

SEEK AND YOU WILL FIND ACTS 8:26-39

Sometimes I lie in bed at night and think about all the people with whom I wanted to connect that day but didn't. I think about the person who desperately needs encouragement, the guy who's been asking to get together, the couple in crisis, the widow who's grieving, the newcomer who's falling through the cracks. I lament that yet another day has gone by without me contacting them.

Sometimes I lie there feeling guilty or anxious. I think, "I wish I wasn't spread so thin. I wish I had more hours in the day. Better yet, I wish I had a clone." And then I try to console myself with the thought, "Well, there's only so much one person can do." Yet that doesn't provide much comfort because I really care about these people and I *want* to connect.

Isn't it wonderful to know that Jesus never gets spread too thin? Isn't it terrific that the statement, "There's only so much one person can do!" does *not* apply to Him? He is never too busy or never too pre-occupied that He cannot and will not give us His undivided attention. He never gets sidetracked, He is never delayed, and He never procrastinates. He is never detached or aloof. He never leaves us or forsakes us. He knows exactly what is going on in our lives at all times, and He is always there for us—ready to comfort, encourage, or just connect.

And talk about someone who can multi-task? We are told in Colossians that Jesus sustains the universe. That means He oversees the moment-by-moment operation of several billion galaxies with hundreds of billions of stars and planets in each one. Yet we are also told that He is so personal He knows the number of hairs on our heads (Matt.10:30). We are also told in Scripture that when we draw near to Him, He draws near to us (James 4:8), and that anyone who reaches out for Him *will* find Him (Acts 17:27).

The passage that we are going to look at this morning is a story about just how intensely personal our Savior is. Last week, we saw the Spirit of God extend His grace to an entire people group—the Samaritans. Through a disciple named Philip, He revealed that Jesus was their Messiah, too, that Jesus had died for their sins as well, and that Jesus would give them eternal life if they put their faith in Him. We are told that the work of the Spirit was so powerful and pervasive that a palpable joy settled over the entire region.

We might classify what happened in Samaria as *mass evangelism*—hundreds, perhaps thousands of people coming to faith at nearly the same time. But beginning in verse 26 we see the Holy Spirit going after one individual in a very remote place. Look at **verse 26**. *²⁶Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place.*

Philip had been healing diseases, casting out demons, and preaching to large crowds of people. Suddenly, the Lord tells him to leave all that excitement and go to a lonely desert road in the middle of nowhere. Put yourself in Philip's shoes for a moment. Wouldn't you be tempted to question whether this was *really* a word from God? I mean, Philip was successfully ministering to the masses! People were hanging on to every word he said and getting saved right and left. The fields were ripe for harvest in Samaria, and Philip was driving the combine!

It doesn't make much sense to us. We think, "Don't pull your best and brightest off the big job and send him to a little job. Leave *him* where he is to do more of what he's doing and send someone else."

But that is not how God thinks, and if Philip had a problem with God's rationale it certainly isn't evident, because we are told that when he got these instructions, **verse 27**,

27 He rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship²⁸ and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

Incidentally, this Ethiopia is not the same as modern day Ethiopia on the horn of Africa. Known as Cush in the Old Testament, it was the region that is today southern Egypt and northern Sudan. In ancient literature Ethiopia was called “the end of the earth.” And so, once again, Philip’s pioneering ministry is another fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy in Acts 1:8 that His disciples would be His witnesses “in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

The man in the story was the Secretary of the Treasury for the Candace Dynasty. Because of his position, he traveled in a caravan in a chariot with an impressive entourage, most likely consisting of dozens of attendants and guards. He is identified as a eunuch, but there is disagreement among scholars as to whether he was literally a eunuch since the word was also used of trusted workers of a royal court.

More importantly, he was a God seeker. He had just completed a thousand-mile religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem, which tells us that he was either a God-fearing Gentile or a proselyte to Judaism. In other words, he worshiped Yahweh and he was familiar with the Temple (which castrated eunuchs were prohibited from entering, c.f. Deut. 23:1). Furthermore, he was acquainted with the Scriptures. The fact that he possessed his own copy of the Scriptures, which was exceptionally rare, was proof that he took God very seriously.

Evidently the eunuch was spiritually hungry, for as he journeyed down the Gaza Road he was reading and puzzling over the Book of Isaiah. There is no way of knowing for sure, but I suspect that while he was in Jerusalem he had heard about Jesus and the Christian movement, since it was the talk of the town and, especially, the talk of the Temple.

I wouldn’t be surprised if he had heard a few fiery sermons from members of the Sanhedrin railing against the apostles and other followers of Jesus. It’s possible he had seen Peter or heard him preach. I suspect he had heard about Stephen who had recently been stoned to death for testifying about Jesus. It’s likely he would have known about the great wave of persecution that had broken out against Christians. Maybe on his way back to Ethiopia he was trying to make sense of it all. Perhaps he wanted to know who Jesus really was and why He was so controversial.

So, he’s reading Isaiah. **Verse 29**, *29 And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.”*

Imagine Philip’s surprise when the Spirit told him to go over and join the chariot, for a couple of reasons. First, Philip sees this affluent, official caravan from a foreign country, and he’s told to approach the VIP in the group. Secondly, he isn’t told *why* he’s supposed to approach the chariot, nor is he told what to do or say when he gets there. If I were Philip, I think I would have requested more information. I would have said, “Lord, can you tell me what’s going on? Would you fill me in so I can at least know how to respond when they pull out their swords and ask why I’m making a beeline for the VIP?”

But Philip does not ask. He simply obeyed. In fact, **verse 30**. *30 Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?”*

That demonstrates a tremendous amount of faith. Philip trusted the Spirit enough to know that if the Spirit told him to do something He would protect him and provide the information he needed when he needed it. Philip’s responsibility was to obey and keep his spiritual antennae tuned for whatever was to happen next. In this case, he stood by the chariot and heard the eunuch reading Isaiah 53.

Philip recognized the passage immediately because Isaiah 53 was a favorite text of the early church, and there is perhaps no better place in the Old Testament from which to understand and explain Jesus' suffering and death. So, it was by God's design that the eunuch was reading this particular passage and that he brought Philip to his side at this particular moment.

Philip hears him reading and then asks, *"Do you understand what you are reading?"* And the eunuch replies, **verses 31-33.** ³¹ *"How can I, unless someone guides me?"* And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² *Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:*

*"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so He opens not His mouth.*

³³ *In His humiliation justice was denied Him.
Who can describe His generation?
For His life is taken away from the earth."*

This passage, on the Suffering Servant, was and is very familiar to Jews, which is puzzling to Christians who think that any Jew ought to be able to read it and see the obvious depiction of our Lord Jesus. So why don't they?

Because the rabbis of that day (and still today) interpret the Suffering Servant as the *nation* of Israel, not the Messiah. In the first century the idea of a suffering Messiah was unheard of and considered unthinkable in Jewish circles (Fernando, 284).

It seems evident that the Ethiopian eunuch had not thought about this passage in relation to the Messiah either. Until now. Look at **verses 34-35.** ³⁴ *And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?"* ³⁵ *Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.*

We do not know how long this conversation lasted, but we know that they discussed more than just Isaiah 53. We are told that Philip *began* with that Scripture, implying that he used other Scriptures as well to tell the whole story about Jesus. Notice, he wasn't merely sharing his own thoughts and opinions about Jesus. His assertions were anchored in Scripture, which gave those assertions validity. Philip was showing the eunuch from Scripture how God had revealed His plan of salvation long before Jesus came, and how it was fulfilled in Jesus.

By the way, in order to do this, Philip had to know the Scriptures well enough to connect the dots—to tie together several prophetic passages and make a comprehensive presentation of the gospel. I believe it is imperative that we are able to do the same.

Verse 36-38. ³⁶ *And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?"* ³⁸ *And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.*

Notice, it is the Ethiopian who suggests baptism when they come to some water. Philip may have discussed baptism with him, or he may have already known about it since baptism was the initiatory rite for Gentiles who converted to Judaism (Fernando, 284). Regardless, the Ethiopian understood that being baptized was a rite that necessarily followed conversion to Christ.

It raises a question: what is the significance of baptism? After Jesus died and then rose from the dead, He commanded His disciples to make other disciples and *baptize* them in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:20). For the early church,

baptism was, from day one, the formal, public declaration that one was identifying oneself with Jesus Christ—that one was participating in His death and resurrection by dying to one's old self and becoming a new creature, and that one's complete and undivided allegiance would be His. Coming out of the water symbolized a new birth.

In the first century the word *baptism*, in secular literature, was used to describe a process of dying cloth. That cloth was “baptized” into a vat of dye and would permanently take on the color of that dye into which it was immersed.

Christian baptism symbolizes that we have permanently taken on the “color” of Christ. His nature, His righteousness, His identity are now ours. Our old nature has died and been buried with Christ, we have been raised to a new life in Christ, we have been cleansed by Christ, we have been joined to Christ, we have been seated with Christ in the heavenly realms. Everything about us has to do with Christ. Baptism is a way of publicly exclaiming, “I am not my own, I am Christ's. Jesus *is* my life.”

In the New Testament when someone was converted to Christ, there is no record of them raising their hand or filling out a card or walking down an aisle or praying a prayer. They were baptized. *Baptism* was the way people *expressed* their commitment to Christ.

Let me illustrate: When people decide to get married, they don't just move in together; they have a wedding. Few would deny the importance of that public ceremony. The couple's commitment to love one another may have been made in private, but the public ceremony solemnizes and publicizes the nature of the commitment.

Baptism is as important to our commitment to Christ as a wedding is to a marriage.

We worked with Hindus in Africa. We knew several Hindus that had been converted to Christ. Some of them made their “decision” to follow Jesus several months before they were actually baptized. They went to church, Bible studies, prayer meetings, etc., and their Hindu families did not seem to be particularly bothered or concerned by what they perceived as an interest in Christianity. But the moment they were baptized, many of those believers were completely disowned and ostracized by their families. In other words, it was baptism that proved to them how serious they really were.

That formal commitment to Christ is essential. Just as a wedding has an intrinsically powerful quality to it, so does baptism. And while I want to make it perfectly clear that baptism does *not* save you—you are saved by grace through faith—I want to emphasize that in Scripture baptism is rarely ever separated from saving faith.

That's because, again, baptism is an outward symbol of an inward reality. Baptism is a means by which our whole body gets into the act of commitment (Stafford, p. 123-4). And so, it is not surprising that the Bible talks about baptism in the same sentence as it talks about faith, and that it was most often performed the very day one made a profession of faith. People were saved, and then they got wet.

It was also a *public* declaration. The person who is baptized is saying to everyone present, “My faith is not a private matter. I want to declare to those who know me that I belong to Jesus.” That's what the Ethiopian eunuch was doing. Afterward, **verse 39**. ³⁹ *When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.*

As we close this morning, I want to remind you of the main idea of this passage. The Ethiopian eunuch was seeking the Lord, all by himself, out in the middle of nowhere. This story illustrates that the Lord ensures that those who seek Him will find Him. And this is true of anybody who seeks him. Not just those who grow up in a Christian home or a nation like ours; not just those who have exposure to the gospel. It is true of anyone because every individual is precious to God. So precious is every individual to God that He will go to

extraordinary lengths to give him/her an opportunity to be saved. He steered Philip away from the crowds and took him to a remote region, told him to do something risky, timing it perfectly, because he wanted to give this Ethiopian new life.

If you don't know Jesus yet, if you are not yet convinced that He is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that He died on the cross for your sins in order to forgive you and give you eternal life, then ask Him to reveal Himself to you. He will.

If you are a follower of Jesus but you have never publicized your commitment to Him by being baptized, may I encourage you to do so soon?

Those Who Seek Will Find

Acts 8:26-39

Main Idea: *The Lord ensures that those who seek Him will find Him.*

The Unusual Assignment (26)

The Surprising Seeker (27-28)
The Secretary of the Treasury

A God-Fearing foreigner

A Divinely Orchestrated Encounter (29-38)
“Strange” instructions (29)

Two strangers engage (30-35)
Philip’s antennae (30a)

Philip’s inquiry (30b)

The eunuch’s invitation (31)

A messianic passage (32-34)

All about Jesus (35)

The public confession (36-38)

A Dramatic Conclusion (39-40)
A servant is snatched away

A “new creature” is filled with joy

Application Questions

Acts 8:26-40

Does the Lord make himself known to every person who sincerely seeks him? Is this also true of people in unreached nations? How might this explain what is happening in Iran or Saudi Arabia today with the rapidly growing church?

Can you think of some ways in which God is currently making himself known to people who are seeking him?

Do you think baptism for a follower of Jesus is optional (that a Christ-follower can decide for him/herself whether or not to be baptized)? Why or why not? Support your answer from Scripture, not merely from your theological reasoning.

Is there anything “preventing” you from being baptized?