

## **ARE YOU IGNORANT BY CHANCE OR BY CHOICE?**

**Today's Text: Acts 8: 26- 40**

### **Extracts:**

**And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go near and overtake this chariot." So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him. ... Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture [Is. 53: 7-8], preached Jesus to him. Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?" [Acts 8: 27-31, 35-36].**

*On the wall behind the receptionist's desk in the waiting lounge of an environmentally friendly organization was a bold green sign which states, "ABSOLUTELY NO SMOKING!" One afternoon, a middle-aged man came in, asking to see the CEO. The air around him suggested that he was a very important member of society- educated, rich and well connected. Since he did not have an appointment, the receptionist informed him that her boss was at a meeting and that he would have to wait for a few minutes. She offered tea or coffee which the visitor gratefully refused. As the minutes grew longer, the impatient-looking man turned to the receptionist, with a pipe in his hands, and asked her, "Do you mind if I smoke?" Looking rather surprised, she answered, "No Sir." Pointing to the sign behind her, she added, "In fact, that sign is not for illiterates!"*

*The visitor was certainly not illiterate in that he could read and write. Therefore, the sign behind the reception desk applied to him. He was not reported to be blind. Therefore, he could have seen the prohibition notice on that wall. But did he read the sign? His question suggests that he did not. Otherwise, he could have known without asking that smoking there was prohibited. He was ignorant of the rule, but we may not know if he did so by chance or by choice. We can easily find ourselves in a similar situation with respect to our relationship with God. We can read the Bible but do we know God? Is that ignorance by choice or by chance? In this week's Bible story, a disciple called Philip met the treasurer to the queen of Ethiopia reading the book of Isaiah that he could not understand. There is something there to guide us to avoid ignorance- by choice or by chance- that can lead us to hell.*

## 1. Background: An Ethiopian official did not understand what he read

*Somebody has defined education as what is left in you after passing all your exams!* By that definition, most of us have nothing left. We simply crammed lecture notes that we regurgitated in the mandatory tests at school for certification. It is no wonder that in some countries you have to show evidence of skills upgrade through further training before your professional licenses can be renewed. Even so, academic degrees are not subject to the same rule. Otherwise, do you know how many Ph.D's could have expired by now? That is why it is said that anybody who is tired of learning is tired of living.

*Learning is not enough when you do not use it.* Many of us are literate but do we read and write? Even when we read as voraciously as we want, does that mean that we understand what we read? Exactly what are we looking for when we crave for more knowledge? Is it to reduce our scope of ignorance or to justify it?

In this week's Bible text, we come across a story that is an eye-opener for most of us. A top Ethiopian official came on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and he had a close encounter with Philip, one of the seven deacons in the early church. The story goes as follows:

### *a) The official was highly educated*

Following the persecution of the early church after the death (by stoning) of Stephen, Philip and other disciples fled from Jerusalem and scattered "everywhere preaching the word." Philip fled to Samaria where many miracles were performed through him [Acts 8: 4-7]. One day, an angel of the Lord told Philip to go to a desert on the road going south from Jerusalem to Gaza. He went as commanded and saw "a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship" [vv. 26-27].

Examine the Ethiopian official's attributes. He was in charge of all the treasury of the queen of the Ethiopians. In modern language, we would liken him to the U.K.'s Chancellor of the Exchequer or America's Treasury Secretary or Nigeria's Minister of Finance. Look at the educational qualifications and professional experience of people holding such a position in your country. They are financial gurus from the leading educational and professional institutions in the world. Therefore, that Ethiopian was highly educated.

In addition, he was a eunuch, that is, a castrated man. In days past, eunuchs were often employed to guard the women of a harem or as court officials. It was believed that they should have no distractions of lust or

family and you could, therefore, trust them with women, married or single. Understandably, this Ethiopian eunuch had the confidence of his queen and he could afford to devote all his energies to his work and worship. Jesus has said that some people are born eunuchs; some are made eunuchs; and some make themselves eunuchs (celibates) for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Then He added, “He who is able to accept it, let him accept it” [Matt. 19: 11-12]. The Ethiopian eunuch applied his own to serving his queen and his God. He came on pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the latter.

*b) He desired to know but could not understand*

As he was returning to Ethiopia, he was reading the book of prophet Isaiah [Acts 8: 28]. He was not reading the latest salacious publication from Jerusalem’s gossip media, as his modern counterparts are wont to do. Instead, he was reading the word of God. He was apparently finding it difficult to understand what he was reading because the Holy Spirit asked Philip to overtake his chariot. Philip ran and heard the man reading what we now know as Chapter 53 of the book of Isaiah where it is written [Is. 53: 7-8]:

*He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so He opened not His mouth. In His humiliation His justice was taken away; and who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth.*

Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading. He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me” [Acts 8: 29-33]. ***That high official did not know and he was willing to be taught by those who knew. The person offering to do so was an unknown intruder that looked like a possible robber! The Ethiopian wanted to know but he could not understand. He was thus ignorant by chance, not by choice.***

*c) He gladly got help from a knowledgeable man*

The Ethiopian official gladly invited Philip to sit by him in the chariot and asked him if the passage was talking of the prophet Isaiah or about somebody else. Philip used those verses to preach the risen Christ to the visitor from Africa. He was so thrilled by what he was hearing that he said to Philip, “See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?” Having affirmed that he believed in Jesus as the Son of God with all his heart, Philip baptized him. Immediately, the Holy Spirit caught Philip away that he could not be seen anymore, and the Ethiopian went his way rejoicing [vv. 34-39].

From the foregoing, we can conclude that the Ethiopian got more than he had expected from that pilgrimage that might not have been his first. ***He was ignorant of the road to salvation but he was zealous to know.*** That was why he was studying the Scriptures during his journey. God saw his heart and sent a man of God to him to help him to understand the truth. ***He opened his mind and heart to the new knowledge that Philip had to offer him. Philip was in spirit and God empowered him to speak the truth.*** The end result was the chance for the word of God to be spread to Africa- even before Christianity went to Europe! Would you have behaved like the Ethiopian? Let us find out!

## 2. How about you?

Like the Ethiopian official, most believers are quite anxious to come closer to God through Jesus the Christ. They read and study the Bible as a matter of routine. Some even go to Bible colleges to drink deeper from the wells of religious knowledge. Catholic priests spend well over ten years in the seminary before they are ordained. Yet, the kind of behaviour that some believers exhibit in the church, at home or school or at work does not suggest knowledge of the truth of their faith. The word of God says, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” [**Hos. 4: 6**]. In other words, ***ignorance kills***. Why do people lack or hate knowledge? Asked another way, why do people remain ignorant when they know the value of knowledge? Here are possible reasons, among others:

### *a) You could be ignorant by chance!*

It is possible that we get ignorant of Christ’s saving grace by chance, that is, the ***circumstances in which we find ourselves may be beyond our control***. Here are some of such circumstances:

- Wrong knowledge

Some of us are not believers because of ***where we were born or brought up***. For example, a child born into the Saudi royal family is likely to be a fervent Muslim, whether s(he) likes it or not. An average Indian born and raised in the Hindu culture is likely to worship Hindu gods. A child adopted by a gay family is likely to be brought up to see homosexuality as normal. People’s world view is largely shaped by such circumstances. So, when they confront a different point of view of reality, it is a major challenge that they will hardly see as influenced by the wrong knowledge with which they were raised. That is a form of ignorance by chance. For example, although Moses was born to a Hebrew family, he was raised as an Egyptian prince, the adopted son of the Pharaoh’s daughter. It was after he had killed an Egyptian in defence of a Hebrew slave that he fled to Midian where he had an encounter with the true God of the Hebrews [**Ex. 2: 5-15**].

- Insufficient knowledge

Sometimes, we may have had the privilege of being taught the truth but it was either *inadequate or incomplete*. It is like people who have studied science subjects up to high school and no more. Can you call such people scientists? It may not have been their fault that they could not go further in school but the science they know cannot take them beyond beer parlour grandstanding! Take the example of some disciples of John the Baptist that Paul came across at Ephesus. When he asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” they replied, “We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.” Yet, they had received water baptism. After Paul had taught them more properly about Jesus, they were baptized in His name, and when he had laid hands on them, they spoke with tongues and prophesied [Acts 19: 1-6]. They had been ignorant but it was hardly by choice.

- Hidden knowledge

Sometimes, you may be anxious to learn and to know but *the truth is hidden from you unless it is revealed to you by others or God Himself*. For example, unless somebody who loves you tells you that you have bad breath, there is no way that you can know it by yourself. Some of your mannerisms that you consider your strong points may actually offend others. That was why Moses reminded the church in the wilderness that the secret things belong to God but those that He has revealed belong to us [Deut. 29: 29]. Speaking of the blindness of disobedience, Isaiah told the people of Israel, “The whole vision has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one who is literate, saying, ‘Read this, please.’ And he says, ‘I cannot, for it is sealed’” [Is. 29: 11]. Sealed knowledge is hidden knowledge and it cannot help to reduce your ignorance.

b) *Or it may be by your own choice*

Ignorance by chance may be excused [1 Tim. 1: 13] but the one by choice is *a self-inflicted injury*. You have had every opportunity to know more about Jesus but deliberately and knowingly chose not to do so. For example, you may not be prepared to live the “hard life” of being in Spirit all the time. You are in a sexually immoral relationship that you are enjoying and not willing to give up. So, why should some preacher or the Bible keep reminding you that you are on the wrong path? You are holding a political or public position that affords you the chance to steal and cheat; so, why should the Scriptures or your priest/pastor be telling

you “Thou shalt not steal!” each time you come among them? They must be jealous!

Take the case of King Agrippa when he came with his wife, Bernice, to visit the Roman official, Porcius Festus, under whom Paul had been held a prisoner. He was quite anxious to hear Paul speak about his new faith. So, he requested Festus to bring Paul before him. After Paul had narrated the story of his conversion on the road to Damascus to persecute Christians, he turned to King Agrippa and said, “Do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe.” The king replied, “You almost persuade me to become a Christian” [Acts 26: 1-28]. He never did! Perhaps he did not want to lose his political advantages with the Romans. Perhaps he was full of human pride; why should a king bow to another person? In the end, he remained ignorant by choice.

From the foregoing, you can see that *it is quite easy to choose ignorance over knowledge. It becomes more painful and dangerous if you do so deliberately*, that is, by choice. Those who knowingly live on the premise that there is no God are fools [Ps. 14: 1]. Can you afford to be one of them?

### 3. Conclusion: Can you afford to ignore Jesus by choice?

*Ignorance* (the lack or absence of knowledge) *is a matter of the heart, not of the head*, because “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction” [Prov. 1: 7]. When Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews came to Jesus by night, the Lord used the opportunity to try to open his eyes to being born again by water and the Holy Spirit. The highly learned man looked at the matter with his head and asked Jesus, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus replied him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?” [Jn. 3: 1-10].

Jesus is asking you the same question this moment. You are well-placed in society but are you well-placed in God’s kingdom? Bible College can teach you theology but only the Holy Spirit can open your eyes to the truth of God. *Unless you read or study the word of God with the mind of obedience and fear of God, you are a mere scholar, not a disciple of Jesus*. That is why Jesus has asked you, “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things which I say?” [Lk 6: 46]. It no longer matters whether not accepting Him in truth and in spirit is by chance or by choice. Sooner than later, He will return to judge you and the rest of us. Can you afford to ignore Him, especially by choice?