

# “Into the Unknown”

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Acts 8: 26-40

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*This scripture takes place after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus (when Jesus returned to heaven). This story is part of the stories of the early church in the book of Acts. The Church begins in Jerusalem where the Holy Spirit is given to the disciples at Pentecost. After the early church begins to experience persecution and one of the apostles, Stephen, is stoned to death, the apostles begin to move out and spread out and the gospel, the good news of Jesus, begins to spread out further and further to unexpected places and people.*

*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)*

How many of you have heard that scripture passage? It reminds us that even when things don't go according to our plan, even when times are difficult, even when things are beyond our control, even when we have experienced grief or suffering — that God can bring good out of it and use those trials for God's purpose.

I can't help but wonder what good will come out of this pandemic. Note I did not say I wonder *if any* good can come out of this pandemic but *what* good will come out. There has certainly been a lot of pain and struggle in this time and I long for the day when this is history. But even as we live through it, I believe with faith that—though God did not cause this to happen (God is good and God cannot create evil)—God can take what is evil and use it to make good. Especially when we are open to what new thing may be emerging.

In a way, that is where this scripture story begins. It was because of the persecution of the church, because people like Saul (who becomes known as the apostle Paul after his conversion) are out to round up these troublemaking followers of the Way—that Philip is where he is: in Samaria. Samaritans were not liked or respected by Jews, but when things became uncomfortable at home, suddenly places like Samaria and people like Samaritans become more appealing.

We don't know how difficult this time was for Philip and others. The stories give us more of the plot line and the facts and not as much of the character and emotions that people are going through. Did he and the others imagine

they would all stay together or did he imagine from the start that they would travel to different places?

It is clear that Philip gave up control of what he wanted and imagined. Philip (who is different from the Philip who was one of the 12 disciples) decided to join the early church. Perhaps he was there on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended on the followers of Jesus, and seemed to spill over onto others who were just curiously looking on. At some point, Philip decided to follow Jesus and to join his church, and in so doing he died to an old way of life and committed himself to a new way of life. At some point, whether consciously or unconsciously he said: "*Thy will be done*".

How do I know these things about Philip? In this story Philip is guided by the Holy Spirit. He hears the voice of the Spirit giving him direction or has a strong sense of what the Spirit wants him to do, and then he simply acts on it.

The Holy Spirit first tells him to go to a certain road between Jerusalem and Gaza. It is a deserted place, in the middle of nowhere and in the heat of day. And then he is told to catch up and join a caravan carrying the person we know of as the Ethiopian Eunuch. Notice that Philip is not told why, he's not given the big picture, and there are good reasons why he might doubt or question this prompting.

When he is told to join the caravan, he may have wondered about it. After all this was someone not at all like him. The Ethiopian was black. In the Bible Ethiopia often represents the entire continent of Africa. This Ethiopian was also rich and powerful – he was a top official in the courts of the Queen of Ethiopia. We don't know too much about Philip but it's safe to wager he was neither rich nor powerful. We can be biased against or intimidated by people who are of a lower or higher class than we are.

The Ethiopian might have been Jewish or he may have been an admirer of the Jewish religion. There were Jewish people in Ethiopia dating back centuries and likely stemming from King Solomon's relationship with the Queen from the South — but likely the way he worshiped was different because of his culture. Another thing that made the Ethiopian different was the fact that he was a eunuch. He was castrated so that he would be a safe male around the queen. But people were uncomfortable about eunuchs— they were considered different and even sexually deviant. There are passages in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy that would prevent eunuchs from entering the temple and being a full participant in the faith.

So, the Ethiopian was an outsider by virtue of his race, his culture, his sexuality and perhaps also by virtue of his class.

Philip may have had a conscious or an unconscious bias against him – he may have known very clearly that he did not like people like this — that’s a conscious bias. Or it may have been more subtle – “I don’t feel like talking to this guy; I’d rather stick to my own kind; people like that make me nervous or ‘cringy’.” I suspect Philip did have a bias of some kind. We all do. We all prefer what is known and comfortable to the unknown. Our primitive brain from birth reminds us over and over that *known is safe and unknown is dangerous*.

Philip was sent to an unknown, wilderness place and asked to join and speak with an unknown, very foreign person. But Philip’s commitment to following Jesus is stronger than the fears of what is new, foreign and beyond his control. As Peter says a few chapters later: “*I truly understand that God shows no partiality (the KJV said “God is no respecter of persons”)* Acts 10:34. Philip concerns himself with following the will of God more than needing to understand and perhaps control God’s larger plan. Though he may not totally understand it, Philip can see that God is pursuing this man from Ethiopia and he will run after whatever and whoever God is running after.

Have you ever had a nudge from God? I’d be willing to bet you have. We don’t always recognize them. One of the reasons that we have a “God Sightings” time at Celebrate Life is so we learn how to recognize from hindsight a moment where God seemed present in our lives. ‘Shoulder taps’ are God nudging you to do something in the present or in the future.

You may be nudged to give a gift to someone, to call someone, to pick up and read a particular book, to tune into a particular worship service, to decide to go back to school or any number of other feelings of guidance.

Not every nudge is from God. If you haven’t eaten breakfast and you get a nudge that says you should buy a dozen doughnuts — it’s a nudge, but probably a stomach nudge, not a God nudge! Does the nudge lead to healing, reconciliation and life for you, for another and for the world? Then that is almost certainly a God nudge. The more time you spend with God through worship, through reading the Bible, and through prayer the better you’ll get at discerning God’s voice.

This is something that takes practice and we don’t always get it right. If you want to practice, start small. Pray and ask if there is someone you should reach out to today. If the nudge is a big one, like quitting your job or giving

away a lot of money – take more time to discern it. Don't just follow one nudge: pray about it, look for scripture to back it up, talk to other wise Christians. But if it's a nudge where neither you nor another person is going to get hurt if it turns out *not* to be a God nudge—like when the worst that could happen is that you might be embarrassed — then go for it! The most you have to lose is your pride and the most you have to gain is truly being a messenger, an agent of God on earth.

In worship we watched this short video: “[Shoulder Taps](https://www.godtube.com/watch/?v=YYDPDWNX)”  
<https://www.godtube.com/watch/?v=YYDPDWNX>

*[Have you ever had that feeling that you were meant to say or do something? Have you ever felt that tug to reach out to a stranger and speak up? When we follow these little moments in life, it can sometimes lead to the most incredible experiences. And that's exactly what happened to this man while he was enjoying a simple lunch.*

*Bill Hart is a motivational speaker who travels the country speaking on the topic of mortgages and the real estate industry. Bill was with a friend at California Pizza Kitchen when he noticed an elderly woman dining with her daughter and grandkids. That's when he heard a voice in his head to go over and tell the woman how pretty she looked. A lot of people would've ignored this bizarre feeling, but Bill decided to follow that voice. As he was leaving the restaurant, he passed by the woman and knelt down.*

*Then, he said, 'Hey, if nobody else has told you yet today, I just want you to hear from me how lovely you are.' A strange look came over the woman's face. She told Bill that her husband had died a year ago and that was exactly something he would say to her. The two were both overcome with emotion and embraced in the sweetest hug. Bill left the restaurant believing that moment had come from God, who gave Bill the 'shoulder tap' that blessed the woman. These shoulder taps happen in our lives and it's so important to listen to that voice because you never know where it will lead.]*

Isn't that beautiful? Bill had a strange nudge and took a small risk to act on it. He was very blessed to hear from her in that moment just how much of a God moment it was for her. Sometimes we have no idea what comes from a small gesture. She might have kept that precious thought to herself but nevertheless been so blessed by it.

Philip also took a risk running up to that chariot and ended up with an opportunity to share about Jesus, the Messiah who had been crucified and was alive again — giving life, hope and healing even to a man worlds apart from Philip. Philip followed nudge after nudge so that when the man

pointed to some water and asked: “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” Philip didn’t give him a book of rules or tell him he needed to do this, this and this to fully qualify – he simply baptized him. That was the end of that encounter. I don’t doubt that Philip was blessed by the encounter, but he didn’t know the bigger picture. According to tradition the Ethiopian man went home to share the good news of Jesus in his own country and the gospel continued to spread further and further.

My prayer is that you have an open heart and ears to sense those God nudges and that you will have the courage to act on them. Perhaps that nudge or shoulder tap will do something for someone you know and love. Perhaps it will lead to an encounter with a person who is worlds apart from you — but nevertheless pursued by God.

Let us pray:

*Holy Spirit, come and open the eyes of our hearts, open the eyes of our minds so that we might hear your voice. Give us discernment so that we might know when we are being deceived. Give us the courage to take the risks you ask us to take and the humility to laugh at ourselves when we get it wrong. May we see beyond our needs to a world in need, and may we shine your light for all to see. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.*