**A Ready Explanation**

Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40

February 7, 2021 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson

*Please read Acts 8:26-40 before going further in this transcript.*

Two weeks ago we talked about Philip going to Samaria and “Scattering Joy.” That message ended with an encouragement for each of us to tell at least one person about Jesus that week. As I finished preaching that message, I knew who I personally wanted to share Jesus with that week. You see, I have a relative who almost died a few weeks ago from a rare side effect to his chemo treatment. He went into cardiac arrest and was airlifted to a larger hospital where they placed him on a ventilator and kept him sedated. Now, as it turns out, he ended up being ok. Once his system cleared out the chemo meds, he fully recovered. But it was one of those events that got me thinking HOW MUCH this relative REALLY needs Jesus. I’ve talked to him about Jesus before, but he’s never been all that interested. However, after this life flight incident, I felt compelled to share with him again. So, I did. At least, I opened the door for another conversation about Jesus, whenever he’s ready. 1 Peter 3:15 urges us, “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” Now, “always being prepared” is one thing, BUT not everyone is asking. Not everyone is asking us “to give the reason for the hope that we have” in Jesus. Sharing our faith would probably be a lot easier if they did ask. So I suppose a person could conclude from this verse, that we should wait to share the gospel with people, until they ask us. However, sometimes, God uses events in people’s lives to cause them to begin seeking Him. So, my personal prayer, is that my relative will begin to seek the Lord. And when He does, I want to be prepared to share the hope of Jesus with him. In today’s passage, we discover that God prompts Philip to go and talk with an Ethiopian eunuch. Even though he’s a complete stranger, even though he wasn’t even asking Philip about his hope in Jesus, God had been preparing the two of them for this gospel encounter.

Please turn in your Bible to Acts 8:26. In today’s passage, Philip is given a golden opportunity to talk with someone about Jesus. Philip just happens to be in the right place at the right time. Actually, that’s not true, he didn’t just HAPPEN to be there, he was prompted by God to be in EXACTLY the right place, at EXACTLY the right time. Philip’s witness teaches us 3 things.

**First of all, Philip’s witness teaches us to…**

**1. Watch for God’s prompting & take initiative.** Acts 8:26 begins, “Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.”[[1]](#footnote-1) What an incredibly CLEAR prompting from God! God’s leading gets even more specific in Acts 8:29, “The Spirit told Philip, “Go to THAT chariot and stay near it.” So, not just “go south on Desert Road,” but now, “go to THAT particular chariot.” And then, what really sets this up as one of the easiest “softball pitches” in evangelism history, is that Philip overhears the man reading the BIBLE! What happens next is interesting: From what we see in the text, Philip was only told to STAY NEAR the chariot. Neither the angel nor the Spirit told him to start TALKING to anyone. However, once he overhears this guy reading the Bible, Philip seizes the opportunity and takes initiative. This was kind of an “aha moment” for Philip; “alright Lord, now I see where you’re going with all this.” Honestly, God gave Philip an EASY one! Even so, Philip WAS watching for God’s prompting AND he deserves a little credit for being obedient. Also to his credit, Philip had an explanation ready! And that’s the next thing Philip’s witness teaches us, to…

**2. Have your explanation ready.** Acts 8:35 says, “Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.” You see, not only was the Ethiopian eunuch READY, to hear the good news, but Philip was READY, to share it. Philip didn’t know that he was going to be leading a Bible study on Isaiah 53 that day. He didn’t have any advance notice that he should study up on Ethiopian culture. Or, for that matter, study up on eunuchs. There’s no real delicate way to say this, but a eunuch is a castrated male. Occasionally, eunuch may refer to someone who has taken a vow of celibacy, but here it seems more likely that this man had been made a eunuch either for cultural reasons or as part of his job requirement for serving as the treasurer.[[2]](#footnote-2) Acts 8:27 says, “…on his way [Philip] met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandak (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”)….” Ethiopia is not a reference to modern-day Ethiopia, but rather to southern Egypt.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is what we know today as Sudan; “As an Ethiopian, the eunuch was probably black.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In other words, the gospel is moving forward despite any potential barriers of social position, physical characteristics, or cultural distinctives. So this is a story about a Jewish man named Philip sharing Jesus with a black man from Ethiopia.[[5]](#footnote-5) Ethiopia was a LONG way from Jerusalem; ~1,000 miles away.[[6]](#footnote-6) His journey to Jerusalem would have taken him ~5 months at this time in history.[[7]](#footnote-7) (As a matter of fact, Ethiopia was SO far away, it was considered “the ends of the earth” by many people in that day.[[8]](#footnote-8)) You see, God had been providentially preparing each of these men for this very moment.

Acts 8:27-28 goes on, “…This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet.” Wow! Talk about someone who was spiritually hungry and seeking the Lord! After traveling 5 months to worship God in Jerusalem, he was now on his long return voyage. And what is he doing? Reading the Bible along the way! Now, to be fair, chariots didn’t have much technology back then, so there was no way to listen to a song on the radio or turn on a good podcast. Therefore, because it was such a long trip, this Ethiopian eunuch brought a book to read. Well, actually, a scroll. At this time in history, a personal copy of Isaiah would have been quite expensive. It was likely an 8 to 12-inch-wide scroll, that was rolled up and was anywhere from 14-140 feet long.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Acts 8:30 says, “Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ Philip asked.” Now, some of us might be thinking: “That’s kind of weird! Why would he be reading OUT LOUD?” Well actually, that wasn’t weird at all, because at that time in history, it was customary to read out loud because they knew it would help them better remember what they’d read.[[10]](#footnote-10) When Philip hears him reading, he asks, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The Ethiopian replies in Acts 8:31, “‘How can I,’ he said, ‘unless someone explains it to me?’ So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.”[[11]](#footnote-11) So since Philip and the Ethiopian are heading in the same direction, he offers Philip a ride in his chariot. If we didn’t know better, we might be tempted to think that Philip was hitchhiking. Basically what’s going on here is that the Ethiopian has his scroll open to Isaiah 53 and spread out on his lap, and Philip is now sitting beside him, as the carriage is bumping along the road, on its way further south.[[12]](#footnote-12)

God not only blessed the Ethiopian with a portion of His written Word but he also blessed him with someone to explain it to him.[[13]](#footnote-13) As Christ-followers, let’s offer the same opportunity for those around us. First of all, let’s make sure that everyone we know has a good copy of their own personal Bible. Secondly, let’s make sure that they have a genuine invitation from us, to help them understand it. Let’s also keep in mind, that just like this Ethiopian eunuch, there are people right around us, who are more ready to follow Jesus than we might imagine. They may be just a FEW questions away from putting their trust in Jesus. More and more, the stories and teachings of the Bible are foreign to our lost friends and neighbors. We need to be ready to explain not just the complicated parts of Scripture, but also the simple things that you and I might find obvious. Meaning no disrespect, but our society is growing more and more biblically illiterate. It is our responsibility to help them understand it. In the words of the Ethiopian from verse 31: “How can they understand it, unless someone explains it to them?”

The Ethiopian eunuch is reading from Isaiah 53.[[14]](#footnote-14) The words are recorded for us in Acts 8:32-33,

“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. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.” These verses that the eunuch was reading come from a key section of Isaiah. It’s a section of verses often referred to as the “gospel in the Old Testament.”[[15]](#footnote-15) In other words, this is not some obscure, unfamiliar OT passage. The Holy Spirit timed Philip’s arrival at the chariot, PERFECTLY. What a great starting point for telling someone about Jesus! I wonder how Philip connected the dots for this Ethiopian? Perhaps he described Jesus as the Lamb of God, the suffering servant. Maybe he explained how Jesus was deprived of justice, and wrongly convicted and killed. We don’t know exactly what approach Philip took, but we do know that he was well-prepared to share the Good News about Jesus. Philip knew his Bible.

The Ethiopian pleads with Philip in Acts 8:34, “…Tell me, PLEASE, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Acts 8:35 says, “Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.” Clearly the Ethiopian eunuch is convinced, because he ends up asking Philip to baptize him as soon as they came to a place that had enough water.[[16]](#footnote-16)

A ministry called Sonlife teaches Christ-followers to practice Spiritual CPR.

C = Cultivate genuine relationships with the spiritually lost.

P = Plant seeds of God’s truth.

R = Reap a harvest of salvation.[[17]](#footnote-17) (When someone responds “yes” to Jesus.)

Brother or Sister in Christ, are we ready to do this? Not every opportunity will be as clear or easy as Philip’s was. There will be times when God’s prompting will be more nuanced. Times when we need to take a bit of a leap and be intentional in our relationships with lost people. We need to learn the art of steering conversations toward spiritual matters. Not necessarily every time or on every conversation. But, from time to time, when it’s appropriate, we need to mindful of watching for opportunities to share Jesus. A 3rd thing that Philip’s witness teaches us (is) to…

**3. Share Jesus wherever you go.** If you take a loop at the ***MAP*** on the back page of this transcript you can follow Philip’s route. Philip first left Jerusalem to go north up to Samaria and share the gospel there. Then he came back south again through Jerusalem and headed SW toward Gaza. After leading the Ethiopian eunuch to faith in Jesus somewhere along the desert road, he then headed north, along the Mediterranean coast, appearing in Azotus[[18]](#footnote-18) and traveling all the way N up to Caesarea. Acts 8:40 says, “Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.”[[19]](#footnote-19) [[20]](#footnote-20) Philip was faithful to share the gospel in “all the towns,” wherever he went.

As we consider this example of “sharing Jesus wherever we go,” that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t use some discernment. After all, due to the persecution of Christians, even Philip didn’t stay and preach on the streets of Jerusalem. He was scattered elsewhere. Some of us are in workplaces and other settings that make it difficult, perhaps even unwise, to be too pushy about our faith. Back when I used to drive school bus, I needed to be careful to respect the school’s policy on not proselytizing. I could talk to students about my faith, but only if they asked me. I remember one morning when I was dropping students off at the high school, there was a prayer gathering for “See You at the Pole.” This is a national prayer event that is led by students on their school campuses. This event is completely legal, sanctioned by our freedom of religion rights. Without even thinking twice, I got on my intercom and explained to the students on my bus, what their peers were up to. Well, before I even got back to the bus garage, I had a message to stop into my boss’s office. Apparently one of my students had reported me for “proselytizing.” Once my boss heard my side of the story, he was fine with it because I hadn’t crossed any lines. BUT, he did warn me that I was close to the line and that I needed to remember to watch my “p’s and q’s.” I share this to illustrate how tricky it can be sometimes to find the right balance between timing, tone, and tact. We should always carry with us a bold readiness, but that bold readiness should be moderated by the wisdom and leading of God’s Spirit. Mastering this art, is a matter of practice & prayer. One author summarizes some key principles of

**Philip’s approach to evangelism**:[[21]](#footnote-21)

- Faithful obedience.

- Readiness to cross cultural lines.

- Sensitivity to hearts that God has prepared.

- Starting with the seeker’s questions.

- Grounded in biblical teaching.

- Jesus as the central point.

Philip had no idea who he’d meet along that desert road; and you and I don’t know who we may encounter along our road this week. Who knows, maybe we’ll overhear someone reading the Bible or having a spiritual conversation. I hope God tosses some of us an easy softball pitch opportunity, to tell someone about Jesus. But even if He doesn’t make it easy for us, I hope that each one of us, will be watching for His prompting. Maybe some of us have a friend of relative that we need to talk to.

Maybe it’s someone at work or school. Let’s take the initiative. Let’s have our explanation ready for why our hope is in Jesus. Wherever we go, whether it’s Bemidji or Bagley or Boston, let’s share Jesus with the people we meet along the way.

Map

Description automatically generated

1. Gaza was the last watering hole before the desert journey leading to Egypt. *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2234 footnote on Acts 8:26. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Matthew 19:12, explains some eunuchs are born that way, some have been made eunuchs by others (Sometimes to prepare them for certain special functions, like watching over a king’s harem.), and some choose to live like eunuchs as an act of celibacy and spiritual commitment to the Lord. In verse 27, an actual eunuch is most likely, since otherwise there would be no need to call him a eunuch, as verse 27 does, if it were only symbolic. See discussion in Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2234 footnote on Acts 8:27. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It’s good for us to remember that there were no Anglos, no Americans, and no westerners in the Early Church. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 339. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See the end of Acts 1:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See discussion in Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Romans 10:14-15 comes to mind. It’s also interesting to compare Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian on the desert road to Luke’s account of the encounter on the Road to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-35, especially verse 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Isaiah 52:13-53:12 “is often referred to as the ‘gospel in the Old Testament’ or the ‘gospel of Isaiah.’” *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1195 footnote on Isaiah 52:13-53:12. Therefore, the Holy Spirit timed Philip’s arrival perfectly. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1195 footnote on Isaiah 52:13-53:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. After Philip baptizes the Ethiopian, they don’t see each other again. Acts 8:39 says that the Ethiopian “…went on his way rejoicing.” This is reminiscent of the Samaritan city back in verse 8, which was filled with “great joy.” In other words, they both responded to the Good News the same way, with joy/rejoicing (verses 8, 39) ( John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 163). It’s interesting to compare Philip’s witness to the Ethiopian at the end of Acts 8 with his witness to the Samaritans at the beginning of Acts 8. The Ethiopian and the Samaritans were from considerably different geographical regions, vastly different cultures, and different religious backgrounds. The Ethiopian and the Samaritans were from different classes in society. The Samaritans were “everyday people” whereas the Ethiopian is described as “an important official” of high rank. With the Samaritans, Philip engaged in large group, mass evangelism, but with the Ethiopian, he focused his time/energy on 1-to-1 personal evangelism (See discussion by John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, pp. 163-164). In fact, up until the Ethiopian eunuch, Acts has focused on recording mass conversions, but beginning with this Ethiopian, it will now record three incidents in a row of individual conversions: the eunuch, then Saul, and then Cornelius (Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 338). It seems likely that as the Ethiopian “went on his way rejoicing” that he kept reading further in Isaiah. It would have been fun to be there with him when he got to Isaiah 56:3-5, “Let no foreigner who is bound to the LORD say, ‘The LORD will surely exclude me from his people.’ And let no eunuch complain, “I am only a dry tree.” For this is what the LORD says: ‘To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant – to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever.’” Imagine the smile on his face and the rejoicing in his heart as he read these words! As a recent believer who’d recently been invited in and included in God’s family, he must have been excited by this eternally Good News! [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. <https://www.sonlife.com/blog/spiritual-cpr/> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. “uh ZOH thus” Severance, W. M., & Eddinger, T. (1997). In [*That’s easy for you to say: your quick guide to pronouncing Bible names*](https://ref.ly/logosres/easyforusay?ref=Page.p+33&off=2325&ctx=++++++++++++++++++++~Azotus++++++++++++++) (p. 33). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Acts 8 ends with Philip in Caesarea. I wonder whatever happened to good old Phil? Did he just keep hitchhiking his away along the road taking rides with total strangers? Actually, the Bible picks up his story some 20 years later. (*The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1840 footnote on Acts 8:40.) Acts 21:8-9 tells us, “Leaving the next day, we [Paul and his companions] reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. (*one of the seven from Acts 6, one of the seven deacons or servants*.) He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.” So apparently Philip went on to get married and raise a Christian family in Caesarea. He had four daughters, something I can relate to! So Philip probably did not keep traveling for the rest of his life. He seems to have settled down and continued his evangelistic work for some 20 years or more in Caesarea. (*The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1869 footnote on Acts 21:8.) Here’s an interesting little side note. When Acts 21:9 uses the word “we,” we might not realize that one of Paul’s traveling companions at this time was a doctor by the name of Luke. (See Colossians 4:14, 2 Timothy 4:11, and Philemon 24.) Luke, as in the author of the Gospel of Luke. And, the author of the book of Acts. In other words, Luke and Philip knew each other; Luke stayed at his house. We know that Luke was a careful investigator of all that he wrote in his gospel, as well as in the book of Acts. So Luke may very well have obtained his facts about Philip’s life and ministry, directly from the lips of Philip himself, as well as from his family and long-time Christian friends. (See John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 146.) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. By the time Philip came along, the Ethiopian eunuch was in Isaiah 53. But, if he started at the beginning of Isaiah, he would have already read another particularly intriguing verse. Isaiah 11:11 says, “In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the surviving remnant of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush….” This reference to southern Egypt/Cush would have been right near his own stomping grounds. Cush is another name for the region of the Sudan where he was from. Knowing that God’s Word mentioned his region of the world, may have piqued his curiosity. By the way, confusingly, “Lower Egypt” is the delta region of the Nile which is in the north and “Upper Egypt” is in the south, upstream from the delta (*The NIV Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1133 footnote on Isaiah 11:11). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Fernando comments in Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 347. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)