

How Can I, Unless Someone Guides Me?

Acts of the Apostles 8:4-40

What We Found

The Gospel crossed its first great frontier, into Samaria, the long family wound, and it was carried not by an apostle but by Philip, one of the Seven set apart over a food dispute (traditionally counted among the first deacons). The city received the word with joy, and then something remarkable: though truly baptized, the Samaritans had not yet received the Spirit's descent until Peter and John came from Jerusalem, prayed, and laid hands on them (8:14-17). At the healing of an ancient schism, the Church has always seen the point: the new believers were visibly joined to the one apostolic Church, and in that laying on of hands the Church has always recognized the origin of Confirmation; the Catechism quotes this very passage (CCC 1288, 1315).

Simon the magician tried to buy the power in the apostles' hands, giving the Church a word, simony, and giving history a backhanded testimony: his attempted purchase shows he saw something real, and objectively given, in the apostles' hands.

Then the chariot. The Ethiopian official was the best-case reader of Scripture in the ancient world, devout, humble, literate, holding Isaiah itself, and his honest answer stands in the inspired text forever: "How can I, unless someone guides me?" God's response was to send a guide from within the Church, and guided reading ran straight down to the water: "See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?" And we found the tenderest thing in the chapter: three chapters past the passage he was puzzling over, the scroll on his lap promised that the eunuch and the foreigner, both once excluded, would receive in God's house a name better than sons and daughters (Isaiah 56:3-7). He was holding his own invitation, and Philip showed him the Host who wrote it. He went on his way rejoicing.

Voices of the Church

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Mystagogical Catechesis 3, On Chrism (4th century)

St. Cyril explains that as Christ was anointed with the Holy Spirit after His baptism, so the newly baptized are anointed with the holy chrism and sealed, receiving the same Spirit to strengthen them against the adversary; and he insists that this chrism is no ordinary ointment. The gift is not symbolic: the Spirit Himself is conferred. Reading Acts 8, the Church has recognized in the apostles' laying on of hands the origin of this same sealing (CCC 1288).

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Jerome, Letter 53, to Paulinus (4th century)

St. Jerome points to the Ethiopian: a devout man, reading the very words of God, holding the book and yet not knowing Him whom the book proclaimed, until Philip was sent to open the text and show him Jesus. Jerome's lesson to Paulinus is that Scripture is the one book no one masters alone; it asks for a teacher. And the eunuch shows us where to begin: the reader humble enough to ask for a guide is already reading well.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies, Book III, 12.8 (2nd century)

St. Irenaeus recalls the eunuch as a model of readiness: already devout, already searching the prophets, he believed and was baptized without delay. Irenaeus adds the tradition the early Church treasured, that the man returned home as a herald of the faith, the first fruit of the Gospel among the nations of the south.

Live It This Week

Two assignments in the spirit of the chariot. First, read guided: take next week's chapter, Acts 9:1-31, and read it once with a Catholic guide at your elbow, the notes of a Catholic study Bible or a trusted Catholic commentary, deliberately practicing accompanied reading. Notice at least one thing the guide showed you that you would have driven past alone. Second, ask a Philip question: once this week, gently ask someone, "What do you actually make of God these days?", and then do what Philip did first: listen.

Memory Verse

"Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus." (Acts 8:35)

Before Next Session

Read Acts 9:1-31 with your Catholic guide alongside, as promised above. Pay attention to a road, a voice, and a street called Straight.

Catechism References

CCC 1288, 1315 (the origin of Confirmation) · CCC 112-114 (reading Scripture within the Church) · CCC 2121 (simony)