

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Acts 8:26-40 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the passage. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

ACTS 8:26-40 ESV

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?" 37 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.

STRUCTURE

- I. **The angel of the Lord leads Philip** to a desert where he finds an Ethiopian eunuch reading Isaiah (8:26-29).
- II. **The Spirit directs Philip** to join the chariot where he proclaims Christ from the Old Testament and leads him to faith (8:30-38).
- III. **The Spirit supernaturally transports Philip** to a Philistine city where he proclaims Christ all the way to Caesarea (8:39-40).

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

This scene portrays Philip's continued evangelism in former Philistine regions, complementing his ministry to the Samaritans in multiple ways. First, his ministry in Samaria was "mass evangelism." He led a whole city to Christ through public miracles and proclamation. In contrast, his ministry on the road to Gaza is "personal evangelism." By pairing these stories, Luke conveys the importance of both. We need Billy Graham, but we also need street-corner Gideons, handing out Bibles and sparking conversation. The goal of evangelism is the same in both scenes, but the image differs.

Likewise, the means of evangelism in both stories is the power of the Holy Spirit. In Scene 1, however, it is the power of the Spirit for healing and casting out demons; in scene 2, it is the power of the Spirit in giving revelation. Evangelism requires *power* of both kinds.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, both scenes portray the expansion of God's "temple" beyond previous boundaries. After Stephen's speech in Acts 7, temple authorities murder him, representing Jerusalem's last shot (until the end of the age, cf. Rom. 11). From there, Philip's ministry extends the temple border to include Samaritans—former "competitors" who built their own temple and compromised the Bible. Afterward, God's "temple-expansion" through Philip continues to include outcasts like the Ethiopian eunuch. This fulfills the promise of Isaiah 56 (see below), where eunuchs—formerly prohibited from temple worship (Deut. 23:1)—would become pillars in God's new temple, which is not a building, but us. The people of God are the house of God, and now this house includes all peoples.

Nevertheless, someone must tell them the good news. Faithful Christians emulate Philip's ministry by following God's leadership. This passage emphasizes the Spirit's guidance in helping us fulfill the Great Commission by showing: (1) Philip's immediate response to the angel; (2) Philip's immediate response to the Spirit; (3) Philip's seizure by the Spirit.

The Spirit does not seize Philip, however, until after he baptizes the eunuch. Luke thus emphasizes that even though the man is technically saved when he believes, the conversion process consummates at baptism. The story thus exhorts us to be baptized quickly after conversion, as is the pattern throughout Acts. Furthermore, on a broader narrative level, the baptism fulfills God's promise that through the Messiah's ministry, He would turn the "desert place" (Acts 8:26) into a watering hole (Isa. 35:6-7; see more references below).

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

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.

—"angel": these make frequent appearances in Acts.

- 5:19: an angel breaks Peter and John out of prison.
- 8:26: an angel tells Philip where to go.
- 10:3: an angel speaks to Cornelius about Peter.
- 12:7-11: an angel breaks Peter out of prison again.
- 12:15: the believers assume that someone who looks like Peter is Peter's angel.
- 12:23: an angel strikes down Herod for receiving worship.
- 27:23: an angel appears to Paul and communicates the way of escape

—Given the frequency of angelic appearances in Acts, should we expect more of them?

- On the one hand, the story of Acts occurs over decades, and this is the highlight reel. We should not imagine they saw angels constantly.
- On the other hand, angelic appearances occur frequently enough that believers in Acts 12 assume that "a sighting of Peter" was really just "Peter's angel" (since Peter was supposed to be in prison). Their nonchalant assumption suggests some frequency of appearances.
- The latter example also reinforces the truth of Hebrews 13:2: *"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."* In other words, sometimes God tests us by sending angels disguised as people. Angelic "appearances" do not always light up a room. Sometimes they look like the homeless man asking for change or the person waiting in line next to us. We have probably all seen angels "disguised" and not even known it.
- The last thing I'll say about angelic appearances in Acts is that they almost all relate to the expansion of the gospel. For that matter, the miracles and revelations throughout Acts pertain to gospel expansion. This fulfills Acts 1:8, that God gives power for witness. Power manifests as miracles and revelation. Angels often have a role in both. If we want to experience "the highlight reel" of Acts for ourselves, we should preach the gospel to more people.

—Not only is this an "angel" but "the angel of the Lord." Throughout the Old Testament, interpreters agree that the angel of the Lord is the preincarnate Christ. Does this suggest that *Jesus* appeared to Philip? Perhaps, but I'm not convinced. I think the language Luke employs aims to achieve something different. I think he intends to show that just as the angel of the Lord led Israel through the desert, he now leads the church through "the desert place" (8:26). The story will end with baptism, which reminds us of that same exodus generation. In baptism, as in the exodus, we journey "through the water" until we reach the land of promise.

—"to the south": Philip had previously ministered in the northern region of Samaria; now he ministers in the south. At Pentecost, the nations gathered at Jerusalem to hear the wonders of God declared; after the persecution, disciples fan out from Jerusalem to declare the wonders of God. All roads lead away from Jerusalem—to eternal life.

—"to the road":

- There appears to be some symbolism with "roads" in Acts. Here, God leads Philip on a road that heads South. Later, the Lord appears to Saul on the "road" to Damascus, which heads North. After that, when Saul arrives in Damascus, a disciple named Ananias has a vision that Saul is on "Straight Street." The idea is that God has made Saul's path straight.
- "road" can also be translated "Way," which was the normal name for Christianity in the early church.
- I think there are two messages here: first, God meets us on our way, on our road, on our journey. We are going about our own way, when God interrupts us. He doesn't wait for us to reach a certain destination. He interrupts our path and sets us on His path. Second, the Gospel is headed out from Jerusalem in all directions. By the north road and by the south road, God is on the move.
- Many of the people God wants to use us to reach are not at destinations; they are on roads. This means two things: one, they are not close friends, but travelers we meet along the way. We meet them in the grocery store, at the bank, in our neighborhoods, and at the gym. We can't close our eyes to the possibility that chance encounters are divine appointments. Second, this means that

metaphorically, many of the people we meet and introduce to God are people-in-transition. I've heard it said that the people who meet God are often "stressed, depressed, and in-transition." This was true of the "harassed and helpless" that Jesus ministered to; it was true of the men who dwelt with David in the cave of Adullam—men who were "distressed, discontented, and indebted."

—"from Jerusalem to Gaza":

- Gaza was one of five Philistine cities: Gaza, Ashdod (the same as "Azotus" in Acts 8:40), Ashkelon, Gath, and Ekron (Josh. 13:3).
- Gaza was the site of Samson's demise: he slept with a Philistine prostitute in Gaza (Jdg. 16:1) and perished there (16:21, 30).
- Prophets predicted the judgment of Gaza/Philistia (Jer. 47:1ff; Amos 1:6ff; Zeph. 2:4ff; Zech. 9:5ff).
- Now that Gaza has become a deserted wasteland, God visits her with salvation. Perhaps this was foreshadowed in Zechariah 9, where God pronounced judgment (9:5-8) and then immediately announced King Jesus, riding on a donkey with salvation in His saddle (9:9ff).
- O, the goodness of God! The lands He once judged, He now visits with salvation! No country is too far gone. Goliath's hometown becomes a house of redemption. This should give us hope for our country.

—"This is a desert place":

- Sometimes the Spirit of God will lead us to unlikely places. God leads Philip to an uninhabited place to meet a person. Unlikely heroes like Philip often find themselves in unlikely places. God loves to move among the unlikely. He's not confined to the A-team. He's happy to move in desert places amongst table servers. He's not confined to the land of blessing; He's happy to turn the desert into a fruitful spring. Look for God amongst the unlikely, and you're likely to find Him. Expect God to move in the unexpected places, and amongst unexpected people. Never be off-duty. "Where can I go from Your Spirit?" David asks. Philip's life is the answer: nowhere. And this means that God can move anywhere. Any place, any life, any situation. Deserts may inhibit vegetation, but they don't inhibit the Holy Spirit. He loves to move in the desert.
- This road would have been extra unlikely for meeting a traveler. Particularly at noon – in the heat of the day.
- Luke alludes to several Old Testament passages:
 - Isaiah 32:14-18 *14 For the palace is forsaken, the populous city deserted; the hill and the watchtower will become dens forever, a joy of wild donkeys, a pasture of flocks; 15 **until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field**, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. 16 Then **justice will dwell in the wilderness**, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. 17 And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. 18 My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.*
 - The Spirit was "poured upon us from on high" on Pentecost. Jesus even uses this language in Luke 24:49: "And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with **power from on high**."
 - Luke wants us to see that this promise is fulfilled. The promise of the Father—the Holy Spirit—has granted us "power from on high." As a result, the "the wilderness becomes a fruitful field" and "justice will dwell in the wilderness."
 - In this age, we realize this promise when the Spirit gives new birth in otherwise wastelands. In the age to come, we realize this promise in consummate form, when the whole earth is renewed into a global Garden of Eden. O Lord Jesus, come!
 - Isa. 35: 1 **The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; 2 it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.** 3 Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. 4 Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you." 5 **Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 6 then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; 7 the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.** 8 And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the **Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way**; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray. 9 No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but **the redeemed shall walk there.** 10 And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; **everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.**

- The promises of a transformed wilderness fill this passage, but I have underlined other links to Acts 8 also.
- This former wilderness “shall be called the Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to all who walk on the way...” Not coincidentally, Philip meets a eunuch—essentially, unclean by Jewish law (Deut. 23:1)—and he meets him on the “road”, which can also be translated “way.” It’s the “Way of Holiness” from Isaiah! God has paved a road in the wilderness for the unclean eunuch to be made clean! The former temple has become a haunt for unclean idols, but the unclean temple-outsiders are welcomed by the work of Jesus into His new temple! God’s people are God’s new temple; this man is now part of it.
- The eunuch departs “rejoicing” (8:39), just as the redeemed are promised in verse 10: “everlasting joy shall be upon their heads.”

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.

—“And he rose and went”: Philip responded immediately to the angel’s message. “Haste” is a sign of faith in Luke’s two-volume work. When God speaks, we must act promptly.

—“Ethiopian”: we don’t know whether he was a full-blooded Ethiopian or whether he was a Jew of the diaspora, living in Ethiopia. If the former, he would have been a black man; if the latter, he would have been Jewish by blood but not by citizenship. Either way, church tradition holds that this man became the first missionary to Ethiopia, which at the time included southern Egypt and parts of Sudan. Luke is showing how the gospel continues expanding, even to the global south.

—“a eunuch”:

- This means he was castrated. Eunuchs were prized because they could oversee royal harems without endangering them. But they were also despised and rejected. It must have been the strangest reality. This man was wealthy—“a court official” of the queen, “in charge of all her treasure”, capable of purchasing a scroll, and possessing his own chariot. Yet, he would have been a total outsider. Imagine being wealthy, but never being invited to parties. Imagine holding a position of power, but not having anyone—spouse, child, or friend—to share your life with. The “desert place” pictures his life before meeting Christ. Jesus meets us in our desert place.
- “eunuch” is the most prominent of his characteristics, as Luke tells it. This label recurs in 8:27, 34, 35, 38, and 39.
- Luke must have a purpose for emphasizing his status as “eunuch” over the other potential labels, like “Ethiopian” or “court official.” His reason points back to a promise in Isaiah 56:
 - 3 Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, “The LORD will surely separate me from his people”; and let not the eunuch say, “Behold, I am a dry tree.” 4 For thus says the LORD: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, 5 I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. 6 “And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant— 7 these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” 8 The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, “I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.”
 - The “Ethiopian eunuch” fits both categories addressed by Isaiah: “foreigner” and “eunuch.” Isaiah promises that one day foreigners and eunuchs will experience an entirely different reality in relation to Yahweh than they previously did.
 - The “eunuch” whose testicles were forcibly removed, who weeps over the inability to enjoy love or produce offspring, who feels like a “dry tree” rather than a fruitful one—this one is promised “a name better than sons and daughters” and “an everlasting name.” Ancient people thought much about their “name” being perpetuated through sons and daughters. The eunuch will not have biological children, but he is promised something even better from God!
 - Furthermore, the promise to this eunuch is realized “in my house and within my walls.” In other words, the one formerly excluded from the house of the LORD will become a pillar inside of it!
 - The “temple” theme continues in Isaiah 56:7, where foreigners—otherwise excluded from the former temple—will be made “joyful in my house of prayer.” No wonder this Ethiopian eunuch “went on his way rejoicing” after finding Jesus (Acts 8:39)!

- This “temple” theme is especially fitting in the flow of Acts. In Acts 7, the temple authorities murder Stephen, and the Jerusalem temple is revealed for what it is, a house of idols. The true temple, which is God’s people, expands north to Samaria. Those who formerly disputed with Jews over a temple location now united with Jews by coming under Jesus, the cornerstone of a new temple that included Jews and Samaritans. Furthermore, this temple includes eunuchs and foreigners. Everyone that the former temple rejected, the new temple opens its gates to.
 - The eunuch and foreigner were considered “outcasts of Israel” for their inability to worship in the temple freely like the rest of Israel. Interestingly, Isaiah envisioned a day when even “foreigners” would become part of “Israel.” We, the church, are “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6). More to the point of this passage, however, Luke is showing how the Spirit leads Philip straight to an outcast in the middle of nowhere. Those whom the world rejects, God pursues for a special relationship.
- The “eunuch” also has special significance for sexual challenges the church faces in the twenty-first century.
 - Eunuchs were considered neither male nor female. Schreiner: “Eunuchs in the Greco-Roman world were considered the ultimate ‘nonmen’ since they lacked the main feature of masculinity. Philo writes that eunuchs are ‘neither male nor female’ (Somn. 2.184), and Josephus urges his audience to drive off ‘those who have deprived themselves of their manhood’ because ‘their soul has become effeminate.’” Schreiner then adds, “Though he is “between,” his sex is not debated.”
 - Despite not meeting social expectations for gender, the Scripture still labels him a “he.”
 - The church should *both* radically welcome those who fit outside traditional sexual realities *and* radically insist on truth. The most loving response to someone who demands to be called by untrue gender labels is not to play along with their lie in the name of courtesy, but to tell the truth—kindly and gently, but firmly. The Scripture considers this Ethiopian man a man, even though his culture considered him non-binary. Let us agree with God’s word and not culture. At the same time, let us insist that God will meet transgender individuals on their desert road and turn it into a fruitful place. He will meet those with broken sexuality and promise them a name better than sons or daughters. This realization will become all the more important as the transgender illusion comes crashing down in the coming decades—and it will—because thousands who were mutilated as teens will regret it as adults. The church must respond in grace and truth. The story of the eunuch shows us how. Those with mutilated private parts will not be—reproductively speaking—a “dry tree” *if they repent and believe*. Rather, Jesus meets them on their journey away, promising them a name better than sons and daughters.
- The “eunuch” also has special significance for singles in the twenty-first century.
 - In the Old Testament, God told Israel to “be fruitful and multiply” in order to “subdue the earth” under God’s kingship. This command remains for those who are married, but Jesus expanded it into the Great Commission: now, we make disciples in order to subdue the earth under Christ’s kingship—for “all authority” has been given to Him (Matt. 28:18-20). As Christians, we fulfill the Great Commission by making disciples, and this does not require children.
 - The church throughout history valued singles because of stories like Acts 8, but the church of the twenty-first century has succumbed to marketing strategies with target markets that zero in on the hottest market: “young families.” Jesus meets outcasts on the road, but churches target what’s trending? It shouldn’t be so.
 - Augustine even said that it would be better if nobody got married because we would have more time to make disciples, and we would hasten the return of Christ in this way.
 - Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7 that singleness is better because you can be single-minded for Christ.
 - In Matthew 19:12, Jesus says, *“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. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.”*—what does this mean?
 - “eunuchs who have been so from birth”: ostensibly, those who have a birth or health defect, preventing them from having kids or consummating a marriage.
 - “eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men”: those who have been kidnapped and castrated by conquering armies.

- “eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven”: Jesus intends this line to be the *zinger*. The disciples have just exclaimed how impossible it is to keep Jesus’ standard of monogamy, and He responds by saying, “Be single for the sake of the kingdom—if you have ears to receive this!” Jesus Himself had made this decision.
- In our culture, we have people who are single because they want to “live it up” and sleep around; we have people who are single because they won’t sleep around and it narrows their options; we have people who are single because of death or divorce; we have people who are single because a doctor mutilated their genitalia when they were confused teenagers and now regret it; we have people who are single because they are attracted to the same sex and unattracted to the opposite sex and thus choose celibacy; we have people who are single because they chose this for the kingdom. The latter category can apply to all the others because even “forced” or “circumstantial” singleness can be redeemed—as it was for this eunuch.
- If we are single, but not by choice, we must ask, “How might God maximize my singleness for His kingdom?” If we are single by choice, we must ask the same question. And if we are married, we must ask, “How might God maximize my marriage and family for His kingdom?” Whatever station we find ourselves in, we essentially must ask the same question.
- The greatest danger is that we despise the station God has placed us in and thereby miss our opportunity to hear God and obey.
- 1 Corinthians 7:17 says, in the context of seeking marriage or divorce, *“Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.”*

—“Candace”: like “Pharaoh” meant king of Egypt, “Candace” meant queen of the Ethiopians. It was not her name, but her title.

—“He had come to Jerusalem to worship”:

- Scholars debate whether he was an Ethiopian proselyte to Judaism or part of the Jewish diaspora. In favor of the latter, Luke presents the salvation of Gentiles as a momentous leap forward in Acts 10-11, suggesting that they were the first Gentiles and that this man was a Jew, displaced to Ethiopia. In favor of the former, Luke interests himself in tracing the gospel to the ends of the earth, so it would make sense to portray, not just a displaced Jew, but a black Ethiopian being saved.
- We can’t know which option is correct, but it matters little. Luke emphasizes not his ethnicity, but his status: “eunuch.”
- Either way, he came to Jerusalem to worship because he worshiped the God of Israel. Not until Philip proclaimed it did the Ethiopian realize that the God of Israel sent His Son Jesus to Israel.
- This man was very much like Cornelius—an already religious man who lacked a full-fledge, fully-informed faith. God seeks after seekers like the eunuch and Cornelius. As we’ll see in Acts 9, however, He also seeks after rebels like Saul.

—“he was reading the prophet Isaiah”:

- In ancient times, readers spoke the words aloud. Philip overhears the prose of Isaiah’s familiar scroll.
- What at first seemed like a detour—“go to the desert”—led to a divine appointment. What are the chances that Philip would find someone reading from such a key text as Isaiah 53? Conventional wisdom would have led him away from the desert. But because the Spirit leads him, Philip finds himself at the right place and right time.

29 And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.”

—First an angel speaks to him (8:26); now the Spirit speaks to him (8:29). We can’t be attuned to only one of God’s manners of speech; we must be attuned to all of them. Throughout the Book of Acts, God speaks through angels, through the Spirit, through circumstances, through prophetic messages, through visions, through dreams, through trances, and still more. The more open we are to all God’s forms of speech, the more likely we are to hear when He uses them. We must learn the language of the Spirit.

—Luke is revealing how the church succeeds in evangelism. In Acts 1:8, we are promised power for witness, which typically makes us think of healing, exorcisms, and miracles. However, Luke portrays throughout that prophetic revelation sits under the umbrella of “power for witness.” This is why, when God pours out His Spirit on Pentecost, prophetic phenomena ensue (Acts 2:17-18).

—We see the same prophetic guidance in Acts 10-11, where a combination of angels, visions, and direct speech from the Spirit set up a divine appointment with Cornelius; we see the same thing in Acts 13:1-3, where the Spirit says to set apart Barnabas and Saul for the mission work of Acts 13-14; we see the same thing in Acts 15, when “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” to make a crucial decision for missionaries; we see the same thing in Acts 16, where the Spirit of Jesus prevents Paul from entering Mysia and Bithynia but gives him a dream about Macedonia; we see the same thing in Acts 19-21, where Paul resolves in the Spirit and is compelled by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem, despite being warned by the Spirit of danger. The list goes on. Without the guidance of the Spirit and an openness to prophetic phenomena, our witness suffers terribly.

—At this point, Philip does not know that the eunuch is reading the Bible aloud. He only knows that he must approach this wealthy chariot, which must have intimidated him. Sometimes the Spirit tells us to do things that are not only strange (“go to the desert”) but intimidating (“talk to that powerful person”).

—One more thing to note about the Spirit’s communication: Philip isn’t given the whole picture, all at once. He is given bits and pieces. He didn’t know what would happen when the angel told him to go to the desert. He didn’t know what would happen when the Spirit told him to join a chariot. Why didn’t God just say from the beginning, “Go to a desert road, where you will see an Ethiopian eunuch reading Isaiah, preach the gospel to him, and I will save him...”?? Because God wants a friendship, and friendships are built on trust. We grow in trust as we follow His breadcrumb trail. Over the course of our lives, we build a mental scrapbook of Spirit-trails that have set us up for blessing and breakthrough. Living a Spirit-led life means we must be okay with partial pictures. We must get comfortable without a full download. God may speak to us while we’re sitting quietly, but He **KEEPS** speaking **AS WE GO**.

—Schreiner: “The church did not simply stumble upon the idea of evangelizing outcasts; it did so at the direction of God himself.”

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.

—“Philip ran”: Philip quickly responds to the Spirit’s direction. Don’t snooze on the Spirit!

—“Do you understand... How can I, unless someone guides me?”

- This story bears resemblance to the road to Emmaus: (1) they meet on a road away from Jerusalem; (2) the travelers know the Scriptures but don’t understand them; (3) someone meets the travelers on the road, asking questions; (4) Christ is proclaimed from the Old Testament; (5) both stories end with a sacramental focus—Emmaus, with communion; the desert road, with baptism.
- Because the disciples on the road to Emmaus already know Jesus, their story points to communion—a meal for the saved. Because the eunuch had not already known Jesus, his story points to baptism—a ritual of conversion. (Technically, we are already saved before baptism, by faith alone. But Acts always associates baptism with conversion. It’s our first step of faith.)
- Both stories emphasize the power of Scripture in fostering faith. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Rom. 10). Without Scripture, we cannot believe or grow in faith. This is called the doctrine of “the necessity of Scripture.” Scripture does not just adorn or supplement our faith; it nourishes our faith. We need the Bible like creatures need food (Matt. 4:4; 1 Pet. 2:1-3).
- Scripture is sufficient for fostering faith, but this does not preclude the need for teachers. The role of the teacher is to help people understand Scripture. Only after understanding Scripture, can people grow in faith.
- I am reminded of Nehemiah 8, when the people gather for God’s Word to be read aloud by Ezra from early morning until midday (8:3). The Levites helped Ezra: “*Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading*” (8:7-8).
- Another important role for the teacher comes to light in the next section, where Philip proclaims Christ from the Scripture. Teachers must do more than clarify the meaning of the text; they must proclaim Christ from the text. This means that I must not only preach about Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden but Christ’s submission in the Garden of Gethsemane; I must not only preach about the murder of Abel, but about the blood of Christ that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Heb. 12:24). In other words, I (and all teachers) must show how every text points to Christ as the solution to our deepest human needs. If we are doing this well, people will feel more inspired by what Christ has done than they will feel condemned over what they have done.

- Just like at Emmaus, the risen and exalted Jesus continues to meet “travelers” on the journey of life. He meets us where we’re at—in our disappointment (Lk. 24) and our estrangement (Acts 8)—but here’s the difference. Now that Jesus has ascended to heaven, now He meets “travelers” *through His church*. Like Philip, when we follow the Spirit’s leadership, He uses us to meet people on their journey away.
- While the disciples on the road to Emmaus returned to Jerusalem to share the good news, the eunuch returned to Ethiopia to share the good news. Because Jesus has ascended, our journey is not to Jerusalem but rather to the ends of the earth. Once we find Jesus, we proclaim Him to the nations.

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.

—Significance of the quote from Isaiah 53:

- Authors of the New Testament quote it often for its clear prophetic fulfillment in Jesus, the “suffering servant” of Isaiah.
- The eunuch quotes from the Septuagint (Greek translation of OT), which could suggest he does not belong to the Jewish diaspora but rather to the Gentiles.
- The portion of Isaiah 53 links with the experience of the eunuch:
 - “shearer” is literally, “the one who cut him.” The eunuch would have involuntarily been “cut” as a young boy.
 - “humiliation” would have been the eunuch’s daily experience. Imagine living in a man’s world with your mark of manhood eliminated. Eunuchs were “feminized men”; they were viewed as neither male nor female. Christ’s humiliation was of a different kind, but crucifixion was meant to shame. It was not just physical, but emotional torture. This is why they stripped the victims naked.
 - “Who can describe his generation” in the Servant Songs laments the lack of offspring for the suffering servant. Some translations render this, “Who can speak of his descendants?” Like the Suffering Servant, the eunuch also lacked offspring.
- Even though the original Servant Song in Isaiah lamented the servant’s lack of offspring, it also celebrated His many offspring: “He will see his seed and prolong his days” (Isa. 53:10) means that Jesus would be resurrected and reproduce spiritual offspring—disciples.
- Jesus is the original and prototypical eunuch in the kingdom of God. He’s the One who chose singleness for the sake of the kingdom (Mt. 19:12). Now, “make disciples” would trump “be fruitful and multiply” (without abolishing the latter).
- “his life is taken away from the earth”: in Isaiah 53, this most directly prophesied the death of the Suffering Servant. However, in Acts 8, it is a “reversal text” (Schreiner). In the Greek translation, “taken away” (Gk. *airo*) can be rendered, “taken up” (again, see Schreiner). Given Luke’s emphasis on the ascension, it seems likely that we have a double meaning here. Jesus, our Suffering Servant, was both “taken away” at the cross and “taken up” in the ascension.

—“About whom does the prophet say this...?”: almost every ounce of Bible knowledge I’ve gained has come by asking questions of the text and pursuing answers. I write down my questions and try to answer them. When the Bible talks about “meditation,” I think Bible study achieves that. It forces us to warm ourselves by the fire of God’s Word rather than just passing by and hoping to feel heat. People ask me often how I produce these long study guides. I did it for years, even before I preached the Bible. It’s how I study Scripture. I ask questions, record my thoughts, and ask the Holy Spirit to speak to me as I think deeply about His Word. (Note: I also have a daily Bible reading plan that takes me through the Scripture in a year. Reading the Bible helps me see the forest; studying the Bible helps me see the trees. Or sometimes the bark on the tree 😊)

—“beginning with this Scripture”: like on the road to Emmaus, Philip proclaims Christ from multiple (probably, many) Old Testament passages. The whole Old Testament is about Jesus. If we enjoy the New Testament but not the Old it’s because we don’t see Christ in the Old. We must learn to look for Him. If we do, the whole Bible will feel like a New Testament to us, and our hearts will burn like the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

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?” 37 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.

—In the middle of the desert, they found water! These baptismal waters remind us of the promises of Isaiah, quoted above, about springs in the desert produced by the Messiah.

—Given this Old Testament allusion, we should not suppose that baptismal waters are dry of spiritual power. The water is not magic—apart from faith baptism means nothing—but it is not a bare symbol either. Rather, baptism, like communion, is a means of grace. God meets us in the water. We who have received the grace of new birth subsequently enter the water as an objective, shared, powerful assurance of this reality.

—Baptism and communion remind us that matter *matters*. God does not value the “spiritual” above the “material.” He created the material universe and saw that it was good (Gen. 1:31); likewise, angelic spirits observed the freshly-minted physical world and shouted for joy (Job 38:7). Satan tainted the universe, but Christ did not abandon it. In the incarnation, He took on flesh, eternally affirming the goodness of creation. In the resurrection, He launched His “new creation” project. In water, bread, and wine, the elements of old creation become instruments of new creation. We see and feel and taste them physically. Human beings are not just spirits or brains-on-a-stick. We are gloriously physical. For this reason, God gives us physical signs of spiritual realities, enabling us to participate in new creation through old creation, sanctified by faith.

—“the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water!’”: true faith desires baptism. Not only that, but true faith desires *prompt* baptism. In Acts, baptism is associated with conversion. People repent, they believe, and they get baptized. Faith and repentance take pride of place, but baptism consummates our conversion story. An unbaptized Christian is like someone who settles for common law marriage. Technically, it counts as marriage—but only technically. If someone goes years without being baptized, I question the genuineness of their faith. Like the eunuch, we should be begging to be baptized ASAP after conversion.

—“what prevents me from being baptized”:

- This reminds me of Acts 10:47: “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit?”
- In Acts 10, we observe how faith takes pride of place. Cornelius and his family are baptized in the Spirit—they are saved—before being baptized in water.
- Nevertheless, baptism consummates our conversion story. The eunuch asks, “what prevents me” and Peter asks “can we withhold water”? Luke is driving home the point: don’t prevent baptism; don’t make it hard; don’t insert hoops to jump through; don’t wait till they’ve proven themselves for months and years.
- The early church violated this, inserting three years of discipleship between conversion and baptism. The heart was good—we should aim to confirm genuine faith—but it contradicted the pattern of Acts.

—In the passage above, you will notice that verse 37 is missing. Some manuscripts (a minority) add this line: “Then Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may.’ And he answered and said, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’” Evidently, later scribes felt uncomfortable by the spontaneity of this baptism. To be clear, Philip undoubtedly received a confession such as this before baptizing the eunuch. He would not have baptized a half-convert. But we don’t need to modify the text to alleviate our discomfort. Rather, we should modify our behavior by pursuing baptism immediately after conversion.

—“they both went down into the water”: some try to argue that this did not necessarily entail “immersion” in the water, but this is special pleading. Besides, the Greek word *baptizo* means “to immerse.” If we have not been baptized by immersion after conversion, it is best that we get rebaptized according to the model of Scripture. (It is also best that we don’t divide sharply over this issue.)

—“the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away”:

- An angel spoke; the Spirit spoke; the Spirit carries away. From beginning to end, Philip is led by God to perform God’s mission. We should do the same. “Those who are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God” (Rom. 8:14).
- The Greek word for “carried” is the same one found in 1 Thess. 4:17, depicting the rapture (which I believe occurs publicly at Christ’s return, not seven years prior, secretly). The word does not communicate a gradual “urging” of the Spirit to go somewhere else with his own two legs. Instead, it conveys sudden seizure by God. As the NASB renders it, Philip was “snatched” away by the Spirit.
- Obadiah believed God might snatch Elijah away:
 - 1 Ki. 18:11-12: *And now you say, ‘Go, tell your lord, “Behold, Elijah is here.”’ And as soon as I have gone from you, the Spirit of the LORD will carry you I know not where. And so, when I come and tell Ahab and he cannot find you, he will kill me, although I your servant have feared the LORD from my youth.*
- The company of prophets believed God might have snatched Elijah away:

- 2 Ki. 2:16-18: *And they said to him, "Behold now, there are with your servants fifty strong men. Please let them go and seek your master. It may be that the Spirit of the LORD has caught him up and cast him upon some mountain or into some valley." And he said, "You shall not send." But when they urged him till he was ashamed, he said, "Send." They sent therefore fifty men. And for three days they sought him but did not find him. And they came back to him while he was staying at Jericho, and he said to them, "Did I not say to you, 'Do not go'?"*
 - Philip moves in the power of Elijah. Like Elijah experienced, the angel of the LORD guided him, the Spirit spoke to him, and then the Spirit carried him away. In the quotes above, Elijah was not transported as the prophets imagined, however he was snatched up into heaven.
 - Why does this story echo that of Elijah's? What does God intend to communicate by these connections? I think it's significant that Philip *the table server* resembles Elijah. We might have expected such a powerful Old Testament prophet to foreshadow Peter or John, but no, it's a nobody: Philip. In the 2 Kings 2 narrative, Elijah's "snatching away" is associated with the Spirit resting on Elisha—Elijah's successor—as a double-portion. I think the Old Testament echo conveys that the same Spirit that rested on the apostles now rests on one of their disciples, just as the Spirit on Elijah subsequently rested on Elisha. In other words, the "democratization" of the Spirit—everyone gets to play—is reinforced by the allusion to Elijah's story. *Nobodies* like Philip receive the same wonder-working Spirit as the apostles, and we do too. This explanation makes more sense to me than supposing the allusion is accidental.
 - The Spirit does not carry Philip away before he baptizes the eunuch. Preaching the gospel and leading the man to Christ did not complete Philip's mission. Likewise, our mission is not complete if we make converts without baptizing them. Again, baptism is not an optional addendum to conversion. It is a mandated component of conversion. We are saved by faith alone, but true faith goes down in the water—quickly. At least, that's the biblical model.
- "went on his way rejoicing":
- After Philip ministered in Samaria, "there was much joy in that city" (8:8); now the eunuch departs "rejoicing" (8:40). The Christian life is one of joy. Sometimes that looks like being "sorrowful but always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10), and sometimes we have to pray for God to restore to us the joy of our salvation (Ps. 51:12). But long-term joylessness is not born of the Spirit. "The fruit of the Spirit is... joy" (Gal. 5:22).
 - The eunuch's joy resembles the promise of Isaiah 56, quoted above.
 - The joyous worship of the Ethiopian also fulfills the following promises:
 - Ps. 68:31: "Nobles shall come from Egypt; Cush shall hasten to stretch out her hands to God."
 - Isa. 45:14: "Thus says the LORD: 'The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush, and the Sabeans, men of stature, shall come over to you and be yours; they shall follow you; they shall come over in chains and bow down to you. They will plead with you, saying: 'Surely God is in you, and there is no other, no god besides him.'"
 - Zph. 3:10: "From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, the daughter of my dispersed ones, shall bring my offering."

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.

- The story begins in one Philistine city, Gaza, and ends in another, Azotus (Ashdod).
 - As a literary device, this "inclusio" neatly frames the story of the eunuch as a single narrative unit.
 - The inclusio also communicates that former enemy lands are now discovering the gospel. Through the work of Jesus, enemies become friends.
- "preached the gospel to all the towns":
 - Ancient Philistia, the homeland of Goliath, gets thoroughly evangelized. Rather than removing the heads of our enemies, we lift their heads with heavenly hope.
 - What faithfulness to preach in "all the towns"! He never takes a break. This makes me think of my friend Everett, who never stopped witnessing, even on vacations. God calls all of us to the ministry of evangelism. Faithfulness requires more than "friendship evangelism." In every town we visit and every store we frequent, we must ask God to open doors for us to share the good news. Divine appointments like that in Acts 8 await us—but we must be on mission like Philip, or we miss them.
- "Caesarea": later, we meet "Philip the evangelist" again, living in Caesarea (Acts 21:8).