

## Philip and the Ethiopian

Acts 8:26-40

by Larry Roach

### Teaching Summary

Acts 8:26-35

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake<sup>1</sup>, (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

He was led like a sheep to the slaughter and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth, [Isaiah 53:7-8].

The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

Ethiopia was located in the southern Nile region. The king of Ethiopia was venerated as a child (or son) of the sun and considered too sacred a person to carry out the secular functions of royalty. These functions were carried out by his queen-mother, who bore the dynastic title Kandake.

The Ethiopian treasurer was a high ranking official of the queen and was most likely a Gentile worshipper of the God of Israel who had been converted to Judaism. Eunuchs were commonly employed as court officials in the Near East. He most likely visited Jerusalem at the time of one of the great pilgrim feasts, i.e. Passover, Pentecost, or Tabernacles. He is now on his long journey back to his homeland.

Obviously this man was seeking the Lord. He needed answers. So much so that he had made the long journey to Jerusalem from Ethiopia. He probably returned with much of his questions unanswered as he probably was met with the separationist attitude of Jews regarding eunuchs. He chose the deserted road away from the crowd as he headed home. He must have been deep in thought. He had a problem to resolve.

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<sup>1</sup> or “Candace”

Brother David Bray adds a thought worth considering to this discussion by his observation of the passage in Acts regarding the Ethiopian eunuch coming to Jerusalem to worship. He states:

If he had been unable to worship equally in the assembly of the Lord, he may have been pondering or trying to reconcile that restriction stated in Deuteronomy 23:1: "No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the LORD" with the passage in Isaiah about the Lord's mercy to eunuchs: "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,'" Isaiah 56:3-5. It would have been natural as he read from Isaiah 53 to try to reconcile the conflict with Deuteronomy 23 and Isaiah 56.

When Phillip spoke with him, it's implied that he also used other OT passages to identify Jesus as the Messiah." "Then Phillip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus" Acts 8:35. Phillip, like he had done in Samaria and the Apostles had done in Jerusalem explained how Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah.

**Reflective Questions:** Would we be ready if we had met this man on the road? Would we give him Christian clichés for his problem, or would we know enough about Isaiah 53 that we could communicate to a Jewish person how this passage points to Christ and fulfills the law of the Torah? We certainly face similar situations where people have questions about the Lord –oftentimes about something they have read in the Scriptures. Do we give them superficial answers or are we prepared to meet them where they are at? Would we be prepared to biblically interpret the Scripture they are looking at? I say this to stress the importance of studying the Scriptures not only to know God but also to teach others—in other words to make disciples.

Acts 8:36-40:

As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?"<sup>2</sup> And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.

When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.

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<sup>2</sup> v37. Some later manuscripts include "Phillip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' The official answered, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.'" This statement was probably added later to comply with 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century church tradition of confession of Jesus as the Son of God before being baptized.

Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

All evidence would point to the Ethiopian being receptive to the message concerning Jesus as the Messiah. This Jesus is the one who came to take away the sin of the world by his sacrifice and reconciled man to God for all who believe. After hearing the truth about Jesus, the Ethiopian's response was probably much like those in Jerusalem who heard Peter preach that Jesus, the one crucified, has now become Christ and Lord (cf. Acts 2:36). Those in Jerusalem were "cut to the heart" (crushed) after hearing the truth and they asked Peter and the other apostles "What shall we do?" (cf. Acts 2:37). Peter's response, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

In Acts 8:36, the Ethiopian's response to Phillip's preaching resulting in him asking, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" Obviously he had met the requirements for baptism for Philip baptized him that moment in the water God had provided along the way. The man not only professed his faith in Christ through baptism to Philip but also to all the onlookers that accompanied him on his journey.

It is worth noting that the only evidence of fulfillment of the promise of the Holy Spirit on this occasion was that the man went on his way with great joy praising God. For what happened in his life that day was very much "good news!" With mission completed, the Spirit was present and suddenly took Philip away to Azotus and where he continued preaching along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The words "took away" are also translated "snatched away" or "caught up." This indicates a very sudden removal. A very similar use of these words can be found in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 regarding the return of the Lord, "We who are still alive and are left will be caught [snatched] up together with them [those who previously died] in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever."

It would be understandable to conclude that this mission that Philip was upon was more than reaching one man on a deserted road for Christ. Through this encounter we continue to see the fulfillment of the great commission to preach the gospel to all nations. We would expect that this man carried his new found faith as a missionary to Ethiopia –which in that time was considered the outermost parts of the world.

In the next section we will explore Isaiah 53 to gain greater understanding of how it points to the Messiah. We will see how the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 53 was fulfilled through Christ. We will also see how Christ fulfilled the law as described in Leviticus. It is difficult to understand Isaiah 53 without connecting it to Leviticus. By making this connection we can begin to see it from a more Jewish perspective and pointing to how Jesus the Messiah fulfilled the law and prophecies. God's plan of redemption has been marvelously woven over a long period of time. Scripture reminds us that there was a "Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world," Revelation 13:8b.

### **What's Your Next Step?**

Every passage of Scripture requires a response back to God. Respond back to God with statements or questions about the focal verses. This is really a form of prayer that might include asking for understanding, forgiveness, wisdom, direction, and strength in regards to what you are reading in the focal verse.

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