

# OpenTheo

## November 1st: Hebrews 11:32–12:2 & Acts 8:26-40

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Christ, the Head of the exemplars of faith. Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Hebrews 11, verse 32 to chapter 12, verse 2 The end of Hebrews chapter 11 and into Hebrews chapter 12 concludes the great list of the exemplars of the faith from the Old Covenant. The author of Hebrews began his catalogue with the story of creation itself, moved to Cain and Abel, to Noah, to the patriarchs, and all the way down through the history of the Old Testament. While he could continue the tour through the Old Testament, he hastens us down, as it were, a long hallway, past many doors he might have shown us into, a number of them quite surprising.

Tracing the story through the judges and into the story of the kingdom and the prophets, he gives us a number of exemplars. Faith is seen in a host of different situations. It's seen in battle, in perseverance through suffering, in accepting opposition and alienation.

One thing the reader will notice is a movement from battles and military struggles being paramount and foremost, to a focus upon persecution, suffering, and rejection, from the

faith of judges and kings to the faith of the prophets and the sufferers, whose struggle was often a much lonelier one. We should also recognise a number of the events being alluded to, from tradition and from scripture. The Shunammite woman, for instance, is a woman who received her dead son back.

Jeremiah was stoned. According to tradition, Isaiah was stoned in two. Others, like Elijah, wandered about in the wilderness.

The world considered these people unworthy, but presented themselves as unworthy of these people of faith. The test of hospitality is an important one within the New and the Old Testament. God tests people by sending a messenger or visitor to them unawares.

Will they receive and welcome this person, or will they reject them and turn them away? Abraham and his reception of the angels in chapter 18 of Genesis is a great example of this. The parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew chapter 25 is a further example of this. People are judged on the basis of how they treat the messengers of God.

And the prophets, these figures who are easy to reject, to ignore or to marginalise, often serve to test God's people to see whether they will receive the word that he has sent to them. These great exemplars of faith were not received. They were outsiders, they were marginalised, they were exiles.

They wandered about in deserts and mountains and in dens and caves of the earth. All these places where human beings do not dwell. In expelling them, the world did not consider them worthy, not knowing that in rejecting them, it was condemning itself.

The author of Hebrews moves forward to give an example of a race before a vast audience, but not just mere spectators. It's described like a relay race of faith, with each generation passing things on to the generations succeeding them. There are persons that have completed their leg of the uncompleted race that are watching us run ours.

They exemplify what faithfulness looks like to us. And we look to Jesus who has blazed the trail ahead of everyone to the finish line. He has brought the entire race of faith to its glorious completion.

The faithful heroes of this book are to look to these figures as their forerunners in the faith, yet ultimately heirs with them of the promise of God. The forerunners did not receive that promise. However, Christ's high priestly work has brought the promise of God into more concrete reality.

And we now more directly receive benefits that they could only await. We have been perfected, made fit to enter into God's very presence, and they can now share in what we have received. Following the great list of the heroes of the faith in chapter 11, chapter 12 then points us towards the one in whom the entire story of faith reaches its climax.

Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. He is the one who not only runs the way of faith himself, but also trailblazes the way to its heavenly destination. He is both our example and our deliverer.

He both leads the way and clears the way. He opens our way to approach God here and now. But he is also the high priest who establishes our final and complete access to God's presence.

The way of faithfulness is more perfectly exemplified in him, but he is also the one to whom our faith looks as its object. Without the salvation of Christ, faith would be in vain. The promise and the deliverance to which it looks would not be realized.

In this respect, Christ is both like and unlike those who live by faith. He faithfully obeys and perseveres through suffering. But while his people must depend upon his work by faith to have a way to God, he creates this way for them as the faithful son.

He does not need this way himself. Rather, he takes flesh and suffers so that he might furnish a way for others. This way is achieved through his facing of the shame of the cross, and doing so in the light of the joy that was set before him.

In this respect, he also provides an example for us. We face the shame of persecution, resistance, rejection, the same sort of rejection that is described for the people of faith at the end of chapter 11. And we must do so, we must face these challenges, in the light of what God has prepared for us.

In the same way as Christ looked for that joy that was set before him, so we must look towards his heavenly joy, to sharing in his glorification. The charge here is similar to that of 2 Corinthians 4, verses 17-18. For this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory, beyond all comparison.

As we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. A question to consider, how does the work of Jesus as the founder and perfecter of our faith, inform the way that we learn from other exemplars of faith that have preceded and that follow him? Acts chapter 8, verses 26-40.

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza, this is a desert place. And he rose and went, and there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, 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 he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb before its shearer is 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 about someone else? Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture, 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. 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 Azotus, and as he passed through, he preached the gospel to all the towns, until he came to Caesarea.

To this point in the book of Acts, the second half of chapter 8, we have seen the conversion of various groups of persons. The next few stories, however, focus upon three key individuals, the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul of Tarsus, and Cornelius in Caesarea. The story of the Ethiopian eunuch, the second story that focuses upon the character of Philip, is a journey narrative, like that of Saul after it, and like the story of the two travelers on the road to Emmaus at the end of Luke's gospel.

Later, in Acts chapter 21, verses 8 to 10, we will discover that Luke stayed for some time with Philip. Presumably, during this period, Philip informed him of the events recorded in this chapter. An angel of the Lord directs Philip to go to the south, to a road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.

Being directed here by the angel of the Lord, and in a few verses' time by the Spirit of the Lord, we see that God is the one in charge of this mission. This is not a mission that's primarily directed by the apostles. It is directed by God himself, who is sending the messengers where they really ought to go.

On the road, he meets an Ethiopian, a eunuch, who's a court official of the queen. While some have suggested that he might just have been a high-ranking official, it's almost certain that he was an actual literal eunuch. Because they had no natural heirs, eunuchs could be of value to courts.

As their personal legacy was entirely invested in the health and the continuance of the dynasty, the loyalties of such men could be more certain than those who had children of their own. Eunuchs were sometimes used to guard the harem, whereas other eunuchs

like this were high-ranking officials who performed important state tasks. This eunuch is in charge of the queen's treasure.

He has come to Jerusalem to worship, which suggests that he is at the very least a God-fearer. Perhaps he's some sort of proselyte. Others have raised the possibility that he might have been a diaspora Jew.

One way or another, he has a prior attachment to the worship of God. It's important to remember that when we read of conversions in the Book of Acts, many of them are conversions not from unbelief to belief, but from old covenant and the status that belonged to someone within that order, to new covenant and a new status. The eunuch is a very effective illustration of this particular movement.

Someone who would have enjoyed little to no status within the old covenant order, now being marked out as a full member of the people of God. The eunuch would have been restricted in a number of ways. First of all, as a Gentile or God-fearer, when he went to the temple, he would at most have been able to come into the court of the Gentiles.

Then we read in Deuteronomy chapter 23 verse 1, No one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord. The Spirit directs Philip to go over to the Ethiopian eunuch's chariot. There, Philip hears him reading Isaiah the prophet.

While modern readers are accustomed to read text silently, ancient readers almost invariably read aloud, or while muttering the words under their breath. We should bear this in mind as we so often read the scripture without any regard for the ear and its place in receiving the word. There are certain things that the ear will hear in texts the eyes cannot see.

The story here is similar to ones that we have read before, particularly to the story of Emmaus. There's a stranger meeting someone returning from Jerusalem on their way. They enter into conversation.

They speak to a lack of understanding. They teach them the scriptures, beginning with some part in particular. As we go further, we'll see that there are greater similarities binding together these two stories.

Similarities that might help us better understand the message that they have for us. The fact that the Ethiopian eunuch has a copy of Isaiah probably indicates both his personal wealth and his interest in the Old Testament scriptures as a Gentile God-fearer or proselyte. As the travellers of Emmaus invited Jesus in to share a meal with them, so the Ethiopian eunuch invites Philip into his chariot.

The passage he is reading is Isaiah 53, a text that was of importance for the early church as a testimony to Christ as the suffering servant. However, this particular scripture might

have had a resonance for the Ethiopian eunuch beyond its regular readers. Peter Lighthouse observes, When Philip meets him, the eunuch is in a desert place, a setting that mimics the barrenness of his own body.

Yet his reading gives him hope. Though the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 is cut off from the land of the living, Isaiah 53, verse 8, he will see his offspring. Verse 10, The suffering servant is a kind of eunuch, but a fruitful one, as his suffering issues in fruitfulness for Zion, the barren woman who becomes a joyful mother of children.

Chapter 54, verse 1, Anyone reading the book of Isaiah beyond this point would also discover a reference to the eunuch that would have been an immediate source of promise to someone like this Ethiopian. It speaks directly to two aspects of his experience and his existence, to the fact that he is a foreigner and to the fact that he is a eunuch. Isaiah chapter 56, verses 3 to 8, Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, The Lord will surely separate me from his people.

And let not the eunuch say, Behold, I am a dry tree. For thus says the Lord to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in 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.

And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it and holds fast my covenant, these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. The Lord God who gathers the outcasts of Israel declares, I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.

The eunuch then receives a promise that he will have an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. The eunuch by virtue of the fact that he could not have children would presume himself to be cut off, his name would die with him. Yet in this word of prophecy there is a promise of a way in which his name need not be cut off.

Through the work of the suffering servant, one who himself was cut off, cut off from the land of the living itself, yet one who nonetheless saw his offspring and gave fruitfulness to others, he might receive a sort of fruitfulness and re-inclusion himself. The Spirit is clearly working on both sides of this interaction. He's brought Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch, but he's also brought the Ethiopian eunuch to these particular texts to reflect upon those and then to invite Philip into his chariot.

The Spirit is a sort of matchmaker, one who's doing the work of forming the kingdom of Christ beyond the walls of the church, beyond the purview of the church. He's bringing life in the wilderness to people that the church has not yet encountered, so that when

the church in people like Philip encounters people like this Ethiopian eunuch, they will discover that the Spirit has already been working there. Having been provided his text by the work of the Spirit, Philip is well able to speak of the gospel and to explain the meaning of Christ from this text.

And like Jesus teaching the disciples on the road to Emmaus, taking this as his starting point, he goes all the way through to explain what Christ means. As they're passing through this wilderness, they encounter some water and the eunuch's response is to ask for baptism. In certain translations, there is a verse following this in verse 37, a verse that almost certainly does not belong in the text, but is a later inclusion.

Nevertheless, it likely witnesses to widespread early Christian understandings of baptism. The charities stopped, they both go down into the water and Philip baptises him. While they're both going down into the water suggests that this was something more than a sprinkling, it should not be taken as certain evidence of immersion.

It could, for instance, involve pouring the water upon the Ethiopian eunuch while he was standing in the water to his waist. Such a form of baptism would capture different aspects of the symbolism of baptism. Baptism symbolically draws upon waters from above and waters from below, the waters from below are the waters associated with death, the waters from which we are delivered, that we pass through, and the waters from above are the waters of God's heavenly blessing, most particularly the water of the spirit poured out.

Were there these two different dimensions of baptism, it might also help us better to explain how the church's later practice of baptism could involve either full submersion, or the pouring out of water, or the sprinkling of it from above. Both of these forms then would be running with one particular aspect of the symbolism of the water, either the water from above or the water from below, whereas both forms could be included in a single rite. The story of the Ethiopian eunuch might also remind us of other stories, a high court official who comes in a chariot who is then washed in water, it's the story of Elisha and Naaman the Syrian.

There might also be some sort of reversal of the story of the Exodus, here a Jewish man on foot is pursuing a descendant of Ham in a chariot, this is the reversal of the story of the Exodus, where the Egyptians, descendants of Ham, pursued the Israelites who were travelling on foot in their chariots, and whereas Pharaoh and his men were submerged in the water of the Red Sea, here the Ethiopian eunuch goes down into the water, is washed, comes up, and is cleansed. In a reversal of the story of the Egyptians, this man is delivered through the waters. As they come up from the water, the spirit of the Lord carries Philip away, it seems to be an instantaneous thing, he is instantaneously moved away from that place and snatched up and placed somewhere else.

We read of similar events in the context of Elijah and also in the book of Ezekiel. Philip's

disappearing from the sight of the eunuch immediately after the baptism is completed might remind us of something, it should remind us of the story of Emmaus once again, Luke chapter 24 verses 30-31. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them, and their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight.

In the story of Emmaus, in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, and later in the story of Paul, we have three examples of an encounter with Christ, in speech or in the words of scripture. In all of these occasions, it is followed by an administration of the sacrament, Christ breaks the bread and is revealed in that act of breaking bread, here it is in the act of baptism, and then later on in the story of Saul, it is baptism once more. The story ends with Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch both going their own ways, the eunuch continues on his way back home rejoicing, according to Christian tradition, he became the father of the Ethiopian church, a very powerful fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, his name is not cut off, he has many sons and daughters, even though a eunuch.

Philip, for his part, finds himself at Zodus, the former site of Ashtard, and then he preaches all the way up to Caesarea. A question to consider, what lessons might we learn from Luke's three journey narratives about the proper form and purpose of Christian worship?