

ACTS 8:26-40 WATER WARS!

“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. 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 and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over and join this chariot.’ So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ And he said, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 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.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.’

“And the eunuch said to Philip, ‘About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?’ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. 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 baptised?’ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptised him. 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. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.”¹

“**W**ater wars!” That would be an appropriate description of the continuing controversies surrounding the issue of baptism—the mode, the motive and the candidate. These controversies have continued since shortly after the Apostles passed off the scene. Unless seeking to stir controversy, why would a preacher present a message on the “mode of baptism?” Perhaps you think the issue to be irrelevant to this day. However, the practise of the churches and religious societies that constitute Christendom is far more important than one might imagine.

At issue is far more than the performance of a mere rite or the form of a ritual. The manner in which the ordinance is conducted expresses much about the belief of those performing the rite. What is pictured is significant, and the mode of baptism must not be casually dismissed as unimportant. What is important is not whether the ritual is performed; rather, the truth that lies behind the act of baptism is of utmost significance.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

In a previous message, I observed that it is inaccurate to speak of “modes” of baptism. If the Greek term used in the original manuscripts means “sprinkle,” then we may speak of modes of “sprinkling.” If the word *baptizo* means “pour,” then we may properly refer to modes of “pouring.” If the word carries the meaning, in the Greek tongue, of “immersing,” then we may speak of modes of “immersing.”² However, we cannot intelligently speak of “modes of baptism,” as such a concept is meaningless by the rules of language.

I am convinced that baptism is important. Though baptism by immersion is not the *raison d’être* for the existence of Baptists, it does nevertheless express our passion for evangelism and our desire to be obedient to all that is written in the Word of God. Baptists are insistent that we do not baptise in order to transform sinners into Christians, but rather we baptise because God has already saved the sinner and that redeemed individual is called to identify openly with the Master in His Passion and in His Resurrection. Consequently, whenever we witness baptism, we rejoice because the baptism we witness is a declaration that the one baptised has been redeemed through faith in the Risen Son of God—if we hold to the biblical model and precept.

There is more than a suggestion of this glorious truth in the account of Philip’s encounter with an Ethiopian official. Turn to **ACTS 8:26-40** for the scintillating account of this drama in the desert. Join me in exploring the Word of God to see the reason we insist upon immersion in water as the only valid expression of faith commanded by God.

PHILIP’S OBEDIENCE LED TO EFFECTIVE SERVICE — “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. And he rose and went.” Philip received appointment as one of the first seven deacons serving the Jerusalem congregation. When the disciples, with the exception of the Apostles, were scattered as result of the persecution precipitated by the murder of Stephen, Philip went down to the city of Samaria [see **ACTS 8:4, 5**].

There, among the Samaritans, he was powerfully used of God to open the door to faith for these non-Jews. It was the first time the message of life had extended beyond Jewish people since the Spirit of God had descended at Pentecost. Philip was God’s instrument to begin the process of penetrating the dark, Gentile world with the light of Christ’s Gospel. As I read that account of his service [**ACTS 8:4-25**], I am left with the impression that his ministry was just reaching the acme of promise when God intervened.

If you want to thoroughly understand the Word of God, pay attention to the coordinating conjunction. Conjunctions are so pedestrian, so ordinary, so commonplace, that they are easily overlooked. In the opening verse of the translation I am reading, the Greek *de* is translated into English as “now,” Other translations translate the Greek with the English term “then,” or “but,” or even neglect to translate it at all.

What is obvious to me is that God is drawing a comparison in order to teach a great lesson. Philip is being powerfully used as an instrument of God’s grace, and many people are coming to faith. From our perspective, it would appear that the greatest ministry is that which results in the most conversions to Christ. We imagine that the greatest servants of God are those that have the largest, most visible ministries!

² See, Michael J. Stark, “When They Believed, They Were Baptised,” <http://www.newbeginningsbaptist.ca/clientimages/42652/sermonarchieve/acts%2008.09-13%20when%20they%20believed,%20they%20were%20baptised.pdf>

However, obedience to God may well lead us into smaller, more restricted fields of service—fields where we will labour unrecognised and in obscurity. However, God calls us to obedience, and not to success. The only true success is that which compels us to fulfil His will. Thus, God had a ministry that required a man of Philip's stature and abilities. We know that Philip was "full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" [ACTS 6:5]. We also know that because he was full of the Holy Spirit, he proclaimed the message of Christ with boldness [cf. ACTS 4:31; 8:5]. He was ideal for the task God had for him.

We should marvel, not at the fact that God would pull His servant out of the midst of a great revival, but at the servant's instant obedience. For most of us, such obedience to the cause of Christ is witnessed only rarely. The angel of the Lord spoke; and Philip obeyed. Philip did not even know precisely where he was headed; he had only a command to travel the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. The text is careful to note, "This is a desert place." Philip knew that God commanded him go, and that command was enough to send him on his way. I am struck by the simplicity and the power in the first sentence of that 27TH VERSE: "He rose and went."

Anything else that I may say must rest upon this foundation of obedience to the command of God. Would you be effective in your Christian walk? Then, obedience to the command of God will be necessary. Would you be an instrument of power in the hand of God? Then, you must be obedient to His orders. It is nothing less than grace that so often despite the fact that we act to secure our own interests, God still uses us. J. B. Gambrell, a Texas divine from a bygone era, spoke a powerful truism when he attested, "God can hit some mighty straight licks with some mighty crooked sticks."

Philip was obedient to God's command; as result, his service was effective. So many of us want to be successful, but we want to define success. We want the honour that Paul enjoyed, but we forget that Paul said of himself and his entourage, "We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; through honour and dishonour, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything" [2 CORINTHIANS 6:3-10].

I am often amused when I consider the preparation of Saul of Tarsus for service to the King. Converted to Christ, he is commanded to wait. This brilliant rabbi is brought to faith so that he can wait! After he was saved, he was baptised, and according to the Word of God, "Immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God'" [ACTS 9:20]. Some waiting! The result of his impetuosity is that he is compelled to escape at night concealed in a basket because of threats against his life.

This would-be servant of Christ then journeys to Jerusalem where he preaches boldly in the Name of Jesus, arguing against the Hellenists [see ACTS 9:28, 29], resulting in an effort by the Hellenists to kill him. As result of his intemperate service, again he is compelled to flee into the desert. What is fascinating, and not a little bit humorous, is Luke's commentary following Saul's escape from Jerusalem. "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up" [ACTS 9:31].

Did you see that? After Saul is removed from the scene, after the enemies of Christ appear to have bested the earnest convert—the church had peace and began to be built up. Saul was zealous for God; but his zeal was not a substitute for working in God’s time. His journey to greatness in the sight of God would lead him first to Arabia and Damascus and Syria and Cilicia [see GALATIANS 1:17-21]. Though it appeared that the enemies of the cross were victorious, God was simply preparing the rough-hewn preacher into a polished tool that would transform the world. God uses the obedient soul, and His command may well lead us into obscurity for His Name’s sake and for His glory. The most effective place to serve God is where He places you.

PHILIP’S SERVICE LED TO THE ETHIOPIAN’S SALVATION — “The eunuch said to Philip, ‘About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?’ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.” There were multiple reasons why Philip should not speak to this man. He was an Ethiopian, and Philip was a Jew. It is true that Philip was a Hellenistic Jew, or at least his name would lead us to believe that he was raised in a Greek household. The Ethiopian was obviously a man of considerable power and of high social standing, travelling with an entourage; Philip appears to have been a common man. The man was a eunuch, his masculinity cruelly stripped from him so that he would give utter devotion to his queen. Any of these observations could have served to dissuade Philip from speaking to the man. Nevertheless, whatever hesitation Philip may have felt was overcome by the gentle urging of the Spirit.

This Ethiopian was seeking God. He was not saved, but he was seeking God. He had come to Jerusalem to worship, but he would have been proscribed from entering into the Temple. He was a Gentile, and that would permit him to enter only so far as the Court of the Gentiles. He was uncircumcised, and it is likely that he could not have been circumcised had he so desired since he was a eunuch. Castration in that day usually resulted in removal not only of the testicles but also of the penis;³ and thus disfigured, the man would have been debarred from converting to Judaism [see DEUTERONOMY 23:1]. He could be a “God-fearer,” as was Cornelius [see ACTS 10:1, 2], but he could not be a convert. He would have been permitted to worship, but not to convert to Judaism.

Now, get the picture. The chariot is travelling down the road at a slow pace. We know this is so because the chariot is moving slowly enough that Philip is able to run alongside, hearing the man read the Scriptures. Moreover, the man is reading, which would be quite impossible as the chariot was bouncing along. There is an interesting insight provided in this account. Unlike modern reading, the skill of reading silently was not developed in antiquity; those who could read were compelled to read aloud. The picture before us leads us to conclude that this was a divinely prearranged meeting.

The chariot is being driven at a slow pace to permit the official to read the Scriptures. Urged on by the Spirit, Philip runs alongside, listening briefly, to what is being read. He hears the man reading from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, and the place where he is reading is ISAIAH 53:7, 8. Seizing the initiative, Philip asks, “Do you understand what you are reading” [ACTS 8:30]?

³ Cf. Craig S. Keener, **The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament** (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL 1993) 346

I can readily imagine that the man was startled; he appears to have been absorbed in what he was reading. Taking cognizance of Philip, he responds to the question, “How can I, unless someone guides me” [ACTS 8:31]? And with that, he invites Philip to join him in the chariot. He reads aloud the Scripture:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he opens not his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.”

Then the man asks Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” Philip now knew the reason he has been sent into the desert. The Greek idioms are so descriptive. We read, “Then Philip opened his mouth” [ACTS 8:35]. Certainly, it means that Philip began to speak, but the implication is that he simply began speaking at God’s prompting. And the message he delivered was “the good news about Jesus.”

If Philip were presenting the message of many modern churches, we have to question whether he would have preached “the good news about Jesus?” Consequently, precisely what is the “good news about Jesus” that Philip preached, and where did he find it in such an ancient book as the Prophecy of Isaiah? The passage the man was reading was **ISAIAH 52:13-53:12**. Reading that portion of the Word, it becomes apparent that the prophet speaks repeatedly of the suffering servant of the Lord who offers Himself as a sacrifice for sin. The passage makes it evident that this suffering servant is bearing the sins of many—He is offering Himself to bear “our griefs,” to carry “our sorrows,” to take upon Himself “the iniquity of us all.” Isaiah testifies that the Servant of God presents His own life as an “offering for guilt.” The insistent message is one of death, of sacrifice because of our helpless condition. The most natural conclusion is that this is the message Philip presented to the Ethiopian official—Jesus is the suffering servant who gave His life as a sacrifice for sin and has taken all our sin upon Himself. Now, the call to all people is to accept the sacrifice presented in our place.

Then the emphasis changes to hope. “Out of the anguish of His soul,” this suffering servant “shall see and be satisfied.” He will “make many to be accounted righteous.” The careful reader will be drawn in by the final statement that “He bore” [past tense, Qal perfect (Hebrew)] “the sin of many,” and He “makes” [present tense, Hiphil imperfect (Hebrew)] “intercession for the transgressors” [ISAIAH 53:12b].

It is suggestive to note that the sacrifice that is offered is offered once for all, but the intercession that is provided continues forever. He “bore the sin of many,” an action that was accomplished once and can never be repeated [HEBREWS 9:28b]; but He continually “makes intercession for the transgressors” [HEBREWS 7:25]. Though crucified in weakness, Jesus our Master was “declared to be the Son of God in power,” and the basis for that declaration is “His resurrection from the dead” [ROMANS 1:4]. These are the facts that Isaiah presents, and the good news of Christ that Philip preached was that “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, He was buried” and “He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” [1 CORINTHIANS 15:3, 4].

The death, the burial and the resurrection of Jesus the Christ is the foundation for the Good News. Whenever an individual who is reading the Word of God asks for an explanation of what they have read, any child of God should be able to make a beeline through the cross and to the empty tomb. This is nothing less than an exhortation much like that which Peter gives us. “Always [be] prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” [1 PETER 3:15].

Let me stress what should be obvious; “the good news about Jesus” is God’s provision of atonement for our sin and His provision of a sacrifice for us; and this rich provision is through Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection for each of us in our sin. The “good news about Jesus” continues by testifying that no individual need ever face judgement or continue separated from God because of his or her sinful condition. Instead, each of us is invited to enjoy a new quality of life that results through faith in the Living Son of God. Philip’s message—and the message that each Christian preaches—is the message of Christ’s death as a sacrifice because of our sin, His burial to demonstrate that our sin is actually and fully put away, and His resurrection to provide justification for all who are willing to receive His reign. The “good news about Jesus” is good news precisely because it addresses the universal problem of sin and offers life to as many as will receive God’s provision. This is the thrust of the testimony Paul gives when he says, “We have our hope set on the Living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe” [1 TIMOTHY 4:10].

Writing in his Second Letter to the Christians in Corinth, Paul provides such insight into the work of Christ on our behalf. In one particular place, I find a declaration of freedom in Christ coupled with a plea for all people to receive the grace of God that is freely offered in Christ. Read those familiar words once again in 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-6:2. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

“Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says,

‘In a favourable time I listened to you,
and in a day of salvation I have helped you.’

“Behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.”

When we are obedient to the Spirit of God, we serve Him and promote His interests, even at what appears to be our own expense. When we serve God, He is glorified through the salvation of others. Let me encourage you who perhaps fret that you are not an evangelist. Perhaps you think that because you are not appointed to some particular office within the congregation of the Lord, your service is of scant moment. Obedience among the people of God leads each Christian to fulfil the ministry that God assigns. As we fulfil His appointment together, the Body of Christ comes more sharply into focus and the watching world marvels at the power demonstrated.

As we obey the direction of the Spirit of God together, our prayers are answered, our witness is strengthened, the impact of our lives becomes ever more powerful. Individual obedience to the command of Christ leads to greater corporate impact on the world and to greater individual impact on those about us who watch to see if Christ is real. Instead of appearing to be plastic saints, looking as if we had been stamped out with a cookie cutter, we become real and each of us is used powerfully to the glory of God. Sinners will be converted and Christ will be glorified.

Philip was a powerful evangelist for the cause of Christ. I do not read that he ever conducted a crusade. I do not read that he ever advertised his services. I do not read that he pitched a tent in the centre of Samaria. I do read that he was obedient to the command of Christ delivered by an angel and given through the Spirit of God. I do read that he was greatly used, because he was obedient to serve as God commanded.

THE ETHIOPIAN'S SALVATION LED TO OBEDIENCE — “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 baptised?’ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptised him.” And so the circle is complete. Obedience led to service. Service led to salvation. Salvation led to obedience. This describes a pattern that is witnessed in every successful congregation where Christ is exalted and where outsiders are brought into the Faith.

One obedient Christian has an impact on others, influencing them to be obedient. Because Philip was faithful in heeding the voice of the Spirit, the Ethiopian official was obedient to the call of Christ to receive salvation. The evidence that he was truly saved was witnessed through his obedience to the command of Christ to be baptised. He was baptised because he was saved, and not in order to be saved. He was baptised, providing a picture of “the good news about Jesus.”

Though it is included in some older translations of the Book of Acts, **VERSE 37** was almost certainly inserted into the text by an unknown scribe. The verse is not found in the oldest manuscripts available for critical study; it is found only in manuscripts prepared after the Sixth Century. Nevertheless, the verse represents an ancient tradition, being quoted as early as the second century by Irenaeus.⁴ It appears that this is an ancient baptismal formula, though it was likely not what Doctor Luke wrote. Though it is not probable that Luke wrote the words, it is quite possible that the exchange took place.

Philip may well have responded to the request to receive baptism, “If you believe with all your heart, you may [be baptised].” If the response is accurate, it is quite likely that the Ethiopian responded, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” Though the words are an apparent emendation, it does not negate their value as a baptismal confession.

What is evident is the message this man received; he received the message of the death, burial and resurrection of God's Messiah as atonement for mankind's sin. His death and resurrection has provided justification. Christ has become our righteousness, if we accept His sacrifice and receive the life He offers through the resurrection from the dead. This man sought to identify as belonging to Christ. He did so through picturing his faith through a burial into water and a resurrection out of that water.

⁴ Bruce M. Metzger, **A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament** (United Bible Societies, New York, NY 1971) 360

The text is so vivid in the original tongue and we lose some of the excitement when it is translated into English. There is an air of excitement as the Ethiopian exclaims, “Look! Water [*Idoû húdor*]! What hinders me to be immersed?” The identification with the Messiah, Isaiah’s Suffering Servant, is typified through burial—immersion—into the water and then through being raised up out of the water. The language of the text makes this evident.

So it was, that as the swarthy attendants stood wondering at the scene unfolding before them, Philip led the dark court official down, into the water and baptised him. Take note that Philip was evidently comfortable with the man’s confession of faith, because he had no hesitation in baptising him. Though Philip had just witnessed the deceit and hypocrisy of Simon, he did not question this man’s attestation by delaying baptism. Whatever the Ethiopian said, it was sufficient to allay any concerns Philip may have had. Moreover, there were witnesses to the baptism as those who were normally in attendance to the man were present.

Note that Doctor Luke takes care to state, “they both went down into the water.” Then, as though anticipating the changes in the rite that would be introduced among the professed people of God in years after, and in order to ensure that readers would not misconstrue what is entailed in going down, Luke adds the word “into” [*eis*]. In an attempt to get around what is pictured through this baptism, some have argued that the two went down the embankment. However, the text states that they went down into the water; and the purpose clearly conveyed by the Greek text is that this was done so that the Ethiopian could be immersed. The logic of language compels us to acknowledge that this is the case since he sought to typify what had transpired in the sacrifice of Jesus, whom he now confessed as Lord.

Then, the good doctor is equally careful to note, “They came up out of the water.” Again, there are those who endeavour to change the clear statement of the text to state that Luke is saying that they ascended the embankment; however, his wording denies such an understanding since “they **came up out of** [*ek*] the water.” The Greek makes it clear that they did not arise from near the water, nor does it appear probable that they merely stepped away from the water—they had each been standing in the water and now came up out of the water.

Now, the question must be asked of you. When you were baptised, what did you picture? What was typified when you were baptised. You say you believe, but did you picture your faith that Christ died, that He was buried and that He rose again? Those who were not immersed will have a difficult time demonstrating identification with the Lord Jesus in His passion and in His conquest of the grave. Did you make this choice for yourself? Or did another make the choice for you? Did you choose to be baptised because you had been set free from condemnation? Or did you act in hope that you could somehow compel God to receive you? These vital questions should be asked of each of us, for at the heart of the questions, we are challenged to examine whether we have been obedient to the Master, or whether have substituted our own thoughts for His.

Anyone observing the ordinance of baptism should come away with an understanding of the message of salvation. Anyone seeing baptism for the first time should be brought to the point of understanding that Christ died, that He was buried and that He rose from the dead. They should furthermore realise that the one being baptised is identifying with Him in His passion and in His victory.

Of course, a mere ritual is meaningless in making us acceptable to God, and even more meaningless if we receive it unconsciously. Infants do not exercise faith in Christ. Those who argue from silence for the baptism of infants must acknowledge that they have no basis for their contention other than a desire to justify their own practise—a practise without basis in Scripture. Those who baptise in order to make themselves acceptable to God must acknowledge that they obviate faith since the act and not the faith becomes paramount. All who believe are called to obey the command of Christ to confess Him openly, beginning with baptism picturing their faith.

Have you believed? Have you been baptised since you believed? Your first responsibility is to believe this message of life. The first and greatest need of all mankind is the forgiveness of sin. We have offended Holy God, violated His law and exalted ourselves. We stand condemned; we need mercy, not judgement. Mercy is offered through Christ Jesus the Lord. The Word of God clearly states, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved... ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” **[ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13]**.

It is equally clear that those who believe are to confess openly their faith through baptism as Jesus has taught, and as demonstrated through the response of this first Ethiopian believer in the Risen Son of God. And that is our call to you. Confess Christ, receiving the forgiveness of sin as you receive His sacrifice because of your sin. Identify openly with Him as one who has accepted His sacrifice and who believes that He has conquered death, hell and the grave. Walk openly with His people. Our invitation is to come, doing that which the Spirit commands today. Amen.