

THE HOUR OF DECISION

Acts 8:36–40

We're looking at one man's journey to faith in Christ. It began with a *determination*. He must have been determined to undertake that long journey from Ethiopia to Israel. He must have been determined to face the questions from his colleagues in the government, almost certainly the disapproval of Queen-mother, Candace, the suspicion that his dissatisfaction with the worship of the king was tantamount to disloyalty.

But he wouldn't be put off. He set out for Jerusalem with the intention of worshipping the true and living God. But his determination was rewarded with *frustration*. His physical condition, which qualified him to serve in the government of Candace, disqualified him to enter fully into the worship of the temple in Jerusalem. As the Apostle Paul might have put it, the written code, with its regulations, was against him and stood opposed to him (Colossians 2:14).

And still he wouldn't be put off. His determination led him to purchase a copy of Isaiah's prophecy. In those days of huge scrolls copied out by hand that would not come cheap, and he thought it was worth it. But as he read he got more and more frustrated because he couldn't understand it.

It may be that some of this rings a bell with you. You find in your heart a dissatisfaction with the world and what it has to offer. There are big questions in life for which you want answers. You're willing to run the risk of losing friends, or being misunderstood. If there is a God you want to find him, but every effort you make seems to end in frustration.

I said last week that those who genuinely seek after God will not find him. But he will find them. And that's what happened. The eunuch went to Jerusalem and was unable to enter the sanctuary. He opened the scriptures but was unable to understand them. Just when it all seemed hopeless God stepped in and met with him and he had a *confrontation*, an encounter with God.

The place God chose was rather unexpected. A desert road. No temple. No ritual. No priesthood. No sacrifice. The place God chose was unexpected and so was the person God sent. Not Peter or John. In fact, not an apostle at all, but Philip, one of the seven we first read about in Acts chapter 6. He hadn't been chosen to be an apostle. He hadn't been chosen as an apologist. He had been chosen to organise the distribution of food to those who were in need. He was a fairly humble sort of guy, in fact just the kind God loves to use.

Philip, of course, had not stayed organising the food. He had proved his faithfulness in a relatively menial task and God called him to be an evangelist. He had travelled through Samaria preaching to large crowds of people. God had given him the power to work miracles of healing and spiritual deliverance. His ministry had been spectacular, to say the least. And now it seemed like a backward step. Not a city in Samaria but a desert road. Not huge crowds of people but one man.

Philip's career reminds us that usually the Lord tests his servants in small things. In the parable of the talents, twice Jesus has the Master saying these words, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things' (Matthew 25:21, 23). Pride is a fatal flaw in the service of Christ. Humility is essential, and the proving ground of humility is service in small things.

But having tested his servants in small things the Lord often leads them on to greater things. That can be a test too. As Kipling put it, 'If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster and treat those two imposters just the same...'

And then again, the Lord can test his servants by removing them from great things and returning them to smaller things. This is the whole thinking behind the imagery of the vine in John 15:1, . 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. • He *cuts off* every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he *prunes* so that it will be even more fruitful.' There's a play on words that we miss in our English translations between 'cuts off' and 'prunes'. The Greek words are AIREI and KATHAIREI. We might expect a different outcome. Every branch that bears no fruit he takes away, but every branch that does bear fruit he leaves so that it will bear more fruit. That's what we might expect but that's not the way it works. Both the branches, those that don't bear fruit and those that do, feel the cut of the knife.

The hard times, the cutting times, the times of loss, are as much part of God's plan for us as the times of success and obvious fruitfulness. There was no doubting that God was in the call to the desert. Commentators have observed the similarities between Philip's experiences in the desert and those of Elijah and Elisha in the Old Testament. His guidance was clear, an angel of the Lord in verse 26 and the Spirit in verse 29.

If you look at the whole of Acts chapter 8 it's full of surprises. God moves in mysterious ways his wonders to perform, from the persecution with which the chapter begins to this strange encounter with which it ends. Life is comfortable when it is predictable but God doesn't always want to work like that.

The eunuch's encounter with God came in an unexpected place with an unexpected person. He met God not in the temple but on a desert road. God's messenger was not an angel or an apostle but a humble servant whose chief claim to fame was that he was good at serving dinners.

Occasionally people come into this church and are surprised not to find the minister in colourful robes and a dog collar. They don't see ornate images or a high altar. Can this be real religion? Is God really in this place? The answer is that God is not confined to a particular place or ritual. Jesus said, 'A time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks' (John 4:23). God is looking for sincerity of heart. God has provided a way into his presence, through faith in his Son Jesus. That's all that counts, not who you are or where you are or how you came. 'Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.'

As we come to the end of the story in verses 36–40 two questions arise, one that we might ask and one that the eunuch asked.

The question we might ask is: What happened to verse 37?

'Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may [be baptised]." The eunuch answered, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.'"

In modern versions of the Bible it has disappeared, although it's usually in the margin or in a footnote. What makes it even stranger is that it seems such a good verse. It seems to be a necessary corrective after the unfortunate business in verses 12 and 13, followed by verses 18–21.

'But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon [the sorcerer] himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw. ... When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this

ministry, because your heart is not right before God.'

To understand why verse 37 has disappeared we must remember that there was no printing press in those days. Copying texts by hand on awkward materials was a long, laborious and expensive business. But as Christianity spread all through the Roman empire so did the New Testament scriptures. Parts were copied out by hand on papyrus, first scrolls and then books. They didn't have paper and so you couldn't get all the books bound together. At first there were collections of the Gospels and the letters and sometimes only parts of these but many of the earliest manuscripts have been preserved and are available to scholars today.

It's clear from this manuscript evidence that in the original text of Acts chapter 8, verse 37 wasn't there. The text was as we have it in our modern English Bibles. However, fairly early on, in the western part of the empire versions appeared with verse 37 included. How did this happen? There are two possible explanations. The words read like part of a baptismal service. Possibly a scribe who was familiar with the set order of service for baptisms wrote it in the margin and it was accidentally included in the text when copies were made. Alternatively, some eager scribe felt it was necessary to make the conditions of baptism clearer and deliberately inserted the words.

There is nothing wrong with the words, but they were not part of the original text.

That's a question we might ask, but far more important is the question the Ethiopian eunuch asked. Verse 36. 'Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptised?'

It's fifty years since Billy Graham came to Britain and preached the gospel in London at Haringey. Over the years the Billy Graham organisation has been putting out radio broadcasts under the title, 'The Hour of Decision'.

We've seen three stages in the spiritual journey of the Ethiopian eunuch: his determination, his frustration and his confrontation. Now we come to his hour of *decision*. For each of us there has to come an hour of decision. When Jesus was on trial Pilate asked the crowd who they wanted to be released. 'Barabbas,' they shouted. And then Pilate said, 'What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?' (Matthew 27:22). That's a question each of us has to answer.

For the Ethiopian eunuch there was no hesitation. He made his decision to receive Christ, to believe in Christ, and to identify with Christ in baptism. 'And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. 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' (verses 38, 39).

When Gentiles were received into Judaism in a limited way they underwent baptism. It was self-administered baptism. Significantly it was still something they had to do. Christian baptism is different. It's something that is done to you. "'Why shouldn't I be baptized?' ... and Philip baptized him.' That's ultimately what it's all about, not what you do but what God does to you and for you in Christ. I can't help seeing a contrast with that other foreigner in the Old Testament, Naaman, whom we read about in 2 Kings 5. He had a great need but he was too proud to accept God's way, too proud at first, anyway. Pride can be a great barrier to receiving salvation. Part of the imagery of baptism is going down, being humble, admitting your need of cleansing and forgiveness. 'Then both Philip and the eunuch went *down* ...'

Literally, the eunuch's question was, 'What is there to hinder me from being baptised?' If you haven't trusted in Christ what is hindering you? If you haven't been baptised what is hindering you? It's the hour of decision.