

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 11, Acts 8

6-Min. Video Overview

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Alright, let's jump right in. We're going to be looking at a story from the book of Acts, chapter 8. That is, well, it's an absolute powder keg. This is a moment when a young, kind of fragile movement gets put under some intense pressure, and instead of breaking, it just explodes.

It shatters all these social, ethnic, and even religious boundaries in a way that I guarantee you no one saw coming. This is the story of how persecution accidentally kicked off a global mission. And that really gets to the heart of it, doesn't it? What happens when you're forced out of your comfort zone? When everything you know, everything familiar, is just stripped away? Does your faith wither up and die, or does it find a strength and a purpose you never even knew it had? Well, let's find out.

So our story doesn't start with some grand strategic plan. It starts with a crisis. After a leader named Stephen is executed, this wave of persecution hits Jerusalem, and it scatters the believers like seeds in the wind.

And what was meant to destroy them accidentally launched the movement's first major expansion. Now, one of those seeds is our main character, a guy named Philip. He's one of the key Greek-speaking leaders.

And when he's forced to run for his life, he doesn't go to some friendly town. Nope. He heads to Samaria, a region that, for a devout Jew, was basically enemy territory.

The bad blood between Jews and Samaritans went back for centuries. It was deep. And this is exactly where that first big wall comes tumbling down.

Philip walks straight into a cultural minefield, and it sets the stage for this dramatic showdown between two very, very different kinds of power. Okay, so to really get what happens next, you've got to understand something about the Roman world. Magic wasn't some weird fringe activity.

It was everywhere. I mean, people used it for everything. Love spells, cursing their rivals in a chariot race, you name it.

And Jewish magicians, they were often seen as the most powerful of all, because people believed they knew the secret unpronounceable name of God, which gave them, like, ultimate power. And in Samaria, the big man on campus was a sorcerer named Simon, and he had the whole city completely captivated. The difference between these two guys is just stark.

You've got Simon, who's using his power for fame, drawing on magic. Then you have Philip, whose goal is just to talk about Jesus, and his power comes from the Holy Spirit. And the outcomes: one leads to some temporary amazement, sure, but the other leads to genuine, life-changing faith.

So when Philip shows up, he's not just preaching. He is demonstrating a totally different kind of power. People are being healed, real miracles are happening.

And this power is so undeniable and so clearly not about him that it just completely eclipses Simon's magic. The people see that Philip's power is the real deal, and it sparks a revival across the whole city. This thing gets so big that the head honchos back in Jerusalem, the apostles Peter and John, have to come see it for themselves.

And this is the crucial part. They don't shut it down. They affirm it.

They actually lay their hands on these new Samaritan believers who then receive the Holy Spirit. Right there, in that moment, former enemies officially become partners in the mission. The first huge ethnic wall has just been demolished.

But just as Philip is at the absolute peak of his success, I mean, he's leading this massive city-wide movement, the story takes a hard left turn. He gets a new command from God. And honestly, it sounds completely absurd.

The instruction is incredibly specific. Get up and go south to the desert road, the one that goes from Jerusalem down to Gaza. Now this road was known for being desolate.

It was literally a road to nowhere. I mean, can you just imagine that for a second? You are in the middle of the most successful work of your entire life, watching a city transform, and the command comes to just walk away from it all and head out into the desert. That is a massive test of faith.

Why on earth would God do that? Because God wasn't just breaking one barrier back in Samaria. He was about to use Philip to break every single barrier you could possibly imagine, all in one profound encounter with one single person who represented the very ends of the earth. So out on that deserted road, Philip meets a man in a chariot.

And this man isn't just an outsider. He's a triple outsider. First, he's a foreigner, a non-Jew.

Second, he's an African, a super high-ranking official from the Nubian kingdom of Meroe, which is in modern-day Sudan. And third, he's a eunuch, a status that, according to the Old Testament law, explicitly barred him from ever fully being part of the worshiping community of Israel. But here is where this story gets absolutely incredible.

Hundreds of years before this, the prophet Isaiah wrote these exact words, promising a day when God himself would welcome the very people who were excluded, foreigners and eunuchs. This ancient prophecy was a direct promise to someone just like the man in that chariot. So this one man's encounter with Philip, it was a living, breathing fulfillment of that ancient prophecy.

It was like a giant divine signpost declaring in no uncertain terms, this message is for everyone. No cultural barriers, no geographic barriers, no religious barriers, no exceptions, period. And the divine setup is just perfect.

When Philip runs up to the chariot, what is this man reading? Isaiah chapter 53, the famous passage about the suffering servant. He looks up at Philip and asks the million-dollar question: so who is the prophet talking about here? I mean, talk about the ultimate opening. Philip explains that the servant is Jesus, the man believes, and he asks to be baptized right then and there.

And the moment the baptism is done, something completely supernatural happens. The Spirit of the Lord just snatches Philip away. He was there one second, and the next, poof, he's gone.

This wasn't some friendly goodbye; it was a miraculous relocation, just underscoring that this entire event was orchestrated by God from start to finish. And the final shot of this scene isn't of Philip; it's of the African official. He's no longer an outsider; he's been fully welcomed in.

And he continues his journey home, taking this incredible news back to Africa, rejoicing. So why does this story matter so much? Because in these two back-to-back missions, Philip acted as a forerunner. He was breaking ground that would end up defining the entire future of the movement.

Let's just break it down. In Samaria, he smashed the ethnic barrier, turning historic enemies into family. Then, with the African official, he broke the religious and geographic barriers, proving the message was for even the most excluded people on the planet.

And here's the key thing that a lot of people miss. Long before the Apostle Peter's more famous story with Cornelius, Philip pioneered this work. He was the first person recorded in Acts to bring a fully Gentile non-Jewish person into the faith.

And that right there makes Philip the quintessential unsung hero. You know, the person who makes a groundbreaking contribution that paves the way for others, like Peter and Paul, but doesn't get nearly as much credit. He did the work without getting the top billing.

The scholar Dr. Craig Keener puts it beautifully. He says, Most people have not heard of most of us, but our names are written down in heaven. And that's what matters most.

Philip's story is this powerful reminder that your significance isn't measured by your fame, but by your faithfulness to whatever mission you're given. And that really just leaves us with a final thought, doesn't it? Philip's obedience on that lonely desert road literally changed the course of history. It makes you wonder, who are the unsung heroes today? The ones who are quietly breaking new ground, crossing difficult barriers, and doing the essential work far, far away from the spotlight? Maybe they're the ones who matter most of all.