

What Prevents Me From Becoming A Christian?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 February 2024

Preacher: Phil Pickett

[0 : 0 0] me in your Bibles or it will also come up on the screen to Acts chapter 8. Acts chapter 8. And we'll read from verses 26 to 40.

For a bit of background, the early church has just been established in Jerusalem and following persecution the church has become scattered around the region of Jerusalem and Judea and as that scattering has happened people have gone out and shared the gospel.

And so we come to the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch from verse 26. Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, rise and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. This was, this is a desert place and he rose and went.

And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candis, 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 who was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before it cheers his 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 someone else? Then Philip opened his mouth and beginning with the with this code, they came to, 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 baptized? And he commanded the chariot to stop and they both went down into the water. Philip and the eunuch and he baptized him.

[2 : 1 3] 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 Azotos and he passed through and as he passed through, he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

What prevents me from being baptized? Those are the striking words of the Ethiopian eunuch in eunuch in verse 36. What prevents me from being baptized? In other words, he's saying, what prevents me from receiving the sign that marks me out as one of God's people, as one of the children of God? What prevents me from being a Christian? I wonder how people would answer if we ask that question in a survey around town this week. What prevents you from being a Christian? Maybe someone would say, well, I'm not religious. I didn't grow up in church. I've got a different background. This isn't for me. Or someone would say, well, I just don't think there's only one way to God. Maybe someone would say, I'm too busy. I don't need God, not right now, another day. Or I'm too bad. If God really knew what was going on with me, he'd want nothing to do with me. Or maybe I'm just sounds too boring. I'm not interested. I might miss out. I don't want to, I feel like I might miss out. Those are just a few. I wonder how your friends and neighbors though would answer or maybe how you would answer that question. Maybe you're switching here and you're listening online and you wouldn't call yourself a follower of Jesus. What would you say prevents you from being a Christian, from being part of God's family? Or even as we thinking about communion in two weeks, what prevents you from saying that you're a Christian and taking communion, professing your faith? Maybe you spend your whole life comparing yourself to a relative or someone who you think is really, really godly and you think, well, I'm, I don't live a life like them.

How could I call myself a Christian, especially if maybe that person never had? Or maybe you hear about dramatic experiences that people have and you think, well, I can't profess faith. I haven't experienced that. Maybe you're afraid of missing out. You think they're following in Jesus means

you lose out on all the fun of life? Or maybe you're just afraid of people talking about you, you know, to become the latest part of village gossip. Have you heard about this person? They just started taking communion. They went forward. Some of you who have made that commitment to follow Jesus, maybe remember a time when all of those things were clattering around in your mind, reasons why you think, well, this is all these, this is why I can't. This is why I can't follow Jesus. This is why I won't follow Jesus. Maybe you are so aware of your sin. You thought, how can God want me? Or you just thought the whole church was strange. You thought, why would I want to spend time with them? What prevents you from being a Christian? In our passage this evening, we meet a eunuch and he's a man on a journey. He's on a journey back from Jerusalem to his home country in Ethiopia, but not just a journey across geography. He's also on a spiritual journey.

[5 : 34] And as he starts this journey, he has a big list of reasons why he can't be part of God's people. But he ends this journey with all of those reasons swept aside. And actually in our passage, with that question, is there anything that can prevent me from being baptized? Is there anything that can prevent me from being part of God's family? And whether you'd call yourself a Christian tonight or not, we're going to join this Ethiopian eunuch on his journey and find out what changed.

What changed in his mind? What did he learn that flipped the world? What did he learn that wiped all those reasons away? We've got two points and then two implications. First then, excluded by nature. In this passage, we meet a man called Philip. Just because my name's Phil, that's not why I chose this passage. But he's one of the first members of the early church. He was like, maybe he fulfilled, did some kind of role that like a deacon or something like that. But Philip has just been out sharing the gospel with people around what was Palestine in those days and up in Samaria, the northern part of Israel. And now God directs him to take the desert road all the way down to the south. And there in verse 27, Philip meets an Ethiopian eunuch.

And he would have been instantly recognizable to the Jewish reader as an outsider, someone who is excluded by nature from God's people. I don't know if you've ever found yourself excluded as an outsider. Since I've been on Lewis, I found that on the whole, Gaelic speakers, all of you are very considerate. And if you're speaking Gaelic and I join in a conversation, you'll quickly swap to English so I can understand. But there are times when I've come into a shop or when someone just says a word in Gaelic, it reminds me straight away that, yes, I've been here for two years, it's not long, but I'm still an outsider. Maybe you just say the solution is I should learn Gaelic. But maybe you've also found that maybe in other places going to another country, you've gone to order something and you practice this. And they just reply to you in English, they know straight away that you're an outsider. This Ethiopian man was obviously an outsider. Ethiopia was a five month journey. And so as far as people in Israel were concerned, he'd come from the ends of the earth. But what excluded him was more than just the color of his skin. It was the fact that he was a eunuch. He was a man who had been castrated. And whether that was obvious or not to the passerby, it would have been a thing of incredible shame that might have happened early on in life, it might have happened later. But it was a mark of slavery, something that scarred him for life. And most significantly for him, or more significantly, this excluded him from being part of God's people. In Deuteronomy 23, God told Israel that no one who was castrated could join the gathered people of God. We might think that's a strange thing to say, but that was because Israel was meant to be a kingdom of priests. And they were meant to symbolically be without blemish. And so while this man had traveled thousands of miles to worship

God, it was likely that when he'd got to the temple, he wasn't even allowed into the temple courts. That's Ethiopia to Jerusalem, it's about 4000 kilometers. That would be like you traveling all the way to Florida and not being allowed to go to Disney World. That's the kind of trip he's made, except he took about five months to do it. He was a man whose whole life in some ways was defined by the way he'd been permanently and irreversibly scarred and altered by something in the past. And just as an aside, maybe that's true for you. You might not be a eunuch, but you feel marked by your past. It hangs over you. It affects your relationship, it affects your church, it affects your decisions, maybe even affects how you see God, maybe how you view the church. Maybe when I ask that question, what stops you from being a Christian? It's that shadow of those that thing or those things in the past that hangs over you. That stops you makes me think I can't have anything to do with God. I can't follow Jesus. This eunuch was a man truly scarred by his past. They affected his every day. And if there was anyone who could give a big list of reasons of why he couldn't be part of God's people, this was the guy. The surprise of this story though is that the biggest thing that

stopped this man being friends with God wasn't that he was a eunuch. It was the fact, and it wasn't to do with anything about what this man looked like on the outside. The reason that he couldn't be friends with God is that he had a sin problem with his heart. Like me, like you, like all the people around us. Sin is what we call, when we reject God.

Sin is when we say no to God, we decide that we want to live for ourselves. And we know that that sin was the big problem for him because that's the passage he's reading in the chariot. That's the passage that Philip engages him with. We'll come back to that in a second. But in many ways, the state of this man being a eunuch was actually a really good picture. It is a good picture of the state of his heart and of ours. That you and I are sinners. That external scarring of castration is a good picture of how disfigured and disformed we all are by sin. The way we're scarred by other people's sin, we're scarred by our own sin, the way we're blemished and not wholly as we were created to be. It left the eunuch permanently excluded. Just like sin leaves us permanently excluded from God. And the eunuch was powerless to change his state. He might have been in charge of all of the treasure of Candice, Queen of the Ethiopians, but none of that could change who he was.

[11:53] None of that could change that he was a eunuch. And we can live as morally upright as we want. We can have all the wealth in the world, but none of that can change that the blemish of sin remains on us by nature. And sin is worse though than that. We're not just powerless victims of sin. We're active participants. We're born in sin. We remain in sin. And sin has everlasting consequences.

The biggest thing, stopping this man being a Christian wasn't what he was like on the outside. It was his heart. And I wonder, do we realize that the biggest thing that prevents us, that cuts us off from God, isn't anything on the outside, but it's our hearts? Not only that, but do we realize that that's true for those around us? You could take two people who are trusting, who aren't trusting in Jesus. You could take the person who's out every night drinking themselves legless. And you could take the person who seems to be the most respectable person in society. They've got a tidy garden. They treat their family great. They work hard. But at the end of the day, actually, these people stand in the same place before God because they both have sinful hearts.

They have the same biggest problem as one another. While it might not have looked like it from the outside, like us, the unit's biggest problem was his sin. But that meant he was reading the best possible thing while he was sitting in that chariot. We're on to our second point. First, we were excluded. The unit was excluded. The unit was re... Second, he's included by Christ's death. The passage that the unit was reading is Isaiah 53.

It's one of the famous, famous servant songs in Isaiah. And it speaks of God's servant, one who is exalted above kings, but then is brought down, who's brought low, who suffers as an outcast. I don't know as you... We read Isaiah 53, whether you saw the ark as he's the one who is led like a lamb to the slaughter, who is killed like a sacrificial lamb for sins. And he's the one who is killed like a sacrificial lamb for sins. And yet somehow at the end, he's vindicated.

[14:12] He has life and he's victorious with God. Let me just read that part of the unit quotes, but beginning a few verses earlier. If you have your Bible, do turn back to Isaiah 53, verse 4.

Speaking of the suffering servant, Isaiah says, Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

I wonder how much the eunuch understood as he read that. Having stood outside the temple courts and watched as hundreds, if not thousands of animals were led in there and sacrificed, I wonder if he thought this sounds different. This is a person, not an animal. This is not just, there's only one sacrifice here, not many. Maybe he read verse 5. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and he thought, this sacrifice really works. It brings peace between God and man.

It brings forgiveness of sin. Maybe he read that line and thought, all we that says, all we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way. And he thought, that's me.

I've wandered away from God. I do that every time I sin. Maybe he read that last line, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all, and he thought, us all. The suffering servant takes the sin of everyone, even someone like me. What we do know is that as he read Isaiah 53, he knew this was something important, and he knew that it's important revolved around this figure, this suffering servant figure. But who, what is he? That's his question in verse 34. He says to Philip about whom I

ask you, does the prophet say this? Who is this suffering servant? Who is he?

[16 : 36] And then Philip opened his mouth and beginning with this scripture, he told him the good news about Jesus. Jesus is the one who fulfills every word of this prophecy. Jesus is the sheep who has led to the slaughter. Jesus is the one who led the perfect life, the lamb without blemish. He was the one who said stayed silent even when he was falsely accused. Even when people hurled insults at him.

He stayed silent. He did not open his mouth. He was the one who willingly went to the cross to die for sin. But he wasn't left in the grave, just like that, that Isaiah 53 arcs upward. Jesus was victorious. He was, God raised him from the grave three days later. He was vindicated by God as God's. Jesus is the one whose death makes all the difference. Just imagine the smile spread on the eunuch's face as he understood this. As Philip told him that if he believed in Jesus, then Jesus takes the punishment for his sins past, present and future. As Philip explained that that sin that once separated him from God has been dealt with on the cross, that he could be part of God's people, that it was that simple, that nothing else needed to happen. Maybe the eunuch said, well, but look, I'm not like you guys. I'm from this kingdom in Africa. I wonder if Philip would have turned to or scrolled down to Isaiah 11 where God says, let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, the Lord will separate me from my people, from his people. Or maybe the eunuch said, but I'm still a eunuch. Or maybe Philip would have scrolled up to Isaiah 56 where God says, let not the eunuch say, behold, I'm a dry tree. For thus says the Lord to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me, who hold fast to my covenant.

I will give him my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. I love that. It's not partial inclusion, but full membership as part in God's family. The point of this event is clear that Jesus' death breaks down every barrier between us and God. He deals with the sin that alienates us from God so that whoever we are, whatever we have done, whatever we look like on the outside, whatever our hearts are messed up with, Jesus can deal with it on the cross.

And if we have repented and believed, he has so that we can say like the eunuch, answer is if Jesus is from being baptized. What prevents me from being part of God's kingdom?

Because the answer is if Jesus deals with everything on the cross, then the answer is nothing. Nothing stands in the way. If we have trusted in Jesus, he can wash us clean from sin. He has washed you clean from sin. What prevents us from being a Christian? Nothing.

[19 : 51] Two implications of this for us then. First of all, believe the good news because there is no one who is too far. There is none too far. I imagine that point is already obvious as we've gone through this passage, but it's worth saying again, Jesus' death is so powerful, it casts that gospel invitation to everyone, whatever their race, whatever their gender, whatever their sexual orientation, their profession, their class, every single person, any discriminating boundaries that you can think of.

They mean nothing. The invitation to come to Jesus goes out to every single person. Jesus' death is the great leveler. You and I can probably think of hundreds of ways in which we're different, but the Bible says that fundamentally, we are all excluded by nature, from God, by nature, because of our sin. Because we're all sinners, we're all in need of salvation, and so we all need Jesus. That's why there's no one too far. Philip and the Ethiopian might have looked miles apart. Philip was, you know, they're from different places. One was, it probably could maybe come from a Jewish Greek or Grico-Jewish background.

They would have looked very different from the surface, at the surface. But the heart of the matter was, they both had called us then to be cleansed by Christ. And the good news of the gospel calls us then to repent, to turn from our sin, to trust in Jesus' death on our behalf. Maybe you're listening here, maybe you're listening online, and you've never done that.

Can I ask you what's preventing you? What's preventing you that Jesus cannot deal with? If you trust him, then he deals with every single thing that you can think of that might separate you from God. Anything else is minor in comparison. If Jesus can deal with your sin, what else could there be that he couldn't deal with? What else could stand in the way that he's not powerful enough to get rid of? What would hold you back?

No one is too far away, no one is too different. Look at the Ethiopian, no one is too sinful. Later on, in Acts, we see how God saved Saul, who called himself the chief of sinners. This is a guy who watched with satisfaction as Stephen was stoned to death. There was no one who was too bad,

there is no one who is too different. Jesus' death is for everyone. Jesus' death is enough for everyone. And I hope that if you have trusted in Jesus, this passage is a reassurance to you. [22 : 47] Jesus' death has paid for your sin, no matter what your last week has looked like, no matter how much an outsider you might feel, even in church, if you've trusted in Jesus, you belong, you belong to Christ. It could be easy to look around on a Sunday and compare ourselves to other people to think, I'm just not like this person, everyone else seems sorted, they seem so confident in their faith, say they seem struggle, I fail, they seem to know so much of the Bible, I struggle and you think I struggle, I fail, I don't know much at all.

Well, that's all of us in some ways. What matters is that we've trusted in Jesus. That's what ask if our sin is what makes us all the same, what unites us as Christians is that we've trusted in Jesus. Maybe you feel like your sin disqualifies you from being a child of God, from being a member of the church, from taking communion, from professing your faith.

What matters if we're trusting in Christ? Listen to this encouragement that Paul says to Timothy, he says, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom Paul says, I am the foremost. When we recall our sins over the past week, we don't have to think we mustn't despair, rather than we can confess them to Christ, we can have the assurance that Philip offers this Ethiopian eunuch. We could go through Isaiah 53 and say Jesus was pierced for my transgressions, he was crushed for my iniquity, upon Jesus was the punishment that gives me peace.

Brothers and sisters, if you're trusted in Jesus, nothing can stand between you and God, nothing ever will stand between you and God. That brings us to our second implication, we need to proclaim the good news because there's no one to none too far. We already saw that because sin is the great leveler, we're all excluded by nature and that universality of sin means that everyone needs to hear the same gospel. I imagine, I hope that's obvious, there's no one gospel for Scotland and the UK and another one for Asia, another one for South America, another one for another country, there's no one gospel for men, one gospel for women, one for the mature Christian, one for the baby Christian, we all, because everyone needs to hear that same good news of Jesus Christ and because everyone needs to hear the same message, well in some ways it's a very simple message that we share, that Jesus died for our sins and it can be intimidating, it can be difficult to, it can be intimidating to share the gospel and that's why just as we close I want to point out three things that Philip does to share the gospel. Do you notice he asks questions, he opens the Bible and then he points to Jesus.

[25 : 48] Very simple, Philip asks questions, do you understand what you're reading? If you're trying to think how do I talk to someone about Jesus, we'll ask them a question, ask them about people's lives, if we're interested in people's lives that naturally will come up, Jesus will naturally come up to the surface, ask them, well ask them about what they, ask them, well you can ask them, have you ever been to church, have you ever read the Bible? You can even ask them, do you want to read the Bible? That's what Philip does next, he opens the Bible and that's fundamental, at the heart of evangelism is presenting Jesus to people and the Bible contains the words of God, powerful words of God that save people.

Now it's unlikely that we're going to have the opportunity like Philip where a car pulls up next to us and someone rolls down their window and says here I'm reading this passage in the Bible, can you explain it to me? But actually I suspect that if we asked our friend or our colleague if they would like to read one of the gospels with us I think we'd be surprised how many people might say yes, how many people might be interested to do that with us, to open it and read and learn together and you don't have to have all the answer that he points to Jesus and that's one thing Philip doesn't have all the answers, what matters is that he points to Jesus, in this passage that there's there he says it points to Jesus, it's all about him.

We might think how do I respond to questions about science, how do I respond to questions about I don't know, whatever else people might see as a barrier, fundamentally we need to point to Christ. As we close then we really do have good news to share with people but one more thing I want to say is that ultimately it's God's work, even as we talk about going out and sharing the good news it's God who is the great evangelist, he is the one who gathers the outcasts and I love the fact that in this passage we see that God isn't confined to any space, God isn't confined to a temple, God isn't confined to a church, God isn't confined by geography, God doesn't, it's isn't interesting, the unit goes into the temple, that's where he spends time but that's not where God saves him, rather while he's in the middle of the desert God sends Philip there, God's the one who can gather people at any

place and bring them back to him, people don't have to come into this building to hear about Jesus, we can go out to them and share them the share of the gospel with them because God is the God of this whole world and God is the one who can speak wherever we are through his word, through his people, he's the one who sent his son to die, he's the one who arranged this life-changing meeting between the eunuch and Philip and he's the one who brings people from death to life, God's the great evangelist, he was back then, he is still today in Carlyway, he's just think what people or geography and if he saved a eunuch in the desert, just think what he might, what he can do here, who knows what he might do through just the simple encounters that we have with family and friends, God is the great evangelist, he's given us a great gospel so let's pray that he'll gather to himself all the his lost sheep in the western isles and abroad, let's pray