

The Book of Acts

Lesson 13: Philip and the Ethiopian -- Acts 8:26-40

An angel tells Philip to leave the revival in Samaria and walk south, down a desert road toward Gaza. It makes no sense. Philip has crowds in Samaria; why send him to an empty road in the wilderness? But Philip goes. And on that lonely road he meets a single traveler: an Ethiopian official, a court treasurer to the queen, riding home in his chariot from worship in Jerusalem. In his lap is a scroll of Isaiah, and he is reading aloud, reaching for a God he does not yet fully know.

The Spirit says to Philip, go over and join this chariot. So Philip runs up alongside and hears the man reading the prophet, and he asks the question that opens everything: do you understand what you are reading? The official answers with beautiful honesty: how can I, unless someone guides me? And he invites Philip up into the chariot. He has been reading one of the most stunning passages in all of Scripture, Isaiah 53, the song of the suffering servant led like a lamb to the slaughter, and he is desperate to know who it is about.

Philip could not have asked for a better opening. Beginning with this very Scripture, Luke says, he told him the good news about Jesus. The servant who was pierced for our transgressions, who bore the sin of many, is Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and risen. As the chariot rolls on, the gospel pours out, and the seeking heart of the Ethiopian is filled. Then they come to some water, and the man asks the question that shows he has understood not only who Jesus is but what he must do: see, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?

Nothing prevents him. The chariot stops. Both of them go down into the water, and Philip baptizes him. When they come up, the Spirit carries Philip away, and the Ethiopian, now washed and forgiven, goes on his way rejoicing. He came up that road searching; he goes home a new man. One desert road, one open Bible, one willing witness, one seeking heart, and the gospel reaches a continent. This little scene is a textbook of how God saves a soul.

Group Discussion: When Philip asked whether he understood what he was reading, the Ethiopian answered honestly, how can I, unless someone guides me? (vv. 30-31). What does this exchange teach about the importance of having someone to explain the Scriptures, and how has someone guided you in understanding God's word?

Personal Reflection: Philip left a thriving ministry to obey God's call to a lonely desert road, and it led to a soul being saved (vv. 26-29). When you sense God prompting you toward an inconvenient or unlikely opportunity to share Christ, how do you usually respond? Where might He be sending you?

Read Acts 8:26-40

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Isaiah 53:4-12, the suffering servant pierced for our transgressions, fulfilled in Christ; Luke 24:27, Jesus interpreting all the Scriptures concerning Himself; Romans 10:9-17, confession of Christ as Lord and faith coming by hearing the word; Acts 22:16, the call to rise and be baptized and wash away sins; Romans 6:3-4, baptism as burial and resurrection with Christ into newness of life