**Acts 8:1-40**

**Day One**

Review - Last week we saw that the conflict between the religious leaders of Judaism and the new followers of the Messiah reached its zenith in the death of Stephen. He is stoned to death, with Paul giving his hearty approval, and the general persecution of the church begins. This resulted in the scattering of the disciples into the regions around Jerusalem. Of important note, Luke includes Judea and Samaria—a clear indicator that the command of 1:8 was being fulfilled, though not at all how the disciples may have imagined.

Samaria now becomes the central location for the unfolding story of the spread of the gospel.

The chapter details the work of Philip the evangelist, and the central theme is, of course, the proclamation of the good news. The term “evangelize” (Gk. *euangelizo*—to preach the good news) is used five times in the chapter (v. 4, 12, 25, 35, 40).

8:5–13 - Philip’s Ministry in Samaria

Luke now focuses on Philip. This is not the apostle who is named among the eleven in Acts 1, but was “another Hellenistic leader who, like Stephen, was one of the seven [servants] appointed to manage the daily administration of the communal fund. Driven from his work in Jerusalem, Philip went north to Samaria and preached the gospel there.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

In **v. 5**, we discover Philip departing to go to Samaria (potentially the city itself, though it could have been other cities like Shechem in the Roman region) in order to preach Christ. The Samaritans were notorious enemies of the Jews, and were seen as inferior ‘half-breeds’—of the same religious value as Gentiles. John acknowledged this relational strain in John 4:9.

The Samaritans claimed to worship YHWH, but instead of seeking a Messiah from David who would rule, they were searching for a coming teacher (Heb. ‘*taheb*’ - from Deut 18:15ff) who would help them. For that reason, it’s important that Philip’s message points to *Jesus* as Messiah—he proclaimed Christ to them for salvation.

We must pay careful attention to this event. For Philip to travel there and proclaim the Jewish Messiah was a substantial breach of traditional Jewish convention. Jesus and John the Baptist had both done some work in and near the region (John 1:28; 4:9ff), so there may have been precedent. Further, though clearly not “pure Jews,” the connections were obvious enough that no one in the church had any struggle with Philip for traveling there to preach Christ.

In **v. 6**, we are told that his efforts are widely successful. The connection between the message that Philip proclaimed and miracles he performed is made explicit. In fact, the priority of the message is clear—the crowds give attention to the teaching because of the signs. It is important to note, however, that the people did not believe because of the miracles themselves, but that the miracles opened the door for them to hear.

The same verb used for ‘pay close attention’ is used later in vv. 10-11 for the crowds giving attention to Simon. Apparently the attention that Simon was receiving was transferred to Philip.

**Vv. 7-8** detail the events that were happening as Philip preached. The signs were both “heard and seen,” as Luke made clear in v. 6. The unclean spirits were coming out with loud shouts, and the paralyzed and lame were healed. Both of these miracles occurred during Jesus’s earthly ministry (see Luke 4:33 and 7:22), which helps to reinforce the fact that Philip is carrying on the work of Christ through the church.

The result of the widespread salvation and miracles was great rejoicing in the city. This same reaction occurs whenever the gospel transcends cultural barriers (see, for example, 8:39; 13:48; 15:31).

The story takes an interesting turn, however, with the inclusion of Simon the magician. In **v. 9** Luke introduces his readers to this very strange man. There is substantial debate about who he is. Some in the early church make a direct connection between this Simon, and Simon Magus—a heretic and early teacher of Gnosticism. Whether they are the same person or not is difficult to ascertain.[[2]](#footnote-3) Regardless, this Simon was a deceiver of the first order.

The concept of magic in the ancient world is different than our modern notions. This was not sleight of hand, but actual occult practices that may likely have had real miracles occurring by demonic powers (see for example, the magicians of Pharaoh). He was likely earning a living from this practice, and claimed to be someone ‘great.’ The Greek term is *megas*, which produces the name Simon Magus of history.[[3]](#footnote-4)

According to **vv. 10-11**, all the people of the city were paying attention to him. Luke repeats this twice in order to emphasize the point—when Philip came down and began preaching, the attention that everyone paid to Simon was now shifted.

Apparently the people of the city were completely taken in by his deception, so much so that they called him “The Great Power of God.” This may have been a claim to divine powers, or to divinity itself. It seems best to take it as the former—a claim to have direct access to the power of God for miracles.[[4]](#footnote-5) This would have likely included a connection with the divine for the purpose of revelation—he would have claimed to have spoken for God as well.

The details of his life and the forms of deception are hard to piece together. This is likely intentional on Luke’s part—he simply wants us to understand that this man was a deceiver, but that Philip was clearly doing the work of the true God. Regardless, the people of the city had formerly been astonished by his magical arts.

In **v. 12** we return to Philip who has preached the good news to the city. Again, this term is important—it is the proclamation of the gospel, and comes up several times in this section. It is also important because Luke indicates that the people believed Philip. It isn’t that they shifted their attention from Simon to Philip, but that they shifted from Simon to Jesus Christ and the message of the Kingdom of God. This is the first time this phrase has been used since Acts 1:6, where the disciples ask about the Kingdom returning to Israel.

Significantly, the expansion of the gospel over the hurdle to the Samaritans does not change the message of the Kingdom of God. Apparently Philip still considers it possible that the Kingdom was open to the nation of Israel, and the Samaritans, though only partial Jews, were included in that call. No Gentile has yet been converted.

Those who believed were baptized, as had occurred before. Again, the expansion of the Gospel includes both men and women in equal measure.

**V. 13** brings us back to Simon. He, like many other Samaritans, makes a profession of faith and is baptized. The word “even” or “also” is at the beginning of the verse, indicating that this profession was a surprise to Philip, given Simon’s background.

There are two worrying notes here about Simon’s profession of faith.

First, he is said to “continue on with Philip.” The word means ‘to be devoted to’ (*proskaptereo*), and is elsewhere only used of devotion to forms of ministry.[[5]](#footnote-6) That Simon appears devoted to Philip is concerning.

Second, he is “constantly amazed” by the signs and wonders he’s observing Philip performing. Apparently he is still focused on the miracles, rather than the message.

However, it would be improper to argue that Simon is certainly not a believer. Luke speaks of him believing, and we should accept Luke’s testimony at that point. It is hard to know with certainty, as we’ll see soon.

Questions for Day One:

1. What is the significance of Samaria in the gospel proclamation?
2. How does the suffering of the church in 8:1-4 fulfill God’s purposes? How might this encourage us?
3. How does the message of the gospel inform the circumstances that we see around us, even when they appear to be miraculous?
4. What might we apply in our own lives from watching Simon’s attachment to Philip, rather than devotion to the gospel and ministry?

**Day Two**

The events that follow in vv. 14-17 are of immense help in understanding what was happening in the early church, and how the apostles were connected to it.

8:14-17 - The Spirit’s Coming in Samaria

In **v. 14**, Luke informs us that the apostles in Jerusalem hear that Samaria had received the word of God. The use of the regional name, rather than the name of the city or the people is important. At this point, the apostles are watching the gospel move outward in concentric circles, but reaching those who would otherwise be second-class Jews.

The first thing to notice is that the apostles still had direct oversight over these new believers. There is no mention of the establishment of a church, etc. which occurs later in Paul’s missionary journeys. Instead, Peter and John are sent to them regionally, since the conversions in this region are still under the care of the Jewish church in Jerusalem. This is not a statement of Presbyterian church polity—it is a time of expansion of gospel witness, which the apostles view as continuing their ministry in Jerusalem.

Second, this is the last mention of John in Acts. We know from church history that his ministry continued in Jerusalem, and that in his later years he resided in Ephesus. Regardless, because of the movement toward the Gentiles, John does not serve Luke’s purposes here.

Third, it is interesting to note that the apostles sent Peter and John. Apparently they were not acting independently, but were also under the authority of the apostolic leadership (see 13:1-4 for a similar pattern).

In **v. 15**, the apostolic mission is to come and pray that these new believers would receive the Holy Spirit. Some have argued that the Samaritans were not saved until this point in the story. However, this is impossible. The very fact that the apostles were willing to come would indicate otherwise. Further, the language of v. 14 (received the Word of God) would indicate acceptance. Clearly they had believed.

The receiving of the Spirit here, then, must be the reception of the Spirit of power, like the apostolic experience of Pentecost, rather than the Spirit at the time of regeneration.

Finally, it is important to note that the apostles prayed that they would receive the Spirit first, and then acted. This would again indicate that they have every reason to believe that the conversion of the Samaritans was authentic. However, the fact that they would pray and petition the Lord for the Spirit to come upon these new believers indicates that they did not necessarily anticipate that it would occur. While they had confidence that these people were true believers, the Spirit for power was not certain.[[6]](#footnote-7)

Luke gives an explanation in **v. 16** that strengthens this argument. He explains that they had not yet received the Spirit but had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Their salvation and baptism were certainly assured, since Luke stresses the clarity and orthodoxy of the gospel message.

The fact that Luke stresses the point here is important. He is indicating that the Spirit’s presence for power is not necessarily directly related to conversion. This will be made clearer in the following account of the Ethiopian eunuch, who goes on his way without apparently receiving the gift of the Spirit in power.

In **v. 17** he then provides the summary statement regarding what the apostles did—they began to lay hands on them and they were receiving the Spirit. The language indicates that the apostles’ act of laying on of hands continuously granted the presence of the Spirit to the believers. Like a wave, each successive laying on of hands had the same result—the Spirit’s presence was made obvious.

It is difficult to know just how the Spirit manifested His presence in the lives of these new believers. It is most likely through similar acts as those done by the first believers at Pentecost—tongues, healings, prophecy and the like. But it is not evident in the text.

What then is God’s purpose of this event, and why is it so crucial that Luke records it?

As the gospel moves over the social barriers that would have existed between Jews and Samaritans, the Lord provides the Spirit in power in order to authenticate the salvation of these Samaritans. This is crucial because the Jewish Christians could have been incredulous about the salvation of Samaritans.

The first of these overcoming events occurs when the Spirit is first given at Pentecost. The second is here, in Samaria, when the gospel moves beyond the bounds of Israel proper. The third event will be when Cornelius and his household are saved. These divine appointments prove the salvation of those present.

However, this is also important because it shows exactly how the Spirit for power was given during the early church. For this to take place, an apostle must have been present, and able to give the Spirit through the laying on of hands, or, the Spirit had to come spontaneously upon a person at conversion. There is no other means.

**Day 2 Questions -**

1. How does the Gospel going over social barriers help us to understand about God’s view of people?
2. How does the sending of Peter and the events in Samaria show God’s purposes in fulfilling the command of 1:8, and His work in confirming the power of the Gospel?
3. What is the significance of the apostles praying for the Spirit? What does it show about their dependence on God for spiritual blessings?

Day Three

The appearance of the Spirit’s power in Samaria through the laying on of hands of the apostles brings Simon’s heart into a dangerous place of temptation. Luke includes this episode to show how even those who are apparently in the church can be tempted by the power that the Spirit provides. Interestingly, this is the same sin that was apparently plaguing the Corinthian church, and which occasioned Paul’s writing of 1 Corinthians 12-14.

8:18-23 - Simon’s Evil Request

In **v. 18**, Simon sees that the Spirit is given through the laying on of hands of the apostles. It is not plainly evident what the signs that Simon observes are, but it is certainly possible to conjecture.

“It is a plausible assumption that the Samaritan Christians spoke in unlearned foreign languages (glossolalia) when they received the Holy Spirit—when Luke introduces a new group of people who accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ, he links the reception of the Spirit with glossolalia (in 2:4–12 the Jews; in 10:46; 11:15, 17 the Gentiles; and in 19:6 the disciples of John the Baptist). These four groups (including the Samaritans) represent people who are distinct from a salvation-historical perspective.”[[7]](#footnote-8)

Observing these signs apparently causes him to consider the potential that he might be able to acquire this same ability. It isn’t that Simon wanted the *powers* that the Spirit was performing; he wanted *the ability* *to grant* those powers, which is the greater miracle. Obviously he thought that Peter and John were essentially miracle workers like himself who sought to gain a greater following.

He therefore offers them money in order to acquire the power to do this same act. He essentially wants to purchase a share in their thriving business, or so he thinks. This is obviously wildly misunderstanding the ministry of the apostles, and so wrongly motivated.

In **v. 19**, Luke records his words to them, as he requests the power to offer the Holy Spirit to everyone he chooses. Again, his woeful misunderstanding of the Spirit is made clear. He believes that the power to give the Spirit is something that happens to everyone by his choosing, rather than by the Spirit’s choosing through salvation. He does not understand that the Spirit does as He pleases (John 3:8).

The obvious issue is Simon’s motivation. He wants to be able to offer the Spirit so that people return to following him. He’s happy to share the limelight with Peter and John, but wants back into the position of prominence that he held prior to the arrival of Philip.

“What is emphasized is his sinful desire to have spiritual power for the wrong reasons and to gain that power by the wrong method. The possession of any kind of spiritual authority is a solemn responsibility rather than a privilege, and its possessor must constantly be aware of the temptation to domineer over those for whose spiritual welfare he is responsible; he must also beware of the danger of using his position for his own ends, whether as a means of making money or bolstering his own ego (1 Pet. 5:2f.).”[[8]](#footnote-9)

This is, perhaps, the most blatant use of religion for personal gain in the entire New Testament. Simon’s obviously wrong motives are clearly on display, and his intention to garner power and fortune by using the Spirit as a magic act are the height of unrighteousness.

‘Whenever religion is used to make its leaders seem great and powerful, and whenever religion becomes a commodity by serving the interests of those who have or want money, it has become corrupt.”[[9]](#footnote-10)

“When the evil practice of obtaining positions in the church by paying a price or offering a bribe developed, the sin gained the name of ‘simony’ as a result of this incident.”[[10]](#footnote-11)

Peter’s stern rebuke is recorded beginning in **v. 20**. There are four parts:

1. First, he uses a rare form of Greek verb in the form of a curse of perishing to express the extremity of his disdain for Simon’s request.

The curse is expressed as a potential, since Peter calls him to repentance later. It is not that Peter is actually cursing Simon, but telling him what will happen if he fails to repent of his unrighteousness.

“Peter formulates a threat that implies a curse as punishment for Simon’s offer: “May your money perish with you” (v. 20b). The noun translated as “perish” (ἀπώλεια) refers in the Old Testament to the destruction that God brings upon human beings as a result of their rebellion against him. Peter threatens that God will destroy Simon (σὺν σοί) and the money (τὸ ἀργύριόν) that has been offered.”[[11]](#footnote-12)

The basis for this curse is the obvious misunderstanding of the Spirit. Peter calls the work of the Spirit the gift of God (Acts 2:38), and is disgusted that Simon would seek to purchase it with money. It is important to note that it is not the buying or selling that would result in judgment, but even the very thought that such a thing is possible!

This statement also helpfully reminds the reader that the Spirit’s work is a gift that God grants. God does not require payment for anything—He owns everything!—but grants gifts freely without cost.

1. Peter continues in **v. 21** with the second portion of his rebuke, telling Simon that he has no part in the matter of the Spirit. The word “matter” is actually the word “teaching” or “word” (*logos*). The word of the gospel and the free gift of the Spirit is what Simon has no part or portion in.

“The key word for the interpretation of v. 21a is the term translated as “matter” (λόγος); the demonstrative pronoun (τούτῳ) indicates that λόγος here does not mean “word” in terms of the Christian message but refers to the “matter” of the bestowal of the gift of the Spirit, which is the substance of Simon’s request.”[[12]](#footnote-13)

A “part” or “portion” was the language of the Old Testament position among the people of God (Deut 12:12). To have been denied this is effectively excommunication from among the people.

This rebuke is followed by the statement that his heart is not right before God. Again, the scolding tone indicates that Simon’s motivations of his heart were unrighteous. He wanted to receive something, rather than to glorify God.

1. Third, Peter then calls Simon to repentance in **v. 22**. Interestingly, the repentance is a change of heart posture, and this is made clear. Peter says that Simon must repent of his wickedness, and pray to the Lord that the evil intention (‘thought’) of his heart might be forgiven. Literally, Simon must ask God to forgive him for his false motives that are rooted in greed and self-aggrandizement.

The little phrase “if possible” sounds like it is doubtful that God would forgive, but it translates a Greek word (*ara*) that indicates that there is a real possibility that God would provide this forgiveness. A better translation might be “if indeed.”

1. Fourth, Peter expresses his concern over Simon’s heart in **v. 23**. The expression here is again stark—he is in the “gall of bitterness” (meaning the unpleasantness of a bitter taste) and bondage to iniquity. These phrases have OT roots.

“Peter discerns that this reveals a deep-seated, underlying problem that needs to be resolved. Simon is still ‘*full of bitterness and captive to sin*’ (*eis cholēn pikrias kai syndesmon adikias*; KJV, ESV ‘in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity’)… There was a bitter poison in Simon that needed to be extracted. The expression *captive to sin* appears to be an allusion to Isaiah 58:6 (*syndesmon adikias*, ‘the bond of unrighteousness’).”[[13]](#footnote-14)

This four-part rebuke raises the question of whether Simon was truly saved. The conversation itself does not make the answer clear, though Simon’s response to Peter in **v. 24** adds little clarity. Clearly Simon understands and affirms his spiritual status is in grave danger. This would indicate an awareness of his sin. Nevertheless, rather than Luke recording personal repentance from Simon, he requests the apostles to pray for him, and interestingly, the request includes a fear that the curse Peter pronounces might come upon him, which he is wishing to avoid.

The entire dialogue leaves us with many questions. I’m inclined to believe Simon is actually a believer, and his repentance is simply the words of a young Christian, but the text does not seem particularly clear.

Regardless, Luke’s main point is abundantly clear—using the gospel for personal gain is not tolerated in any setting.

In **v. 25**, the apostles return to Jerusalem, continuing the evangelistic work among the Samaritans.

**Day 3 Questions**

1. What are some ways that the gospel might be used for personal gain, even in our day?
2. While we might be inclined to condemn Simon, and the false teachers of today, what are ways that our hearts can sometimes do just as Simon does?
3. What does Peter’s offer of forgiveness reveal about God’s heart, even for the most vile of sinners?

**Day Four**

The work of Philip in evangelism continues, but this time miraculously, with the Ethiopian eunuch. Obviously there were many amazing stories of conversion during these days, but Luke records just the Samaritans and the Ethiopian. The reason is likely that the eunuch represented another category of persons who, though still connected with Israel, would have been considered distant from the covenant people of God.

“Though a Gentile, the official was probably a Jewish proselyte or near-proselyte (a so-called Proselyte of the Gate) and was therefore viewed by Luke as still within a Jewish religious milieu. He had been to Jerusalem to worship, was studying the prophecy of Isaiah, and was open to further instruction from a Jew.”[[14]](#footnote-15)

Acts 8:26-40 - Philip Shares the Gospel with an Ethiopian

In **v. 26** Luke begins to explain how God orchestrated the salvation of another social outcast. The Ethiopian is certainly of Gentile origin. However, it is fairly clear that he is a proselyte—a convert to Judaism, since he “had come to Jerusalem to worship” (v. 27).

Philip’s role is reminiscent of the OT prophets, which highlights the divine appointment of this moment — “Alerted to the way in which Philip had been identified as a prophet (being filled with the Spirit, working signs and wonders, proclaiming the word of God), we may discern in this narrative certain parallels with the prophet Elijah. Philip is addressed by *an angel of the Lord* (cf. 2 Ki. 1:15), moved from place to place by the Spirit (8:29, 39; cf. 1 Ki. 18:12), and runs down the road with the chariot of an important person (8:30; cf. 1 Ki. 18:46). References to an angel and the Spirit highlight the fact that the initiative in this mission is entirely with God.”[[15]](#footnote-16)

An angel of the Lord comes to Philip and tells him to go to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.[[16]](#footnote-17) This road is far south of Samaria, and so it makes sense that he is told to go that direction.

In **v. 27-28** we are introduced to the Ethiopian. Several clarifying points are needed.

First, the location is helpful because the Ethiopian is evidently heading back southward toward home, having been in Jerusalem to celebrate a feast or participate in worship.

Second, it’s clear that this man is a eunuch. The term could be used for a person who was castrated, and therefore able to function in high places in court without risk to the royal line. Or, by this time, the term had come to function as shorthand for court official. It is impossible to determine which this man is. However, the fact that he is called a court official and the term eunuch is repeated frequently may indicate that he was an official, but was not actually castrated. However, a final determination is impossible, and unimportant in some ways.

Third, Candace is not the name of the royal queen of Ethiopia. It was likely a title that was bestowed on the mother of the king.[[17]](#footnote-18) Depending on the political situation, such a person would have held considerable clout among the court. According to Schnabel, "A queen Nawidemak ruled Nubia in the first half of the first century AD, attested as *qore*; she could be the Candace of Luke’s account.”[[18]](#footnote-19)

Fourth, this man was in charge of the queen mother’s treasury. This would have been, perhaps, the highest ranking official in her court who was not related to her or the royal family. As with all monarchs, the man in charge of the money is the most trusted of all.

“Little did Philip know his own role in their fulfillment. He probably was still wondering why in the world God had sent him to this lonely place, and perhaps he was a bit bemused by the strange spectacle of the carriage plodding in front of him with its exotic passenger and retinue of servants.”[[19]](#footnote-20)

Finally, Luke tells us that he has come to Jerusalem to worship, confirming his identity as a proselyte.

“He had probably been in Jerusalem on the occasion of one of the pilgrim festivals and was now on his way home, riding, as befitted his status, in a chariot and beguiling the journey by reading from a scroll containing part of the Jewish Scriptures.”[[20]](#footnote-21)

In **v. 28** we are informed that he is returning from worshipping and is sitting in his chariot (further proof of his exalted status) and reading the prophet Isaiah. This is noteworthy—he owned his own copy of the Old Testament, which would have been very expensive, and probably indicates a high level of devotion to the Lord. Interestingly, he’s reading Isaiah—a fact which will become clearly of God in a moment.

Again, God’s providence is in clear view—the man was reading Isaiah, of all things.

In **v. 29-31**, Philip is told to join the chariot. He has no idea why, but he is simply moved like a chess piece into the correct place. He does so, and trotting next to the carriage, overhears the eunuch reading out loud from Isaiah. He asks the most natural question, and one that is highly informative—do you understand what you are reading?

“The Ethiopian official has reached a passage whose significance Philip is eager to explain, as it would allow the traveler to understand the reference of the Isaiah text to the life and death of Jesus. While Philip’s question is not rhetorical in the strict sense, it is certainly leading, as he is not likely to encounter a wealthy foreign traveler on the road to Gaza who reads Isaiah in the light of the events of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.”[[21]](#footnote-22)

Again, the Ethiopian’s response is expected. Of course it makes sense that he would need help, and Philip, as a Greek speaking Jew, is the perfect person to communicate with him and explain the text to him. Therefore he invites Philip into the chariot to help him.

In **vv. 32-34**, Luke quotes a section of the passage that the eunuch is reading. It is from the Septuagint, and is Isa 53:7-8. Some have been concerned that the section does not contain the obvious statements of substitutionary atonement that come before (see for example, Isa 53:4-6!). However, a wider reading indicates that Luke particularly enjoys this fourth Servant Song in Isaiah and quotes it many times ( Isa. 52:13 in Acts 3:13 and Isa. 53:12 in Luke 22:37). The fact that the eunuch asks about these verses would obviously imply that he had read the whole context.[[22]](#footnote-23)

The passage that Luke quotes is interesting for understanding his emphasis. These verses relate to the righteous suffering of the Messiah. The question that had apparently come into the eunuch’s mind was, if this is the Servant of YHWH, then why is his suffering so great, and why would God allow it?[[23]](#footnote-24)

This emphasis is actually in line with the apostolic teaching throughout Acts. Peter is careful to point out that the death of the Messiah was not an accident but was ordained by God (2:32), and in fulfillment of prophecy (3:19-21). These verses are therefore in perfect alignment with this theme.

The eunuch’s question is appropriate. Is the prophet speaking of himself or of someone else? If it is himself, he’s foretelling his own suffering, but if it is someone else, then this Servant must be very special in God’s plan. This leads to the opportunity to explain Christ from the OT.

**Day Four Questions** -

1. Why is it significant that this man is likely not born Jewish, and is a eunuch? What does that say about the movement of the gospel?
2. What might be some application points for ourselves as we watch the Lord bring Philip into this man’s life so abruptly?
3. Read Isaiah 53, and spend a few minutes just meditating on the glory of the good news of the Servant of God who would come to take away the sins of His people!

**Day Five**

Having heard the question, Philip, who was a consummate evangelist, does what he has been sent to do—proclaim Christ to this man. In a case of this sort, it seems clear enough that the Lord has ordained this plan—we might call this a ‘soft-pitch’ gospel presentation. And yet, the Lord uses Philip to share Christ with this man.

In **v. 35**, we’re told that Philip begins with Isaiah 53, and from that passage, preaches Christ. The language of “opened his mouth” is meaningful - it communicates the importance of the message being spoken (see Matt 5:2).[[24]](#footnote-25)

The verb that’s translated “preach” here is “evangelize” (Gk. εὐαγγελίζω), or literally, to preach the good news. Luke is making it plain that Philip preached the good news of Jesus as the Suffering Servant and the Savior of His people to this Ethiopian.

“Philip uses this Scripture passage (γραφή) to “proclaim the good news” (εὐηγγελίσατο) about Jesus. Rather than explicitly asserting that Philip explained Isaiah’s words as fulfilled in the life and death of Jesus, Luke points out that Philip “began” (ἀρξάμενος) with the Isaiah text, explaining the life, suffering, and death of the Servant before proceeding to explain the connections with the life, suffering, and death of Jesus in terms of being “good news” (εὐαγγέλιον).”[[25]](#footnote-26)

It should come as no surprise that Philip can preach the gospel from the OT. It was, in fact, Jesus Himself who did the same in Luke 24:27ff with the disciples. Luke’s use of the same language as Jesus would indicate that Philip is simply carrying on the work that Jesus had for the disciples, and which they had then communicated to Philip and others. The implication is that Jesus continues to speak through the church as the gospel is shared.

In **v. 36**, the eunuch sees some water near the road and makes a request to be baptized. The question, of course, is how did baptism come up? It could be his previous understanding of baptism as a Jewish right, but is likely because, in the course of sharing the gospel, Philip mentions baptism.

“The eunuch responded to Philip by asking for baptism. As a Jewish proselyte or near-proselyte, the eunuch probably knew that water baptism was the expected external symbol for a Gentile’s repentance and conversion to the religion of Israel. Therefore, it would have been quite natural for him to view baptism as the appropriate expression for his commitment to Jesus, whom he had come to accept as the fulfillment of Israel’s hope and promised Messiah. Or perhaps Philip closed his exposition with an appeal similar to Peter’s at Pentecost (cf. 2:38) and his own in Samaria (cf. 8:12).”[[26]](#footnote-27)

The water there is traditionally identified as the Wadi el-Hesi, though this is by no means certain. To have running water here is also an act of God, since the region is notoriously dry. This would explain the “Look! Water!” exclamation from the eunuch.[[27]](#footnote-28)

There is almost no gospel presentation here, and that has left copyists and translators in a lurch. Apparently one such copyist felt that more should be added, and included v. 37, which is likely not original.

“Verse 37 is found in only a few Western MSS and in some texts of other ancient versions of the NT. Although it does not occur in the early and highly regarded Alexandrian textual tradition, it found its way into the so-called Received Text, which was influenced by the editions of the Greek NT edited by Erasmus, ‘who thought it had been omitted through scribal carelessness’. It is read by KJV and NKJV because of the reliance of those translations on the Received Text. On the ground of poor attestation, it is unlikely to have been part of the original text of Acts, but was presumably added because copyists felt that the Ethiopian would not have been baptized without such a confession of faith.”[[28]](#footnote-29)

The text continues in **v. 38** with the Ethiopian ordering the chariot to stop. There is no interaction in the original text, but the obvious implication is that the eunuch has trusted Christ, and is now anxious to be baptized, knowing that this is an act of obedience as a new convert to Christ.

The scene progresses slowly here, as the men step out of the chariot, walk down into the water together,[[29]](#footnote-30) and Philip baptizes him. The picture is both stark and beautiful. Here, the chief minister of finance over all the realms of the Ethiopian throne is baptized as a follower of Jesus. This is Luke’s moment of crescendo before the conversion of Paul. What comes later will shift the scene onto the Gentiles, but for this moment, the reader is left stunned that the gospel has reached across the geographical barriers, if not the religious barriers as yet.[[30]](#footnote-31)

Having accomplished his divine purpose, Philip is no longer needed. In **v. 39**, the Spirit takes him away. The verb used here is not always used of miraculous events, but this is apparently a miracle—the Spirit whisks Philip away. This must have been a jarring moment for the Ethiopian and for Philip. He had just come up out of the water, and is suddenly taken. It is not clear what exactly occurred, but certainly Philip was no longer present with the Ethiopian.

The eunuch, however, wastes little time, but instead continues on his way, rejoicing. We know nothing else of this man, though church tradition offers some dubious details.[[31]](#footnote-32) Regardless, Luke’s point is achieved—this proselyte is now converted and following Jesus, and he departs with great joy.

“With our Western interest in cause-and-effect relations and our modern understanding of historiography, we would like to know more about what exactly happened between the eunuch and Philip and more about their subsequent lives. Irenaeus writes that the eunuch became a missionary to the Ethiopians (*Contra Haereses* 3.12), though we do not know whether he only inferred that from this account or whether he had independent knowledge about it. All that Luke tells us about the eunuch is that his conversion was a significant episode in the advance of the gospel and that he “went on his way rejoicing.”[[32]](#footnote-33)

Philip, on the other hand, finds himself in Azotus in **v. 40**. This is the same city as Ashdod—the ancient Philistine capital. The location is not particularly significant, though it is back in a northerly direction away from Gaza, so probably toward Jerusalem from where Philip leaves the eunuch.[[33]](#footnote-34)

He continues preaching the gospel (same verb as in v. 35, imperfect tense indicating continuous action) and ends up in Caesarea. This is the location where we find Philip next in Acts 21:8, which Luke will come to. Apparently, Luke gathered all this information from Philip himself, having been with him there.

**Day Five Questions** -

1. What is significant in this story in terms of the flow of thought in Acts, and Luke’s point (see 1:8)?
2. Could you share the gospel from the Old Testament? Which verses/passages would you rely on?
3. What do you notice about the Ethiopian’s obedience? Why is this so important?

1. Bruce, [The Book of the Acts](https://ref.ly/logosres/nicnt65ac?ref=Bible.Ac8.5&off=77&ctx=+is+concentrated+on+~Philip%2c+another+Hell), 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The most important information comes from Justin Martyr, who was also Samaritan. “The facts about Simon are hard to disentangle from later legend. We have reliable information from Justin Martyr, himself a native of Samaria, that Simon lived there and later moved to Rome where he continued his mischief. Later, Irenaeus records how he travelled around with a certain Helen, a former slave, and said that she was an incarnation of ‘Thought’ (a Gnostic power). Hippolytus, another writer about heresies, tells a nice story about how Simon was worsted in a disputation with Peter. At last Simon said ‘that if he were buried alive he would rise again on the third day. Commanding a grave to be dug, he ordered his disciples to heap earth upon him. They did as he commanded, but he remained in it until this day. For he was not the Christ.’ What degree of truth there is in these and other stories is hard to assess.” - I. Howard Marshall, 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The term is originally Persian, and was used for sorcerers in Zoroastrian religious rites. The ‘Magi’ from the East were likely of this order. A ‘Magus’ because a magician in Latin, and has carried that same terminology through history. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. “In the context of the ancient world, the formulation is ambiguous. The expression can be read as a claim to be the highest of the supernatural powers, or as an explicit claim to divinity.1900 If Simon claimed to have divine status, we would expect Luke to challenge such a claim. He has been described as “a charismatic figure adept in the traditions of the Magoi, who exercised considerable ability, authority, and influence.”— Eckhard J. Schnabel, 408. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. “The verb used here has previously been applied to the devotion of believers to prayer and various forms of mutual ministry (1:14; 2:42, 46; 6:4)” — David G. Peterson, 284. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Some have argued that the Spirit coming here is an indication of Peter’s possession of the ‘keys’ of the kingdom-a reference to Matt 16:18-19. While Peter certainly plays a prominent role in the early chapters of Acts, the fact that he is sent by the apostles shows his submission rather than his authority. Further, the argument falls apart when one considers the events of Acts 19:1-6, and the laying on of hands by Paul. Had Peter possessed the keys, that event would be a non-sequitur. Finally, “Peter’s role at the Apostles’ Council (15:16–29) is not described as being more important than the role of Paul, Barnabas, and James, and Peter’s role in other passages in the first half of Acts focuses more on his teaching authority rather than disciplinary powers.” - Eckhard J. Schnabel, 411. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Eckhard J. Schnabel, 412. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. I. Howard Marshall, 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. David G. Peterson, 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. I. Howard Marshall, 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Eckhard J. Schnabel, 413. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Ibid, 414. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. David G. Peterson, 289. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Richard N. Longenecker, 361–362. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. David G. Peterson, 292. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. “If he was active in Samaria-Sebaste, he could have traveled via Neapolis on the route just described, or he could have traveled northwest via Deir Serur and Socho to a crossing just south of Caesarea, and then turned south traveling via Theraspis on the route which passed through Antipatris, Lydda, and Beth Guvrin. Gaza was a major center on the caravan route leading to Egypt. The city of Gaza (Γάζα; Tell Azza), the old city of the Philistines in the southern coastal plain, was destroyed by Alexander the Great in 332 BC and sacked by Alexander Jannaeus in 98 BC. It became famous as a center of trade with Arabia, which extended as far east as India. After the death of Herod I, who had controlled Gaza, the city was a semiautonomous *polis* under the control of the Roman governor in Syria. By the middle of the first century, Gaza is described as an important city with numerous pagan temples. When the new Gaza was built, the site of the old city remained “desolate” (ἔρημος; Strabo, 16.2.30); thus understood, Luke’s comment may mean “I refer to the old deserted Gaza.” - Eckhard J. Schnabel, 424. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. “Candace” (Κανδάκης) is the Greek transcription of the Meroitic word *kdke* or *ktke ʿ kd* (“woman”) + *-ke* (a suffix in titles). The title *kandake* designates “the king’s mother or the mother of the heir to the throne” (A. Lohwasser, “Kandake,” *BNP* 7:15). Bion of Soli (second century) comments that the Nubians “term the mother of a king Candace” (βασιλέως μητέρα καλοῦσι Κανδάκην; *Aethiopica* 668, Frag. 5; cf. BDAG). Many Greek-Roman authors erroneously regard the term as a personal name.” - Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Schnabel, [Acts](https://ref.ly/logosres/exegcommacts?ref=Bible.Ac8.27&off=4429&ctx=led+for+their+sons.+~A+queen+Nawidemak+ru), 425. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. John B. Polhill, 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. I. Howard Marshall, 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Eckhard J. Schnabel, 426. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. it is again not surprising that the Servant has been identified as Israel, or a part of the nation, or Israel as God intended her to be. Both of these types of view were current in Judaism. What is not clear is whether the Servant was equated with the expected ‘Son of David’ who would establish God’s final rule in Israel. — Marshall, 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. “The fact that the effects of the Servant’s suffering are not mentioned explicitly agrees with Luke’s tendency in Acts—he does not focus on the significance of Jesus’ death in terms of a vicarious sacrifice which creates the possibility of forgiveness and salvation for sinners who repent (but see 20:28). Rather, he uses Scripture here to emphasize that Jesus is God’s agent and that his suffering and death do not negate the fact that he was the promised Messiah since they were an essential part of his divinely ordained mission as expressed in Scripture.” - Ibid, 427. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. The phrase ‘to open one’s mouth’ is used when a significant or weighty utterance follows. Here, then, is the climax of the conversation as Philip takes his point of departure from the passage and declares the good news of Jesus. - I. Howard Marshall,173. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Eckhard J. Schnabel, 428. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Richard N. Longenecker, 365. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. They came to some running water—whether the Wadi el-Hesi northeast of Gaza, which is traditionally pointed out as the place, has been rightly or wrongly identified with it is totally uncertain. “See, here is water!” said the Ethiopian. “What is to prevent my being baptized?” — F. F. Bruce, 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. David G. Peterson, 296–297. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. It is putting too much on this verse to demand that this is a proof of immersion for baptism. While the language does sound that way (‘down into the water’) we should not demand too much of this. While we hold to immersion baptism, this verse is not the proof text. Nevertheless, it is a helpful note of support when discussing the various modes and why immersion seems most biblical. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. “Luke records the Ethiopian’s baptism, not Philip’s answer to his suggestion that he might be baptized. The details of the verse are vivid; four verbs in the aorist tense describe what happened. The official “ordered” (ἐκέλευσεν) the driver “to stop” (στῆναι) the carriage, which happens, allowing the occupants to step onto the road and walk to the water; then Philip and the official “went down” (κατέβησαν) into the water, both of them together (ἀμφότεροι); standing in the water, Philip immersed (ἐβάπτισεν) him.” — Eckhard J. Schnabel, 429. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.23.2: “Immediately when [Philip] had baptized him, he departed from him. For nothing else [but baptism] was wanting to him who had been already instructed by the prophets: he was not ignorant of God the Father, nor of the rules as to the [proper] manner of life, but was merely ignorant of the advent of the Son of God, which, when he had become acquainted with, in a short space of time, he went on his way rejoicing, to be the herald in Ethiopia of Christ’s advent (*praeco futurus in Aethiopia Christi adventus*).” [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Richard N. Longenecker, 366. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. The Spirit takes Philip to Azotus (Ἄζωτος), the ancient Philistine capital of Ashdod, about twenty-two miles (35 kilometers) north of Gaza, which had been sacked by the Hasmoneans but later rebuilt; the city had belonged, like the other cities in the coastal plain, to the kingdom of Herod I. Luke does not report that Philip preached the gospel in Azotus, but this seems to be implied from the following statement. Evidently Philip had become one of the early itinerant missionaries who “traveled from place to place” (continuously, note the present participle διερχόμενος) and “proclaimed the good news” (continuously, note the imperfect εὐηγγελίζετο).— Eckhard J. Schnabel, 429. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)