

Main Idea: In Acts 8:26-40 we find the answer to the baptism question in an account involving a eunuch from Ethiopia. The account involves four scenes.

- I. Scene #1: The Confusion (26-31).
 - A. He was an important man (27).
 - B. He was a religious man (27b-28).
 - C. He was a man that God was seeking (29).
 - D. He was a man in need (30-31).
 - II. Scene #2: The Confrontation with Jesus (32-35).
 - A. God used the Scriptures to reach him (32-33).
 - B. God used Philip to reach him (34-35).
 - III. Scene #3: The Convincing (36).
 - A. A person who doesn't know Jesus as Savior shouldn't be baptized (Titus 3:4-7).
 - B. A person who doesn't want to obey Jesus shouldn't be baptized (Matt. 28:19-20).
 - C. A person who doesn't understand grace shouldn't be baptized (Rom. 6:1-4).
 - D. A person who hasn't experienced the Spirit's regeneration shouldn't be baptized (John 3:5-8).
 - E. A person who does...ought to be baptized.
 - IV. Scene #4: The Commitment (38-40).
 - A. He went into the water to show his identification with Christ.
 - B. He went in with Philip to show his identification with the church.
 - C. He went on his way rejoicing to show he was a new man.
- The Bottom Line: When it comes to the baptism question, it's all about Jesus.
What's your answer to the baptism question?

I love talking with people who don't know Jesus in whose lives God is obviously at work. I think about a young couple from Utah that showed up at church awhile back on their honeymoon.

"How did you end up here?" I asked them.

"We closed our eyes and put our finger on a map. That's how we decided where we'd go on our honeymoon."

"So you put your finger on Wheelersburg?" I responded.

"No, Morehead, Kentucky. That's where we've been. But we decided to take a drive, and found ourselves at the Greenup bridge, and wanted to get our picture in Ohio. Once there, we saw a sign that said 'Wheelersburg,' and since I have a cousin named 'Jason Wheeler,' we decided to drive there. And since it was a Sunday evening, we thought we'd find a church. So here we are!"

Then it dawned on me. "Where were you married?" I asked.

"In the Mormon temple," they responded.

Amazing. The Lord brought two young Mormons to us that Sunday evening, for a service where I preached a message on the atoning merit of the blood of Jesus Christ. Which, you may know, is something Mormon's do not believe.

Yes, it's amazing to watch God at work in the lives of people who do not know the salvation His Son came to provide.

I think of a local businessman I met a few years ago, a wealthy man who was filled with great anxiety. He came to church, so I visited him.

"I've basically been an agnostic," he said. "But I've been reading the Bible some, and I found a verse that scares me. It's the one where Jesus said that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Matt 19:24). I'm not sure what to do with that."

*** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this text, see 12/3/06.

We began to meet, and study God's Word together, and a few months later, that man stopped trusting in his money and gave public testimony of his trust in Christ.

It's great to spend time with people like that. I think of the couple that told me they wanted to join the church so they could go to heaven, and the hours we spent after that in their home seeing what the Bible said about heaven and who goes there. I think about the college student that opened up about his struggle with depression and how that transparency led eventually to his admission of his need for a Savior.

One of the evidences that God is working in someone's life is the presence of *questions*. Inevitably, this question arises. *The baptism question*. It did for the man I just told you about. It also did for the man in the Bible we'll be considering this morning.

We don't even know his name, for the Bible doesn't tell us. We do know his country (he was from Ethiopia). We know his position (he was a government official in charge of his country's treasury). And we know his question. He asked...

Why shouldn't I be baptized?

That question intrigues me. *Why shouldn't I be baptized?* I've had people ask me, "Why should I be baptized?" but never that I recall, "*Why shouldn't I be baptized?*"

Why did this man ask that question? Why did he want to be baptized? And for that matter, why would someone today want to be baptized, like the individuals we'll witness after this message? To answer these questions let's investigate carefully the story of the Ethiopian man I just mentioned.

You'll meet him in Acts 8. We'll call this nameless figure what the Scriptures call him, the Ethiopian eunuch. As we examine his life, we'll find our answer to the baptism question in Acts 8:26-40. The account involves four scenes.

I. Scene #1: The Confusion (26-31).

Our story begins with the spotlight on Philip, a deacon from the Jerusalem church. In the first part of Acts 8 we learn that persecution hit the believers and forced them to scatter. Philip moved to Samaria and did evangelistic work there. God blessed and many believed in Christ.

At that point, Philip received a surprising set of marching orders...

Verse 26—"Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.'"

Nothing just "happens" in a world where the Sovereign Creator is on the throne. Whether it's honeymooners showing up here, or you this morning. God specializes in arranging providential contacts. That's certainly what He did in Acts 8.

Note that God told Philip exactly what to do. *Go south to the road*. Not just to any road. Go to the *desert* road, the one that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza. God gave Philip some very specific instructions.

On the other hand, there were a lot of unanswered questions in the assignment. Why go there? The angel didn't say. And where exactly on the Desert Road was he to go? After all, the stretch from Jerusalem to Gaza was fifty miles. Again, he didn't say. And what was he supposed to look for when he got there? Again, no answer. Just *go*. That was God's instruction.

Think of how this must have sounded to Philip. He had a great ministry going in Samaria. He'd won many to Christ, and had even cracked the hard case of Simon the Sorcerer. The new church obviously needed his teaching ability. And surely, the Lord wouldn't want him to leave this successful ministry to go—where?—to an obscure place in the desert?

Philip must have wondered, “Why would the Lord want me to leave this fruitful ministry to go to the *desert*? You find people in cities and towns, not in deserts.” It didn’t make sense.

Philip could have resisted, and he could have sounded rather pious in doing so. After all, he wasn’t living in sin. He was already serving the Lord.

But not Philip. God told him what to do, and he did it. He obeyed the Lord. Not because it made sense. Not because he was dissatisfied where he was in Samaria. Certainly not because it was an opportunity for job advancement. He obeyed because he wanted to please his Master. Here’s what happened...

Verse 27 “So he started out, and on his way, he met an Ethiopian eunuch....”

In the Bible, Ethiopia refers to a large area of Africa south of Egypt, located between the Egyptian city of Aswan and the Sudanese city of Khartoum. It corresponds to the modern region called Nubia. This is the area that the Queen of Sheba came from to visit Solomon.

There in the desert Philip met this man from Ethiopia. The text reveals four things about him.

A. He was an important man (27). Verse 27 states, “...he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians.

This must have been an impressive site. Since the man was in charge of all the treasury of the queen, we can assume he was traveling in a caravan.

Candace is not a proper name, but a title, like Pharaoh or Caesar. This man was what we might call the queen’s Minister of Finance. This was a costly journey, again underscoring that this was an important man.

B. He was a religious man (27b-28). Note the text again, “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.”

Though brief, the information we’re given tells us much about this man. He’d traveled all the way to Jerusalem to worship, perhaps a distance of five hundred miles. This man was not a Jew either. He didn’t speak Hebrew. He probably was black. We’re told he was a eunuch, which was not uncommon for government officials in those days. If it’s true that he’d been emasculated, he would have been denied full access to the temple (Deut 23:1), and unable to participate fully in the Jewish worship services. In fact, he would not have been allowed to become a full proselyte to Judaism.

But the fact that he made this long trip to Jerusalem tells us something. There must have been a void in his soul, a yearning to know God, for him to make such a costly and even dangerous trek. This man was looking for answers to the meaning of life. Maybe that’s you today, too.

And so, apparently, while in Jerusalem he made a purchase, an expensive one. He obtained a copy of the book of Isaiah. He must have paid an incredible for that scroll. Not many people had books in those days, let alone a portion of the Bible. The fact that a Gentile obtained the Jewish Scriptures indicates this was a serious seeker.

Again, I love being around people like this. Curious. Hungry. Seeking. You may be such a person this morning, and if so, we’re glad you are here. We are a church full of people who once were precisely where you are now.

We learn a third piece of information about him in verse 29, namely...

C. He was a man that God was seeking (29). “The Spirit told Philip, ‘Go to that chariot and stay near it.’” In eternity past God the Father chose to save an undeserving people (Eph 1:4). At Calvary God the Son died to rescue those people (John 10:11;

17:24). And now God the Holy Spirit is at work seeking those individuals, one by one, bringing them to Christ. Watch Him at work in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch.

“Go to that chariot,” the Spirit told Philip. Philip had obeyed his first instruction—*Go south to the desert road*. Now he receives his second instruction—*Go to that chariot*. The first time it was an angel. Now it’s the Spirit Himself.

Again, notice the command is both specific *and* vague. Go to *that* chariot. That’s clear, but then what? What if this powerful government official says, “What are you doing trespassing near my chariot?”? Philip would feel kind of foolish, wouldn’t he?

But God knows what He is doing, even if He doesn’t tell His servants the whole story of what He’s up to! Here we see God at work seeking another of His chosen ones. Indeed, through this man God is going to take the gospel to the African continent.

Please know that God is still seeking and saving people today. In a moment you’ll witness the baptism of three individuals who give testimony to this truth. “I was a lost sinner not interested in God, but He worked in my life and by His grace saved me and brought me into His family.”

D. He was a man in need (30-31). “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.”

That may strike us as odd, but in ancient times, people usually read out loud. They did so for a couple of reasons. For one, the print in ancient documents was hard to read, with letters often placed in block form with no spaces between them. For another, since there weren’t many books there weren’t many experienced readers, and it’s easier for beginners to sound out words aloud (just like some of you will be doing when you start school next week).

The Ethiopian was reading God’s Word, a good thing to do. He was reading Isaiah the prophet, also a good thing to do. By the way, the book of Isaiah would have held special appeal to this man for it offers specific hope to eunuchs (Isa. 56:3-5).

But this man had a problem. He couldn’t understand what he was reading. He was *confused*. Religious, yes. A Bible reader, yes. Zealous, yes, so much so that he made a trek to Jerusalem to worship God. But still he lacked, until God in His grace brought someone into his life who could clear up his confusion. Which brings us to scene #2...

II. Scene #2: The Confrontation with Jesus (32-35).

Verse 32—“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.’”

When Philip approached the chariot, the Ethiopian was reading Isaiah 53. We can assume then that the man had already read the first part of Isaiah (if he had a scroll he had to unwrap the first part to get to chapter 53). Perhaps he read about Isaiah’s call to the ministry in chapter 6. If so, he learned from Isaiah’s vision of the seraphim that God is *holy*. And as he read through chapters 1-39 he learned that a holy God will judge sin. Then as he moved into chapter forty and beyond he learned that God desires to show compassion to undeserving people.

But how can a holy God do that? How can He demonstrate compassion towards sinful people and still be just? Or to turn the question around, on what basis can sinful people be right with a holy God? By doing good things? No. They’re still sinners.

The answer comes in chapter 53. And the answer relates to the Ethiopian’s confusion.

Luke says specifically in verses 32-33, “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.’³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.”

Answer this. Who is Isaiah talking about? Who was it that was led like a lamb to slaughter and did not defend Himself? And who was deprived of justice and died in humiliation? The answer, of course, is *Jesus*.

We know that, don’t we? But the world is full of people who *don’t* know that, even good, decent, religious people like the Ethiopian eunuch.

By the way, just because a person has a Bible doesn’t mean he’s a Christian. Nor does the fact that he’s reading a Bible guarantee he is either. If we want to help people, we mustn’t make assumptions. We need to learn to ask questions, like Philip did, to find out where people are spiritually. And then, we need to do what Philip did next, use the Scriptures to introduce people *to Jesus*.

Religion doesn’t save anyone. In a sense, even the Bible doesn’t save anyone, but merely points to the One who does save. Only Jesus can save a sinner.

It’s important to see that the Sovereign One used two instruments that day to reach the Ethiopian eunuch: the Scriptures and human ambassadors.

A. God used the Scriptures to reach him (32-33). The Old Testament Scriptures, no less! What’s more...

B. God used Philip to reach him (34-35). “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.”²

Think about something. Instead of sending the angel to Philip, the Lord could have sent the angel directly to the Ethiopian to tell him how to be saved. But He didn’t. He sent the angel to Philip, who told Philip to go to the eunuch.

That’s God’s way. God didn’t give the Great Commission to angels. He gave it to people, to *His* people, to *us*.

Can you do what Philip did? He actually introduced a man to Jesus by using the Old Testament. The Bible, from beginning to end, is a book about Jesus. Though His name doesn’t appear in the Old Testament, He is the main character of both Old and New Testaments.

You can’t understand Genesis 1:1 (“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”) without talking about Jesus, because Jesus is God. In fact, according to Colossians 1 He is the person of the Godhead who performed the creative act.

You can’t explain the Passover in Exodus apart from discussing Jesus, for the blood placed on the door-frames merely anticipated the shedding of Messiah’s blood.

You can’t understand the sacrificial system in Leviticus without understanding who Jesus is, for the lambs of OT times merely foreshadowed “the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.” And on we go through the Old Testament, as the biblical account prepares the world for the coming of Messiah.

So yes, Philip introduced this man to Jesus. But why? Because that’s who Isaiah is talking about in chapter 53? Yes, but there’s another reason. There is no other person who can save a sinner, dear friend. He is *the* God-sent Savior for sinners, who provided salvation by dying on a cross in the place of sinners, and then walking out of His tomb alive three days later.

² Scholars tell us by examining the wording of this man’s quotation of Isaiah, he must have been reading the Greek Old Testament (LXX).

Jesus is the crucified, risen Savior. Do you know Him as *your* Savior? This morning we're studying a divine appointment. But this may be *your* divine appointment, too. You are on a trip through life, and God has sent a messenger to point you to Jesus. Believe in Him, and God will do for you what He did for our Ethiopian friend, *give you eternal life*.

Scene #1—the confusion. Scene #2—the confrontation with Jesus.

III. Scene #3: The Convincing (36).

Verse 36—“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?’”

There’s the question of the hour. *Why shouldn’t I be baptized?* Not why *should* I, but why *shouldn’t* I? Friends, according to the Bible, not everybody should be baptized. Let’s talk about four kinds of people who should NOT be baptized...

A. A person who doesn’t know Jesus as Savior shouldn’t be baptized (Titus 3:4-7).

If a person who doesn’t know Christ as Savior enters the waters of baptism, guess what happens? He gets wet. Period. But that’s all. Baptism doesn’t save anyone. According to God’s revelation, a person is saved by grace alone which He gives to a person who places his faith in Jesus as Savior.

Titus 3:4-7 explains: “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done [like baptism], but because of his mercy. *He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.*”

Why shouldn’t I be baptized? You shouldn’t if you don’t know Jesus as your Savior. Here’s another person who shouldn’t be baptized...

B. A person who doesn’t want to obey Jesus shouldn’t be baptized (Matt. 28:19-20).

Just before returning to heaven, Jesus gave these important instructions to His disciples. It’s our mission statement as a church...

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:19-20).”

Our mission is to *make disciples*. What’s the first thing the Lord said that should happen to a disciple? He should be *baptized*. He should go under the water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that is, he should give public testimony through water baptism that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have done for him what he could never do for himself, namely, *save him from his sins and make him a child of God*.

But then what? That’s not the end. What did Jesus say is supposed to happen with a newly baptized disciple? Jesus’ words, “Teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” To be a disciple of Jesus means you will follow Him, you will obey His commands till death. You no longer call the shots. He does. He is your Lord and Master. You are His disciple.

When a person is baptized he is saying, “I want to follow Jesus all my life. I want to learn His commands and I want to obey them so that He will be honored in my life.” If a person doesn’t want to obey Jesus, he shouldn’t be baptized.

C. A person who doesn’t understand grace shouldn’t be baptized (Rom. 6:1-4).

Sometimes people will say, “I’m not ready to become a Christian. I don’t think I can live up to God’s expectations.” The fact is, they can’t. None of us can. God’s standard is perfection and we can’t attain that. But if we put our trust in Jesus Christ and His cross work and resurrection, God gives us the merit of Christ’s righteousness. He gives us the ability to obey His commands.

That’s called *grace*. Grace means that in Christ God gives us what we don’t deserve. To be saved we must acknowledge that we cannot save ourselves, that only Christ can save us, and that Christ gives us the ability to live a righteous life, all by grace.

Some would abuse grace and try to turn it into a license for sin. “If I’m saved by grace then I can live however I want.” No way. If you’ve been saved by grace you won’t *want* to live in sin. You will *want* to live in obedience to Christ.

Romans 6:1-4 explains, “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

To be baptized a person must understand *grace*. If he doesn’t, if he thinks that he’s right with God because he’s a *good* person, he shouldn’t be baptized because he’s never truly been saved.

D. A person who hasn’t experienced the Spirit’s regeneration shouldn’t be baptized (John 3:5-8).

Jesus had this to say to a very religious person named Nicodemus in John 3:7-8, “You must be born again. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

Being religious doesn’t do it, not according to Jesus. A person must experience the regenerating, life-giving work of God the Holy Spirit. A person must be born again. And a person who *hasn’t* been born again shouldn’t be baptized.

But those four things were true of the Ethiopian eunuch. He did know Jesus as his Savior—he just met him by Philip’s help. He did want to obey the Lord—that’s why he asked the question about baptism. He did understand that salvation is by grace, not works—he learned that from Isaiah 53. And he had experienced the Spirit’s regenerating work in his heart. In fact, some later manuscripts emphasized this by adding verse 37, which records the Ethiopian as saying, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” We can be sure the Ethiopian did experience a Spirit-produced heart change as evidenced by his desire to be baptized.

Why shouldn’t I be baptized? Simply put...

E. A person who does know Jesus as Savior, who does want to obey Jesus, who does understand grace, and who has experienced the Spirit’s work of regeneration...ought to be baptized.

And Philip agreed. That’s why in the following verse he baptized the Ethiopian. Which brings us to scene #4...

IV. Scene #4: The Commitment (38-40).

Verse 38—“And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.” We’re told three things about the Ethiopian’s commitment.

A. He went into the water to show his identification with Christ. He went into the water, that is, he was baptized by what's called *immersion*.

And why immersion? One, because that's what Christ did (He was baptized by John "in the Jordan," Mark 1:9. Jesus went into the water and then came "up out of the water," Mark 1:10). Two, it's also what Christ commanded. The word "baptize" means "to plunge under, to immerse." The mode of immersion pictures the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6:2-4). By going under the water the Ethiopian was announcing his belief in and dependence upon the death of Jesus. By coming out of the water he was proclaiming his belief in and dependence upon the victorious resurrection of the Savior.

We're told something else about the Ethiopian's commitment.

B. He went in with Philip to show his identification with the church. Perhaps it goes without saying, but this man didn't baptize himself. Rather, he went into the water *with Philip* and *Philip* baptized him.

Does that matter? Yes. Philip was a servant of the church, an elected deacon from the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:5). By being baptized the Ethiopian was doing what every other member of the early church had done, not only identifying with Christ but with Christ's people, the church.

So becoming a Christian is personal, but it's also inter-personal. Now that I'm God's child, I choose to live in relationship with God's other children. And where do I find His children? In the place He has established for called out ones, the *ecclesia*, the church.

A third detail regarding this man's commitment...

C. He went on his way rejoicing to show he was a new man. Verses 39-40—"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."

Wow! As soon as they came out of the water, Philip ended up about twenty miles away in Azotus (the OT city called Ashdod). This must have shocked the Ethiopian, but the text merely says he went home *rejoicing*. He's a new man now.

What happened to this unnamed Ethiopian? We don't know for sure. Irenaeus says this man went home and became a missionary to his people. That's conjecture, but this we know. As the Ethiopian eunuch continued his trek home that day, he didn't have a church waiting for him. He probably didn't know a single Christian in Ethiopia. He didn't have a New Testament—it hadn't even been written yet.

But he had Jesus.

When it comes to the baptism question, it's all about Jesus. That's the bottom line.

The Bottom Line: When it comes to the baptism question, it's all about Jesus.

Jesus came to save sinners. Have you received Him as *your* Savior? If not, I invite you to do so today. If He is your Savior, have you obeyed His command to be baptized like the eunuch did, to make it known publicly that He is your Lord and Savior and you now live for Him?

It's our joy at this time to see three people say, "Yes, Jesus is my Savior, and I want to make it known, and I want to become part of this local church so I can grow and help others come to know Him too!"