

The Book of Acts, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 13: Philip and the Ethiopian

Acts 8:26-40

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Acts 8:26-40 is one of the clearest conversion accounts in the book, and it lays out the pattern of salvation step by step. What is doctrinally at stake includes God's providence in seeking the lost, the necessity of the preached and explained word for faith, Christ revealed in the Old Testament (Isaiah 53), and the conversion pattern of hearing, believing, confessing Christ, and being baptized by immersion. This account, along with the others the study has highlighted, is at the heart of how people were saved in Acts.

The heaviest doctrinal weight falls on the full conversion pattern and the good confession. Present clearly that the eunuch heard the gospel, believed, and was immediately baptized by immersion for the forgiveness of his sins, which refutes salvation by faith only. Note honestly that Acts 8:37 is absent from the earliest manuscripts, and teach the good confession of Christ as Lord from clearer texts such as Romans 10:9-10.

Yet aim at the heart. This passage glows with God's pursuit of one seeking soul, a willing witness, an open Bible, and a new convert going on his way rejoicing. Help students become available witnesses, grow in understanding and explaining Scripture, treasure the suffering Christ of Isaiah 53, and rejoice in the obedience of baptism into Christ.

Question 1

Student Question:

God orchestrated this encounter through an angel, the Spirit, and precise timing, sending Philip to one seeking man on a desert road (vv. 26-29). What does this elaborate divine arrangement reveal about God's heart for the lost and His involvement in bringing the gospel to seeking souls?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Look at how much divine activity surrounds this single conversion. An angel directs Philip to the road. The Spirit tells him to approach the chariot. The timing is exact: Philip arrives precisely as the Ethiopian is reading the very passage that opens to the gospel. God arranged every detail to bring one seeking soul to salvation.

This reveals God's heart for the lost. He is not indifferent or distant; He actively seeks and pursues those who are searching for Him. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10), and the same seeking heart is at work here, going to extraordinary lengths for one man.

It also reveals God's involvement in evangelism. He prepares hearts, arranges circumstances, and brings together the seeker and the witness. Behind every conversion is a God who has been at work long before, drawing the seeker and positioning the messenger.

Help students take heart from this. No seeking soul is overlooked by God, and no act of witness is random. When we share Christ, we join a work God is already doing. The God who arranged a desert encounter for one Ethiopian still orchestrates divine appointments today, and He invites us to be part of them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's active pursuit of seeking souls (Luke 19:10)
- Divine providence orchestrating the details of evangelism
- God preparing hearts and arranging circumstances
- Witness as joining a work God is already doing
- No seeking soul overlooked by God

Discussion Prompts

- What does the elaborate divine arrangement reveal about God's heart for the lost?
- How is God involved in bringing the gospel to seeking souls?
- How does it encourage you that God is already at work in those you might witness to?

Question 2

Student Question:

Philip obeyed God's call to leave a fruitful ministry for an uncertain desert road, and a soul was saved (vv. 26-29). When you sense God nudging you toward an inconvenient or unlikely opportunity to share Christ, how do you respond? What holds you back, and what would glad obedience look like?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Philip's obedience is remarkable. He was in the middle of a fruitful work in Samaria, yet when God said go south to a desert road, he went, without arguing that it made no sense. His willingness positioned him for one of the great conversions in Acts.

We often sense nudges toward unlikely opportunities, a person to speak to, a conversation to start, an inconvenient interruption that might be a divine appointment, and we hesitate. It is not the right time, we tell ourselves, or it seems pointless, or we are too busy.

Invite students to examine what holds them back: fear, inconvenience, self-consciousness, the sense that an opportunity is unpromising. Philip teaches us that God often works through what seems inconvenient or unlikely, and that obedience may lead to fruit we could never have foreseen.

Encourage glad, prompt obedience. We do not need to see the whole plan to take the next step God puts in front of us. The desert road did not look promising, but God knew the chariot was coming. When God nudges, the faithful response is simply to go, trusting Him with the result.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Prompt obedience to God's promptings in evangelism
- God working through inconvenient and unlikely opportunities
- Obedience positioning us for unforeseen fruit
- Trusting God with results we cannot yet see

Discussion Prompts

- How do you usually respond to nudges toward unlikely witness opportunities?
- What most often holds you back?
- Where might God be sending you, and what would glad obedience look like?

Question 3

Student Question:

The Ethiopian was reading the Scriptures but could not understand them without help, asking how can I, unless someone guides me? (vv. 30-31). What does this teach about the necessity of the preached and explained word for faith, and about our responsibility to help others understand Scripture?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The Ethiopian was sincere and seeking; he had traveled far to worship and was reading the prophet Isaiah. Yet he could not understand it on his own. How can I, unless someone guides me? His honest admission shows that even an open Bible and a seeking heart needed a guide to explain the word.

This teaches the necessity of the preached and explained word. Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ; and people cannot believe in one of whom they have never heard, and cannot hear without someone preaching (Romans 10:14-17). God ordinarily brings people to faith through faithful human messengers who explain His word.

It also underscores our responsibility. The Ethiopian needed a Philip. Many people today are like him, reading or hearing the Scriptures but confused, needing someone to guide them to understanding. God uses prepared, willing believers to open the word to others.

Help students see both the privilege and the duty. We have the word and, with study, the ability to explain it. There are seeking souls who need a guide. This calls us to know the Scriptures well enough to help others, and to be ready, like Philip, to explain the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The necessity of the preached and explained word for faith (Romans 10:14-17)
- God bringing people to faith through faithful messengers
- Even a seeking heart needing a guide to understand Scripture
- The believer's responsibility to help others understand the word
- Readiness to explain our hope (1 Peter 3:15)

Discussion Prompts

- Why could the Ethiopian not understand the Scripture on his own?
- What does Romans 10 teach about how faith comes?
- How well are you prepared to guide someone else through the Scriptures?

Question 4

Student Question:

The Ethiopian humbly admitted he needed someone to guide him into understanding (v. 31). Are you growing in your own understanding of Scripture, and are you able to help others understand it? What is one way you could deepen your grasp of God's word so you can guide others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The Ethiopian models a teachable humility we should imitate: he knew what he did not know and welcomed help. Growth in understanding Scripture begins with that kind of humility, recognizing our need to keep learning.

Invite honest reflection. Am I growing in my understanding of God's word, or have I plateaued, content with a shallow grasp? Could I explain the gospel and guide a seeker through key passages, or would I be at a loss? Many believers want to help others but feel unequipped because their own understanding is thin.

Deepening our grasp of Scripture is within reach. It comes through regular, attentive reading, through study, through good teaching, through asking questions and seeking answers, and through putting the word into practice. We grow as we give ourselves to the word over time.

Encourage one concrete step toward growth, a plan for reading through Scripture, a deeper study of the gospel, learning the key passages on salvation so as to guide others, joining a class. The goal is to become, like Philip, someone who knows the word well enough to open it to a seeking heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Teachable humility as the start of growth in understanding
- The danger of a plateaued, shallow grasp of Scripture

- Growth through reading, study, teaching, and practice
- Becoming equipped to guide others into the word

Discussion Prompts

- Are you growing in your understanding of Scripture or plateaued?
- Could you guide a seeker through the gospel from the Scriptures?
- What is one way you could deepen your grasp of God's word?

Question 5

Student Question:

The Ethiopian was reading Isaiah 53, the song of the suffering servant, and Philip used that very passage to tell him the good news about Jesus (vv. 32-35). What does it mean that Philip preached Jesus from this Old Testament Scripture, and what does Isaiah 53 reveal about the cross?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The passage the Ethiopian was reading was Isaiah 53, written some seven centuries before Christ, yet describing His suffering with stunning precision: like a sheep led to the slaughter, He opened not His mouth; in His humiliation justice was denied Him. Beginning with this very Scripture, Philip told him the good news about Jesus.

This teaches that Christ is revealed throughout the Old Testament. Jesus Himself said the Scriptures bear witness about Him (John 5:39) and, beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, interpreted in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself (Luke 24:27). The whole Old Testament points forward to Christ, and Isaiah 53 is one of its clearest windows onto the cross.

Isaiah 53 reveals the meaning of the cross. He was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; the chastisement that brought us peace was upon Him, and with His stripes we are healed (Isaiah 53:5). The suffering servant bore our sin in our place. The cross was not a tragedy that befell Jesus but a substitution He embraced, the sinless One dying for sinners.

Help students treasure this. The good news Philip preached is the same we believe: Jesus, the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, bore our sins on the cross so that we might be forgiven and healed. To grasp the cross is to grasp the heart of the gospel, and Isaiah 53 helps us see its depth.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ revealed throughout the Old Testament (Luke 24:27; John 5:39)
- Isaiah 53 as a clear prophecy of the suffering Christ
- The substitutionary nature of the cross (Isaiah 53:5)
- The cross as embraced substitution, not mere tragedy

- The gospel preached from the Scriptures

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that Philip preached Jesus from Isaiah 53?
- How does the Old Testament point forward to Christ?
- What does Isaiah 53 reveal about the meaning of the cross?

Question 6

Student Question:

Isaiah 53 declares that Christ was pierced for our transgressions and bore the sin of many (Isaiah 53:5, 12). When you consider that Jesus suffered and died in your place, how does it affect your heart? Where do you need to let the reality of His suffering for you sink in more deeply?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The truth of Isaiah 53 is not meant to remain abstract. He was pierced for our transgressions, our transgressions, mine and yours. The suffering servant bore the sin of many, and we are among the many. This is intensely personal.

Invite students to move from doctrine to wonder. It is one thing to affirm that Christ died for sinners and another to let it sink in that He suffered for me, that my sins were laid on Him, that the stripes He bore were the ones I deserved. Such reflection melts and motivates the heart.

Often we hold the cross at arm's length, familiar with it but no longer moved by it. We can recite that Jesus died for our sins without feeling the weight or the wonder of it. The remedy is to slow down and consider, deliberately and personally, what our salvation cost Him.

Encourage students to let the reality sink in this week, perhaps by meditating on Isaiah 53 or the accounts of the cross, by giving thanks specifically and personally, by partaking of the Lord's Supper with fresh attention. A heart that grasps the suffering of Christ for us is a heart moved to love, gratitude, and obedience.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The personal nature of Christ's substitutionary suffering
- Moving from doctrine to wonder at the cross
- The danger of holding the cross at arm's length
- Meditation on Christ's suffering as fuel for love and obedience

Discussion Prompts

- How does it affect you to consider that Jesus suffered in your place?
- Where have you grown too familiar with the cross to be moved by it?

- How could you let the reality of His suffering for you sink in more deeply this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

When they came to water, the Ethiopian asked, what prevents me from being baptized? and they went down into the water and Philip baptized him (vv. 36-38). What does this account show about the place and urgency of baptism, and about how baptism was practiced?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Two things stand out immediately. First, the Ethiopian's own question shows that Philip's preaching of the good news about Jesus included the necessity of baptism. The moment they came to water, the man asked, what prevents me from being baptized? He would not have asked this unless Philip had taught him that baptism was part of the gospel response. Preaching Jesus included preaching baptism.

Second, notice the urgency. There was no delay, no waiting period, no suggestion that baptism could come later or was optional. As soon as they reached water, the chariot stopped and the man was baptized. This matches every conversion in Acts, where baptism follows belief immediately (Acts 2:41; 16:33; 22:16). Baptism was understood as the urgent, essential response to the gospel, not a later step for the already-saved.

Third, observe how baptism was practiced. They both went down into the water, and Philip baptized him, and when they came up out of the water (vv. 38-39), the Spirit carried Philip away. Baptism was by immersion, going down into and coming up out of the water. The very word baptize means to dip, plunge, or immerse. This pictures the burial and resurrection with Christ that Paul describes (Romans 6:3-4) and is the form the New Testament consistently shows.

Help students see how clear this is. Baptism was preached as part of the gospel, practiced immediately upon belief, and performed by immersion. This account leaves no room for treating baptism as optional, delayed, or a mere symbol added after salvation. It is the God-appointed point at which the believing, penitent sinner is united with Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Baptism preached as part of the gospel of Jesus (v. 36)
- The urgency and immediacy of baptism upon belief (Acts 2:41; 16:33)
- Baptism by immersion: going down into and coming up out of the water (vv. 38-39)
- Immersion picturing burial and resurrection with Christ (Romans 6:3-4)
- Baptism as essential response, not optional or delayed

Discussion Prompts

- How do we know Philip's preaching of Jesus included baptism?
- What does the immediacy of the baptism teach about its importance?
- What does going down into and coming up out of the water show about how baptism was practiced?

Question 8

Student Question:

The Ethiopian responded to the gospel without delay, being baptized as soon as he came to water (vv. 36-38). If you have obeyed the gospel in baptism, how are you living out the new life it began? If you have not, what is keeping you from following the Ethiopian's example?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the account into personal application in two directions, for those who have been baptized and for those who have not.

For those who have obeyed the gospel in baptism, the question is whether they are living out the new life it began. Baptism is not the end but the beginning; we are raised to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4). Invite students to consider whether their daily life reflects the new creation they became, or whether they have drifted back into old patterns. The new life is meant to be lived, not merely begun.

For anyone who has not obeyed the gospel as the Ethiopian did, the question is gentle but direct: what is keeping you? The Ethiopian saw water and asked what prevents me from being baptized? The honest answer was, nothing. For many today the hindrances are delay, fear, uncertainty, or simply never having been taught clearly. This is an opportunity to lovingly invite a response.

Handle this pastorally. The teacher should be ready to talk privately with anyone who realizes they have never truly obeyed the gospel, and to point them, like Philip, to the joy of being baptized into Christ. For all, the call is the same: to take the gospel seriously enough to act on it without delay, and then to live the new life fully.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Baptism as the beginning of a new life to be lived (Romans 6:4)
- Living out the new creation rather than drifting back
- The gentle call to obey the gospel without delay
- Readiness to guide seekers to baptism into Christ

Discussion Prompts

- If you have been baptized, how are you living out the new life it began?
- If you have not, what is keeping you from following the Ethiopian's example?

- What would taking the gospel seriously enough to act on it look like for you?

Question 9

Student Question:

The Ethiopian heard the gospel, believed, confessed his faith, and was baptized, then went on his way rejoicing (vv. 35-39). Drawing this account together with the others in Acts, what is the consistent pattern by which people were saved, and how does it correct the idea that we are saved by faith only?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, gathering the consistent teaching of Acts on how people are saved. The conversion of the Ethiopian displays the same pattern we have seen throughout the book: the word of Christ was preached (v. 35), he believed it, he confessed his faith in Jesus, and he was baptized for the forgiveness of his sins (v. 38), after which he went on his way rejoicing. Hearing, faith, confession, and baptism, this is the pattern of salvation in Acts.

A textual note is important and honest here. Many Bibles include or footnote verse 37, in which the Ethiopian confesses, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. This verse is absent from the earliest and best manuscripts and was likely added later, so we should not build doctrine on it. But the truth it expresses, the good confession of faith in Christ, is taught plainly elsewhere. Paul writes, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved (Romans 10:9-10). Jesus said that whoever confesses Him before men, He will confess before His Father (Matthew 10:32). So the good confession of Christ as Lord is a genuine part of the response to the gospel, grounded in clear Scripture even apart from verse 37.

Now see how this whole pattern corrects the idea of salvation by faith only. The Ethiopian was not told that he was saved the instant he believed, with baptism as an optional later sign. He believed and was immediately baptized, and the connection throughout Acts is that baptism is for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16). Belief that does not move forward to confession and baptism is not yet the obedient faith the New Testament describes. As James says, faith apart from works is dead, and a person is justified by works and not by faith alone (James 2:24, 26).

Set the consistent pattern before students plainly. In every clear conversion in Acts, the response to the gospel is the same: hear the word, believe in Jesus, repent of sin, confess Him as Lord, and be baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of sins, then live the new life faithfully. The Ethiopian did exactly this, and the result was joy. This is not salvation earned by works, for it all rests on the grace of God and the blood of Christ; but it is salvation received through an obedient faith, not a faith that remains alone.

Pastorally, end on the note Luke ends on: the Ethiopian went on his way rejoicing. Obeying the gospel is not a burden but a joy. The man who came up the road searching went home forgiven, cleansed, and full of joy. The same gospel, received the same way, still brings the same joy today.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The consistent conversion pattern: hear, believe, repent, confess, be baptized
- Acts 8:37 absent from the earliest manuscripts and not a basis for doctrine
- The good confession of Christ as Lord taught in Romans 10:9-10 and Matthew 10:32
- Baptism for the forgiveness of sins as part of the response (Acts 2:38; 22:16)
- The refutation of salvation by faith only (James 2:24, 26)
- Salvation by grace through an obedient faith, not a faith that remains alone
- The joy that follows obedience to the gospel (v. 39)

Discussion Prompts

- What is the consistent pattern of salvation seen in the Ethiopian and throughout Acts?
- Why should we ground the good confession in Romans 10:9-10 rather than the disputed verse 37?
- How does this account correct the idea of salvation by faith only?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back over this whole account, God's pursuit of one seeker, a willing witness, the suffering Christ of Isaiah 53, and a soul saved and rejoicing, name one specific way the Lord is calling you to respond, in availability, in understanding His word, or in obedience to the gospel, and what is one step you will take this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the lesson into a personal response. The story of the Ethiopian invites us to be available witnesses, to grow in understanding and explaining the word, to treasure the suffering Christ, and to take the gospel seriously enough to obey it and live it out.

Invite each person to name one concrete step. Perhaps it is to make themselves available for a divine appointment, to deepen their grasp of Scripture so they can guide others, to meditate afresh on the cross, or, for anyone who has not, to obey the gospel in baptism, or for the baptized, to live more fully in the new life.

Keep the focus on joy. The account ends with the Ethiopian rejoicing, and the whole scene radiates the goodness of a God who seeks the lost and the gladness of a soul that finds Him. Transformation is not grim duty but joyful response.

Close by reminding students that the same God who arranged a desert encounter to save one seeking soul is at work in them and around them, sending them as witnesses and inviting them into the joy of the saved.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal response to God's pursuit of the lost
- Availability, understanding, and obedience as the call of the account
- The joy of the gospel received and shared
- Witness as joining God's seeking work

Discussion Prompts

- What most challenged or moved you in this account?
- What specific step toward availability, understanding, or obedience will you take?
- How can this group encourage and pray for you?