

“Now There Was an Ethiopian Eunuch...”

Acts 8:26-40

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We have before us a compelling story of an encounter on a desert road. This encounter led to a conversation, a conversion, a baptism, and more. It is the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, a familiar story to many of you. But let us approach it as if we were hearing it for the very first time.

It begins with a message from an angel: “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” The angel is talking to Philip. Which Philip? There are three different Philips in the New Testament. There was Philip the son of Herod the Great, who governed part of the region we now call “Israel;” he’s the guy who founded the cities in the area called “Caesarea Philippi.” It’s not him. There was Philip the Apostle, one of the twelve original disciples of Jesus; tradition says he eventually took the gospel to parts of Greece, Syria, and what is now Turkey. It’s not him. Then there was Philip the Deacon, one of the original seven Deacons who were appointed by the apostles to tend to the needs of the Christian believers in Jerusalem. *This* is the Philip we’re talking about; *this* is the Philip who received a message from an angel. It seemed that God had an additional job in mind for Philip.

“Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” Gaza was the one of the ancient cities of the Philistines. It was a fortified city on a hill, adjacent to the Mediterranean Sea, only about eleven miles from Jerusalem. Philip is just supposed to head south-west along this road, heading down from Jerusalem toward the coast. So Philip is just walking along.

Now this story takes place fairly early in the church’s history. We don’t have a precise date, but we know it happens after the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which was probably in the year 30, and before the death of Herod Agrippa, which was in the year 44. So it’s probably somewhere around the year AD 35 to 40. Also, Philip had, shortly before this story, been up in Samaria, north of Jerusalem, proclaiming the gospel to the Samaritans. He had successfully converted and baptized many of them. So Philip was an evangelist, as well as a Deacon. Those two ministries are not mutually exclusive; those of you who are Deacons, be mindful of the fact that God might call *you* to share the gospel as well.

So Deacon/Evangelist Philip is walking down the road, toward the coast. “Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot.” Okay, lots of details here. There’s a horse-drawn chariot, heading southwest, the same direction Philip is. The chariot must have been traveling *behind* Philip, and was in the process of *passing* Philip. Inside the chariot was an important man, a high official in a royal court. Which court? The *Ethiopian* court. That’s in Africa. If you know where Egypt is, in the northeast corner of Africa, follow the Nile River south, and you’ll enter what is now called the country of Sudan. Keep going south, and follow the Blue Nile as it

bends a bit to the east, and you'll enter the country called Ethiopia. You're now south of the Sahara Desert, deep into the heart of Africa. The ancient region called "Ethiopia" had different boundaries, and probably contained parts of Sudan as well, but you get the general idea. It was a *native African* kingdom. It was a powerful kingdom, at different periods of history; at this point in history, the Ethiopian kingdom was having periodic skirmishes with the Roman Empire. Rome controlled the parts of Egypt along the Mediterranean Sea, and tried from time to time to expand their territory southwards, but they ran into troubles with this Ethiopian kingdom, which did not want to submit to Roman rule.

We know from other historical records the names of a couple Ethiopian queens in the early-to-mid first century. One was named Amanitore; another was named Gersamot. The queen's title was "Kandake," or "Candace," which technically means "queen regnant;" these women were either the husband or the mother of the king. The queen had her own royal court, and wielded a great deal of power and wealth. One of those queens was buried in a tomb in a pyramid in a place called Meroë; that pyramid still stands today. One of these women may be the "Candace" who is mentioned in our story.

So the Ethiopian man in the chariot worked for the Candace, the Ethiopian queen. He was in charge of her royal treasury – all her wealth. You could call him the "Secretary of the Treasury." This was an important position, held only by somebody who was deeply trusted by the queen.

He was also a eunuch. Either he was deformed from birth, or he was surgically altered to prevent the production of testosterone and to make him incapable of fathering children. Eunuchs were commonly employed in royal courts in antiquity, particularly in women's courts, because they were viewed as "safer" than the typical male. There was a lot less risk to the women from a eunuch.

Did I mention – he was Black? Presumably that's obvious, since he's a native Ethiopian, but it does need to be said. When I was searching for art relating to this story, I found numerous paintings from across the centuries depicting him as a *white European*. The man had been stripped of his identity, his ethnicity, his culture. An integral part of this story was lost. The word "Ethiopian" did not originate in Africa; it was a *Greek* word; it meant "burned-faced" or "scorched-face." It was used by Greek-speakers to describe people *with dark skin*. There is no question: this man was most definitely Black.

He was also *interested in the Jewish religion*. He had just been to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage! How he had learned of the Jewish faith, and whether this was his first visit to Jerusalem or his twentieth, we will never know, but the combination of the Nile River and the Roman roads made it easy for wealthy people like him to travel from Africa to Jerusalem and back again. He would not have been granted the same degree of access to the temple that ordinary Jews would have had – as a foreigner and as a eunuch, there were two strikes against him – but he was clearly taken with Jewish faith and practice. *He even owned a copy of the book of Isaiah*. Those were not easy to come by. Synagogues had them, but most ordinary Jews did not. A lot of people couldn't even read. It had been copied by hand, as all books were. Was it available for purchase in Jerusalem? Had he commissioned it? We don't know. All we know is that he was *reading the book of Isaiah*, in his chariot, as he rode along the road.

The Holy Spirit tells Philip to run up to the carriage. In the ancient world, people read *out loud*, so when Philip comes near, Philip hears the man uttering *familiar words*: "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." Philip asks: "Do you understand what you are reading?" The man responds: "How can I, unless someone

guides me?” Sensing that Philip has some wisdom to offer, he invites Philip to join him in the chariot.

Thus begins a conversation between two strangers, from two different races. A conversation about an ancient Jewish prophecy, a conversation about a man named Jesus, a conversation about *faith*.

Eventually, the chariot reaches a body of water. The man asks Philip: “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” Baptism was not an ordinary part of Jewish faith and practice; the topic must have already come up in their conversation. Philip had probably told the man about Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River, and about the many Samaritans that Philip had recently baptized. The Ethiopian man is realizing that he, too, might be able to become part of this community of believers, *even though he’s not Jewish*. It is dawning on him that the dividing wall that existed in Judaism *might not exist* in Christianity. He asks Philip to be sure: “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” Does my race matter? Does my country of origin matter? Does my native language matter? Does the fact that I have been castrated matter? Does the fact that I’m not a Jew matter? The answers: *No, No, No, No, and No*.

So Philip and the Ethiopian step down into the water together. Philip lowers him down under the surface and then lifts him up again, in the name of the Lord Jesus. The man dies to his old life and rises to his new. He is still Black. He is still African. He is still a eunuch. But now he is also a *Christian*. He doesn’t lose any of his old identities when he becomes a Christian. He just gains a *new* identity.

The new Christian continues on his journey back home, rejoicing with a newfound joy. Later Christian tradition says that this man returned home and shared his faith with his fellow Ethiopians. Tradition also gives him a name; by the end of the second century, he was being called “Simon Backos.” He was not the only evangelist to come to Ethiopia; tradition says that Matthew, the gospel writer, also went there, to spread the gospel. These and other efforts led to the creation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. The word “Tewahedo” means “United as One.” That term isn’t referring to the united *Church*, but rather, to a united *Jesus*; they affirm that Jesus has *one* nature, a perfect union of both human and divine. It’s a slightly different understanding of Jesus than what we Western Christians have; we tend to say that Jesus is fully human and divine. But it’s a minor point, not worth arguing about. Today there are some 36 million members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, most of whom live in Ethiopia. They belong, like we do, to the global Christian organization called the World Council of Churches. We recognize these believers as our sisters and brothers in Christ.

There are several messages for us here. First, *God clearly wanted the gospel to spread across cultural, racial, and geographic boundaries*. It was *God* who orchestrated this whole affair. God sent Philip down that road at just the right time; God told Philip to go up to the chariot; God whisked Philip away as soon as the Ethiopian man had come to faith and had been baptized. This sequence of events didn’t happen by chance. It was the *divine will*. *God wanted to bring the gospel to sub-Saharan Africa*.

Secondly, as our country continues discussions about race, note the existence of this strong African nation in the time of Jesus, that existed entirely on its own merits, and did a fine job keeping the Romans at bay. It was rich, powerful, and smart. They had art, architecture, and literacy. Do not underestimate what Black people can do, when they’re not treated as second-class citizens, or worse.

Finally, for goodness’ sake, do not hesitate to spread the gospel. There are tons of people who are interested in or curious about God, who just need someone to *guide* them. That guide might be *you*.

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