

## **Action Figures: Philip**

### **Acts 8:26-40**

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This is not a story for those who have become cynical about faith and about God and about human beings. This is a story about a faith that is wide enough to include outsiders, a God who speaks through the written Scriptures, a Spirit who sends witnesses to just the right place at just the right time, a Savior whose life-story makes such an impression that a decision to follow him is made immediately, and a believer who can't wait to enter the waters of baptism and experience new creation and new life. In other words, everything that can go right does go right in this story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Luke must have recorded this episode in Acts 8 with a twinkle in his eye. Every piece of the puzzle fits perfectly. Philip has just had an incredibly successful evangelistic mission with a Samaritan village, a mission that saw the baptism of numerous men and women who were responding to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Without skipping a beat Philip is now on to his next mission post. This time he is sent out to a stretch of highway from Jerusalem to Gaza, leading all the way down to Africa. On his way he meets an Ethiopian eunuch. It turns out the Ethiopian eunuch is quite an important figure in the court of Candace, the queen of Ethiopia. The official is returning from a trip to Jerusalem which involved offering worship to the God of Jews. Apparently, this Ethiopian eunuch is either a convert to Judaism or a "God-fearing" Gentile, but either way, this man is interested in the work of God and the word of God. When Philip comes upon him the Ethiopian eunuch is reading aloud from the prophet Isaiah.

Now when I say this story is not for the cynics, I hope you are beginning to understand what I mean. Not only is the Ethiopian eunuch reading from the Jewish Scriptures, he asks Philip to help him understand what these verses mean. He is reading from Isaiah 53, a passage that promises a Suffering Servant whose wounds will bring healing and forgiveness to the people of God. The Ethiopian eunuch wants to know who the prophet is talking about. The door is opened

wide for Philip, and Philip walks right through. He uses that very passage of Scripture to tell the man the good news about Jesus. Amazingly, Philip doesn't even have to close the deal. The Ethiopian eunuch sees some water, demands the chariot be stopped, and practically pleads to be baptized. "What can stand in the way?" he asks Philip. I can almost see Luke throwing up his hands in self-defense and saying, "What? What? Isn't it supposed to be this easy when Jesus fills you with the power of the Holy Spirit and sends you out to be witnesses?" Indeed, what can stand in the way?

What can stand in the way? You don't have to be cynical to know there are plenty of things that can stand in the way. The man wants to be baptized. Well, are you going to be baptized by immersion or baptized by sprinkling? Some are convinced there is only one way to be baptized. A Baptist preacher was talking to an ecumenical group, and with the desire of being open-minded and inclusive he assured us there was room for all of us when it came to baptismal practices. This Baptist preacher practiced immersion, many of us baptized by sprinkling, or anointing. With a big smile the Baptist pastor said, "You do it your way...and we'll do it His way." His smile let us know he understood there were different practices in baptism. When it comes to baptism, some are convinced there is only one way to do it, and this becomes a stumbling block, something that stands in the way.

What can stand in the way? Later in Acts we will find out the Jewish practice of circumcision can stand in the way. Some said to be a "true" follower of Jesus you had to practice circumcision. What can stand in the way? There will be debates in New Testament letters about food sacrificed to idols and whether those who eat such food truly "belong". The role of women in the community and in worship became a flashpoint. What can stand in the way? Lots of things. Just let two or three gather and a list starts to form. What about speaking in tongues? What about how people dress? What about whether heads are covered or uncovered? What about having an organ in worship or should it be drums and guitars? What about raising hands in worship? Hands up? Hands down? Just give us a few minutes and we can fill that Ethiopian eunuch in on some of the many things that stand in the way of someone just getting baptized.

What can stand in the way? What we believe about God can stand in the way. For some people, their God is too big. Their God is distant and removed and too busy to be bothered with individuals and their journeys through life. This God is sovereign and righteous and holy and just, but this God is not personal. What can stand in the way? A God who is too big to be personal, too big to draw close, too big to be concerned with lone travelers on deserted roads reading Scripture and asking, “What does this mean?” A God who is too big can stand in the way.

So can a God who is too small. This Ethiopian eunuch was returning from Jerusalem. Not too long ago a follower of Jesus named Stephen had been put to death for his faith in Christ. Then a great persecution broke out against the whole church, all the believers in Jerusalem. Everyone except the apostles scattered and left Jerusalem, the scene of the crime. Doesn't that raise questions about God? If God is mighty and all-powerful, what is going on in Jerusalem? How can a mighty God allow his people to suffer, to experience pain, to endure persecution? If God cannot even keep things together in Jerusalem, how in the world can we expect him to be ruling and reigning out in the hinterland, on the desert road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza?

Or maybe a person can think they are too big, and that stands in the way of baptism. This Ethiopian was a man of standing. He was an important official in an important kingdom and he had important connections. He was in charge of all the treasury of Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians. Philip, the follower of Jesus was on foot. The treasurer of Ethiopia was sitting in his chariot, and he had the time and the leisure to be reading. Having power, having authority, having comfort, having privilege, having resources, having leisure, can convince a person they have it all. Why do I need God? Why do I need baptism?

And then again, a person can think they are too small, and sadly, that stands right smack dab in the middle of the way for many. There are some who have no illusion that they are too big for God. These dear souls are keenly aware of their deep need, of their hunger, of their longing for God. These ones seeking God believe that God is big, but not so big that he isn't willing to be small, and intimate, and personal, and available. But they just can't get to the point where they believe that

God would be this kind of God for them. They can't believe God would actually be concerned with their sorrows, their pain, their suffering, and especially those things that have brought them shame and sadness and brokenness.

We don't know very much at all about this Ethiopian eunuch. But what we do know is enough to make us wonder aloud how he could ask such an innocent question as, "What can stand in the way?" The Old Testament itself tells us one thing that could stand in the way. In Deuteronomy 23:1 we are told, "No one who has been emasculated may enter the assembly of the Lord." As a eunuch, this man had been emasculated. His sexual organs were not intact. Yet here he is, a eunuch, asking, "What can stand in the way?" Not only that, but he is an Ethiopian. There are places in Scripture where the people of God wrestle with foreigners, those from different nations. Sometimes Israel is gracious and willing to accept the stranger and the alien, but there are other times when Israel draws back, when they set up boundaries and borders and they exclude the foreigner. And yet this Ethiopian eunuch is asking, "What can stand in the way?"

It makes me sad to think of how much can stand in the way. The waters of baptism are life-giving. The waters of baptism are cool and refreshing. The waters of baptism communicate the incredible blessing of belonging to God, of finding forgiveness and hope and purpose and passion and joy, deep, lasting, and abiding joy. And somehow a whole slew of things stands in the way. Or I let myself believe these things stand in the way. You see, in our story today there is absolutely nothing that stands in the way of this Ethiopian eunuch and the waters of baptism. The Ethiopian eunuch asks innocently, but he also asks honestly, "What can stand in the way?" As far as he can see, everything that stands in the way is gone, and the way is wide open to him and those living waters.

Where did all those things that stand in the way go? The prophet Isaiah had a hand in removing them. References to those being emasculated and the foreigners who were cut off elsewhere in Scripture are met head on in Isaiah 56, where a new word comes to those who have experienced the pain of exile, the pain of being uprooted, the pain

of being excluded. “Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.’ And let not any eunuch complain, ‘I am only a dry tree.’ For this is what the Lord says: ‘To the eunuchs...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 not be cut off. And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord...I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer.’” (Isaiah 56:3-8 selected) That is the word of God through the prophet Isaiah making a promise that an emasculated foreigner would certainly hear as an invitation to come, a promise that he could belong.

What about the God who is either too big or too small? Philip helps the Ethiopian eunuch to realize that God is neither too big to care nor too small to act. Philip does this by using the passage the man is reading in Isaiah 53 to proclaim the good news of the gospel. Isaiah speaks of a big God, the God whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts, the God whose ways are not our ways. This God is big, guiding the events of history. But in Isaiah 53 (and other places in Second and Third Isaiah) we read about the God who becomes intimately involved in the events of his people. God enters history as the Suffering Servant. He becomes acquainted with our suffering. This Suffering Servant learns about our suffering first-hand, by enduring suffering of his own. But the suffering of this servant has a purpose. His suffering removes roadblocks and things that stand in the way of people having a rich and full relationship with God. This Suffering Servant takes up our infirmities and carries our sorrows. This suffering servant is pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. This suffering servant takes a punishment upon himself that brings us peace, and as he is wounded, by his wounds we find healing. The Suffering Servant tells us of a big God who becomes small and enters our world and endures our sorrow and pain and out of it he brings healing and peace and forgiveness and carries our sorrows. The prophet Isaiah, proclaiming the word of the Lord, clears away obstacles and roadblocks.

But the story would not be complete without Jesus. Philip starts with Isaiah, with the very passage the Ethiopian eunuch is reading, and he proceeds to tell the man the good news about Jesus. Friends, Jesus did

not let anything stand in the way of the God whose desire was to love his people. Nothing stood in his way. When there was a distance between the eternal God and his earthly children, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Luke tells us he was born in a manger because there was no room in the inn. When he started his preaching career, Jesus let everyone know that nothing would stand in the way. He came to preach good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, release for the oppressed, and for everyone the year of the Lord's favor.

Things do get in the way, but Jesus steps in and removes them. He reaches out and touches the leper because he will not let what others call unclean stand in the way. He makes friends with the tax-collectors and the sinners, enduring criticism for being with sinners. But he won't let that criticism stand in the way. Instead he proudly says, "I have come to seek and to save the lost." When a righteous Pharisee wants to let his judgment stand in the way of a broken woman who is anointing the feet of Jesus with a poignant mixture of perfumes and her own tears, Jesus will not let anything stand in the way. He points to her great love as a sign that she has received an even greater love, the embracing and healing love of the Father in heaven.

At one point in his gospel Luke tells us Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem. There Jesus will remove the seemingly immovable object that stands as a constant threat to our relationship with God. In Jerusalem Jesus will suffer and die, but his death and resurrection will prove to be the very means the Father in heaven uses to remove sin and the power of death. Jesus removes our sin and he conquers death. Sin and death no longer stand in the way.

If all of this strikes the Ethiopian eunuch as good news, but good news of which he is not worthy, of which he is too small to receive, too insignificant, bound too much to the judgment of others and the fears he himself carries, Philip has an answer even for that. I hope it comes as no surprise that the answer is found in Jesus. Using the gospel of Luke, can't you imagine Philip telling the Ethiopian eunuch about the shepherd who searches for one lost sheep, the woman who sweeps and scours her house for one lost coin, and the tender and loving father who watches,

who waits, and who welcomes the lost child back to the house. I wonder if Philip might have said, “He cares for every one of his children. He died for every one of his children. He doesn’t want even one single child to be lost and alone.”

Is it too hard to imagine the Ethiopian eunuch hearing this good news and upon seeing some water by the side of the road jumping out of his chariot and saying to Philip, “Look, here is water? What can stand in the way of me being baptized?”

A while back there was some talk about churches that were removing the cross from their places of worship because they were afraid that the focus on the harsh reality of the death of Jesus might stand in the way of people coming to church. I guess they didn’t want the focus to be on suffering. But somehow it seems to me that if there were to be one thing that stood in the way of baptism, if there was one thing that should stand in the way of being baptized, it would be the cross of Jesus. When the cross of Jesus stands in the way, it doesn’t block the path to the waters of life. Instead, the cross is the very thing that opens the way, that gives the invitation, that calls people from all walks of life, people who are very different in a hundred ways, to find one thing in common, which is the love God has given for all people, for every tribe and every tongue, for every race and every nation, for every color and every culture, for every person who yearns to know they belong and every person who yearns to know they are beloved. Friends at the Dunn’s Corners Community Church, Presbyterian, I pray that we do not let anything stand in the way of people being baptized, except this one thing, the cross of Jesus. The cross is a symbol of how wide and long and deep and high God’s love is for us, and for all people.

The Ethiopian eunuch asked, “What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” Just this dear friend: the cross of Jesus Christ. Take up that cross and enter the waters of life.