

August 13 Lesson 11

Called to Break Down Barriers

Devotional Reading: [Romans 10:9-15](#)

Background Scripture: [Acts 8](#)

ACTS 8:26-39

²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” ²⁷ So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

³¹ “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

³² This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

**“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.**

**³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.
Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.”**

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

³⁶ As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” ³⁸ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.

KEY VERSE

Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.—[Acts 8:35](#)

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Introduction

A. Crossing Cultures

Approximately 8,500 Sudanese live in Omaha. Most have immigrated since 1995 because of warfare in their nation. The number of Somalis who live in Minneapolis is estimated to exceed 60,000. Louisville has about 80,000 immigrant refugees from Bhutan, Burma, Iraq, and Somalia.

Your nearest city likely has its own population of new immigrants whose culture is very different from the traditions of that city. How do we effectively understand and communicate with people having languages and customs different from our own? Our lesson today reveals how Philip reached across cultural lines for Christ.

B. Lesson Background

[Acts 8](#) records two episodes in which Philip, a Jewish Christian from Jerusalem, was pressed to cross cultural lines. First, he found himself in Samaria after persecution broke out in Jerusalem ([Acts 8:1b, 4-8](#)). The Samaritans of a certain city had for years been under the sway of a sorcerer named Simon ([8:9-11](#)). This was a people invested in the occult—surely not how Philip was accustomed to living! But despite crossing two cultural lines, Philip preached boldly, and many Samaritans came to faith in Christ ([8:12](#)).

Dealing with those cultural distinctives was a stretch for Philip, but at least he did not have to deal with barriers such as language difference or economic status. Yet the second episode (today’s lesson) challenged Philip to cross even more cultural lines. As we consider his success in this, we take care to remember that he is “Philip the evangelist” of [Acts 21:8](#), not the apostle Philip of [Mark 3:18](#); etc.

I. Obedience

([Acts 8:26-29](#))

A. Road ([vv. 26, 27a](#))

^{26, 27a}. Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out,

In Old Testament times, the city of *Gaza* was in Philistine territory ([1 Samuel 6:17](#); etc.). Gaza in the first century is on the important commercial roadway that connects Egypt with cities such as Jerusalem, Antioch, and Damascus. To travel the approximately 50 miles from Jerusalem to Gaza, one has to cross a semiarid coastal plain described here as *desert*. This indicates an unpopulated place.

The movements of Philip are not devised by his own planning but directed by God through *an angel of the Lord*. In obedience, he travels through the countryside to be where God wants him at the precise time God intends.

HOW TO SAY IT

Antioch *An-tee-ock*.

Caesar *See-zer*.

Caesarea *Sess-uh-ree-uh*.

Kandake *Kan-dak-ay*.

Damascus *Duh-mass-kus*.

Esaias *Ee-zay-us*.

Ethiopia *Ee-thee-o-pea-uh* (*th* as in *thin*).

Ethiopians *Ee-thee-o-pea-unz* (*th* as in *thin*).

eunuch *you-nick*.

Gaza *Gay-zuh*.

Pharaoh *Fair-o* or *Fay-roe*.

rabbi *rab-eye*.

Samaria *Suh-mare-ee-uh*.

Samaritans *Suh-mare-uh-tunz*.

B. Read ([vv. 27b, 28](#))

^{27b} and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship,

Philip meets an exotic character whom he would have seen only from afar prior to this encounter. We learn five things about this man that create cultural separation from Philip. First, he is *an Ethiopian*, coming from a kingdom in Africa south of Egypt. While it is likely that he speaks Greek, that is not his primary language.

Second, he is a *eunuch*. Eunuchs originally served kings who had harems. Having been emasculated, eunuchs do not pose a threat in looking after the king’s wives and concubines. Since this man serves a queen, his duties do not include harem management.

Third, he is a servant to royalty. In particular, he serves the *queen of the Ethiopians*, the *Kandake*. This is not a personal name, but a dynastic title. This title functions much like the Roman title *Caesar* or the Egyptian title *Pharaoh*. The text implies that this man is under the direct command of the queen, making him one of the top half dozen officials of the realm.

Fourth, this man serves specifically as the treasurer for the queen. Not only is this a position of great responsibility and influence, but also one that probably makes him quite wealthy. Evidence of his wealth is seen in the fact that he is traveling by chariot rather than by foot, camel, etc. It’s almost certain that he is accompanied by servants and bodyguards, but the text gives no details on this.

Fifth, the man’s awareness of the much larger world beyond Israel is evident in the fact that he is even here. A trip from Ethiopia to Jerusalem and back is an arduous one exceeding 1,000 miles. It is for him the trip of a lifetime, a treasured experience.

The reason for the Ethiopian’s having traveled to Jerusalem is *worship*. The man may be Jewish by lineage, having Jewish parents in Ethiopia. Or he may have converted to Judaism at some point; this is a possibility since a Gentile convert to Judaism is mentioned in [Acts 6:5](#), which is prior to God’s extension of the gospel to Gentiles in [Acts 10](#). The fact that the man has invested so much time, money, and effort to make such a trip allows us to conclude that he is quite devout in his faith.

²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet.

The Ethiopian is returning home in a manner befitting his position. The chariot is a mode of travel that allows him to sit, not stand as a chariot warrior would. Someone else is driving.

The man has what is probably a souvenir of his trip to Jerusalem: a copy of *the Book of Isaiah*. This is a confirmation of his great wealth, for the cost of such a handwritten scroll is out of the reach of most people. This is likely a copy of Isaiah in the Greek language. The fact that he is able to read any language is a testimony to his high level of education. As with many details of this story, these factors do not seem to be accidental, but somehow prepared by the Lord. Isaiah, of all the Old Testament books, has the greatest witness to the coming Messiah. So the stage is now set for Philip to talk with the Ethiopian about Jesus as being that Messiah.

C. Ride ([v. 29](#))

²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

A common man like Philip does not have the status to accost a rich and regal person such as the Ethiopian in this scenario. It is a “don’t speak unless spoken to” situation.

Furthermore, the Ethiopian and his crew might see Philip as a threat. A lonely road is a perfect haunt of bandits, so for Philip to appear and run toward (see the next verse) the Ethiopian is risky. But the Lord nonetheless directs Philip through *the Spirit* to approach *that chariot*. That prodding gives Philip both direction and confidence.

II. Observation

([Acts 8:30-35](#))

A. Investigation to Invitation ([vv. 30-34](#))

³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

Reading is done aloud in the ancient world, so Philip is able to hear the Ethiopian and recognize the text he is working through. Philip takes the risk of speaking first, but the Lord has given him the perfect question: *Do you understand what you are reading?* Philip’s Spirit-given insight likely provides him the answer before the question is even asked.

³¹ “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

The Ethiopian’s response to Philip’s question is almost as if he is saying, “I bought this scroll, and I should have hired someone in Jerusalem to come with me and explain it.” The Ethiopian sees no threat in Philip, so he invites him *to come up and sit* on the bench seat of the chariot. This highly educated man is not ashamed to admit his lack of understanding. He welcomes Philip’s assistance.

³² This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

**“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.**

Again, we see the providential hand of the Lord working in preparation for this encounter. The Ethiopian is reading from [Isaiah 53](#) and is stuck on [verses 7](#) and [8](#). Being at that point means he is about 80 percent through the scroll.

Surely by this point he has encountered texts such as the prediction of a virgin conceiving a son to be called Immanuel ([Isaiah 7:14](#)) and the prophecy of a coming “Everlasting Father” ([9:6](#)). Such texts also must be inexplicable to him. He likewise would have read by this point the marvelous inspirational passage of [Isaiah 40:31](#), which promises strength to those who trust in the Lord.

[Isaiah 53](#) is one of several Servant Songs in that book. They speak of a coming servant of the Lord who will be called as a leader of the people but suffer many abuses and much pain for his service. For Christians today, these are obvious prophecies about the coming Messiah that have been fulfilled in Jesus. But for Jews of Philip’s day, the Servant Songs are very difficult to understand, because they portray a coming leader who is humiliated rather than victorious.

[Isaiah 53:7](#), quoted here, pictures something Jewish people have at least a yearly experience with: slaughtering a lamb. The Passover lamb submits silently to being killed; not expecting death, it yields passively. Although quite aware of the cross ahead, Jesus remained silent before his accusers ([Mark 14:61](#)).

33. **“In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.**

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth.”

This “death without a fight” is a great *humiliation* for the servant of the Lord. To be *deprived of justice* means he is denied due process of a legal system. No one stops his unjust death. Just as the lamb is silent during its preparation for slaughter, so is the servant of the Lord. No one speaks of *his descendants* as his life is taken, meaning his death will be the end of his family line.

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?”

The Ethiopian realizes the paradox in the verses. Why would the mighty Lord of the people of Israel send a sheep-like leader to end up humiliated and deprived of justice? Isn’t the God of the Jews both powerful and just?

The man reasons that Isaiah must be *talking about* a specific and identifiable person—either *himself or someone else*. The first option is possible given that Isaiah sometimes speaks of his own experiences (compare [Isaiah 6](#)). But the Ethiopian probably realizes the passage under consideration does not quite fit the prophet. Therefore he likely suspects *someone else* to be in

view. His careful reading of Scripture has brought him to the place where he is open to hearing about Jesus.

B. Invitation to Interpretation ([v. 35](#))

³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

Philip does not miss this great opportunity, orchestrated by the Spirit and made possible by Scripture. Sometimes the most effective sharing about Jesus is done in one-on-one situations. In Samaria, Philip had preached to crowds ([Acts 8:5, 6](#)). Here, his target audience is a single man (and perhaps his retinue of servants and guards).

III. Outcome

([Acts 8:36-39](#))

A. Belief and Baptism ([vv. 36-38](#))

³⁶ As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?”

Although the Gaza road goes through a sparsely populated and semiarid landscape, there are nevertheless several places for water. It is impossible to pinpoint the site of the *some water* that is *along the road*, since courses and sources of water change over the years. Some research suggests the location to be an ancient spring near what is today the archaeological site of Tell el-Hesi, which is about 15 miles east of Gaza.

Although the specific elements of Philip’s gospel presentation are not recorded, the man understands his need for faith in Jesus, repentance of sin, and *being baptized*, for this is the New Testament pattern ([Acts 2:36-39](#); etc.). Jewish customs of the day involve ritual cleansings with water (compare [John 2:6](#)), so the Ethiopian probably already has some idea about what his pending baptism involves. Because of his physical situation, he may not have been allowed to experience Jewish ceremonial cleansings during his Jerusalem visit (see [Leviticus 21:18-20](#); [Deuteronomy 23:1](#)). But he eagerly desires baptism now, and his physical condition cannot disqualify him if he has faith (compare [Isaiah 56:3](#)).

³⁷, Footnote. [Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” The eunuch answered, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”]

This verse does not appear in the oldest manuscripts of the New Testament. But the fact that it repeats teaching on confessing Christ as found elsewhere indicates that its content is genuine. (See [Matthew 16:16](#); [John 6:69](#); [9:35-38](#); [11:27](#); [1 John 4:15](#); [5:5](#).) And before baptizing the Ethiopian, it only makes sense for Philip to check the man’s faith situation with regard to Jesus, whether or not that inquiry is recorded in the text. Baptism without faith is meaningless.

³⁸ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.

The description of the baptism is simple and beautiful. The fact that they both go *down into the water* implies full immersion, the baptismal practice of the church in its earliest days.

B. Rejoicing and Relocation ([v. 39](#))

³⁹. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.

As they leave the pool of baptism, a most surprising thing happens. We may have preconceived notions about how *the Spirit of the Lord* removes Philip from the scene (science fiction dematerializations, etc.). In the ancient world, however, this more likely is understood in terms of Philip's body being carried into the sky as if by an unseen hand.

The main thing is that Philip is gone. The Ethiopian is surely astonished, but his reaction is not one of puzzled paralysis (compare [Acts 1:9-11](#)). Instead, he continues his journey home with joy in his heart and on his lips.

We might ask why Philip is not allowed to accompany the eunuch to Ethiopia, where there may be a ready audience for the gospel. We are not told, but we must assume that Christ has more things for Philip to do in Palestine. That his name appears later in [Acts 21:8](#) as "Philip the evangelist" hints at many successes in preaching the gospel over the coming years.

Conclusion

A. Divine Appointments

Philip was prepared for this encounter because he knew not just the book of Isaiah, but the gospel as well. The exposition of Scripture is a powerful way to present the gospel to those who seek truth. We can fumble our own divine appointments if we cannot answer basic questions. A Christian should love the Bible not just for the marvelous encouragement it is personally, but also as the true sword of the Spirit to be used in fighting unbelief among those who need the gospel ([Ephesians 6:17](#); [Hebrews 4:12](#)).



Visual for Lesson 11. *“When was a time you found this to be true?”*

There is no mention in the text of Philip’s being a trained rabbi or scribe; he probably was quite ordinary, not unlike Peter and John ([Acts 4:13](#)). Lacking a formal theological education is no excuse for us today! Having been chosen as one “full of the Spirit and wisdom” ([6:3](#)) implies Philip’s love for Scripture, since it is the ultimate source of wisdom ([Psalm 119:105](#); etc.).

God used Philip’s self-preparedness to good effect. That preparedness was likely the reason the Lord selected him for the divine appointment with a foreigner in the first place. And it took place on Philip’s home turf! Opportunities to cross cultural lines with the gospel are all around.

B. Prayer

O God, give us divine appointments to share Jesus. May you use our preparation to say the right things at the right time in the right way. We pray for this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

People of all cultures need Jesus..