

“WHY SHOULDN’T I BE BAPTISED?”

Acts 8:26-40

Last week, you may recall (if you were here and awake), we looked at the idea of “*being saved*” and used a story from the book of *Acts* to help us in our reflection on that. We said that most of the Bible is written in the form of stories and from those stories we can start to get a handle on what some of the key elements of our faith are all about. As we look at the way other people respond to God, as we see the effect Jesus has on their lives, as we start to identify with some of these fairly ordinary people we get to see what the Gospel means to us as human beings. Our starting point last week was a question – “*What must I do to be saved?*” – asked of Paul and Silas by a first century civil servant: the jailer at Philippi. This week we’re going to look at another question, again posed by a civil servant – the Finance Minister of Ethiopia, who, like many officials in the courts of North Africa and the Middle East at the time, was a eunuch. This man, who was a senior minister and close aide of the Queen, Candace, had been castrated so that he could not be a threat sexually to her or to female members of the court.

Let’s just set this story in its context again. Philip the Apostle – one of the evangelists of the early Church – had received instructions to set off for a place called Gaza. As he travelled south from Jerusalem, wondering what on earth he was going to have to do there, he met up with a chariot, also travelling south. In the chariot was an influential official who was on his way back to Ethiopia after worshipping in Jerusalem. The man was obviously a Jewish convert – he had been to Jerusalem and had been worshipping the God of Israel.

As Philip came closer to him he could make out the familiar words of a passage from the Old Testament – they used to read aloud in those days – and he identified it as *Isaiah 53*. It may have been the official’s tone of voice, or a perplexed look on his face, but Philip could tell that this man was having a hard time understanding it. Offering his services, Philip was able to join him, explain the passage to him and how it was linked to the good news about Jesus, and eventually help the man to put his faith in that same Jesus. Then, as they approached a “wadi” in the desert, the Ethiopian suddenly shouted, “*Why shouldn’t I be baptised?*” That’s always the next step after believing in Jesus in the preaching of these first Christians. In fact, it’s often included in the call to commitment, as we see in, for example, *Acts 2:38* or *10:46*. As it happened, there was nothing then to stop him being baptised.

But what if he’d asked that question a bit earlier – maybe an hour or so? What if you ask yourself that question? Is anything keeping *you* from being baptised? You may never even have thought about it – but let’s look at this story and see what Philip’s answer might have been if the man had asked earlier. And let’s see if that has anything to say to us.

1. A LACK OF BASIC UNDERSTANDING

Initially, this Ethiopian had no idea what it was all about. In fact, Philip asks him if he can understand (v30) and the Ethiopian says no, of course he can't (v31). He had all he needed, it seems – the Bible (or a good part of it) and the trappings of religion. So why couldn't he understand the basics of all this? As we said last week, there's no way we can fully understand what the Gospel is all about in one go, but this man didn't really know what the next step was and Philip needed to tell him.

You see, he was really thinking along the wrong lines: he wasn't tuned in to the way God speaks and acts. As an influential official he had his own lifestyle and his own system of values. And as Jewish believer he had his own ideas about how he could win God's favour. His mind was effectively clouded by false ideas. As Paul writes in *2 Corinthians 4:4*, talking about those who are not Christians: "*The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God*".

Is that the same for you, maybe? You have a Bible (somewhere!), you've heard a bit about Jesus and about his life and death. But you still don't get it. You don't understand. Why? Well, "*the god of this age*" has clouded your understanding! What that really means is that, if you simply think along the lines that the world around you thinks, then the story of Jesus doesn't seem to make sense. What's all this God stuff? Why should Jesus die for me? It doesn't really fit into the rational way of thinking that we are encouraged to adopt. Why worry about anyone but myself? That's not the way society seems to work.

You need to begin to look at things from a rather different perspective. Don't just dismiss Christianity because it doesn't fit into your way of looking at things, because it doesn't suit your way of thinking. I don't think you'll ever get all your questions answered, either.

But it wasn't just his lack of understanding that might have prevented this man from being baptised ...

2. A LACK OF BELIEF

Philip began to explain to this Ethiopian the passage that he was reading and went on to tell him about "*the good news about Jesus*." The next question, of course, is what is this good news about Jesus? We all know that he lived a couple of thousand years ago – no-one doubts that – but what was the significance of his life? What do we mean when we talk about the "good news" – or "the gospel" as it is sometimes termed? Well, let's strip it down to the bare bones, because just as Philip's time with the Ethiopian was limited, so is ours this morning. This is what I believe is at the core of the Gospel. It's

committing yourself to this that really makes the difference. You may think it's all a bit basic, but it's lawasy worth remodning ourselves of what we do actually believe and why.

- a) We begin with the fact that God made us. He created this wonderful world somehow or other and he put human beings into it to enjoy it and look after it. Ideally, we should be in a perfect relationship with God and able to connect with him with no trouble, just as the first human beings originally did.
- b) Unfortunately, evil got into the world and people started to make wrong decisions, wrong choices – they began to leave God out of the reckoning and so that relationship with him became spoiled and distorted. Indeed, we began to ignore God altogether, to try and convince ourselves that he doesn't exist. All of us find our lives affected by the evil in our world, by sin and as Paul tells us in *Romans 3:23*, no-one is exempt from that.
- c) God made it very clear at the beginning of things that he hates sin and evil and will do all that he can to eradicate it. Having made that very clear, he now has to keep his word and do something about the human race – about you and me – that has become tainted by sin. He has to deal with it and that leaves us with an eternal future that is pretty hope-less.
- d) But – and here comes the good news – Jesus Christ, acting out of a love which we can never fully comprehend, took our place and took the consequences of all our wrong choices – including accepting God's punishment on our behalf (*Romans 5:8*). We don't deserve that because there is nothing we can do to merit it. The good news about Jesus Christ, then, is that he has dealt with the root of our problem, the underlying sin which is in each of us, and we can be restored to that original relationship with God..

Now, the Ethiopian could have listened to all that and said, "Fine. I think I'm starting to understand. What a nice story!" But that would have done him no good, other than giving him a sense of intellectual satisfaction. For it to be any real use to him he had to believe, to take a step of faith and say, "Yes, God did that for me. I believe it is true." The Bible is very clear that knowing, even understanding, isn't enough. We need to **believe**: *John 3:16* – "*Whoever believes in him*"; "*1 John 5:1* – "*Whoever believes that Jesus is the Messiah is a child of God.*" And when the Ethiopian finally does ask if he can be baptised, that's the question that Philip asks him (v37, *NIV* margin). Don't just listen and assume you understand and say, "Well that obviously doesn't apply to me." We're all in the same boat here – and without Jesus and a real belief in him, you've got no hope at all.

3. A LACK OF OPPORTUNITY

The Ethiopian now believed and was beginning to understand. But the most vital practical thing for his baptism was lacking – water! He now needed an opportunity to express his belief. And as they came upon this wadi, there it was – a pool big enough for him to be baptised.

Maybe you need an opportunity. God has been working in your life for a while, perhaps. Things have been happening, people have been saying things, stuff is starting to fall into place – but you haven't yet had an opportunity to do anything about it. Perhaps this morning you've come to realise that you need to believe – you need to respond to what God has been doing in your life.

Well, today is an opportunity for you to do something. I'm not necessarily suggesting that you stand up and actually get baptised (although that's how it seems to have happened in New Testament times), but I am saying that you need to sort it out with God. In *2 Corinthians 6:2*, Paul writes "*I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation.*" Maybe something has made you think. Perhaps you can think back to a time when you did believe, when it did mean something to you, but things have slipped a bit over the years and now you know that God is calling you back. If you want to find out more, if you want to express and desire to be baptised, if you want to get back to God – don't put it off! You can fool me, you can even fool yourself, but you can't fool God. The Ethiopian took the opportunity that presented itself, an opportunity that might not have presented itself to him again. Who knows? You might not get another opportunity, an opportunity to accept Jesus and declare your belief in him. Take it today!

"Why shouldn't I be baptised?"

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Questions for discussion

- 1) Philip was told to go to the road to Gaza. How do you think this happened? Have you ever been told to do something very clearly by God?
- 2) How important is understanding in becoming a Christian? How much do you need to understand?
- 3) Is it right to baptise someone so soon after they have committed themselves to Jesus? Why/why not?
- 4) How important do you think baptism is for discipleship? What if you have already been baptised as an infant?

If you have been baptised as a believer, share with the group what led you to that decision.