



# LIFE ON THE ROAD: TRANSFORMING OUTCASTS INTO SONS AND DAUGHTERS

*SERIES: LIFE UNLEASHED*

Acts 8:26–40

14th Message

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Last Friday our family gathered in Pasadena to celebrate my sister's wedding, only to be awakened Saturday to the news of the unspeakable terrorist attacks in Paris. Beirut suffered a similar attack in a neighborhood that included a Palestinian refugee camp that had many Syrian refugees. The death toll reached at least 43, with 239 wounded. In Baghdad a suicide bomber killed at least 17 people and wounded 33 inside a Shiite mosque. Unable to digest the horror, I focused my attention on our celebration and family reunion, which was a delight to all. As the reception was drawing to a close, one of my cousins asked me how we're supposed to respond to the all-out war ISIS has declared upon mankind. Returning home I listened to the eyewitness reports of a cold, calculated ruthlessness that fired upon innocent victims with businesslike efficiency. I was filled with grief for the victims coupled with "a sense of outrage that brutal men should roam and ravage [innocent victims] in God's world."<sup>1</sup> As David writes in Psalm 10:

**He sits in ambush in the villages;  
in hiding places he murders the innocent.  
His eyes stealthily watch for the helpless;  
he lurks in ambush like a lion in his thicket...  
The helpless are crushed, sink down,  
and fall by his might.  
He says in his heart, "God had forgotten,  
he has hidden his face, he will never see it. (Ps 10:8–11 ESV)**

Like the Psalms, these events "touch the nerve of the problem [of evil] and keep its pain alive, against the comfort of our familiarity, or indeed complicity, with a corrupt world."<sup>2</sup> Living where we do, it's easy to forget that we are at war with spiritual forces in heavenly places, forces so cunning and powerful no human can equal, which is why we must be extremely vigilant. So how do we as Christians live in the midst of a terror-stricken world? The Bible is no stranger to terror. For three centuries the followers of Jesus lived with a death sentence upon their heads. But being well trained by the teaching and examples of the apostles, they lived courageous lives, bringing down strongholds of evil wherever they went.

Luke's accounts of Philip in the eighth chapter of Acts and of Saul's conversion in chapter nine offer us a helpful perspective. Though not exhaustive in addressing the issue, these chapters inspire us with two examples of how the Holy Spirit leads his people into new and dangerous territory to courageously "overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21). In the first instance, an outcast is embraced and given "a name better than sons and daughters" (Isa 56:5); and in the second, a violent persecutor is transformed into the boldest and most influential advocate of Christianity.

The first thing to note is how Luke orchestrates his account to show that, despite the most savage persecution upon God's people (8:1-3), the kingdom of God is going forward exactly as Jesus had prophesied in Acts 1:8. And for those who have eyes to see, God is using the violent oppressor as his instrument to advance the

gospel into new territory, for "those who were scattered went about preaching the word" (v. 4).

Though he was still consumed by grief over the murder of his friend Stephen, Philip was forced to flee his home and community in Judea and to cross the dangerous border into Samaria. Earlier in Luke when Jesus sent his disciples to a Samaritan village to make preparations for him, they were met with rejection. The Samaritan response fueled their longstanding hatred and they asked Jesus' permission to "tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them" (9:54). Philip is of a different spirit. Instead of judgment he courageously proclaims the gospel of grace and backs it up with mighty deeds, casting out demons and healing many with diseases. When the apostles heard that the Samaritans had received the word, they came to Samaria to investigate and confirm what the Lord had already done through Philip. Their act of laying hands on the people placed a seal on Philip's work of evangelism and was a sign of their solidarity with the Samaritans as full members of God's restored people. The fact that the gift of the Spirit was delayed was God's way to assure the Samaritans, who were accustomed to being despised as outsiders by the Jews, that they were beyond a shadow of doubt full members of the restored people of God. Because of the obedience of one servant, centuries of animosity, violence and hatred vanished like dew under the hot sun. No wonder Luke says "there was much joy in that city" (v. 8).

In a recent Wall Street Journal article, Jillian Melchior tells of an unlikely group who are reaching out to the refugees from Syria.

As Europe grapples with the biggest population shift since World War II, many have reacted with fear, warning of threats to European culture and the Islamification of the continent. Croatia's small but growing Roma Christian community has embraced this development enthusiastically volunteering to help Muslim newcomers.

Deno and Biljana Nikolić and other believers sprang into action in mid-September, when Hungary closed its border with Serbia and thousands of refugees and migrants shifted their route to travel through Croatia. Some of the Roma Christians have been involved daily, serving food, helping medical teams, playing with children and praying.

The response derives from their own hardships. In the past century the Roma have been targeted by Nazi Germany and endured the Yugoslavian wars; even today many live in extreme poverty, and discrimination remains prolific throughout the Balkans. So when Roma Christians see the suffering of the refugees and migrants, they identify.<sup>3</sup>

Shortly after the war ended in the late 1990's, Deno and his wife were forced to live on the streets of Serbia. They begged and struggled to survive. When they moved back to Croatia, still penniless, a Christian couple fed them, invited them to church,

and helped them find shelter. As they were loved and embraced by Christians, so now they are eager to do the same. Deno and Biljana started the first Roma church in Croatia and became co-pastors who are enthusiastically serving Syria's refugees.

## I. A New Assignment (8:26–31)

### A. Traveling with no itinerary

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. (Acts 8:26–28)

Soon after Peter and John's departure from Samaria, Philip is given another assignment by the angel of the Lord. Once again we find that, because everyone is given the gift of the Spirit, the Lord is able to direct the ministry of his servants from heaven, even when it signals an advance into new territory. In this case Philip is directed to go south to the desert road that goes down about sixty miles from Jerusalem to Gaza near the Mediterranean coast. The road was a prominent highway that extended further south to Egypt, connecting Asia with the African continent.

The fact that Philip obeys instantly with no knowledge of his final destination or the one to whom he is being sent is a credit to his faith. This encounter is going to take significant coordination to pull off, as Philip must intercept a moving target traveling at a high rate of speed on a stretch of highway 60 miles long. It would be like asking a jogger to intercept a Tesla traveling on Hwy 280 from San Francisco and San Jose. Had Philip been plagued with doubt about the reliability of the angel's voice and demanded signs from God like Gideon, he would have missed the encounter. There are times when the Lord wants us to wait before rushing in to meet a need (John 11:6). But there are other situations that are time sensitive and need to be carried out with a sense of urgency.

As Philip makes his way on the desert road toward Gaza, he hears a covered chariot coming up behind him. Turning around he sees a prominent and powerful individual seated in the chariot. He is the minister of finance for the Queen Mother of the Ethiopian court (Candace was not a personal name, but a dynastic title), who was on his way home after making pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel. The fact that he has a personal copy of the Isaiah scroll speaks highly of his devotion to Israel's God. For ancient scrolls were copied by hand, which made them rare, bulky and expensive. But despite his devotion, the Ethiopian minister would have been excluded from entering "the assembly of the Lord" (Deut 23:1) because he had been castrated to serve in the Queen's court. How sad he must have felt that his royal service had disqualified him from full membership among God's people.

Though the eunuch may be returning home disappointed, Philip on the other hand, is seized with excitement. For the sight of an Ethiopian eunuch coming to worship the one true God signals yet another advance of the kingdom of God in fulfillment to the promises of the prophets.

**On that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from**

**Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea. (Isa 11:11 NRSV)**

**"For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord.**

**From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia, my suppliants, my scattered ones, shall bring my offering." (Zeph 3:9–10 NRSV)**

As Luke Timothy Johnson writes, "Luke clearly wants his readers to see him as part of the 'ingathering of the scattered people of Israel.'"<sup>4</sup>

### B. Become a hitchhiker

**And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. (vv. 29–31 ESV)**

As the chariot comes into view, the Spirit directs Philip to invite himself into the official's chariot. I'm struck once again by Philip's instantaneous obedience. It's one thing to follow the Spirit without an itinerary, it's quite another to run up to a dignitary's limousine and invite yourself in. As he approaches the chariot he hears the foreign minister reading from the Greek version of the Isaiah scroll. In the ancient world reading was normally done out loud, even when reading alone. This was especially true when reading Greek manuscripts where, up until the ninth century, all the words were written in upper case letters with no spaces in between. To understand what was written a beginner would practically have to spell out each word.

At this point Philip demonstrates his skill in connecting with people. Rather than bluntly accosting him with the gospel, he politely asks the Eunuch a question, "Do you know what you are reading?" In his humility the Eunuch frankly replies, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" The eunuch graciously invites Philip to sit beside him in his chariot. For the next part of their journey toward Gaza the Eunuch and his new friend will be engaged in a rigorous Bible study.

## II. An Enlightening Bible Study (8:32–35)

**Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. (vv. 32–35)**

The verses that Luke quotes come from the Greek version of Isaiah 53, which describe a servant of the Lord who inexplicably suffers humiliation in silence, is deprived of justice and subsequently killed. As the eunuch wrestles with the content of these verses, he asks "about whom does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else." There is no evidence in the first century that anyone linked the "suffering servant" with the triumphant Messiah of Isaiah 11:1 or the exalted "son of man" in Daniel 7. Jesus was the first to put these themes together and he did so emphatically in his own

person. Just as Jesus opened the minds of his disciples to understand the Scriptures on the road to Emmaus, so now Philip, having been taught by the apostles, opens his mouth and beginning with this text he tells him the good news about Jesus from the Old Testament Scriptures. What must that have been like?

As they continued reading the Isaiah scroll from that point, it did not take long for the eunuch's heart to burn. Isaiah 54 opens with a resounding shout of joy celebrating the birth of a new age where those who are desolate and barren will have fruitful lives beyond anything they could have imagined (v. 1). For exiles longing for their homeland, Isaiah announces that when God restores his people from exile, the boundaries of the promised land will have no limits and will encompass the whole earth (vv. 2-3; Matt 5:5, 28:18-20; Rom 4:13; Rev 21:1-2). For those who lives are riddled with failure and haunted by guilt and shame that never goes away, the prophet speaks of an unconditional new covenant where God's love is inscribed love on human hearts in an inseparable bond that will outlast history (vv. 4-10). What's more there will be a new temple made of living stones — people transformed with the beauty of God's holiness, more radiant than England's crown jewels (vv. 11-12; 62:3; Eph 2:19-22). In this new world there will also be no layers of human bureaucracy or religious gate keepers to prevent you from being intimate with God, for everyone will possess God's Spirit and be taught directly by him (54:13).

And finally for those who lived through decades of oppression, terror and desolation from foreign armies as a consequence of their idolatry and sin, God announces that they “will never again fear evil” (Zeph 3:15). For God's people will be eternally secure in a righteousness that is not their own. And if anyone assaults them, they can rest assured that it did not have divine authorization and that God will have the last word, exalting them over their enemies (vv. 15-17).

As they continue on their journey, Philip carefully explains how each of these promises announced by the prophet finds its fulfillment in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. There is no more waiting and for anyone who is poor and thirsty, it is free for the taking (55:1). If all this were not enough to push the eunuch over the edge, the next chapter in Isaiah's prophecy becomes extremely personal, giving voice to the eunuch's pain.

**Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say,  
“The Lord will surely separate me from his people”;**

**And let not the eunuch say,  
“Behold I am a dry tree.” (Isa 56:3)**

Sometimes when you are reading the Scriptures, the Spirit makes the written words come alive and you hear God's voice speaking directly to you. In order that we might feel the impact these words had upon the eunuch, I quote from Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*:

**“Make sure no outsider who now follows God  
ever has occasion to say, ‘God put me in second-class.  
I don't really belong.’**

**And make sure no physically mutilated person  
is ever made to think, ‘I'm damaged goods.  
I don't really belong.’”**

**For God says:**

**“To the mutilated who keep my Sabbaths  
and choose what delights me  
and keep a firm grip on my covenant,**

**I'll provide them an honored place  
in my family and within my city,  
even more honored than that of sons and daughters.  
I'll confer permanent honors on them  
that will never be revoked.” (Isa 56:3-5 MSG)**

### III. Taking the Plunge (8:36-38)

**And as they were going along the road they came to some water,  
and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from  
being baptized?” And he commanded the chariot to stop, and  
they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and  
he baptized him. (vv. 36-38 ESV)**

Luke records yet another instance of God's hand orchestrating the details of their encounter. Just as the eunuch's eyes are open to God's personal invitation to become a full member of God's restored people, their chariot comes across a wadi with running water in it, a rare sight on this desert road. Philip's teaching had such an impact on the eunuch that he initiates his own baptism and orders the chariot to stop. His question, “What *prevents* (Grk. *kōluō*) me from being baptized?” evokes the memory of Jesus' rebuke to the disciples to not “hinder” (Grk. *kōluō*) the children from coming to him, “for to such belongs the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:16).

What prevents the eunuch from being baptized? Nothing — no apostolic witness, laying on hands, additional confession, or new members class.<sup>5</sup> Philip's recognition of how the Spirit had led and transformed the eunuch's heart is evident by his actions. Without hesitation or dialogue he descends from the chariot and walks hand in hand with the eunuch into the water and baptizes him. As John Stott observes, “The water was a visible sign of the washing away of his sins and of his baptism with the Spirit.”<sup>6</sup>

### IV. Sealed with Joy (8:39-40)

**And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord  
carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went  
on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as  
he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until  
he came to Caesarea. (vv. 39-40)**

Philip's sudden departure is a wonderful reminder to us that not every divinely orchestrated encounter requires follow-up. In this case Luke makes the point emphatically, as the Spirit “snatches” Philip away and though “the eunuch saw him no more,” it did not dampen his joy, for he had the Spirit of Christ living inside him.

With the mission to the eunuch completed, Philip continued his work of evangelizing, working his way along the coast, preaching the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea, where he settled down and made it his home. We find him there twenty years later where he is not only married, but has four daughters, who like their father, are ministering as prophets.

### V. Blessed are the Peacemakers

Philip's life is an inspirational example of how we ought to live our lives in a terror-stricken world. In closing I offer seven observations from Philip's Spirit filled ministry.

1. First and most important was Philip's conviction that Jesus is Lord and reigning in the affairs of mankind. Regardless of whether “the kings of the earth set themselves...against the Lord and his anointed” (Ps 2:2), the Sovereign Lord is on his throne and reigns supreme (Ps 2:4-6). Therefore we must avoid the temptation of giving in to fear and hunkering down in Christian ghettos. Rather we must be attentive to the Spirit,

who will faithfully lead us into strategic encounters with people, especially those who are outcast and marginalized. As Johnson affirms,

The dramatic interventions of the angel and the Spirit serve to highlight Luke's fundamentally religious perspective on the story: mission is not first of all a result of human enterprise but of the Spirit's impulse. The Christian missionaries are constantly trying to keep up with God's action.<sup>7</sup>

2. Philip began his ministry by serving in the distribution of food to the widows and was proven faithful by how he handled material possessions. Though he faithfully carried out his responsibility of service, he did not allow his ministry to be limited to what the leaders asked him to do.
3. Being forced to flee the mother church in the face of persecution opened new and greater opportunities to use his prophetic gifts of preaching and healing. And being deeply wounded over the murder of his friend Stephen increased his compassion for the oppressed and the marginalized.
4. Philip had a strong conviction that when God calls us into a new work, the Spirit goes ahead of us to prepare the way. Our only task is to obey and do what God has gifted us to do in the grand drama of his Kingdom coming to earth.
5. Being led by the Spirit, Philip was not afraid to cross national and cultural barriers to bring God's life and grace to those despised by his people and to transform them into "sons and daughters" of the King.
6. What made Philip so effective was:
  - a. his knowledge of all Scriptures, especially how the prophetic promises are uniquely fulfilled in Christ and how they apply in someone's life
  - b. his deeds of love, kindness and healing, which authenticated his word
  - c. his understanding of his role as a servant, he didn't need to be "in charge" and control others, but was free to move on trusting others to complete what he had began
7. After he settled down in Caesarea, his influence is seen in his investment in four daughters who, like their father, also became prophets.

*May God in his grace grant us more saints like Philip to sow seeds of grace and love in our terror-stricken world, transforming war torn lands into havens of peace and joy. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matt 5:9).*

1. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 209.
2. *Ibid.*, 71.
3. Julian Melchior, "Muslim Migrants, Meet Christian Gypsies," *Wall Street Journal*, Oct 22, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/muslim-migrants-meet-christian-gypsies-1445556478?alg=y>
4. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP 5 (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1992), 159.
5. Verse 37 is in not the earliest manuscripts and was probably inserted into the text "by a scribe who felt certain that Philip, before baptizing the Ethiopian, would have made sure that he had believed in his heart." It reads, "Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' And the Eunuch answered, 'I believe that Christ is the Son of God.'" John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts, The Spirit, the Church & the World*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 161-162.
6. *Ibid.*, 162.
7. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 160.

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