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THE CONVERSION AND BAPTISM OF THE ETHIOPIAN

STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS
NUMBER 31
ACTS 8:25-40

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We have just completed our study of one of the four Pentecosts to appear in the Book of the Acts. The first was in Acts 2 where we studied the Jewish Pentecost which brought the Jews into the body of Christ. The second one was in this Chapter 8 where the Gentiles were converted and brought in as a part of the Christian family. Though the Samaritans were half-Jew and half-Samaritan, they were converted and included in Christ's body. The third Pentecost took place in the house of Cornelius who was a Roman type Gentile, and this group was also brought into the Christian family. The fourth Pentecost will be described in Acts 19 which shows what happened to the older Jews who had been converted back in the Jewish dispensation but lived over into the dispensation of the Church and were brought into the body of Christ.

ACTS 8:25 "And they, when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, returned to Jerusalem, and preached the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans." This was the ministry of Peter and John to the Samaritans. These Samaritans got exactly the same blessing as the Jews at Pentecost even though they were half-Jew and half-Samaritan. Peter and John preached here to show that the gospel was for all--that Christ died for every person that ever lived or will ever live and that Christ paid for every sin that has ever been committed or will ever be committed.

ACTS 8:26 "And the angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert." Philip had been with great crowds and in a place of great evangelistic success. Here he received some definite guidance from God to go into a rather obscure place where there were no crowds. This word "Saying" is in the present linear action and means that the Lord had to say it over and over several times before Philip actually caught the drift of what the Lord meant. (Some of us today are a bit like that--the Lord has to keep on telling us something before we catch on.) It is rather hard for an evangelist to leave a very successful campaign where there are great crowds of people and go to a place where there are no people.

Philip is an evangelist and to go where there is a lot of sand and desert but no people is quite a change for him. He gets the command to go to the desert country between Palestine and Egypt. He is to by-pass the centers of population and God has an important assignment for him, and on this mission a man will be converted whose influence will fall across a whole African nation. As a result of the conversion of this Ethiopian Eunuch, in one hundred years this nation will become one of the great centers of Christianity in the whole world. There is something intimated here which is of great importance. Evidently, Philip was getting a bit big-headed over his success and needed a change. Every member of the human race has a breaking point as far as ego and approbation lust is concerned. But God moved him out and saved his ministry and preserved him for some great work later on.

ACTS 8:27-28 "And he arose and went: and, behold, a man of Ethiopia, an eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who had the charge of all her treasure, and had come to Jerusalem for to worship, Was returning, and sitting in his chariot read Esaias the prophet." Meet this Ethiopian Eunuch. Remember, he was a V.I.P.. He was the number three man in the Ethiopian Empire. He was dedicated to his office. Please note that "Candace" is not the name of a queen but the title of that office. This Eunuch was going back to Ethiopia from Jerusalem. He had in some way become interested in Judaism. Many people carried on trade on these trade routes and no doubt information had come to him in that way. He had become a convert to Judaism and he is deeply interested in learning all he can about this new religion. As we look in on him in this story, he is riding in his chariot and is reading the Prophecy of Isaiah.

ACTS 8:29-30 "Then the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot. And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said Understandest thou what thou readest?" Here we have the personal contact. Hitchhiking is not the usual practice of Philip. This indicates to me that God had to deal with him about his ego. Philip needed to realize the value of the conversion of one man. There is nothing that will slow a man down concerning his ego like a rebuke of this kind. Philip doesn't understand his new orders, but he obeys.

Philip doesn't yet know it, but he is to move into a greater realm of service and the conversion of this one important man is to touch a whole nation. (As a result of this incident, we have some hitchhiking evangelists today who have been very effective in winning many to Christ.) The Eunuch was reading Isaiah. The King James version says Esaias, which is the Greek way of spelling Isaiah. Philip saw him reading Isaiah and asked him, "Have you studied this passage?" He was really saying, "Have you studied this and have you come to understand what it means?" There is a great deal of difference in reading and understanding something.

ACTS 8:31 "And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him." This is a difficult verse for the construction of the sentence is complicated indeed. "How can I" introduces a mixed conditional clause in the reverse order. First of all we start usually with the protasis, then we have the apodosis. The protasis states the condition and the apodosis gives the conclusion. Like in the temptations of Jesus we read, "If thou be the son of God, command these stones to be made bread". The "If thou be the son of God" is the protasis and the "Command these stones to be made bread" is the apodosis. One is the condition, the other is the conclusion. But here in this statement, the Eunuch starts with the apodosis of a fourth class condition with the words, "How can I?" It means "I wish I could understand, but I can't". "Except some man should guide me" is a first class condition. So the statement means this, "Except someone should guide me and teach me how can I understand something like this?"

Here is the principle--NO PERSON IN THIS LIFE CAN UNDERSTAND BIBLE DOCTRINE UNLESS HE GETS IT FROM SOMEONE WHO KNOWS BIBLE DOCTRINE. You can't sit down and get it alone. But God has given some the gifts of Pastors and Teachers. People who do not have this gift and go out and try to get it on their own come up with some of the most weird things under the sun. Here Philip is going to guide him and teach him and it was done so well that as a result a whole nation is going to be blessed by the thorough work of this evangelist.

The Eunuch is reading Isaiah 53, one of the greatest Christological passages in the whole Bible. It says here that Philip heard him "reading" and it is present active participle and means he was reading it over and over and over and still he couldn't understand it. The sound of his voice reading it over and over didn't reveal any truth to his mind. He wished he could understand it, but he can't until someone comes along who knows. (The sheep are always dependent upon the shepherd.)

ACTS 8:32-33 "The place of the scripture which he read was this, He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth: In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth." Here we have a quotation from Isaiah 53:7-8. He kept on reading this over and over and over. "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter." In that phrase Jesus is pictured as the lamb of the Levitical sacrifice. The last part of the verse is to illustrate what actually happened on that cross. On the cross during the first three hours, Jesus was silent as they poured punishment upon him. In all the preliminary abuse, Christ said nothing. But when the sins of the whole human race were poured out on him he screamed, as described in Psalm 22.

"His humiliation" means his perfection coming into contact with sin. Instead of "His judgment was taken away" the literal meaning of that language is "Judgment for sin was lifted up". In other words, on that cross Jesus carried judgment for the sins of the whole world. The meaning of "Who will declare his generation" is rather "Who will think through the problem of sin by dying for sin?" This passage clearly tells what happened on that cross, that Christ picked up the sins of all mankind, carried them, thought through the whole sin problem, and paid the acceptable price to take away our sins.

ACTS 8:34 "And the eunuch answered Philip, and said, I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this?" of himself, or of some other man?" The positive volition of the Eunuch was ready, but he doesn't have anyone who can explain this passage to him. He has been to Jerusalem and he has heard the testimony of Judaism but he needs information concerning the person of Christ. So many give testimonies about what they did to change their lives. What this man needs is information about what Christ did on that cross that will change his life. Here is a man who needs information.

ACTS 8:35 "Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus." The issue is the gospel. "He opened his mouth". In other words, Philip witnessed to him. You can live your Christianity before people, but you have to come to the time and place where you open your mouth and tell people about Christ. Philip was not a spiritual cripple. He was a man of courage and Christ was his theme. Notice--He preached unto him Jesus. Jesus is clearly revealed in the Old Testament.

ACTS 8:36 "And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?" This verse clearly indicates that the Eunuch had understanding. Verse 37 is not in the original manuscripts. There isn't anything wrong with these words in verse 37, except it would indicate that Philip had done a sloppy job and he hadn't. Philip did such a thorough job that it would touch a whole nation for hundreds and hundreds of years. Just because you are saved you can't be baptized. You need to understand the meaning of baptism if it is really going to mean anything to you. (This is why I wrote the little book, "When You Join The Church", and this is why we go so carefully over and over this matter of the meaning of baptism with all those who join our church.) Ignorance of the meaning of baptism makes baptism a farce. You see, Philip had explained to him the meaning of the new birth, the meaning of Christ's death on the cross, the meaning of the filling of the Spirit, and because the Eunuch understood all this he is now ready to be baptized. He believed and he learned doctrine, and he learned the meaning of the baptism of the Spirit. Naturally, when the Eunuch saw the water beside the road he wanted to be baptized. Philip began to teach him things not revealed in the Old Testament. (Like John 14:20 and Acts 1:5 where we learn of the baptism of the Spirit.) The Eunuch came to realize he was identified with Jesus in his death and burial and resurrection and in being identified with him at the right hand of God on his throne. He understands all this and this man has truly been converted. The Eunuch realized it was not human good that was important but divine good. Please note--this man was thoroughly briefed before he was baptized. With all this in your minds, you can see why verse 37 is misleading and why it is not in the original manuscripts.

ACTS 8:38 "And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him." Philip baptized him because he knew that the Eunuch understood the meaning of salvation. And remember, ritual without reality is meaningless.

ACTS 8:39 "And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing."

Please note "Out of the water". This is clearly immersion, and as you know, there is not one instance in the whole Bible where baptism is in any other form. The Eunuch, this great Ethiopian V.I.P., went back to his land spiritually self-sustaining, and he was able to spread Christianity so effectively that it lasted for hundreds of years. (Many of these thoughts came to me in the summer of 1968 as I flew on a missionary journey all over this ancient land and saw the locations of new mission centers where our Southern Baptist missionaries plan to take the gospel.)

Possibly this interview between Philip and the Eunuch lasted most of the day. Philip taught Bible doctrine to this new believer. The Spirit of God knew all that was to happen and led in every step of this procedure. Isn't it thrilling to know that this one man returned to Ethiopia and did such a thorough job that centuries later when the Moslem people came in, they received the strongest resistance here they received in the whole of Africa. Ethiopian Christianity was founded on doctrine.

After Philip had baptized him, we read, "And he went on his way rejoicing". The word is "But he went on his way" and is a conjunction of contrast and means that the happiness of the Ethiopian Eunuch didn't depend on being with Philip, but rather depended on the new found doctrine he now had implanted in his heart. Any Christian can have joy if he has doctrine implanted in his mind. The word "rejoicing" is a present active participle and means that he kept on rejoicing.

ACTS 8:40 "But Philip was found at Azotus: and passing through he preached in all the cities, till he came to Caesarea." Philip went on to Azotus. Azotus is the Greek name for a Philistine town. Ashdod was thirty miles north of Gaza and Alexander the Great changed the name to Azotus. This is one of the last towns where there was a Greek settlement and Philip preached in all the cities clear up to Caesarea. Caesarea was the famous city built by Herod the Great. So this means that Philip went to both Greeks and Romans and preached to them and evangelized Gentiles just like he had evangelized Jews. Gentiles are just as much in the body of Christ as anybody.