

Good News and Boundaries of Belonging

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Acts 8:26-39 Translation TR

²⁶ Now an **angel of the Lord** said to Philip, "*Go toward the south to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza*" – a desert place. ²⁷ When he went, he saw an **Ethiopian**, a **eunuch**, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. He was over all her treasury. He had come to **Jerusalem to worship** ²⁸ and was returning, seated in his chariot, reading aloud the prophet **Isaiah**.

²⁹ **The Spirit** told Philip, "*Go over and join this chariot.*" ³⁰ When Philip ran up, he heard the man reading Isaiah and asked, "*Do you **understand** what you are reading?*"

³¹ He answered, "*How could I, unless someone guides me?*" So he invited Philip to come sit with him. ³² Now the Scripture passage he was reading was this:

*"Like a **sheep**, he was led to **slaughter**
and as a lamb is silent before its shearer, so he doesn't open 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 The eunuch asked Philip, "*Who's the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?*"

³⁵ So starting from this Scripture, Philip told him **the good news of Jesus**. ³⁶ And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "*Look, here's water! What's to stop me from being baptized?*"

³⁸ And he ordered his chariot to stop, and both went down into the water, **Philip and the eunuch**, and he **baptized** him.

³⁹ But when they walked up out of the water, the Lord's Spirit took Philip away, and **the eunuch** never saw him again, for he **proceeded on his journey full of joy**.

Acts 8:4-6, 8, 12, 14-17 Translation TR Good News for Samaritans

⁴ Now the believers who were scattered (by persecution) went about proclaiming the message as good news. ⁵ When Philip went to the city of Samaria, he proclaimed to them the Anointed King (*Christos*). ⁶ The crowds paid careful attention to what Philip said as they listened and saw the signs that he did.... ⁸ And great joy broke out in that city. ...

¹² And when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Anointed King, both men and women were being baptized....

¹⁴ Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received God's message, they sent Peter and John to them. ¹⁵ When they arrived, they prayed for them to receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ for the Spirit had not yet fallen on any of them, but they were just baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus.

¹⁷ Then they started laying hands on them and they began receiving the Holy Spirit.

Isaiah 56:3-7 Translation TR Good News for Foreigners and Outcasts

³ Don't let the foreigner joined to Yahweh say, "Yahweh will surely separate me from his people"; and don't let the eunuch say, "I'm just a dry tree." ⁴ For Yahweh says: To the eunuchs who ... hold fast my covenant, ⁵ I'll give them, in my house ... a monument and a name better than sons and daughters. ...

⁶ And the foreigners who join themselves to Yahweh, ... ⁷ I'll bring them to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; ... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

Deuteronomy 23:1,3 Translation TR A Tradition of Exclusion

¹ No eunuch shall be admitted to the assembly of Yahweh. ... ³ No foreign Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of Yahweh even to the tenth generation

Genesis 12:2-3 Translation TR God's Promise to Abraham

²And I'll make of you a great nation, and I'll bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ ... and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.

Galatians 3:25-29 Translation TR Jesus' Faithfulness Changes Everything

²⁵But now that Jesus' faithfulness has come, we're no longer under a guardian, ²⁶for you're all children of God through the faithfulness in Messiah Jesus.

²⁷Every one of you who was baptized into the Messiah clothed yourself with the Messiah.

²⁸There's neither Jew nor Greek, there's neither slave nor free, there's no male and female; for you're all one in Messiah Jesus. ²⁹And if you're part of the Messiah, you're also Abraham's family, heirs of everything in the promise.

The Spirit's Surprise in the Spreading Good News

Jesus sent the Apostles out to make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:18-20). On Pentecost, Jews from many nations/languages were gathered in Jerusalem when the Spirit came.

Acts unfolds the story as these diverse Jews respond, and God creates new community.

But there's irony as the Apostles stay in Jerusalem when persecution comes. Greek-speaking leaders go out. The great story of the inclusion of Gentiles is Acts 10: Cornelius & Peter. We see that Peter never intended to go to foreigners, till pushed by God's Spirit. He has to learn that God shows no partiality. God's Spirit comes unexpectedly and pushes him.

But even earlier, Acts tells of Philip, a leader among Greek-speaking Jews. Under persecution he goes out to Samaritans alienated from Jews. People respond with joy. But surprisingly the Spirit doesn't come. There needs to be unity across old wounds and prejudices. The Spirit waits till apostles come from Jerusalem. Jews and Samaritans are united in Jesus.

Good News that Breaks Barriers – in a Single Person

Acts pushes us to see where God's work is going by including the story of an Ethiopian eunuch. Dt. 23:1 rules that no eunuch can be part of God's people. But Isa 56 held out great hope. The Spirit sends Philip to find a particular person, to show God's intentions.

The event inserts the Good News into the ancient debate between exclusion and embrace. Was Israel an exclusive, pure community? Or could a foreigner like the Moabite Ruth be included?

A different ethnic identity. A rejected sexual condition. A powerful part of a pagan court. But drawn to God enough to travel to Jerusalem to worship. Reading Isaiah 53: the "Suffering Servant" –with questions. Philip realizes from the Spirit that this man, on the other side of a whole series of barriers, can receive the good news of Jesus, be part of Israel's Messiah.

The Ethiopian eunuch – two words that excluded him – sees the challenge of God's servant who dies for the deep sin, brokenness, and alienation of God's people and all others. Jesus turns indescribable humiliation into Good News that includes even him. "What's to stop me...?" The Greek-speaking Jew and the Ethiopian join in his baptism into Jesus. Joy breaks out.

Just How Far Does the Good News Go?

Paul had been a Pharisee, bearers of the pure community, exclusivist side of the debate. But now he preached among ethnic Gauls living in Asia Minor, strangely tempted by exclusion.

Because God works in Jesus' faithfulness in the Gospel event, everything changes for everyone. Ethnic barriers, slave/free, even gender, all fall as each becomes part of God's life in Jesus.