

## CONVERSION OF ETHIOPIAN

### Introduction

This is another example of conversion to Christ. The person and circumstances seemed unlikely. But a humble faith led to this saving change, and it changed the world for many others.

### Surprising events

We would not have expected Philip to be involved in this. He was one of 'the seven' of Acts 6 and had become a successful evangelist in Samaria. We would not normally give up a successful work, especially remembering that the Samaritans had been enemies of the Jews and needed reassurance they were accepted.

The Holy Spirit did the opposite of what we would expect; he sent Philip away to a remote place on the edge of the desert where the main road to Africa passed. Normally God directs us through sanctified common sense in applying the principles of scripture. Occasionally he will direct someone to do something that is not immediately obvious; Jonah is an example of that.

The parallel with Jonah is interesting; Philip obeyed when Jonah did not. Both were in line with Abram who was sent out to a place inhabited by strangers. This is a picture of the Christian life, where obedience is based on trust in God rather than in circumstances.

It was surprising, too, when we think about the Ethiopian eunuch.

At that time the name referred to the south of Egypt and northern Sudan. His social status was high – he was one of the most senior government officials. Why was he in Jerusalem? We do not know. He may have been a 'god-fearer' – someone who admired the Jewish religion; or he may only have been there on state business. In any case, he was reading the scriptures.

And that is another unexpected part of the story. He was baffled by what he was reading – 'does he write this about himself or about someone else?' He could not have expected to make the greatest discovery of his life in a desert place, talking to a complete stranger about a book he did not understand. That should be encouragement to us if we do not understand the Bible. Persevere, and the Lord will reward you.

With hindsight we realise the story is about Christ coordinating events from his heavenly throne. He had a purpose in all this – it was he who instructed Philip to go there. But Christ's guidance is not mechanical, as though he was the only party who was active. Christ uses people who respond to him. Philip obeyed the instruction he was given. The Ethiopian was searching God's Word.

It is wonderful to find a prepared speaker and a prepared hearer meeting at Christ's command. How we should pray for that! Surely his blessing will follow.

### Philip preached Christ

Christ brought the two together as the Ethiopian was reading about him. Christ is at the centre, and when we acknowledge that we may expect him to work. That is reflected in Philip's message – 'he preached Christ'.

Notice what Philip did not preach. He did not preach Christian ethics, though that is important (the Law still instructs us). Nor did he urge him to obtain Christian experience. Christian living is always the result of faith in the Christ we meet in the Bible, and we dare not put things the wrong way round. It is the message that makes the difference. That is what the Holy Spirit uses to make us new.

We can imagine Philip's message when we read, 'He preached Christ'.

The message includes the Person. He is God our Saviour come into the world in human flesh – 'God and man in two distinct natures and one person forever.' As the Son of God he was the Father's servant; his obedience led to our salvation. In his life and ministry he revealed God, and his miracles of mercy were pointers to what God would do through him. He was betrayed, crucified and buried. On the third day he rose to life again, and then returned to heaven to be rewarded with all authority and power in order to give people eternal life.

Why did these things happen? God was speaking by him. And God was laying sin on him, so that his (voluntary) death was a judicial act – the penalty of sin. By bearing our sins he opened the door to our being forgiven. His resurrection was evidence that sin's penalty had been paid. It is evidence of eternal life through him.

Now, from heaven's throne, he gives the Spirit to sinners to turn them from darkness to light when they hear this message. The Spirit restores spiritual life, and the Spirit will restore physical life at the resurrection.

So – the message of Christ is a call to us to repent – to turn to God with confession of sin and trust in Christ to save us from it and give us life eternal.

### **The choice he made**

The Ethiopian's response was to pause Philip and say, 'Here is water. What hinders me from being baptised?' Gaza was the last watering place for many miles and the Ethiopian had made a choice. He took the initiative.

It showed a new understanding of God, of Christ and the way of salvation, and of the church worldwide. It showed a new relationship with God through Jesus Christ; that is a practical matter though the actual closeness varies from person to person. It showed a new commitment to God, to Christ, and to his church. It showed that he would have a new source of strength, both for life in general and to persevere in serving Christ. It showed that God had given him a new heart – he would never have turned to God with faith in Christ otherwise.

It showed something about God as well. He had sent Christ to save that man and had given the risen Christ power and authority to turn him around. The Good Shepherd had given his life for the sheep; he had also gone searching for the lost sheep and was now bringing it home rejoicing. And it showed how God will respond to those who seek him – the man persevered with what he did not understand and the Lord led him from there.

The first result was joy. There are many reasons why a Christian may experience sadness, but there is always joy when the Spirit brings home to us the reality of Christ and our share in him. Christianity is more than a change of group or of intellectual belief. It is more than a change of lifestyle. Knowing Christ brings joy the world cannot give nor take away.

That is the last we hear of the Ethiopian, but his humble obedience had far-reaching effects (as did Philip's). The message of Jesus travelled into Africa. The Coptic Church (in Egypt and Sudan) is one of the oldest in the world. Those two men's obedience spirit has brought multitudes of people to heaven.

### **Conclusion**

This account shows another example of conversion to Christ. It was sudden and decisive. The work of Christ's Spirit is only seen in hindsight, the people were only responding in faith to God's word. At its heart, conversion is receiving Christ. The obedience of faith has massive effects – it takes the person to heaven and it often takes others there also.