

Called to Break Down Barriers

Bible Background • [ACTS 8](#)
Printed Text • [ACTS 8:26-39](#)
Devotional Reading • [ROMANS 10:9-15](#)

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: NOTICE that the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian represented a cross-cultural recognition of Jesus' identity; APPRECIATE the need for cross-cultural evangelism; and PLAN to participate in cross-cultural outreach.



“My faith is encouraging me to stay,” Latrice daringly replied to Zara as they sat and drank freshly brewed tea in Latrice’s kitchen. Zara had been probing Latrice, wanting to know if she’d stay in a neighborhood that was adding new immigrants each day. “This town is changing,” Zara noted. “Your friends have moved out; your neighbors now look like me.”

Latrice paused for a moment. She had never spoken to Zara about her faith in Christ. She had only visited the family the first day they arrived, bringing freshly baked bread, flowers from her garden, and candy for the children. “God showed His love to me by coming to stay within my heart,” Latrice continued. “And I share His love by living with people who I used to see as outsiders. Because of Christ, my life is being enriched by learning to love and know others.” Zara didn’t understand all that Latrice said, but she had felt Latrice’s love from the first time they met. She would have tea with Latrice again and learn more about this love.

Going out of our way to know and help others is perhaps the most powerful witness of God’s love we can give. In today’s lesson, we see the lengths Philip was willing to go to in order to share the Gospel with one person. What did someone do for you in order to see you come to know Christ?

Keep in Mind

“Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus” ([Acts 8:35](#)).

KJV

Acts 8:26 And the angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert.

27 And he arose and went: and, behold, a man of Ethiopia, an eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who had the charge of all her treasure, and had come to Jerusalem for to worship,

28 Was returning, and sitting in his chariot read Esaias the prophet.

29 Then the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot.

30 And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest?

31 And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him.

32 The place of the scripture which he read was this, He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth:

33 In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth.

34 And the eunuch answered Philip, and said, I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man?

35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.

36 And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?

37 And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

38 And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.

39 And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing.

NLT

Acts 8:26 As for Philip, an angel of the Lord said to him, "Go south down the desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza."

27 So he started out, and he met the treasurer of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under the Kandake, the queen of Ethiopia. The eunuch had gone to Jerusalem to worship,

28 and he was now returning. Seated in his carriage, he was reading aloud from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

29 The Holy Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and walk along beside the carriage."

30 Philip ran over and heard the man reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

31 The man replied, "How can I, unless someone instructs me?" And he urged Philip to come up into the carriage and sit with him.

32 The passage of Scripture he had been reading was this: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter. And as a lamb is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth.

33 He was humiliated and received no justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."

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

35 So beginning with this same Scripture, Philip told him the Good News about Jesus.

36 As they rode along, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “Look! There’s some water! Why can’t I be baptized?”

38 He ordered the carriage to stop, and they went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing.

The People, Places, and Times

Philip the Evangelist. The Philip who shares the Gospel with the Ethiopian eunuch is not the Apostle Philip. This Philip was one of the seven men selected in Acts 6 to help ensure that widows and the poor, whether from Hebrew or Greek backgrounds, would be treated fairly. He was chosen because of his integrity and obedience to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Philip, along with the other six men, are often referred to as the first deacons of the church. They cared for the material needs of the growing group of believers so that the apostles could continue preaching and teaching the Gospel without distraction.

Background

When believers started to be persecuted in Jerusalem, Philip, like many new Christ followers, fled that city. He went to Samaria and began sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ there. Philip’s speaking was accompanied by miraculous signs from God, and people from diverse walks of life turned to Christ because of his words. During this successful evangelistic crusade, Philip responded to a prompting from God to leave the success of the city for a special assignment on a desert road.

At-A-Glance

1. Leaving the Familiar ([Acts 8:26–29](#))
2. Including Others (vv. 30–35)
3. Rejoicing in God’s Salvation (vv. 36–39)

In Depth

1. Leaving the Familiar ([Acts 8:26–29](#))

The persecution that caused Philip to leave Jerusalem took him and the Good News of Christ to new people and cultures. In Samaria, his preaching was well received by the crowds there. But he left that success to travel to a desert road leading to Gaza because he felt God’s leading. There he met an Ethiopian who was traveling back to his country. Ethiopia, located south of Egypt, was known to Jews from ancient days ([Psalm 68:31](#); [Jeremiah 38:7](#)). The man, a eunuch and officer for the queen of Ethiopia, had traveled a long distance to Jerusalem to worship. Still hungry and thirsty to know God, the eunuch was reading the Scriptures, trying to understand their meaning when Philip came alongside his chariot. While Philip’s religious upbringing might have dismissed this man from being worthy of God’s grace and mercy, Philip acknowledged God’s saving work was for all people, even Gentiles and eunuchs ([Isaiah 56:3–8](#)), by engaging him in a conversation.

2. Including Others (vv. 30–35)

While in Jerusalem, the eunuch would have been excluded from full participation in Temple worship ([Deuteronomy 23:1](#)). If so, the passage he was reading, [Isaiah 53:7–8](#), would have resonated with him because it spoke about a person who was bruised, cut, humiliated, and would have no descendants. The eunuch wanted to know who this person was. Was it Isaiah, the Jewish people, or someone else? Philip used this passage and many others to share the Good News about Jesus Christ and God’s redemptive plan of salvation for everyone. For someone who might have felt marginalized and excluded from full access to God’s presence, this certainly would have been good news.

3. Rejoicing in God’s Salvation (vv. 36–39)

In his discourse, Philip must have shared the importance of baptism in signifying a relationship with Christ and His body, the church. As soon as the Ethiopian saw a body of water, he wanted to be baptized. He confessed his faith in Christ, then went down to the water where Philip baptized him. The Ethiopian continued his journey rejoicing in his newfound salvation. Philip was sent by God to Azotus, an ancient Philistine capital, for another ethnic group that needed to hear the Gospel (v. 40). Philip carried out Jesus’ commandment to take the Gospel everywhere and to everyone. His clear understanding of Scripture gave him the ability to share the Gospel with large groups. He also was comfortable sitting with one individual of a different race and stature to explain the love of God. This is a skill that all Christians can seek God’s grace to attain. It’s a gift worth rejoicing about, then and now.

Search the Scriptures

1. What is meant by the term “angel of the Lord” ([Acts 8:26](#))?
2. What are some similarities between Christ’s life and the passage the Ethiopian was reading (vv. 32–33)?

Discuss the Meaning

Sharing the Gospel often starts by listening and learning where others are in their understanding of Scripture, God, or core Bible teachings. List some principles for effective evangelism that Philip used in his encounter with the Ethiopian.

Lesson in Our Society

On our jobs, in our communities, or while shopping at the store, we will meet people from different nations, religions, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Many might dress differently, speak with an accent unlike ours, and have preferences unfamiliar to us. It’s easy to ignore those we see as different, missing opportunities to share the Good News. We become Christ’s hands and feet when we are willing to cross any boundary for the Gospel’s sake.

Make It Happen

Often we are uncomfortable with people who are different from us. Go to a store or restaurant where people speak a different language than yours. Volunteer to teach an English as a Second Language class. Talk to a neighbor of a different ethnicity and ask him or her to tell about his or her country of origin.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Acts 8:26–39

26 And the angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert.

Angels play a critical role in the narrative of Luke and Acts (cf. [Luke 1:11–20](#), [2:9–15](#); [Acts 12:7–10](#)). In this passage, an angel guides Philip away from heavy ministry activity toward the desert. It took an angel’s authority to get Philip to leave such a fruitful ministry location in Samaria.

Because Jerusalem was built on a hill, any departure was considered “go[ing] down” from the city. Gaza was one of the five cities occupied by the Philistines in southwest Palestine from approximately 1200-600 BC. At the time Luke writes, it was on a caravan route leading to Egypt that someone traveling from Jerusalem to Ethiopia would naturally take. After Gaza was captured by Nebuchadnezzar and later the Greeks and Romans, it remained an important city of commerce due to its location near the sea.

27 And he arose and went: and, behold, a man of Ethiopia, an eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who had the charge of all her treasure, and had come to Jerusalem for to worship.

Ethiopia bordered Egypt to the south and was known in the Bible as the ancient land of Cush ([Genesis 2:13](#), [10:6](#); [1 Chronicles 1:8](#); [Isaiah 11:11](#); [Ezekiel 38:5](#)). The Ethiopia referred to in antiquity was not modern Ethiopia, but the region now called Sudan.

Ethiopia was often among the Gentile nations that were named in the Bible as being subject to God’s judgment for their corruption ([Isaiah 20:3–5](#), [43:3](#); [Ezekiel 30:1–9](#); [Nahum 3:9](#); [Zephaniah 2:11–12](#)), and its people were among those foreigners who would be converted and acknowledge the true God of Israel. For example, Ethiopia figures prominently in a text of Isaiah concerning the restoration of the people ([Isaiah 11:11–12](#); [Zephaniah 3:10](#)).

It was not uncommon for eunuchs to hold positions of importance in royal courts in the region. Some eunuchs were not castrated but simply set apart to serve the government. However, if they were castrated or maimed, this condition meant a rejection of full participation in the Jewish assembly ([Deuteronomy 23:1](#)). An emasculated male was physically blemished and in a permanent state of ritual impurity ([Leviticus 21:17–21](#)). But Isaiah prophesied that a time would

come when “eunuchs [would] keep my sabbaths,” “take hold of [his] covenant,” and would be given a place in God’s house (from [Isaiah 56:4–5](#)).

The Ethiopian eunuch held a high position in the Ethiopian government. He was in charge of the entire treasury of the Candace. According to ancient writers such as Pliny the Elder and Callisthenes, Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, was a dynastic rather than personal name; that is, it was used to refer to a royal line of queens over various generations.

The Ethiopian eunuch had come to Jerusalem to worship. The narrative does not indicate whether he was a Jew or a proselyte (i.e., a Gentile who has converted to Judaism). He may have been a God-fearing person (i.e., a non-Jew who, although sympathetic to Judaism, did not submit to circumcision or observe the Torah in its entirety, but did agree with the Jews’ ethical monotheism and sometimes attended their synagogue services). If he was a eunuch not only by position but also physically, it would not have been possible for him to participate in worship in the Temple. In this regard, his status was like that of other foreigners who came to the Temple, in spite of being excluded from it.

28 Was returning, and sitting in his chariot read Esaias the prophet. 29 Then the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot. 30 And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest?

The angel of the Lord delivered the original message. Here, the Spirit of the Lord further instructs Philip. The point is the same: God is directly guiding Philip. When the Spirit told Philip to go and join up with the chariot, he obeyed. As he came near, he heard the eunuch reading Isaiah. It was customary in the ancient world to read aloud, even when alone. This was especially the case with lengthy scrolls where there was no separation between words; they had to be read syllable by syllable to detect the word divisions. Philip asks the eunuch, “Do you understand what you are reading?” (v. 30). Philip’s question derived from the conviction that the prophetic writings contained deeper meaning for the future.

31 And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him.

The eunuch admits he won’t be able to understand the text unless someone “guide[s]” him. “Guide” (Gk. **hodegeo, ho-day-GEH-oh**) literally means to lead along a road (see Jesus’ use of the term “blind leaders” and “blind leading the blind” in [Matthew 15:14](#)). Here “guide” gains the transferred sense of “leading” in righteousness or wisdom similar to its use in passages such as [Psalms 5:8, 73:24; John 16:13](#). Thus, the eunuch invited Philip to get in and sit with him under the assumption that he would be able to explain the passage in Isaiah. Traditionally, the Jews applied the concepts of suffering and humiliation in [Isaiah 52:13–53:12](#) to the nation of Israel or the unrighteous Gentile nations. Thus, the idea of a suffering Messiah was not a common idea among Jews of the time. The deeper meaning of this passage, then, must have been unclear to the eunuch.

32 The place of the scripture which he read was this, He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth. 33 In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth.

The passage the eunuch is reading from is [Isaiah 53:7–8](#). The Greek word for “humiliation”

(tapeinosis, ta-**PAY-no-sees**) provides a possible allusion both to Luke's theme of humbling the haughty and exalting the humble ([Luke 1:52, 3:5, 14:11, 18:14](#)), and to the humility of Jesus becoming incarnate and finally His humiliation on the Cross (cf. [Philippians 2:7-8](#)).

34 And the eunuch answered Philip, and said, I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man? 35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.

The eunuch's question is the pertinent one. The traditional understanding of this passage did not address his deep spiritual hunger. After having been invited into the Ethiopian's chariot, Philip explained the Isaiah passage by beginning with the same text, and showed him that Jesus was the focus of the Scriptures. In a similar scene ([Luke 24:13-35](#)), the risen Jesus teaches the two on the road to Emmaus how to understand the Scriptures: "O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (from vv. 25-27).

The Scripture passage in Isaiah that the eunuch was reading focused on the humiliation and exaltation of the Messiah. The passage's application to Jesus is clear, to His humiliation and exaltation in particular ("his judgment was taken away," v. 33). This type of interpretation of the prophecy of Isaiah is also seen in other New Testament Scriptures ([Romans 10:16, John 12:38](#)), so Isaiah is sometimes called the "fifth Gospel." It outlines many themes which are picked up in the New Testament, such as the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of His kingdom.

36 And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? 37 And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. 38 And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.

After hearing the Scripture explained and being shown how it pointed to Jesus, the eunuch asked, "What doth hinder me to be baptized?" "Hinder" (Gk. koluo, **ko-LOO-oh**) is also used in [Luke 11:52](#), where Jesus accuses the lawyers of preventing ("hindering") others from entering the kingdom of God. Because there was no reason for his exclusion from full inclusion among the followers of Jesus, the Ethiopian eunuch ordered the chariot to stop; Philip and the eunuch both went down to the water, and Philip baptized him.

39 And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing.

The Old Testament often portrays the Spirit moving prophets around in this fashion, catching them up and away to another location instantly (cf. [1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 2:16; Ezekiel 11:24](#)). The Greek word used for caught away is harpazo (**har-POD-zo**), which also means "to snatch." After his conversion experience, the eunuch continued on his way "rejoicing" (Gk. chairō, **KIGH-row**), an appropriate response to salvation. Frequently in the books of Luke and Acts, joy or rejoicing is a noted response to God's work in the world ([Luke 1:14, 6:23; Acts 5:41](#)).

Say It Correctly

Eunuch. **YOO**-nik.
Candace. **CAN**-dis.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Jesus Heals the Canaanite Daughter
([Matthew 15:21-28](#))

TUESDAY

Good News for All Peoples
([Galatians 3:23-29](#))

WEDNESDAY

All Who Call Will Be Saved
([Romans 10:9-15](#))

THURSDAY

Persecution Scatters the Church
([Acts 8:1b-3](#))

FRIDAY

Converts in Samaria Baptized
([Acts 8:4-13](#))

SATURDAY

Simon Repents of Selfish Power Grab
([Acts 8:14-25](#))

SUNDAY

Called to Break Down Barriers
([Acts 8:26-39](#))