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July 27, 2024

BAPTIZING: ACTS 8:26-39

Followers of Jesus obediently submit to baptism after coming to faith in Him.

TEACHERS NOTE: EACH QUARTER THE ETB CURRICULUM SETS ASIDE ONE LESSON AS AN “EVANGELISTIC” LESSON. THIS WEEKS LESSON IS DESIGNATED AS SUCH. THE LESSON TITLE AND AIM FOCUS ON BAPTISM. I, HOWEVER, WILL USE THE LESSON AS A GUIDE TO EVANGELISM AND IN THE PROCESS PRESENT TO THE GOSPEL.

FACILITATOR 2

Focus Attention

Ask the group to name some games they played as children and share which was their favorite.

Explain: Today many children play indoor games or games on their devices. Many who are adults today did not have that option while growing up. Even today when children are given the chance to go outside at school or church, they jump at the opportunity. One game that some children play is Follow the Leader. In this game, one person, a child or adult, is the leader and the children follow and mimic the leader around the playground or other area. If the leader goes under the slide the follower does as well. If the leader hops on one foot, the followers mimic him.

In today’s lesson, we will observe one man who followed his Leader and accomplished great things.

FACILITATOR 1

Introduce the Passage and Transition: Last week we explored Acts chapter 6. According to some commentators, the events in chapter six took place 5 years after the day of Pentecost. In that chapter, the church faced a problem that threatened to divide it and hamper its growth. The issue at the center of this divisive problem was the unintentional disregard for the needs of the Hellenistic widows. The Apostles responded by focusing on their God-given task of teaching and prayer. They instructed the church to choose seven men to serve the Hellenistic widows. Those seven men included two who stood out in the early church for their ministry. Stephen was the first recorded Christian martyr. His story is recorded in Acts 6 and 7. Chapter 8 begins with a summary statement of the situation in Jerusalem following the death of Stephen. Luke tells the reader that great persecution broke out and many believers fled the city. Their departure led to the second phase of the Great Commission given by Jesus in Acts 1:8. The first phase was the evangelism of Jerusalem. The second phase was the evangelism of Judea and Samaria. The evangelism of Samaria is seen most acutely in the life and work of Philip. Philip was

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Notes:

This is the Aim of the lesson. It drives our discussion and should be the point we drive home throughout the lesson.

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *New American Commentary: Acts* (NAC)
- *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts* (HNTC)
- *Preaching the Word: Acts* (Preaching)
- *Exalting Christ in Acts* (Exalting)
- *Unstoppable Gospel*, Gregg Matte

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one of the seven Hellenistic brothers who had been selected as servants to the Hellenistic widows. Like Stephen, his ministry expanded beyond his initial ministry assignment.

Luke tells the reader that “⁵ Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. ⁶ The crowds were all paying attention to what Philip said, as they listened and saw the signs he was performing.” (Acts 8:5-6) A great revival broke out in the area and was attested to by the Apostle who visited to investigate. Today’s lesson picks up in the midst of that revival. Philip is going to receive a call from the Lord, and he chooses to follow His leader into a vastly different ministry context.

1. INTERSECTION (ACTS 8:26-29)

Read or have someone read Acts 8:26-29

Explain: This passage marks a shift for Philip. In the midst of the Samaritan revival, God instructs him to “get up and go.” Moreover, He tells him to go south of Jerusalem to a deserted place. Polhill explains that this is “the last watering place before the desert on the route to Egypt.” (NAC, 223) This is far from the bustling metropolis of Jerusalem and Samaria ablaze with the gospel message. “Moving so far from a prosperous ministry did not align with human logic, but it fit God’s plan.” (ETB LG, 102)

FACILITATOR 2

Discuss: Has the Lord ever instructed you, your church, or your small group to do something that did not align with human logic? What was the response and what happened?

Explain: It did not make sense for Philip to leave his thriving ministry. Sometimes the Lord asks us to do seemingly illogical things. He might ask someone to leave a well-paying job in the community and take a lesser-paying position on staff at a church. He might call someone to downsize their living arrangement so that they can give more to missions. He might call a small group that has been together for many years to birth a new group so that they can reach more people. He might call a church to step out in faith and begin a new costly and resource-heavy ministry to reach a new segment of the population. Our God does not always instruct us to do the “logical” things. Instead, He places that who choose to follow their Leader in the right situation to do Kingdom work. That is what He intended for Philip. Luke records that “he got up and went. There was an Ethiopian man, a eunuch and high official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of her entire treasury.” (Acts 8:27)

FACILITATOR 1

When Philip got to the desert road that led from Israel down into Africa, he encountered the traveling party of a high-ranking official for a prosperous nation south of modern-day Egypt. The Ethiopia mentioned in

Notes:

“The ancient kingdom of Meroe was a flourishing culture from the eighth century b.c. until the fourth century a.d. Referred to in the Old Testament as the Kingdom of Cush, its population consisted of blacks. This remote, advanced culture was an object of endless curiosity for the Greeks and Romans and represented for them the extreme limits of the civilized world.¹³² Their kings were viewed as incarnations of the sun god and held a primarily ceremonial role. The real administration of the kingdom was in the hands of powerful queen mothers who had the title of “the Candace.” (NAC, 223)

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the text was not located where modern-day Ethiopia is located. Instead, it is synonymous with the Old Testament Land of Cush. The Land was prosperous. The queens who ruled the land were given the title “Candace.” The Ethiopian Philip encountered would have been akin to the Minister of Finance. Whether the man was an actual eunuch is not known. The term could have been a title that developed from the custom of employing actual eunuchs as trusted officials. What is clear is that this man had come to Jerusalem to worship. On his trip home, he was reading from the book of Isaiah. It appears that his man had heard about the God of Israel and had either fully converted or was a God-fearer who worshipped the Lord. “He had just completed a thousand-mile religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem and had a searching heart... he was a noble man on a noble search.” (Preaching, 120)

FACILITATOR 2

Consider: Philip was directed by the Spirit to “go and join that chariot.” This was not a physically difficult command to follow. The chariot was probably pulled by oxen and traveling slowly enough for attendants to follow on foot. Ask the group to silently consider how they respond when the Spirit leads to them go and join another person with the intention of sharing the gospel or having a gospel conversation.

Summarize and Transition: As followers of Jesus who consistently seek His will in the Word and through prayer, we will at times be prompted by Him. Tony Merida writes that “Those walking by the Spirit are sensitive to God’s leading.” (Exalting, 124) Sometimes the Lord asks us to do seemingly illogical things like Philip when he was told to leave Samaria and travel to the desert road. Sometimes though He prompts us to do something simple like turning to a person in the grocery store line or approaching our neighbor with the purpose of sharing Jesus or having a gospel centered conversation. For many of us both the outwardly illogical big step and the small promptings of the Spirit are equally frightening or disagreeable. Nevertheless, a prompting of the Spirit should result in acts of faith because when a believer follows the prompting of the Spirit, he or she will discover that God has already set the stage for Kingdom work. Let’s see what He had in store for Philip and the Ethiopian official.

FACILITATOR 1

2. ILLUMINATION (ACTS 8:30-35)

Read (or have someone read) Acts 8:30-35

Explain: When Philip approaches the chariot, he hears the man reading Scripture aloud. Reading aloud was a common practice in that day. The man is reading from Isaiah chapter 53. Before we examine what he was reading let’s examine Philip’s actions.

Ask: In what manner did Philip approach the chariot? (He ran up to it.)

Notes:

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First, we see that Philip acted with urgency in response to God's command to approach the chariot. This can be a reminder that when God prompts we should act with haste. In our fast-paced world, we might miss the opportunity to share with others. The grocery line moves along while we ponder God's prompting. Or the neighbor fires up the leaf blower interrupting the moment God had ordained for you to approach. When God prompts, we should act quickly.

Ask: What did Philip ask when he heard the man reading from Isaiah? (He asked the man if he understood.)

Second, we can see that Philip acted upon the God-ordained situation. This can remind us that God is moving in the lives of people around us. In Philip's situation, it was clear that this man was interested in the things of the Lord. In our lives, we might notice that someone is sharing religious-themed posts on social media. Or we might notice that the person sitting near us in the waiting room is reading from a devotion that was left on the coffee table. Or maybe someone asks us a question related to the Bible or Christianity. If we are followers of Jesus who have eyes to see the opportunities, we should not assume these encounters are coincidences. Instead, we should see them as God-ordained encounters. Simply asking, "Do you understand what you are reading?" or "Is that interesting?" can open the door to a fruitful gospel conversation.

FACILITATOR 2

Like Philip, when we respond to God-ordained opportunities we might get invited to join others in their journey toward Christ. It appears that the Ethiopian official invited Philip to join him in the chariot and began asking questions related to the passage. He asks, "I ask you, who is the prophet saying this about — himself or someone else?" This is not an oddball question. It appears that this man had been *looking* into the passage and had questions about it. "Contemporary Jews debated about whether the prophet was speaking of his own suffering [in Isaiah 53] or of that of the nation as a whole or of the Messiah." (NAC, 225) In response, Philip begins to explain the passage and uses other Scripture to help the official understand it. Kent Hughes writes, "There is perhaps no better place in the Old Testament from which to preach Jesus." (Preaching, 121) Let's examine the passage and see why that is so.

Isaiah 53:7-8a

"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb is silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth." —Jesus is the perfect lamb of God. Unlike any other human even born, He was without sin. Sin is anything we think, say, or do that dishonors God or disobeys His Word. Sin separates humanity from a holy God and leads to our death. Jesus however did not deserve death because He was sinless. Nevertheless, He did not argue, fight, or refuse to die in our place on the cross.

Notes:

"Has there ever been a better invitation to proclaim the gospel than this? 'He invited Philip to come up and sit with him.'... Not only did the eunuch invite Philip to sit with him and explain the text, but he asked the very questions that lead to an introduction to the Savior." (HNCTC, 126)

"The picture of the slaughtered lamb evokes the image of Jesus' crucifixion, the lamb before his shearers, that of Jesus' silence before his accusers". (NAC, 225)

"The deprivation of justice reminds one of the false accusations of blasphemy leveled at Christ and the equivocation of Pilate." (NAC, 225)

"When Christ's life was taken from the earth, it was taken up in the glory of the resurrection, exalted to the right hand of God." (NAC, 225)

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“In his humiliation justice was denied him.”—The leaders of Israel who should have understood that Jesus was the Messiah and Savior denied Him. They like so many today would rather do away with Jesus and the Truth He represents than accept the fact that humans are sinners and need a Savior. However, the passage goes on to help us know that we too can find salvation in Jesus.

“Who will describe his generation? For his life is taken from the earth.”—Christ willingly gave His life as a sacrifice for many. As a result, His biological line did not continue. But the spiritual family of Jesus continues and includes too many speak of. Any person can join that family when you

- 1) Admit to God that you are a sinner
- 2) Believe that Christ died for you in your place and took responsibility for your sin even though He was sinless.
- 3) Confess that you believe this and make Him Lord of your life.

Apply: Provide a quiet moment for group members to consider the gospel message. You can (and should) lead the group to silently pray a prayer of repentance, belief, and confession of Jesus as Lord. After the prayer encourage anyone who prayed the prayer to tell you after the group time or to find a pastor and tell them.

The gospel message is not complicated. Anyone, even a child, can understand it. Nevertheless, the Lord has chosen to use His followers as messengers of the gospel message. Philip taught the man what the passage meant. This can remind us that we should be ready at all times to explain the gospel. We prepare to do this when we study Scripture on our own and to the best of our ability. “You need to see that your personal study of Scripture is *evangelism training*.” (Exalting, 129-130)

FACILITATOR 1

Summarize and Transition: As followers of Jesus who seek Him in the Word and through prayer, we will receive promptings from the Spirit to speak into other people’s lives. First, we should prepare ourselves by learning Scripture in such a way that we can explain the gospel message. Second, we should remember that as participants in the Kingdom work, we are to always be on mission. “The Ethiopian man needed more than a friend in his chariot. He needed an encounter with someone who could explain the truth of the gospel with the Spirit’s help.” (Exalting, 126) Sometimes we are tempted to speak kind words or offer encouraging words to a friend or a person we meet. We should never forget that the best kind of friend and sometimes the best words are those that lead to salvation. Let’s see how the Ethiopian man responded to Philip’s explanation of the gospel.

3. AFFIRMATION (ACTS 8:36-39)

Notes:

“His response enunciates a basic principle that runs throughout Luke-Acts concerning the interpretation of the Old Testament prophetic texts—the need for a Christian interpreter. The disciples themselves had needed such guidance, and Christ had ‘opened ... the Scriptures’ for them (Luke 24:45).” (NAC, 224)

TEACHERS NOTE: YOU WILL HAVE TO DEAL WITH VERSE 37 BECAUSE SOMEONE IN YOUR GROUP IS GOING TO HAVE A BIBLE TRANSLATION THAT INCLUDES IT. DO NOT BE AFRAID OF THIS OR LET IT FLUSTER YOU. USE THE INFORMATION INCLUDED ON THE LAST PAGE OF HIS LESSON PLAN TO HELP YOU EXPLAIN IT. DO NOT GET INTO AN ARGUMENT AND ENCOURAGE THE GROUP TO ASK A PASTOR FOR MORE INFORMATION IF THEY WANT IT.

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Read (or have someone read) Acts 8:36-39

TEACHERS NOTE: SOMEONE IN YOUR GROUP MIGHT IMMEDIATELY NOTE THAT YOU “SKIPPED” VERSE 37. AFFIRM THEIR COMMENT AND EXPLAIN THAT YOU WILL TALK ABOUT VERSE 37 BUT FIRST WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND VERSE 36.

Explain: It appears that Philip either spoke about baptism in his gospel presentation or the official knew that baptism was a Jewish custom associated with cleansing. Regardless of the reason “the Eunuch was not only convinced [of the gospel message]—he wanted to take the next step.” (Preaching, 121) Baptism is not required for salvation, but it is the next step in a person’s spiritual journey after receiving the gospel. That is where verse 37 comes in.

If someone has not already mentioned it, note that verse 37 was not included in the passage as printed in the ETB material. That is because the verse does not appear in the Christian Standard Version of the Bible. It also does not appear in the NIV (New International Version), NLT (New Living Version), NRSV (New Revised Standard Version), and the NASB (New American Standard Bible) includes it in brackets. These translations do not include the verse because it is not included in the oldest copies of the Book of Acts that have been discovered. In Bible scholarship, older manuscripts

are viewed as more accurate and in agreement with what was originally written. NEVERTHELESS, the verse does provide us with a summary of what the official, and every person baptized today, declares as true.

Read the verse: “Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart you may.’ And he replied, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’”

Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One who can save us from our sin. He is the Son of God and is therefore sinless and the **only** person who can save us. This is the declaration made by any person who is baptized. Philip believed that this man trusted Jesus as his Savior and Lord so he proceeded to Baptize him.

Luke tells us that they both went down into the water where the man was baptized and that they both came out. This is a picture of the baptismal practice of the New Testament. Full immersion baptism is the best picture of what the new believer has experienced. Putting someone under the water pictures their death to sin. Raising them out of the water pictures their rebirth in Christ. They can now walk in the new life of Christ.

FACILITATOR 2

Apply: Encourage the group members to consider taking part in baptisms if in the recent or distant past they came to faith in Christ but never followed up with baptism. The act of baptism is an outward statement to the world that you are a follower of Christ and want to live a Christ-centered life.

Summarize and Transition: Philip followed the seemingly illogical command of God to leave Samaria and go to the desert road. He then quickly followed the quiet prompting of the Spirit to approach the man. He then engaged the man in a gospel conversation and following the man’s questions presented the gospel message. While Luke does not tell us outright, it is clear that Philip then invited the man to follow Jesus. This is a picture of how God wants to use us. If we follow our Leader and engage with those around us, we can be part of Kingdom expansion.

Notes:

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CONCLUDE

The conversion of the Ethiopian official is the first recorded instance of the third phase of Christ's Great Commission coming to fruition. Philip was taken away and this man continued his journey to be a Christian witness in Africa. When we share our faith with strangers, we do not always know what God intends to do. We can know that God will use us again if we are willing and He will send out new believers to take the gospel to their friends and as well.

Conclude your time together by praying that group members will listen to the Spirit when He guides them. Also, pray for those in your group who might not yet know Jesus.

A Note on Verse 37

[8:37] Verse 37 is omitted from the NIV text of Acts, and for good reasons. It is not found in the early manuscripts of Acts and seems to be a later scribal addition. It is given in a footnote of the NIV and consists of a profession of faith on the part of the eunuch. Evidently a scribe felt this was lacking and so provided the missing confession of faith. He did not need to do so. Luke had summarized Philip's sharing the gospel with the eunuch in v. 35, and one can assume it included an appeal for the eunuch to respond. The eunuch's desire for baptism would indicate a favorable response to Philip's appeal. The added verse, however, has considerable value. It seems to embody a very early Christian baptismal confession where the one baptizing asked the candidate if he believed in Christ with all his heart, to which the candidate would respond by confessing Jesus Christ as the Son of God. This old confession is of real significance to the history of early Christian confessions and would be appropriate to the baptismal ceremony today. To that extent we can be grateful to the pious scribe who ascribed to the eunuch the baptismal confession of his own day.¹

¹ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 226.