

Words and Deeds: Road Trip
By Jason Huff
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Isaiah 56:1-8; John 6:35-40; Acts 8:26-40

Our final Scripture reading today is from Acts 8:26-40. Listen now to God's holy and perfect Word. "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 Candace, 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. The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the 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." 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. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" 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. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea."

Road trips are a part of American culture. Route 66 is a part of our nation's collective memory, even though the official Route 66 was decommissioned over 30 years ago. Lots of us have taken family vacations by car. I still remember long drives to upstate New York, Texas, and Florida to visit family when I was young. And America is one of the few countries where a long road trip is a big deal – most 1st world countries are much smaller than ours, or they don't have the impressive interstate system we do. You can find more beautiful road trips around the world, but rarely as big a ones as you have in the United States.

And even in our modern era of cell phones and maps that have every local road at your fingertips, one of the coolest parts of the road trip is the unexpected. Finding the perfect local pizza place or ice cream shop, discovering an awesome museum you never expected...for a lot of adults here today, maybe happening across a great little winery. Part of a good road trip is going with the flow, embracing the unknown, and enjoying the journey as well as the destination.

Today, we're studying a biblical road trip – certainly not the first in the Bible or the last, but an important one. How many road trips do you know of that were commanded by one of God's own messengers? And in today's road trip, we learn how openness to the journey God has set us on can affect not only the individuals we meet but generations of people on down the line.

So we continue for now following the missionary journey of Philip. The last couple of weeks, we learned how Philip had been incredibly effective at spreading the gospel in Samaria, to the point that Peter and John had come from Jerusalem to see what was going on. They were astonished to find that people of this hated group, related to them by blood but despised because of their corrupted version of Jewish belief, were coming to genuine faith. When Peter and John arrived and laid their hands on them, they received the Holy Spirit – proof that God had included them in His Kingdom. Peter and John left rejoicing, preaching in more Samaritan villages as they headed back to Jerusalem.

Following all of that, Philip is given instructions by an angel, a messenger of God, to head south, down to the desert road that connects Jerusalem with Gaza. This was the essential connector between Israel and the roads that led down to Egypt and greater Africa. Now I had to wonder – why does an angel have to come and usher Philip on this road trip? In Acts, a lot of times the Spirit intervenes and tells someone what to do – even later in this story, the Spirit leads Philip to stay by a certain chariot. What's going on?

I don't wonder that Philip would want to stay. He's had amazing success in Samaria, among people that no one expected would ever come to faith. He's teaching them the ways of Jesus, he's making them into disciples, he's spreading the message, and it's all working. We can't say for certain, but if Philip is like us, he wants a good thing to last. He has no reason to want to go near Jerusalem, back to the persecution of Christians there. And the trip isn't short – at least two days walking from Samaria to Jerusalem, and at least three days walking from Jerusalem to Gaza, assuming conditions were perfect. Huge risk, little hope of reward – it's not a surprise that Philip needed an angel to get him out of his comfort zone so he would go where he was needed.

Philip is obedient, though, and whatever internal struggle he has isn't a part of the story. He follows God despite the obvious pull to stay. So he gets on the road and comes across this unique fellow – the Ethiopian eunuch. Let's talk about who this guy was for a minute. In ancient Ethiopia, the king ruled, but the queen had the power. It had been that way for years. And the Candide was the name for their line of queens. This man was in charge of the treasury. That's no small thing; he had enormous influence in his country.

Being a eunuch made things...different for him in certain ways. It was pretty common in the ancient world for certain youths to be castrated and then trained to serve the king's family. The thought was that because they wouldn't have a family, their loyalties were not divided and thus not quick to betray a king for personal power; they were rarely violent because of the lack of testosterone; it also meant they could be trusted around the queen and maidens of the court, and were often their personal servants.

But being a eunuch and someone who worshiped the one true God was to be an outsider. The law prohibited the Jews from practicing castration, and anyone who had been castrated was excluded from the assembly of the LORD. There were a few reasons for this. One is that the man was physically damaged, which made him ritually impure. Not spiritually, but ritually. He also couldn't have children, which meant that he could not continue the covenant God has made with his people through generational lines.

Isaiah 56, which we heard from this morning, promised that a faithful outsider would be accepted by God – but this man would have still been kept from being a full member of the faith. While he was probably Jewish – Judaism was practiced in parts of ancient Ethiopia – he wouldn't have been allowed to worship in the inner courts of the temple. He would have only been allowed as far as the courts of the Gentiles – the area that Jesus cleansed because it had become a storefront for merchants rather than a place of worship.

Do you see the pattern? First the gospel spreads throughout the Jewish lands. Then it moves to Samaria, where the outcasts of ancient Israel return to the Kingdom of God through Jesus. Now we have those ritually excluded from worship and the community brought in through faith in Jesus. God's Kingdom opens its doors wider and wider to accept people not on their outward appearance or their ethnic background, not on what has happened to their physical bodies, but their faith and obedience to God's son.

So the spirit prompts Philip to stay near this man's chariot, and he hears the man reading the book of Isaiah. Reading aloud was super common because it was hard to read Greek and Hebrew. All the letters were smushed together. [write an example on the board] Sometimes the only way to make sense of it was to speak it aloud.

And even then, just hearing the words doesn't mean you get the meaning. We read our passages together every week, but then we dissect them to make sure we get what God is saying to us. That's what Philip offers the Ethiopian. In essence, Philip goes up to him and says, “Do you get it?” And not surprisingly for a man who probably doesn't have a ton of biblical training, who lives a long ways away from Israel, he's like – “the only way I can possibly get it is if someone explains it.” Pretty familiar, right? We are all like that at times. Certain Scriptures are really easy to understand, and then we hit a portion that's really hard.

So Philip explains the passage the eunuch is reading. It's from Isaiah 53 – God worked that out, because Isaiah 53 is a central chapter in the Old Testament that describes exactly who the Messiah would be and what would happen to Him. Even today, many Jewish believers in Christ come to faith because of this passage that lines up so clearly with what happened to Jesus. And Philip uses it as a gateway to help the eunuch see that Jesus is the man who the Old Testament predicted would come.

It brings the eunuch immense joy, to the point where he's like, “Pull the car over now!” There's water, and he's ready to be baptized. He's waited his whole life never fully accepted, and now he is. By God's grace through Jesus, now he's a son of God. And he knows it, and he wants to be baptized in the name of Jesus. We don't even know what body of water this was! He was just like, “This needs to happen right now.” And Philip obliges.

The man goes under the water, he comes back up, and Philip is gone. The eunuch returns home rejoicing. And Philip finds himself in Azotus, well north of Gaza, a long ways away from where he was – just as Jesus appeared to the men on the road to Emmaus and then disappeared after sharing supper with them. So Philip continues to do what God called him to do, preaching and teaching as he goes north up the coastline to Caesarea.

Now what the Bible doesn't say, what we have to rely on church history to tell us, is that this unnamed eunuch was not content to keep the gospel all to himself. Instead, he told others back home, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was born. Ethiopia was soon full of believers. Ethiopia is likely the first nation to declare itself a Christian nation. And all of this is traced back by the church to the testimony of the eunuch who had a "chance encounter" with Philip.

So what should we take home from this? I have a few ideas, things that I hope will stick with us. *First off, live your faith – you never know the impact it will have on others and on future generations.* 60% of Ethiopia is Christian. Over 40 million believers are a part of the church attributed to this court official; there are 14 million more in other Christian churches. Maybe over 100 million over the centuries. The trajectory of 100 million people was affected by one guy sharing his faith with another guy at the prompting of the Holy Spirit. I doubt Philip had 100 million people in mind when he just did what the Spirit told him to do. He didn't even get to celebrate the guy's baptism with him – he was already 40 miles away! But that's the end result.

Our faith in Jesus was never meant to just a personal thing – "me and Jesus." If you have a real faith, it's going to reach into every part of your life: your job, your family, what you choose to do with your free time, your outlook on current events. Let me be blunt: if by your words and actions, nobody knows you're a Christian, you're not a Christian!

Not everyone is an evangelist, but every Christian will share their faith because it's like breathing. A Christian can't not be a Christian. We do still sin, we fail at times, but we have been changed and are continuing to be changed. We're going to represent Christ to others. Don't be afraid of it. You have the Holy Spirit who will give you the words to say if you are just willing.

And you don't know what the end result will be. What will the eternal result be of the child you tutor and invite to church? What will the eternal result be of the friend you make at a club and tell about what God has done for you? What is the final story from the co-worker you led to Christ? It is impossible to say. But God knows, and your obedience will pay off dividends far beyond what you and I will know.

Secondly, *live your faith - you may be the only true representative of Christ someone meets, and they need you.* God arranged a miraculous meeting for Philip, one that has changed the world – even though it only takes up half a chapter of Scripture. The Ethiopian eunuch was looking for answers, but he wasn't finding any. "How can I understand unless somebody explains it to me?" He was looking in the right place, but he needed God to open His mind and heart to the truth, and he needed a Philip to be God's servant to make it happen.

Paul explains in Romans 10:13-15, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!""

When you look at the world around us and the way people live, it is clear that not many are actual disciples of Jesus Christ. They may have gone to church, may have heard of Jesus, but they only heard rumors and whispers. So many people have never been introduced to the true and living God. In our area, two out of every three people you meet are not active in a church – one of those two has no connection to a church whatsoever. Our culture has gone dark when it comes to knowing God and His love for us.

No one can be saved if they don't know the Savior. The only way they are going to hear is if someone tells them. And that someone has to be us, at least to the ones God has called us to. You probably think, "Man, Jason sounds like a broken record." It's not me that's the broken record, though – it's Scripture. It keeps leading us back to stories where people share the good news that Jesus lived, died, and resurrected for our salvation and forgiveness, and the people they share with are changed.

So let's look at the real...not everybody has a big circle of friends and acquaintances. My job at Compassion Pregnancy Center has me working alongside other Christians who have church homes – that's part of our volunteer requirement. These folks are in. Catha works at a Christian school where the vast majority of the families belong to the church. Our circles of influence are all Christian. But we branch out. We've asked waitresses to Bible studies. We've become a part of various groups so that we could be a light to them.

God knows who you are and what your circles of influence are. Unless you've had some sort of calling you haven't told me about, you aren't called to stand on a soapbox on a street corner; you've probably not been called to preach or teach in a church. God has given you your circle of influence so that you could be a light, a witness, an influence. Your responsibility isn't to everyone in the whole world or even everyone in Chesterfield or Mt. Clemens or wherever you may be. Your responsibility is to those God has put in your path, in your circles, that you might share Him with them. God intentionally moved Philip to put his path and the path of the Ethiopian together. Whatever path you're on, be willing to share your faith.

Finally – *embrace the road trip*. And what I mean by that is, embrace God's call when it comes to you. Despite how Philip might have felt about his ministry in Samaria, when God called him to hit the road, he went without hesitation. Not only did he follow through with the Ethiopian official, he continued his travels spreading the word of God up the coastline. This is the last time we hear of Philip's ministry days; the next time we see him, decades later, he'll be hosting Paul at his home in Caesarea, the final stop on the road trip. But when God spoke, he did what God called him to do.

Don't leave in fear of God calling you to something new and different, whether that's sharing your faith in a new way or volunteering somewhere to be a light or, in some rare situations, pulling up stakes and heading somewhere God wants you to be. Keep reading your Bible, keep steady in prayer, get involved with our Bible study and stay regular in worship so that you know you're working on your relationship with God, and then listen. God will tell you where He wants you and what He wants you to do.

Don't be afraid of it – embrace it. It's been said that the only safe place is in the center of God's will, and that's absolutely right. We might find physical comforts elsewhere or temporary distractions, but in a world that's full of danger, where the only safe place is to know that you will one day be in the embrace of God and a member of His Kingdom forever, our only hope is to rest safe in God and His instructions for us. As Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Will you embrace the road trip of faith this week?