

Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch Acts 8:26-40

Outline adapted from "Follow That Chariot," by David Henderson @ Sermon Central.com.

This is one of the most intriguing stories in Acts. Philip was a Hellenic Jew, meaning he had grown up in a Greek city (probably Caesarea), who was appointed by the Apostles as one of the original 7 Deacons, charged with caring for the physical needs of his fellow church members. But, like Stephen – another Deacon – Philip was also a gifted evangelist, capable of sharing the Gospel in a powerful way (in fact after Samaritan revival, Philip the Deacon came to be known as Philip the Evangelist [Acts 21:8]).

How did this Samaritan revival begin? Fleeing from the persecution in Jerusalem, Philip is walking through Samaria on his way home to Caesarea. But as he is walking, he is also preaching Christ as the Messiah which brought about an amazing revival in the region. This was such a surprising event that two of the Apostles come up from Jerusalem to verify the revival and were so excited by it that they returned to Jerusalem also bearing witness to Jesus the Messiah. **So in the midst of this wonderful revival, with thousands of Samaritans coming to faith in Christ, why would God move Philip from where he is touching so many lives to now send him out walking along some distant desert road looking for just one man?** The place and the timing both seem odd until you know the rest of the story.

Samaria was 42 miles north of Jerusalem; with just another 40 miles of walking Philip would have gotten home to Caesarea. Gaza was about 50 miles SW of Jerusalem. So Philip is being called by the Spirit to go some 90 miles out of his way and now 130 miles from home – by foot - down to this desert road without even telling him the reason why. The Bible simply states that, having been called by God, **Philip rose and went** (v. 27). And who does he find there, but a high ranking Ethiopian official – the Queen's treasurer – returning home from worshipping in Jerusalem, riding along in his chariot while reading the scroll of Isaiah.



This scene actually tells you a lot about this man. He had come to Jerusalem to worship, meaning he was of the Hebrew faith. How did an Ethiopian come to practice the Hebrew faith? Would you be surprised to know that Ethiopians had followed the Hebrew faith since the Queen of Sheba came up to visit King Solomon around 950 BC. *(How this came to be, is an amazing story in its own right, that I can share with you next Tuesday, during our "Something More" Bible study, because I just don't have the time right now).*

This Ethiopian was also obviously very wealthy, and powerful in his nation. Since all such scrolls were hand copied, not too many individuals would have their own personal copy of any portion of the Hebrew Bible. Whether or not he had all the scrolls of the Hebrew Bible, perhaps purchased in Jerusalem and stored somewhere in his caravan to be brought back home, there he was holding and reading aloud from the scroll of Isaiah as he was carried

homeward in his deluxe oversized chariot. He also was certainly not traveling alone, for the chariot must have included a driver, and even still Philip was able to climb up and sit beside the official as they rode along. He was probably also accompanied by some guards, because this pilgrimage from Ethiopia to Jerusalem and back would probably have taken almost half a year to complete.

The fact that he was a eunuch is also important to this story. To be so, was probably a requirement of his profession in the palace, but because of Hebrew law, being a eunuch disqualified him from entering the Temple in Jerusalem (Deut.23:1). So here was a man who had traveled 40-60 days, over 1500 miles one-way to worship the One True God, and he had to do so standing outside the Temple in the court of the Gentiles. This was a man hungry for God and yet due to his physical condition denied the right to approach God at the altar. In his homeland he was a respected official, in Jerusalem he was just another unclean outcast.

We also know that this official was highly educated, because – as was the standard practice of those days - he was reading aloud from the Greek (Septuagint) version of the Isaiah scroll; and this is why Philip was the most appropriate person to witness to him. Having grown up in the Greek culture, Philip was fluent in reading and speaking Greek. And he also apparently knew the book of Isaiah quite well; two reasons why the Spirit brought him to this Ethiopian.

Now imagine with me, this highly educated, well dressed, wealthy, very powerful, and prominent man, a man who answers ONLY to the queen, is riding along in his royal caravan in the middle of this hot lonely desert, when up to his chariot runs a stranger who obviously only owns the clothes on his back, and boldly asks him, "*Do you understand what you are reading?*"

His response normally would have been: "*If I who have had years of education and experience cannot understand what I am reading, then what are the chances that you a common everyday stranger from out of the desert do understand? Guards, make this vagrant unwelcome!*"

A man such as this, in his position of authority, would normally ignore a stranger of no standing like Philip. But you must understand that this man has been prepared by God for this very moment. He was nurtured in the Word of God perhaps by his parents, by his grandparents, and he studies the Word of God himself. **This man is so hungry for God, that he made a six month pilgrimage just to stand outside of the Temple to worship God.** He has been so prepared by God's Word and the Spirit, to hear Philip's witness - so that such a comment does not even cross his mind. Instead, he replies, "*How can I know unless someone guides me,*" and he invites Philip to come up and sit with him (8:31). The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture from Isaiah 53:7-8.

'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.'
(Isaiah 53: 7-8, Acts 8:32-33)

So, he asks Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?"

His question isn't simply a matter of personal curiosity, this was one of the unresolved "hot" questions of the time. The rabbis could not figure out who this passage referred to; no one in the history of Israel fit the bill. Some claimed it may be about the prophet Jeremiah and others said it was the nation of Israel, but neither solution was truly satisfactory.

In the history of Israel, no person has ever fulfilled this prophetic description, that is, until Jesus came along. This Ethiopian is not ignorant, he would not have risen to such a prominent place in his kingdom otherwise. And while he may not have heard of Jesus, he does know both his Hebrew Bible and the current commentaries on it. In essence, he assumes Philip is also aware of this debate and he essentially asks, which theory do you side with?

The answer the Eunuch expects is probably some version of what any number of rabbinical schools taught on the subject, but to his surprise, beginning with this scripture, Philip tells him about Jesus.

- Jesus was silent before his accusers.
- Jesus was led to his death without protest.
- Jesus was humiliated (death on a cross was thought to be the most humiliating way to die).
- Jesus' trial deprived him of justice.
- Jesus never was married, and never produced any children, even if the Ron Brown and the Da Vinci Code falsely claim otherwise.

Remember, the NT had not yet been written. There were no Gospels or Epistles to refer to yet. So, for a person schooled in the OT, this is the perfect passage to use to explain who Jesus is. The man sees that what Philip is telling him matches the prophecy - he believes that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Christ, God's Chosen One, And so he asks to be baptized into his new found faith.

Coming upon a pool of water on this desert road (another coincidence?), Philip baptizes him, and is then "*snatched away*" by the Spirit. Does this mean that he runs away, just like he ran up? Or did the Holy Spirit teleport him to the next place? Whatever happened,

"*Philip found himself*" in the coastal town of Azotus (Ashdod) some 60 miles from where he baptized the Ethiopian, with only 60 more miles to get himself home to Caesarea. What does Philip do? He preaches all the way home.

And what of the Ethiopian? He heads homeward rejoicing. He had come to Jerusalem seeking to worship God believing he was only half a man who could not even stand in the presence of his Lord. And he is now returning home, knowing that he has been fully loved and accepted by God, just the way he is. **But why did God go to such great lengths to bring the Good News of Jesus to this particular person?**

As long ago promised, God is continuing to work out a plan begun at the foundation of our world for the restoration of His lost creation: both the salvation of humanity and the world we inhabit. **So this meeting on a lonely road in the middle of nowhere was not by chance, it was by design.** God, had long prepared an African nation, far distant from Israel in both ethnicity and culture, to come to faith in Jesus Christ. God had brought together Philip and this particular Ethiopian at this exact moment, in this exact place, for one specific purpose. **With the meeting of these two individuals on desert road south of Jerusalem, the Good News of Jesus, God's messiah, was now headed into the heart of Africa, to a people ready to receive it.** That is might miraculous and just how God works!

Which brings up another bit of history that we can talk about next Tuesday. The first nation in Europe to officially declare itself Christian was Armenia in 310AD, the second nation to do so was in Africa in 330AD; this was because one Ethiopian official carried his newfound faith homeward and obviously spread the Good News around (*The Roman world did not officially declare itself Christian until 385AD*).

And here is one final oddity to note: You may have noticed that verse 37 is missing from this chapter (your Bible skips from verse 36 to 38). This is another bunny trail that we can run down on Tuesday.

But for now, let's move on to personal application. What lesson, from Philip and the Ethiopian, can we take home to increase our faith and witness. That answer can be found in noting what made Philip the Evangelist such a powerful witness.

1. Philip lived by faith
2. Philip was prepared to witness:
3. So God directed him to lost people
4. The Holy Spirit prepared their hearts to listen
5. Philip met where they were and then lead them to where they needed to be
6. Follow up your witness.

1. Philip lived by faith.

Contrast the story of Philip here in the NT with Jonah in the OT. God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach the gospel. But because he hated the Ninevites and wanted them to perish, Jonah refused to witness to them. He ran away from the Lord heading in the opposite direction. But if you know the story of Jonah and the big fish, then you know that Jonah does get to Nineveh – not by the most pleasant means of transport – and he does preach, and they are saved, much to God’s pleasure but Jonah’s continuing displeasure.

Now, when God tells Philip to go 90 miles out of his way to this desert place, the scripture simply tells us, *he got up and went*. So you must understand when God calls us to do something, to go somewhere, or speak to someone, no matter how difficult it may seem at the time, God does have a specific reason for us to do this specific thing (like finding a particular Ethiopian on some desert road): **we must respond in faith**. Many times in scripture, we see God calling for his people to go and do, often times without giving them all of the details. And every time – willing or unwilling – they went.

God told Abraham to “*leave your country, leave your people, leave your Father’s house and go to a land that I will show to you.*” And he did. If someone were to ask you to drop everything, pack your bags and go somewhere else, what would your first questions be? Where? When? Why? How much will this cost me? And who are you to tell me to go anywhere? But when God speaks to you, your best response is just to go in **faith**.

God told Moses to go to Pharaoh and deliver the Israelites out of Egypt. Like Jonah, Moses attempted to get out of this mission; he made excuses: in Egypt, he was a wanted man, he couldn’t speak well, why not send my brother Aaron. But for all of his 80 years of life up to this point, God had been preparing Moses for this task, so with a bit of complaining eventually Moses went, and **his faith** grew dramatically.

2. Philip lived by faith, he was ready to go. **But he was also prepared to witness: Philip knew his Bible and he knew how to share the story of Jesus.**

God wants people to come to faith in Him, so if we are willing and prepared to witness, God will direct us to lost people.

- That we are to be his witnesses and
- that we are to be prepared to witness

are the two primary commands that God has given us as followers of Jesus Christ. The last thing Jesus said was:

**Go and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
and teaching them to obey everything
that I have commanded you.**

Matthew 28:18-19

According to Barna Research the number of people in the U.S. Who do not have a relationship with Jesus Christ is somewhere in the neighborhood of 180-190 million people. That is over 1/2 of the population in America. So there are lost people everywhere around you needing to be witnessed to, baptized, disciple, and taught about Jesus.

But even if you are willing, you can only be ready to go, if you have prepared yourself to go; like Philip have you learned and are you prepared to share scripture, to tell the Good News of Jesus the Christ? That is why Paul instructed his young disciple Timothy whom he was preparing to be a pastor, to ...

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, **a worker who has no need to be ashamed**, rightly explaining the word of truth.
2 Timothy 2:15

I certainly would want God my father to approve of me. And I would love to join with Abraham, Moses, and Philip (and perhaps even the Blues Brothers) in going on a mission for God.

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2. Philip was prepared to witness:
3. So God directed him to lost people
4. The Holy Spirit prepared their hearts to listen
5. Philip met where they were and then lead them to where they needed to be
6. Follow up your witness.

3. And if you are willing and prepared to go, like Philip to all the Samaritans or to one individual Ethiopian, **God will certainly send you to those people who are ready to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ, God's son, our savior.**

4. Because just as He is working in you, **God's Holy Spirit goes before you to prepare their heart to receive Christ.** When he was ready to hear it, when his hunger for God was felt most deeply, The Ethiopian needed an educated Jewish Christian who was also literate in Greek, to speak to him about Jesus from the prophet Isaiah. And the Holy Spirit brought that exact person, 90 miles down into the desert to do just that.

5. And when God does that with us; bringing us to, or bringing to us, someone needing to hear the Good News, our job is to **meet them where they are at and lead them to where they need to be.**

So our first task when meeting someone who needs to meet Jesus is to find out spiritually where they are at. **We do this by first listening before we speak** (a difficult lesson for me to practice).

Philip heard the Ethiopian reading aloud from Isaiah, so that's where he began his gospel presentation by asking him a question, and then by listening as the Ethiopian told him where his thoughts were.

Philip met him right at the point of his need and then he took him straight into a conversation about Jesus. Always share Jesus first before anything else. Philip must have also talked with him about baptism because when they came to water, the eunuch then wanted to be baptized. Sometimes we spend too much time talking to people about the church or the theological controversies of the day; all of these things matter but first we must get them to Jesus.

6. And though you don't see this in the Eunuch's story – because Philip was snatched away – having shared the Good news and brought another to the point of faith, then we need to follow through ... make sure they get into the family.

If we have been privileged to share our faith and lead a person to Christ, Our very next task is to get them into the body of Christ:

- a Church nearby who can help them grow.
- Encourage them to get into the word
- Get into a growing group of christians...
- encourage them to be baptized.

Let me ask you, who has God placed in your path that He wants you to share your faith with? Who is God saying to you, follow that chariot, follow that car, talk to that neighbor, share with your children, grandchildren, a co worker. Who is God placing on your heart? If you don't know of anyone, then start praying and asking God to lead you; because that is what he has left you here to be doing.

Did you hear about the little boy returning home after his first Sunday school class? His mother asked, "Who was your teacher?" and the little boy answered, "*I don't remember her name, but she must have been Jesus' grandmother because she didn't talk about anyone else.*"

Does our conversation reflect our love of Jesus?
Would our words give away our relationship with him?
Are you ready and willing to go if God calls?

Let's pray about this together.

Why is Acts 8:37 missing?

A common question that I am asked is, "***with all the translations that the Bible has gone through, how can we be sure that someone has not changed God's word***". The answer is that whatever version of the Bible you are holding in your hand has only gone through one translation – It and all other modern translations have all started with the original and very accurate Hebrew and Greek Text. So what you are holding is the best attempt by one particular group of translators to get the words of scripture as accurately as possible from the Hebrew and Greek into the English language. – Let me explain.

As you know, the Bible was originally hand-written on various scrolls in Hebrew and in Greek. And then year after year copies of copies were continuously made so there are literally thousands of scrolls containing Biblical text. Some are complete books of the Bible, others are just fragments recording bits of biblical scriptures.

Beginning with the renaissance and continuing even to this day, All of these thousands of scrolls have been carefully studied and compared by biblical scholars who have graded them from very reliable to questionable. Then only those texts from all the most reliable scrolls have been compiled into the modern Hebrew and Greek Bibles that we have today. **And from these verified Hebrew and Greek Texts various English translations have been made. But every translation starts from these verified texts, so you are always only one translation away from the original writing.**

And how do we know that the Hebrew and Greek texts have not changed? Because when we can compare thousands of texts and fragments of texts, any one text's discrepancy in wording would be clearly evident, duly noted, and corrected (Like the verse that should have been Acts 8:37). What this means in short, is that the Bible we have today, is very, a very accurate of the original writings. You can be assured that when you read the words of Jesus - they are the words of Jesus.

For example, since verse 37 is not found in the most reliable manuscripts of Acts, therefore it was excluded from the authoritative Greek text and thus modern translations omit this verse. Verse 37 said, "***and he [Philip] said to him, 'If you believe with all your heart you may, and he said in answer, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.'***"

While these words are part of in early Christian baptismal confessions, they were not in the most reliable manuscripts. Certainly the Eunuch believed and perhaps said something like this, so what verse 37 says is not out of line, but it originally wasn't there in the text of Acts.

This is one of those rare occurrences where it appears a commentary was added by a copyist, and at a later date the commentary was taken by another copyist as part of the text, and not just a commentary. So in the quest for complete accuracy, modern translations omit this verse. Your Bible is a very accurate translation.