

“ON THE DESERT ROAD”  
Psalm 75, I Thessalonians 1:4-10, Acts 8:26-40  
August 31 & September 1, 2024

“There are some wives who get an anniversary present every year. Their husband comes home from work, takes his wife out to dinner, gives her a great gift, and makes a to-do about that special day. But that’s it. The wife doesn’t hear from him for the rest of the year.

“The husband doesn’t regularly do any dinners, no dating, or romances, but she can count on it - on the next anniversary, he’s going to be there with a great present and a nice dinner and he’s going to wine and dine her, yet practically say, ‘Okay, love you! I will see you again next year.’

“Any woman I know would gladly trade in an annual anniversary day for a consistent 364 days of a year that were faithful and consistent and full of communication, even if it only included McDonald’s. She’s looking for something ongoing rather than just one big thing a year.

“Some of us get happy because we do one big thing for God a year. We say, ‘Boy, on November 26<sup>th</sup> I did a biggie for God. I know heaven was applauding because I did a whopper for God!’ We’ve got those one, maybe two or three things a year we do for God.

“At the judgment seat, God is not going to want to know only about November 26<sup>th</sup>. He’s going to want to know about what you did every day over the course of your life. He’s going to ask you, ‘Did you live a life of faithfulness to Me?’

“God is not concerned about the occasional biggies you do. He’s concerned about the consistent obedience that you give. He wants to know whether or not we can be faithful. The definition of faithfulness is consistently giving God your best in what He calls you to do.”<sup>1</sup>

The psalm writer, Asaph, expresses that same sentiment in Psalm 75. He says, “*To the arrogant I say, ‘Boast no more,’ and to the wicked, ‘Do not lift up your horns.’ Do not lift your horns against heaven; do not speak so defiantly.*’ No one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt themselves. It is God who judges; He brings one down, He exalts another” (75:4-7).

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<sup>1</sup> (Tony Evans, *Tony Evans’ Book of Illustrations*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009) pg. 101, #286)

He's saying that we are not to lift up our "once a year" activity to God as if that is all that He expects from us. God wants consistency in our faithfulness to the point that we live for the Lord each day, doing things that bring honor and glory to Him. Our hearts are not to be focused on us being boastful about the few things we've done, but rather humbly serving God every day, even in the little things of life. In that way, God can see our consistency and lift us up to do great things for Him.

The apostle Paul shares this with the Thessalonians as they began to live faithful lives among all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. It wasn't a once in a while faith, but one that naturally flowed out of them during the course of their daily living, touching the lives of others as they lived for the Lord their God. Paul reminds them, "*You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia*" (I Thess. 1:6-7) and "*your faith in God has become known everywhere*" (1:8). It wasn't a "once and done" act done each year, but a regular living in faith, guided by the Holy Spirit that influenced the other believers around them. They were unfailing in their faith every day. And their faith shone out from them so that others took notice.

So the believers in Thessalonica did not waver in faith when times grew difficult, or persecutions escalated around them. They put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and waited patiently for Him to return, regularly practicing their faith until the time which they would join Him.

And that's our calling as believers, too. While many boast of their strength (that's what it means to "*lift up your horns before heaven*" (Ps.75:4-5)), or others boast of their wisdom, or others brag about their great abilities before the Lord, actually all God wants is our humble service, daily living out our faith in Jesus Christ in ways that touch the lives of those around us to enable them to see Him through us. While our world experiences great hardship, difficulty and chaos, we can demonstrate the difference that Jesus makes in us as we stay true to His words and commands. When many misunderstand the teachings and intentions of Jesus, and others misinterpret those teachings and intentions to seek their own selfish desires, Jesus calls us to obediently follow Him so that His Truth might be made known to

those around us so that that they may come to know and follow Jesus, too.

And that's what the followers of Jesus did when the persecutions broke out upon the early Christian church. The believers went to other areas from Jerusalem in order to escape the persecutions, and they took Jesus with them wherever they went, telling others about Him.

Philip had gone to Samaria and began to guide many into faith in Jesus Christ. Though he came upon some difficult people who tried to use their profession of faith to benefit only themselves, many more came to follow Jesus, and the Christian church began to blossom.

But Philip wasn't done yet. After guiding many in Samaria to Jesus, he was called to a different place to touch the life of another one. Listen to our next portion of the Book of Acts and see what Philip was called to do. This is Acts 8:26-40. (READ Acts 8:26-40)

Many scholars believe that Philip returned to Jerusalem with Peter and John after their visit to Samaria. But regardless of where he was at the time, Philip was called by an angel of God to go from a successful evangelistic campaign in Samaria and make his way out of the lush green landscape around Jerusalem, to the desert road that leads to Gaza. He was directed by the angel to "*go toward the south*" (Acts 8:26). The Greek phrase, however, can be translated 'at noon.' This is the literal meaning; since the sun is due south at midday, the phrase came to have a geographical meaning. This makes the divine command to Philip all the more unusual and perplexing; at noon the road would be deserted of travelers because of the heat. The road that went south from Jerusalem goes down to Hebron and then west to the city of Gaza.<sup>2</sup>

Now I don't know about you, but I don't like traveling in the desert, much less along a hot desert road, no matter where it leads. The road may have possibly had oases where water could have been acquired, but other than that, it was bleak, rather lifeless, and very hot, a place where most people would see as being completely inappropriate for evangelization to take place. It's hard sometimes to respond to God's command to go somewhere to do His work when conditions are not optimal, or even tolerable.

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<sup>2</sup> (I. Howard Marshall, *ACTS*, [Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980] pg. 161-162)

Philip's transportation was his feet, so progress would have been slow, and possibly agonizing. What in the world was God calling him there to do?

But Philip didn't argue with the angel asking why he should do this, but rather, in faith, followed the angel's command and went. He trusted in his calling from the Lord, and relied upon God's provision, and he started out on his journey toward Gaza, confident that this was God's intention for him. Like many obedient followers before him, Philip simply trusted that God had a reason for him to be on the desert road to Gaza.

Though he didn't know it at the time, Philip was beginning the intended outreach to the Gentiles. God had called him out onto a desert road to begin a new wave of outreach to those in Judea and beyond. So it wasn't the work of Peter or the other apostles that began the outreach to other people groups; it was the Hellenistic Jews that **began the work** of going into "*all Judea, and Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth*" (Acts 1:8). The apostles had focused on Jerusalem, but Philip and the others affected by the persecutions taking place in Jerusalem, were the ones that took the message **first** to those outside of the Jewish tradition.

AND it was there, on that desert road to Gaza, that Philip came across a man traveling in the same direction - in the heat of the day, going south, on the way to Gaza. He was an "*important official in charge of all the treasury*" (Acts 8:27) of Candice, the queen of all of those in the southern Nile region in Africa (including Sudan and Ethiopia that would have comprised the nation of Cush). He was returning home from a visit to Jerusalem where Luke (the writer of Acts) tells us that he had gone to "worship."

Now this is very unusual, not that one from another country would come to Jerusalem to worship as Psalm 68:31 foretells, but that it would be a eunuch, one who would be excluded and prohibited from entering the Temple in Jerusalem according to Jewish law. It seems that God was reaching out to the very least of the people in order to bring hope and life to them through Jesus Christ.

Luke may have been describing this event in the Old Testament language in order to illustrate the

fulfillment of Isaiah 56:3-8, which says, “*Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will surely exclude me from His people.’ And let no eunuch complain, ‘I am only a dry tree.’ For this is what the Lord says; ‘To the eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths, who choose what pleases Me and hold fast to My covenant - to them I will give within My temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever. And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to minister to Him, to love the name of the Lord and to be His servants, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to My covenant - these I will bring to My holy mountain and give them joy in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on My altar; for My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.’ The Sovereign Lord declares - He who gathers the exiles of Israel: ‘I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered.’”*

Even if he were counted less than all other people, this servant of the Queen of Cush, “served God to the best of his ability. He had probably been in Jerusalem on the occasion of one of the pilgrim festivals and was now on his way home, riding as befitted his status, in a chariot and beguiling the journey by reading from a scroll containing part of the Jewish Scriptures.”<sup>3</sup> It is a clear indication that God knows the hearts of all people, and meets their every need in very particular ways to bring them joy.

It is also a very real picture for us to know that God may use us to even touch the life of one solitary person, so that they may not feel excluded from the family of God. Philip’s willingness to follow the command of the angel brought him to this very marginalized person to give him hope and life beyond anything that he could ever have hoped for.

So Philip goes up next to the chariot and listens to what he is reading, and it turns out to be Isaiah 53:7-8. And led by the Holy Spirit, Philip asks the very important question, “*Do you understand what you are reading*” (Acts 8:30).

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<sup>3</sup> (I. Howard Marshall, *ACTS*, [Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980] pg. 162)

You see, it's one thing to read the Word of God, but it's quite another thing to understand what you are reading. And if we read too quickly, we miss many important parts that could influence us for the rest of our lives. So, appropriately, the eunuch responds, "*How can I...unless someone explains it to me*" (8:31)? And he invites Philip into his chariot. An unemployed, unimportant, common, ordinary Jewish Christian man is invited into the opulent, luxurious chariot of an important Ethiopian traveling home along a hot, desert road to explain the prophetic writing of a prophet who had lived hundreds of years before. Isn't that the kind of irony that God uses to touch the heart of one of His faithful servants? WOW!

So Philip is given this extraordinary opportunity to share the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ with this traveler and his driver. And from the very text that the statesman had been reading, he explains the whole Salvation message of God so that he might understand and grow deeper in his faith. Step by step, verse by verse, Philip explains how this prophecy had been fulfilled in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. And he continues to tell of all that Jesus had done to bring Salvation to all who will believe in Him as the Messiah of the world.

Luke describes the situation so that we could easily relate it to what Jesus had done with the two men traveling from Jerusalem to Emmaus on the day of His resurrection (Luke 24:13-35). Jesus opened up the eyes of the two men using the Scriptures of the Old Testament to help them see the reason for the coming of the Messiah, the way that God brought redemption to all the people of the earth, and how everyone could find salvation from their sins by putting their trust and faith in this Messiah, the Savior.

And being a man seeking after the heart of God, the Ethiopian eunuch begins to put two and two together to reach four, and as they pass by a rare stream along that desert road, states, "*Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized*" (8:36)?

Sadly, the most important verse of this section of Acts is not written in the NIV translation. Notice that verse 37 is missing! It rightly needs to be proclaimed to you. "*Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' The eunuch answered, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God'*"

(8:37). There it is folks! If you believe with all your heart that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world, you have life, and are able to become baptized in the Name of Jesus Christ for your salvation.

Salvation is not for sale as we saw last week with Simon the sorcerer trying to buy the gift of the Holy Spirit. The power of the Holy Spirit is for those who believe in Jesus Christ with their whole heart, and desire to find freedom from all their sins to become right with God the Father. The eunuch heard the Good News of Jesus Christ' gift of salvation to all of us, and he chose to receive that gift into his heart so that he could be saved. Baptism was the outward and visible expression of the man's faith in Jesus. So Philip and the eunuch went into the water and a new man was born again, saved from his sin, redeemed from all wickedness and evil, and completely perfect in the eyes of the Lord our God. His professed faith in the sacrificial life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ arose from the depths of his heart, and he was changed because of his receiving Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

His being born of the water through baptism transformed his life to the point that when he came up out of the water, the eunuch went on his way REJOICING! He was now a child of God, and a brother of Jesus Christ, restored in the image of God into the likeness of Christ Jesus, Himself. And having made his profession of faith, having been baptized in the Name of Jesus, think of the great joy the eunuch would have received when he got to the verses of Isaiah 56:3-8! God would be speaking directly to him in these verses to let him know that he was now a precious son of the most high God. And that was the full reason that God had directed Philip to this desert road on the way to Gaza, to save this one man and offer him hope through the Salvation of Jesus Christ.

But listen to this. I like how Howard Marshall explains the next verse. "As the text stands, it describes how *the Spirit* snatched Philip away as the two men came up out of the water. This is an abrupt ending to the story, and it is considerably eased by a longer form of the text which reads: 'And when they came up out of the water, the *Holy Spirit fell upon the eunuch, but the angel* of the Lord caught up Philip...' Since in the Greek sentence the word for 'Holy' comes after 'Spirit', it can easily be seen that the whole of the italicized phrase might have dropped out of the text by accident. If so, the

longer form of the text could have been the original wording, in which case the story would have related explicitly how the gift of the Spirit followed upon the eunuch's baptism."<sup>4</sup>

I like that because it is consistent with the giving of the Holy Spirit to all those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, give themselves into the full service of the Lord God as they receive the salvation of Jesus into their hearts, and proclaim Jesus Christ as the new owner of the temple of God found in that person. The Holy Spirit would have enabled this Ethiopian eunuch to find complete joy as he went from the place of his water baptism, receiving the Holy Spirit to guide him and use him as the new evangelist to the people in Cush.

Then, having completed his assigned task there on the desert road, Philip is taken to Azotus, directly to the west, and north of Gaza. And there, he is given guidance to continue to "*preaching the Gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea*" (Acts 8:40). Philip consistently gave his best in the service to God the Father through his faith in Jesus Christ. He was willing to go where the Spirit led him, and wherever he went he gave hope and life to the people in the Name of Jesus Christ.

Folks, that's just what God wants us to do, every one of us! Yes, we may have served the Lord when we were younger, but God's not done with you yet! You may have given your heart to the Lord years ago, but never listened to His call in your heart to serve Him. Now is the time! We are a brand new church, just coming into our own baptism in the Global Methodist Church, to begin reaching out to all those around us here in Sheboygan and throughout the county. Let God's Holy Spirit fill you so that you may be one of Jesus' disciples and take His Good News to those who need it the most.

Father, move us beyond our "once and done" attitude to serve You with our whole heart right here in this place. Convict us of all that separates us from You, and give us clean hearts so that we might commit ourselves to Your service once again. Give us the desire to give You our best, fully committed to being in Your service, no matter where we are, and no matter where You might send us. Help us to proclaim the Good News of Jesus to all those we meet, so that they might have life, no longer thinking they are beyond hope, but providing new life to them so that they might become servants of You, too. Guide our hearts, Father, that we might be filled with Your Holy Spirit, and give You our very best, every day of our lives. We pray this in the great Name of Jesus Christ our Savior. AMEN.

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<sup>4</sup> (I. Howard Marshall, *ACTS*, [Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980] pg. 165)