

## The Book Of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

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### Acts 8:36-40

**As we finished last time**, I noted that Philip had gone from the excitement of a full-scale revival in Samaria to ministering to just one person – a high-ranking Ethiopian official.

Before we move on, just let that sink in a little. What did Philip think when the Holy Spirit changed his ministry from a city-wide revival to sharing the gospel with just one person?

I suppose that some preachers would have been very disheartened by the Spirit's directions. When you are in a place where people are being saved and baptized and filled with the Spirit, it might be a letdown to hear the Spirit say, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." - Acts 8:26

From a revival to a desert road in one day? Well, that's what the Holy Spirit wanted, and Philip obeyed without resistance. Whatever questions he might have had about these new marching orders, he did what God asked him.

That's something for us to consider, isn't it?

As we come back to our text, we are going to find several things, including a mystery and a textual debate.

Philip obeys the Spirit, approaches the Ethiopian's.

carriage, and ends up telling him about Jesus – using the very passage from Isaiah Candace’s official was reading.

Let me repeat John Stott’s statement about that:

“At a time when not one line of any New Testament document had been written, what scripture could any evangelist have used more fittingly as a starting point for presenting the story of Jesus to one who did not know him?” – John Stott

Okay, that was all a free introduction. Let’s come back to our text and look at verses 36-38:

“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?” 38 And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.”

As Philip and the Ethiopian official continued rolling along in the chariot on the road that led south from Jerusalem to Gaza, they came upon a body of water. Now, we might not think much of that, at first, but remember it is called the desert road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza.

The Greek text implies this was running water. Today’s tour guides often indicate that the water they found was the Wadi el-Hesi – which is northeast of Gaza. However, there are at least two other likely locations for the Ethiopian’s baptism.

One is Al-Walaja – a Palestinian village in the West Bank, some 2.5 miles northwest of Bethlehem. Another is a site

called Halhul – another Palestinian city located in the southern West Bank, about three miles north of Hebron.

I told you that we would find including a mystery and a couple of textual debates. Before we look at them, let's ask a question: "How did the Ethiopian official know he needed to be baptized?"

We don't see anywhere in the text that Philip talked about baptism, yet the official sees a wadi and immediately says, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?"

I often remind you that some things are explicitly stated in the scriptures while others are implied by either the context, geography, or the linguistics. It's here that we find again.

Although our text does not tell us that Philip explained to the official that baptism was the expected response to believing on Christ, it's certain that he did. Why else would the official see a wadi and ask, "Why shouldn't I be baptized?"

That question only makes sense if Philip had told the official what Peter told the crowd on the day of Pentecost: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." – Acts 2:38

Now, I don't know if you've noticed this, but the NIV translation actually skips a verse in our text! It goes from verse 36 to 38 but leaves out verse 37!

Other versions include verse 37. For example, the New King James Version says, "Then 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.” – Acts 8:37 NKJV

Why do some versions have verse 37, while others don't? Here's the problem:

Verse 37 doesn't appear in any of the ancient manuscripts. Our best guess is that sometime around the second century a well-meaning scribe added those words to the text.

There are a couple of reasons this may have happened: The scribe may have felt that it needed to be inserted to show that the Ethiopian official had indeed accepted Christ.

A second reason may be that, by that time, those words had become the standard formula for baptism. The pastor or other church official would say, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” The baptism candidate would respond with, “I believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”

That aside, let's note that the Ethiopian official was prepared to be baptized. As I have mentioned before, some scholars suggest he was a Gentile worshipper – often called “God fearers”. This suggests that he was a Gentile proselyte, subject to the various restrictions. Others, however, suggest he was Jewish.

Whether he was Jewish or a Jewish proselyte, he was ready to take a very important step of being baptized. Either way, he was prepared for some critical things to change once he did this. Family, friends, and

colleagues might well alienate him. His relationship to Jewish people was certainly going to change.

Let's look at verse 38: "And he [the Ethiopian Eunuch] gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him."

That brings us to a second textual debate. Now notice that we have the order of things correct. The official believed and then was baptized. He has met the Acts 2 requirement of "repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins."

So what's the textual debate? Well, did Philip immerse the man fully in the water, or – as some insist – did they walk waist high into the water, followed by Philip sprinkling or pouring out some water on the official's head?

Let's use a couple of standard answers to that question. Baptists generally insist that the phrase, "... both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him" means that baptism was by full immersion.

For the most part, Presbyterians take a different approach. They suggest the text doesn't mean immersion at all. J. A. Alexander insists that these words "... can prove nothing as to its extent or depth".

One reason for this view isn't from the text at all. Instead it is based on the fact that some of the earliest paintings and baptistries suggest that they went down into the water up to their waist, and that Philip then poured water over the Ethiopian.

The other is the Greek phrases used in verse 38. Here's why. The Greek prepositions in these two verses includes, "eis", in or into, as well as "ek" which means "from" or "out of".

Some linguists insist that using these prepositions in their most literal sense would mean that Philip and the Ethiopian both dipped completely under the water and came up out of the water. That certainly is not how we do baptisms by immersion. I do my best not to end up under the water with the candidate!

Who is right? Arguments based on the prepositions aren't really that strong. They simply aren't conclusive. So let me suggest that we are looking at the wrong verses to make the best interpretation of those events.

The real textual evidence of immersion isn't in verses 38 & 39. It's in verse 36 and 38. Here's why:

Let's remind ourselves of the geographical context. Both Philip and the official are traveling on the desert road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza. Now let me ask you a question. If you were Philip or that official, and you were traveling on a desert road, would you very likely be carrying with you? The answer is water!

Philip certainly would have had a waterskin with him. He's travelling from Samaria when the Spirit instructs him to approach the Ethiopian official.

Now, let's consider the Ethiopian official. He's travelled some 1200 miles from Cush or Nubia to Jerusalem. He had to take water sacks with him and refilled them at the necessary intervals.

I don't know if you have realized this, but the Cushite wasn't traveling by himself. How do I know that? It's because in verse 38 he commands the carriage to stop. In other words, he's not driving the carriage, someone else is.

Consider this, he is a high official, travelling under the authority of the queen mother. Isn't it more than likely that he has an entourage with him?

Why am I pointing this out? It's because the more people who were in that carriage, the more water they are going to need. That means they were carrying plenty of water for the return trip from Jerusalem to Africa.

Now we are coming to the point. If Philip was just planning to sprinkle the official, or even pouring water from a cup over his head, there was plenty of water to do that. So why is it that when the official sees a wadi he immediately says, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?"

So what happens? In Acts 8:38-39 we plainly read that the official commanded his carriage driver to stop. Then he and Philip walked down a slope, such as a riverbank to a body of water and Philip baptized the official.

In the Ethiopian's case, if New Testament baptism was by sprinkling or pouring out some water – there wouldn't have been any reason for the official to point out a body of water and ask to be baptized.

Philip could have baptized him while the carriage was still moving. Or, they could have stopped anywhere

along the road for Philip to sprinkle the official or pour out some water over his head.

That's not what happened. Instead, official commands his driver to stop the carriage. He and Philip go down the bank into the water and Philip baptizes him.

Okay, we've tackled a couple of textual debates. Now for the mystery I mentioned. Look at verse 39-40:

“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.

In these verses, we have another one of those New Testament events that are viewed differently by various scholars. An individual's New Testament worldview definitely comes into play in Luke's account of what happened after Philip baptized the Ethiopian official.

I want you to notice that the NIV chooses to say, “The Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away...” I have no doubt that the team translating this version was trying to avoid saying what the Greek clearly says. I'll explain that in a moment.

So, out of 32 Bible versions I consulted, here is the tally on how the text is translated:

- 10 use the phrase “snatched away”.
- 7 use the phrase “carried away”.
- 9 use the phrase “caught away”.

So, what's going on here?



The Greek word in verse 39 for “taken away” is Harpazo (harpadzo). Anyone familiar with koine Greek knows, as Strong’s Greek Dictionary indicates, the word means to seize, catch away, pluck, pull, or take by force.

Clearly, the word indicates a sudden, speedy snatching – and that without warning.

Now let’s apply something I have taught you many times. The best way to interpret difficult bible verses or passages is to compare scriptures with scriptures. The question becomes, “Are there any other New Testament scriptures that depict this harpazo – this “snatching away”?”

As it turns out there are three other instances of the word harpazo being used in the New Testament to describe a similar event. Let’s look at them together:

1. Paul’s experience of being “caught up” to the 3rd heaven: 2 Corinthians 12:2

“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven.”

2. Paul’s statement of the Church’s Rapture: 1 Thessalonians 4:17

“After that, we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord.”

3. The “Child” (Jesus) being caught up to God: Revelation 12:5

“She gave birth to a son who was to rule all nations with an iron rod. And her child was snatched away from the dragon and was caught up to God and to his throne.”

If we read verse 39 in its original context – without adding our personal theological presuppositions, Luke is stating that the Holy Spirit suddenly, without warning, transported Philip from the desert road to the city of Azotus (Ashdod).

Yet, there are scholars who insist that no such miracle could or would take place. Let me give you an example:

“This phrase has been usually understood of a forcible or miraculous removal of Philip to some other place. Some have even supposed that he was borne through the air by an angel. To such foolish interpretations have many expositors been led. The meaning is, clearly, that the Spirit, who had directed Philip to go near the eunuch, now removed him in a similar manner.”

Here's the problem with that view, especially that last statement. The Spirit didn't do any “snatching” when he told Philip to go to the desert road from Gaza to Jerusalem. There wasn't any “snatching” when the Spirit told him to join himself to the Ethiopian official's carriage.

The only “harpazo” we find in Acts 8 is when Philip and the Ethiopian official came up out the baptism waters.

Now, I don't want to unnecessarily belabor this point, but let's apply comparative scripture to the Old Testament as well. The Hebrew equivalent of the word “harpazo” is “laqach”, so do we have any Old Testament examples of persons being “snatched away” or “snatched up”?

As it turns out, we have several examples. Let's look at them:

### **1. Enoch: Genesis 5:24; Hebrews 11:5**

“And Enoch was well-pleasing to God, and was not found, because God (laqach) translated him.” – Greek Old Testament

5 By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: “He could not be found, because God had taken him away.”

### **2. Elijah: 2 Kings 2:11, 15-16**

“As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.”

“The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, “The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha.” And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. “Look,” they said, “we your servants have fifty able men. Let them go and look for your master. Perhaps the Spirit of the Lord has picked him up and set him down on some mountain or in some valley.”

### **3. Ezekiel: Ezekiel 8:3**

“Then the Spirit lifted me up into the sky and transported me to Jerusalem in a vision from God. I was taken to the north gate of the inner courtyard of the Temple, where there is a large idol that has made the Lord very jealous.”  
—Ezekiel 8:3 NLT

I think these Old Testament examples bear out the fact that “physical translations” by the Spirit were not unknown, but in the case of Elijah, well documented. As such, it wouldn’t have been a total surprise for the Early Church to reference such events as Philip’s “catching away”.

Okay, let’s come back to the text at verses 39-40:

“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.”

In these verses Luke is giving us two important geographical markers: Azotus and Caesarea. Both are important cities – one of Old Testament notoriety, the other in New Testament history.

After his translation, Philip was found in Azotus. This is the Old Testament city of Ashdod – one of the five primary Philistine cities including Gaza, Gath, Ashkelon, and Ekron.

Like the other Philistine strongholds, Ashdod was a major metropolitan city with corresponding towns and villages. It was located about three miles from the sea, and half-way between Gaza and Joppa.

Ashdod is mentioned frequently in the book of Joshua in conjunction with the conquest of the Promised Land. For example, Joshua 11:22 says that some of the Anakim (giant warriors) remained in some of the Philistine cities including Ashdod.

In I Samuel 5 Ashdod is described as one of the headquarters of the worship of Philistine god Dagon.

In later history Gaza was the subject of a series of sieges by Tartan, the Assyrian General in 716 B.C., Psammetichus in 630 B.C., and the Maccabees. It was rebuilt Roman general Gabinius in 55 B.C.

Caesarea is the second city that Luke references. It, too, is important to our text as well as first-century Christian history.

The “Caesarea” Luke cites is often called “Caesarea Maritima” to differentiate it from Caesarea Philippi, another ancient coastal city.

Caesarea Maritima was located about 30 miles north of modern Tel Aviv on the Mediterranean coast. It was one of the ancient world’s largest artificial harbors as well as a regional center for Roman government.

Caesarea Maritima is mentioned many times in the book of Acts. After the apostle Paul’s conversion, he faced death threats from the Jews and was forced to flee home to Tarsus through Caesarea Maritima. He no doubt boarded a Caesarian ship for the journey to Turkey.

After his second missionary journey, Paul passed through Caesarea on his way to Syrian Antioch. He subsequently visited Jerusalem, which was about 50 miles away (see Acts 18:22).

On Paul’s last recorded trip to Jerusalem, he stayed in Caesarea with Philip, now known as “Philip the Evangelist”. There, he met a prophet named Agabus,

who warned him of the dangers he would face. Eventually Paul was imprisoned for some time there as he faced multiple trials.

Let me give you three more notes on Caesarea Maritima:

First, this was the home city of Cornelius, the centurion Peter was led to share the gospel with. Cornelius, his family, and many friends became Christians.

Second, Caesarea Maritima was the location where the angel of the Lord struck Herod Agrippa I with a wasting disease after he gave a great speech and accepted the crowd's adulation as a god (see: Acts 12:23).

Finally, Caesarea continued to have an important role in the early Christian era. It hosted some major figures and was the site of several libraries credited with preserving Christian literature. It became a vibrant, multi-ethnic community and an important center for education, writing, and intellectual discourse.

Let's tackle one last question connected to our text: "What became of the Ethiopian Eunuch?"

The only information we possess is a statement by Irenaeus, one of the Early Church Fathers. He indicates that the Ethiopian Official became a missionary in Nubia/Cush. Irenaeus does not elaborate on this statement.

Luke's record of the Ethiopian's conversion is a watershed moment in Acts. In Luke's day, interest in the Ethiopians greatly increased after the Romans

completed an expedition of the Nile as far up as the city of Meroe.

It's interesting that from Homer's time onwards the Greeks considered the Ethiopians to be living on what they called, "the edge of the world". Compare that with Jesus' statement that the apostles would take the gospel to "the ends of the earth".

One final note: What happened to Philip? After his foray into Samaria and his witness to the Ethiopian Official, we hear nothing about him for 20 years, until Acts 21:8. There we learn that he had travelled to Caesarea Maritima, settled down, married, and became a father of four daughters.