

Acts | The Incendiary Fellowship

The Gospel to the Excluded

Acts 8.25ff

7.10.16

So, when they had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.

²⁶ But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, "Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert road.) ²⁷ So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." ³⁰ Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: "HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER; AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT, SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH. ³³ "IN HUMILIATION HIS JUDGMENT WAS TAKEN AWAY; WHO WILL RELATE HIS GENERATION? FOR HIS LIFE IS REMOVED FROM THE EARTH." ³⁴ The eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. ³⁶ As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" ³⁸ And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea.

We're looking at a New Testament book called The Acts of the Apostles.

It's a book written by the writer Luke who also gave us The Gospel According to Luke and now this historian/physician (Col. 4.14) is telling how the message of Jesus Christ is spreading –
"Volume Two"

This "Volume Two" started with Jesus Christ, 40 days after His resurrection saying to His disciples, "When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you WILL BE My witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth"

And IN THIS Chapter 8 – we’re seeing that happen. The Samaritans, the Lost Tribes of Israel who went out on their own and just kept going...now they’re being rescued and included (25). And today, “the ends of the earth” – the Good News of what Jesus Christ DID, that message is going to be carried in an unexpected and amazing way into Africa – the first, truly non-Jewish convert to be baptized is an African man. Africa sings a new song before Europe does!

The man we’re about to meet is a study in disappointment. He came a long way...in hope...but didn’t find what he hoped to find. He’s disappointed.

And since disappointment is something we ALL face, this is a text that can really help us. Sometimes we deal with little disappointments, like a small purchase that doesn’t deliver (even a meal at a restaurant). It could be a mid-range disappointment: a vacation/holiday/event with a lot of build-up and now it’s passed and you feel let down. OR some people live with MAJOR life-disappointment – like a mid-life-crisis or you didn’t get into the college you wanted or you’re NOT where you hoped to be in your family, your career...just thought life would be different...would be MORE... “is this as good as it gets” (Jack Nicholson)?

Today – just two simple points: #1) Man DISappointed and #2) Man APPOINTED.

Descriptors are used sparingly in ancient writings but this man – the disappointed man – is described with some detail. He’s from Ethiopia, i.e. South of Egypt and what is today called Northern Sudan. Ethiopia was a formidable nation...and he is a powerful man, the Finance Minister of the queen (kan-da’-kay) of Ethiopia - HE WAS THE MONEY MAN.

He was also a eunuch. And while he’s described with a variety of details at FIRST...the one detail that’s used again and again is “eunuch”. He was in a class of people who worked in royal courts and with women and he had been sterilized...castrated probably as a child...And he didn’t wear a badge or a sign to that effect. He could be identified in part because eunuchs... had no facial hair.

He had come to Jerusalem to worship...maybe it was a feast/holiday. It was a major, major commitment to get there because it could have been 1000 miles from Jerusalem so it wasn’t a casual decision ...would’ve required weeks of preparation and maybe two months travel time...very determined.

Why had he come ALL this way to worship in Jerusalem? Well, we’re not told...exactly... but we can safely speculate a little. The ancient queen of Sheba (she may have been from that region) she had come to Jerusalem in the time of Solomon and she gasped at the wealth and order/beauty of Jerusalem ... maybe this eunuch heard the stories.

There seem to have been Jewish people IN Ethiopia and though HE wasn’t Jewish, he had heard of the Temple... “There’s a place in Jerusalem where the God of Abraham’s people LIVES...He is

the God of grace... You can't control/manipulate Him like our gods...you don't BUY His blessings... He gives grace to the afflicted (Proverbs 3.34). Not karma religion – something different.”

So...perhaps he came (all those miles in his caravan and entourage) looking for the one alternative to idolatry and superstition and KARMA – looking for grace from the God of the Promise, Abraham's God.

And WE know (because we've been looking at it 10 weeks) WE know that the leaders of the Temple at this time had traded Grace for commerce – and it was big business in that Temple...and it was all about earning your way IN...proving how good you are...buying the right sacrifices...having the right currency...looking the part...qualifying... transacting...performing.

When those leaders got a good look at this beardless man, this not-so-manly man...well, they knew, he had been castrated...been cut-off from the people and emasculated...he was a foreigner and a eunuch.

The Law said it (Deut 23): "No one who is emasculated or... cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD.”

He'd come all that way...looking for grace...looking to be included and embraced...wanted to know this God of the covenant...who commits Himself to US by “hesed” – covenant loyalty based on His promise NOT on OUR ability to qualify/to “man-up”...but when WE meet him he's on his way home and he's disappointed.

And now...humiliated...disappointed...excluded, he's driving on a desert road (reminded that HE is dried up!) and he has a copy of Isaiah the Prophet...he's reading it aloud...he's trying to figure out what happened...where IS the difference? Where was the grace...the truth...where is the God of Abraham who makes promises NOT BASED OUR QUALIFICATIONS ...but on based on His faithfulness?

He's reading about a Mysterious Figure: Who IS this Person? Is it the Prophet Isaiah? Is it the nation of Israel...I have to know...because THIS Person...knows what I am feeling...knows what it is to be “cut off” and shaved/shorn like a sheep...humiliated...treated unjustly...who faced early death...before he could have children...who was dried up ... (“I THIRST”).

And THEN the Man Disappointed meets the Man Appointed... It's Philip at the Fringes (just coming off his tour of Samaria and those fringe people!) and Philip has been sent/appointed by God to JOIN this EUNUCH... “The Spirit said, ‘Go up and JOIN this chariot’ (Lit. stick to it – connect – identify).

It's like the Emmaus Road experience (Luke 24), a group leaving Jerusalem and a well-placed

question gets it going – “Hey, there, reader, in the chariot, do you understand what you're reading?”

Then a good question meets a good question (first of three): “HOW CAN I without a guide?” asks the eunuch.

So the disappointed man invites (parakaleo) Philip to come up and sit WITH him... It's Isaiah 53...about this Mysterious Person who was cut-off, sheared like a sheep, humiliated, excluded, sterilized (“no descendants” NLT) and the Eunuch asks the SECOND of his THREE BIG QUESTIONS: “Who IS this character?”

And the Appointed Man, Philip, opened his mouth, and starting from this Scripture preached Jesus to him (like at the Emmaus Road – “He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.” Luke 24.27). And surely Philip quoted the next sections in Isaiah where you find these words, “Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, ‘The LORD will surely separate me from His people. Nor let the eunuch say, ‘Behold, I am but a dry tree.’” (Isa 56.3)

Can YOU imagine how those words must have crashed on this man...this eunuch...on the “desert road”...the very landscape mocks him; it illustrates his own infertility ... “I can't MAN UP – I'm DRIED up...I'm a dry tree...drier than that desert!”

But Philip is now declaring THE Appointed Man – “Sir, Abraham's seed has come...God has come in the Person of Jesus and HE IS THE ONE APPOINTED to carry our shame and bear our burden... HE SHARED OUR HUMILIATION/identified with us...He was excluded and cut-off for people like YOU AND ME.

So, sir, while you ARE disappointed and left out of that stone Temple in Jerusalem...YOU ARE ALSO BEING CLAIMED, A LIVING STONE IN THIS NEW TEMPLE. Isaiah 56.5 (we read it earlier) “To them (i.e. to the eunuchs who enter My rest) I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial, and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off.”

Can you imagine how those words sounded to that disappointed man – the News of a Man APPOINTED to be cut-off in his place...and who would (like Philip had joined him, stuck to him, SAT WITH HIM IN THAT CHARIOT) this Appointed Man, Jesus Christ, would stand in our place...represent us...be excluded FOR US AS HE HUNG UNDER THE JUSTICE OF GOD THAT WAS DUE TO ME... I deserved to be excluded...but He was cut off for me...and for YOU, Sir, if you will just receive it...just believe...step inside the New Temple! Unite with Jesus Christ!

And the Disappointed Man says... “I want this! I want to join Jesus Christ...to unite with Him...be represented by Him...be cleansed, be included, step IN... “LOOK! There's some water! “

Then the third BIG Question! “What prevents ME, EVEN ME...from stepping in...from being baptized INTO Christ, clothed and covered by Jesus Christ who was cut off that I MIGHT BE INCLUDED... STOP THE CHARIOT?”

And Philip who was appointed to come along side the disappointed man...goes with him down to the water...baptizes him into the One Appointed to live the life the eunuch had failed to live and to be cut off for him...to bear our penalty and shame... The dried-up tree was now like a tree firmly planted by streams of water (Psalm 1.3).

And when they came up out of the River (Oh, the River! Where you will leave CHANGED!) – they get up on the banks...and the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away...he had more appointments to keep... more good news to tell.

And the Eunuch (v.39)... went on his way rejoicing just like it said of the eunuchs who were promised a place in the new Temple from the passage we’ve been reading, Isaiah 56 – (quote) “Even those I will bring to My holy mountain and make them joyful in My house.”

And ancient church tradition tells us, for instance, in the writings of the Church Father, Irenaeus:

This man was also sent into the regions of Ethiopia, to preach what he had himself believed, that there was one God preached by the prophets, but that the Son of this God had already made His appearance in human nature, and had been led as a sheep to the slaughter; and all the other statements which the prophets made regarding Him. (Against Heresies, Book Three, 12.8-10)

Some claim that it was this Dried Up Tree who became God’s appointed man in Africa, the founder of the Coptic Church (which still meets today throughout Egypt, Ethiopia and the Middle East) ...and that God did indeed give him a memorial in the New Temple...more sons and daughters than he could ever count. He went on his way rejoicing because he found grace to cover his shame and became INCLUDED like he never imagined!

I wonder how this passage might be used to stir US up to move to the fringes (like Philip at the Fringe) and to move next to people...to move with the Spirit who is saying, “Go join his chariot – go stick with that man or woman...maybe even someone not sure whether to be called man or woman...an excluded person... maybe rich or powerful but also deeply conflicted and isolated...maybe deeply disappointed with life (Really? Is this as Good As It Gets?)

May God use this amazing story to move us...to give us those well-placed questions that communicate to that OTHER person, “Hey, I know what it’s like to be disappointed...to be a stranger to grace...to be ashamed... fearing exclusion and fearing God’s judgment...and I ALSO KNOW WHAT IT IS TO BE EMBRACED... Wanna talk?”

I've been down to the River ...and I'll take you there! If you're open...I'll stand next to you and show you Jesus Christ... the only one who WILL NOT disappoint.

Maybe...no...undoubtedly...WE are God's appointed men and women to the excluded... may God give us grace to keep our appointments in the coming days.