

Who was the Ethiopian eunuch?

The Ethiopian eunuch mentioned in the Bible was a high court official of Candace, the queen of Ethiopia. He was in Israel to worship the Lord at the temple, which means he was probably a Jewish proselyte. On his trip home to Ethiopia, he had a life-changing encounter with Philip the evangelist (Acts 8:26-40).

A eunuch is a man who has been castrated for the purpose of trusted servitude in a royal household (see Esther 1:10; 4:4; and Daniel 1:9). A king would often castrate his servants to ensure they would not be tempted to engage in sexual activity with others in the palace (specifically, the royal harem) or to prevent their plotting an overthrow (eunuchs were incapable of setting up a dynasty of their own). Eunuchs have been employed in many civilizations, including the Ancient Middle East, Ancient Greece and Rome, China, Korea, and Thailand. Jesus mentions them in Matthew 19:12.

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 is a marvelous depiction of God's role in evangelism. The story starts with Philip, one of the seven original deacons, who had just preached the gospel in Samaria (Acts 8:4-8). Philip was visited by an angel who told him to go south to a road that ran from Jerusalem to Gaza, in the desert (Acts 8:26). Philip didn't ask why he was being sent to the middle of nowhere; he just went (verse 27). On the road, in a chariot, was the Ethiopian eunuch, who was just returning from Jerusalem. The eunuch was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah. The Spirit of the Lord told Philip to go over and join the chariot, and when Philip drew close he overheard the eunuch reading from Isaiah out loud. Philip asked the Ethiopian whether or not he understood what he was reading. The eunuch replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" He then invited Philip to come sit with him in the chariot (verse 31).

The passage the Ethiopian eunuch was reading was this: “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” (Acts 8:32-33; cf. Isaiah 53:7-8). The eunuch was wondering whom the prophet was talking about, “himself or someone else?” (Acts 8:34). Philip used this opportunity to explain the passage: this was a prophecy about Jesus Christ, who meekly gave His life to save the world. As Philip explained the gospel, the Ethiopian eunuch believed. When they came to some water by the side of the road, the eunuch asked to be baptized (Acts 8:36).

Philip agreed to baptize him, and the Ethiopian eunuch “gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him” (Acts 8:38). As soon as the Ethiopian eunuch 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” (verse 39). Tradition says that the eunuch carried the gospel back home to Ethiopia and founded the church there. Philip found himself at Azotus, and he carried on preaching the gospel on his way to Caesarea (Acts 8:40).

There are many elements of God’s providence and intervention in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. The account reveals the importance of these three things: the Word of God, the Holy Spirit’s leading, and a human evangelist. In order for a person to accept the truth, he must first hear the truth preached (Romans 10:14). It is God’s desire that the truth be preached everywhere (Acts 1:8). The Spirit of the Lord had been preparing the eunuch’s heart to receive the gospel. As the eunuch read Isaiah, he began to ask questions, and at just the right moment the Lord brought Philip across his path. The field was “ripe for harvest” (John 4:35), and Philip was God’s laborer in the field.

This was no coincidence. It was God's plan from the very beginning, and Philip was obedient to that plan.