

The Conversion of The Ethiopian Eunuch

The eighth chapter of Acts recounts for our learning, how an unnamed Eunuch of Ethiopia was brought to a knowledge of the things concerning the Name of Jesus Christ. There is some speculation as to who this man was; some suggest he could have been Theophilus to whom both the gospel of Luke, and the book of Acts were written, on the basis that he was “of great authority,” but such a suggestion cannot be verified. Whoever he was, this man was already a man of faith and zeal for Yahweh, as he had come to Jerusalem to worship, and was returning home.

Hundreds of years earlier, Solomon had prayed:

“concerning the stranger that is not of thy people Israel, but cometh out of a far country for thy name’s sake; (for they shall hear of thy great name, and of thy strong hand, and of thy stretched out arm;) when he shall come and pray toward this house: hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place, and do according to all that the stranger calleth to thee for” (1 Kings 8:42-43).

And so here was this Ethiopian, who had come “out of a far country” to worship Yahweh – one who was in need of help and guidance in his reading of The Word. He was trying to understand one of the prophecies of Isaiah, yet could not perceive who it was that prophet was speaking about. As he was reading the Scriptures out loud in his chariot, Philip ran over to him, and asked:

“Understandest thou what thou readest? And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him” (Acts 8:30-31).

This event is most helpful to bear in mind when we consider some of the claims made by those around us, with regard to the supposed influence of the Holy Spirit, to give understanding. The author of a recently circulated booklet states: “may we be guided by the Holy Spirit into the paths of truth and righteousness”. This epitomises the belief that we can be “guided” by some mysterious influence, in some unknown and indefinable way, by the Holy Spirit in our study of the Word, in order to understand it more perfectly. But in the case of the Ethiopian Eunuch, notice he did not pray for the Holy Spirit to give him understanding. He rather perceived the need to be guided by “some man” to understand his Bible. And Philip did not tell him to pray for the Holy Spirit to guide him either, rather he “opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus”. So is illustrated the saying:

“How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? As it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!” (Rom. 10:14-15).

The Eunuch could not believe in Christ, unless he first “heard” of him. And in order for him to hear of him, Philip was “sent” to “preach” the gospel of peace to him. So it is, that all men are “taught of God” (Jno. 6:45) by hearing His Word preached, and expounded.

The narrative informs us that the passage which the Eunuch was reading at the time, was Isaiah 53:

“the place of the scripture which he read was this, He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth; in his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? For his life is taken from the earth” (Acts 8:33; Cp Isa. 53:7-8).

The common Jewish understanding of this passage, was that the prophet was speaking of himself, in uttering these words. But this did not appear to be wholly satisfactory to the Eunuch, for he asked Philip, “I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? Of himself, or of some other man?” (Acts 8:34). He was returning from Jerusalem, and when he was there he doubtless heard reports of what had happened regarding Christ, even if the details had become mixed up, and the account given by those who rejected him. All of the city was in a stir because of the Master’s claims and his subsequent crucifixion, and it is highly improbable that the Eunuch could go to the temple without hearing something about what had taken place. So in considering this prophecy of Isaiah, there were doubts in his mind, as to whether or not the prophet was, in fact talking of himself ... or could he have been speaking of the Messiah?

Philip opened his mouth, and in so doing, opened up the Scriptures before the man. He “began at the same Scripture, and preached unto him Jesus” (Acts 8:35). He would have described how the man portrayed there, as having his life taken away, as being like a lamb before his shearer, and a sheep to the slaughter, was none other than Israel’s Messiah. He would, doubtless, have expounded the sense of what Isaiah taught, saying “he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his bruise we are healed” (Is. 53:5).

But at some point during the discourse, he also expounded to the Eunuch the need to become associated with the death of Messiah, through the waters of Baptism. We know this, because as soon as “they came to a certain water” the Eunuch said, “See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptised?” (Acts 8:36). He recognised the need for baptism at the earliest opportunity and saw no reason to hinder him from obeying the Gospel that he had just received.

Being as that Philip was expounding Isaiah 53 to the Eunuch, when he instructed him in the need for Baptism, it is worth considering whether there is anything in that passage, or it’s context that relates to the subject. Isaiah chapter 55, a little further on, commences: “Ho, everyone that thirsteth, *come ye to the waters*, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price” (Is. 55:1).

Here is an invitation to draw waters out of the wells of salvation – to come to the waters of Yahweh’s providing, and to partake of the nourishment which might be procured without money. Jesus himself alluded to this place, when he spoke to the woman of Samaria, speaking of himself:

“... whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (Jno. 4:14).

This is “water” of a most remarkable property; it is able to satisfy those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. It is able to quench such a thirst perpetually, that it be experienced no more. Could it be, that in connection with speaking of this “water”, that Philip expounded the need for Baptism, as a means of partaking of it? Interestingly enough, the very next chapter in Isaiah, speaks directly to Eunuchs:

“ ... neither let the eunuch say, behold, I am a dry tree. For thus saith Yahweh unto the eunuchs that keep my Sabbaths, and choose the things that please me, and take hold of my covenant; even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off” (Isa. 56:3-5).

Here then, was the Ethiopian Eunuch choosing the things that please Yahweh, and taking hold of the New covenant. He made his confession: “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God,” and thereupon was baptised into the only name under heaven whereby men must be saved. He went his way, not lamenting his physical limitations as a Eunuch, but rejoicing for the hope that he now had in the Risen Messiah, and the prospect of having a place and a name in the House of God of the Age to Come.

Scripture records one other man who was both an Ethiopian, and a Eunuch. Ebed-Melech, whose name signifies, “Servant of the King,” apparently therefore also a man of high standing, humbled himself to become identified with the sufferings of Jeremiah. As a consequence of testifying to the Truth, Jeremiah had become cast into “the dungeon of Malchiah the son of Hammelech, that was in the court of the prison: and they let down Jeremiah with cords. And in the dungeon was no water, but mire: so Jeremiah sunk in the mire” (Jer. 38:6).

Jeremiah’s experiences here typified those of Messiah. Just as Jeremiah was thrown down into the dungeon, so Messiah was placed into the tomb. Jeremiah lamented his experiences whilst in the dungeon: “They have cut off my life in the dungeon, and cast a stone upon me. Waters flowed over mine head; then I said, I am cut off. I called upon thy name, O Yahweh, out of the low dungeon. Thou hast heard my voice: hide not thine ear at my breathing, at my cry. Thou drewest near in the day that I called upon thee; thou saidst, Fear not” (Lam. 3:53-57).

Just as Messiah’s tomb was sealed with a stone, so the hole through which Jeremiah was thrown had a stone placed over it. For Jeremiah, all hope was lost, humanly speaking. The dungeon would become his tomb, as perhaps it had for others. There was no way out.

That is, but for the faith of Ebed-Melech, who was willing to identify himself as being a follower and supporter of Jeremiah the prophet. He approached the king to plead for Jeremiah, and lifted him out of the mire. He let down old clothes and cloths for Jeremiah to put under his arms for padding, and pulled him up with cords. “So they drew up Jeremiah with cords, and took him up out of the dungeon: and Jeremiah remained in the court of the prison” (Jer. 38:13). So, Jeremiah went down into the dungeon, and rose up again out of it, enacting in a shadow, the experiences relating to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Ebed-Melech was evidently a man of faith, who was prepared to lose his own standing in the sight of both the king and the people, for Jeremiah's sake. He believed in the words of Jeremiah, and was therefore promised that Yahweh would be with him, and he would not be destroyed in the judgments about to come upon the people:

“Go and speak to Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, saying, Thus saith Yahweh of hosts, the Elohim of Israel; Behold, I will bring my words upon this city for evil, and not for good; and they shall be accomplished in that day before thee. But I will deliver thee in that day, saith Yahweh: and thou shalt not be given into the hand of the men of whom thou art afraid. For I will surely deliver thee, and thou shalt not fall by the sword, but thy life shall be for a prey unto thee: because thou hast put thy trust in me, saith Yahweh” (Jer. 39:16-18).

In these two men, then, we behold characters of faithfulness and trust in the Almighty. The Eunuch to whom Philip preached trusted in Jesus Christ for his salvation, and was baptised accordingly. And the Eunuch who rescued Jeremiah was promised that he would be delivered from the coming Babylonian hordes, that he would survive the judgments to come – because he trusted in Yahweh. In both men, we see instructive examples for us. One Eunuch was not ashamed to be identified with the sufferings of Jeremiah – even though it would cost him his standing in the eyes of all the people. And the other identified himself with the sufferings of Christ through baptism, that he might go his way rejoicing. We must therefore take heed to both examples – to seek to help our brethren and sisters who suffer in this life, ministering to their needs as we are able. And also, to trust and have faith in Christ who suffered for us, identifying ourselves with his sufferings by obedience to the Gospel, and a humble servitude before him. For if we do these things, and trust in the Father, and then we too, will be able to go our way rejoicing.

Christopher Maddocks