

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 11

Podcast Audio Overview

Acts 8

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All right, so today we're going to be taking a deep dive into early Christianity, specifically how the movement spread beyond its Jewish roots. And we're using a lecture from Dr. Craig Keener on the Book of Acts as our source material today. Okay, sounds good.

Now, you might think that the first Gentile Christian was Cornelius the Centurion. But did you know that it was actually an African official? And his conversion happened even before the church in Jerusalem fully accepted Gentiles. That's right.

Yeah. It's an often overlooked story for sure. It really is.

So Dr. Keener really highlights Philip, one of the seven Hellenist Jewish Christian leaders, as the first to take the gospel outside Jerusalem and Judea. It's interesting to think that it wasn't the apostles at the forefront of this huge expansion, but it was someone like Philip. Yeah.

Yeah, that's a good point. Why do you think that was? Well, I think it's interesting because Philip's actions actually fulfilled the groundwork laid by Stephen back in Acts chapter seven. Stephen really challenged the traditional view of the temple and God's presence.

And he really opened up this idea that faith wasn't limited by geography. So Philip kind of took the baton from Stephen and just ran with it? Exactly. Yeah.

And it also aligns perfectly with Jesus's vision in Acts 1.8 where he tells the disciples that there'll be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. So it's almost like Philip is like a scout venturing into new territory. That's a good point.

Yeah. And then it's fascinating how he also seems to pave the way for Peter, like we see with the Samaritans. Right.

And speaking of the Samaritans, their conversion is a whole other wild part of this story. Oh, for sure. I mean, Simon the Sorcerer, what a character.

Oh, yeah. Absolutely. He gives us a glimpse into just how prevalent magic was in the ancient world.

It was just woven into everyday life. It was used for everything, you know, from love spells to influencing sporting events. Oh, wow.

I mean, it was everywhere. It's interesting, though, what made the Jewish magic practitioners stand out? Well, they were believed to possess knowledge of God's secret name, which in their magical rituals held immense power. So they were kind of like, almost like demigods in a way.

Yeah. Well, according to Justin Martyr, a second-century Christian from the Samaritan region, there was actually a tradition that Simon was seen as the incarnation of the male deity, with his consort, Helena, representing the female deity. Wow.

So that adds a whole other layer to his, you know, to his desire for power. Yeah. It flashes so starkly with Jesus's teaching on humility and service that we see in Luke's Gospel.

Absolutely. It's a fascinating contrast for sure. Yeah.

But, you know, in the midst of all that, it's important to remember that Simon ultimately asked for the apostles' prayers. That's true. So there was like a flicker of something more than just this desire for power.

Yeah, exactly. Makes you wonder what was really going on in his heart. It really does.

But let's move on to the African court official. Dr. Keener really emphasizes his significance as the first fully Gentile convert to Christianity, even before Cornelius. Yeah.

I mean, his conversion happens on the road to Gaza, far from Jerusalem. And it's really this pivotal moment in the early church's story. You know, it really marks a turning point.

It's interesting though, because what strikes me is that the text repeatedly emphasizes that he's a eunuch like five times. Five times. That's right.

Why do you think that's so important, especially, you know, considering his position as a treasurer to Queen Kandaka? I mean, that's a powerful position. Yeah, you're right to point that out. Being a eunuch carried immense social stigma in the Roman world.

You know, they were considered half men, denied full participation in society, and actually they were even excluded from becoming full proselytes in Judaism as per Deuteronomy 23:1. Yeah. So imagine just the weight of that on this man's shoulders, you know. Yeah.

Yet he was deeply devout. Yeah. It makes you wonder what drew him to the Jewish faith in the first place, you know.

Yeah. Well, what's even more interesting is that he likely wasn't from modern-day Ethiopia, as many assume, but from the ancient Nubian kingdom of Meroë, located in present-day Sudan. Ethiopia, back then, referred to all of Africa south of Egypt.

Okay. And the mention of Queen Kandaka points to Meroë. So the Ethiopian eunuch wasn't actually Ethiopian.

Right. Yeah. Yeah.

Not in the way we think of Ethiopia today. Tell me more about this kingdom of Meroë. Well, it was known for its wealth, its powerful queens, and its vast trade networks.

You know, it even rivaled the Roman Empire in influence at one point. Wow. And what's really fascinating is that Meroë later embraced Christianity, and it remained a stronghold of the faith for almost 1,000 years.

That's incredible. It really is. So that really changes how we view this official story, doesn't it? It does.

It really highlights how early Christianity took root in these diverse parts of the world. Absolutely. And his status as both a foreigner and a eunuch, that directly connects to Isaiah 56.305, which, you know, emphasizes God's welcome to the marginalized.

Exactly. Yeah. And that also echoes Jesus' words about the temple being a house of prayer for all nations, right?

Which is also from Isaiah 56. It's like a recurring theme. Yeah.

It's almost like this meeting, this encounter between Philip and the official was orchestrated by a higher power, you know? I mean, just imagine he's reading Isaiah 53, a passage about the suffering servant. Yeah. And Philip approaches him.

At that exact moment. It's pretty incredible. It really is.

And remember, being a eunuch, he wouldn't have been allowed to be circumcised and fully convert to Judaism. Right. But now through faith in Jesus, he's able to be baptized.

That's powerful. What do you think that, you know, that signifies about how the early Christians viewed the gospel's power to, you know, to break down barriers? Yeah. That's a great question.

I think it really highlights the revolutionary nature of the gospel message. It wasn't simply about adhering to a set of rules or rituals, but about a transformative encounter with Jesus that transcended cultural and social boundaries. And the official's, you know, joy of being baptized, I mean, it just speaks volumes about the impact of that encounter.

For sure. And speaking of baptism, Dr. Keener clarifies that full immersion was the standard practice during that time. Some accounts even mentioned the requirement of nudity for full immersion, which is pretty different from what we see today.

A little bit different. Yeah. But so back to the story, the official's baptized and then suddenly the spirit just whisks Philip away.

Yeah. It's like a scene straight out of the Old Testament. Yeah.

Like Elijah being taken by God. Exactly. It's a pretty dramatic moment.

It really highlights the supernatural nature of Philip's mission. Yeah. But how literal was it? Like, do we know? That's a good question.

You know, whether he was physically transported or it was a visionary experience, it's actually debated among scholars. Yeah. Some believe it was a literal relocation, while others see it as a symbolic representation of the spirit's leading.

Oh. Okay. That's interesting.

Yeah. There are different interpretations. So either way though, it definitely underscores the unpredictable nature of Philip's journey.

Absolutely. You never know where the spirit's going to take you. You really don't.

Yeah. So he finds himself in Azotus, and from there he kind of embarks on this preaching tour along the coastal cities and eventually reaches Caesarea Maritima. Caesarea is crucial, you know, later in Acts, especially with Peter and Cornelius.

But even Philip's arrival there is significant. I mean, Caesarea was this incredibly diverse port city, a real melting pot of cultures, quite different from Jerusalem. So it's like Philip's journey is foreshadowing that movement of the gospel from that very Jewish context to a more Gentile one.

Exactly. He's almost like a cultural ambassador. I like that.

Yeah. And you know, we really owe a lot to Luke for recording these stories, because without Luke, Philip's work might have been lost to history. It's true.

It makes you wonder if there are unsung heroes in our own communities, you know? Oh, absolutely. People whose stories we need to hear. For sure.

And you know, Philip's example also makes me think about those illogical steps of faith that we sometimes hesitate to take. Right. You know, Dr. Keener mentioned how God sometimes tests his servants with seemingly absurd commands.

It's true. Think of Moses at the Red Sea. God tells him to part the waters with his staff.

Or Elijah, asking that widow to feed him first, even though, you know, she's about to starve. It goes against all logic. Yeah.

But in both cases, you know, obedience leads to the miraculous. Yeah, that's right. So how does that apply to Philip's journey? Well, you know, remember when he's told to go to that deserted road leading to Gaza? I mean, it seems pointless.

Right. But it turns out to be that pivotal meeting with the African official. It really makes you reconsider those moments where you feel called to do something that doesn't make sense at first.

Yeah. Like maybe, maybe there's a divine appointment. Right.

Waiting just around the corner. That's a great way to put it. But let's get back to this official.

He's described as being from Ethiopia, but which we know was a broader term back then. Right. It referred to all of Africa south of Egypt.

Right. And since he's a treasurer to a Kandaka, which is a queen mother in the kingdom of Moro, it's highly likely he's from that powerful Nubian kingdom. That's right.

So we're talking about someone, you know, high-ranking, probably wealthy, educated. Yeah. I mean, he's even reading Isaiah in Greek.

That's fascinating. It is. Greek was the language of trade and diplomacy in that region.

Right. So this official was likely comfortable in both Nubian and Greco-Roman cultures. So it speaks to his worldliness, you know, his openness to new ideas.

And the fact that he's reading Isaiah suggests that he was already searching for spiritual truth. Absolutely. He was already at work in his life.

Long before Philip arrived. It's a beautiful example of God preparing the way, you know. It really is.

Now, what about that moment when Philip is caught away by the Spirit? What do you make of that? Well, it's clearly divine intervention, you know, highlighting the supernatural element in Philip's mission, similar to Elijah in the Old Testament. But how literal it was is up for debate. So some scholars think he was physically transported, and others see it more symbolically.

Exactly. It could be a literal relocation or a powerful representation of the Spirit's leading. But either way, it emphasizes the urgency and importance of what Philip was doing.

Right. So after this, you know, dramatic experience, he ends up in Azotus, a coastal city north of Gaza. And from there, he travels and preaches all the way to Caesarea Maritima.

Right. And remember, Caesarea was a major port city, you know, with a diverse population of Jews and Gentiles. So it represents this significant shift from the more homogenous environment of Jerusalem.

It's like Philip's journey is a microcosm of the larger movement of Christianity from its Jewish roots to the Gentile world. Precisely. It's like he's a trailblazer.

Yeah. You know, laying the groundwork for this massive expansion. It really makes you, you know, think about those pioneers in our own lives.

Oh, absolutely. And communities, those people who challenge the status quo and open up new possibilities. That's a good point.

What would happen if we followed their lead? That's a thought-provoking question. I mean, it's easy to get comfortable in our own little bubbles, you know? It is, yeah. It's easy to stay in our comfort zones.

But Philip's story challenges us to step outside of that. For sure. And to embrace the unexpected.

Absolutely. And this reminds me of something else Dr. Keener said that really resonated with me. He talked about how God often tests his servant's faith through seemingly absurd commands.

It's true. And it makes me think of this quote I read recently: faith is taking the first step, even when you don't see the whole staircase. It's about surrendering to the unknown and trusting that God is working, even when we can't see the bigger picture.

Yeah. Does Philip's story make you reconsider any illogical steps that you might be hesitant to take? It definitely does, yeah. It's a reminder that God might be calling us to something that seems crazy or impossible, but if we trust him and take that leap of faith, it could lead to incredible things.

It really could. It's about letting go of our own desires and agendas and allowing God to work in us and through us. That's what it's all about.

And I'm also struck by Philip's role as a forerunner to Peter. He seems to constantly be preparing the way for Peter's ministry. That's a great observation.

It's almost as if Philip is like this catalyst for change, pushing the boundaries of the early church's understanding. And then Peter, with his authority in connection to the Jerusalem church, is able to kind of solidify those changes and integrate them into the larger movement. It's a fascinating dynamic.

Yeah. And it makes me wonder if there are similar dynamics at play in our own lives and communities, you know? That's a good question. Are there Philips among us challenging the status quo and paving the way for new possibilities? That's a powerful question to consider.

Who are the people in our lives who are pushing us to think differently, to step outside our comfort zones, to embrace a wider perspective? And are we willing to be those Philips ourselves, you know, to be the ones who challenge the status quo and open doors for others? It's a challenge for all of us to be willing to be uncomfortable, to speak up for what we believe in and to create space for new voices and perspectives. You know, Philip's story is a testament to the power of one person's, you know, faithfulness and obedience. He may not have been an apostle, but his impact on the early church was profound.

He really was. I mean, he paved the way for the inclusion of Gentiles and helped to shape the very identity of Christianity as we know it. He played a pivotal role, for sure.

And you know, it's a reminder that God can use anyone, regardless of their background or position, to accomplish his purposes. Absolutely. His story really challenges us to rethink the traditional narrative of early Christianity.

For sure. It was so much more complex and dynamic. It was.

Yeah. More than we often realize. Than we often realize.

Yeah. And it's a story that continues to unfold today. Absolutely.

The gospel is still breaking down barriers, transforming lives all over the world. That's right. It's a message that transcends cultural and social boundaries.

Yeah. And it's a challenge to us to be a part of that movement. I think that's a perfect place to pause for now.

We've covered a lot of ground, and I think it's important to let these ideas sink in a little bit. Yeah. Yeah.

Good idea. We'll pick up the conversation in our next segment. That's good.

So, welcome back to our deep dive into the early church. Yeah, it's good to be back. We've been tracing Philip's journey and the impact of that first Gentile convert.

Right. And I don't know about you, but this conversation has really shifted my perspective on the whole narrative of early Christianity. It really is amazing how one seemingly small event, like Philip meeting that official on a deserted road, can just ripple through history and change the course of a whole movement.

It makes you wonder about those moments in our own lives. Yeah, totally. That might feel insignificant now, but could actually be setting the stage for something much bigger down the line.

Absolutely. It speaks to that idea we were talking about earlier, how God's ways are higher than our own. We might not always understand the why or the how, but if we're willing to trust and obey, incredible things can happen.

And speaking of trusting and obeying, let's revisit that powerful passage in Isaiah 56 that we touched on earlier, the one about God welcoming those who are often marginalized. It's such a beautiful and radical message, especially in the context of the ancient world. You know, eunuchs were often viewed as outcasts, excluded from religious and social life.

And yet here we see God explicitly extending his embrace to them. And it's not just about eunuchs. I mean, Isaiah 56 speaks to anyone who feels excluded, forgotten, or unworthy.

It's a reminder that God's love is truly for everyone. And I think that that inclusivity, that radical welcome, is what makes the gospel so revolutionary. You know, it challenges the social hierarchies and power structures of the world.

And it offers this new way of being in relationship with God and with each other. It's a message that transcends cultural and social boundaries, uniting people from all walks of life under this banner of grace and acceptance. I love that.

Yeah. And, you know, it's a challenge to us today as well, right? I mean, we live in a world that's still filled with division and exclusion. Right.

So how can we, as followers of Jesus, how can we embody that same radical welcome that we see in Isaiah 56 and in the story of Philip and the African official? It's a question worth, you know, wrestling with. I think it might start with small acts of kindness and compassion, you know, reaching out to those who are different from us or speaking up against injustice when we see it. Absolutely.

But ultimately, it's about transforming our own hearts so that we can reflect God's love to a world that desperately needs it. It's about recognizing the inherent dignity and worth of

every human being, regardless of their background, their beliefs, or circumstances. It's about tearing down walls of division and building bridges of understanding and empathy.

So as we wrap up this deep dive, I'm left with a sense of both challenge and hope because, you know, Philip's story, it calls us to examine our own lives and to see where we might be falling short of that radical welcome and hope because it reminds us that God is still at work in the world, you know, breaking down barriers and drawing people to himself in these unexpected and beautiful ways. I agree. And perhaps, like Philip, we might be surprised by the places God calls us to and the people we encounter along the way.

You know, his story invites us to embrace the unexpected, to trust in God's leading, even when it doesn't make sense, and to be open to the transformative power of the gospel in our own lives and in the world around us. It's been a fascinating exploration. It really has.

Thanks for joining us on this deep dive. Yeah, thanks for having me. We'll see you next time for another journey into the depths of knowledge and discovery.

Welcome back to our deep dive into the early church. You know, we've been tracing Philip's journey, and the impact of that first Gentile convert. I don't know about you, but this whole conversation has really, I don't know, shifted my perspective on the whole narrative.

It really is amazing how one, like, seemingly small event, like Philip meeting that official on a deserted road, it can just ripple through history and change the course of a whole movement, you know? Yeah, it makes you wonder about those moments in our own lives. It feels insignificant right now, but maybe, you know, it's actually setting the stage for something much bigger down the line. Absolutely.

I think it goes back to that idea we were talking about earlier about God's ways being higher than our own, right? Right. We might not always understand the why or the how, but if we're willing to trust and obey, incredible things can happen. So speaking of trusting and obeying, let's revisit that passage in Isaiah 56 that we touched on earlier.

Okay. The one about God welcoming those who are often, you know, marginalized. It's such a beautiful and radical message, especially in the context of the ancient world.

You know, eunuchs were often viewed as outcasts, excluded from religious and social life. Yet here we see God explicitly welcoming them. And it's not just about eunuchs.

No, not at all. Isaiah 56 speaks to anyone who feels excluded, forgotten, or unworthy. Yeah, absolutely.

You know, it's a reminder that God's love is truly for everyone. Yeah. And I think that inclusivity, that radical welcome, that's what makes the gospel so revolutionary.

It challenges the social hierarchies and power structures of the world. And it offers this new way of being in relationship with God and with each other. Yeah.

It's a message that transcends cultural and social boundaries, you know, uniting people from all walks of life under this banner of grace and acceptance. I love that. And it's a challenge to us today as well.

It really is. You know, we live in a world that's still filled with division and exclusion. So how can we, as followers of Jesus, how can we embody that same radical welcome that we see in Isaiah 56 and in the story of Philip and the African official? It's a question that, you know, it's worth wrestling with.

It is, for sure. Um, I think it might start with small acts of kindness and compassion, reaching out to those who are different from us, speaking up against injustice when we see it. Yeah, absolutely.

But ultimately, it's about transforming our own hearts, you know, so that we can reflect God's love to a world that desperately needs it. It's about recognizing the inherent dignity and worth of every human being, regardless of their background, their beliefs, or their circumstances. Tearing down walls of division and building bridges of understanding and empathy.

So as we wrap up this step dive, I'm left with a sense of, I don't know, both challenge and hope challenge, because, you know, Philip's story calls us to examine our own lives and see where we might be falling short of that radical welcome and hope, because it reminds us that God is still at work in the world, breaking down barriers and drawing people to himself in these unexpected and beautiful ways. And perhaps, like Philip, you know, we might be surprised by the places God calls us to and the people we encounter along the way. Yeah.

His story invites us to embrace the unexpected, to trust in God's leading, even when it doesn't make sense, and to be open to the transformative power of the gospel in our own lives and in the world around us. It's been a fascinating exploration. Thanks for joining us on this deep dive.

We'll see you next time for another journey into the depths of knowledge and discovery.