

October 30, 2022

Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

Printed Text • Acts 8:26–39

Devotional Reading • Isaiah 56:1–8

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: EXPLAIN the connection between Philip’s sharing of the Gospel and its universal availability; REFLECT on our openness to people who differ from us; and DEVELOP strategies to make our churches more open and inclusive.

In Focus

Michelle loved meeting with her Bible study small group but lately she felt unsettled. The group had met faithfully for about five years and studied the Bible along with other Christian books that helped them apply God’s word to their daily lives. She was so grateful for the group and how it helped her grow in her faith, but now she felt God calling her to other things.

“I want to take all that I’ve learned and share it with others around the world, you know – missions,” she said to her small group leader one day after the group meeting. The following Sunday at church, her small group leader introduced her to the leader of the Missions Ministry, and she began to go out with the group to share the Word of God and serve those in need.

In our lesson this week, we will explore how Philip used the Scriptures to explain salvation to the Ethiopian eunuch.

Keep In Mind

“And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?” (Acts 8:36, KJV)

Words You Should Know

A. Eunuch (Acts 8:27, 34, 36, 38–39) eunouchos (Gk.) – A state officer

B. Esaias the Prophet (v. 28) Hesaias (Gk.) – Isaiah, an Old Testament prophet

Say It Correctly

Shewed. SHOWED

Stiff-necked. Stiff-nekt

Uncircumcised. Uhn-SUFR-kuhm-sized

KJV

Acts 8:26 And the angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert.

27 And he arose and went: and, behold, a man of Ethiopia, an eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who had the charge of all her treasure, and had come to Jerusalem for to worship,

28 Was returning, and sitting in his chariot read Esaias the prophet.

29 Then the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot.
30 And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest?
31 And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him.
32 The place of the scripture which he read was this, He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth:
33 In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth.
34 And the eunuch answered Philip, and said, I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man?
35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.
36 And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?
37 And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.
38 And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.
39 And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing.

NLT

Acts 8:26 As for Philip, an angel of the Lord said to him, "Go south down the desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza."

27 So he started out, and he met the treasurer of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under the Kandake, the queen of Ethiopia. The eunuch had gone to Jerusalem to worship,

28 and he was now returning. Seated in his carriage, he was reading aloud from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

29 The Holy Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and walk along beside the carriage."

30 Philip ran over and heard the man reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

31 The man replied, "How can I, unless someone instructs me?" And he urged Philip to come up into the carriage and sit with him.

32 The passage of Scripture he had been reading was this: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter. And as a lamb is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth.

33 He was humiliated and received no justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."

34 The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, was the prophet talking about himself or someone else?"

35 So beginning with this same Scripture, Philip told him the Good News about Jesus.

36 As they rode along, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "Look! There's some water! Why can't I be baptized?"

38 He ordered the carriage to stop, and they went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing.

The People, Places, and Times

Eunuchs. Throughout the Bible, there are references to royal attendants appointed by kings as official caretakers of queens, harems, and women (Esther 2:3, 12–15). Those eunuchs, who served with distinction, were able to rise in rank within the royal households. The Assyrians and the pharaohs of

Egypt were known to have minor officials in their court who often served as trustees of the royal assets. While the term is often literal, referring to men who have been physically castrated, this was not always the case. The term “eunuchs” was also used to denote officials who were assigned to duties in the courts of kings. Because the Ethiopian man referenced in today’s lesson was a proselyte, or Gentile who has converted to Judaism, to the Jewish religion, we may deduce that he was not castrated because the Mosaic Law would not have allowed him to become a part of the congregation of God’s people (Deuteronomy 23:1).

Background

In the Book of Acts, the story of Philip’s evangelistic effort serves as a transition between the ministries of Peter and Paul. The account of Paul describes how God adds to the church through his bold and relentless preaching. Philip is in the middle of the record of these two great statesmen; Philip’s efforts add to the church soul by soul.

We see Philip first serving as an elected deacon in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:5). His effective witnessing efforts are described in Acts 8:4–25, which shows how they fulfill Jesus’ Great Commission to spread the Gospel from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth.

At-A-Glance

1. Philip Obeys the Spirit (Acts 8:26–29)
2. Philip Witnesses in the Spirit (vv. 29–35)
3. The Ethiopian Confesses Christ (vv. 36–39)

In Depth

1. Philip Obeys the Spirit (Acts 8:26–29)

Acts 8 focuses on two great missionary efforts by Philip. In the first, Philip, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, has preached Christ, which led to the conversion of the Samaritans. The receipt of the Holy Spirit by the Samaritans verifies his success with spreading the Good News from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria.

The Spirit then directs Philip on another mission. We are told that an angel of the Lord directs Philip to go down from Jerusalem to Gaza (Acts 8:26, NLT). In Acts, the writer (Luke) presupposes that Jerusalem is ground zero for church activities, implying that Philip has returned to Jerusalem from Samaria. Philip was now directed southwest into the desert. Initially, Philip was not told what to do in Gaza. However, this lack of information did not stop him. He was obedient to the word from God and immediately obeyed. We should note that while Peter and Paul are noted for their great preaching ability, Philip was outstanding in the area of obedience. Whenever the Spirit directed him, Philip heeded. Because he was so sensitive to the direction of the Holy Spirit, it is clear that prayer and the study of God’s Word must have been integral parts of Philip’s life. How much more effective would Christians be today if we were more sensitive and obedient to the Holy Spirit?

On the road, Philip encountered a fellow traveler. Scripture tells us four important things about this man. First, we are told that he was a man from Ethiopia. Native Ethiopians were Black people. The

man was from a distant country located along the upper Nile. At this time in history, Ethiopia was located in the area we now know as Sudan. We then learn that he is a eunuch in the court of Candace, queen of Ethiopia, and “had the charge of all her treasure.” Finally, we’re told that he had come to Jerusalem to worship.

Biblical scholars provide varied interpretations of what it means that the Ethiopian man was a eunuch. One group takes the position that the term “eunuch” designates that he was a government official. They also say he was a circumcised Jewish proselyte. This group uses as proof the fact that he was in Jerusalem to worship. Temple worship dictated both his Jewish conversion and his circumcision. Others believed that because the man was in the service of a queen, the Ethiopian had been castrated. If this second theory were correct, Mosaic Law would have prohibited him from joining “the congregation of the LORD” (Deuteronomy 23:1).

2. Philip Witnesses in the Spirit (vv. 29–35)

The Gaza road was well traveled; certainly, other chariots had passed Philip. The Spirit directs Philip to “Go near, and join thyself to this chariot” (v. 29). This was no chance meeting. Philip was being purposefully led by the Holy Spirit to be with this man at this time. In this way, Philip was like Jesus. He did not mind leaving the crowds behind to deal with one lost soul. Notice Philip’s zeal: He ran to the Ethiopian’s chariot. Philip recognized the seriousness of his missionary work. Do we move quickly to assist in the salvation of the lost?

Because the Ethiopian eunuch was reading from the Book of Isaiah, we can safely assume that this man took the religion of Judaism seriously. Ethiopia was one of the areas among which the Jews were scattered after the Babylonian conquest (Isaiah 11:11). The eunuch may have had contact with Jews in Ethiopia or in nearby Egypt, where a great many Jews settled. Similarly, the fact that he could read Greek could be explained by the fact that from the time of Ptolemy II (306–246 B.C.), the Ethiopian kingdom had become partially Hellenized, or made to reflect Greek culture.

The custom of the time was to read Scripture aloud. Upon hearing the Ethiopian man reading, Philip asked if he understood what he was reading. In Acts 8:31 he said, in effect, “How can I unless someone shows me the way?” The eunuch was confused by what he was reading and needed someone to explain the Scripture to him. The man’s sincerity and willingness to learn were demonstrated by his invitation to Philip to come into the chariot and sit with him. Like many people today, the Ethiopian eunuch earnestly sought the truth, but he lacked saving faith in Jesus Christ and needed someone to show him the way. We must recognize that God could have allowed an angel to explain the Scripture to him but instead commissioned Philip. Similarly, Jesus has commissioned, ordered, and instructed each and every Christian to share the Gospel with others.

The Ethiopian had been reading from Isaiah 53, a passage describing the humiliation and suffering of the servant of God. He wanted to know, “Tell me, was the prophet talking about himself or someone else?” (v. 34, NLT). The Holy Spirit had been preparing Philip for this very moment. Philip “opened his mouth, and . . . preached unto him Jesus” (v. 35, KJV). Philip explained that the prophet Isaiah was describing Jesus, the Christ. The eunuch had no doubt heard great deal about this Jesus while in Jerusalem.

3. The Ethiopian Confesses Christ (vv. 36–39)

During his preaching, Philip had probably talked about baptism. As soon as they came to a body of water, the eunuch asked if there was any hindrance to his being baptized right on the spot. Notice that Philip did not drill the Ethiopian on his knowledge and understanding of the Scripture. Philip

simply asked him if he believed that Jesus was the Son of God. In other words, did he have faith? Obviously, at least to Philip, there were no impediments to this man's baptism. Upon the Ethiopian's simple confession of faith, "I believe," Philip recognized the man was prepared to be placed under the lordship of Jesus and incorporated into the church (some early manuscripts do not have v. 37). Philip and the man entered the water, and the Ethiopian was baptized. At this moment, another prophecy of Isaiah was being fulfilled. This prophecy spoke of strangers, eunuchs, and other outcasts who would be given an "everlasting name" and called God's people: "The Lord GOD, which gathereth the outcasts of Israel saith; Yet will I gather others to him, beside those that are gathered unto him" (Isaiah 56:8).

Search the Scriptures

1. Why was Philip on the road to Gaza (Acts 8:26)?
2. From where was the Ethiopian official returning when Philip encountered him (v. 27)?
3. Why did Philip approach the Ethiopian (v. 29)?
4. When they reached the water, what did the Ethiopian ask Philip (v. 36)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Read Acts 1:8. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in Philip's evangelistic efforts?
2. Why do you think Philip was able to be so sensitive to the Holy Spirit's directives?
3. It's clear that the Ethiopian's faith was sincere. Yet, in reading Scripture and seeking truth, he was lost. Why?

Liberating Lesson

When Philip then was finalizing his successful missionary work in Samaria, the Spirit ordered him to go to Gaza. Instead of dragging his feet, Philip heeded the direction of the Holy Spirit and performed a life-saving evangelistic appeal to the Ethiopian official. Today's Christians would do well to follow Philip's example and get up and go! If we are to be witnesses for the Kingdom, we will have to maintain sensitivity to the Spirit rather than follow our own course of action. We will be more effective witnesses when we allow God to order our steps in every area of our lives.

Application for Activation

Commit to daily personal devotion, prayer, and Bible study. Select a quiet time and place to do an uninterrupted reading of and meditation on the Word of God. You may find that early in the morning or in the evening just before you go to bed is best. Start with five minutes of reading the first week and add three to five minutes each week. You can start with the Daily Bible Readings.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Acts 8:26–39

26 And the angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert.

Angels play a critical role in the narrative of Luke and Acts (see Luke 1:11–18; 2:9–15; Acts 12:7–10; 27). Because Jerusalem was built on a hill, any departure was considered “going down” from the city. Gaza was one of the five cities occupied by the Philistines in southwest Palestine. At the time Luke wrote, it was on a caravan route leading to Egypt that someone traveling from Jerusalem to Ethiopia would naturally take.

27 And he arose and went: and, behold, a man of Ethiopia, an eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who had the charge of all her treasure, and had come to Jerusalem for to worship,

Nubia (Ethiopia) bordered Egypt to the South of Israel and was known in the Bible as the ancient land of Cush (Genesis 2:13; 10:6; 1 Chronicles 1:8; Isaiah 11:11; Ezekiel 38:5). It is important to note that “Ethiopian” meant “Black person” and “Ethiopia” meant “land of Black people” and was used in various ways by Greeks to refer to Arabians, Indians, Nubian and actual Ethiopians (Axumites). But here, given the reference to Candace (Kandake), it clearly meant Nubia/Kush. Kush referred to in antiquity is now called Sudan.

Kush did not worship the true God (Isaiah 20:3–5; 43:3; Ezekiel 30:1–9; Nahum 3:9; Zephaniah 2:11–12), and its people were among those foreigners who would be converted and acknowledge the true God of Israel. For example, Kush figures prominently in a text of Isaiah concerning the restoration of the people (Isaiah 11:11–12; Zephaniah 3:10).

It was not uncommon for eunuchs (castrated males or government officials) to hold positions of importance in royal courts in the region. Yet, according to Deuteronomy 23:2, this condition meant a rejection of full participation in the Jewish assembly. According to Leviticus 21:20; 22:24, an emasculated male was physically blemished and in a permanent state of ritual impurity. Some eunuchs were not castrated but were simply those set apart to serve the government. Though Isaiah prophesied that a time would come when “eunuchs [would] keep my sabbaths,” “take hold of [his] covenant,” and would be given a place in God’s house (Isaiah 56:4–5).

The Kushite eunuch held a high position in the Kushite government. He was in charge of the entire treasury of the Candace. According to ancient writers Pliny the Elder and Callisthenes, Candace, queen of the Kushites, was a dynastic rather than a personal name. That is, it was used to refer to a royal line of queens over various generations (e.g., “the Candace”).

The Kushite eunuch's Jewish affiliation is made evident by the fact that he came to Jerusalem to worship and was reading Isaiah in Hebrew.

28 Was returning, and sitting in his chariot read Esaias the prophet.

29 Then the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot.

30 And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest?

The angel of the Lord delivered the original message. Here, the Spirit of the Lord further instructs Philip. The point is the same: God is directly guiding Philip. When the Spirit told Philip to go and join up with the "chariot" (Gk. harma, HAR-mah), he obeyed. As he came near, he heard the eunuch reading Isaiah. It was customary in the ancient world to read aloud, even when alone. This was especially the case with lengthy scrolls where there was no separation between words; it had to be read syllable by syllable to detect the word divisions. In Acts 8:30, Philip asks the eunuch, "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip's question derives from the conviction that the prophetic writings contained deeper meaning for the future.

31 And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him.

In verse 31 (NLT), the eunuch replies, "How can I (understand), unless someone instructs me?" "Guide" as the KJV reads (Gk. hodegeo, ho-day-GEH-o) literally means to lead along a road (see Jesus' use of the term "blind leaders" and "blind lead the blind" in Matthew 15:14). Here "guide" gains the transferred sense of "leading" in righteousness or wisdom similar to its use in passages such as Psalm 5:8; 73:24; John 16:13.

The eunuch invites Philip to get in and sit with him under the assumption that he will be able to explain the passage in Isaiah. Traditionally, the Jews applied the concepts of suffering and humiliation in Isaiah 52:13–53:12 to the Nation of Israel or to the unrighteous Gentile nations. This passage must have been unclear to the eunuch.

32 The place of the scripture which he read was this, He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth.

33 In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth.

The passage the eunuch is reading from is Isaiah 53:7–8. The Greek word for "humiliation" (Gk. tapeinos, ta-pi-NOS), used in Acts 8:33 provides a possible allusion both to Luke's theme of "humbling the haughty and exalting the humble" (Luke 1:52; 3:5; 14:11; 18:14), and to the humiliation of Jesus as described by the Apostle Paul as having "made himself of no reputation" (Gk. kenoo, ken-O-o); see Philippians 2:7.

34 And the eunuch answered Philip, and said, I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man?

The eunuch's question is the pertinent one. The traditional understanding of this passage did not address his deep spiritual hunger.

35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.

After having been invited into the Kushite's chariot, Philip explains the Isaiah passage by beginning with the same text, and shows him that Jesus is the focus of the Scriptures. In Luke 24:13–35, the risen Jesus teaches the two on the road to Emmaus how to understand the Scriptures: "O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (vv. 25b–27).

The Scripture passage in Isaiah that the eunuch is reading focused on the humiliation and exaltation of the Messiah. Similarly, Acts 8:32–33 refers to Jesus generally and to His humiliation and exaltation in particular ("his judgment was taken away," v. 33). This interpretation of the prophecy of Isaiah is also seen in other New Testament Scriptures. In Romans 10:16, Paul quotes Isaiah 53:1 and applies it to his own ministry; in John 12:38, Jesus quotes Isaiah 53:1 and applies it to His ministry.

36 And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?

After hearing the Scripture explained and being shown how it pointed to Jesus, the eunuch asks, "What hinders me from being baptized?" "Hinder" (Gk. koluo, ko-LOO-o) is also used in Luke 11:52, where Jesus accuses the lawyers of preventing ("hindering") others from entering the Kingdom. Similar circumstances are seen later in Luke's account.

37 And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

38 And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.

Because there was no reason for his exclusion from other followers of Jesus, the Kushite eunuch orders the chariot to stop. Philip and the eunuch both entered the water, and Philip baptized him.

39 And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing.

The Old Testament often portrays the Spirit (Gk. pneuma, PNYOO-mah) moving prophets around in this fashion (Ezekiel 11:24; 1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 2:16).

In Acts 8:39, we read that the eunuch continued on his way "rejoicing" (Gk. chairō, KHAH-ee-ro), an appropriate response to salvation. Frequently in the books of Luke and Acts, joy or rejoicing is a noted response to God's work in the world (Luke 1:14; 2:10; 6:23; 8:13; Acts 5:41).

*Acts 8:36 Some manuscripts add verse 37, "You can," Philip answered, "if you believe with all your heart." And the eunuch replied, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Blemishes That Exclude
(Leviticus 21:16–24)

TUESDAY

Lifting Up the Downtrodden
(Psalm 147:1–6)

WEDNESDAY

Gathering the Outcasts
(Isaiah 56:1–8)

THURSDAY

Changing Shame into Praise
(Zephaniah 3:14–20)

FRIDAY

A Ruler Who Seeks Justice
(Isaiah 16:1–5)

SATURDAY

A Champion for the Needy
(Job 29:2–16)

SUNDAY

The Good News about Jesus
(Acts 8:26–39)