

Explore the Bible: July 28

Baptizing • Acts 8:26-39

By Roland L. McMillan



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Philip met an unlikely person in an unlikely place. An Ethiopian man was riding in a chariot on the desert road. He came from a place considered to be one of the ends of the civilized world by Greeks and Romans, the ancient Nubian empire south of Egypt. (The Old Testament calls it "Cush.") He was a eunuch, which was common for a treasurer in those days. In our times, he might be called the treasury secretary or the minister of finance. The man represented the Candace, the title used for queens in his country. Being a eunuch limited him in how he could approach God under the old covenant (e.g., Deut. 23:1).

The Ethiopian was returning home from a pilgrimage to

Jerusalem and was reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Silent reading was unknown in the ancient world. Everyone read aloud. Moved by the Spirit, Philip approached the chariot and heard words from Isaiah 53. The Ethiopian probably bought the scroll on his visit to Jerusalem. Written on parchment and meticulously hand-copied by a professional scribe, the scroll would have been worth a small fortune. This man obviously had more than a passing interest in the one true God. He may have been interested in this section of Isaiah in particular because of its mention of humiliation and lack of descendants. As a eunuch he could relate, but he was confused. Who was Isaiah describing? The Ethiopian man was not alone in being puzzled about Isaiah 53. The passage does not make sense, at least not completely, without Jesus.

Philip started with Isaiah 53 and did what Jesus himself did on another road on resurrection day. He explained about Jesus from the Scriptures (Luke 24:27). We do not know which Old Testament passages Philip used, but probably at least some of them were the same passages that Peter used in his preaching in the early chapters of Acts, like on Pentecost. When they came to some water, the Ethiopian wanted to be baptized, so Philip baptized him. He was not limited because he was a eunuch. In Acts, baptism always is connected to a person beginning to follow Jesus. The verb "baptize" carries with itself the idea of immersion. Philip dunked the Ethiopian man in water to show on the outside what was happening on the inside: now he was following Jesus. Led by the Spirit, the gospel was spreading in unexpected ways.

One question sometimes arises when people study this passage: What happened to verse 37? Before the printing press, every copy of everything written was a handwritten copy, a manuscript. For hundreds of years, none of the manuscripts of Acts had the extra words that would become verse 37. Several hundred years after Luke wrote Acts, the extra words were copied into a few manuscripts. They reflect a common

confession of faith for someone who was about to be baptized in the early centuries of the church in some places. Probably, a scribe wrote them in the margin of a manuscript, maybe as commentary, or maybe to reflect the practice of a church at that time. Then, a later scribe making a new copy copied them from the margin into the text, thinking that they were supposed to be there. Adding the words probably was a well-intentioned mistake. When verse divisions were first added to the New Testament in 1551, the extra words were in that manuscript, and were numbered as verse 37. Later, comparisons with older manuscripts made the mistake obvious. So, printed editions of contemporary translations of the Bible today skip verse 37, avoiding words that Luke did not write in the first place.

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