

Sunday, 25 September 2022

Understanding the Miraculous Message

Intro

Storytelling is a wonderful gift isn't it. A few years ago Canon UK, the Camera company were starting a competition to document 365 stories in a year through photos. To mark the start of that competition they took a vote of over 2000 people to build a top 50 list of the most influential storytellers. Can any guess who came out on top?

Well it was Roald Dahl. His wonderful literature has been a joy for so many throughout the years and why? Because is a talented author and a brilliant storyteller.

It also emerged at that vote, a staggering 94 percent of adults tell four stories a day, through words, conversation or with photos. Story telling is natural and has been used throughout human history to convey wonderful memories, ideas and messages.

If you've read through the Book of Acts you'll see a story that grasps the reader. So many things are going on with tension, drama, action and a vast range of characters.

One thing that entices me into a watching a film or reading a book is whether it's based on a true story. One story that me and Bekah really got into during lockdown was the musical Hamilton, in part because of the true story it told. And we found that the more times watched it, the more little details that stood out to us. We saw different things, about certain characters did that we hadn't noticed before and new lyrics from the songs stood out to us. A story that has truth behind it can have so much impact on its audience.

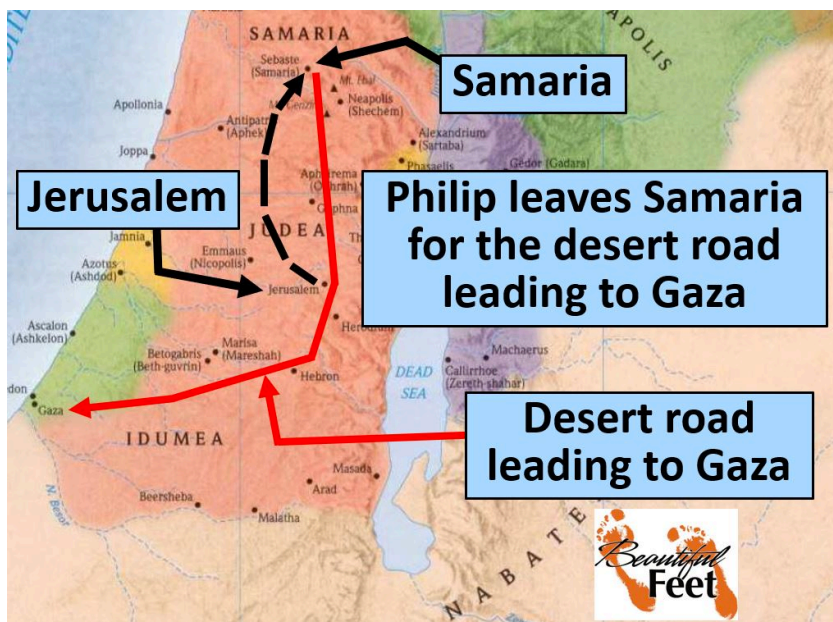
As we come to look at Acts 8 and the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, it has such a wonderful narrative with so many different aspects. We see movements in locations. Two interesting characters interacting and Gods miraculous hand at work in different ways. Most importantly of all its life transforming message.

2. Maps

So let's look at this story together. I have found it helpful to break the story down in to 4 sections all starting with M.

So firstly Maps. As we see at the start and end of Acts 8 both Philip and the Ethiopians Eunuch are on a journey. The eunuch has been visiting Jerusalem to worship and is now back on his way home. Philip has this encounter with an Angel and is told to go on a Journey from Jerusalem to Gaza along the desert road. This is where our story is based on that journey. We see in Acts 8:5 that Philip was preaching in Samaria, so it was from here that he was called down to the Desert Road. This would have been about a days travel.

The Ethiopian Eunuch was in Jerusalem to worship therefore he must have been a Jewish god-fearer or convert. The journey for the Ethiopian Eunuch was around 1500 miles by chariot. Which is quite a journey. The kingdom from which the Ethiopians Eunuch was from was not modern Ethiopia but was a placed called Meroe which is along the river Nile in modern day Sudan.



The Desert road ran through the surrounding hillsides of Jerusalem and then to the flatter land towards the mediterranean sea, leading ultimately to the fertile land where Gaza was.

The last journey we see in Acts 8 is Philip's journey from Azotus to Caesarea as he preached in all the towns between the two places.

These long journeys set the scene for our encounter between our two characters.

3. Men

So who is Philip and who is the Ethiopian Eunuch.?

Philip is often called 'Philip the Evangelist'. He is likely to be one of the 72 talked about in Luke 10:1 and is thought to be one of the seven deacons chosen to serve the Church in Jerusalem seen in Acts 6:5. He clearly had a heart for evangelism and spreading the Gospel. So as persecution arose in Acts 8:1 he set out to take the Good News, the Gospel, to Samaria in Acts 8:5-12. This is shortly before we find our story of his conversation with the Ethiopian Eunuch. The last time we actually hear of Philip is 20 years later in Acts 21:8-9, where we find him still serving the church in Caesarea.

We have half our duo then, So who is the Ethiopian Eunuch and what is he doing on this Journey.

We as we mentioned earlier Meroe is the Kingdom from which the Eunuch was from. Verse 27 points out that the Ethiopian eunuch, was an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). Now in this particular nation the King was seen as too stately to deal with political affairs. So instead they would put the King's Mother in charge and give her the title Kandake. So this Eunuch was the treasurer to the Queen. He was in charge of huge wealth and power. This is also the reason he is a Eunuch. A Eunuch is someone who has been castrated. This was done, so that the person with all these power as treasurer couldn't get caught up in sexual promiscuity and couldn't have any offspring. Therefore keeping him focused on his task as treasurer as well as having no heir to which he may want to give money to.

As a Foreign Eunuch, that was a Jewish convert he would have been seen as an outsider to the Jews. Firstly because he is a gentile and therefore not a

true Jew. Secondly because he was a Eunuch, which, by the command in Deuteronomy 23:1, meant he wouldn't have been allowed in the temple. It says 'No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the LORD.' So as he comes to worship in Jerusalem, he was an outsider and unable to be in the assembly of the Lord.

So as we build our story, we see these incredible journey these two characters are on. Well why is this story so amazing? Because God is at work in it.

This is why Testimonies are so powerful. No matter if it is a wild experience or a gentle journey to come to God. When God is at work in our story it is miraculous.

4. Miracles

And our story here is not short of the Miraculous. I want to mention four miracles we see in our passage. Verse 26 has our first miracle which is the encounter between Philip and an Angel whilst he is in Samaria. God often uses Angels for incredible moments of interaction in the Bible. And once again he use this conversation and command from an Angel to direct Philip to go out and spread the Gospel. Ultimately leading to this conversation with the Eunuch. Although he directs Philip to a location - the Desert Road - Philip still has to have faith to be willing to Obey with no direct instruction. He does so faithfully, knowing that God has called him to spread the Good news and obey him. As he finds himself on the road he comes across a Chariot. Well no he doesn't really... **5.** did anyone pick up how long the procession for the Queens funeral was? ... Its was 1 and 1/4 mile long. Well this Eunuch, as treasurer of the Kandake, would have had an entourage that could have matched. When Philip was walking along the desert road it wouldn't have been just jump in for a Chat he would have risked his life by approaching this entourage. **6.** But that is where our second miracle jumps in. The prompting of the Holy Spirit. Have you ever recognised that? When you feel the Spirit promoting you or setting something on your heart to do or pray for. That is a miracle, the miraculous God is at work in you. I hope we find encouragement in that. The Spirit prompts Philip to approach this chariot. Giving him the courage to obey. Our third miracle comes at the end of our passage after Philip has baptised the Eunuch and he has gone on his way rejoicing we see

Philip is taken away by the spirit and appears in Azotus, ready to start his journey to Caesarea and preach to all the town along the way. Now it doesn't say explicitly that Philip teleports to Azotus. He simply could have gone on his way quickly as the Spirit guides him. And maybe that's true but let's not forget the whole story of Acts and the Gospels before it. God empowers signs and wonders, miraculous healings and more. So there is no reason not to believe that Philip was whisked away onto his next point of call to evangelise. Our last miracle is the miracle that every true believer has experienced themselves. It's the miracle that far outweighs healings and other signs. It's the miracle that God chose a sinner, in the Ethiopian Eunuch, an outsider, deformed in the eyes of the culture around him and chose to bring that sinner to himself. As it says in **7**. Ezekiel 36:26, *'I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.'* It's a miracle to understanding the truth of the Gospel, to have our eyes opened to the true message of the Bible.

8. Message

So where do we see that message in our story in Acts 8:26-40. Well let's take a look at verse 30 to 34.

'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.'

Here we see Philip's heart as an evangelist and the Eunuch's searching at the Word of God.

There's actually some real significance why the Eunuch was reading from Isaiah. The reality is that the Eunuch, an outsider in faith and different because of his deformity, would have found it a challenge to be able to obtain a portion of Scripture and only due to his immense wealth, would he have been able to get God's word. So why would the Ethiopian Eunuch want to work so hard to get his hands on God's word. Well since finding the Jewish faith he wouldn't have been allowed to be part of the assembly of the Lord and

therefore would have had a limited capacity to understand the Word of God. His position was desperate he wanted to understand and be accepted.

Being accepted can be a challenge when you are an outsider or new to the situation. There are some in the Church who play Fantasy Premier League football. Very simply is a game where you choose a team of players and get points on the games based on there player real life performances. Well I've played it for a couple of years, so this year when it came back around, my wife Bekah, decided it would be fun for her to play. So she made a team, but quickly realises that she needs to know more about the players and squads to have a chance of getting points. She has to go to the source of information to be able to engage in that specific game. She was an outsider, she didn't know as much as others did about football. So she looked to learn by going to different sources she could access to improve her team. You'll all be delighted to know she is now not bottom of the league.

So then why does the Eunuch go to Isaiah. Well, Isaiah 56:3 says *'Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, "The Lord will surely exclude me from his people." And let no eunuch complain, "I am only a dry tree."* The Eunuch has found something that affects him. Verse 4-5 say that *'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 endure forever.'* He wants to know what is it to have an everlasting name. As someone who can have no offspring, what does it mean for him to endure forever. Isaiah 56 links back through to Isaiah 53, which the Eunuch is reading from as Philip arrives. It's the understanding that the suffering servant will bring Salvation to the 'Future Zion' and then to all people in chapter 55 and 56.

So as Philip approaches and hears the Eunuch reading Isaiah 53, what is his aim? What does he want the Eunuch to understand? He wants him simply to see Jesus is the true fulfilment of the suffering servant. The Gospel, the work of Christ on the Cross, his death and resurrection, the fact that he defeated death and in that took on the sins of the world on himself and offered life for ALL those who believe. No matter your defects, no matter your tribe, no matter you sins, no matter if you feel like an outsider. The Gospel wipes it all clean.

So what do we see in Isaiah 53 that bought the Eunuch to God. Jesus, as the fulfilment of this Chapter. As you read it, and I'd encourage you to read it. You just see Jesus shining through the prophets words.

This is written 800 years before the life of Jesus, yet he fulfils it perfectly. He came in humbleness with no majesty to attract us to him. He was rejected by mankind. Verse 5 says *'he was pierced for our transgression and crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought peace was on him and by his wounds we are healed'*. This is a description of what Jesus went through at the cross. The passage that the Ethiopian Eunuch is reading is verse 7 and 8. *'He was led like a lamb to the slaughter and did not open his mouth'*. Even though he was the God above all, he willingly laid himself down to be sacrificed. *'He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors'*. He took the punishment for sin in your place. You can just see how Philip led the Ethiopian Eunuch through the words in Isaiah 53 and shows him that Jesus is the fulfilment of this. He is able to take the questions of the Eunuch, answer them with the word of God, whilst being empowered by the Spirit, allowing the Eunuch to accept Christ.

9. What's the response to that miracle of Salvation? Well, Philip would have clearly taught the Eunuch, it is to Repent, Believe and be Baptised.

Well, Why? What is Baptism? What does it mean?. It's a joy to be able to share in Baptism today because we come together to celebrate the miracle of Salvation.

Baptism is ultimately a sign of death to life. We leave our old life of living without God and through his grace and mercy are given new life with him. As Jesus says to Nicodemus *'No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.'* We aren't physically born again but spiritually we are renewed. As we enter the waters of baptism we show a sign of leaving our old life and as we rise out of the water we show our new life and beginning. Following the example of Christ's death and resurrection. The miracle of salvation is represented in that moment. We also are blessed that the sign of Baptism acts as a seal of all of God's promises in our lives. All the way through Scripture we see this external sign, sealing an internal promise between God and his people. God's promise to Noah to never flood the world again had the

sign of a rainbow. The Jewish people had the circumcision to seal the Old Testament promises and we have Baptism as an external sign of Gods New Testament promises to us. The wonder of Baptism is found in the fact its celebrates, remembers, confirms and seal all the promises that God has made with his people.

Application

10. As we come into finish, the challenge that is set out for everyone is dependent in where we see ourself in the Story of Philip and the Ethiopian. Are you searching for God like the Eunuch? - Well if you are then please do come and ask. Read his word, talk to people. Sometimes its not easy to understand and sometimes we feel we are outsiders try to find a way in. Well Ask, Seek and Knock as its says in Matthew 7. God will answer and open a door for you to come to him if you are humble.

Maybe you are more like Philip and able to evangelise. You've been walking with God for many years and you have opportunities in life to lead people to Gods Word and to the Good news of Jesus.

Lastly, maybe you are like the Eunuch, wondering if you can be baptised. Maybe you are new to faith or haven't quite come to the outward profession and sign of Baptism. Like Philip must have made clear. If you repent and believe in Jesus you can be baptised. Confirming all the promises of God in you life.

We are all along that journey somewhere, we are at different points in the Story. I'd love to encourage you to think about where you are and the next steps in our walk with God.

11. Lets Pray and give thanks for the Miraculous Message that many of us know and that is open to all.