



WEEK 3

# DIGGING DEEPER

The unexpected road to hope

## WHAT IS A EUNUCH IN THE BIBLE?

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What is a eunuch in the Bible? Under the Old Testament law, eunuchs were banned from the priesthood and from God's assembly due to their castration. Yet, we see men in the Bible fitting the description of a eunuch, many whom are depicted favorably and even a unique object of God's promises. What does the Bible teach about eunuchs? Is there grace and favor for eunuchs? Or did their shame put them outside of God's love? The Bible's answer is certainly not!

The biblical words translated as "eunuch"

The Hebrew word saris appears 45 times in the Old Testament. The word saris has twofold meanings as 1) a person, often a royal official, who has been emasculated, meaning a eunuch, or 2) a title for a royal official who serves in a position of power, trust, or command in the Ancient Near East.

The earlier usage of saris is of a royal official, with no reference to castration. Saris is actually an Akkadian loanword from sa resi, meaning royal official or one who is of the king's head. Neither the original Akkadian etymology nor Egyptians used this term to imply sexual impotence. This makes sense especially in Potiphar's case, for if the Egyptian Potiphar had been a eunuch, why would he have had a wife (Gen. 39:7-9)? Thus, Potiphar's title as sar hattabbahim is translated as "captain of the bodyguards" (Gen. 37:36; 39:1).

The earliest uses of saris in the Bible come from Joseph's story, where sari is used as a title for three Egyptian officials: Potiphar (Gen. 37:36; 39:1), the chief cupbearer, and the chief baker (Gen 40:2, 7). Importantly, the idea of saris being a eunuch developed much later in biblical Hebrew.

What is a eunuch in the Bible? "The Hebrew word saris has twofold meanings as 1) a person, often a royal official, who has been emasculated, 2) or a title for a royal official."

Then, when the Old Testament mentions saris as eunuchs who were employed as personal attendants of a queen or a harem, it highlights the era of Iron Age. Eunuchs were men who were castrated in order to be trusted in overseeing the king's domestic interests, especially in protecting king's harems. This heartless order was probably established by tyrannical and pagan kings so as to make loyal attendants sexually impotent and disinterested in marriage in order to have an undivided loyalty to the king.

The Greek word translated as “eunuch” is eunouchos. The term is a compound word joining “to keep” with “bed,” signifying the function to tend to domestic affairs. The word can signify a castrated palace official (e.g., supervising the harem), or, more generally, a person who by castration, physical incapacitation, or choice abstains from marriage or having children.

Eunouchos is also the word in the Greek Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament) more often than not used to translate saris (although sometimes a different Greek word is used because of the context, such as spandontos, meaning a “guard”). Eunouchos and its forms appear a total of eight times in the New Testament (e.g., Matt. 19:12; Acts 8:27, 34, 38-39).

What is a eunuch in the Bible? “The Greek word translated as ‘eunuch’ is eunouchos.”

### **What does the Old Testament Law say about eunuchs?**

When we come to the Old Testament law, we see that castration was a matter of shame and offense. Part of this is because Yahweh’s law encourages marriage and procreation. There was also likely a religious stigma attached because of ritual castration practiced by pagan neighbors. The list of deformities that disqualified a man from serving as a priest included castration (Lev. 21:20). Deuteronomy 23:1 prohibits any man “who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting” from entering the Israelite assembly. The word saris is not used in these passages; again, saris as a castrated person was a later development in Hebrew.

These passages help explain why eunuchs were generally seen as outcasts in the Jewish community. Most people looked down on a eunuch as a “half-man” because he was incapable of marriage and natural fatherhood. Rabbinic Judaism taught that procreation is a duty and that the unmarried state is shameful. Some people recognized that many eunuchs were in that state through no fault of their own, but many mocked eunuchs for natural desires remaining unfulfilled. Interestingly, among Gentiles, Jewish circumcision was often equated as a form of castration.

What is a eunuch in the Bible? “When we come to the Old Testament law, we see that castration was a matter of shame and offense.”

Were Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego eunuchs?

The multiple possible meanings of the word saris are important to note as they lead to an unresolved debate among scholars regarding Daniel and his friends: Were they eunuchs? While we lack certainty on this issue, here are some possibilities for understanding Daniel’s situation.

The first possibility is foreshadowed in the text of Isaiah 39:5-7 and 2 Kings 20:16-18 where, after King Hezekiah had foolishly shown his whole treasure to the Babylonian envoy, Isaiah prophesied that the king’s descendants would be taken into captivity and would be castrated, putting an end to the royal dynasty. Some have seen a fulfillment of this prophecy in Daniel 1:1-4 when Daniel and his friends were taken into Babylonian captivity. Though they were taken into captivity during the time when slaves were made eunuchs, still the book of Daniel nowhere mentions that they were castrated. However, it does mention that a man named Ashpenaz, who was the “chief eunuch” (ESV), was in charge over Daniel and his friends (Dan. 1:3).

What is a eunuch in the Bible? “Isaiah prophesied that the king’s descendants would be taken into captivity and would be castrated, putting an end to the royal dynasty.”

It’s worth mentioning though that this prophecy from Isaiah could also be read as a prediction of the well-known Neo-Babylonian practice of capturing princes and nobles and placing them into subordinate roles as state officials in the Babylonian royal court (recall that the word used, *saris*, can simply refer to subordinate royal officials). If so, this was fulfilled as Hezekiah’s son Manasseh was captured by Assyrians and held prisoner in Babylon (2 Chron. 33:11) and as more descendants of Hezekiah were taken by Nebuchadnezzar II to Babylon, where they maintained a noble status (2 Kings 24:15; 25:7; Dan. 1:3).

As for the possibility that Daniel and his friends became eunuchs, we also find examples of *saris* as castrated officials in the book of Esther. Esther’s book has labelled four kinds of Persian royal officials who were eunuchs employed by Xerxes such as eunuchs in charge of the harem (Es. 2:3, 14-15), namely Hegai; eunuch guarding queens (4:4-5); eunuchs guarding the king’s bedchamber (2:2; 6:2); and seven eunuchs as kings’ attendants (1:10, 12, 15; 6:14; 7:9). Another reference of *sari* as a eunuch comes from Israel’s royal court, when King Jehu instructed palace eunuchs to toss Queen Jezebel from the royal palace’s window. The eunuch was likely brought by Jezebel from her Phoenician hometown (2 Kings 9:32).

What is a eunuch in the Bible? “We also find examples of *saris* as castrated officials in the book of Esther.”

A second possibility is that Daniel falls under the category of *saris*—but as a royal official. In addition to the early examples of *saris* as Egyptian officials, some later examples of this more foundational usage of *saris* (as royal officials and attendants) are as follows: The word *sarisayw* is used for royal officials in 1 Samuel 8:15. *Saris* is used to describe palace officials in Israel’s royal court (*hassarisim*) in 1 Chronicle 28:1. *Sari* is used of a royal court member/official sent by King Ahab to summon Micaiah in 1 Kings 22:9 and 2 Chronicles 18:8. King Joram charged a *sari* (“official” in NIV) to restore a woman’s land (2 Kings 8:6).

### **God’s promise to eunuchs**

Although eunuchs had previously been kept from the Israelite assembly, many eunuchs were portrayed in the Bible as positive characters. For example, Hegai in the story of Esther, Ashpenaz in the story of Daniel, and the eunuchs who threw Jezebel from the window. And, of course, there is the possibility that Daniel and his friends were eunuchs as well.

How were these people to relate to God’s community? And how about those unnamed Jews who were made eunuchs as Isaiah prophesied? Were they to have a place in God’s community? Or were they cursed and tainted, e.g., by these paganistic rituals, forever?

Through Isaiah, God gave eunuchs a beautiful promise. The book of Isaiah speaks these promises to eunuchs in 56:3-5:

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.”  
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.” (Is. 56:3-5, NIV)

What is eunuch in the Bible? “To them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters.”

God here directly speaks to eunuchs, who in their maimed-ness lacked the human wholeness that was God’s ideal. Yet God does not exclude them from his coming kingdom. God rather instructs the eunuch to not complain that “I am only a dry tree” even though he could not reproduce or become a natural father. Being a “dry tree” can also be interpreted as the tree bearing no fruit which is useless and is consequently burnt up in a fire. Perhaps the eunuch felt good-for-nothing and despised by his society, yet God does not forsake him. The Lord tells him to 1) keep the Sabbath, 2) choose to do what pleases God, and 3) hold fast to his covenant.

This passage encourages them to keep a covenantal relationship with God, a relationship of true devotion which stands those who are acceptable in the Lord’s eyes for their obedience against those who are unacceptable to God for their rebellion. Since God has included them as his covenant people, now God challenges them to walk in a way which pleases God to maintain a perpetual relationship with God by holding fast to a firm conviction.

What is a eunuch in the Bible? “Perhaps the eunuch felt good-for-nothing and despised by his society, yet God does not forsake him.”

In the Jewish community, one’s name is remembered and preserved through the continuity of children, something eunuchs would not experience. But in this prophecy, God promises to remember them within his temple walls by giving them a “memorial” and “name” which is everlasting and will never be cut off (Ps. 1120:6; Is. 55:13), and that this heritage is “better than sons and daughters.” Isaiah uses the imagery of a memorial (e.g., 2 Sam. 18:18) which communicates that they will always be in God’s mind and never be forgotten. This memorial will be even better than having many children who may or may not remember their forefathers in the long run, while faithful eunuchs would be held as an example for generations.

### **Jesus talks about eunuchs and celibacy...**

In Jesus, we see a continuation and expansion of this theme in Isaiah’s prophecy. In a society in which eunuchs were demoralized for their disfigurement, in Matthew 19:11-12, Jesus reframed the concepts of eunuchs and celibacy as potentially good things. When Jesus explained that we are not permitted to divorce except when the covenant has already been broken through sexual immorality,



his shocked disciples responded that, in that case, it is better not even to get married. To this, Jesus explained,

“Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.” (Matt. 19:11-12, NIV)

Jesus states three types of eunuchs as 1) eunuchs by birth, 2) people who were made eunuchs by men, and 3) people who choose to live as eunuchs for the kingdom’s sake. The first two types are the result of either humans’ or nature’s doing. The rabbis distinguished these as *seris adam*, literally “eunuch of man” who was either emasculated by men or after some time lacked reproduction due to some debilitating factors, and *seris hamma*, literally “eunuch of the sun,” from the first seeing of the sun, as someone born with defective genitals.

We ought to note here that being a eunuch through a birth defect or being made a eunuch by men was not the equivalent of being a transgender person, as this interpretation does not match up with its original context. Making another person a eunuch is a ruthless and immoral process and is not to be equated with when a person does not feel congruence with the body gifted and intended by God’s perfect mind and hand. In most cases, eunuchs were not personally responsible for their fate, but rather it was the doing of nature or the tyranny of other men. They neither denied their maleness nor were confused regarding their sex.

In addition to this, the third category which Jesus mentions are those who figuratively have “made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” This verse is not a command from Jesus for all to stay single or to become eunuchs—as God himself in Genesis 1 officiated the first wedding, and Jesus himself performed his first miracle at a wedding. Rather, Jesus reasons that as some men submitted to be eunuchs so as to serve kings as their personal attendants without any distractions, similarly some believers with such a gift intentionally choose the unmarried state in order to serve God’s kingdom more effectively with an undivided loyalty. They are living on earth as the angels do in heaven (Matt. 22:30).

“As some men submitted to be eunuchs so as to serve kings as their personal attendants without any distractions, similarly some believers with such a gift intentionally choose the unmarried state in order to serve God’s kingdom more effectively with an undivided loyalty.”

Jesus’ words may have sounded strange and offensive to Jesus’ audience which held onto the Torah strictly, but here the kingdom takes priority.

### **Paul talks about celibacy for the kingdom’s sake**

Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19 is echoed in 1 Corinthians 7 and 9, where Paul advises singles to remain unmarried, if possible, to secure undistracted devotion for kingdom work (1 Cor. 7:25-35). The apostle knew that, like other apostles (including Peter), he too could have a wife and father children. He was not a physical eunuch. Yet Paul willingly remained unmarried knowing that, for him, marriage would only be an obstacle in preaching the gospel which he found more important.

Thus, Paul is a great example of a spiritual “eunuch,” as Jesus described the person who “choose[s] to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.”

### **God’s Spirit gathers outcasts in love...**

With Christ’s arrival, God’s Spirit actively and personally started gathering outcasts in greater love as witnessed in the story of an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40). This man was a foreigner and a royal eunuch who came to Jerusalem to worship.

Ironically, on his journey back to Ethiopia, the eunuch was reading Isaiah’s scroll (Is. 53:7-8) which made him eager to know about the One that Isaiah was talking about. Seeing the urgency of this faithful servant, the angel of God directed Philip to meet with this eunuch. Philip ran to meet him and explained to him about Jesus. This eunuch straight away believed, requested baptism, and then returned on his way rejoicing!

“With Christ’s arrival, God’s Spirit actively and personally started gathering outcasts in greater love as witnessed in the story of an Ethiopian eunuch.”

This is how God’s love and care work for those who are shameful in the world’s eyes, for if they truly commit themselves to the God of promises and walk in a worthy manner before him, they become an apple of his eye, for whom he acts and reacts. These are people whom he intentionally places and preserves in his memory, in his heart, and in his eternal kingdom.