

Why Not Be Baptized?

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Acts 8:26-40

Well, this is a Great Day! A great Day for our church. Eleven people being baptized! And a great day for you that are being baptized! This is a day that you affirm your faith in Jesus, just like the Scripture calls you to! For our message today, I thought I would read to you all a story from the Book of Acts that is a story about Baptism. It's from Acts 8:26-40, and it's in your bulletins if you didn't bring your Bible to the lake today. The story goes like this:

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road the desert road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Kandake, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet.

The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the 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." The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus (now here's the baptism part)

As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they 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. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

- Acts 8:26-40

Today I just want to take a few minutes to look at this story and then to think about what it teaches us about Baptism, what baptism means, and why we do baptism the way we are going to do it today. So this passage will have something to say to you guys that are being baptized today and something to say to all of us as well. So let me just start out by saying "I love this story!" It's one of my favorites from the book of Acts! So let's look at it together. Luke, the guy who wrote the book of Acts, begins this passage by introducing us to the two main characters of his story.

First, there's Philip. This is not the "Phillip of the 12 Disciples" Phillip. This is another Phillip that Luke introduced us to two chapters earlier in Acts. This Philip was a sort of Deacon in the church at Jerusalem. He was a Greek-speaking Jew, and he came to be known as "Philip, the Evangelist." Philip the Disciple was in Jerusalem, But God had told this Philip through an angel to walk south of Jerusalem to a road that went through a desert. So there's Philip.

Second, there's the Ethiopian, and Luke tells us some important things about him. First, he was an Ethiopian! He was a Gentile! Actually, he was from a Kingdom called Nubia, that is in modern day Sudan, west of Ethiopia. But back then, they called that area Ethiopia. So he was an African, which automatically means he's good people! Second, he was powerful. Luke calls him an important official. And he was important. He had his own chariot and his own chauffeur. He was the chief treasurer for the Queen of Ethiopia. Luke calls her Candace or Kandake, but Candace wasn't her name. Candace was a title, like Caesar or Pharaoh. And Candace (or the Candace) ran the Kingdom of Nubia. It was a Matriarchy. Her husband, the King, was considered almost like a deity, so he didn't really do anything and that left the Queen to run the country! Some of you ladies can relate to that! I've heard some women say "My husband is the head of this family, and I'm the neck that turns the head." So he was treasurer to the queen of this very prosperous, very advanced society (Wakanda). So this Ethiopian court official was very important.

Then Luke tells us one more thing. This Ethiopian had been exposed to the God of Israel. Somehow during his studies and travels, he had found out about Yahweh, the God of Israel, and had decided to follow him. He wasn't ethnically Jewish, because he was an Ethiopian. He wasn't a fully converted Jew, because he was a Eunuch. But he was something of a proselyte or follower of the God of Israel.

When Philip finds him, he just happens to be returning from a Jewish religious feast, probably Passover, going down that same desert road that Philip is on. He's reading, as he goes on, the five month chariot trip back to Nubia. He's reading the book of Isaiah out loud. So those are the characters - Philip and the Ethiopian.

Now I love the next part. Philip meets the Ethiopian. Philip is walking down the road, when this Ethiopian guy's chariot goes by. The Holy Spirit tells Philip "Follow that Chariot!" Literally, the Greek says kollao (like collage) "glue yourself to that chariot!"

Phillip doesn't have a chariot, or a horse, or even a donkey, so he does the only thing he knows to do. He runs alongside the chariot! When I hear this about Philip running alongside the chariot, I have this image in my mind from a trip we took to Mozambique. When you would drive through the townships, the kids would run alongside your car trying to sell you pineapples and cashews. We couldn't lose the car in front of us, so we would drive along and these little guys would run alongside the car. Kelley would lean out the window bargaining with them. "No, I want two pineapples and one bag of cashews." "No I don't have change just give me an extra pineapple." It was hilarious. She loved it, and they loved it!

So that's the picture in my mind, and I love Philip's obedience! If God told him to stick to that chariot, he's going to stick to that chariot! I can see Jim Higgins or Josh Garcia doing that. I love his obedience! As he's running, he hears this guy reading from Isaiah. He asks him, while he's running, "By the way, do you understand what you're reading?" And the Ethiopian, although he's very wealthy and very educated, is also very humble, and he says "I don't have a clue without someone to explain it."

So he finally stops the chariot. Philip gets in and explains the gospel to him. The guy is reading from Isaiah where Isaiah describes the Suffering Servant or Messiah as a lamb led to the slaughter. He says to Philip, the Evangelist, "Tell me, sir, is Isaiah writing this about himself or could there possibly be someone else that this is about?" Talk about your second putts! Talk about a slow pitch! This guy lobs one over the plate, and Philip says "I think I might possibly know who that could be about." And so he tells this wonderful guy about Jesus, about how the passage is really all about him, about how he was led to the slaughter to be sacrificed for that Ethiopian Eunuch that man who couldn't be fully accepted into the worship of Israel. He tells the man that Jesus could be his Savior!

The next thing we know the Ethiopian is asking to be baptized. As they are going along, he sees what is called a wadi, a seasonal water-course, that has a pool full of water. He lobs another one over the plate. He literally says to Philip in the Greek "Here is water. Is there anything to prevent me from being baptized?" Philip had to be going "This guy is the easiest sales call ever!" Actually, it's a tender moment. This guy, who had been excluded because he wasn't Jewish and because of his status as Eunuch, is asking Philip "Is there a place for me in the Kingdom? Could I be fully accepted as a Christian? Could I be baptized?" And Philip takes the man and wades into the pool with him and baptizes him.

And then as they wade out "POOF!" Philip just disappears! His work there is done, so he goes on to the town of Azotes, and the Ethiopian goes on his way rejoicing. We don't know what became of him, but we do know this: Some time later the great Kingdom of Nubia became a Kingdom with a heavy Christian influence. Maybe this guy was the one who started that. So that's the story of Philip and the Ethiopian. Now what does it teach us about Baptism? Three simple things:

Baptism Is Important

Guys, baptism is a really important step in your relationship with Christ! Every Christian should be a baptized Christian! It's important. It's the way we identify ourselves as belonging to Christ. You say "Well, it's kind of messy and embarrassing!" It is there's no two ways about it! It's worth getting messy and being embarrassed for. It's important!

Sometimes I think we modern Preachers can kind of unintentionally minimize the importance of baptism, because we say "Baptism isn't the thing that saves you, that's not what gets you to heaven!" And that's true. The Bible teaches that we are saved by faith, not by baptism.

But baptism is the most basic way that we express our faith. It's one of the two parts of the Great Commission. If you know the Great Commission, which is Jesus' most basic description of our mission as Christians, it says "Go therefore and make disciples." How? By baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And by teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

That's our job in a nutshell - to teach people. That is, to help them grow as Christians, to baptize and to help them become Christians. Baptism is not the thing that makes us a Christian, but it is so strongly associated with becoming a Christian that the one is a metaphor for the other.

So baptism is important. We see that in this story of Philip and the Ethiopian. It was important enough that during the short time that they were on that chariot when Philip explained the gospel to the man he must have mentioned it, because the guy knows enough to ask about baptism when he sees the water. So it was important enough to be mentioned.

And it's important enough that Philip's job isn't finished until he's baptized the guy. Did you notice that? At the end of the story, Philip has that "Beam me up, Scotty" moment where the Holy Spirit snatches him up and takes him to Azotes. But notice the Holy Spirit doesn't do that when the man just believes. He waits until Philip baptizes him. That's when Philip's job is finished.

Baptism is important. It's not what saves you, but let me say this: Your profession, your proclamation of your faith, your declaration of your faith, really isn't finished until you've been baptized. So to you Candidates today I want to say this: What you are doing today is very important to God! He values your obedience. The second thing this passage shows us about baptism is this:

Baptism Requires Water. Lots and Lots of Water!

We are going to immerse you guys today! Someone said “How long will you hold us down?” Depends on how long I think it will take to wash your sins away. Just kidding, but that immersion will be messy and a little bit un-dignified. In some places, it can be dangerous! I went to check my email Tuesday and I literally saw the News Story “Pastor killed by Crocodile in Lake Baptism.” I wondered if that was a little divine warning!

Seriously, it’s messy! It’s messy to immerse, so why would we do it this way? Well, there is more than one reason. Baptism is a symbol of our burial and resurrection with Christ, and Baptism portrays our total change and cleansing, so immersion fits that.

But mostly we immerse because that’s pretty much the way baptism is described in the New Testament. The Greek word baptizo (baptize) literally means “to dip or immerse.” It was used to describe ships sinking or even people drowning. Not to make you guys nervous, but the idea is that you do go under! There are passages where the Bible says they baptized in a particular place, because there was much water there. They needed a lot of water to immerse.

We see this in our passage, too. This Ethiopian guy was on a five month journey through the desert. There’s no way he didn’t have some drinking water on his chariot. But notice it’s not until they come to a pool that the guy suggests baptism. I don’t know if you caught it, but Luke says they went down into the water and came up out of the water. So baptismal candidates, let me tell you something: You are going to get wet!

It takes water. Lots of water! So it’s important, and takes lots of water. The last thing this passage portrays with regard to baptism is this:

Baptism Is Immediate

There are lots of ways that you could choose to signify your faith as a new Christian. You could pray out loud for everyone to hear. You could do an “I believe in Jesus” on a Sunday morning for our congregation. You could write the date you trusted in Jesus on the inside of your Bible cover. There are lots of ways you could choose to signify your faith.

Well, baptism is the way that God has chosen for us to do that. It’s the first thing we do as Christians. It is the pattern all throughout the New Testament that as soon as someone believes they are baptized. That’s what happens in the book of Acts, not just here but time and time again. At Pentecost, in Samaria with Saul, with Lydia, and the Roman Jailer in Philippi, in Corinth, in Ephesus, that’s always the pattern.

As soon as someone truly clearly believes in Jesus, they are ready for baptism. We have one little guy here today, Evan Mailand, who is very young and has been telling his parents for months that he wants to be baptized. I said “I don’t know. He’s awful young. I’ll talk to him and see,” because the last thing I want to do is confuse Evan and have him put his faith in a ceremony before he truly understands the gospel.

So I prayed “Lord, show me what to do, and I interviewed Evan.” No offense to you other candidates, but I have to say Evan gave an incredible interview! Maybe the most theologically technical interview of all! I asked “Why do you want to be baptized? Because it’s a symbol of my faith. Does baptism save you? No, you have to believe in Jesus and ask him to forgive your sins. What is sin? Disobedience to God. Like big stuff, like murder? Yes, but also little stuff like disobeying your parents. So it’s all the wrong things we do, big or little, Pastor John. So I said “So I’m a sinner because of the stuff I do?” and He said “Well, it’s not that I’m a sinner because I sin. It’s that I sin because I’m a sinner.” At that point, I asked Evan if he could preach next Sunday and he said he would have to check with his Mom. Just kidding. But he’s ready! As soon as we have a clear understanding and faith in Christ, we are ready to be baptized.

And it’s a matter of obedience, not really a matter of feeling. It’s important that we understand that. I was once talking to someone who was considering baptism, and this person said “I believe in Jesus. I have a relationship with him, but is it the right time for me?” I said “How would we know?” and they said “I’m not sure.” So we prayed about it and then I said “You know, there are two kinds of things in the Christian life: There are some things that you need a lot of guidance on, like when Kelley and I decided to move to Zimbabwe. We really needed God to speak to us about that. But then there are other things like “Should I steal my neighbor’s car?” we don’t need a lot of guidance on that. It’s pretty clear in Scripture.” And that person said “Yeah ” I said “Baptism is like that. We don’t need a strong feeling once we believe. We just need to obey.”

We see that in our story. God had prepared this Ethiopian’s heart. He knew a little bit about the God of Israel. Philip shares the gospel with him. He recognizes that a change has occurred. He sees water, and he says “There’s lots of water right here, and I know I want to follow Jesus. Is there any reason I shouldn’t be baptized?” His obedience is immediate.

I would say to those of you who are baptismal candidates today: Obey God immediately in every way. Never put it off. Have a sense of immediacy about your obedience to Jesus. And to the rest of you, I would say something too: I would put to some of you the question that the Ethiopian asks. Is there really anything that would prevent you from being baptized? Maybe you've been wrestling with this for a long time. Maybe you know you've never been baptized, but you know you believe in Jesus. Maybe you think you should be baptized, but you're not sure. Why not settle that today? Why not take care of it once and for all. We can clear that up. If you want to, we won't force you to but if you want to we can baptize you today. It's important. We have water, plenty of water, and we even brought some extra baptism clothes. Whether you want to get wet today or just talk about it today, why not settle it once and for all?