

**Philip: “I Bet You’re Wondering How I got Here . . .”**

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One of the things I enjoy most about being a pastor is leading people through baptism.

Whether it’s explaining baptism, leading baptism classes, or actually baptizing people, I love all of it! It’s the point in someone’s life where they fully say “yes” to Jesus for themselves. Going into the water represents the death and burial of Jesus; coming out of the water represents rising again with Jesus to new life. It’s a powerful symbol of faith in Jesus Christ, and it’s a powerful declaration of giving our lives fully to God.

As I wrote this sermon, I asked a few people from our church: ***What is the most significant memory from your baptism?*** There’s not a “correct” answer to this question. I was asking a very open ended question on purpose. The responses I received back were fantastic. Some said . . .

- Their baptism moment itself was an exciting highlight and very profound.
- Their baptism wasn’t an emotional highlight at the time, but it was very meaningful in hindsight.
- Their baptism was a noted shift into a new direction in life.
- Their baptism was part of many other intersecting moments leading to a new phase of life.
- Their people that were there or even conducting the baptism were significant.

Baptism can be a very big deal for some – it’s time for a profound statement of belief! Sometimes people leap out of the water with joy after they are baptized. For others their baptism is simply a declaration of what they believe – there’s no fanfare, no heightened emotions – it’s just time for them to say, “This is what I believe”. There is no correct feeling to feel when it comes to getting baptized.

It doesn’t matter to me how someone feels about the step of baptism, as long as they are taking this moment to declare, “I belong to Jesus and I’m going to follow him.” That is always a highlight for me.

In Acts 8 we read about an Ethiopian man who gets baptized. Personally, his baptism is very significant. But in the book of Acts and in the history of the early church, this is a massive and significant moment. The details of this person’s life show what makes his baptism so important.

**The Ethiopian is a high government official.** In Acts 8:27 he is “an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. A lot of people Jesus and the early church served were poor, catastrophically disabled, and on the outside of political power. This does not describe the Ethiopian official! He has lots of power and authority. He is well trusted. He is an insider to their politics and power.

**The Ethiopian official is definitely not Jewish!** Many of the first people who became Christians were people from a Jewish background. Jesus’ disciples were Jewish. Jesus’ foundations were all in Judaism. This African man would not have looked Jewish. He would not have a shared religious and historical connection to Judaism. He would not look or sound Jewish, nor would he have Jewish roots.

**The official is a physical and sexual outsider.** What's a eunuch? Ask your parents when you get home, kids! (And then ask them where babies come from.) A eunuch was a man that had his testicles removed. For someone serving in an official, royal capacity, it prevented them from ever becoming part of the royal line. It's possible "eunuch" was just a word to describe his political position. But it's more likely that he was physically a eunuch.

What's the big deal about this? In the Jewish law it is written, "No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the Lord." (Deuteronomy 23:1) Eunuchs like this man were forbidden from entering the temple or tabernacle. They were forbidden from entering the full church, essentially, at least the part open to all "worthy" people. Physically and sexually this man is an outsider in some parts of society, and particularly in worship.

**The official is enthusiastic to worship the Jewish God.** So this man, having no Jewish roots or connections, and being a eunuch and seen as "damaged", is a full on outsider to fully accessing the Jewish faith. **"He was thus an outsider, forever to remain so within the Jewish system. But there was something about the Jewish God and the Jewish way of life which attracted him, as it did with many in the ancient world."** (NT Wright)

We have this understanding of the Jewish faith as rigid and heavy – a burden people could not possibly bear. But there was exceptional freedom in this way of belief. NT Wright explains further: "if you think of the kind of gods that were worshipped by other nations, and of the kind of practices that were often associated with them, you might well see Judaism as a wonderful oasis of clean, calm wisdom."

The Ethiopian official eagerly seeks the God of the Jewish people. He went to worship where it was accessible to him at the temple. He was reading the Hebrew Scriptures in the book of Isaiah. Even though he is an outsider, something compels him to the God of the Jewish people.

**The Ethiopian eunuch is disqualified from temple worship!** As passionate as he is about knowing this God, he cannot fully participate. **"His emasculation and his race would have barred him from being accepted as a Jew under the Old Levitical Law (De. 23:1)."** (Nick Page)

This is where Philip encounters the Ethiopian official, returning from the temple, reading the book of Isaiah. Philip takes this passage in Isaiah and uses it to explain Jesus to the official. In learning about Jesus, the Ethiopian learns Jesus has provided a way for all people to be worshippers of God and full followers of God. If he believes in Jesus Christ, **the Ethiopian is completely qualified to be a baptized follower of Jesus Christ.**

**"His emasculation and his race would have barred him from being accepted as a Jew under the Old Levitical Law (De. 23:1). Christianity has no such barriers."** (Nick Page)

The official had been learning the history of Israel and the God that was present in that history. He assumed he was outside of that history, and disqualified from fully worshipping this God. But Philip explains that through Jesus, he can and will belong. **"When you tell the story of Israel like that, with Jesus at its climax, it opens up to include everybody, including people like him, doubly excluded and**

**now wonderfully welcomed. No wonder he wanted to share in the death and resurrection of this Jesus by being baptized, by having the whole story become his personal story.” (NT Wright)**

It is no wonder that the official jumps at the opportunity to be baptized, confessing faith in Jesus and finding full belonging in God. For him personally this is a massive realization and a massive moment.

But this is not just a big moment for him; it’s a big moment for the church, too. **The Ethiopian shows a major shift in Acts and in the early church. “The baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch . . . broadens the inclusiveness of the church yet further”.** (Robert Gundry)

Prior to chapter 8 of the book of Acts, the Christian church was primarily in Jerusalem. But from this point onward it is being thrust around the world. And this message is breaking through all barriers – race, class, previous religious experience. The Good News about Jesus is breaking through all barriers and is available to anyone. The Ethiopian official is the embodiment of who this good news is for.

So how does Philip get to take part in this? How does Philip get to be part of this intersectional moment? How does he get to a moment so significant that it marks a massive shift in the Ethiopian man’s life, and in the life of the early church?

If this was a movie, it’s the place where the screen would freeze, you’d hear a record scratch, and in a voiceover Philip would comment, “I guess you’re wondering how I got here . . .” How does Philip get to be someone that participates in this incredible moment?

**Philip was faithful.** Philip was part of that early church in Jerusalem. He was part of the church that was persecuted and scattered. But instead of hiding and waiting for things to blow over, he goes to a Samaritan city and teaches there. He is not silenced. He continues following Jesus even though it may cost him something. He faithfully follows Jesus through difficulty.

**Philip was consistent.** If you look earlier in chapter 8 of Acts, Philip was already telling people about Jesus. Philip was already baptizing people. Philip was already doing miracles in Jesus’ name. This encounter with the official is something Philip was already doing in other places with other people.

**Philip was ready.** Philip was experienced in Scripture, able to take a passage and show how it relates to Jesus. He was approved by the Apostles or main leaders of the early church. Philip seems to be in a constant state of preparation to share Jesus with others.

In teaching about this passage, NT Wright has this to say: “Like many people, I very occasionally have a sense of something strange going on, and I find myself somewhere I hadn’t expected and know that whatever is going on I’d better go with it.” If we keep feeding ourselves with good teaching, and looking for where God is at work, and trusting God to guide and lead us we, too, will be ready.

Being faithful, consistent and ready are vital, but what strikes me most in this passage is that **Philip was listening.** Philip overhears the official reading from the book of Isaiah in his chariot. In hearing this, Philip asks a question – “Do you understand what you are reading?” The Ethiopian man invites Philip to

explain it to him: “How can I [understand] unless someone explains it to me?” Philip joins the official in the chariot.

Here’s what the official was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,  
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.

In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth.”

The Ethiopian official asks, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

Philip is invited to speak and share and so he does. He was able to because he was listening. He wasn’t just trying to shove in a message about Jesus. He has permission to do so, and he does this clearly – it is truly Good News!

Somehow we think we are going to turn the world to Jesus Christ through Facebook rants; through taking a stand; through “speaking the truth”. And most of the time we are answering questions that almost no one is asking – we are just making noise! If we instead listen, we will truly have Good News to share. Because we will be sharing the news that people are actually looking for – they are looking to fill the longing that God has placed in their hearts.

### **How can you be Philip in someone else’s life?**

- **Faithful.** Follow and obey Jesus even when it takes discipline and hard work.
- **Consistent.** What are you currently doing that you know is work that God has given you? What is something you can start doing with consistency that makes a difference for somebody else? What’s a habit that you can actually keep?
- **Ready.** What are you filling your life with? What are you reading? Who are you listening to? What difficult faith discussions are you having with people that you can trust?
- **Listening.** What are the real questions people are actually asking? What are the discussions that people are currently having? Where does Jesus intersect with those?

**How can you be Philip in someone else’s life?** The best news is: **God is already at work.** God was already at work in the heart of the Ethiopian official. God is already at work in the lives of neighbours, co-workers, family, and friends. You don’t have to force something to happen. But are you ready?

Every single person I heard a baptism story from had a Philip in their life. They had a person or people that were faithful, consistent, listening and ready. Who have the faithful, consistent, ready, listening people in your life been? What from their lives is something you can imitate in your own?

God is already at work. God is empowering you to listen and respond. Are you ready?