

May 21 Lesson 12 (NIV)

An Ethiopian Is Baptized

Devotional Reading: Isaiah 60:9–14

Background Scripture: Acts 8:26–40

Acts 8:29–40

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?” ^[37] [Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” The eunuch answered, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”] 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. ⁴⁰ Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Key Text

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

—Acts 8:38

Jesus Calls Us

Unit 3: The Birth of the Church

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Religious Tourism
- B. Lesson Context: The Evangelist
- C. Lesson Context: The Ethiopian

I. Evangelist Running (Acts 8:29–31)

- A. Opportunity to Read (vv. 29–30)
- B. Failure to Understand (v. 31)

II. Gospel Preaching (Acts 8:32–35)

- A. Prophecy by Isaiah (vv. 32–33)
- B. Fulfillment by Jesus (vv. 34–35)

A Ride to Remember

III. Water Baptizing (Acts 8:36–40)

- A. Believing (vv. 36–38)
- B. Rejoicing (vv. 39–40)

The Humbling Beauty of Baptism

Conclusion

- A. The Wonder of Fulfilled Prophecy
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Ashdod *Ash-dod*.

Azotus *Uh-zo-tus*.

Caesarea Maritima *Sess-uh-ree-uh Mar-uh-tee-muh*.

eunuch *you-nick*.

Gamaliel *Guh-may-lih-ul* or *Guh-may-lee-al*.

Herod Antipas *Hair-ud An-tih-pus*.

Septuagint *Sep-too-ih-jent*.

Xenophon (Greek)Zen-uh-fun.

Introduction

A. Religious Tourism

The desire to travel to places of religious significance is ancient and yet still strong. Historically, we refer to travel to a sacred site as “making a pilgrimage.” Many pilgrimage sites dot our world. For Christians these include St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City, Mount Sinai in Egypt, and the locations around where Jesus is thought to have been crucified.

People often testify that a visit to a holy site had such an impact on them that they were changed forever. They never forget it. Our story today concerns a religious pilgrim who journeyed to Jerusalem to visit the temple some 2,000 years ago. His pilgrimage to Jerusalem may well have been a once-in-a-lifetime journey, taking many weeks. We know little of his lasting impressions of the holy city, but we learn of an encounter with Philip that changed his life forever, and he surely never forgot it.

B. Lesson Context: The Evangelist

A central figure in today’s text is a man referred to as “Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven” in Acts 21:8 (compare 6:3–5). That distinguishes him from “Philip the apostle”—they were not the same person. In addition to today’s text, other passages that refer to Philip the evangelist are Acts 8:5–6, 12–13. On the other hand, passages that refer to the apostle of the same name are Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:14; John 1:43–46, 48; 6:5–7; 12:21–22; 14:8–9; and Acts 1:13. Regarding the designation *evangelist*, see also Ephesians 4:11 and 2 Timothy 4:5.

It’s tempting to refer to this Philip as one of the first deacons of the church, as the noun is used in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8, 12. But that noun does not appear in Acts 6:1–6, although variations of the Greek word do occur in 6:1 (“distribution”), 6:2 (“wait”), and 6:4 (“ministry”).

Like his colleague Stephen, the Philip of today’s lesson moved from a ministry of feeding widows (Acts 6:1–5) to preaching the gospel (compare 6:8–8:1a with 8:4–25). Philip was the first to take the gospel to the Samaritans in fulfillment of Jesus’ directions in Acts 1:8. This happened as a result of persecution in Jerusalem (8:1b). During a highly productive ministry in Samaria (8:25), an angel of the Lord directed that Philip “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza” (8:26), the location of today’s text.

C. Lesson Context: The Ethiopian

Acts 8:27–28 reveals several facts regarding the man whom Philip encountered in today’s text.

First, he was from Ethiopia, a kingdom in Africa that is south of Egypt. This kingdom is also known as Cush (see Isaiah 11:11).

Second, he was a eunuch. Though some were born eunuchs or chose this status (Matthew 19:12), the word most commonly refers to a castrated man. Eunuchs were found in royal courts throughout the ancient world (compare 2 Kings 9:32; 20:18; Isaiah 39:7). The Greek historian Xenophon (430–355 BC) wrote that Cyrus the Great (about 600–530 BC; see Ezra 1:1; Isaiah 44:28–45:1; Daniel 1:21) preferred eunuchs in his court because he found them to be more reliable in general and trustworthy around women in particular. The Law of Moses restricted such men from participation in the assembly (Leviticus 21:16–23; Deuteronomy 23:1). One theory is that this individual had purchased a copy of Isaiah because of its promise of inclusion of eunuchs, those who sometimes described themselves as a “dry tree” (Isaiah 56:3–8).

Third, he was a servant to royalty. In particular, he served the queen of the Ethiopians as one having charge over the treasury. He was indeed a person of influence and wealth. He would have had to be wealthy to purchase a copy of Isaiah. The Great Isaiah Scroll, written in Hebrew and discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls, measures about 9 inches in height and 24 feet in length!

I. Evangelist Running (Acts 8:29–31)

A. Opportunity to Read (vv. 29–30)

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

The active role of the Holy *Spirit* is characteristic of the book of Acts (see the Lesson Context of lesson 10). Philip might have been intimidated by the splendor of the eunuch’s *chariot* and thought any approach would be scorned. God’s Spirit, though, knew that the heart of the man in the chariot had been prepared by his reading of Isaiah, and so prompted *Philip* to approach him.

The chariot, for its part, was not a vehicle designed for war, but for travel. It may have been more like what we would call a carriage or wagon, allowing the traveler some comfort while reading. Horses would have been pulling it at a walking pace, allowing Philip to run and catch up to it easily. It is unlikely the man intended to ride this all the way back to Ethiopia, hundreds of miles distant. It is more likely that he had purchased or hired the chariot to get him to a port on the Red Sea; there he would have been able to get a boat ride home.

30a. Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet.

Philip could hear the man reading. This half verse tells us two things about the reading. First, the man was reading aloud even though there was no audience. People in the ancient world did not typically read silently to themselves like we would in a public setting. Reading, even for oneself, was done by voicing the words out loud. This was slower, but allowed for better understanding. Second, the man had a copy of *Isaiah the prophet*, which indicates a high level of education to be able to read it and the wealth to purchase such a large scroll.

30b. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

Philip, trusting the Holy Spirit, interrupted the man with a simple question. To be able to read the text is one thing; to be able to comprehend it is another!

B. Failure to Understand (v. 31)

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

Although the Ethiopian had traveled to Jerusalem to worship (Acts 8:27) and had some knowledge of Scripture, he was no master of the material. His plea for a guide indicated lack of in-depth schooling in interpretation as available in the great rabbinic schools of Jerusalem, such as Paul had with the school of Gamaliel (22:3; compare and contrast 4:13). The man’s hunger to understand prompted him to invite a complete stranger into his carriage!

II. Gospel Preaching

(Acts 8:32–35)

A. Prophecy by Isaiah (vv. 32–33)

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.

Comparing the differences of Isaiah 53:7–8 with its quotation here, we surmise that the reader had purchased a Greek translation of Isaiah, a version we call the Septuagint. As an official in a royal administration that had international dealings, it is not surprising that the man knew how to read Greek. He would have needed it for his business transactions.

In God’s providence, the man’s encounter with Philip coincided with his reading a passage from Isaiah that presents one of the clearest prophetic visions of the coming Messiah! Verses from Isaiah 53 are quoted or alluded to nearly 40 times in the New Testament, making it a key text for understanding Jesus as the Messiah. The part before us is from Isaiah’s fourth “Servant Song” (Isaiah 52:13–53:12). That text presents the Messiah as one who would suffer in accordance with God’s will rather than serve as a military leader who would fight for the political independence of Israel (as many Jews expected; Acts 1:6).

The imagery of *sheep* and *lamb* depicts the suffering servant as one who would not fight or protest while on the way to death. Luke’s account of Jesus’ trials presents him like this silent sheep, especially when he appeared before Herod Antipas (Luke 23:8–9; compare 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.”

The key to the Isaiah passage is the word *humiliation*, a blanket word to describe the horrendous treatment that Jesus would undergo during his trials and crucifixion. Jesus was denied *justice*. Even though the Roman governor, Pilate, declared that there was no valid charge against Jesus (Luke 23:4), Pilate still consented to the execution. That made it a case of judicial murder (23:23–24). Jesus, as the suffering servant of Isaiah’s prophecy, seemingly had no hope of being the father of future *descendants*.

B. Fulfillment by Jesus (vv. 34–35)

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

In attempting to answer his own question, *the eunuch* reasoned that Isaiah must be talking about a specific and identifiable person. In that light, *the prophet* may have been speaking of

himself. That is possible, given that Isaiah sometimes spoke of his own experiences (compare Isaiah 6). But the Ethiopian probably realized that the passage under consideration did not quite fit the prophet's situation. Therefore he likely suspected *someone else* to be in view. His careful reading of Scripture brought him to the place where he was open to hearing about Jesus.

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

The very verses that had puzzled the reader served as the springboard to preaching Jesus. We easily imagine *Philip* using other verses in this passage as part of that presentation—texts such as references to the Messiah as “a man of suffering” (Isaiah 53:3), and one who “bore our suffering” (53:4), as well as Isaiah's statement that God intended to make “his life an offering for sin” (53:10).

The violence against the Messiah as predicted by Isaiah was a matter of historical record by the time of Philip's preaching. It is possible that the Ethiopian, as a recent visitor to Jerusalem, had heard some of these facts. But there is more to preaching Jesus than telling the story of the Good Friday crucifixion. We must say also that Jesus has risen from the dead, as Peter did in Acts 2:32, 36; that Philip did so as well is a safe assumption.

III. Water Baptizing

(Acts 8:36–40)

A. Believing (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?”

The assumption just mentioned, that Philip's presentation of the gospel included things like Peter's address in Acts 2, is supported here. *The eunuch* would not have inquired about what hindered him from *being baptized* had Philip not mentioned baptism before the carriage came to some *water*. As with Peter on the Day of Pentecost, the story of Jesus' death and resurrection leads to a call for belief in him (see next verse below), repentance from sins, and the cleansing of sins in baptism. The believer can rest assured that his or her sins are forgiven and that the presence of the Holy Spirit will be given (Acts 2:38; Titus 3:5).

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.) Philip's response has a little “not so fast, my friend” to it. One thing had to be certain: that the man sincerely believed *that Jesus Christ is the Son of God* (compare Matthew 16:16). This was indeed the man's confession of faith. It meant he acknowledged Jesus of Nazareth to be the Messiah, which is the Hebrew word rendered “Christ” in the Greek language (see John 1:41; 4:25); in English both words mean “anointed one.” That is the irreducible content of the Christian faith, the belief that Jesus was God in the flesh, and that his atoning death was the proper mission of the Messiah as prophesied by Isaiah.

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

Only after *Philip* was assured of the Ethiopian's faith did he agree to baptize him. There is no mention of repentance, but we assume the man's familiarity with Scripture extended to knowledge that repentance precedes forgiveness (example: Jeremiah 36:3). Baptism is of no value without belief and repentance. An unrepentant unbeliever who is baptized is no more than a "wet sinner."

Although churches have different understandings of valid modes of baptism today, we see in the text before us the earliest mode of the baptismal action and one that is accepted by all churches even now: Philip and the man go down *into the water*. The precursors of Christian baptism, which were the ceremonial washings by the Jews of the day (see John 2:6), likewise were full-body experiences.

B. Rejoicing (vv. 39–40)

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.

The end of the story is surprising: *Philip* disappeared and *the eunuch did not see him again*. Rather than be terrified or regretful, the eunuch continued his journey home in a spirit of *rejoicing*. It is not illegitimate to attribute this to the Holy Spirit in his life, for the connection between the Spirit and joy is evident in Luke's books (Luke 10:21; Acts 13:52).

40. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Azotus was the Greek name of the ancient city of Ashdod, located on the Mediterranean coastline of Israel. From there, Philip made a coastal tour all the way north to *Caesarea Maritima*, a trip of about 50 miles. When we next read of *Philip* (in Acts 21:8), he is in Caesarea. That was about 20 years later, so he may have made it his permanent residence after his ministry to the Ethiopian.

Conclusion

A. The Wonder of Fulfilled Prophecy

Many years ago, I heard Mildred Welshimer Phillips speak of her father, P. H. Welshimer. (His first name was Pearl, which explains the use of initials.) In the first decades of the twentieth century, Welshimer was the minister of the First Christian Church of Canton, Ohio. At its height, this congregation was often recognized as the largest church in the world, with a Sunday school attendance of 6,000 each Sunday.

One of Welshimer's more audacious public acts was to stage a debate with Clarence Darrow, the attorney who had won national recognition as the defender of evolution in the so-called Scopes Monkey Trial. Darrow was seen as the spokesman of a new kind of person in America, a public figure who was openly agnostic/atheist and who saw the Bible as nonsense, the church as a medieval relic, and Christian faith as preposterous.

The debate was inconclusive, as most of these sorts of things are, with Darrow rarely engaging the arguments of Welshimer. But, remarkably, the two became friendly after it was over. Darrow confessed that Welshimer presented one argument about the Bible that gave him pause: its record of prophecy and fulfillment.

Welshimer was doing nothing more and nothing less than what Philip did with the Ethiopian. The New Testament is loaded with quotations from the Old Testament that point to Jesus. This is not coincidental or accidental. The reader of Matthew cannot help but notice that he punctuates many of his stories of Jesus with the observation that this happened to fulfill Scripture (example: Matthew 1:22).

Presenting Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy requires a high level of Bible knowledge. But as Welshimer's encounter with Darrow shows, there are opportunities to make gospel claims that are best framed by presenting Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy. When Isaiah 53 is read in light of the events of Jesus' life, we should be struck by the remarkable fact that there are more than seven centuries between the two records! Those who have an inclination for deep, comprehensive knowledge of Scripture and its connections may be given opportunities to witness to unbelievers today in some manner like the Holy Spirit gave to Philip 2,000 years ago. Every generation of Christians must raise up those who are trained in understanding the Bible—their "Philips"—so they can explain it effectively and accurately to others.

B. Prayer

Our Father, you planned for Jesus to come, teach, heal, and to go to the cross for our salvation. You planned to raise him from the dead. You even orchestrated the meeting of Philip with one who was eager to hear. We welcome your plans that include using us as ones who are ready to preach Jesus. We pray in his name as we prepare ourselves. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Jesus fulfills prophecies in ways that cannot be explained—except as the providence of God.