

Unity in Diversity

April 2, 2023

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Acts 8:26-40

Session Outline

1. The Right Place (Acts 8:26-28)
2. The Right Time (Acts 8:29-35)
3. The Right Result (Acts 8:36-40)

Theological Theme

The Lord directs His followers to reach the world with the gospel and not judge or rank people according to race, gender, culture, or anything else. We have been given the ministry of reconciliation and that applies to every person we encounter.



Leader Guide

Unity in Diversity

Introduction

Think about a time when you felt isolated or didn't fit in with the rest of the group. As a kid, was there ever a time when you were excluded from your peers for not being athletic enough, dressing differently, or just being different?

Dr. Seuss wrote a book about the subject of prejudice and exclusion that speaks into the world we live in today. *The Sneetches and Other Stories* tells the story of sneetches who are all the same except for some have stars on their bellies. The ones with stars hold themselves above the other sneetches because they are fortunate enough to have a star. An entrepreneur develops a factory that put stars on bellies, so the plain sneetches line up to get stars. In the ensuing chaos, the exalted group of sneetches changes from those with stars to those without, and the only ones who thrive are the factories who put on and take off the stars. It is a fun yet powerful story that stresses the problem of focusing on prejudices and divisions instead of recognizing the value of all people.¹

- ❓ What feelings of being left out did you deal with as a kid?
- ❓ How does the Sneetches story relate to our society today?

Session Summary


The early church grew as they learned what it meant to be Christ followers in real time. The world they lived in was very divided by cultures, races, and religion. It was heavily prejudiced in many directions even though the gospel has always been meant for every nation, tribe, and tongue. Philip demonstrated what it meant to follow the direction of the Holy Spirit and to obey His instructions.

Because God is always at work around us, we need to be in tune with what the Spirit prompts. When we are quick to obey Him, we find ourselves being used by God in ways we might never have imagined. All believers have been given the ministry of reconciliation for all people. We are to

take advantage of every opportunity that comes our way regardless of the culture, race, or religious background of those we encounter.


1. The Right Place (Acts 8:26-28)

An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip and gave him instruction. When we read about the Lord speaking to someone in the Bible in a dramatic fashion, it can be tempting to question why we don't have the same kind of experiences ourselves. We must understand that God still speaks today, even though it might be in different ways. Our job is to listen and obey.

 How confident are you that God has spoken to you this week? How does that change the way you listen to/for Him?

The instruction Philip received was to go south to the desert road toward Gaza. At the time he received this instruction, Philip was involved in great work of the Lord where he was, so it could have seemed odd that he was told to leave. He was also told to take a very difficult road for travel. Why would God want Philip to stop what he was doing for the sake of the gospel and go on a difficult or unpleasant journey? As we will discover, there was a plan working out perfectly, but only God knew the details. All Philip received was one step of the plan, and he could choose he would respond to God.

Too often we expect God to lay out His whole plan for us so that we can decide whether to obey or not. Philip could've wasted time asking questions or giving excuses but instead he simply went. He obeyed the Lord without reservation. This kind of obedience positions believers to get in on what God is doing. Because Philip responded immediately in obedience, he was able to be part of a work of God he could not have imagined.

 When has your obedience to the Lord put you in position to be part of something bigger than you had in mind?

Once on the road, Philip encountered a man from Ethiopia. There was every opportunity for Philip to ignore, overlook, or dismiss the foreigner. However, Philip was on a mission from the Lord, and he knew God had called him to that place at that time. Instead of focusing on cultural differences, Philip focused on what God was doing.


Every day, Christ followers have the choice to speak up, reach out, and overcome barriers to be part of God's plan. If we want to be used by God, we need to recognize we have to decide daily to obey God or not. We should be looking for the opportunities He is offering us in the places we go. When the Lord speaks to you, are you willing to obey even if you don't

The Ethiopian Man

Reading aloud was common, especially if the scroll was not in his native language. The eunuch was a Gentile God-fearer who had come to worship in Jerusalem. The Ethiopia of that time was not the modern country of Ethiopia but the ancient kingdom of Meroe, which covered what is now northern Sudan south of Aswan to Khartoum.

have the full plan?


Do you tend to get caught up in asking for more details instead of obeying?

 Application: What needs to change in your life to show obedience to God daily?


2. The Right Time (Acts 8:29-35)

The Lord continued to speak to Philip and told him to go and talk to the man in the chariot. Again, when God spoke, Philip responded immediately. Philip did as the Lord directed him, setting up the encounter with a man who was able to take the gospel into a completely different country. There was no delayed obedience; it was immediate and complete.

Many of us wait for the perfect circumstances before obeying God's voice. We wait for the right position at work. We wait for the right house, car, or material possessions. We wait for our family to be a certain way. It is easy to get caught up in thinking that everything must be perfect for us to do something, even to share the gospel. One of the tools the enemy uses to stop the work of the church is to lead God's people to wait instead of obeying.

 When was a time you waited for certain things to happen before you took the next step with God? What happened?


When Philip approached the Ethiopian man, he noticed the man was reading from the book of Isaiah. The time was right for Philip to step up and share the gospel, so he didn't wait for anything else to happen. He knew God was working. He knew God had directed him to that specific place. He also knew God had a plan Philip would be involved in. Think about all that might happen in the world if the body of Christ stopped waiting and started obeying the Lord.

 What do you think would be different if you and every believer started obeying God instead of waiting on the perfect moment or circumstance?

As Philip approached the Ethiopian, he heard the man reading aloud and recognized the book of Isaiah. Many believers won't bring up the gospel with people they don't know because they aren't sure how to have a Jesus-centered conversation that isn't awkward. Philip gives us an excellent example of how to be bold in our faith and how to read a situation. He observed and listened to the man, then found some common ground to ask a question. When you are attempting to begin a gospel conversation,


asking questions is a great way to get the ball rolling. Philip was bold without being antagonistic. He simply asked what the man was reading.

God directed Philip to the right place at the right time so that he could open the door for Philip to share the good news with the man. Too many people claim that they don't share about Jesus with people because they don't want to offend. Philip shows us exactly how to go about being bold in our faith while also being inviting. Read the situation. Ask a question. Listen and enter in as the Spirit prompts.


-  Application: How can you apply what you've learned from Philip's example to an opportunity you have to share the gospel?

3. The Right Result (Acts 8:36-40)

After Philip asked the Ethiopian what he was reading, the man admitted he needed help understanding what he was reading. Some lost people have never directly rejected Jesus but have never had anyone explain the gospel message. If we are not careful, we will be quick to rush to judgment about others who may desire to hear what we have to say about Jesus. Our responsibility is to go through the doors God opens for us. We are not to judge or make assumptions but to take advantage of every opportunity that comes our way.

-  Why is assuming things about others a hindrance to sharing with them? When have you experienced this personally?

The gospel message is for every person from every tongue, tribe, and nation, and it is for people of all social and economic standings. The Ethiopian was in a chariot reading aloud. He was a high official for the Queen, and it could have been intimidating to initiate a conversation with him. When Philip boldly asked the man what he was reading, it affirmed that God was at work because the foreigner invited a Jew into his chariot to learn from him. In his obedience, Philip made himself available and opened the door to conversation.

-  Why is asking questions a good way to start a conversation? What are some questions you might ask that could lead to gospel conversations?

When Philip realized the man was reading about Jesus, he started his explanation of the gospel. Philip had been preaching and teaching about Jesus and now had the opportunity to pour into this man who could take the gospel back to another region. God had not just been preparing Philip for this encounter, He was also preparing the Ethiopian for it. We can

be encouraged that when God is working in us to open doors, He is also working in other people to prepare them for what we share.

The right time and right place led to the right result. As Philip shared about Jesus and His work as the perfect sacrifice for all people, the Ethiopian was ready to respond to the gospel. He believed what he heard and accepted Christ. He heard the truth and knew it was for him. As they continued traveling, they saw a body of water and the man asked Philip why he couldn't be baptized. This is a further indication of the man's change of heart.

Imagine what it would have been like for Philip to hear that confession of faith from a man he had never seen before on an unfamiliar desert road that God told him to travel. It was a beautiful confirmation of his obedience when he was able to lower the man under the water and raise him again to walk out his new faith in Christ.



Application: How is God calling you to go to others for the sake of gospel conversations today? How will you respond?

Conclusion

God is always at work around us. As Christ followers, we need to be listening and paying attention when He speaks so that we can join what He is doing. Philip gave us an example of how to respond when the Lord prompts us to act. Obedience is the key. If you want to be involved in the work of the gospel, one of the first things to do is to practice immediate obedience instead of asking questions or waiting for more information. Even when God only gives you the first step of His plan, like Philip, you can trust that He will be with you in every step until you see the whole situation play out. When you obey the Lord, you will find yourself in the right place.

God is not only concerned with the right place but also the right time. When He instructs or prompts you to act, it is the right time to speak up about your faith. Philip found himself on a desert road, the right place, looking for the door God was going to open, the right time. When God told him to approach the man in the chariot, he evaluated the situation and asked an appropriate question to start a conversation. The fact that the Ethiopian was reading from the book of Isaiah confirmed that God was working on his heart and preparing him for the meeting with Philip. You can trust God to be at work when He calls you to obey in a certain time and place.

Philip was not concerned about race, culture, or religious background. He simply obeyed God. When Philip was faithful to preach the truth about Jesus, the Lord provided the right result. He believed in Jesus and requested to be baptized. There is no time like the present to be obedient to what God has called you to do. If you want to be part of the right result, you must be willing to be in the right place at the right time. That happens when we are living under the direction of the Holy Spirit and obedient to what God says in His Word.

- ❓ How have you been guilty of assuming things about people without really knowing them?
- ❓ Are you willing to pray for opportunities to share the gospel this week?

Prayer of Response

Thank the Lord for opening doors and giving you opportunities to be used by Him. Ask for wisdom to see the right place and courage to speak up at the right time so that you can be part of His intended right result.

Additional Resources

- *Exalting Jesus in Acts* by Tony Merida
- *Acts* by H.A. Ironside
- *Turning Everyday Conversations Into Gospel Conversations* by Jimmy Scroggins

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



DxD This Week

Call to Action

Encourage your group members to understand that the Lord is already working in the lives of those around them. It is our responsibility to follow the promptings of the Spirit to actively share the gospel of Jesus as ambassadors of reconciliation for His sake.

Questions to Guide Your Group's Discussion

1. What does this passage say?
2. What did this passage mean to its original audience?
3. What does this passage tell us about God?
4. What does this passage tell us about man?
5. What does this passage demand of me?
6. How does this passage change the way I relate to people? (*How can you use this information this week at work or with friends and neighbors?*)
7. How does this passage prompt me to pray to God?

*Adapted from Seven Arrows by Matt Rogers pastor of The Church at Cherrydale, Greenville, SC

For Next Week

Session Title

- The Beginning

Main Passages

- Acts 9:1-12

Session Outline

1. The Backstory (Acts 9:1-2)
2. Meeting Jesus (Acts 9:3-6)
3. Transformation and Healing (Acts 9:7-12)

Memorize

Philip proceeded to tell him the good news about Jesus, beginning with that Scripture. - Acts 8:35

Historical Context of Acts

Purpose

The book of Acts emphasizes the work of God through the Holy Spirit in the lives of people who devoted themselves to Jesus Christ, especially Paul as he led the Gentile missionary endeavor. It is no exaggeration to say that the Christian church was built through the dynamic power of the Spirit working through chosen vessels. Another important concept is the radial spread of the gospel from Jews to Gentiles, from Jerusalem to Judea, from Samaria and on to the rest of the world (1:8). Thus Christianity transformed from being a sect within Judaism to a world religion that eventually gained acceptance everywhere, even in the heart of the pagan Roman Empire: Rome itself.

Author

The book of Acts is formally anonymous. The traditional view is that the author was the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke—Luke the physician and traveling companion of Paul (Col 4:14; 2Tm 4:11; Phm 24). As early as the second century AD, church leaders such as Irenaeus wrote that Luke was the author of Acts. Irenaeus based his view on the “we” passages in Acts, five sections where the author changes from the third person (“he/she” and “they”) to first-person plural (“we”) as he narrates the action (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–29; 28:1–16). Irenaeus and many scholars since his time have interpreted these passages to mean that the author of Acts was one of the eyewitness companions of Paul. Luke fits this description better than any other candidate, especially given the similar themes between the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

Setting

The date of composition of the book of Acts is to a large extent directly tied to the issue of authorship. A number of scholars have argued that Acts should be dated to the early 60s (at the time of Paul’s imprisonment). Acts closes with Paul still in prison in Rome (28:30–31). Although it is possible that Luke wrote at a later date, a time when Paul had been released, it is more plausible to think that he completed this book while Paul was still in prison. Otherwise he would have ended the book by telling about Paul’s release.

Special Features

The book of Acts provides a glimpse into the first three decades of the early church (ca AD 30–63) as it spread and multiplied after the ascension of Jesus Christ. It is not a detailed or comprehensive history. Rather, it focuses on the role played by apostles such as Peter, who ministered primarily to Jews, and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

Extended Commentary

Acts 8:26-40

8:26. The southernmost of the five chief Philistine cities, Gaza lay about fifty miles southwest of Jerusalem. It was destroyed about 98 BC and then later rebuilt by Pompey. Philip, sent by an angel, would soon enter a new phase of ministry.

Surely the place and timing seemed inappropriate. Why would God move him from an area-wide evangelistic campaign just getting underway in Samaria, down to this lonely desert road? Luke wants us to see what the early Christians were really like. Contrast Philip with Jonah. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, this lay evangelist went wherever God sent. Philip was on his way to the end of the Palestinian world of that time. South and west of Gaza the desert trailed off across Sinai into Egypt. There was nothing.

8:27–28. Philip was in God’s plan again and functioning through the Spirit. Gaza was not the target at all, but rather an Ethiopian eunuch, treasurer to the queen, on his way home from temple worship, presumably in an ox-drawn chariot. Both eunuch and Candace are probably government titles. In that case the man probably was, like Nicolas in 6:5, a proselyte or full convert to Judaism. This would mean he was a Gentile who had embraced the Jewish religion and Scriptures which he now read. Some commentators believe that because Luke uses both eunuch and the title of treasurer, that the two terms mean different things: physical castration and political office. If that is the case, the Ethiopian could not have been a full participant in temple worship (Deut. 23:1) though he was certainly a full participant in God’s promise (Luke 14:12–14).

8:29. How easy we find it to picture Philip plodding southward on that desert road, casually observing the common sight of a foreign visitor returning from Jerusalem and, in the custom of the day, reading aloud, this time from Isaiah 53. What might the evangelist have been thinking? Perhaps mixed emotions—the loneliness of the place, possibly regret at leaving the thriving effort in Samaria, and even a wish that this stranger could really understand the Messiah of whom the prophet had written.

Silent musings appealed neither to Philip nor Luke. This is an action story, and since an ox-drawn vehicle hardly moved at blazing speed, the Spirit can easily say to Philip, “Catch that chariot!”

8:30–31. Philip’s question, doubtless placed in his mind by the Holy Spirit, illustrates a basic theme in Luke and Acts—how to find Jesus in the Old Testament. Luke had already written to Theophilus that Jesus is the key to understanding that ancient Scripture (Luke 24:45).

This problem has never disappeared. People caught up in religion of various kinds not only fail to understand the intricacies of their chosen religion, but make no connection between that dogma and God’s genuine revelation through the Bible. Has there ever been a better invitation to proclaim the gospel than this? He invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

8:32–33. Imagine the exhilaration in Philip’s heart as he realized why the Spirit had sent him to the desert. Here is a good man in need of grace, a serious searcher whose religion had not satisfied his quest for reality. God had prepared not only his heart but his mind. What better Old Testament text from which to preach Jesus than Isaiah

53:7–8. Indeed, it is so dramatic, Luke spells out the verses. This common messianic text in Judaism was hardly interpreted by the rabbis in light of God’s suffering servant, an unthinkable concept in first-century Jewish theology.

Jesus had said repeatedly he had not come to wrest power from the Romans and build an earthly kingdom. “The Son of Man had not come to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45) and even to die. This Christian interpretation of Isaiah Philip knew well. He was quite prepared to explain Jesus from this venerable text.

8:34–35. 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 of the Savior. Could Philip have begun somewhere in Deuteronomy or Job and explained the new covenant gospel to this man? Quite probably. God made it much easier. Jesus had repeatedly quoted portions of Isaiah 53 as being fulfilled in his death (Matt. 8:17; John 12:38; Luke 22:37), and the disciples certainly passed that information on to the Christians in the early church. With joy Philip explained, and with joy Luke recorded this good man hearing for the first time the good news about Jesus.

Can we conceive of a modern parallel to this incident? Picture yourself waiting in the departure lounge of an airport. A stranger sitting next to you has an open Bible on his lap. He may not be reading aloud, but his finger moves along the lines as he ponders the words. You glance over and discover he’s in John 3 rapidly approaching verse 16. God prompts you to speak, and you say something like, “How unusual to find someone reading a Bible in an airport; isn’t that third chapter wonderful?” The stranger turns to you and replies, “It is interesting; but I’m stumped on this sixteenth verse. What exactly does it mean to believe in Jesus and have eternal life?” Could you handle that situation without a seminary degree? Any serious Christian would offer a prayer of thanks and plunge in with a simple explanation of the gospel.

8:36–37. We cannot know whether Philip closed his explanation of the gospel with a mention of baptism as he had heard Peter do earlier (2:38). Verse 12 indicates Philip clearly understood that baptism follows faith so he may have done that. Or, as a Jewish proselyte, the eunuch may have understood that when one places faith in God, water baptism symbolizes that internal act.

8:38. Luke seems to take pains to talk about going down into the water and coming up out of the water. Since the word baptizo always carries the idea of total immersion, we must assume that is what happened here. The focus of this passage is not baptism but the conversion of a black, non-Jewish official to Christ.

8:39–40. Even as they emerged from the water, a miracle occurred as the Spirit took Philip away. He disappeared immediately from the eunuch’s vision. The word here is herpasen, a forceful and sudden action with no resistance. In this chapter only the Holy Spirit is more active than Philip. Leaving a rejoicing new Christian behind, Philip showed up at Azotus and continued evangelizing in all the towns as he made his way northward to Caesarea, where he apparently put down roots (Acts 21:8–9).

Luke’s Gospel speaks often of joy (twenty-two times compared to thirteen in Matthew and three in Mark). We should not be surprised therefore that he emphasized a rejoicing treasurer on his way back to Ethiopia. Luke is carefully detailing the spread of the gospel. This double-barreled record of Philip’s ministry is a potent part of Luke’s gospel story. First, the gospel to the hated Samaritans, a half-breed race with distorted theology in the eyes of all good Palestinian Jews. Now, a Gentile secular official from a foreign land will take Jesus home with him. The church of Jesus Christ began sending missionaries to Africa almost two thousand years ago. The first was an African, a high government official, possibly a man with physical limitations.

References

1. Dr. Suess, *The Sneetches and Other Stories* (HarperCollins Publishers Children's Books, 2017).
2. Kenneth O. Gangel, *Acts*, vol. 5, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 125-128.

Author Bio

Tony Merida (Exalting Jesus in Acts)

Tony Merida is lead pastor of Imago Dei Church in Raleigh, NC, and associate professor of preaching at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, NC.

H.A. Ironside (Acts)

Henry (Harry) Allan Ironside (1876-1951) was an American Bible teacher, pastor, and author. Authored more than 60 volumes as well as many pamphlets and articles on Bible subjects. For 18 of his 50 years of ministry, he was pastor of the Moody Memorial Church in Chicago. He is buried in Purewa Cemetery, Auckland, New Zealand.

Jimmy Scroggins (Turning Everyday Conversations Into Gospel Conversations)

Jimmy Scroggins serves as the Lead Pastor of Family Church in West Palm Beach, FL. Jimmy is married to Kristin and they are blessed with eight children – James, Daniel, Jeremiah, Isaac, Stephen, Anna Kate, Mary Claire and Caleb. Jimmy earned his PhD from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY. Jimmy is dedicated to building families in South Florida through a network of neighborhood churches. His vision is to see each Family Church campus on mission to help people in their community discover and pursue God's design. The Family Church Network has a vision to plant 100 churches in South Florida.

Dr. Suess (The Sneetches and Other Stories)

Theodor Seuss Geisel—aka Dr. Seuss—is one of the most beloved children's book authors of all time. From *The Cat in the Hat* to *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*, his iconic characters, stories, and art style have been a lasting influence on generations of children and adults. The books he wrote and illustrated under the name Dr. Seuss (and others that he wrote but did not illustrate, including some under the pseudonyms Theo. LeSieg and Rosetta Stone) have been translated into 45 languages. Hundreds of millions of copies have found their way into homes and hearts around the world. Dr. Seuss's long list of awards includes Caldecott Honors, the Pulitzer Prize, and eight honorary doctorates. Works based on his original stories have won three Oscars, three Emmys, three Grammys, and a Peabody.

Kenneth Gangel (Acts)

Dr. Kenneth O. Gangel (1935-2009): A prolific author and an experienced leader has been influential in the field of Christian education for over forty years. He's written numerous articles and over 50 books, while pastoring, teaching, raising a family and leading schools. His impact reaches around the world through students, co-authored books, and working with leaders of churches and schools.