FEET OF THOSE WHO BRING GOOD NEWS OF GOOD THINGS!’”

❖ Through the account of the Ethiopian eunuch, God demonstrates that there is indeed **‘no distinction between Jew and Greek.’** We are all one in Christ. It is the Gospel and the Gospel alone that breaks down every cultural, ethnic, nationalistic, and racial boundary! This is indeed miraculous!

- ❑ Luke concludes this passage by stating, in **Verse 40**, that ‘Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea.’
 - Azotus was about twenty (20) miles north of Gaza, and was the contemporary name for the ancient Philistine city Ashdod.
 - He continued preaching the Gospel ‘until he came to Caesarea.’
 - This was apparently where he and his family lived (Acts 21:9).

- ❑ Scripture does not inform us what happened to the eunuch; however, the Early Church Father Irenaeus wrote that the eunuch became a missionary to the Ethiopian people.
- ❑ In conclusion, John Polhill writes, ‘Archaeology has uncovered a flourishing Christian community there [Ethiopia] between the fifth and tenth centuries. One is tempted to see the converted treasurer as at least planting the seed. It is in any even of interest to note that the first converted Christian ‘foreigner’ in Acts was an African, and one could say that the mission began there, long before Paul ever took it to European soil.’