AN ETHIOPIAN OFFICIAL BAPTIZED

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE
Acts 8:26–40

A VERSE TO REMEMBER
"He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him." (Acts 8:38)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	May 15	Acts 6:8–15	Full of Grace and Power
T	May 16	Acts 7:48–8:2	The First Martyr
W	May 17	Isa. 60:9–14	The Far Countries Wait for God
Th	May 18	Zech. 8:1–8, 20–23	Peoples Shall Come to the Lord
F	May 19	Ps. 139:1–10	God Is Present Everywhere
Sa	May 20	Acts 8:4–17	Samaritans Embrace the Gospel

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

In this unique passage, it is necessary to identify the *dramatis personae* to discover its place in the description of the work of the early church. Philip proclaims the gospel, heals the sick, encounters Simon the Great (a magician?), travels south out of Jerusalem, and baptizes a court official from Ethiopia.

This narrative is not easy to understand since Luke does not make it clear who Philip is and does not really explain the significance of the designation of the Ethiopian as "eunuch." What is more, the description in 8:39–40 of the disappearance of Philip into thin air and his transportation (reminiscent perhaps of Star Trek), to a place called Azotus offers some puzzling problems to modern Bible students.

The confusion about Philip occurs because, although he is listed with the other eleven disciples in 1:13–14, someone with the same name is listed as one of the first deacons (6:65). In 21:8, another Philip appears prominently as one called "the evangelist" who has four unmarried daughters who all had the gift of prophecy. There, he and Paul have a conversation with a prophet Agabus who predicts Paul's arrest and imprisonment. How many Philips does Luke know: one, two or even three?

Some scholars identify Philip throughout with the apostle who was called by Jesus in the Gospels (Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:14). This Philip, who was from Bethsaida, plays an important role in John (1:43–51; 6:1–14; 12:20–22; 14:8–11). Others contend that the Philip who is a deacon is clearly not the apostle but may be the one called an evangelist. Consequently, we are left wondering who this Philip really was. Do some more reading online about the identification of Philip (see *Wikipedia* entries "Philip the Apostle" and "Philip the Evangelist"); s.v. "Philip" in *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary* [Harper One, 2011]).

Dear God, help us as we struggle to understand the work of the first church members. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 8:29–40

8:29 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 scripture, 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 bap-
tized?" 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.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

THE INCLUSIVITY OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Acts 8 raises interesting questions about the composition of the early church that may not have occurred to readers in previous centuries. We wonder why the man who was baptized was labeled as a *eunuch* and what his status was in the Christian community. First of all, it is clear that he was a man worthy of high respect since he was riding in a chariot or some kind of fancy wagon (not on a donkey!). He is identified as a representative of the queen of Ethiopia (the Candace), having major financial responsibilities in her kingdom (in charge of the treasury). Presumably, he was in an entourage including drivers, attendants, and maybe even some bodyguards. It appears that he was heading back home to Africa since he was in Gaza, a city about 2.5 miles from the coast of the Mediterranean, traveling along a major international road.

One reason Luke may have included this account is because of the eunuch's prominence as a foreign diplomat. Luke regularly reports the encounter of early Christian leaders with Roman officials and records their response to Christian teaching and witness. What is more, the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch strengthens Luke's assertion that the gospel was for all people, not just the Jews. In the Pentecost sermon, for example, Peter makes a point of the fact that people from all over the world heard the gospel in their own languages "speaking about God's deeds of power" (2:11). Quoting Joel, Peter asserts in 2:17 that "in the last days it will be, God declares, / that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh." Some ancient texts emphasize this aspect when the eunuch asks what prevents him from being baptized, and the following words are added to 8:37: "And Philip said, 'If you believe in all your heart, you may.' And he replied, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.'"

The fact that the Ethiopian is a eunuch raises other questions about the passage. Eunuchs were men who had been castrated and often served in the courts of women. They may have been emasculated by birth defects, by punishment or torture, from war casualties, or by choice (see Matt. 19:12). As F. Scott Spencer points out, eunuchs were often considered defective, mutilated, or deviant. In Deuteronomy 23:1, for example, eunuchs were not allowed to worship with other Jews, and were excluded from the priesthood (Lev. 21:17–21). In Acts, however, the Ethiopian eunuch is presented as a powerful and trusted representative of the queen, one who is educated and able to read the book of

Isaiah in the Greek version. Some scholars suggest that the eunuch identifies with the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 because he is looking for inclusion and wholeness in the synagogue or church.

What do you think the story of the eunuch in Acts 8 implies about questions about LGBTQ+ people in today's church?

THE UNUSUAL WORK OF THE SPIRIT

When we read the account of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch closely, we realize that his encounter with Philip was not accidental. An angel of the Lord directed Philip to travel on the main road from Jerusalem to Gaza, and when he encountered the man in the chariot, "the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it'" (v. 29). And he ran over and heard him reading the passage about the suffering servant in Isaiah 53.

Clearly, the Spirit intends this man to be accepted into the newly formed church, regardless of his physical condition or nationality. It is reminiscent of Jesus' unusual comments in Matthew 19: 11–12, in a discussion about why some men should not marry. "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom. Let anyone accept this who can." This uncomfortable saying has been interpreted variously. Some scholars have argued that it refers metaphorically to celibacy and the ascetic life. Others have insisted that it describes people who were physically castrated. Megan Sauter suggests that it runs counter to the concept of male dominance in the Roman world, where being different would identify someone as weak and effeminate.[1]

In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, it is difficult to read this passage in a blasé manner and ignore the questions that are raised today about gay participation and racism in the church, even if these issues may not have concerned Luke directly. Clarice Martin points out, for example, that the eunuch's reading of Isaiah is significant not only for its emphasis on the suffering Messiah but for the prophecy in Isaiah 56:3–8 about foreigners who will illustrate how God's house will be a house of prayer for all people. In particular, verses 3–5 assert that eunuchs should not say, "I am just a dry tree," but that those who keep

1. Megan Sauter, "What Is a Eunuch in the Bible?" *Bible History Daily* (blog), March 26, 2022), bit.ly /TPWSauter (article since removed from website).

God's covenant will have a name better than sons and daughters. In a play on words, God says, "I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off." Martin also suggests that the passage challenges our concerns about racism since the eunuch was an African and no doubt considered to be black.[2]

In what ways do you think this passage challenges how we address racism today?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Does the study of Acts 8:26–40 recall any experiences you have had with the Holy Spirit or situations where your church has been directly Spirit-driven? As we have seen, Acts could be called "The Book of the Spirit," and it offers examples of the Spirit at work among the first Christians.

Some passages are more helpful than others, however. What are we to make of 8:39, which describes the aftermath of the eunuch's baptism: "When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went away rejoicing"? This passage is difficult to understand, and it is easy to see why many commentators pass over it as quickly as possible. The Greek word for "snatch" (*harpazō*) has a violent connotation, indicating that someone or something was forced away. In Acts 23:10, for example, soldiers physically put Paul in prison to protect him from protesters. When Philip is snatched away, Luke seems to indicate that he is transported invisibly like some supernatural or divine figure. As Richard I. Pervo[3] points out, there is a blurring between real time and magical time here, one that is confusing to us as modern readers. Possibly Luke is trying to compare Philip to Old Testament prophets who were whisked away by a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11–12) or moved from place to place by the Spirit (Ezek. 3:12; 8:1–3; 11:24f.), but it is not clear.

Leaving 8:39 aside, however, information remains in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch that helps us understand our own experiences. No doubt in our own lives we have experienced times when it seemed that God was urging us to minister to certain people, just as Philip was led to introduce himself to the man in the chariot. Once, when I was leaving home on my way to a study leave at Princeton Theological Seminary, I had an urge to stop before I began the drive and visit a member who was critically sick. When I arrived at her house, one of the family greeted

2. Clarice Martin, "A Chamberlain's Journey and the Challenge of Interpretation for Liberation," *Semeia* 47 (1989): 105–35.
3. Richard I. Pervo, *Acts*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 226–29.

me with powerful relief, saying something like, "Thank God you are here. My mother just died." I went into the bedroom with the family, and we sat together in prayer with the woman who had just passed away.

In the passage we are studying, it is clear that the Ethiopian was also guided by the Spirit. Reading verses from Isaiah 53, he was eager to have someone explain them to him. For him, the appearance of Philip was a godsend and may remind us of Paul's comments in Romans 10:17, "Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ."

Has God's Spirit ever directed you to minister in a certain way? What did you do?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. The fact that the Ethiopian eunuch had been in Jerusalem might be interpreted as a fulfillment of Psalm 68:31: "Let Ethiopia hasten to stretch out its hands to God."
2. According to biblical law, eunuchs were not permitted in the temple (Lev. 21:20; Deut. 23:1). Isaiah 56:3–5 contains promise of inclusion for eunuchs who keep the covenant. Interestingly, this is close to the passage that he and Philip go on to discuss (Isa. 53:7–8).
3. The eunuch's question in verse 34, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" indicates that there were competing interpretations of this text. As Christians continue to do today, early Christians read all of Scripture anew in light of the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.
4. Like so many events in Luke and Acts, this story is narrated "as they were going along the road [literally: way]" (v. 36). This resonates with the fact that the early Christian movement was first called "the Way" (see Acts 9:2).
5. Philip's miraculous relocation provides him the opportunity to preach the gospel in even more distant lands, furthering the spread of the Christian message (see v. 40).