

JOURNEY FROM JERUSALEM

Acts 8:26–35

Luke, who wrote the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, was interested in travel. He would have loved to live in the 21st century with all the opportunities for travel that we have today. I suspect he would have signed up for space travel if that were available. He was a seasoned traveller himself and in his Gospel and in Acts he tells the story as a kind of travelogue.

In both the Gospel and Acts the focus of the journeys is Jerusalem. As early as Luke chapter 9 verse 51 we read, 'As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.' The climax of the Gospel takes place in Jerusalem and the beginning of Acts finds the risen Christ telling his disciples, 'Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about' (1:4).

The main difference between the Gospel and Acts is that in the Gospel the movement is towards Jerusalem. In Acts the movement is away from Jerusalem. One is a journey to Jerusalem. The other is a journey from Jerusalem.

When God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt at the Exodus and led them out into the desert he gave this command. 'But you are to seek the place the LORD your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling. To that place you must go' (Deuteronomy 12:5). Fourteen times in Deuteronomy God refers to 'the place the LORD your God will choose'. He says this about it. 'There bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, what you have vowed to give and your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks' (verse 6).

As centuries of history went by God led his people very clearly to Jerusalem as the place he had chosen. There the temple was built. There the sacrifices were offered. The final journey of Jesus led inexorably to Jerusalem. It was there he offered himself, the one full and perfect sacrifice for sin, the fulfilment of all the Old Testament illustrations – burnt offerings, sacrifices, tithes, special gifts. The life of Christ was one long journey to Jerusalem. The death of Christ was the sacrifice to end all sacrifices, the sacrifice to take away sins once and for all.

When Jesus rose again and commissioned his disciples there was a massive change. Now was the time to go out and preach the gospel, beginning at Jerusalem but leaving Jerusalem and going into all the world. When we get to Acts chapter 8 we see the start of that agenda beginning to take place. 'On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ... Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. ... When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them' (verses 1, 5, 14).

The story continues at verse 26. 'Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road —the desert road —that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.'" Notice 'the road that goes *from* Jerusalem'.

In verse 27 and 28 we meet another man. He had been on a different journey. Note the last part of verse 27. 'This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship.' When you've seen the pattern of Luke-Acts this stands out like a sore thumb. Luke's Gospel: *to* Jerusalem; Acts: *from* Jerusalem. But here was a man who was out of step, behind the times, stuck in the past. He was still travelling *to* Jerusalem. Here's what Luke tells us about him.

He was an Ethiopian, an African, a black man. He was an important official in the government of his own land, the equivalent of our Chancellor of the Exchequer. The king of Ethiopia was regarded as a child of the sun and worshipped as a god. It was thought that he was too sacred to carry out the every-day functions of royalty and

these were performed by the queen-mother. Every queen-mother was given the royal title Candace.

An Ethiopian, a high ranking government official, and a eunuch – that was normal for court officials in those days. For some reason that we're not told he was not satisfied with Ethiopian religion and he came to Jerusalem to worship at one of the Jewish festivals.

What happened when he got there? We can get some idea from a text in Deuteronomy 23:1. 'No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the LORD.' He was an outsider: by birth, by colour, by his physical condition. There was a bar on his entering the people of God. That was a long way to travel to be told, 'Sorry. You can't come in. You're not acceptable.'

It's a reminder that for all of us there's a barrier to the presence of God, to being part of his people, and that barrier is sin. We can be sincere but our sincerity will not let us into God's kingdom. We can be good people, but our goodness will not let us in. We can come as worshippers, but our worship does not qualify us as long as our sin disqualifies us.

And now the Ethiopian eunuch was on his way home, disappointed, rejected. But he hadn't given up. He was reading the word of God. It didn't make any sense to him but he was reading it just the same. The book he was reading from was Isaiah.

Verses 29–31. 'The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.'

Something I love about the Bible is how straightforward it is. The Holy Spirit gives Philip a clear command. Philip comes out with a direct question. The man gives an honest answer. He then invites Philip to explain things to him. We don't have to pretend with God. We don't have to pretend we understand when we don't. It's not like sitting in a class and trying to look intelligent when you're completely lost and you just hope the teacher doesn't ask you anything. We can be honest with God and with each other.

Verses 32–35. 'The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.'

I don't think it was any accident that the eunuch was reading from Isaiah chapter 53. He had read chapter 1 verse 18. "'Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool."

He had read chapter 9 verse 6. 'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'

He had read chapter 14 verse 1. 'The LORD will have compassion on Jacob; once again he will choose Israel and will settle them in their own land. Aliens will join them and unite with the house of Jacob.'

He had read chapter 45 verse 22. 'Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.'

Now he had come to chapter 53 verses 7 and 8. It was at this precise point that he needed to be shown the meaning. The Lamb who takes away the sins of the world, the Son who became a sacrifice, the hope of Israel and the ends of the earth, is Jesus.

Beginning with this passage Philip told him the good news about Jesus. He took our sins. He took our sorrows. He took our infirmities – everything that could and did debar us from God's presence. He took it all and opened the way to God.

The Bible says, 'Come near to God and he will come near to you' (James 4:8). I'm going to say something that may surprise you. Those who genuinely seek after God will not find him. But he will find them. This whole account demonstrates the miraculous way God led this seeker to himself.

The Ethiopian eunuch did not find God by going to Jerusalem. Philip did not say, 'You've missed something there. Go back.' He said, 'What you're seeking is right here – Jesus.' Finding salvation is not about going to a particular place, or being part of a particular race, or performing some religious ritual. It's about putting your faith in Jesus, the Lamb of God who died for our sins on the cross.

I said it was no accident that the Ethiopian eunuch was reading the book of Isaiah. I have no doubt that he kept reading. He had reached chapter 53. He would go on to chapter 55 verses 1, 3, 6, 7.

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

“Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.”

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.’

And then, wonderfully, he would go on to chapter 56 verses 3 to 8.

‘Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, “The LORD will surely exclude me from his people.” And let not any eunuch complain, “I am only a dry tree.” For this is what the LORD says: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant — to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off. And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant — these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.” The Sovereign LORD declares — he who gathers the exiles of Israel: “I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered.”

These promises were made against the context of Isaiah's own times but they were wonderfully fulfilled in the grace of Christ.