

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #101:

THE CONVERSION OF THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH

By John Temples

How do you become a Christian? How are we made right with God? How do we leave the state of sin and alienation from God and enter into a state of salvation? Is it just making some vague “decision for Christ” or “praying the sinner’s prayer”? No, those are just theories of men as to how to be saved; you will not find either in the Bible. The only sure way to know how to be right with God is to read your Bible. And God has given us the clear answer in the New Testament, particularly the book of Acts.

Acts records the first few decades of the history of the church, starting with its establishment on the day of Pentecost in AD 33. In Acts, we find actual examples of real people obeying the gospel and becoming Christians--not just theory or theology, but actual “case studies.” And there are no less than eight of these examples. One of the most interesting and detailed accounts is that of the Ethiopian eunuch, found in Acts chapter 8. Here is the record:

Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is desert. So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go near and overtake this chariot.' So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' And he said, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him. The place in the Scripture which he read was this: 'He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so He opened not His mouth. In His humiliation His justice was taken away, and who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth.' So the

eunuch answered Philip and said, 'I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?' Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him. Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, 'See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?' Then 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.' So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:26-39).

Who was this eunuch? He was a high government official serving the queen of Ethiopia. Very likely, he was a black man; but the color of one's skin is irrelevant in regard to salvation. Though not a Jew by birth, he became one by conversion. But what made him stand out in God's eyes is that he was a man searching for truth; and God saw that he found it. In fact, God called Philip, a deacon of the Jerusalem church and a preacher, to travel from Samaria to southern Israel to meet the eunuch and teach him the plan of salvation.

What was there about this man that prompted the Lord to call Philip away from preaching in Samaria (northern Israel) to travel all the way to the southern desert? Here are some of his fine points:

- He was a devout and faithful worshipper of God, living up to the spiritual light he had at the time, the Old Testament.
- He had made a journey of 1,500 miles to Jerusalem to worship. (It's hard to get some people to travel 15 miles to worship today!)
- As he was returning to Africa in his chariot, he was reading the word of God. God loves and takes note of people who read His word!
- He was willing to be taught and to ask a stranger for help in understanding Scripture.

Let us examine carefully the process of the eunuch's salvation, because we know it is GOD'S plan, not man's; and let us see how our salvation compares.

First, God dispatches an angel from heaven (verse 26). This is not surprising--angels are God's messengers and are intimately concerned with the salvation message of God. And many people today would say, "Yes, an angel spoke to me." But what is surprising is that the angel was not sent to the eunuch! He was sent to Philip, to set up the meeting between the two men. And observe: all the angel told Philip was to go to a certain road. Why was it necessary for Philip to meet the eunuch? Because "it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching¹ to save them that believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21, KJV).

Next, God sends the Holy Spirit. But again, the Spirit does not go to the sinner, to mysteriously work on his heart or to "illuminate" the Scriptures; rather, He speaks only to Philip, instructing him to approach and overtake the eunuch's chariot. The Spirit does not even tell Philip what to do when he gets there. Why? Because we--Christian men and women--are now charged with preaching the gospel to the lost (Matthew 28:18-20). Faith now comes by hearing the word of God (Romans 10:17), not by miracles, angelic voices, or mysterious operations of the Holy Spirit. It's important to note that neither an angel nor the Holy Spirit was directly or miraculously involved in the eunuch's salvation.

So Philip meets the eunuch and says, "Nice day, isn't it?" Not! Philip saw a golden opportunity, a man reading his Bible and trying to understand it. The passage he was reading was Isaiah 53. Philip got right to the subject, saying, "Do you understand what you are reading?" To us, that sounds like a nosy and presumptuous question. But this one question enabled Philip to immediately know where this man was, spiritually speaking. If he was a believer in Christ, he would know what the Isaiah passage meant, because Isaiah spoke of Jesus. If he did not know, then Philip knew exactly how to begin and to give the eunuch the information he needed.

Next, Acts 8:35 tells us that Philip began where the eunuch was reading and preached Christ to him. Here is a challenge for you and me: if you came upon a

¹ The gospel is not foolishness, but it seems so to worldly minds.

person reading a passage from the Bible, and that person asked you for help in understanding it, could you do it? Could you begin at that Scripture--any Scripture--and preach Christ? Philip told the eunuch that Isaiah was speaking prophetically of Jesus, who had been recently put to death and who had risen from the dead.

The next item on the agenda is baptism (verse 36). I can hear it now: "Yes, I knew you Church-of-Christ people would get around to baptism. That's all you talk about. Why can't you just preach Christ and leave baptism out of it?" The simple answer is, it's impossible to "preach Christ" without preaching baptism. Jesus inseparably connected faith, baptism, and salvation in passages such as Mark 16:16. And in this very text in Acts, verse 35 says Philip preached Christ, and the eunuch suddenly requested baptism. This leads to the inescapable (one preacher called it "un-get-around-able") conclusion that preaching Christ includes preaching baptism!

We also learn from this text what baptism is: immersion in water. Many folks think that you can just have a little water sprinkled on you. But verse 38 says, "they both went down into the water, and he baptized him." The only reason they would both go down into the water is that baptism requires immersion.

Once, a preacher was talking to a lady who insisted that sprinkling constitutes acceptable baptism. The preacher asked her about the eunuch's going down into the water. She said, "Well, they were in the desert; so what that must mean is that the eunuch had a jug of water under the chariot seat; so he held it up and said, 'See, here is water.' So Philip took the jug and sprinkled some water on him." The preacher said, "Oh, I see. So verse 38 really means "they both went down into the jug!"

Notice the salvation process here: (1) The good news of Christ--His death, burial, and resurrection--was preached to the eunuch from Scripture. (2) The eunuch indicated his desire to submit to Christ and be baptized, an indication of faith (implied) and repentance (implied). (Yes, faith and repentance are essential prerequisites to salvation--see John 3:16, Luke 13:3, Mark 16:15-16, and Acts

2:38). (3) The eunuch was baptized--immersed--in water. (4) He then rejoiced in his salvation. So the process was:

- He heard the gospel.
- He believed in Christ.
- He repented (resolved to turn from Judaism to Christ) and confessed Christ.
- He was baptized.
- He then rejoiced, having obtained salvation.

THE "REST OF THE STORY"

The Bible account ends here; but through the magic of "preacher imagination and total fabrication," I can give you the rest of the story. Amazingly--very amazingly--a Holy Land tour bus came on the scene, carrying a load of modern-day preachers. Oral Roberts was there; so were Jimmy Swaggart and Billy Graham. The bus stopped when they saw this fantastic sight: a man riding in a chariot, dripping wet and grinning from ear to ear.

All the preachers rushed up to the eunuch and began asking him what happened. He told them of his experience and of becoming a child of God. They all exclaimed, "That's wonderful!" One preacher asked, "What was it like when you saw the angel come down from heaven?" The eunuch said, "What angel?" (Remember, an angel was involved; but only in instructing the preacher to go to meet the prospect.)

Another preacher, of a Pentecostal persuasion, asked, "How did it feel when the Spirit opened your heart and illuminated the Scriptures?" The eunuch knew nothing of this; his "illumination" came from having the Scriptures explained to him.

Still another asked, "Who voted to allow your baptism and to receive you into the church?" The eunuch said, "Why, nobody--I asked if I could be baptized and was told that if I believed, I could; there was no vote. Besides, there was nobody there to vote except for Philip, me, and the horses--and they could only vote 'Neigh!'" (I just had to do it.)

Billy Graham spoke up and said, "Now that you're saved, you need to identify with a church of your choice." That was strange to the eunuch. He might have said, "Well, I heard the gospel of Christ, I believed in Christ, and I was baptized into Christ; so I must be a member of the church of Christ." The early Christians were all one in Christ; there were no denominations or "hyphenated Christians."

Folks, we need to let this powerful record, and the other records of conversion in the book of Acts, teach us God's way to be saved. We need to ask, "Was my conversion like the eunuch's, or Paul's, or the people on Pentecost? Did I hear the word of God explained, consider the evidence, believe in Christ as the Son of God, change my mind about the course of my life, and submit to immersion?" Or did my "conversion" involve some supposed supernatural operation of an angel or the Holy Spirit, or require the vote of some church?

The conclusion of the whole matter is this: if we do it the way the eunuch did it, and the people on Pentecost did it (Acts 2), then we know we're right. --John
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