Philip and the Ethiopian: A Chariot on the Desert Road

Bible Stories Anthology — Acts 8:26-40

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Author: John Lobota

Research Assistant: Claude Cowork

papertiq@bellsouth.net

> **Romans 15:4** *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Why These Stories Were Written — Romans 15:4

Paul had just quoted a thousand-year-old psalm and applied it to Christ (Romans 15:3, quoting Psalm 69:9), and then he explained why he could: *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning*. **Written aforetime** — the scriptures that already stood before this present age of grace opened at Pentecost: the record God gave through Moses, the prophets and the writings, along with the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly ministry, which belong to that same time before Pentecost. (When Paul wrote these words, the scriptures he had in hand were the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospels had not yet been written down.) **Written for our learning** — "learning" is the Greek word for *teaching*, the very word rendered "doctrine" in 2 Timothy 3:16. These are not quaint tales; they are doctrine in narrative form. Adam, Ruth and David never knew us, but God did, and He had their lives recorded with us in mind — written *for* us, though not all of it written *to* us, which is why we read Israel's history as our instruction and not as our marching orders. **Through patience and comfort of the scriptures** — "patience" is literally *remaining under*, the staying power we gain from watching men and women stay under a load; "comfort" is a *calling alongside*, the strength God brings when He meets them there, which is why Paul calls Him "the God of patience and consolation" in the very next verse. **That we might have hope** — not a wish, but confident expectation: the return of Jesus Christ and everlasting life with Him. That is why these accounts exist, and it is how they should be read.

One Man, One Road, One Scripture

Philip was in the middle of the greatest revival anyone had seen outside Jerusalem. A whole city in Samaria was listening to him. The sick were being healed, the possessed set free, and there was great joy in that city. And God told him to leave — to walk south, to a road in the desert.

On that road, a single chariot was heading home toward Africa. In it sat one of the most powerful men of a foreign kingdom: the treasurer of the queen of the Ethiopians. He had travelled over a thousand miles to worship at Jerusalem, and as he rode he was reading aloud from a scroll of Isaiah. He had come to a passage he could not understand — about a man led like a lamb to the slaughter.

Philip ran alongside and asked him one question. By the end of the afternoon, a man from what the ancient world called the ends of the earth had heard of Jesus, believed, been baptized in water beside the road, and gone on his way rejoicing.

Of all the stories in Acts, this is the one with the fewest people in it: two men, a chariot, a scroll, and some water. It is also one of the clearest pictures in the Bible of how one person tells another about Jesus.

The Setting

When. Shortly after the death of Stephen. The persecution led by Saul had scattered the believers out of Jerusalem, and **"they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word"** (Acts 8:4).

Who Philip was. Not the apostle Philip, one of the twelve, but Philip **"one of the seven"** (Acts 21:8) — chosen with Stephen to serve the church's widows (Acts 6:5). Like Stephen, he was a Greek-speaking

believer, full of the gift of holy spirit and wisdom. Later he became known as **"Philip the evangelist,"** and years afterward he was living at Caesarea with **"four daughters, virgins, which did prophesy"** (Acts 21:8-9).

Samaria. Philip had gone north into Samaria, the region between Judaea and Galilee. The Samaritans were a mixed people who worshipped the God of Israel in their own way; Jews and Samaritans avoided each other (John 4:9).

> **Acts 8:5** *Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them.*
> **Acts 8:6** *And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did.*
> **Acts 8:7** *For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them: and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed.*
> **Acts 8:8** *And there was great joy in that city.*

Many believed and were baptized, men and women. The apostles in Jerusalem sent Peter and John, and when they prayed and laid their hands on the believers, **"they received the Holy Ghost"** (Acts 8:14-17). Philip was at the centre of a great work of God.

The road south. From Jerusalem a road ran down through the hills toward Gaza, the old Philistine city near the coast, and joined the coastal highway to Egypt. Much of the country it crossed was dry and thinly settled.

Ethiopia. The "Ethiopia" of the Bible is not modern Ethiopia. The Hebrew name is *Cush*, the land of the descendants of Ham's son Cush (Genesis 10:6) — the kingdom on the upper Nile, south of Egypt, in what is now Sudan. In the first century its capital was Meroë. To the Greeks and Romans, Ethiopia lay at the very edge of the known world; the old Greek poet Homer called the Ethiopians "the farthest of men."

Candace. Not a personal name, but a royal title — *Kandake* — borne by the queens (or queen-mothers) who ruled the kingdom of Meroë. Roman writers mention these ruling queens.

The administration. The age of grace had begun at Pentecost. Jesus had told His followers they would be witnesses **"in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth"** (Acts 1:8). Jerusalem had heard. Samaria was hearing. Now God was about to reach toward the uttermost part.

The Story, Told Faithfully

Go South

> **Acts 8:26** *And the angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert.*

"The angel of the Lord spake unto Philip." God sent Philip a messenger with a direction, not an explanation. He was told where to go, not why.

"Arise, and go toward the south." Leave a city full of people, in the middle of a revival, for a road. From a human point of view it made no sense. From God's point of view, there was one man on that road whose heart was ready.

“Which is desert.” The Greek can mean either that the road was desert or that Gaza itself was deserted (old Gaza had been destroyed in the century before Christ and rebuilt on a new site). Either way, Philip was sent to a lonely place.

> **Acts 8:27** *And he arose and went: and, behold, a man of Ethiopia, an eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who had the charge of all her treasure, and had come to Jerusalem for to worship,*
> **Acts 8:28** *Was returning, and sitting in his chariot read Esaias the prophet.*

“He arose and went.” No argument, no delay. Philip’s obedience is the first lesson of the story.

“A man of Ethiopia, an eunuch of great authority.” Three things are said about him. He was an Ethiopian — from Cush, far to the south. He was a **eunuch** — a man who had been castrated, as officials who served close to royal women often were in the courts of the ancient world. And he held **great authority**: he **“had the charge of all her treasure.”** He was the queen’s minister of finance, one of the most powerful men in his kingdom.

“Had come to Jerusalem for to worship.” He had travelled well over a thousand miles — weeks by chariot and along the Nile — to worship the God of Israel. Scripture does not say whether he was a Jew of the dispersion (Jewish communities had lived along the upper Nile for centuries) or a Gentile who feared the God of Israel. But it does tell us something that must have been painful for him. The Law said:

> **Deuteronomy 23:1** *He that is wounded in the stones, or hath his privy member cut off, shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD.*

As a eunuch, he could not be received into the congregation of Israel. He could stand in the outer court of the temple, but not go further. He had come so far to worship, and he went home an outsider.

“Sitting in his chariot read Esaias the prophet.” “Esaias” is the Greek form of Isaiah. A scroll of Isaiah was costly, and he may well have bought it in Jerusalem. He did not waste the long journey home. He was reading the word of God.

Join Thyself to This Chariot

> **Acts 8:29** *Then the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot.*
> **Acts 8:30** *And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest?*
> **Acts 8:31** *And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him.*

“Then the Spirit said unto Philip.” First an angel sent him to the road; now God, by the gift of holy spirit within him, told him exactly which traveller to approach. God directs His people step by step.

“And Philip ran.” Not strolled — ran. A man on foot running alongside a moving chariot.

“And heard him read.” In the ancient world people usually read aloud, even when alone. So Philip could hear exactly which passage the man was reading.

“Understandest thou what thou readest?” Philip did not begin with a sermon. He began with a question — a respectful, simple question about the very thing the man was already doing. In the Greek there is a

play on words: *ginōskeis ha anaginōskeis* — "do you *know* what you are *reading*?" (the Greek word for "read" is built on the word for "know").

"How can I, except some man should guide me?" An honest answer from a humble man. He was powerful, educated and wealthy, and he admitted he needed help. "Guide" is the word for leading someone along a road — fitting words for two men on a road.

"He desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him." The treasurer of a queen invited a stranger on foot into his chariot. His hunger for the word was greater than his pride.

The Place of the Scripture

> **Acts 8:32** *The place of the scripture which he read was this, He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth:*
> **Acts 8:33** *In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth.*

This is Isaiah 53, the chapter of the Suffering Servant — the clearest prophecy of the cross in the Old Testament. The Ethiopian was reading from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which is why the wording differs a little from the Hebrew as the King James renders it in Isaiah:

> **Isaiah 53:7** *He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.*
> **Isaiah 53:8** *He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken.*

"As a sheep to the slaughter… like a lamb dumb before his shearer." Two **similes**, comparisons using "as" and "like." A sheep does not fight its killer; a lamb does not cry out under the shears. The Servant would go to His death without resistance, without protest.

"In his humiliation his judgment was taken away." He would be denied justice.

"Who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth." Who could speak of His descendants, when His life was cut off? A question that answers itself — the figure of speech called **erotesis**. And yet, a few verses later, Isaiah says, **"he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days"** (Isaiah 53:10) — the one who was cut off would live again and have spiritual children. This Ethiopian was about to become one of them.

Read the rest of the chapter the Ethiopian had open before him:

> **Isaiah 53:5** *But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.*
> **Isaiah 53:6** *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

Of Whom Speaketh the Prophet?

> **Acts 8:34** *And the eunuch answered Philip, and said, I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man?*

> **Acts 8:35** *Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.*

"Of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man?" It is exactly the right question. Jewish teachers had long debated whether the Servant of Isaiah 53 was the prophet himself, the nation of Israel, or someone else.

"Then Philip opened his mouth." A **Hebrew idiom** for beginning to speak at length and with weight — used of Jesus at the start of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:2) and of Peter before Cornelius (Acts 10:34).

"And began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus." Philip started where the man was — on the very page he was reading — and from there he showed him Jesus: led as a lamb to the slaughter at Passover; silent before Pilate; denied justice by His judges; crucified, **"cut off out of the land of the living"**; raised from the dead on the third day; ascended to the right hand of God; and now offering to all who believe the forgiveness of sins and the gift of holy spirit. It is exactly what Jesus Himself had done on the road to Emmaus: **"beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself"** (Luke 24:27).

"Preached unto him Jesus" is one word in Greek: *euangelizō* — to announce good news. Philip *good-newsed* him Jesus.

A Name Better Than of Sons and of Daughters

If the Ethiopian kept reading his scroll, only three chapters further on he would find this:

> **Isaiah 56:3** *Neither let the son of the stranger, that hath joined himself to the LORD, speak, saying, The LORD hath utterly separated me from his people: neither let the eunuch say, Behold, I am a dry tree.*
>
> **Isaiah 56:4** *For thus saith the LORD unto the eunuchs that keep my sabbaths, and choose the things that please me, and take hold of my covenant;*
>
> **Isaiah 56:5** *Even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off.*

"Neither let the eunuch say, Behold, I am a dry tree." A man who could never have children, shut out of the congregation by the Law — and God promised him **"a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters… an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off."** As this series understands it, it is hard to imagine a scripture this man needed more. Whether he read it that day, scripture does not say. But on that desert road, God fulfilled it for him. The Servant who was "cut off" had died so that a man who was cut off could be brought in.

See, Here Is Water

> **Acts 8:36** *And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?*
>
> **Acts 8:37** *And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.*
>
> **Acts 8:38** *And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.*

“As they went on their way, they came unto a certain water.” A stream, a pool, a wadi with water in it — somewhere along the road.

“See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?” The Ethiopian asked, unprompted. Philip must have told him about baptism as part of preaching Jesus. And there is a note of longing in the question: *what hinders me?* All his life there had been things that hindered him — his nation, his condition, the Law’s barrier. Now, in Christ, nothing did.

“If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest… I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” A word of honesty about this verse. Verse 37 is not found in the oldest Greek manuscripts of Acts, and most modern translations leave it out or put it in a footnote. It does appear in some later manuscripts and in old Latin copies, and it was already known by about A.D. 180, when Irenaeus quoted it. Whether or not Luke wrote it, it says nothing that the rest of scripture does not say plainly: **“if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved”** (Romans 10:9). Believing with the heart comes first.

“And he commanded the chariot to stand still.” The man of great authority gave one more command — and then humbly went down into the water.

“They went down both into the water… and he baptized him.” Here the Bible plainly describes a baptism in water — both men went down into it. This series reads it exactly as written: a real, literal water baptism, the Ethiopian’s willing response to what he had just believed. Notice that it is not described with the phrase “in the name of Jesus Christ” that Peter used at Pentecost.

Caught Away

> **Acts 8:39** *And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing.*
>
> **Acts 8:40** *But Philip was found at Azotus: and passing through he preached in all the cities, till he came to Caesarea.*

“The Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip.” The Greek word is *harpazō*, to snatch or seize suddenly — the same word Paul uses for believers being **“caught up”** to meet the Lord at His return (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Some understand that God carried Philip away miraculously, as the Spirit of the LORD had been known to carry Elijah (1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 2:16). Others understand that God simply led Philip away at once, before the eunuch knew where he had gone. Either way, Philip’s work was done, and God moved him on.

“That the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing.” He lost his teacher, and he did not lose his joy. His joy was not in Philip. It was in the Lord Philip had preached. He came to Jerusalem to worship and went home an outsider; he left the desert road a son of God.

Scripture tells us nothing more about him. An early Christian tradition, recorded by Irenaeus in the second century, says that he went back to his own country and preached there. That is **tradition**, not scripture — but it is easy to believe.

“But Philip was found at Azotus.” Azotus is the old Philistine city of Ashdod, some twenty miles or more up the coast. From there Philip **“preached in all the cities, till he came to Caesarea”** — the Roman capital of Judaea on the coast, where he made his home. Twenty years later Paul and Luke stayed in his house there (Acts 21:8).

Where the Story Leads

To the Messiah

Isaiah 53 is about Jesus. The Ethiopian asked the question every reader of Isaiah 53 must answer: of whom does the prophet speak? Philip's answer was Jesus — the Lamb led to the slaughter, silent before His accusers, cut off out of the land of the living, "wounded for our transgressions… bruised for our iniquities." And yet the Servant would "see his seed" and "prolong his days": He was raised from the dead and exalted to God's right hand.

Begin where the scripture is. Every part of the Old Testament leads to Him. Philip "began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus."

To the Grace Administration

To the uttermost part. Jesus had said "Jerusalem… Judaea… Samaria… the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). In one chapter of Acts, the gospel reaches Samaria and then a man from the very edge of the known world.

No one is shut out. The Law kept the eunuch outside the congregation. In Christ, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Later God would reveal to Paul the full extent of it: "That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body" (Ephesians 3:6).

Believe, and be saved. The way in is believing — "with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Romans 10:10).

Led by the Spirit. Philip was directed by an angel and then by God speaking through the gift of holy spirit: "Go near, and join thyself to this chariot." God still leads His people to the people He has prepared. "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God" (Romans 8:14).

To the Topic of Telling Others About Jesus

- **Go when God says go**, even when it makes no sense.
- **Run.** When God opens a door, move quickly.
- **Listen first.** Philip heard what the man was reading before he said a word.
- **Ask a question.** "Understandest thou what thou readest?"
- **Start where they are.** Philip "began at the same scripture."
- **Preach Jesus.** Not a system, not a church, not yourself — Jesus.
- **Let God finish the work.** Philip was caught away; the man went on rejoicing. The joy did not depend on Philip.
- "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Romans 10:14).

The Main Takeaway

God sent one obedient man down a desert road to one hungry man reading Isaiah 53, and by starting where he was and preaching Jesus, Philip saw a man the Law had kept outside go home a believer, rejoicing — because in Christ, nothing hinders.

- **God cares about one person** enough to send an evangelist out of a revival to meet him.
- **Obey promptly.** "He arose and went."
- **A good question opens a heart.**
- **Humble hearts learn.** "How can I, except some man should guide me?"
- **The Old Testament preaches Jesus.**
- **Nothing hinders** the one who believes.
- **The joy stays when the teacher goes**, because the joy is in the Lord.

For Our Learning — The People

- **Philip.** One of the seven chosen to serve the widows (Acts 6:5); the evangelist who preached in Samaria, then to the Ethiopian, then along the coast to Caesarea. Not the apostle Philip.
- **The Ethiopian.** An unnamed eunuch, treasurer to the queen of Cush; a worshipper of the God of Israel who had travelled to Jerusalem; the first African convert recorded in Acts.
- **Candace.** The title of the ruling queen (or queen-mother) of the kingdom of Cush at Meroë.
- **The angel of the Lord.** The messenger who sent Philip south.
- **Esaias (Isaiah).** The prophet whose words about the Suffering Servant the Ethiopian was reading.
- **The Samaritans, Simon the sorcerer, Peter and John.** The people and events of Philip's work in Samaria just before this story (Acts 8:5-25).
- **Philip's daughters.** Four daughters who prophesied, living with him at Caesarea years later (Acts 21:9).
- **Ebed-melech.** An earlier Ethiopian eunuch in scripture, who rescued Jeremiah from the dungeon and to whom God promised deliverance "because thou hast put thy trust in me" (Jeremiah 38:7-13; 39:15-18).

For Our Learning — Customs and Orientalisms

- **Eunuchs in royal courts.** Men who served close to queens and royal households were often castrated; many rose to great power.
- **The Law and eunuchs.** A eunuch could not "enter into the congregation of the LORD" (Deuteronomy 23:1) — yet God promised eunuchs who held to Him an everlasting name (Isaiah 56:3-5).
- **Pilgrimage.** Jews and God-fearers travelled great distances to worship at Jerusalem at the feasts.
- **Chariots.** Wealthy travellers rode in covered chariots or carriages, often slowly, with a driver.
- **Reading aloud.** In the ancient world reading was normally done aloud, even alone.
- **Scrolls.** Books were handwritten scrolls, costly to buy; owning a scroll of Isaiah was a mark of wealth and devotion.

- **Hospitality on the road.** Inviting a traveller to ride with you was a courtesy — remarkable from a high official to a man on foot.
- **The Greek Old Testament.** The translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek, made in Egypt before Christ and widely read by Greek-speaking Jews; the Ethiopian's wording of Isaiah comes from it.

For Our Learning — Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used by God to add emphasis and feeling. These are the ones in this story:

- **Simile** — a comparison using "as" or "like." "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer" (8:32).
- **Erotesis** — a question asked to make a point. "Who shall declare his generation?" (8:33); "What doth hinder me to be baptized?" (8:36).
- **Paronomasia** — a play on similar-sounding words. "Understandest thou what thou readest?" (8:30) — in Greek, *ginōskeis ha anaginōskeis*.
- **Idiom** — "Philip opened his mouth" (8:35), began to speak at length and with weight.
- **Metaphor** — "I am a dry tree" (Isaiah 56:3), for a man with no descendants.

What the Bible Actually Says

- **This Philip was one of the seven**, not one of the twelve apostles.
- **God sent Philip away from a revival** to a single man on a desert road.
- **"Ethiopia" is Cush**, on the upper Nile — not modern Ethiopia.
- **"Candace" is a royal title**, not a personal name.
- **Scripture does not say whether the Ethiopian was a Jew or a Gentile.** It says he had come to worship.
- **He was reading Isaiah 53** — and asked whom it was about.
- **Philip began with a question**, then "began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus."
- **The eunuch asked to be baptized**, and it was a real baptism in water.
- **Acts 8:37 is not in the oldest Greek manuscripts**, though it agrees with the rest of scripture.
- **Philip was "caught away,"** and the eunuch "went on his way rejoicing."
- **Scripture does not record the Ethiopian's name** or what he did afterward.

God's Will and Intent

- **God seeks the one.** He moved an evangelist and an angel for one searching man.
- **God wants His word understood**, and sends people to explain it.
- **God wants every nation to hear**, to the uttermost part of the earth.
- **God removes the barriers** that shut people out; in Christ nothing hinders.
- **God leads His people** by His word, by angels, and by His gift within them.

- **God wants believers to rejoice** in Him, not in the messenger.
- **God keeps His promises** — even to a eunuch who thought himself a dry tree.