

Commentary

26 The angel of the Lord appears in the Old Testament a lot. He is normally identified with Christ, but in v29 it seems that this is the Holy Spirit. It's not clear how Philip knew he was being directed. It might have been a specific voice in his ear or it could have been an awareness that the Spirit wants us to reach out with the gospel.

The gospel has just gone out to the district of Samaria for the first time. In v25 we see Philip and others leaving the city of Samaria and heading south towards Jerusalem. This word from God calls Philip beyond Jerusalem, further south towards Gaza. Yet again, God wants the gospel to go where it isn't known.

27-28 We learn a lot about this man in these two verses. Firstly, he's an important official from Ethiopia, something similar to a Chancellor of the Exchequer. He is not Jewish by birth. But he is a God-fearer, having been to Jerusalem to worship.

But that experience in Jerusalem would have been a hard one. The most notable thing we learn about this man is that he was a eunuch. Deut 23:1 says, 'No one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD.' So he was excluded from the people, and not allowed into the temple.

Eunuchs were common in those days outside Israel, often holding high offices. One of the reasons was that a eunuch would not be considered a threat to the throne. Castration would happen before puberty which made eunuchs physically weaker, beardless, though taller than average. They would have no children to produce heirs to the throne. Lack of sexual appetite was thought to make them more focused on their job. Socially, but most of all spiritually, this man was an outsider.

In this Samaritan portion of Acts, this eunuch is a perfect example of someone in that region. He's a 'halfway person'; a Gentile with interest in Jewish things, an important outsider, not quite Jerusalem, not quite ends of the earth.

29-30 Once again, the Spirit directs Philip towards the eunuch. Having come near, he can hear what that the man is reading aloud from Isaiah. He then takes the initiative and asks a leading question. God sets the encounter up and Philip takes the opportunity.

31 Having been turned away from the temple, the eunuch leaves Jerusalem with big questions still ringing in his ears. Unlike many people, he realises that he needs someone else to help him understand the Bible. As Romans 10:13-15 points out, people won't call on the name of the Lord unless someone speaks to them. The need here is for biblical evangelism; taking people to the Bible to show them the gospel. Do we recognise our need for the Bible to be explained? Do we see our role in providing that for non-Christians?

32-34 The eunuch's big issue is about the identity of the suffering servant. There was someone who would suffer and die unjustly, but who? With the Samaritan obsession with power and this man's experience of suffering, that would have been a pressing issue.

35 Philip did the best thing evangelistically - he 'opened his mouth'! He actually answered the question. And wouldn't it have been great to be there for that! v35 tells us that he showed the identity of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 was Jesus. In fact, we find that from this very section of Scripture, he was able to get the good news about Jesus. The whole Bible is about that good news about Jesus!

From that passage, we find out about a man of sorrows who knew what it was like to be rejected by men. He was innocent and yet it was the LORD's will to crush him. Why? For *our* sins, for *our* healing. Jesus came alongside the sinners and the sorrowful in order to take their punishment for them and bring them peace. The song continues in Isaiah 56:3-5 telling the foreigners and the eunuchs (this man!) that they will be part of the people and that they will receive an inheritance which is 'better than sons and daughters'. For this man who could never have children and would always be an outcast, this was a wonderful promise. And for us too!

36-38 The call from Philip would have been, as elsewhere, to repent and be baptised, as shown by the eunuch's response. Again conversion and baptism are put close together (cf 2:28; 8:12). Nothing is stopping this outsider becoming fully a part of the people of God. The provision of water in the desert (v26b) shows God's hand at work. v37 isn't there because the earliest manuscripts don't have it.

39-40 The eunuch is changed forever and goes on his way rejoicing. Many credit him with bringing the gospel to Ethiopia himself. Philip's departure doesn't need to be as spooky as it might seem! It could be that God 'carried' him away just as He carried him last time - by telling him to go and Philip obeying. Seeing him no more might just be a reference to the fact that this was a one-off chat with no follow-up!

Perhaps one reason it is phrased ambiguously is to remind us of the encounter in Luke 24 where Jesus met with two disciples as they also walked away from Jerusalem, this time to Emmaus. They too struggled with how the Christ could have suffered and died. Luke 24:27 says, 'And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.' Then he too disappeared! In *this* story with the eunuch, Luke is pointing out that Jesus is still opening people's minds to understand that the whole Bible points to Him, but He does it now through his followers.

Philip heads north-west to Azotus and then north up the coast to Caesarea, surprise surprise, preaching the gospel again. God the evangelist will work in the big crowds but also in the individuals, taking the good news about Jesus to wherever and whoever has not heard it and believed.

Group Study Outline

Acts 8:26-40 Theme Sentence

God is the great evangelist who seeks the individual outsider through the good news about the suffering servant Jesus.

Launching Question

Who is the greatest evangelist you know? What makes them so good?

God is the evangelist! We will also learn stuff about how we can be better evangelists, but let's look at God the evangelist at work in one man's life.

READ Acts 8:26-40

What might be significant about the persecution in 8:1? (see 1:8 & 8:4)

Who is behind the encounter? (see 26, 29, 39)

What might this tell us?

What do we know about the man Philip met?

What would his relationship with God and God's people have been like?

(see Deut 23:1)

Are there people who are outsiders/feel outsiders like this today?

What is the man's issue?

Philip used this portion of Isaiah 53 to tell him the good news about Jesus.

How might he have got from that bit of the Bible to the gospel?

Looking up Isaiah 53 might make this easier!

What do we learn about Jesus from this?

How would this be 'good news' to a man like this?

What do we learn about the Bible from this?

How does the man respond to the gospel?

Is anything about this strange or surprising?

What happened with Philip next? What might this be telling us?

Thinking it through

Do we recognise these divine appointments in our lives?

Are we willing to take them?

If someone had a question about the Bible, what can we learn from this passage about how we might answer them?

It's not every day that someone is reading Isaiah and asks us for help. Is there anything about this encounter that can still encourage us in our evangelism?

Acts 8:26-40



Introduction to the main theme

As we've seen before, Acts is the story of the unstoppable gospel as Jesus spreads out the good news from Jerusalem to Judea & Samaria and then to the ends of the earth. This spread is both geographic *and* religious, since the Samaritans were semi-Jews and those at the ends of the earth were outright Gentile pagans.

Something big has happened in chapter 8. Following the arrest and execution of Stephen, 8:1 records that a big persecution began against the church. This forced the Christians to scatter out of Jerusalem and into Judea & Samaria. As you might expect by now, v4 tells us that the gospel went with them. The first Samaritans become believers and, following the apostolic all-clear, received the Holy Spirit, much like the Jews did at Pentecost. (A similar delay between conversion & receiving the Spirit occurs only once more when the first Gentiles come to faith, each time reinforcing the spread of the gospel to the next stage.)

One of the problems in Samaria was an obsession with power. Simon the Magician can do amazing things and sees the Holy Spirit as something he'd like to buy for his own power; which he is rebuked for. The gospel was never about power, but centres on a suffering Christ, dying for the unworthy. Amongst all the crowds, Luke now zooms in on one individual, an outsider who is wrestling with the idea of a suffering servant in Isaiah. God is in control of the big scale movements of the kingdom into new territory *and* the small scale of one man getting to grips with his Bible.

[NB]

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Application

- Jesus makes it possible for outsiders to become one of God's people. Whoever you are, repent and believe this great news!
- God is sovereign in evangelism, so recognise and then take the opportunities He provides.
- The whole Bible points to the good news about Jesus. Understand it that way and use it to bring others to know Jesus.