

Acts 8 The Eunuch's Name

As part of the ordination process for those who would become ministers within PC (USA) there are five written examinations which are given denomination wide. These five exams cover theology, worship and sacrament, polity, exegesis, and Bible content. All but the Bible content exam are considered senior exams. They are not taken until you are a candidate under care and well into your seminary training. However, the Bible Content exam can be taken at any time because familiarity with scriptures is assumed. When I took it, it was a simple exam of 100 multiple choice questions drawn from all portions of Scripture divided into the genre areas of history, prophets, gospels, epistles, etc. There were questions from all portions. Each question consisted of a sentence or two taken directly from Scripture. There was either a blank within the verses or you were given an option of identifying the source of the verses; who said it to whom or some other detail. For example, Which of Joseph's brothers argued against taking Joseph's life? That's a very familiar story, but do you remember that detail? Four possibilities are given, one of which wasn't even a brother. When it comes to the prophets, although we remember their message, do we remember their names or to whom they spoke? All of these are there in the text, but how precisely do we remember their individual characteristics? Of Habakkuk, Hosea, Malachi, Nahum who said "but the righteous live by their faith?" Of Ham, Japheth, Seth, and Shem, who was not a son of Noah? With the multitude of names found in Scripture is not beyond our ability to count them, but since the names of even minor participants are often given we sometimes pay little attention to the particulars. The details of time and place are also numerous. The details are there in the text for a reason. They give the narrative and the message context. They are often there to establish connections to what has gone before. Since the writing down of the events of Jesus' life and that of the early believers was not concurrent to their happening, the details were very important to establish the truth—the reality—of the experience narrated. It is therefore interesting to note when the details are not given and what that might indicate. When looking at any passage from the Book of Acts, the first detail to notice is the very active presence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit arrived while the disciples were in Jerusalem huddled in fear. This immediately changed as they began proclaiming Christ risen which led to persecutions—to arrests and stoning yet they continued to testify. The persecution does lead to some scattering of some disciples away from Jerusalem, but does not stop the proclamation of the gospel message. Today's passage begins just after a portion of chapter 8 which describes the activity of the disciple Phillip who has left Jerusalem and gone down into Samaria. When Phillip arrives in Samaria he testifies to the Samaritans and many believe and are baptized. Remembering the long history of hostility between Samaritans and those who worshiped at the Temple in Jerusalem, this is a detail which begins to show how active the Holy Spirit is, and how completely that movement changes perceptions. These disciples who were so timid just weeks before are filled with the Holy Spirit, timid and confused no more they begin to tell the story of Jesus Christ to anyone and everyone, not just fellow Jews but to all kinds of strange foreigners—including Samaritans, Greeks, Romans and others outsiders of the Jewish tradition—everyone they encounter. But as the story continues we find Phillip who fleeing persecution has gone down into Samaria after testifying there is now summoned by an angel of the Lord to get up and go somewhere

else. In these first verses we learn the names of two of the three participants in this narrative: Phillip and the Holy Spirit. Phillip is now given very specific directions for his course; no generalized instruction to go testify to those met in villages along the way. The text reads like the directions you might find when googleing an address. He is told to go toward the south, to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. When told to get up and go—Phillip does even though he is not given a reason—only a specific destination: the road to Gaza and a specific direction—away from Jerusalem. Another detail given is that this is a wilderness road. The characteristics of a wilderness road within scripture is a detail with some associated images—it goes through a deserted, rarely traveled desert region. We aren't given any information about what Phillip thought about these instructions to go where there aren't villages to proclaim his message—he wasn't told how far to go and probably did not expect to meet anyone. We are only told that he got up and went. This road was known to be thinly populated, not lined with villages because it went through desert areas. But it was and still is the most likely route to take if you were going from Jerusalem to Africa. So it is not surprising that when Philip saw someone it was an Ethiopian on the road returning home after a visit to Jerusalem. We are given a great many details about this Ethiopian participant in the narrative: He is a eunuch. He is a court official of the Candace, who is the Queen of the Ethiopians. We are even told the specific office he holds within the court: he is in charge of her entire treasury, surely an important position of responsibility and trust. He is riding in a chariot and is holding a scroll in his hands and is reading from it. This description tells us he was an extraordinary man. He is clearly privileged. He's not walking, which is how 99% of the population went from place to place in those days. He's riding in a conveyance AND he has the ancient equivalent of a book in his hands. In the ancient world only the VERY privileged had their own personal books. Books were all hand copied and were unimaginably expensive. But considering his rank, these things are not surprising details, especially if we remember that at that time Ethiopia was an advanced and prosperous country. We are also told that he is returning home from Jerusalem where he has gone to worship. This is someone who seems to have it all within his culture, but he has gone on a long journey to seek something deeper—he has gone to worship in Jerusalem, the home of Yahweh. As he returns home, sitting in his chariot, he is reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. Again we are given the specific scroll, that of the prophet Isaiah and even the specific section of the scroll—the part which describes the suffering servant of the Lord. Just to confirm that this particular man being there was not a coincidence—the Spirit said to Phillip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” Again, Phillip obeys and runs up to the chariot. Since the common practice when reading was to read aloud—Phillip hears and knows what the eunuch is reading. Phillip speaks up and asks him if he understands what he is reading. The eunuch's reply is “How can I, unless someone guides me?” He invites Phillip to join him as he continues his homeward journey. Phillip then proceeds to tell him the good news of Christ. We now come to another interesting detail. “As they were going along the road, they came to some water.” Remember the terrain of this road—it goes through a deserted-desert region. Yet here, just beside the road is some water. When the eunuch saw it he said, “Look, here is water!” If you read along with me when I read the passage you might have noticed that there is an exclamation point at the end of that statement. That usually indicates surprise and or excitement. Seeing water along the Wilderness Road to Gaza was not something expected.

Yet, there it was. It was there in an abundant manner since Phillip and the eunuch got down and went into it for the baptism which Phillip did. When he first saw it, the eunuch asked Phillip, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" It is obvious from the verses that follow that the answer was nothing, but there were many reasons why the eunuch would have asked that. There are many reasons why the expected answer would have been a host of items. Within Jewish tradition, baptism which signifies acceptance as a child of God would not have been possible for a eunuch. The Ethiopian eunuch, despite his many forms of privilege, was also the consummate outsider. With his dark skin, he looked different. He doubtless spoke Greek or Aramaic but with the strange accents of ancient Coptic or Ge'ez. And then there was this awkward business of him being a eunuch. This bizarre sexual status made him even more of an outsider. Eunuchs were actually forbidden to even enter the Temple in Jerusalem. They were considered ritually impure; all in all, it would have been obvious that a eunuch was simply NOT "one of us." Tradition would have indicated that he never could be. Yet, without batting an eye, God—working through Philip—reaches out to this consummate outsider, embraces him, and accepts him for who he is. When Philip baptizes him in the nearest water, the outsider becomes an insider. We are almost at the end of this story with its multitude of details, but did you notice there is one detail which is never given? In the fourteen verses, Phillip's name is given nine times. But the eunuch's name is not given at all. When a noun is given to specify who is speaking, he is just referred to as "the eunuch." This story ends much as it began in Samaria: God is seeing to it that the gospel rushes to the ends of the earth as this eunuch will take the message back home with him to Ethiopia and all Africa. There were no Ethiopians mentioned in those named among the crowd in Jerusalem at Pentecost, but the message reached them anyway. But that the eunuch is not given a name in this story carries a message crucial to our world today. As an Ethiopian he represents those who are geographically and ethnically, far away. He represents what we declare to be unacceptable to God. He represents that God's Spirit moves where it will and is not boxed in by human expectations and limitations. Just because we construct a theology or a doctrine that boxes God's Spirit in does NOT mean that God is in that box. Just because we find someone to not "be one of us" does not mean that God agrees or will accept our judgment. The Eunuch's name is anyone who has been outcast, excluded or rejected by us. The eunuch's acceptance shows God's love and acceptance is for all. Thanks be to God.