

## Prepared: Philip & the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26-40)

### Introduction

How many of you, like me, remember watching Billy Graham on the television during one of his evangelistic crusades?

I remember being impressed by him as he stood before those crowds of people and presented the gospel in that rich North Carolina voice of his

And I remember being amazed as I watched the swarm of people making their way to the front of the auditorium to accept Christ

While I will probably not speak to as many folks and will likely not see as many conversions in my entire life as he did during just one of his messages, I can tell you that leading someone to a saving knowledge of the Lord is the most rewarding thing a believer can do

I can only imagine what it must feel like to have a multitude of converts like Billy Graham

Philip enjoyed that kind of success in Samaria

Last week we saw Philip take his ministry to an unknown city in Samaria because of the persecution that had erupted in Jerusalem on the day of Stephen's death at the hands of the Sanhedrin

We saw how he was enjoying a great deal of success and many people were coming to the Lord as a result of his preaching the Word of God

Then we saw how the apostles came and laid hands on the Samaritan believers thereby bestowing the Holy Spirit to them

Things were going great even by modern standards and Philip had to be overjoyed with his ministry in Samaria

But, while we have been taught to equate success with sheer numbers in our "bigger is better" world, Scripture reveals that God cares about the individual as much as he does the multitude

Jesus often took his leave from the crowd to minister one-on-one to a single person who was in need

And who could forget his parables about the lost sheep, coin, and son?

Clearly God cares about each person and that's a good thing since he calls us to be his witnesses and his instruments in bringing people to salvation and most of us will never have the opportunity to reach the masses

Philip had a vibrant ministry going on in Samaria and then, as we will see today, God moved him from there and sent him to witness to a single individual who was travelling on a desert road

Our passage this morning is Acts 8:26-40 and I invite you to turn there in your Bible if you haven't already done so

First, we are going to look at the account of Philip and the Ethiopian itself

We will do a quick overview of the account and then look at some difficulties in the text that we have to acknowledge are present

Then we will dig in a little deeper as we see what the passage holds for us today

We will see how Philip was prepared to **obey**

How Philip was prepared to **answer**

And how the Ethiopian was prepared to **respond**

## I. The Account

Follow along as I read the entire passage

**26**Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is a desert place. **27**And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship **28**and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. **29**And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.” **30**So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” **31**And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

**32**Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter  
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,  
so he opens not his mouth.

**33**In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.”

**34**And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?”

**35**Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. **36**And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” **38**And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. **39**And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. **40**But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

### A. Overview

The story is rather straightforward and easy to follow

Philip is ministering in Samaria when God sends word that he wants him to leave his ministry and go to a particular road that is out in the middle of nowhere

Philip goes to the road and there he sees an Ethiopian who was travelling and reading a scroll containing what we know as the book of Isaiah

God tells Philip to approach the Ethiopian’s chariot and because it was very common in those days to read aloud Philip heard what the Ethiopian was reading so Philip asked him if he understood it and when he replied that he was confused and needed someone to explain it Philip took the opportunity to present the gospel message of Jesus Christ which led to the Ethiopian’s salvation and baptism

There aren’t a lot of twists and turns in the account and it’s really easy to see the flow of the story

But that doesn’t mean it’s without certain **difficulties** that we have to at least acknowledge even if we can’t be absolutely certain of the answers to them

### B. Difficulties

#### *Verse 37*

Perhaps the most obvious difficulty is the fact that our ESV Bible omits verse 37 from the text and includes it only as a footnote

That verse shows Philip responding to the Ethiopian's question about baptism and reads:  
And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he replied, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

Certainly there is nothing unbiblical about this verse on its face

It contains dialogue that shows that salvation must necessarily occur before baptism and relates a positive response of belief from the Ethiopian

This is pretty much how we would expect the scene to unfold and it certainly adds clarity and a sense of completeness to what feels like a jump forward in the action of the account

We give this same admonition today to those who seek baptism and we always ask for a clear testimony of saving belief before baptizing anyone

So we need to address why the verse is relegated to footnote status in some English translations

In the ESV Bible that we use here at Brick 18 total verses are moved to the footnotes so you may have run across this phenomenon before when reading the Bible and have wondered about why it's done

### ***Explanation***

Translators have rules and guidelines they rely on when making decisions in the translating process

One of those guidelines is that older manuscripts are more likely to be more true to the original writings than later manuscripts

And many of the newer English versions are simply the product of continuing scholarship that has discovered older, more accurate manuscripts than were available when earlier translations were completed

Another guideline is that it is more likely to have words added to the Bible than omitted from it because of the reverence that the copyists had for Scripture and because their desire to be helpful often caused them to write explanatory notes on the pages that later were incorporated into the text itself

And we have both of those scenarios in regards to verse 37

Once again, the thought in verse 37 is not unbiblical or "wrong" and there is no real damage done to the text whether it is left in or taken out

We just wouldn't want to rely on these types of verses when making doctrinal determinations and, in the case of verse 37, baptism being only for believers is well attested in other passages of Scripture so there is no need to use this passage to make that point

### ***The Ethiopian Eunuch***

We also need to look at a couple of questions about the Ethiopian **eunuch**

First is what Luke means when he refers to this man as a "eunuch"

Normally, we would define a eunuch as a castrated male in our everyday vernacular

But in Scripture we actually see **four (4) different meanings** behind the term "eunuch"

Look with me at **Matthew 19:12** where we see Jesus' own words as he taught his followers –

For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven...

The **first class** of eunuch would be those who physically unable to fulfill the matrimonial commitment, or, having the physical ability, lack the predisposition as a part of their nature and not by choice

The **second class** would be those who we typically think of when we think of eunuchs – those who were involuntarily made eunuchs through castration at the hands of others

And the **third class** would be those men who make the conscious decision to live a celibate life for a higher purpose even though they could have engaged in normal relations should they have chosen to

This choice is not meant to be understood in the literal sense of self-mutilation but as a purely voluntary choice of lifestyle to abstain from marriage as Gill writes, “Cheerfully and contentedly”

The term “eunuch” is also used in a **fourth** way in the Old Testament to designate a high-ranking government official **Potiphar** in Genesis 39 is described as an “officer of Pharaoh” and the Greek word behind that designation is this same word “eunuch”

And we know that Potiphar was a married man from the fact that it was the accusation of Potiphar’s wife that landed Joseph in prison

The reason this is important is because we need to try to understand in which way Luke referred to the Ethiopian as a eunuch

We also need to try to determine the Ethiopian’s **ethnicity**

The simplest understanding is that he was a Gentile eunuch who was a proselyte to Judaism

But there is no reason to necessarily come to this conclusion because eunuchs who were eunuchs by castration were prohibited from being proselytes

Also what was referred to as Ethiopia in the first century is what we know today as Nubia which is in the northeast corner of Africa and lies adjacent to the Red Sea and we know that the Jews were there during their captivity in Egypt

Therefore, an equally plausible explanation is that he was an ethnic Jew from Ethiopia who was called a eunuch because of his place in the court of the Ethiopian queen

I have gone into all of this because Luke takes great care to show in Acts 10 that **Peter was the one to open the door of the Gospel to the Gentiles** – not Philip

While I can’t be absolutely dogmatic about my analysis it seems plausible and I believe that we need to tread lightly when making assumptions where Scripture is silent or less than clear

What is important is that we take the time and make the effort to reach an informed position to the best of our ability to do so

I believe what we see in this account is **not** the first designated Gentile conversion in Acts but rather another instance where God reached out to work apart from Jerusalem and apart from the temple to save a single individual according to his purposes and for his glory

### ***Individual Witness***

In spite of the rather minor difficulties found in this passage it presents yet another way that God works in bringing the gospel to mankind

So far we have seen crowds of people receiving the gospel through the public preaching of the Word of God

First in Jerusalem and then in Samaria people were hearing and believing the gospel message and multitudes were being saved

But now God shows us the importance of evangelism to the individual

The gospel is a personal message that can be delivered even in isolation

And in this account we see God take Philip away from a vibrant, successful ministry in the city where many were being saved and send him to a remote area to reach out to one man

### ***Preparation***

And we see that Philip's effort was successful in large part because of **prior preparation**

The Roman philosopher, Seneca, is credited with saying, "Luck is when preparation meets opportunity"

Since I believe the whole concept of luck is unbiblical, I would dare to change Seneca's quote to say:

"Success is when preparation meets opportunity"

Or, perhaps better still is Roger Maris' quote, "You hit home runs not by chance but by preparation"

## **II. Philip Was Prepared to Obey**

As we consider this matter of preparation we will see first that Philip was prepared to **obey**

In **verse 26** we see that Philip is approached by "an angel of the Lord" who told him, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza"

We weren't told why Philip chose to go to a city in Samaria when persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem

There is no indication that he had divine instruction to do so

In all likelihood he simply used his own God-given intellect and chose a direction to head

Christianity is not a condition which requires us to passively wait for God to move us like chess pieces

God gave us minds and he expects us to use them as our thinking is informed by Scripture and predicated on submissive, seeking prayer

So Philip headed to Samaria and while he was there he went about what he knew to be God's will in witnessing and ministering to those around him

And he built a successful ministry

The command to walk away from a successful ministry to the masses to go to a "desert place" would seem to most of us to be counterintuitive

I know it would seem that way to the church growth experts of today as the push has been to emphasize ministry in large cities often to the neglect of our nation's rural areas and you will find very few pastors who voluntarily move from larger churches to smaller ones

But whereas Philip likely went to Samaria on his own volition he now has a clear order from an angel of the Lord – (we aren't told exactly how the angel contacted Philip so it must not be too important)

So notice what he does in **verse 27** – "He rose and went."

Now that's a blunt statement of obedience

There appears to have been no argumentation, no rationalization, not even a time of “prayerful consideration” – he heard God’s command and he obeyed

I am reminded of Abraham’s immediate obedience when God told him to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22

Look with me quickly at **Genesis 22:1-3** where we see that account unfold

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” **So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.**

Turning back to Acts, Philip went to the designated place and there he saw the Ethiopian travelling along the road in his chariot which was likely more like what we would consider a covered wagon

Then the Holy Spirit spoke to Philip in **verse 29** telling him to “Go over and join this chariot”

Whereas the angel of the Lord seems to have visited Philip and spoken in some tangible way which was common in the Old Testament, here we see what is more common in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit prodding Philip to take this action

What we see here is an important bridge that shows a transition in how God normally addresses his people

We certainly wouldn’t want to say that God *can’t* or *won’t* send an angel to us but it would seem more usual for God to speak to us through the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit

In any event, Philip heard from the Holy Spirit and again Philip obeyed fully and without hesitation

In fact, **verse 30** says that Philip “*ran* to him”

I believe that Philip obeyed as readily and fully as he did because he was **prepared to obey**

He had seen God at work in his life and in the lives of others and he was ready to do whatever God required of him

I have often shared the story of the time I asked an adult class that I was leading the following question:

“If God were to fully reveal his will for your life to you right now so that there was absolutely no doubt about it, would you do it?”

The response from the class was awkward silence and then a weak, “Maybe...”

Every person in the class said some version of wanting to know God’s will before they would commit to doing it – they wanted to see if God’s will met with their approval or squared with their plans

One young man was honest and said, “I’m afraid God might want me to go to Africa and eat worms”

Sadly, that’s often how we are when it comes to God’s revealed will

But Philip was prepared to obey and so he obeyed

And I want you to notice that he didn’t know fully what God was doing

At first he simply knew that God was telling him where to go – but not why he was being sent

It was only after he obeyed that command that God revealed the next step

This tells us something about how God operates

**God is under no obligation to tell us what he is doing or why – he expects us to obey what he says even while our understanding may be imperfect or incomplete**

And it is often only after we have demonstrated obedience to what we know that he reveals the next step

I know this to be true in my life

I was saved as a young child but it wasn't until I was obedient to the Lord as an adult that he began to reveal his plan for my life

I took the step of demonstrating my willingness to allow God to control my life by being baptized

Sometime after I took that step of obedience I sensed that God wanted me to be engaged in ministry

So I took the opportunity to substitute teach an adult Sunday School class – and I was terrified by the way – I hated standing up in front of a group

Then I took an opportunity to preach – again with great trepidation as it involved getting up front again

Only to have God reveal to me that he wanted me to go to school and prepare for full-time ministry...

The point is, God's revelation of his will for my life was done in installments as I obeyed each step

Honestly, had he told me what was coming I probably would have run the other way like Jonah and missed a great blessing

### **III. Philip Was Prepared to Answer**

As Philip obeyed each step he found himself confronted with an individual who had questions

As Philip drew near he heard the Ethiopian reading aloud from what we know as Isaiah 53

And Philip asked him if he understood the meaning of the passage

Of course the Ethiopian didn't understand and he asked for help in understanding so Philip climbed aboard the chariot and taught the Ethiopian as they rode along

Philip was **prepared to answer** the Ethiopian's questions

Philip had enough knowledge of Scripture that he could begin where the Ethiopian was and show him the truth of the Messiah and how the Old Testament Scriptures testified to Jesus

I think it's on purpose and a very good thing that God doesn't tell us exactly how Philip proceeded or exactly what he said because every situation is going to be as different as the individuals we meet and we might be tempted to follow some kind of formula that wouldn't always fit

We need to meet people where they are and begin from that point if we want to present the gospel in a way that meets their needs

In Philip's actions, though, I see similarities to Jesus when he met the two disciples on the road to Emmaus and how he began with Moses and the prophets and taught them from the Scriptures about himself

Philip began where the Ethiopian was and showed him what he needed to know in order to be saved

We too have been given the commission of taking the gospel to the lost and we must be prepared to be Jesus' witnesses

And **preparation isn't as hard as we make it out to be**

We don't need to be able to rattle off Scripture that we've memorized – although Scripture memory certainly comes in handy

I keep a card in my Bible that has the key verses for presenting the gospel printed on it because I know my tendency to forget in the moment of need

There's no shame in using a tool for such an important thing as presenting the gospel but the funny thing is I've never actually had to refer to it – but I keep it just in case

What we each need to be able to tell people what God has done for us and who Jesus is to us

Witnesses tell what they know and that's all we need to be able to do

**Because, and I want you to really get this, whether a person accepts or rejects the gospel message is not our responsibility**

The apostle Paul makes this clear in 1 Corinthians 3 where he says one person may plant and another person may water but God is the one responsible for any growth

You may never be the one who has a person accept Christ in your presence because of your witness because that honor may fall to the next person who witnesses to them or to the one after that

Would you be content to only plant and never see the harvest come in as a direct result of your labors?

I remember the first person I ever engaged in a one-on-one evangelistic Bible study with accepted Christ while having breakfast with my pastor at the time

I had put a lot of effort into the study but I wasn't bothered by not being the one who saw him accept Christ and our study simply turned into a discipleship study after that day

As much of a thrill as it is to see someone make a decision for Christ we must be willing to be obedient even if we don't know or even experience the outcome and we must be prepared to answer when people have questions – it's our job

#### **IV. The Ethiopian Was Prepared to Respond**

Philip was prepared to obey and he was prepared to answer but that isn't all that's necessary for someone to be saved

God also has to do a work in the life of the lost person and God had done so in the life of the Ethiopian as we see that he was prepared to respond to Philip's **teaching** of the gospel

The Ethiopian was clearly a devout and dedicated man

He had travelled to Jerusalem from his home – a distance of roughly 700-750 miles one way just to be present to worship there during a feast

He had procured a copy of at least Isaiah which would have been very expensive and nearly impossible to get

Remember, unlike today when most of us have an embarrassing number of copies of the Word of God, the printing press had not yet been invented and every scroll had been copied by hand making them rare and precious

Maybe the Ethiopian had heard the name of Jesus and what was being said about him while in Jerusalem

We don't know for sure what caused him to be reading from this particular scroll at this particular time

But far from all of this being a series of fortunate coincidences, we are privileged to see that this was a divine appointment set up by God in all of its details



God put the Ethiopian and Philip on a collision course and had prepared the mind and heart of the Ethiopian so that when the truth was presented to him he was ready to accept it

And not only that but he was ready to seal the deal by being obedient to the ordinance of baptism

So when they came to water enough to baptize him they dismounted the chariot and Philip baptized him straight away

The preparedness of the other person is the one part of the equation that we have absolutely no control over – that's a work of God in each individual

But if we are sensitive to God's leading and prepared to give the gospel to everyone God presents before us we are bound to run into the ones that God has prepared

## ***Prologue***

Just to finish up the passage we must look at some details that Luke provides in verses 39-40

In **verse 39** we read that Philip was “carried away” by the Spirit of the Lord

There are those who want to deny that Philip was miraculously and instantaneously transported to Azotus but there is no real reason to doubt that is exactly what happened

The Greek word used means to “seize by force with the intention of snatching away”

And we’ve seen this before like when the disciples suddenly found themselves having reached their destination while on the boat on the Sea of Galilee in **John 6:21**

The text seems to make plain that Philip just disappeared as far as the Ethiopian was concerned but notice that he doesn’t seem to mind or be concerned

I think that might have freaked me out just a bit but he had found Jesus and that was all that was on his mind as he “went on his way rejoicing”

We don’t know from Scripture what happened to the Ethiopian after this event but tradition says he returned to his home country and spread the gospel there which seems likely enough

But Philip, finding himself suddenly in another city, (again, there is no mention of what Philip thought about this) made his way northwest to Caesarea on the coast preaching in every town he passed through on his way

Philip remained obedient to his commission

## **Conclusion**

The fact that we arrived at this passage on this day is no accident

Neither is it a plan of mine that I would be preaching on this text on the day we see three people follow the Lord in baptism

It's another of those divine appointments – don't you just love it when God does things like this?

So what should we take from this passage this morning?

**First** we need to be actively doing what we already know

**God has revealed his general will to us and we need to be busy seeking to obey it**

**Then** we need to be listening for the prompting of the Holy Spirit and we do that by partaking of godly input first through being in and under the teaching of the Word by communicating with God in prayer

We need to be around other believers and seeking their Spirit-led counsel and we need to be looking at the circumstances in which God has placed us

**And we need to commit in advance to doing God's will when he decides to reveal it**

Thomas Edison said, "Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work"

Sadly, many Christians miss out on great blessing for the same reason that God's will doesn't always present itself in the way we expect

Committing to follow God wherever he leads may not lead to a life of ease but it will lead to a life of blessing

Are you prepared for it?

Let's pray