

The Ethiopian Eunuch

Acts 8:26-39

In our journey through the book of Acts, we have been learning that its central message is that the work of Jesus continues to triumph through his word and Spirit, across all kinds of boundaries.

Along the way, Acts also shows us what authentic Christianity looks like, and this is one of the reasons it is always so up-to-date. Over the past 2,000 years, the waters of Christianity have streamed into virtually every part of the world, but picked up a lot of contaminants along the way. If you want a fresh, undiluted drink of the Christian faith, don't take sips from the murky puddles of 21st century American politics and culture wars. Drink from the bubbling spring of the New Testament, right from the book of Acts.

When we do this, we will probably find much that surprises us. We will learn that Christianity is not a program for reforming people's behavior, changing society, or providing better mental health. Granted, it changes people, benefits their communities, and gives real joy. But at its core the Christian faith proclaims that God has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ, to rescue us from our self-imposed ruin so that we can flourish in his presence forever. This is the message that Jesus' followers were proclaiming: "Because Jesus of Nazareth died and rose again, he must be the fulfillment of God's promises about a forever King—a King who liberates us from sin and death. Therefore, you must think differently about him—that his death was not punishment for his own sins, but for yours and for mine." That is why the essential response to the Christian message is not "Behave!" but, "Believe!"

Overview of Acts 8

Acts 8 features three main episodes. First, the Samaritans believe the gospel. Second, Simon the Magician gets rebuked for trying to purchase spiritual power. Third, the Ethiopian eunuch believes the gospel. While we will focus on that third episode, the first two must not be overlooked.

The importance of the first episode (8:4-17) especially can hardly be overstated. It represents the next major movement in the church's mission "in Jerusalem and in all Judea *and Samaria*" (Acts 1:8). For hundreds of years a cultural, racial, and religious barrier more solid than brick and mortar had stood between Jews and Samaritans. The good news about Jesus shatters through that barrier, and the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit.

In the second episode (8:18-25), Simon the Magician offers to purchase from Peter the power to grant the gift of the Holy Spirit. From Peter's stern response we learn that God's gifts are not for sale, that Christians are not peddlers of spiritual merchandise, but proclaimers of a message.

Finally, in the third episode, we learn about how the Ethiopian eunuch—a wealthy, highly educated, deeply religious foreigner—comes to embrace the Christian faith. This teaches us who the Christian message is for, why we need it, how to respond to it, and what happens when we do.

1. The Man He Was (8:26-31)

We know quite a lot about the Ethiopian eunuch, simply from the few details we are told. He was (1) *powerful* (his position of responsibility came with much authority); (2) *capable* (he could not

have occupied that position unless he were highly competent); (3) *educated* (he was studying a scroll), and (4) *wealthy* (he had the means to purchase the scroll, as well as the leisure to take the trip to Jerusalem). But most strikingly, he was (5) *deeply religious*, for he had gone to “Jerusalem to worship” (8:27).

What is important to note is that the Ethiopian eunuch does not fit the stereotypical profile for a convert to Christianity. In every respect, the man had everything he needed—including religion.

2. The Question He Asked (8:32-34)

The thing that prompted the Ethiopian’s question was his reading of Isaiah 53, which described a servant of Yahweh who, though flawless (“like a lamb”), would be treated as a sinner (“justice was denied him”). If such a person existed, the Ethiopian thought, he must know who he is. That’s why it mattered to him whether the prophet was writing “about himself or about someone else” (8:34). As a sincere and intelligent man, the Ethiopian understood that the existence of such a person would change everything. No amount of religious zeal on his part could do what was described here: “He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace” (Isaiah 53:5). “If my biggest problem is moral behavior,” ponders the Ethiopian, “I can solve that. But if my biggest problem is my need for peace with God, only *this man* can solve that. But can someone tell me who he is?”

3. The Answer He Received (8:35)

In reply to this question, Philip “opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus” (8:35). Notice that Philip did *not* say, “Good question. To be completely honest, I’ve kind of been on this spiritual journey too, and maybe we can dialogue about it” (relativism). Neither did he say, “Do you realize how many hungry widows you left back in Jerusalem? And here you are flying business class back down to your penthouse in Khartoum!” (moralism). He gave him the answer, simple and clear: Jesus is this one. Notice also *how* he gave him the answer: he showed him *from Scripture*.

4. The Man He Became (8:36-39)

It is significant that Luke was (apparently) unconcerned to tell us that that the Ethiopian eunuch believed and that he received the Holy Spirit. For Luke, it was sufficient to report that the man was eager to get baptized, and that he “went on his way rejoicing.” These two clues—a step of obedience and the discovery of new joy—are enough to tell us that the man really received the Holy Spirit.

Application Questions:

1. Christians often try to advertise the Christian faith by saying that it meets certain needs that we feel—for example, inner peace, freedom from dominating habits, social connection through participating in church. What are the pros and cons of commending Christianity in this way? How does this differ from the way Christians in the book of Acts presented the Christian message?
2. The Ethiopian eunuch probably had more religious zeal than most people in church this morning. Yet Philip was sent to preach the gospel to him. What does this tell us about the difference between Christianity and religion?
3. What does Philip’s use of the Old Testament teach us about its central content? How can we grow in our understanding and use of the Old Testament (see also Luke 24:27; Acts 28:30-31)?
4. Why is *joy* singled out as the quality the Ethiopian had as he went along his way (8:39)? What correlation is there between joy and the Christian message (see also 2:46; 5:41; 8:8, 23).