

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #18: EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT EUNUCHS (BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK)

By John Temples

“Eunuch” is one of those words you don’t hear or use too often--certainly not in polite society. It’s a term we are uncomfortable with, referring to an emasculated man, one incapable of having sexual relations or fathering children. But it is a Biblical term, the word “eunuch” and its plural occurring 39 times in the NKJV. Like any other Bible subject, there are some valuable lessons we can learn by considering it. So, let us delve into “everything you always wanted to know about eunuchs, but were afraid to ask.”

EUNUCHS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Eastern kings and rulers in Biblical times customarily employed eunuchs in sensitive positions, particularly in overseeing harems.

“The eunuchs of the Bible were usually castrated males or those incapable of reproduction due to a birth defect....The purpose of intentional castration was to induce impotence and remove sexuality. It was a common practice in ancient times for rulers to castrate some of their servants and/or advisers in order to subdue and pacify them. It was especially common to castrate men who tended the royal harem.” (www.gotquestions.org/eunuch-eunuchs.html)

Queen Esther was served by eunuchs; they are mentioned in Esther 4:4. Other passages that speak of eunuchs serving in royal capacities are 2 Kings 20:18, Esther 1:10 and 2:3, Jeremiah 38:7, and Daniel 1:3. (It is not directly stated, but Daniel and his friends were probably made eunuchs when they came into the service of the king of Babylon.)

There were restrictions on eunuchs in the law of Moses. Deuteronomy 23:1 says, “He who is emasculated by crushing or mutilation shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord.” “The assembly of the Lord” probably refers to the gathering of the people of Israel for religious purposes. So, it is likely that a eunuch could not enter

the temple or fully participate in the festivals, sacrifices, and worship assemblies of Israel. Some commentators believe that the prohibition also extended to holding public offices or enjoying the full privileges of citizenship.

Eunuchs were specifically forbidden by the law to serve as priests. Leviticus 21:16-23 says, "And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to Aaron, saying: 'No man of your descendants in succeeding generations, who has any defect, may approach to offer the bread of his God. For any man who has a defect shall not approach: a man blind or lame, who has a marred face or any limb too long, a man who has a broken foot or broken hand, or is a hunchback or a dwarf, or a man who has a defect in his eye, or eczema or scab, **or is a eunuch**. No man of the descendants of Aaron the priest, who has a defect, shall come near to offer the offerings made by fire to the Lord. He has a defect; he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God. He may eat the bread of his God, both the most holy and the holy; only he shall not go near the veil or approach the altar, because he has a defect, lest he profane My sanctuaries; for I the Lord sanctify them.'"

Isaiah prophesied of a time when these restrictions on eunuchs would be removed: "Do not let the son of the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord speak, saying, 'The Lord has utterly separated me from His people'; nor let the eunuch say, 'here 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, even to them I will give in My house and within My walls a place and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off'" (Isaiah 56:3-5).

In the same context, verse 7, God says, "Even them I will bring to My holy mountain [a reference to the church, cf Isaiah 2:2-4], and make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on My altar; for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations." That would be a direct reversal of the restrictions of Deuteronomy 23:1, and was fulfilled in the Christian age.

EUNUCHS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Eunuchs are mentioned twice in the New Testament: once in Matthew 19, where Jesus discussed divorce and remarriage; and again in Acts 8, the record of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch.

THE TEACHING OF JESUS REGARDING EUNUCHS IN MATTHEW 19

The gotquestions.org website referenced above gives a good explanation of this text:

“In Matthew 19:12, Jesus mentions eunuchs in the context of whether it is good to marry. He says, ‘There are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.’ Jesus identifies three types of ‘eunuchs’ here: natural eunuchs (‘born that way’), forced eunuchs (‘made eunuchs by others’), and voluntary eunuchs (‘those who choose’). Natural eunuchs include those who are born with a physical defect, but they also comprise those who are born with no real desire for marriage or sex. Forced eunuchs are those who have been castrated for whatever reason. Voluntary eunuchs are those who, in order to better serve the Lord in some capacity, choose to forego marriage.”

Jesus had just announced that there would be only one reason allowed for divorce and remarriage: unfaithfulness or adultery. (The death of a spouse also allows remarriage, but that is not the subject of Matthew 19.)

Even the Lord’s own disciples were astonished at such a restrictive rule, and they said to Jesus, “If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry” (Matthew 19:10). Jesus then said, “All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given” (verse 11).

“All cannot accept this saying.” What saying? Not the declaration of Jesus on divorce and remarriage that Jesus had just stated, as many people believe; but rather the “saying” the disciples had just pronounced--“If there is no way to get out of a bad marriage, then you are better off staying single!”

Jesus was saying that “only those to whom it had been given” could or should live that way (remain unmarried). He was speaking of those who have the self-control and spiritual strength to live a sin-free celibate life.

Jesus went on to explain further what He meant. He named three classes of eunuchs:

- Those made eunuchs by nature (having a birth defect);
- Those made eunuchs by men (a reference to forcible castration, such as the court eunuchs of the Old Testament);
- Those who make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of God.

The first two of these designations refer to actual physical eunuchs. The third reference is to *a eunuch who is one in spirit*--one who may be eligible to marry and capable of sexual relations, but who can control his or her sexual desires and chooses to live a celibate life for God’s sake.

Paul made a similar comment in 1 Corinthians 7:7--”For I wish that all men were even as myself [celibate]. But each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that.”

The bottom line is this: God does not demand either marriage or celibacy. Single people can be holy and serve God just as well as married people can. But not all have the self-control to remain single and stay holy.

THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH

In Acts 8, we read the account of the conversion of a remarkable man: a court eunuch (he served the queen of Ethiopia), who was evidently a proselyte to the Jewish religion and had been to Jerusalem to worship (Acts 8:27).

Several facts point to just how remarkable this man was:

- First is the fact that God thought enough of him to send Philip to him that he might receive the gospel (Philip was conducting a very successful gospel meeting in Samaria at the time).

- Second is the fact that he had traveled from Ethiopia to Jerusalem to worship. That's a 1,500-mile trip by chariot.
- Third is the fact that he must have known (from the Old Testament laws we looked at) that when he got to Jerusalem, he would not be allowed to enter the temple or fully participate in the public worship activities. Yet, he still made the trip.
- And fourth, when Philip found him, he was reading a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. God loves and blesses people who read the Bible!

It could very well be that he had purchased that scroll in Jerusalem (the likelihood of obtaining one in Ethiopia was probably pretty slim).

And why might the eunuch be so interested in the book of Isaiah? *Because it was Isaiah who prophesied that the restrictions on eunuchs in the worship of God would one day be removed.* He was reading chapter 53, but chapter 56 is not far away!

So now hopefully you know more about eunuchs and how they figure in God's word and God's plan. And isn't it wonderful to live under a covenant that allows all persons free access to God, regardless of physical defects or conditions? --John Temples