

# Why Are We Here?

## Lesson 5

To Help All People Experience a New Life in Jesus Christ

### Philip and the Ethiopian

Acts 8:26-40

#### The Conversation with a Descendant of Ham (8:26–40)

##### The Strange Assignment (8:26)

Our discovery of the conversation with a descendant of Ham begins in Acts chapter 8 and verse 26. *“But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, ‘Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.’”*

What a strange assignment the LORD had for deacon Philip, who became an evangelist not long after his duties at the feeding stations of the Gentile widows and their children subsided from their initial time of crisis after the whole lot was cut off from the meals provided by Jews at the Temple and synagogues scattered throughout the vicinity. Deacons would still be needed to serve the tables but not with such urgency as when the Jewish social system was disrupted by the Jewish persecutors of Jesus and His followers. Philip was not one of the Apostles; we must not be confused. There were two Philips at this time; one was the Apostle, and the other was the deacon. It must have been hard for Philip to imagine what would happen shortly. Still, its impact on the tremendous pagan Gentile world was about to explode as our Philip met with an Ethiopian proselyte to Judaism.

The strange assignment was for Philip to take the road towards Gaza. From Jerusalem, the road started south of the city and had a downward slope to Gaza. The angel of the LORD was specific with this strange assignment regarding the path and the direction. Philip did not know the reason for this assignment, but the LORD did. That road had already been taken by a man leaving the city and headed home. He was a man of great authority in his homeland. He was a man who had come to Jerusalem for a reason. Our text will soon tell us that he had come to worship. His heart must have been hungry for the things of the LORD. Had he found what he was looking for in Jerusalem? Or did he leave unsatisfied but still hungry?

We learn that “The angel of the Lord” appeared to Philip. He was a messenger from the LORD. The LORD summoned him to deliver the word of this strange assignment to Philip.

##### The Strange Association (8:27-28)

##### The Ethiopian’s Great Status (8:27)

Luke tells us that Philip obeyed, and then on the way, he found himself in the strange association with the Ethiopian of great status. Verse 27. *“So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship....”*

We do not know how far down the road Philip had to go to come upon this Ethiopian. From Jerusalem to the city of Gaza, it was about forty-five miles. But Philip would catch up with this Ethiopian somewhere along the road, most likely, long before coming near to Gaza. This first strange association with the Ethiopian is, in fact, the first of three strange conversations. Here in chapter 8, we find the Gospel message presented to a person from the line of Noah’s son, Ham, through the Ethiopian. In chapter 9, the Gospel message was given to a person from the line of Noah’s son, Shem, through Saul of Tarsus. In chapter 10, the Gospel message was presented to a person from the line of Noah’s son, Japheth, through Cornelius, the Roman centurion. The three descendants of Noah, through his three sons, which established the three great racial groups in the world, would be represented in these three chapters of Acts, each receiving the Gospel message and becoming believers. Each would be a catalyst for the Gospel to flow to the entire world. This Ethiopian would

take the Gospel to the African continent. This Ethiopian was responsible to Candace, who was responsible for the financial management in her country. By this Ethiopian connection to Candace the Queen, he oversaw those details.

We find that this Ethiopian was a eunuch. A eunuch was a man who had been surgically changed so he could not produce children in a marriage. In the East, such men were prominent as protectors and defenders of the wives and harems of the kings. They were trusted men. Our Ethiopian in this story was a “court official.” The Greek word would have been better translated as a “potentate” because the Greek word means he was a ruler with great independence and power or sway. As such, he was probably the Queen’s Treasury Secretary.

But our Ethiopian was also one who believed in God. But until the Church was born, he would have been considered unclean by the Mosaic law, not because of his race, but because of the surgery that had been performed on him. *“No one who is emasculated or has his male organ cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord...”* found in Deuteronomy 23:1. This passage would have restricted him from being a full-fledged convert to Judaism. Be that as it may, he was still most likely a convert to Judaism because he had sought to worship in Jerusalem, the center of Jewish worship. His position in the court of Candace would fling open the doors of the Temple, the Sanhedrin, the court of the Gentiles, and even an audience with the High Priests, as long as his visit did not occur on certain high and holy days and occasions when all Jews would avoid all Gentiles because of a chance of becoming unclean before the holy days. Why was he in Jerusalem? What we know to this point is that he was in the city to worship and on his way home.

#### **The Ethiopian’s Spiritual Status (8:28)**

But we know more, for we know the Ethiopian’s spiritual status. Verse 28. *“...and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah.”* Where did he get this book? Did he bring it along with him from his home country? Did he buy it in Jerusalem? Either way, he could not have had a better book in his hand at the time. If there is one place among the Old Testament books to find a picture of Jesus Christ, it is Isaiah. What he could not have found being taught in the Temple and synagogues, he could find in their Holy Scripture. He was stopped, sitting in his chariot, reading. What was this Ethiopian’s spiritual status? His heart must have been hungry for something he had not found while he was in Jerusalem. Or, perhaps, his heart was hungry because he had heard about what happened on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem and was searching the Scripture for more. We must remember that only the Old Testament was available at the time. Not one record of the New Testament events had been placed on paper at this time, but the witnesses to the events still shared them with those who had not been there, and *“the LORD was adding to the Church daily.”*

#### **The Strange Action (8:29–31)**

##### **The Directive (8:29)**

On the road to Gaza, Philip noticed this Ethiopian sitting in his chariot reading. The Spirit of the LORD spoke to Philip and gave him the strange action to follow the directive. Verse 29. *“Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go up and join this chariot.’”*

No doubt, gazing at this Ethiopian, Philip must have thought he was a man of great status. The chariot, the horse, the dress, and all! But the Spirit had given him this strange action to perform in the directive, *“Go up and join this chariot”* The Ethiopian was no ordinary person. I love how the King James Version renders this directive, *“Go near, and join thyself to this chariot.”* Philip knew what it was like to be touched by the Holy Spirit, and he knew perfectly that He would not direct him in the wrong direction.

##### **The Duty (8:30)**

The directive was planned. Now Philip had the duty to comply. Verse 30. *“Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’”* The Ethiopian was

reading aloud, and Philip recognized the passage. We are about to hear the words read to Philip from Isaiah. Philip knew they were from Isaiah 53. What better place in God's Word for an evangelist to enter a chariot to witness to an Ethiopian? Isaiah 53!

#### **The Doubt (8:31)**

But now we come to the doubt of the Ethiopian as he answered Philip. Verse 31. *"And he said, 'Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him."*

*"Do you understand?"* Philip asked (8:30). But as well-established and educated as he was, the Ethiopian did not understand. We all have trouble understanding the Scriptures, especially as new believers. One of the gifts to the Church from the LORD was the "teachers." Diligent students of the Scriptures, assigned by the Holy Spirit for that purpose. Jesus said in Luke 6:40, *"A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher."* But not everyone is called to be a teacher by the LORD and directed by the Holy Spirit. Many want to be teachers, but not everyone should be a teacher. James, the brother of Jesus, warned, *"Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment."* (James 3:1)

#### **The Strange Actualities (8:32–35)**

##### **The Text (8:32–33)**

##### **The Lamb Was Silent (8:32)**

Philip explained the passage to the Ethiopian. The strange actualities of the text were astounding. The Ethiopian's text jolted his heart and soul into the power and efficacy of the actions that had occurred with Jesus. The testimony of Isaiah was a prophecy of the death of the Savior, Jesus. The lamb was silent. Verse 32. *"Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER; AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT, So He does not open His mouth."* The Holy Spirit knew it, the LORD knew it, Philip knew it, but the Ethiopian did not. What a text to ask an evangelist to explain. Isaiah 53. Here we see the sinner asking the evangelist about the Gospel of the Savior in the great passage about Christ's death on the cross. The Ethiopian had not seen the day of Calvary, but he was about to be led by the hand to Calvary.

The Ethiopian's text tells that the lamb was silent before the shearers. You know the Gospel story of how Jesus said nothing in His defense. We will move on in the text.

##### **The Lamb was Slaughtered (8:33)**

Next, the Ethiopian's text tells how the lamb was slaughtered. Verse 33. *"In humiliation His judgment was taken away; Who will relate His generation? For His life is removed from the earth."*

The word "judgment" is very interesting. From its Greek word we get our word *crisis*. The Greek is *krisis*. The word "generations" means *posterity*. Note here that the Jews did not want the posterity of Jesus to be known, but the record proved His descent from David through His mother, Mary, and his adopted father, Joseph. The Jews wanted Him dead. Caiaphas wanted Him dead. But Pilate found no fault in Him. The judgment of Jesus was taken away from Him in a sham legal proceeding. The Ethiopian was confused.

##### **The Truth (8:34–35)**

##### **The Question (8:34)**

And so, Philip answered the Ethiopian with the truth. We come to the Ethiopian's question. Verse 34. *"The eunuch answered Philip and said, 'Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or someone else?'"* Such a question opens the door that every evangelist should walk through. It is but one answer away from the sinner coming to salvation.

##### **The Answer (8:35)**

And Philip answered in verse 35. *"Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture, he preached Jesus to him."* Philip was delighted to use Isaiah 53 to prove every point in the Gospel message of the work of the Savior in the tragedy of Calvary.

## The Strange Announcement (8:36–38)

### Baptism (8:36)

From Philip's answer, we come to the strange announcement by the Ethiopian – baptism. Verse 36. *“As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?’”* We are not told how the Ethiopian knew about baptism, but it seems obvious that Philip must have explained it to him. As the chariot was moving down the road, the Ethiopian saw a pond or stream coming up, and he asked, *“What prevents me from being baptized?”*

### Belief (8:37)

Philip's words moved the Ethiopian about the Gospel, and he jumped immediately to the baptism part. Philip backed him up to the part about belief. Verse 37. *[And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”]*

This verse is not in the oldest and most reliable copies of the New Testament. But, no doubt, it makes a valid point. As the jailer will one day ask Paul, “What must I do to be saved,” Paul will answer with, *“Believe in the LORD Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.”* Then, if you read on in the story, the jailer was baptized. That story is years away from this place in the storyline. Still, the belief in Jesus is always to be followed by a personal announcement to the world that you belong to Jesus by symbolically being buried in the likeness of His death and risen to walk in the newness of life.

### Burial (8:38)

The Ethiopian's belief meant he could be baptized. It was time for his symbolic burial. Verse 38. *“And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him.”* The testimony of baptism graphically connects the believer to the LORD's death, burial, and resurrection through the symbol of passing from death in this life to a new life in Christ Jesus. The Ethiopian had accepted the Messiah that the world had rejected.

## The Strange Ascent (8:39)

### The Messenger Removed (8:39a)

Once Philip brought the Ethiopian up out of the water, Philip's work was done. It was time for the strange ascent. It was time for Philip to move forward to evangelize in another place to the north. Verse 39a. *“When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him ....”* No one was dry, but the Spirit of the LORD does not give time for an officer of the Church to sit around and ponder what has been done; he must move on to what must be done. We want to read into this passage that Philip magically disappeared. I do not think so. I believe the Spirit gave Philip his next assignment; the two gave each other parting greetings, Philip went north, and the Ethiopian went south to his home, never to see each other again.

### The Message Remained (8:39b)

But as the Ethiopian journeyed home, the message remained in his heart that Philip had spoken. Verse 39b says of the Ethiopian's joy in the words, *“but went on his way rejoicing.”* True joy comes with true salvation. Had Philip magically disappeared from the Ethiopian, I dare say, he might have had more questions than he had about Isaiah's text.

## The Strange Allocation (8:40)

Moving north, Philip found himself in the strange allocation of the Gentile world on the border of the Mediterranean Sea. Verse 40 says, *“But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea.”* Azotus was the Philistine city of Ashdod in the Gaza Strip, about twenty miles north of the city of Gaza. No doubt, the baptism happened near a fork in the road where Philip could turn north, and the Ethiopian could continue south to Gaza. Philip would faithfully evangelize from Azotus to Caesarea, where we will find him twenty years later with four beautiful daughters faithful to the ministry of the LORD like their father.