

I. Introduction

Good morning! If you were to travel down the ancient road from Jerusalem to the Gaza strip and then continue on into Egypt, you would eventually reach the Nile River. Then, if you headed south and followed the Nile River upstream to the branch called the Blue Nile, and then turned to go along this branch, you would arrive in Ethiopia after a journey of about 2,000 miles.



If you made this difficult journey, you might have a chance to attend worship services at the Church of Saint George in northern Ethiopia. This church is one of eleven churches in northern Ethiopia that were carved out of solid rock nearly a thousand years ago and that are still in use today.



The effort required to carve a church out of solid rock is almost unimaginable, but it is even more amazing when you consider that the site where the church was built is in a trench dug for the purpose. When you arrive at the site, you are actually looking down on the cross-shaped roof of the church.



If you ask the local Christians, they might explain to you that Christianity came to Ethiopia only a few years after Jesus rose from the dead and that Ethiopia was declared to be a Christian nation in 330 AD. Faith in Jesus was widespread in this part of Africa hundreds of years before the people of England, Germany, and northern Europe ever heard the name of Jesus.

Amazingly, the Christian faith seems to have first spread to Ethiopia as the result of the conversion of one Ethiopian man who had made a timely visit to Jerusalem. Let's read about him in Acts 8:26-40.

II. Scripture Reading Acts 8:26-40, (NIV, 1984)

26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road--the desert road--that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." 27 So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. 29 The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." 30 Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. 31 "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

32 The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. 33 In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." 34 The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" 35 Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. 36 As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?"

37 *(Not in the NIV, from the NKJV)* Then 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."

38 And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both 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 suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. 40

Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

III. Teaching

The Lord speaks in many ways, through songs, through the Bible, through the Sunday message, through the words of friends, sometimes even in dreams or visions, or through angels. In this passage, we are told that the Lord spoke to Philip through an angel and directed him to leave the thriving gospel work in Samaria where he had been preaching and baptizing and to go south to the desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza.



In Samaria, Philip had been ministering to thousands, but the Lord redirected him to the desert in order to minister to one man. **Acts 8:27a, "So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians."** Candace is a title, not a name, and we should also be aware that the land called Ethiopia in those days was not exactly the same area as modern Ethiopia, but the cultural and historical connections are the same. In any case, the Ethiopian man was an important official, serving as something like the treasurer for his country.

The Ethiopian man was a eunuch. In our modern society, we often have pets, such as cats, "fixed," so that they cannot have offspring. In modern times, it is considered unacceptable to do this to a man, but in ancient times it was common. In many ancient cultures, including China, emperors and kings used eunuchs for the important administrative jobs of the kingdom or empire. Eunuchs were thought to be more loyal and trustworthy because they could not have children and therefore would not be tempted to try to take over and start their own royal family. In Bible times, many of the nations around Israel used eunuchs, but in Israel eunuchs were rare and probably always foreigners.

This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, so we know that he believed in the God of Israel. However, although gentiles who believed in the God of Israel were usually allowed to convert and become Jews, this was forbidden to eunuchs by Deuteronomy 23:1. So the Ethiopian eunuch was a worshipper of the God of Israel, but he would not have had the right to participate in the temple worship as a Jewish convert. But, we can deduce from the passage that he had bought a scroll of the prophet Isaiah during his visit to Jerusalem. And, soon he would learn from Isaiah that the God of the Bible loved him as much as any man.

Isaiah 56:3-5 says, "Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely exclude me from his people." And let not any eunuch complain, "I am only a dry tree." For this is what the LORD says: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant-- to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off."

If Philip had acted according to human wisdom, he would not have left the thriving ministry in Samaria to go and minister in the desert to one foreign man who could never have children. But the ways of the Lord are wiser and better than the best plans of human wisdom. In that same scroll of Isaiah, the eunuch would also have read (**Isaiah 55:6-9**), **"Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."**

Unless he received a divine revelation about it, Philip could not have known that the Ethiopian eunuch would become a fervent evangelist who would win many of his people for Jesus, but this is the tradition that has been passed down in the church in Ethiopia, and I think there is little reason to doubt it. The Lord delights in doing the unexpected. The eunuch could not have any physical descendants, but he was instead blessed with many spiritual descendants. In a sense, the people we win to Christ through our witness are our spiritual sons and daughters.

If you are a man who has no children, for whatever reason, look to the Ethiopian eunuch and you will see an example of how to have many sons and daughters by sharing the Good News of Jesus with others. If you are a woman who has no children, consider the words of **Isaiah 54:1** and you can make them your own through dedicating your life to sharing the gospel. **“Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband,” says the LORD.**”

If we focus on what we do not have, we become depressed and discouraged. But if we rejoice in the blessings God has given us, then we can live the abundant life just as we are. If you find a husband or wife and have children together, praise the Lord! But if you do not find a spouse, or if you marry, but still have no children, praise the Lord! Those who do not have children of their own can use the time and energy that would have been spent raising children to win many spiritual children to Jesus for the glory of God.

The apostle Paul spoke of these things in **1 Corinthians 7:32-34**, saying, **“I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs--how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world--how he can please his wife-- and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world--how she can please her husband.”**

We should not be overly concerned about whether we are single or married. But instead, in whatever condition we find ourselves, we should rejoice in the opportunities that we have been given to serve the Lord. The Ethiopian eunuch opened his heart to hear God's Word and he was rewarded with the opportunity to share the Good News of Jesus with his nation. I doubt that he ever lamented his condition as a eunuch after he heard the Good News of Jesus. I think he understood that he had been given a blessing beyond measure.

Can you imagine his surprise? He was riding in his chariot and studying the scroll of Isaiah. I think he must have had a driver since it would be difficult to read while driving. Like most of us, he was probably having some trouble understanding Isaiah without a little help from a teacher. But, suddenly something unexpected happened. **Acts 8:30-31**, **“Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.”**

When we are in need, at just the right time, God provides for us. In this case, the man needed a teacher, and God brought Philip to him all the way from Samaria. **Acts 8:32-33**, **“The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the 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.””**

This passage, a quote from the messianic prophecy in Isaiah 53, may have tugged at the eunuch's heart. After all, the eunuch had also suffered a humiliating injustice when he was made a eunuch and because of this he also would have no physical descendants. I don't know, but I wonder, if someone had asked the eunuch what he prayed for in Jerusalem he might have said that he had prayed to have his condition miraculously healed so that he could marry and have children. But God had an even better plan, a plan to use the eunuch's government position for the glory of Christ Jesus and to give the eunuch far more children that he could ever have had with a wife.

The eunuch had just come from Jerusalem where he would have seen many people bringing lambs for offerings at the temple. But, as I mentioned earlier, he was probably not allowed to offer a lamb for his own sins. He might have been bothered by this. He might have wondered, “Where was the lamb to take away his own sins?” But for him, God had provided a better lamb, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Acts 8:35, **“Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and**



told him the good news about Jesus.” I wish we could hear how Philip explained the gospel to the Ethiopian man. I wonder if Philip mentioned that Jesus was also a man who never married and never had any children. I wonder if Philip told him that as a Christian he would be able to have thousands of spiritual children by sharing the Good News of God’s love with others. I think when we get to heaven we will be able to ask Philip or the Ethiopian man.

In any case, I am sure that Philip told the man about how Jesus is God come down from heaven to bring salvation by dying on the cross for our sins. Philip preached the message right there from the prophetic passage in Isaiah 53, a passage which speaks very plainly of how Jesus died for our sins like one of the sacrificial lambs offered at the temple. But unlike the lambs offered at the temple, the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was a perfect sacrifice, made one time in history to bring a complete and perfect salvation to all who believe.



We don’t have time to do a message on Isaiah 53 today, but let’s read some of the verses that Philip would have spoken about. I am sure we will see how these words speak prophetically of Jesus’ death on the cross for our sins. **Isaiah 53:2-11.**

2 He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. 3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. 4 Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. 6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. 7 He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. 8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken. 9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. 10 Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. 11 After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light and be satisfied ; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.

The eunuch read from Isaiah; he heard the message from Philip; and he responded in faith. **Acts 8:36-37 (NKJV), “Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, “See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?” Then 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.””**

It is not a problem, but there is some question about whether verse 37 was originally included in Acts, so in some translations it is in a footnote. In the Japanese New Interconfessional Translation (Shinkyodoyaku) it is included at the end of Acts.

In any case, the Ethiopian man expressed his desire for baptism and Philip agreed after confirming the man’s faith in Jesus. **Acts 8:38, “And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.”** Some churches require a baptism preparation course before they baptize new believers. And sometimes new believers, for one reason or another, want to wait for some time before being baptized. But in the Bible, new believers are usually baptized immediately.



IV. Conclusion

In Christ Jesus, the Ethiopian Official found forgiveness of sins, salvation, and a mission in life. He had no wife or children, but still today, two thousand years later, you can meet his spiritual descendants in Ethiopia. It is my prayer that all of us would know Jesus, receive salvation, and take on the great purpose of sharing the Good News of Jesus with all of the people around us.

I pray that we would all hear the testimony of the Scriptures and the invitation to eternal life and trust in Jesus. Let's close with **John 1:29**, "**The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"**"



Let's pray.

V. Prayer