

## Lesson 12: Acts 8:25-40 Inclusion of an Ethiopian Eunuch

### Introduction

Peter and John do not appear to have stayed long in Samaria. That's one request I would have for Luke. I would love more indication of how long things take. Luke is good with giving us names. We get a lot of names of people in Acts. So, we can reconstruct a broad timeline from major events. For example, the crucifixion, resurrection and Pentecost happened in 30 A.D., that's our starting point. And we know from Roman sources that Herod Agrippa died in Caesarea in 44 A.D. That's in Acts 12. That gives us 14 years for the first half of Acts where Peter is our main figure, from Acts 1:1 through 12:24 - 30 A.D. to 44 A.D. How to break down that 14 years takes a lot of guesswork. Later in the book, Luke will give us more time frame. He will tell us that Paul spent a year in Antioch, then on his second missionary journey he was a year and a half in Corinth, then on the third journey, he was two years in Ephesus, then at least two years in prison in Caesarea, and two years under house arrest in Rome.

Luke gives us these long periods when Paul was in one place. So, I am going to make an assumption that Peter and John and Philip are in Samaria less than a year, because if it had been longer, I think Luke would have told us. But knowing how long Paul was in Damascus and Luke does not tell us about that, you know, we don't find out about that until we read the Letter to the Galatians, I am just guessing they didn't stay so long in Samaria. Their ministries seem to be more on the move. Though on the move over a significant amount of time. We have to keep that in mind. 14 years for this first half of Acts.

Acts 8:25 reports about Peter and John,

<sup>25</sup> So, when they 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.

They are making that 20 mile, 30 kilometer, or so trek back to Jerusalem, preaching the Gospel as they go, to Samaritans. They did not go to Samaria to become pastors of a church. They affirmed both for themselves and for the Samaritans that the New Covenant Word of God had truly been received. They taught. And they returned to Jerusalem. But they did not return straight away. They are not pure administrators on a business trip. You know, let's just go there, witness it, get back. We go done, affirm the work and get back. Their heart was to see people come into relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. And they take time along their journey to witness in the villages that they pass by.

Philip is also not called by God as a pastor of a local church. He seems to be serving in the role of traveling evangelist. Sometimes he is doing cross-cultural work, sometimes not. In Acts 8:5 he is "proclaiming Christ to [Samaritans]." In Acts 8:35 he, "preached Jesus to [the Ethiopian]." In Acts 8:40, moving along the Judean coastline from Azotus northward to Caesarea, "he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities," presumably Jewish cities. "Proclaiming Christ (to Samaritans)...preaching Jesus (to a gentile)...preaching the gospel (to Jews)..." that's how Luke describes Philip's ministry. Philip aims to preach the Good News of Jesus in the whole region to everybody, whoever he meets, whatever their culture.

He was pushed out of Jerusalem by the circumstances of persecution. God uses events in our lives to move us forward in his will. Philip is also led directly in this case by an angel of the Lord. And at some point we're going to need to talk about angels, because they keep appearing in the story of Acts. I'll wait a little longer. The second time Peter gets released from prison by an angel will be a good place

to stop and think about the truth that, though human beings are by far the primary messengers spreading the Gospel to other human beings, we are not the only beings in relationship with God, participating in carrying out His will. There is this whole spiritual realm that we just occasionally get glimpses of. We will come back to that in chapter 12. For now, we recognize the unique experience Philip has, along with a select group of men and women through the biblical story, to receive direct marching orders from God delivered by an angel.

The reference to the angel, the appearance of the angel may suggest an important event in the spread of the Gospel is about to happen. Angels most often appear in the Bible, especially from Daniel on, to give us a word about the Messiah at a significant moment. It really makes me wonder about this man is going to have back in Ethiopia. But that's not part of this story. In this story of Philip and the Ethiopian we are going to see the Gospel moving further out culturally. The Samaritans are a half-step away from the Jews. The Ethiopians are a giant full step away from the Jews. This is a story of inclusion. And it is not only the inclusion of an Ethiopian. It is the inclusion of an Ethiopian eunuch. That will be important. At the same time that this is a story of the Gospel crossing cultural boundaries, it is also a story of God's sovereign action to bring an individual into relationship with Himself. God cared deeply about this Ethiopian seeker. And I think it shows that God cares deeply for Ethiopians who would benefit from the message that the seeker is going to take back with him. So, God sent an angel to tell Philip to go because God wanted Phillip to meet this man. Acts 8:26-40.

#### **Philip's Witness to the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26-40)**

<sup>26</sup> 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*.) <sup>27</sup> So he got up and went; and there was 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, <sup>28</sup> and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah. <sup>29</sup> Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." <sup>30</sup> Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" <sup>31</sup> And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. <sup>32</sup> Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: "HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER; AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT, SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH. <sup>33</sup> "IN HUMILIATION HIS JUDGMENT WAS TAKEN AWAY; WHO WILL RELATE HIS GENERATION? FOR HIS LIFE IS REMOVED FROM THE EARTH." <sup>34</sup> The eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please *tell me*, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?" <sup>35</sup> Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. <sup>36</sup> As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" <sup>37</sup> 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." <sup>38</sup> 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. <sup>39</sup> 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. <sup>40</sup> But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea.

#### *About the Encounter*

Luke uses a repetition of short action verbs as command and response. This is the classic Biblical formula for obedience. The angel says, "Get up and go...So he got up and went." That repetition in the command and response emphasizes immediate obedience and shows us Philip's heart for God. "God tells me what to do, I do it. He says, 'Get up and go to Gaza, I am going to get up and go to Gaza.'" You might say you would, too, if an angel told you. But the Bible has stories about people questioning angels, so we might not ought assume our obedience would be automatic just because it

was an angel. Though I do imagine an angel would help clear up whether we are hearing God right or not.

God's instructions to Philip are not very precise. He is not told where he needs to be on the road to Gaza or what time he needs to be on the road to Gaza. Just get going and leave what's next to God. God often gives us the next step without telling us what is going to happen after that step, or even why we're taking that step. We get up and go.

On the road down to and through Jerusalem, Philip may have passed hundreds of people. One of the more intimidating people he passes is a court official from a foreign land. He is very wealthy, riding in a chariot. He is a political figure of influence. His skin is the full black of Africa, not the olive color of the Jew. His people are fierce warriors. Barbaric in Jewish eyes. He travels with a group, surely having his own protection. Riding, he sits up high, not on the same level as another walker on the road. And he is not looking at Philip. He is not inviting any kind of conversation. His head is down, reading.

His retinue is intimidating. He is not approachable at all. This is certainly not the person. You know, you're looking around at the person you're supposed to meet, and you catch their eyes, and you say, "Oh, that's who I'm looking for? This can't be the guy!" But then it is. The Spirit of God instructs Philip, "Go up and join his chariot." I do not know if this was an audible voice in the mind or a strong impression. It certainly sounds like it was an audible instruction. "Go up and join his chariot!" God is being very clear to Philip. Philip, for his part, obeys. He runs up to the chariot. I don't think the running is exuberance on Philip's part. I don't think there's any other way to keep up with a fast-moving chariot. He has to jog alongside just to keep up.

Fortunately, the Ethiopian likes to read out loud. I am not sure if he was reading just for himself, or if he was reading to a fellow traveler, or if he wanted his driver to hear the Bible. Whatever the reason, it provides an immediate bridge for Philip. For all the potential barriers that exists between these two men, every hesitation and problem that could rise up in Philip's mind to prevent him from speaking, "There is no way I am talking to that guy. He looks powerful and dangerous, and even if I don't get speared by one of his men, I'd look pretty foolish jogging alongside his chariot, trying to speak," in spite of all the potential, reasonable barriers, the man is reading out loud the book of Isaiah! Bam! It's an immediate bridge!

"Do you understand what you are reading?" [Philip gasped as he's running along,] "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

And what is the Ethiopian man reading? Of all the Old Testament passages he could be reading, he is reading the most clear prophetic passage of the atonement of Jesus Christ that you can find in the Old Testament. I sometimes read this passage to students without telling them where it is from in the Bible, and then I'm going to ask them if they know and they always guess it is from the New Testament, and probably written by Paul. Let's read a little more of the context to get the full impact. Luke quotes Isaiah 53:7b-8a. I am going to start earlier and go a little further. This is Isaiah 53:4-9.

4 Surely our griefs He Himself bore,	And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,	Smitten of God, and afflicted.
5 But He was pierced through for our transgressions,	He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being <i>fell</i> upon Him,	And by His scourging we are healed.
6 All of us like sheep have gone astray,	Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all	To fall on Him.

7 He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, So He did not open His mouth.	Yet He did not open His mouth; And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
8 By oppression and judgment He was taken away; That He was cut off out of the land of the living	And as for His generation, who considered For the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke <i>was due</i> ?
9 His grave was assigned with wicked men, Because He had done no violence,	Yet He was with a rich man in His death, Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

“Please *tell me*, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?”, asks the seeking Ethiopian. That’s good Bible observation. He is not trying to interpret what he does not know. He is asking questions of the text. “Who is the prophet talking about?”

And could there be a better possible lead-in to explaining the Gospel of Jesus Christ? From a human point of view, Philip obeyed God when God directed. He did not hide during the persecution. He left Jerusalem with the plan of talking to people about Jesus. He obeyed when the angel said, “Get up and go.” And then for his part, the Ethiopian is seeking truth. He came to Jerusalem to worship the God of the Jews. And he spent some serious money to acquire the scroll of Isaiah, and he has it with him in the chariot. And that’s what these men have done. We do not know if that is his only reason or if he was here on court business. But on his own volition he took time in Jerusalem to worship and he spent some serious money to acquire the scroll of Isaiah, and he has it with him in the chariot. That’s what these men have done.

From God’s side, God gave Philip the courage and will to witness. God is at work in our hearts to will and to do. God worked in the Ethiopian’s life, creating a desire and somehow bringing people into his life to point him to Jerusalem as a source of truth. God arranged for Philip and the Ethiopian to arrive on that road at that moment together. And God prompted the mind of the Ethiopian so that he would be reading. And not only reading, but of all the Old Testament books, he would be reading Isaiah. And out of 1300 verses in Isaiah, he would be reading from the middle of chapter 53 about Jesus Christ.

With everyone ready and in place, God spoke to Philip by His Spirit, “Go up and join his chariot.” God is sovereign in our lives. God’s eye was on this Ethiopian to bring him into his Kingdom. God’s eye was on Philip to bless him with the joy of helping bring this man into the Kingdom. God’s eye is on you, and the road you’re on, and the people you’re going to meet. God is sovereign in our lives.

“Please *tell me*, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?” <sup>35</sup> Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. <sup>36</sup> As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?”

God has called this moment to happen. There is no need to wait for baptism when the circumstances of faith are so clear. The eunuch is ready to identify himself with Jesus Christ. Philip has confidence in his profession of faith. The eunuch is going back to Ethiopia, so there is no foreseeable option for him to first get involved in a Christian community and go through baptism classes. Philip is not going to see him again. I love the detail Luke gives us in the conversation. “Look! Water! Why not?”

And then we get verse 37. It is one of those rare verses that may not be authentic to the original writing of Scripture. My Bible leaves it in the text but makes a note telling me that this verse does not appear in the earlier, more reliable manuscripts. And there is nothing wrong with the verse. It fits well with what we have been reading in Acts. It’s just that there’s a group of ancient manuscripts that have the verse, and there’s a group of ancient manuscripts that don’t have the verse, so where we usually have harmony now we have a problem. Here’s the verse,

<sup>37</sup> 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.”

So, there's nothing wrong with the verse. It's just that we're not sure are the manuscripts without it right or is the manuscript with it right. And it is hard to imagine why any scribe would leave this verse out while copying the text of Acts. Why do some manuscripts not have it, if it was original? Why would you drop this verse out? It is not so hard to imagine why a well-intentioned scribe might insert it. Baptism should follow a genuine statement of faith. And without verse 37 being there, we are left assuming that Philip challenged the Ethiopian to believe and that the Ethiopian indeed understood and believed in Jesus. And with the context Luke has given us so far, it's a safe assumption. When we look at the message Peter has preached four times, and we look at the message of Philip in Samaria that he preaches before he baptizes, we don't need an explicit statement in the text telling us that Philip would have expected the eunuch to believe and that the eunuch would need some kind of confession of faith before baptism. We can assume that from what we have read so far in Acts. But it appears that at some point a scribe wanted to make sure that we understand this, that nobody gets baptized without believing and so,

<sup>37</sup> 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."

Whether stated explicitly as we have in verse 37, or we're supposed to understand it implicitly, this is the kind of assertion of faith required for baptism that Philip would have sought. Having recognized the eunuch's sincere confession, what would Philip do? "Here's water! Why can't I be baptized?" We read on,

<sup>38</sup> 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. <sup>39</sup> 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. <sup>40</sup> But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea.

It was that quick. One afternoon together and the Ethiopian's life is changed forever. He goes on his way rejoicing. His life and those he would influence back in his homeland. And something else spiritual happens here, and it's not explained but somehow, Philip's just gone down to Azotus.

Let's talk a little more about how the Ethiopian is presented here in this passage and about how Jesus is presented in the passage.

#### *About the Ethiopian*

About the Ethiopian, going a little deeper into who he was will help us understand better the significance of this conversation. Candace is not a name, but a title for the Queen Mother whose kingdom "probably centered in the region of Upper Nubia (Meroë) rather than in modern-day Ethiopia."<sup>1</sup> That region south of Egypt along the Nile river is located in modern-day Sudan, it's north of modern-day Ethiopia.

In appearance, the Ethiopian eunuch would have been black African, not Egyptian. He is Nubian. He would have been raised in a polytheistic religion of many gods and spirits. Most likely he had at some point been castrated, having his testicles cut off. Eunuchs had a trustworthy reputation in the Ancient Near East and were particularly associated with care of the king's harem and for royal women. It was not unusual for a eunuch to be given financial responsibility. They were considered trustworthy, and it could be at a very high level like it was with this man.

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Hubbard. "Candace" in *The New Bible Dictionary* D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, & D. J. Wiseman (Eds.). (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 164–165.

He apparently gained knowledge of Yahweh through some Jewish source. We read in Acts 2 that some of those at Pentecost were Jews from Egypt. How did they get there? Way back, Jeremiah records how he himself was forcibly taken to Egypt with a remnant of Jews who escaped the deportation to Babylon in 600 BC. They stayed a while in Judea, but then they got scared and they fled to Egypt and they settled there. F. F. Bruce estimates as many as 100,000 Jews were settled in Egypt and Libya by the first century A.D. So there's sizeable Jewish communities. The Jewish concept of one true God who communicated a clear law for relationship with Him and a high view of morality, attracted pagans disillusioned or disappointed with their own religious system. So, it wasn't uncommon that there were God-fearers who were seeking something deeper, something more true and who were willing to submit to a religious culture that was different from their own.

Judaism did present a number of obstacles for non-Jews. If you wanted to be serious about Yahweh, they made it hard to just add Him in as one of the gods you worshiped. You don't play with Yahweh. There were requirements. The Old Covenant requirements touched every area of life, creating a distinct religious culture. A God-fearer could pray to and worship Yahweh, even attend the synagogue, but remained at a distance, not considered Jewish. A proselyte, as opposed to a God-fearer, a proselyte to Judaism would submit to following Old Covenant requirements, such as keeping the Sabbath, obeying the food and other cleanliness laws, and being circumcised if a male. Jews did not move towards the culture of seekers. Seekers were theologically required to move towards the culture of the Jews because of Old Covenant requirements. You know, requirements put in place by God. Not just cultural but Biblical. Though, by this time the requirements had grown considerably. The religious culture was Old Covenant plus. But at its base there were significant Biblical requirements even if you removed the human tradition that was built on top of that.

In addition to their religious culture barriers, this particular man faced another significant barrier to inclusion. God spoke through Moses, saying in Deuteronomy 23:1, "No one who is emasculated or has his male organ cut off shall enter into the assembly of the LORD." Other translations just say clearly, "No one who is a eunuch shall enter the assembly of the Lord." By the Word of God, eunuchs could not fully join the worship assembly of Israel in the Temple. The command sounds like a harsh exclusion. Recognizing that one of the purposes of the Law was to minimize sin in the culture of Israel, we should also recognize the protective power of the Law. God established a number of laws intended to protect the Israelites from unwisely adopting or continuing cultural practices prevalent in Egypt and Canaan. Castrating men as eunuchs, an acceptable practice promoted under certain circumstances, was now forbidden in Israel because of this Law. Not only is it forbidden, but there is an associated punishment to deter its practice. All Jewish adults are to participate in the assembly. Castration would exclude participation. As a result of this protective law established at the beginning of Israel on Mount Sinai, we do not see castration practiced in Israel. That's why you don't read about Jewish eunuchs because of this law.

We might think it would be easy to prevent castration from happening without such a strict law of exclusion from assembly. Just tell guys, "Don't do it!", and you'd think they wouldn't do it. But oddly enough, the practice came back in the Christian era. A misguided glorification of celibacy led to the even more misguided, perverted practice of castration among some extreme monastic orders. Worse was the practice of castrating pre-pubescent boys to maintain a falsetto singing voice into adulthood. That was a real thing. The last castrato of the Sistine Chapel Choir lived as late as 1922 before it has finally been abolished and the last guy died. The Christian Church could have really benefited from understanding the intent of the Old Testament law of the eunuch to protect boys and men from castration. The emphasis is not on exclusion for the sake of exclusion. The emphasis is, don't do this. Do not have this as part of your culture. If you do, they will be excluded. Which, by the way, doesn't mean exclusion from salvation. It is exclusion from the assembly. It doesn't mean they cannot be

saved by faith through Yahweh. It's similar, but for different reasons, with the law of the leper. They're excluded for contagious reasons. The eunuchs were excluded so the practice would not be adopted in Israel. But in both cases, both the eunuch and the leper, exclusion from assembly does not mean exclusion from salvation. That's important to keep in mind.

The positive intent of the law to minimize sin and protect individuals from a damaging practice, even though there were good reasons for it, still created a difficult barrier for men like this Ethiopian eunuch who were from a culture where this law didn't protect them before they were castrated, or before they chose to be castrated. So now, even if he were to convert to Judaism, he would not be able to enter into the fullness of community because of the mutilation he experienced before. It was something that could not be undone. So what hope could somebody like him find in the religion of Israel?

I wonder very much whether he had read on already further in the book of Isaiah. And I imagine he had. I think there's a reason this guy likes Isaiah. It's because two chapters after the passage Philip hears him reading in his chariot there is another passage that would speak deeply to him. It's in Isaiah 56:1-5. So listen to this.

1 Thus says the LORD,

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

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

3 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.”

4 For thus says the LORD,

“To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths,  
And choose what pleases Me,  
And hold fast My covenant,

5 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 gives us so many first names in the book of Acts, he tells us who people are, I wonder why this man's name is not provided. I believe the reason is that the message of the story is bigger than he is. And it's important for us to recognize that he is an Ethiopian. He is a foreigner, and he is a eunuch. He is one who is ceremonially excluded. He's a real foreigner. He's not a half-step from the Jews, not even the more significant step to Hellenistic culture, like the Romans, who speak the same language as the Jews, but he is further out there. He is an Ethiopian, exotic maybe, but far removed, he is other. And he is a eunuch whose body has been mutilated for social purposes and is specifically pointed out as being excluded. God promises through Isaiah that the foreigner who seeks him will not be separated and the eunuch who seeks him will not be a dry tree. They will not be cut off. That's language for the eunuch. Your mutilation will be overcome by spiritual blessing. What was prophesied by Isaiah and it was technically true under Old Covenant, is made immediately accessible through the New Covenant Gospel.

The Law of the Lord established barriers for the protection of Israelite citizens. But it wasn't an impossible barrier to cross for those who truly wanted to worship the Lord. You know, Ruth was welcomed in. Rahab, and Tamar, and Naaman were welcomed in. Isaiah assures the eunuch with his prophecy that, if he were to seek Yahweh with his heart, fear Him and show his faith through obedience, he would be welcomed in. And Yahweh would give him an everlasting name.

This story at this point in the book of Acts reveals to the reader that something about the Gospel of Jesus Christ is tearing down the wall that divides, making a more open way for foreigners and even eunuchs to come to Yahweh. When the eunuch asked, “What prevents me from being baptized?” If we were a good Jew like Philip, we would immediately be thinking, “Well, you are a eunuch. And I

don't know what to do about that. I know Deuteronomy. But I'm not sure how it applies. I've never witnessed to a eunuch before." Philip, however, did not hesitate. The Gospel of Jesus Christ has torn down the religious cultural barrier, the purity barrier. The veil of the curtain was ripped in two and, in Jesus Christ, we can go into the Holy of Holies without fear. "Well, if you believe in Jesus Christ, what reason is there you should not be baptized, my Ethiopian eunuch brother? I cannot think of one." And they go down into the water together.

Jewish man and black African man together in the water certainly rejects racial divisions that, unfortunately, get put up in the Christian Church. So, this is a message for us today. At first thought, it seems to me that I am not likely to come into contact with a eunuch. But then I think, what about the transgender movement, steadily growing in acceptability as a practice in modern cultures? Does Philip's response to the eunuch have anything to say how I ought to treat someone who has gone through gender reassignment surgery? It seems to me it does. It is an extreme case of somebody in our modern culture that we might consider outside the camp of Christianity. There are other, less extreme, depending on how you grew up or what kind of church you come from, whether we're talking about tattoos, or hair color, or dressing, or piercings, or some kind of decision someone earlier in their life that seems to put them just too far outside of the camp. We're going to expect a lot from them before we let them in. Teenage pregnancy, drug use, prison time, homosexual behavior? You know, whatever past taboos you have broken that had put you beyond the pale, or that make somebody unacceptable. And even if we don't say it intellectually, all of our feeling when we're in conversation creates a barrier.

Is transgender surgery that thing that puts people too far out, that they can't be welcomed into the family? That God is not going to give them a name as son and daughters? Was that true of eunuchs? Were eunuchs outside? Those who have been mutilated for social purposes? Were they outside the pale?

"To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths,  
And choose what pleases Me,  
And hold fast My covenant,  
5 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.

Yes, they have cut their body. But if they turn away from a false identity of their own making or of societies making and they turn back to me, and they hold on to me, I will not cut them off. I will give them a name.

To be clear, I stand against transgender surgery. This is not a promotion of that life decision, which I think is the perversion of the identity God has given someone at birth. At the same time, I believe that God offers to anyone who has gone through transgender surgery the same offer Peter has communicated throughout his speeches. Repent and return to God and you will find forgiveness and experience refreshment. No one is excluded by their past. Everyone willing to submit to God and receive the name He would give them, to receive the identity that God would offer, everyone who would receive that from God is welcome to come into the family of God.

## About Jesus

Philip's witness to the Ethiopian eunuch tells us something about the gospel of Jesus Christ as an open call to all who will come. It also tells us something about Jesus that has only been alluded to briefly so far in the book of Acts. Peter calls Jesus a servant during his sermon in chapter 3, after His healing of the lame man. The Suffering Servant is a prophetic reference to the Messiah repeated by Isaiah. That reference to Jesus is made direct here in this conversation between Philip and the eunuch. It even gives Luke the chance to quote the Scripture from a real conversation.

And the way that Luke has told the two stories about Philip sets up a contrast. In Samaria, Simon the magician had embraced the title, “the Great Power of God.” And though he seems to have given up



such aspiration initially, we see later a bitterness in his heart when God denies him the power of the Spirit that's working through Peter and John. He still wants to be "the great power of God". It's a grasping of an identity that God will not share with him.

The true Great Power of God has come into the world. And He was crucified. He came, humbling himself as a servant, obedient, even obedient to the point of death. Simon is not the Great Power of God. The story being told here - who is this speaking? Who does Isaiah speak about? Who bears our iniquities? Who is buried in the grave of the rich man? - The greatness of Jesus was revealed in humility and sacrificial love. That truth is highlighted through the Ethiopian's quote of Isaiah.

Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,                      And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,  
So He did not open His mouth. (Isaiah 53:7b)

Humbling himself, he was exalted. Because this, too, is his name, “Servant of God.” He lowered himself below all people, so that he might save all people.

Philip's witness to the Ethiopian alerts the readers of Acts that something radically different is happening. The barrier has been torn down. Everyone who will believe in Jesus Christ is welcome to enter the family of God and receive an everlasting name. The Gospel is not staying with the Jews in Jerusalem. It is going out to every person of every people, to the remotest parts of the Earth.

## Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 8:25-40. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. How was Philip prepared for this encounter?
3. How was the Ethiopian prepared for this encounter?
4. Reflect on a gospel encounter in your life when you knew that God was at work in that moment. It can be a moment when someone was sharing the gospel with you or when you were sharing the gospel with someone else. What stands out to you about that moment?
5. What cultural barriers did Philip cross to witness earlier to the Samaritans?
6. What further cultural barriers did Philip cross to witness with the Ethiopian?
7. The Ethiopian was also a Eunuch. The process of becoming a Eunuch was forbidden in Mosaic law with the severe penalty that a eunuch was forbidden to worship in the temple. As a result, Jews are never known for practicing castration. The harsh law successfully eliminated the practice. Even so, Philip, strongly disagreeing with the practice, crossed a social barrier to witness to the Eunuch and gladly baptized him that day.  
  
Who is socially taboo in your society? What kind of practices or behaviors are considered way out of bounds by Christians? Make a list of five or six different practices or behaviors.
8. What does this story have to say about the Christian response to people who fit the list?