

HE TOLD HIM THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT JESUS

Acts 8:26–40

Key Verse: 8:35

“Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.”

Have you ever been asked an important life question but had no idea what to say? It can be rough. On the other hand, at a critical moment, how great it is to be prepared to speak up. In today’s passage, once again we see God using Philip out in front, spreading the gospel. It’s a very special, one-on-one encounter. There’s so much to learn here. Mainly, let’s see how to be prepared to share the good news about Jesus. May God speak to us through his word.

So far in Acts, we’ve seen the evangelization of large groups of people. But here, it’s all about just one person. And the man is unusual. Look at verse 27. First, it says he’s “an Ethiopian.” In Greek, the word “Ethiopia” means someone with a “scorched” or blackened face. In his country everyone looks as he does, and black is beautiful! But outside his country he really stands out. When they see him, people might even be afraid. With such a different appearance, he might not be welcomed. Today, sadly, people—even children—experience the pain of prejudice, of getting judged based on their appearance or race. It also says this man is “a eunuch.” Most likely, he’s had a surgical procedure that’s left him unable to have children of his own. He probably had to do it in order to get his current job working for the queen. His condition is irreversible, and in society it gives him a severe social stigma. As we’ll see, it’s his most serious life problem. Then it says he’s “a court official” and “in charge of all [the queen’s] treasure.” A man serving a queen might need to endure a great deal of humiliation. But his high position means he’s quite capable, and now, he’s powerful and wealthy. Altogether, this man seems unlikely to be open to the gospel.

But Luke gives us two more details about him. Verse 27b says “he had come to Jerusalem to worship.” At that time, Ethiopia in Africa was over 1500 miles from Jerusalem.¹ The trip would likely have taken several months. Why did

¹ Ethiopia at that time was not in the same location as it is today; it was likely the land of Cush, south of Egypt, in modern-day Sudan, and its famous capital, the ancient city of Meroë, was located on the Nile River. It was known for its wealth and for producing iron, jewelry and textiles. It had long been part of a trade route, bringing sought-after exotic resources from Africa’s interior to the Middle East, and then, west

the man make such a long journey? He doesn't appear to be on official business. It seems he came out of his personal interest. Somehow he's familiar with the Jewish faith, probably through his dealings with Jewish merchants. And he's no casual observer; he's really gotten into the Scriptures. He's been so moved by the God of the Old Testament, he really wants to worship him. So he's just been to Jerusalem in person, though he probably knew he would not be fully welcomed there.

And there's one more thing here. Look at verse 28. Now, on his way home, he's reading the prophet Isaiah. Clearly he's not satisfied with the mere ritual of worship. He's still seeking God, still reflecting on his word in the Scriptures. At that time, only very wealthy people could afford to have copies of the scrolls of Isaiah.² This man paid for his own because he was drawn to Isaiah's prophecies, which are full of God's hope. In his fancy chariot, he's reading Isaiah all by himself. It's so improbable, and so touching, how much he's seeking God.

The Old Testament shows God has always wanted to make Abraham's descendants a blessing to all the nations of the earth.³ God often predicted that the Gentiles would come and seek him.⁴ And God responds to those who seek him with all their heart.⁵ God is still longing to include people of all races among his people.⁶ And now, it's possible through Jesus, whom God sent to be "a light to the Gentiles."⁷ Jesus is the real hope of all the earth, still today (Matt.12:21).

Look at verse 26. The angel's appearance here shows how serious God is to help this Ethiopian eunuch. Philip gets involved, not with his own idea but in obedience to God (27a). But verse 26b tells us it's a desert place. It's unlikely anyone is even there. Philip may not think it an ideal place for ministry. It may seem like an absurd assignment. But even one person coming by who's actually seeking God is more than enough.

Look at verse 29. Here it's the Holy Spirit who leads Philip specifically to this man. It tells us a vital aspect of the Christian life. We all need the Holy Spirit. As we've seen in our study of Acts thus far, the Holy Spirit changes us. He gives

to Europe and east to Asia. At that time, Ethiopia was perceived to be at "the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8b).

² Isaiah had been translated from Hebrew into Greek, and this man, due to his treasury position, doing business with people outside his nation, was likely fluent in Greek.

³ Gen.18:18; 22:18; 26:4.

⁴ Acts 15:17; 17:27; cf. Psalm 14:2 (53:2); 22:28; 86:9; Isa.2:2; 11:10; 43:6-7; 60:3; Lam.3:25; Zeph.2:3; 3:12; Zech.8:22.

⁵ Jer.29:13; cf. Deut.4:29; Heb.11:6.

⁶ Rom.3:29; 15:9-12; Eph.3:6.

⁷ Both New Testament books written by the Gentile Luke (Luke's Gospel and Acts) have as their major theme the truth that Jesus is a light for the Gentiles (Luke 2:32a; Acts 13:47).

us visions, wisdom, understanding, and boldness. Now we see in Philip's life how the Holy Spirit also leads us, if we let him. In Acts we'll continue to see how crucial this is in spreading the gospel.⁸ We all need to be learning how to humble ourselves to listen to and follow the Holy Spirit's lead. How does Philip respond to the Holy Spirit's prompting? Look at verse 30a. "So Philip ran to him..." When he's sure the Holy Spirit is leading, Philip runs. We need his same eagerness.

And what does Philip find? Look at verse 30b. "...and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah and asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?'" What a surprise! Philip finds a guy in that chariot reading Isaiah out loud! Come on, what are the chances? But with the Holy Spirit leading, Philip is at just the right place, at just the right time, to speak with just the right person. To begin, Philip asks a simple question: "Do you understand this?" How does the man respond? Look at verse 31. He's high-ranking and wealthy, but he's humble. He even admits he can't understand the Bible without a guide. The words of his question are almost haunting: "*How can I, unless someone guides me?*" So he invites Philip to come up into his chariot and sit with him. It shows how serious he is to get help. What a beautiful scene: the Ethiopian and Philip riding in a chariot, talking about the Bible.

Two things stand out here. First, there's always a great need out there for people who can explain the true meaning of the Bible. Philip was ready to do it, right on the spot, because he'd been mentored in a Christ-centered church devoted to prayer and the ministry of the word (6:4). Let's pray that through our weekly Sunday messages, personal reflection writing, group Bible studies, 1:1 studies, and morning devotions, God may raise people of Christ-centered faith, willing and well-equipped to explain his word to others. Second, this encounter shows that we can't teach someone until that person is genuinely interested. If we can't tell if a person is interested in the Bible and we start teaching anyway, we probably just like to hear ourselves talk. Talking onesidely, pushing or bulldozing never works, and it's not Christ-like. May God help us depend on the Spirit to know when it's time to explain, and when it's time to be quiet, and listen, and wait.

Read verses 32–33. This is a quote from Isaiah 53:7–8. Why is the man reading these verses? He's so interested in them because these verses describe someone who's suffered, just as he has. It describes a man who could say nothing and just had to submit to being sheared. He's a man who's been humiliated and denied justice. He's a man who has no descendants and whose life is taken from the earth. It's a man this Ethiopian eunuch can relate to.⁹ His

⁸ 8:29,39; 10:19; 11:12; 13:2,4; 16:6–7; 19:21; 20:22.

⁹ Isaiah also predicts God's hope for eunuchs (Isa.56:3–5).

story speaks to the pain and suffering in his own life. So the man says to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" (34) It's another poignant question from someone who's had time to think, and who so badly needs to know who the verses are describing.

Read verse 35. "Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus." Isaiah 53 is a great passage to point someone to Jesus. Jesus knows firsthand what it's like to be despised and rejected, to have sorrows and grief, to be oppressed and afflicted, to have anguish of soul (Isa.53:3,7a,11a), because he went through it all. Because he himself suffered, he is able to help anyone who has suffered (Heb.2:18). He's able to sympathize with our weaknesses (Heb.4:15). Best of all, the good news is, Jesus suffered in our places, for our sins, to heal us, to bring us God's forgiveness and peace, and to give us hope for a new life, a new future, through his resurrection. No matter who we are, if we trust in his love and grace of forgiveness, he embraces us as his own, he welcomes us into God's family, and he makes our lives abundant and fruitful. He even gives us hope for all eternity in him. It's good news for this Ethiopian eunuch, who lost hope for his life. It's good news for all people today, including all who feel hopeless or like outcasts. We don't know how long this conversation was, but through it, the man truly receives the good news about Jesus.

Evangelism is rarely this quick and easy. As Apostle Paul mentions, it requires "complete patience" (2 Tim.4:2). But Philip's encounter with this unusual man shows us all some timeless lessons. In meeting people, we need to put aside our prejudices and assumptions and be open to the Spirit's leading. We need to be ready for the unexpected, and to discern if the person is truly seeking. We need to observe carefully and listen prayerfully if a person asks questions or shares personally. We need to be asking God to show us what the real problem is, and how Jesus can specifically help the person. And we need to remember that the pain in our lives is often the way God leads us to know Jesus better.

Verse 35 says, "...and beginning with this Scripture..." Like the Ethiopian eunuch, we all can find answers to our deepest problems in the verses of the Bible. Why is that? It's because the Bible always points us to our living Lord Jesus Christ, the one who can truly help us with his grace and truth (John 1:14). Hebrews 4:12 says: "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword...discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." When we're confused and don't even understand ourselves, the Bible can show us what's going on inside us. And as Paul says, the sacred writings of the Bible "are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim.3:15). Romans 10:17 says, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." Still, it may seem intimidating. But if we depend on the Holy Spirit to

guide us, he can show us which verses to share with someone, and how to explain them.

This encounter is not big and flashy, with lots of people; it's small and quiet, with just one person seeking and one person explaining. There's no manipulation, no human pride or boasting in it at all. It just shows a simple truth: one person is so important to God. Yet, at the same time, this, too, is another example in Acts of the mighty work of the Holy Spirit. Look at verses 36 and 38. Through receiving the good news about Jesus, this one man is ready to make a new start, a real life commitment through baptism. *He asks* to be baptized—it's *his* initiative. And even on this desert road they actually find water to do it. Again, God's hand is in it. And what happens? Read verse 39. There's no anxiety here about the man's future. What will he do now? He goes on his way rejoicing, because in Jesus he's found all that he needs. Tradition has it that he becomes a missionary to his own people. And God needs Philip elsewhere (40). Philip's ministry to this man is him just responding to what God is already doing in the Ethiopian. It's a preview of how many Gentiles God is going to reach through the scattered witnesses of Jesus.

Read verse 35 again. May God help us learn how to follow the Spirit's lead, and how to share with anyone, one person at a time, the good news about Jesus.