

Acts 8:26–40

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[0 : 00] That's Acts 8, 26-40, page 1015. Please remain standing for the reading of God's word. Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, Rise, and go toward the south to the road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza.

This is a desert place. And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure.

He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the spirit said to Philip, Go over and join this chariot.

So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, Do you understand what you are reading? And he said, How can I, unless someone guides me? And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this. Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth.

[1 : 03] In his humiliation, justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth. And the eunuch said to Philip, About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this?

About himself or about someone else? Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture, he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road, they came to some water.

And the eunuch said, See, here is water. What prevents me from being baptized? And he commanded the chariot to stop. And they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.

And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away. And the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus.

And as he passed through, he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, good morning, and welcome to Holy Trinity.

[2 : 06] I add my New Year's greetings to you. And those of you who have been traveling, you are a sight for sore eyes. We're glad you're back, and pray that this will be a great year of God's grace, as our life together rests upon the foundation of Jesus and what he's done.

There is a new phenomenon on the American landscape. And by new, I mean I didn't grow up with it. It's simply called binge watching.

This is something that has taken almost the entire country by storm.

People sitting for hours on end watching made-for-TV shows with episode upon episode unable to release themselves until they have concluded everything.

Well, let me tell you, as an old-school guy, the Book of Acts in this year is for me like binge watching. I mean, for a year, we are privileged to watch this narrative unfold with spectacular scene after spectacular scene.

- [3 : 24] Episode upon episode, we have seen early shots set in small group upper rooms, and we've also seen episodes out in the great open streets of Jerusalem.
- We have seen high drama in Israel's Sanhedrin court systems, and then we have been journeying to northern cities and capital cities like Samaria to see what was taking place.
- And today, as the lens of the camera opens on this episode, verses 26 to 40, it focuses immediately on one of our newfound favorite characters, Philip.
- Take a look at verse 26. Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, Rise and go to the south of the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. This is a desert place.
- And he rose and went. So we see before us Philip. Philip, we already know, is a Greek-speaking Jew who, while in Jerusalem, most likely attended a synagogue of the freedmen.
- [4 : 42] Namely, he didn't go to the Aramaic-speaking synagogue where the twelve apostles were their full force and their show of force.
- He came into the series inconspicuously in a list in chapter 6 as one of those who was elected to ensure that those who were speaking the common language of Greek had their needs met in that early household time of Christian growth.
- Last time we were here in this text, he took center stage. He was all the way up into the great city of Samaria, which of course was the capital city of the northern tribes of the people of God.
- And he garnered such respect from the apostles back in Jerusalem that they had to follow his work up the road, leaving the city themselves to see what it was that Philip was effectuating.
- We have been glued to him. And now we have him again. And notice, he's no longer north in Samaria, but told by the Spirit of the Lord to go south on a road that would go from Jerusalem to Gaza.
- [6 : 06] Can you see him? This road now begins to move down toward Lachish and then just swinging to his right if he was looking on the path, the ancient cities of Gath and Ashdod.
- In other words, he's moving toward the Mediterranean Sea, to the coastlands, to the cities which once housed all of Philistia, the ancient perpetual enemy of God's people.
- You may not be familiar with the Old Testament sequence in the book of Samuel, but when Samuel comes on the scene, when there was no king in Israel, the Philistines were the perpetual, persistent thorn in the side of Israel.
- And even after David dies, they are still the perpetual enemy. And here he comes, Philip, walking under the direction of the Spirit, alone, toward Gaza.
- Today, of course, Gaza is that little finger-like strip on the Mediterranean that causes such dilemma in the present-day Mideast discussions, being a self-governing place of Palestinian rule and Jewish-Israeli desire.
- [7 : 33] It is a hotbed for all things, even in this day. And that's the road he's on. Now, that's the setting. The setting suddenly gives way to a scene that's going to dominate this episode.
- Take a look at verses 27b through verses 30a. He rose and went, and there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure.
- He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit said to Philip, go over and join this chariot.
- So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet. I mean, it is cinematic. You can now envision Philip isolated and alone on a vacated roadway that's a wasteland and desolate with the coastline yet a few miles before him.

And now the camera moves and there's a chariot coming from some distance. And on this chariot or in this chariot is one that we are given here.

[9 : 06] In other words, we now are being introduced to an entirely new and unfamiliar character in the narrative. Four observations on him. First, he was a foreigner.

Look at the word there. They're Ethiopian. The first thing the writer wants you to recognize is that this man who is traveling, who Philip is obviously going to meet on this desolate road, is a foreigner.

By race, then, possibly, probably, in all likelihood, a black African. By place, probably one who you would have considered to come from the end of the earth.

Now, why do I say the ends of the earth? To those who belong to the Greek-speaking world run by Rome into which Christianity is born, they considered Ethiopia the farthest reaches of the world.

It was some 1,600 miles south and east of Jerusalem. 1,600 miles. Some of you have traveled a long way over the last few weeks.

[10 : 26] 1,600-mile trip is a long way to go, even and especially in a desert area, and you're in a chariot.

It's going to take you some time. He would have had to journey all the way down, coming into Egypt, and then down through Egypt with its lengthy borders until he reached the Sudan.

If he had hugged the finger-like Red Sea instead, he would have passed through this tiny little country of Eritrea before finally arriving in Ethiopia, which itself had the Arabian Sea to its west and a gulf to its north and a water crossing that would have brought you right into the bottom of what is present-day Yemen.

It was a long, long way away. And he wants you to know right away as you see this one, you are seeing a foreigner.

It was Homer some seven or eight centuries before Luke is writing, who in his famous epic poem, The Odyssey, actually refers in the opening moments to Ethiopia as the location that one of the Greek gods, Poseidon, had ventured to, which enabled the other gods to give the character of the book a way forward.

[12 : 13] So some seven or eight centuries before, Homer had actually written concerning Ethiopia these words. Poseidon had gone among the far-off Ethiopians.

the Ethiopians who dwell sundered in twain. I have no idea what that means. But he follows it up then after the comma with these words, the farther most of men.

So the world into which Christianity is birthed, birthed. We are now introduced to a character who comes from the farthest reaches of the earth.

Like I said, observation number one, a foreigner, but a far-off foreigner. Second observation, he was a high, ranking is the wrong idea, but he was a high-ranking servant of the foreign sovereign state.

I know that for two reasons. Notice how the text describes him. He was a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians.

[13 : 31] Now, he uses the word Candace here as a name, but we also know from ancient literature that that was a title for queen mother. So, he is actually in the service of the queen mother of the Ethiopians, Candace, here by name, title throughout the ancient world.

And indeed, it says that he had charge of all her treasures. So, he was a servant, perhaps even a slave, but one who had a high-ranking position in that he oversaw all the money of the queen mother.

I don't know how much money there was, but that was his role. He was a minister of finance. Not only that, but notice it says here he was a eunuch.

Now, get ready. that means his male organ had been cut off. He had been castrated. This was a common practice in the ancient Near East for those who would serve in the court in ways that protected the ruling family on two fronts.

number one, the servitude of the eunuch would be heightened because they had no other potential of family in which they would go serve.

[15 : 15] So, it was a form of greater allegiance, and yet it also kept in the royal courts any perversion of the kingly line through another seed away.

So, it was very common that those who served in the courts in the ancient Near East were indeed eunuchs. And so, here he is, one who was cut off in service to Queen Mother in care of her money.

Third observation, this man was fixed on Judaism and biblical texts. notice what it says there, that he is here reading from Isaiah.

Now, we know that he had come to Jerusalem for the purpose of worship, it says, which is the one caveat on his race. While he is presumed to be a black African, the fact that he came to worship in Jerusalem means that it is possible we don't know, that he could have been a Jew who centuries before was part of the dispersion and pressed into servitude in this far-off distant place.

Indeed, Luke later will refer to Cornelius as the first fully fledged Gentile convert. church. But at any rate, he was fascinated with Judaism.

[16 : 57] He was a worshiper, an attendee of the things related to the promises of God for Israel. And not only that, that's what had brought him to Jerusalem.

Look how he's spending his time on the way home. He is passing his time listening to books on tape. That's what he's doing. He's actually reading from Isaiah.

Now, these scrolls, it's a scroll. It would have been something he's holding, unrolling, and all of the sentence structure would have been very complex.

No periods or separation of text the way we have it today. So it was very common in that day to read aloud just to be able to discern for yourself the way the movement of the work was going.

And so here he is in this chariot reading an ancient text.

[18 : 00] The setting, Philip on the desert road. The scene, this far-off foreigner was a servant of a sovereign foreign state who had a fascination with Judaism and Israel's holy text is on his way and this now yields to what will be a sermon.

Great screenwriting requires good dialogue and we've got some good dialogue that enters into the episode of today.

look at how the dialogue begins. The first voice is given to that of Philip. Verse 30, so Philip ran to him.

I love that image of him coming alongside this chariot which is in motion. Undoubtedly the chariot with this huge distance yet to go not running her horses with full speed.

This just slow moving chariot. He overhears the reading of Isaiah and you are now set with a question do you understand what you're reading?

[19 : 23] I mean welcome to the one room schoolhouse. Welcome to the church on wheels. Welcome to an environment where there's a solitary pew. Welcome to what's called one on one dialogue.

Philip's getting ready to go to work. Do you understand what you're reading? The second voice then is given to the eunuch. How can I, verse 31, unless someone guides me?

And then that voice gives way to the narrator just as anyone who's actually filming decent movies knows how to use dialogue to set up nothing other than cinematic view and you are now placed in the chariot yourself and you actually see what it is the man was reading without ever being told because the narrator's voice says he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

Now the passage of the scripture he was reading was this and you and I are presently there peering over his shoulder and seeing the text on the screen like a sheep.

he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before it shears is silent so he opens not his mouth in his humiliation justice was denied him who can describe his generation for his life is taken away from the earth let me pause hit pause and tell you that he was reading from a portion in Isaiah 53 what we would call Isaiah 53 verses 7 and 8 he was reading from the fourth of what are four poems on the servant of the Lord who Isaiah outlines as one who will come and rescue God's people and reign over all the earth in other words he has been reading a sequence of poems having left

[21 : 33] Jerusalem and has now arrived at the moment where he's reading the fourth in the series of four about the servant the servant songs and that's what we find him doing it's worth it it's worth it for you to take a Bible anywhere near you or to find it on your phone and to look back at these four so that you can see what it was he was doing the first of the servant songs is in Isaiah 42 my Bible verse one reads this way behold!

Ž Ž Ž Ž Ž Ž Ž Ž for joy. Now Kadar is the name of a city for the second born son of Ishmael long ago in the early narrative of Genesis. And so the sons of Ishmael, who one named Kadar, founds a city in what would be Edom out of the Holy Land and not among the chosen seed, is suddenly placed back into the Isaiahic text of a servant as some indication that when the servant comes, even the sons of Ishmael, today of course they would be Muslims, would indeed be recipients of his work.

That's all back there in Isaiah. But that's not all. The second servant song moves on from chapter 42 all the way to Isaiah 49. And in Isaiah 49, as you turn your pages to see it, you'll notice the servant is mentioned in verse 3, and he said to me, you are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified. But notice the direction that this song is moving toward. Verse 1 of the same chapter, listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples, from afar. And then when you look to verse 12 of the import and the impact of this servant's song, behold, these shall come from afar and behold, these from the north and the west and these from the land of Sien. Now that town there is a town on the very northern border of Ethiopia near Sudan. In other words, when the servant comes, he is going to effectuate something on behalf of God that will reach the very checkpoint between Sudan and Ethiopia. But then there goes on into the next one, chapter 50, verses 4 to 11 in Isaiah, the third of the servant's songs. And now the ministry of the servant moves from all of the things that he will bring to the world to this surprising narrative that has him being maligned by those in the world.

You can see his term there in chapter 50, verse 10, who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant. But you can see he's maligned. Earlier, verse 6, I gave my back to those who strike and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard. I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting as if the servant was actually going to be one whose hair was pulled and who was spat upon. And then when you begin to look further in that same psalm, verse 5, you'll see that the Lord had opened his ear. He wasn't rebellious.

He never turned back. That the servant was one who was going to be maligned, even in his work of saving the people of the Lord. All three of those poems he had just finished. And now he was in the midst of reading the fourth poem. And the text you have before you in Luke picks up on Isaiah 53.

[26 : 51] But that poem began back in Isaiah 52, 13 with these words, behold, my servant shall act wisely. He shall be high and lifted up and exalted. But then the irony of that song is that he's the rejected one, the oppressed one, the one who goes to death like a lamb before it shears a silent one.

But the implication, and if you've fallen asleep, you need to wake up on this one, comes in Isaiah 56. For the implication of that servant comes in Isaiah 56, 3 with these words.

Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, the Lord will surely separate me from his people. And let not the eunuch say, behold, I'm a dry tree. For thus says the Lord to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant. I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than the sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that they shall not be cut off. What an amazing litany of poetry placed centuries before in the lips of the prophet Isaiah, that a servant would come with ministry to the coastlands, that a servant would come that would actually bring blessing upon the very perimeter of that which separates Sudan from Ethiopia, that a servant would come that would be maligned as he brings blessing, that the same servant would do something for the eunuchs who themselves had been cut off.

But through the servant who himself was cut off would be grafted in and enter into a new family. This is what he's reading. I mean, you can't watch anything like this on TV. Put down the crown. Pick up the scriptures.

Let Madam Secretary sit for a day and come back to the book of Acts. And then it moves on. The eunuch says to Philip, about whom I ask you, verse 34, does the prophet say this about himself or about someone else?

[29 : 20] Then Philip opened his mouth and beginning with this scripture, he told him the good news of Jesus. Jesus. This gets lost on us because we live so far after the event.

That verse that indicates that Philip takes the Isianic servant songs and connects them to Jesus who was rejected, now resurrected, was as revolutionary as anything in biblical studies could ever bring.

I mean, you want a doctoral thesis in that day that would gain the approval of any educator, if indeed you could prove it, it would be to establish a, get it, a new hermeneutic.

A new way of reading the Bible. Philip is explaining something with interpretive force that has never been done before him.

Philip is taking all of the Old Testament scrolls, putting them under his arms, laying them in the base of the chariot, and saying Israel's promises where God would bring a rescuer and a ruler into the world are directly fulfilled in Jesus.

[31 : 02] Now, you can't come up with that. What's that? What's that? Other than that Luke has already demonstrated this, even at the end of his first volume. Take a look at this.

Luke chapter 24, in one of the post-resurrection narratives. I'll draw your attention just to verse 26 and 27, where Jesus was on the road with two travelers.

This is what he says. Was it not necessary, Luke 24, 26, that the Christ, that is the king, the coming king, should suffer these things and enter into his glory?

And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Isaiah, of course, is the chief among them, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.

Jesus himself had earlier in the gospel record claimed that he had come to serve, not be served. He was a servant.

[32 : 04] And indeed, in Mark 10, 45, it indicates that he had articulated with his own mouth that he had come to be a ransom for many, which is exactly the movement of that fourth servant song that the Ethiopian eunuch had been reading.

That one would come who would lay down his life, that others might enter into the family of God. If you look across the page, Luke 24, verse 44, there's another appearance of Jesus to his apostles.

And he says to them, These are my words that I spoke while I was still with you. And everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. And he said to them, Thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

You are witnesses of this thing. So this is what Philip began to rest his case upon.

[33 : 21] That all of the Hebrew scriptures concerning a rescuer from God that was promised, and one who would rule the world, yet was mysteriously maligned in his effectuating that promise, was none other than Jesus of Nazareth.

I mean, this completely then opened up a whole new way of reading the Hebrew scriptures that is debated even to this day.

But you've seen the setting. The scene is unbelievably captivating. The sermon that took place was unlike any sermon ever preached to that point in history.

And the significance of it should be spoken of, even if I only use three or four minutes of my time to do so before finding my seat. The significance of this event, first of all, should be spoken of in regard to what it did for the Ethiopian eunuch.

Look at verses 36 through 39. This is the significance of the message. And as they were going along the road, they came near some water, and the eunuch said, See, here is water.

[34 : 51] What prevents me from being baptized? And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when he came up out of the water, the spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

The significance for the Ethiopian eunuch is that he embraced that understanding of Isaiah's prophecy to the work of Jesus, took it unto himself for the forgiveness of his own sins, and became in that moment a full-fledged member of the household of God.

The far-off foreigner is now in the family of God. Remember, even eunuchs, back to Deuteronomy 23, 1, eunuchs themselves were not able to be part of Israel's entrance into the gate.

But here, through Jesus, the far-off foreigner can enter in a relationship with God, and this guy took hold of that as fast as he could, because he knew that he basically asked, Well, then what does Jesus want me to do?

And Jesus, before he had left, said, Well, when people receive this interpretation of the Scriptures, they get baptized. And he goes, I got water, let's get it done. Well, it's amazing.

[36 : 14] He's a fully-fledged member of the family of God. And get this. He is the one that Isaiah 56, 3-5, actually represented.

It talked about a eunuch coming into the family of God. And I'm guessing, for the rest of his journey to Ethiopia, he had to settle on him.

I, I find my place in those texts. And then, of course, it says he went with great joy.

How would he not? How would he not go on his way rejoicing? How does anyone who isn't in a relationship with God, who hears for the first time that you can enter into a relationship with God through the death of Jesus, who is the fulfillment of all that God had promised, how is that not something to rejoice over?

In other words, Happy New Year. I mean, you want an epiphany? You want wise men coming to the cradle? Here you have an epiphany. You have Epiphany Sunday.

[37 : 27] You have the far-off foreigner embracing Christ, coming into his family, becoming a follower of his own, and already demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit, which is love and joy.

What was the significance for Philip? Verse 40, Philip found himself at Azotus, and he passed through. He preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Philip just goes on to the next assignment. Whether it's a miraculous transporting, I don't know, other than to say the only thing we needed to know about the new character that we had come to love is he now spends his time preaching and teaching along that Mediterranean coast all the way until he comes north to Caesarea.

We will see him again in chapter 20, some 20 years later, with five daughters who know the Scriptures and can articulate them better than anyone else of the day. Such was the implication for Philip.

He went ahead talking about Jesus just as he had done wherever he went until he lands in Caesarea and plants his family and home there. He's a Greek-speaking Jewish Christian who spent his entire life then explaining texts so that people would fall in love with Jesus who he now embraced.

[38 : 52] What's the significance for Theophilus? Theophilus, you say, who's he? He's the one to which Luke is writing. For Theophilus, this event gives firm footing the credibility of the Christian message for second, third, fourth generation Christians.

It does not rest upon some experience they have. It actually rests upon texts that are interpreted around the centrality of the figure of Jesus.

And so he goes on believing. Why does he go on believing? Because he had some experience that took him out of sight and out of mind and out of body? No. He goes on believing because he's convinced that when he reads the servant songs of Isaiah, he's hard-pressed to find a better explanation for their fulfillment than Jesus.

What's the implication for you? What's the implication for me? First, God's plan of salvation is universal. God intends to reach the farthest away people.

You far off? That's the way even Peter put it early on, didn't he? The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off.

[40 : 18] Everyone whom the Lord, our God, will call to himself. You have no business entering into the promises of God?

The Ethiopian eunuch is now your patron saint. want forgiveness of sins but not know where to go? No matter how far off you've done.

You cannot be far off enough where God cannot reach you. If he can reach a single Ethiopian eunuch on a desert road through the sending of a one-on-one discussion, he can reach anyone, anywhere, anytime because he's going to the end of the earth.

It's so hysterical to me. We read the book of Acts and we're always waiting for when did they get to the ends of the earth. Philip beat the apostles to their own task long before they accomplished it on their own.

Philip was already there. You don't have to wait to go to some big church meeting, some well-known preacher. You can come right today by embracing in your mind and in your heart that these texts center around Jesus and that through him I have a rescuer, I have a ruler, I have forgiveness of sins, I have a family.

[41 : 45] When do we do the next baptism? That's how fast it goes. And for the rest of us who already have embraced Jesus, well, like Philip, you better start by being sensitive to the Holy Spirit because some of the biggest things in your life by way of assignment might be on an isolated road with no ground beneath your feet and a single person that according to Irenaeus in church history, this eunuch himself becomes one who proclaims that message in a far-off land.

You better be sensitive to the Holy Spirit. You better be obedient to his call. You better know how to ask the question, what are you reading? You better be conversational with the scriptures. You ought to have a knowledge of the biblical text.

You ought to be in conversation with all that you see around you concerning your Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ. I close with this. My father, when I was 11 years old, left a great job to take a position at a small, unknown college along the banks of the Fox River.

He had seven children, and he was making 12 grand a year. But because he felt the Lord wanted him on that road, he went.

And professionally, for him, it was three years of abysmal life. Difficult to even win a game.

[43 : 33] But in that time, he had a ball player who came off the streets of Detroit and lived in my garage, and who somehow was the antithesis of anything related to Christianity, but through conversation came to know Christ, and that man spent a lifetime reaching tens of thousands in the Philippines.

A waste of three years? I don't think so. Just one man, sensitive to the leading, conversing as he goes, and asking God to do the work.

Well, I preached as long as I wanted to, and maybe longer than you wanted from me. But, that's because I'm a binge watcher.

I can't wait to come back next week and see the next episode. But we will close our service by allowing you to get on the road, to stand, to form two lines in the center, to walk forward, to receive the elements of the body and blood of Christ as an indication that you, like the eunuch, are looking for his death, to be satisfying and satisfying to the Father for your sins.

And as you do so, I pray that you will be strengthened in that death to live for him until he comes.

[45 : 23] until the day until the day