

Questions, Questions, Questions!

Thomas Robinson, February 20, 2011

Acts 8:26-39

²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “*Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.*” This is a desert place. ²⁷ And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

²⁹ And the Spirit said to Philip, “*Go over and join this chariot.*”

³⁰ So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “*Do you understand what you are reading?*”

³¹ And he said, “*How can I, unless someone guides me?*” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

“*Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth.*”

³³ *In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.* [Isa. 53:7-8]

³⁴ And the eunuch said to Philip, “*About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?*”

³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “*See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?*”

³⁷ [And Philip said, “*If you believe with all your heart, you may.*”

And he answered and said, “*I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.*”]

³⁸ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.

³⁹ And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

Isaiah 53:3-7a – The Suffering Servant of the Lord

³ He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.

⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.

⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; ...

1 Peter 3:15

¹⁵ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

The Spirit of God, Hard at Work

This narrative is one of the most surprising in Acts. Acts is very selective, but wants to show God's purpose through the Spirit for the spread of the good news of Jesus. Focus has been on Jerusalem and the boundary between Jews and the Greco-Roman world.

This amazing story reminds everyone that God's Spirit is working in a wider world.

An Ethiopian eunuch, treasury secretary for the Queen of Ethiopia (Candace) – educated, very successful – has become a worshiper of the God of Israel. Traveled to Jerusalem; is reading a Greek or Hebrew scroll of Isaiah, as his entourage returns home. As a eunuch excluded from temple (Dt 23:1), but Isaiah offers messianic hope (Is 11:10-12; 56:3-7).

The Gospel (evangelism) is God's work. He is continually preparing people for it all around us. Our challenge is to be proactive enough to give people an opportunity to respond.

God is radically inclusive. The Spirit pushes the early believers to cross boundaries of race, culture, gender, acceptability. The Spirit is urgent: Go join a moving chariot. Run.

A Community of Inquiring

Philip is a Greek-speaking Jew – one of the Seven – whose own understanding of his faith and hopes has been transformed by Jesus. He has been helped by others and brought to a new understanding of the whole story of Israel, promises, history, hope, future. But he has never thought about it in relation to an African, eunuch, finance minister.

Sometimes today Christian conversion is thought of as European domination over other cultures. But the message of Jesus grew in a Middle Eastern (Asian) environment among oppressed people and spread not by domination but by the Spirit. Africa today is experiencing the vast growth of faith in Jesus as people find their culture fulfilled.

Philip finds another inquirer. He knows how serious the questions must be for this man to have come to this moment. The Ethiopian is likewise open. He is a powerful expert in his field, but serious enough to know expertise and power haven't answered his questions. He wants to know God, the astonishing God of the scriptures. Not looking for quick answers, proof texts. He is seeking truth for his life, even if it is challenging, difficult.

What is the whole story about? How are God's great promises fulfilled? How are the deep problems of human brokenness, purpose, meaning answered? How can I know God?

Questions, Questions, Questions

When we think about share our faith, we are often intimidated by the prospect of questions.

We're not trained. We won't know. We'll give a wrong answer. We'll be embarrassed. All of that is potentially true, but we need to engage anyway. We learn and grow by engaging.

"I don't know..." is a good, honest start. "...but let's see if we can find out." We grow as we engage serious questions from people and learn what's at stake in their lives. We ask questions to understand them more fully. See the light of understanding turn on in them.

The serious questions are genuinely challenging, worthy of serious engagement. "Who is this?" Isaiah 53 is haunting, mysterious, and puzzling, but opens the whole story of scripture. There was clearly long discussion as Philip unfolded the events of Jesus as they rode.

The Ethiopian wants to participate and receive the fulfillment of the great story: faith. Philip plunges him into water/in Jesus. He is filled with new hope as he returns home rejoicing.