

An Ethiopian Is Baptized

Background Scripture: Acts 8:26-40 **Devotional Reading:** Isaiah 60:9-14

Acts 8:29-40 (NIV)

²⁹ The Holy Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot. Stay near it.” ³⁰ So Philip ran up to the chariot. He heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you’re reading?” Philip asked. ³¹ “How can I?” he said. “I need someone to explain it to me.” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Here is the part of Scripture the official was reading. It says, “He was led like a sheep to be killed. Just as lambs are silent while their wool is being cut off, he did not open his mouth. ³³ When he was treated badly, he was refused a fair trial. Who can say anything about his children? His life was cut off from the earth.” ³⁴ The official said to Philip, “Tell me, please. Who is the prophet talking about? Himself, or someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip began with that same part of Scripture. He told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶⁻³⁷ As they traveled along the road, they came to some water. The official said, “Look! Here is water! What can stop me from being baptized?” ³⁸ He gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the official went down into the water. Philip baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away. The official did not see him again. He went on his way full of joy. ⁴⁰ Philip was seen next at Azotus. From there he traveled all around. He preached the good news in all the towns. Finally he arrived in Caesarea.

LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To tell how Philip shared the gospel with an Ethiopian and baptized him.
- **Biblical Principle:** To recognize the importance of biblical knowledge in sharing the gospel.
- **Daily Application:** To obey and follow the Spirit’s leading in sharing the gospel with others.

INTRODUCTION

Religious Tourism

The desire to travel to places of religious significance is ancient and yet still strong. Historically, we refer to travel to a sacred site as “making a pilgrimage.” Many pilgrimage sites dot our world. For Christians these include St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City, Mount Sinai in Egypt, and the locations around where Jesus is thought to have been crucified.

People often testify that a visit to a holy site had such an impact on them that they were changed forever. They never forget it. The current lesson concerns a religious pilgrim who journeyed to Jerusalem to visit the temple some 2,000 years ago. His pilgrimage to Jerusalem may well have been a once-in-a-lifetime journey, taking many weeks. We know little of his lasting impressions of the holy city, but we learn of an encounter with Philip that changed his life forever, and he surely never forgot it.

LESSON CONTEXT: The Evangelist

A central figure in the lesson text is a man referred to as “Philip the evangelist, which was one of the Seven” in Acts 21:8 (compare 6:3-5). That distinguishes him from “Philip the apostle”—they were not the same person. In addition to the text, other passages that refer to Philip the evangelist are Acts 8:5-6, 12-13. On the other hand, passages that refer to the apostle of the same name are Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:14; John 1:43-46, 48; 6:5-7; 12:21-22; 14:8-9; and Acts 1:13. Regarding the designation *evangelist*, see also Ephesians 4:11 and 2 Timothy 4:5.

Like his colleague Stephen, the Philip in the current lesson moved from a ministry of feeding widows (Acts 6:1-5) to preaching the gospel (compare 6:8-8:1a with 8:4-25). Philip was the first to take the gospel to the Samaritans in fulfillment of Jesus’ directions in Acts 1:8. This happened as a result of persecution in Jerusalem (8:1b). During a highly productive ministry in Samaria (8:25), an angel of the Lord directed that Philip “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza” (8:26), the location of the current lesson text.

LESSON CONTEXT: The Ethiopian

Acts 8:27-28 reveals several facts regarding the man whom Philip encountered in the lesson text. First, he was from Ethiopia, a kingdom in Africa that is south of Egypt. This kingdom is also known as Cush (see Isaiah 11:11).

Second, he was a eunuch. Though some were born eunuchs or chose this status (Matthew 19:12), the word most commonly refers to a castrated man. Eunuchs were found in royal courts throughout the ancient world (compare 2 Kings 9:32; 20:18; Isaiah 39:7). The Greek historian Xenophon (430–355 B.C.) wrote that Cyrus the Great (about 600–530 B.C.; see Ezra 1:1; Isaiah 44:28–45:1; Daniel 1:21) preferred eunuchs in his court because he found them to be more reliable in general and trustworthy around women in particular. The Law of Moses restricted such men from participation in the assembly (Leviticus 21:16–23; Deuteronomy 23:1). One theory is that this individual had purchased a copy of Isaiah because of its promise of inclusion of eunuchs, those who sometimes described themselves as a “dry tree” (Isaiah 56:3–8).

Third, he was a servant to royalty. In particular, he served the queen of the Ethiopians as one having charge over the treasury. He was indeed a person of influence and wealth. He would have had to be wealthy to purchase a copy of Isaiah. The Great Isaiah Scroll, written in Hebrew and discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls, measures about 9 inches in height and 24 feet in length!

Evangelist Running: Acts 8:29–31

Philip was not only a faithful preacher; he was also an obedient personal worker. Like his Master (Jesus), he was willing to leave the crowds and deal with one lost soul. Philip left the great harvest to talk to one man, but that is the mark of a true servant of the Lord. We must go where God sends us, do what God tells us, and leave the results with Him.

Once Philip arose and went (v. 27), the Holy *Spirit* then told Philip to go and stay close to a *chariot* (where a eunuch was sitting who had just returned from worshipping in Jerusalem, v. 29).

The active role of the Holy Spirit is characteristic of the book of Acts. Philip might have been intimidated by the splendor of the eunuch’s chariot and thought any approach would be scorned. God’s Spirit, though, knew that the heart of the man in the chariot had been prepared by his reading of Isaiah, and so prompted Philip to approach him. This expression shows the definite moving of the Spirit of God in evangelism. What the Spirit of God commanded, Philip could not fail to do.

1. What did the Holy Spirit prompt Philip to do? (Acts 8:29)

Philip could hear the man reading aloud. Having been moved by the Spirit of God to speak to this man, and recognizing the exact portion of Isaiah that the eunuch was reading, Philip received his cue to initiate conversation.

Philip, trusting the Holy Spirit, interrupted the man with a simple question. To be able to read the text is one thing; to be able to comprehend it is another!

The question concerning his ability to understand what he read was natural enough since the man was the Ethiopian and not Jewish. The eunuch’s response also indicates this, “how can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” The actual passage which the man was reading was Isaiah 53:7.

Although the Ethiopian had traveled to Jerusalem to worship (Acts 8:27) and had some knowledge of Scripture, he was no master of the material. His plea for a guide indicated lack of in-depth schooling in interpretation as available in the great rabbinic schools of Jerusalem, such as Paul had with the school of Gamaliel (22:3; compare and contrast 4:13). The man’s hunger to understand prompted him to invite a complete stranger into his carriage!

2. What was the Ethiopian doing? What question did Philip ask? (Acts 8:30-31)

What Do You Think?

To whom do you turn for help with difficult Bible passages?

Digging Deeper

This Ethiopian represents many people today who are religious, read the Scriptures, and seek the truth, yet do not have saving faith in Jesus Christ. They are sincere, but they are lost! They need someone to show them the way. How can you be better prepared to be a faithful guide to others who are struggling with Scripture?

Gospel Preaching: Acts 8:32–35

This event recorded in the New Testament sets the New Testament seal of approval on the interpretation of Isaiah 53 and the “Suffering Servant” passages (Isaiah 52:13–53:12) as to Jesus Christ. When the eunuch asked Philip whether or not the prophet was speaking of himself as the sheep before the slaughter and the lamb before its shearer, Philip boldly *began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.*

The imagery of *sheep* and *lamb* depicts the suffering servant as one who would not fight or protest while on the way to death. Luke's account of Jesus' trials presents Him like this silent sheep, especially when He appeared before Herod Antipas (Luke 23:8–9; compare Mark 14:61).

The key to the Isaiah passage is the word *humiliation*, a blanket word to describe the horrendous treatment that Jesus would undergo during His trials and crucifixion. Jesus was denied justice. Even though the Roman governor, Pilate, declared that there was no valid charge against Jesus (Luke 23:4), Pilate still consented to the execution. That made it a case of judicial murder (23:23–24). Jesus, as the suffering servant of Isaiah's prophecy, seemingly had no hope of being the father of a future *generation*.

3. What was significant about the passage from Isaiah 53:7-8? (Acts 8:32-35)

What Do You Think?

What Old Testament passages do you find most helpful when witnessing about Jesus?

Digging Deeper

What role does the Holy Spirit play in helping you know what to say (consult John 14:26; Romans 10:17; 2 Timothy 2:15)?

Water Baptizing: Acts 8:36–40

The assumption is that Philip's presentation of the gospel included baptism in his witness to the Ethiopian before the carriage came by *some water*, or perhaps he had even seen people baptized while he was in Jerusalem. Throughout the Book of Acts, baptism is an important outwardly physical sign that speaks to the believer's death to the world and resurrection to new life in Christ. So, the man said to Philip, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?"

Philip's response has a little "not so fast, my friend" to it. One thing had to be certain: that the man sincerely believed *that Jesus Christ is the Son of God* (compare Matthew 16:16). This was indeed the man's confession of faith! The Ethiopian believed on Jesus Christ and was born again! So real was his experience that he insisted on stopping the chariot and being baptized immediately! And keep in mind that the Ethiopian was speaking not only to Philip but also to whoever was driving his chariot (Acts 8:38a). He was an important man, and you can be sure that his attendant(s) were paying close attention. Philip and man descended into the water and the man was baptized!

4. What followed Philip's preaching of the gospel to the Ethiopian? How did the Ethiopian man respond? (Acts 8:36-38)

The end of the story is surprising: *Philip disappeared, and the eunuch did not see him again*. Rather than be terrified or regretful, the eunuch continued and *went on his way rejoicing* (v. 39).

Philip was caught away to minister elsewhere in *Azotus* (v. 40). God did not permit Philip to do the necessary discipling of this new believer, but surely He provided for it when the man arrived home. Even though he was a eunuch, the Ethiopian was accepted by God! (see Isa. 56:3-5).

Azotus was the Greek name of the ancient city of Ashdod, located on the Mediterranean coastline of Israel. From there, Philip made a coastal tour all the way north to *Caesarea Maritima*, a trip of about 50 miles. When we next read of *Philip* (in Acts 21:8), he is in Caesarea. This was about 20 years after his ministry to the Ethiopian. Caesarea is where Philip made it his permanent residence.

5. What happened after Philip and the man came out of the water? (Acts 8:39-40)

CONCLUSION

The Gospel Has No Limits

As you trace the expansion of the Gospel during this transition period (Acts 2-10), you see how the Holy Spirit reaches out to the whole world. In Acts 8, the Ethiopian who was converted was a descendant of Ham (Gen. 10:6, where "Cush" refers to Ethiopia). In Acts 9, Saul of Tarsus will be saved, a Jew and therefore a descendant of Shem (Gen. 10:21ff). In Acts 10, the Gentiles find Christ, and they are the descendants of Japheth (Gen. 10:2-5). The whole world was peopled by Shem, Ham, and Japheth (Gen. 10:1); and God wants the whole world—all of their descendants—to hear the message of the Gospel (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15).

In October 1857, J. Hudson Taylor began to minister in Ningpo, China, and he led a Mr. Nyi to Christ. The man was overjoyed and wanted to share his faith with others.

“How long have you had the good tidings in England?” Mr. Nyi asked Hudson Taylor. Taylor acknowledged that England had known the Gospel for many centuries.

“My father died seeking the truth,” said Mr. Nyi. “Why didn’t you come sooner?” Taylor had no answer to that penetrating question.

How long have you known the Gospel? How far have you shared it personally?

PRAYER

Our Father, You planned for Jesus to come, teach, heal, and to go to the cross for our salvation. You planned to raise Him from the dead. You even orchestrated the meeting of Philip with one who was eager to hear. We welcome Your plans that include using us as ones who are ready to preach Jesus to whomever you put in our paths, and in our lives. We pray this in Jesus’ name as we prepare ourselves. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Philip’s experience ought to encourage us in our own personal witness for the Lord. To begin with, God directed Philip to the right person at the right time. You and I can know the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our witnessing if we are walking in the Spirit (behaviors that reflect being in accord with God) and praying for God’s direction.