



Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, Herbert Boeckl

An Ethiopian Eunuch Encounters the Good News of Jesus

SCRIPTURE

Acts 8:26–40

MAIN IDEA

The Word of God is an essential tool for expanding the reign of God.

OPENING PRAYER

Grant that I may hear your voice in the morning since I have hoped in you. Show me the way in which I should walk, since I have lifted up my soul unto you. Deliver me from my enemies, O Lord, since I have fled unto you. Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. Let your good Spirit conduct me to the land of uprightness.

John Calvin, 1509–1564

INTRODUCTION

Clarice J. Martin, Biblical scholar and former PW/*Horizons* Bible study author, says that the conversion of an “Ethiopian” eunuch provides a graphic illustration and symbol of the diverse persons who will constitute the church.²³ This statement is essential as we consider the topic of

inclusion in the early church. Before his Ascension, Jesus Christ commissioned the apostles to go beyond their borders saying, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In this story, the gospel continues its geographical spread beyond Judea and Samaria to the more distant coastland region, including Gaza, Azotus, and Caesarea. But it spreads even further to the outer reaches of Ethiopia where the first known African Christian embraces the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In ancient documents Ethiopia is referred to as the countries south of Egypt, present-day Sudan, and probably farther south. In *The Odyssey*, Homer described Ethiopians as people “who are at the world’s end.” The region was known in Old Testament times as Cush, and during the Roman period as Nubia. The ancient Greek historian and geographer, Herodotus, said the men in Ethiopia were black, and Greeks and Romans were fascinated by their skin.²⁴

²³ Demetrius K. Williams, “The Acts of the Apostles,” *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, eds. Brian K. Blount, Cain Hope Felder, Clarice J. Martin, and Emerson B. Powery (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 226–228.

²⁴ “Who are at the world’s end” is based on Samuel Butler’s translation of Homer’s *Odyssey* (1.22, 23). Butler’s translation is in public domain and available as a free eBook at gutenberg.org/ebooks/1727.

Acts 8:26–40

²⁶ Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." ³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ He replied, "How

can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

³² Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth."

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting

with this verse, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

EXAMINING THE CHARACTERS

The two main characters in the story are Phillip the evangelist and the Ethiopian eunuch. The disciple Philip, who was one of the original twelve, is distinguished from Philip the evangelist (Acts 8:5–13 and Acts 21:8–9). The Gospels record that Jesus called the twelve disciples, but in Acts seven people were selected by the apostles to be part of the mission of the early church: "Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word" (Acts 6:3–4). Philip was one of the seven selected and, along with the other

six, was chosen for specific tasks within their community. They helped in the daily distribution of food to widows and waited on tables in what might be identified as the emergence of the diaconal ministry in the early church. But Philip did not embody the role for which he was selected, instead, he assumed the role of a prophet or an evangelist and carried the gospel of Christ to places rich with possibilities.

The second character in the narrative is the Ethiopian eunuch. Eunuch is not a word we use everyday and if it is new to you, you belong to the majority. A eunuch is defined as a man whose testes (and sometimes also penis and scrotum) have been destroyed or removed; a eunuch has

been castrated. While castration was forced upon many individuals, some men chose to be castrated to avoid “sexual sin,” or temptation. The ancient world adhered to a very narrow view of masculinity; a man was defined as someone who had all his male genitalia intact. Castration changed his status, and as he was no longer recognized as fully male, his sexuality became ambiguous. Nonetheless, this eunuch was distinguished in the Candace’s, or Queen of Ethiopia’s, court. We do not know how he became a member of the court but at that time parents sometimes had their children castrated at a young age and offered them to the court for training and service to the queen. The story says that the Ethiopian eunuch had already served the queen for many years and was astute in financial matters.

Contemplate

What implications does this text have on our understanding of the importance of knowing the Word and being ready to tell others about what we believe?

The Ethiopian eunuch was reading Isaiah. When Philip connects the prophetic words from Isaiah to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the gospel changes both of their lives. In what ways have you been part of changing someone’s life with the good news? In what ways has your life been changed by someone who told you the story?

How does your church spread the good news or evangelize?

SACRED ENCOUNTER

The story is presented as an extraordinary encounter in which God is the primary actor. Philip was directed by an angel to go south, and there he saw the Ethiopian eunuch seated in his chariot reading from the scroll of Isaiah. Two things are striking about this situation: a non-Jew had possession of the scroll and the Ethiopian eunuch could afford the scroll, which was a costly item at that time. As Philip moved closer to the man, he heard him reading aloud, a custom in the ancient world. Even people who were alone often read aloud. In Acts 8:30 Philip asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” and the man admitted to Philip that he did not. Philip joined him in the chariot to explain the scroll and teach him about Jesus Christ. The Ethiopian eunuch was changed by Philip’s words and asked Philip to baptize him. Philip welcomed this request and thereby grasped the opportunity to expand the reign of God.

The Hebrew Scriptures (or Old Testament) shaped the religious and cultural foundation of Jesus’ teaching and preaching. Luke 4:16–21 records Jesus standing in the synagogue on the Sabbath and reading from the scroll of Isaiah, as was customary. Throughout Jesus’ ministry, he referenced the Hebrew Scriptures. In Luke 4:1–13, when the devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness, Jesus quoted Scripture three times in response (Deut 8:3, 6:13, 6:16). When Jesus referred to John the Baptist in Luke 7:27, he quoted from Malachi 3:1. During his cleansing of the temple in Luke 19:46, Jesus quoted Isaiah 56:7. Even at the crucifixion when Jesus uttered his dying words, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit,” (Lk 23:46) he quoted from Psalm 31:5.

TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

Most Christians engage in the study of the Bible in one form or another. Scripture, the word of

God, is central to Christianity. Carl Henry, an early U.S. evangelical, said that the Bible is the most extensively printed, most widely translated, and most frequently read book in the world. While Reformed Christians believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God, we also believe it was written by human beings and is an imperfect document. Read as the revelation of God, the Bible is a story of redemption. Biblical scholar Phyllis Tribble says that the witness of Scripture must be studied, pondered, questioned, and argued with.²⁵ The Ethiopian eunuch read the Scripture and Philip explained Isaiah's words, in this way the Ethiopian could understand God's message and take it to others.

When the word of God has a central place in our lives we can discern the will of God for ourselves, our churches, and our communities. The Ethiopian eunuch represents the movement of the early church beyond the villages of Galilee. The breadth, height, and depth of the church expand

²⁵ Emmy Kegler, "Bruised and Blessed by Scripture," *The Christian Century* vol 136 No. 7, March 20, 2019; christiancentury.org/article/first-person/bruised-and-blessed-scripture.

Contemplate

Can a person read the Bible and understand what it means without help?

What are some of the dangers inherent in trying to understand the Scriptures on your own?

What aids have helped you understand the Bible?

Is your church equipped with resources that people can access for deeper study?

through the reading and proclamation of the word. Phillip intervened in the eunuch's life and offered him the message of Jesus Christ. Gloria Anzaldua describes this type of interaction as a "borderland moment" where people of profound difference enter a new possibility of life together in a shared intimate space and a new, shared

Help Build PW's Bible Study Endowment

Established by Anna and Jerry Bedford, the **Anna H. Bedford Endowment** seeks to provide funds necessary to help deepen understanding and engagement with PW's Bible studies. Anna says that the "need to study the Bible—in whatever form—will stand firm. Jerry's and my small gift just puts a toe in the water before we are plunged into a floodtide of change. I invite others to jump in!"

Presbyterian women can "jump in" to increase the endowment's corpus and provide a reliable stream of funding for this purpose. (Read more about this endowment in the March/April 2020 *Horizons*, page 21. Contact Carissa Herold for a pdf of the article; carissa.herold@pcusa.org.)

If Bible study is central to your life of discipleship and you wish to add to the Anna H. Bedford Endowment, please consult with your financial advisor and prayerfully consider your personal financial situation. Ready to jump in? If so, visit the Presbyterian Foundation's link: endowments.presbyterianfoundation.org/fund/103120000011/ or call the Presbyterian Foundation, 800/858-6127, ext. 3041 or email client.services@presbyterianfoundation.org

identity.²⁶ The Ethiopian eunuch signifies the spread of the gospel to “the end of the earth” and blurs gender, ethnic, and status boundaries in the process. The Ethiopian eunuch’s desire to read the Scripture and Peter’s willingness to proclaim a message to him coalesce and place the church on a new trajectory.

Peter J. Paris, professor of Christian social ethics and author of a commentary on the Ethiopian eunuch, says, “The story ends triumphantly as the eunuch asks for baptism, which Philip gladly provides. The significance of the story lies in the place it has gained in the history of Christianity’s global expansion by means of personal witness. In fact, tradition tells us that the eunuch followed Philip’s example by introducing Ethiopia to the Christian message. Most important, The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has always viewed itself as connected directly to the apostles through Philip’s act of baptizing their queen’s eunuch, whom the church has venerated from that time up to the present era.”²⁷

²⁶ Willie James Jennings, *Belief: A Theological Commentary of the Bible—Acts* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 83.

²⁷ Peter J. Paris, “African Heritage Sunday Lectionary Commentary,” *The African American Lectionary*, February 9, 2009; theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupLectionaryReading.asp?LRID=68.

CLOSING PRAYER

In me there is darkness, but with you there is light; I am lonely, but you do not leave me; I am feeble in heart, but with you there is help; I am restless, but with you there is peace. In me there is bitterness, but with you there is patience; I do not understand your ways, but you know the way for me. Amen.²⁸

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1906–1945

²⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 171.



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This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper appears to be a standard notebook page or a sheet of stationery. There is no handwriting or other markings on the page.

***Annunciation*, Ethiopien d'Abbadie 105, fol. 5, 15th century,
Tigray Ethiopia (Bibliothèque nationale de France)**

An Ethiopian Eunuch Encounters the Good News of Jesus

Overview: Through the direction of the Holy Spirit, Philip has a sacred encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch and begins to spread the gospel beyond the borders of Judea and Samaria. By baptizing this newcomer, the apostle demonstrates how to share faith with kindness and courage and provides a preview of the diverse and inclusive church that is to come.

Materials: Intercessory prayer notebooks; maps of Ethiopia in Biblical times (*see figure 1*); an image of Ethiopian iconography (*see figure 2*); bowl of water; recording of the sound of water and a way to play it; small strips of paper

Prayer

Ask everyone in the group to take three deep breaths.

Read: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Mt 18:20).

Lead the group in the opening prayer on page 61.

Perform Acts 8:26–40

Invite participants to read the text divided into parts for the narrator (Luke), Peter, the Ethiopian eunuch, and Philip. They can wear costumes and move to dramatize their presentation as they read, or they can sit together and read as a group.

Online option: Search and share a short video of a performance based on the text.

Introduce the Lesson

Use the Introduction on page 61 to present this lesson to the group. Display the map of Ethiopia in Biblical times (*see figure 1*) and point out the route from Jerusalem to Gaza where Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch would have been traveling. Show the group pictures of Ethiopian iconography (*see figure 2*) and discuss how these depictions compare with images in your mind of Biblical characters. How do these images inform your reading of the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch?

Examine the Characters

Religious law prohibited eunuchs from participating in the assembly of the Lord, leaving them as religious outsiders (Deut 23:1). Even though Philip could perform physical miracles through the work of the Spirit (Acts 8:7), in this case Philip does not change the eunuch so he can worship in the temple and be a part of the community. Instead, Philip teaches the eunuch about Jesus and welcomes him into the family of faith through baptism.¹

Sacred Encounter

From the very beginning, religious leaders and teachers have interpreted God’s word to increase understanding and to help a diverse community develop their faith and discipleship. Philip’s sacred encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch continues this tradition of teaching and learning.

Ask the group: How can we make room for all to hear and understand God’s word?

Can we offer classes to people who do not speak English as their first language? Can we purchase assistive listening devices or use a sign language interpreter for people who need audio assistance? Can we provide large print, audio, or Braille Bibles for people who are visually impaired? Can we adapt Biblical stories for people who are neurologically diverse?

Contemplate

Use the questions on page 63 and 64 to continue this discussion.

Transformative Experience

In the notebooks of intercessory prayers, list groups of people in your community who might struggle to study the Bible. Ideas might include people in jail, people without housing, people who cannot leave their homes, children who cannot get to church by themselves, people who are deaf, people who are blind, or people with mobility problems.

Write the names of the different groups on small strips of paper.

To set the tone for prayer, set out a bowl of water and play the sound of water for all to hear.

Invite participants to say the names of the people or groups on their lists one by one.

After each person or group name is read, repeat the words of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:35b: “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

Immerse the strips of paper in water.

Invite everyone to remember their own baptisms.

Closing Prayer

As a group, read the closing prayer on page 65.

Until the Next Lesson

Explain that not everyone finds it easy to pray silently or in writing. Some people need to pray while walking, drawing, cooking, gardening, dancing, or singing.

Urge the group to explore alternative ways to pray that fit their needs.

Ask every participant to choose one of the groups of people from the baptism activity and pray for them until the next encounter.

Since the testimony of Lydia is the topic in the next lesson, include in the prayer list people who support the mission of the church with monetary gifts.

¹ David F. Watson, “Luke-Acts,” *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*, Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons and Amos Yong, ed. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 324–325.