

Preparing to Reach Prepared Hearts (Acts 8:26-40)

Our natural tendencies cannot be trusted with the mission of being witnesses for Jesus. Left to do what we are inclined to do there are places we will not go – even if they need to hear the message. Led by our own biases, prejudices, and predispositions there are some people that we will not share the gospel with; we have no natural affection for them. And we are able to rationalize our reluctance, our rebellion, our refusal to go to certain people with the gospel because of “information” we have received that proves it will not be worthwhile. But where did we get that information?

I find that people often get their view of other people groups from their own people group. They have a homogenous membrane around themselves of people like themselves. Nothing about the world gets to them except through that special group of people that look like them, vote like them, listen to music like them, or live in neighborhoods like them. This was my world.

I grew up in a black neighborhood. If there were white or Hispanic people in the neighborhood I did not know where they were. I went to a black church; there were no Asians, no Caucasians, no Hispanics, no American Indians, no east Indians, and no middle easterners. Just black folk. I went to an elementary school that was mostly black, a middle school that was mostly black, and a high school that was mostly black. And, if it had been up to my parents, I would have attended a college that was... you guessed... traditionally black. But, by this time in my life I knew that I was black. That fact did not need to be reinforced. I was against going to a historically black school because I was done learning about other people through my homogenous membrane. It was time to learn about other people directly.

It was during my time in a university that formerly had forbidden the enrollment of black students, that I discovered the rich tapestry of humanity. I had roommates that were Anglo, Asian, and black. And I developed friendships with people from all over the world. It was my time in college that introduced me to an idea that is going to be huge in heaven - *diversity*. It is going to be such a big part of where we are going that Jesus gives us a glimpse of what lies ahead. In a vision that is given to the apostle John we have the following:

⁹ After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation *belongs* to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:9-10, NKJV)

Can you see them? It is not a homogenous group of people standing before the throne. They are *all* the nations (ethnos – people groups). Within the nations they are all the tribes, peoples, and tongues. That is a lot diversity. Here is the question. Between now and then am I working for or against what God is trying to do? Am I being used by God to bring about this vision of diversity or am I foolishly fighting against it? The answer to these questions has everything to do with my response to the leading of Jesus. He is risen and directing the affairs of His people by His Spirit. His direction is aimed at bringing about what He revealed to John. Let us look at how Jesus is leading.

Prompting the Preacher (Acts 8:26-29)

²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, “Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is desert. ²⁷ So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go near and overtake this chariot.”

There is a gravitas in the reading of **angel of the Lord** here. The same phrase (“ἄγγελος δὲ κυρίου”) is used in the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Old Testament) when referring to the special appearing of God Himself to human beings in a form called the Angel of the Lord.

The “angel” seen by Moses (v. 30) was the special *mal' ak Yahweh* (Ex. 3:2), i.e., Yahweh himself in his manifestation to human beings. In Ex. 3 he is variously called “the angel of Yahweh” (v. 2), “God” (v. 4), and “Yahweh” (v. 7); so in Stephen’s narrative the angel speaks with the voice of the Lord (v. 31), claims to be God (v. 32), and is called “the Lord” (v. 33).

Bruce, F. F. (1988). *The Book of the Acts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Luke intimates, with his use of **an angel of the Lord**, that the messenger, and thus the message, carry unusual authority. If this is true, *why*? That is, what warrants the special delivery of directions by a heavenly messenger. The rest of the passage is hereby made pregnant with mystery and the exceptional expectations that come with Heaven's special handling of this matter.

And there is an urgency in the curious command to **arise and go**; the word arise is used like this when the only acceptable response is immediate obedience.⁴⁰ Luke makes a point of telling his reader that the place to which Philip the Evangelist is being sent is not a place where people live - it is deserted or abandoned (αὕτη ἐστὶν ἔρημος). The angel has asked Philip to immediately get up and travel over 70 miles to an uninhabited region in the middle of nowhere. I read this passage and cannot help but wonder if Philip, getting a few things together for the journey, was thinking "This don't make no sense! Ministry is happening here among the Samaritans. People have received the message and are following Jesus. What in the world could be so important in a deserted region that it would require the dispatch of an experienced and effective evangelist to handle it?" As the reader will soon see, *timing is everything*.

⁴⁰ When the command to arise (ἀνίστημι) is seen in the Old Testament or the gospels the person speaking expects a right-now response. The person on the receiving end of the imperative is supposed to immediately start doing what was commanded (Genesis 9:15; 27:43; 31:13; Matthew 2:13-14; 20-21; 9:5-7; Mark 5:41-42; Luke 6:8; 7:14-15; John 14:31).

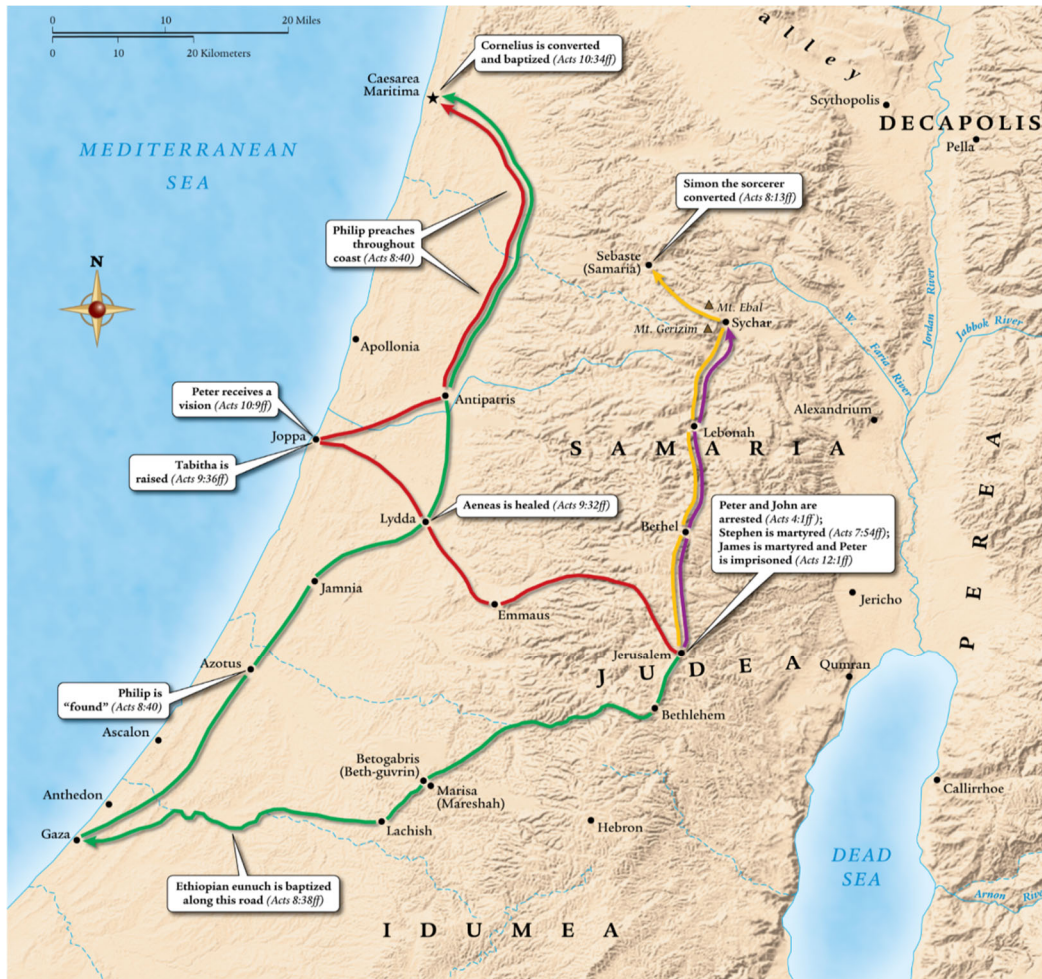


Figure 6: Prior to being called to the desert region along the road to Gaza the evangelist was serving the Lord in Samaria (Acts 8:4-8).

Many excuse themselves from obedience to the call and command to preach the word based on the seemingly nonsensical nature of what is being asked. In my time as a pastor I have been on the receiving end of having an accomplished preacher turn down an invitation to bring the word of God to the church. In the words of so-and-so the attendance was not high enough to warrant his involvement.

Philip, being a man entirely surrendered to the will of God, responds with *immediate obedience* to the directions he has been given. He must have wondered many times as he ventured toward his destination about the reason God had sent him away from the region of Samaria, a place where ministry is booming (Acts 8:4-8), to a place with *no people*. And as he traveled that stretch of road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza he sees a chariot carrying an Ethiopian court official. In case we think that it was natural for this godly Hellenistic Jew to start a conversation with a rich black eunuch Luke tells us that it took the prompting of the Spirit to make him **go near and overtake this chariot**. Do not overlook the fact that it was necessary for the godly evangelist to receive a nudge. The situation did not appear, from a fallen human perspective, to be an evangelism opportunity.

Jesus is leading me places I don't go.

Listening for His Leading (Acts 8:30-37)

³⁰ So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² The place in the Scripture which he read was this: "*He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth.*" ³³ In His humiliation His justice was taken away, *And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth.*" ³⁴ So the eunuch answered Philip and said, "I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?" ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him. ³⁶ Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, *here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?*" ³⁷ Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

The distance between Philip the Evangelist and the Ethiopian eunuch had been the greatest obstacle to everything that Heaven would do to save one soul. And so the Spirit directs the man of God to eliminate the divide: **Go near** (Acts 8:29). What follows the command to **go near** is interesting; it is another imperative - **overtake this chariot**. While the word **overtake** (κολλάω) does indicate that Philip is to catch up to the wheeled transport, in my opinion, it misses something. The verb that **overtake** translates has the sense *to cling*. Consider how it is translated in other well-known versions of the Bible:

- KJV - Then the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot.
- ESV - And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot."
- NASB - Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot."
- NET - Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot."

The verb κολλάω has the connotation of a determination to unite and remain so. It is used to translate the coming together of a man with his wife in the covenant of marriage (Matthew 19:5). Even the NIV, a translation that I do not particularly care for, gives the reader the sense that Philip is commanded to do more than just **overtake** the chariot.

NIV -The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

In other words, "Philip, catch up to that chariot and do not let it get away from you. Stay on it!" As the Jew approached the Ethiopian it became obvious that God had gone before preparing the way. Philip, as he drew near and could hear what was happening in the chariot, perceived that the Ethiopian was reading an ancient passage predicting a Redeemer and redemption for all that would believe in Him. It was not necessary to say more about what should be done; *evangelists evangelize*.

Do not miss the message to Philip and the more general message to you and I today: *to reach the lost it is necessary to go near people that we normally would not*. It is not enough to know the truth. The gospel does not share itself. The gospel I know does nothing for the man who doesn't know it. We who know God and have the

ability to preach the power of God unto salvation need to get out of the pew, take a break from the from the pulpit, come away from the choir stands and **go near** with the gospel to those who don't know it. And we will, if guided by the Spirit of Jesus, be led to go near people that we do not have a natural affection for. We are put off by their political position, or their poverty, or their race. From a distance we cannot see and hear how God is at work making their hearts ready for the good news. Jesus, if we are willing, is changing that.

Jesus is leading me to people I don't know.

We will likely find some ready to receive it.

- *eunuch* - He who is emasculated by crushing or mutilation shall not enter the assembly of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 23:1; Leviticus 21:16-20)
- info - Isaiah ministered from 740 to 680 BC (Isaiah 1:1). He sounds in many passages more like a New Testament author than an Old Testament prophet; his descriptions of Christ suffering, saving work, and second advent are clearer than what can be found in any other Old Testament book.

When Philip heard what was being read by the Ethiopian eunuch he began to ask if it was understood (Acts 8:30). Why? Because the man in the chariot was reading a great prophecy of the suffering Servant of the lord - a passage recently fulfilled only a few miles away. Philip asked because he was ready and eager to explain the passage if the man in the chariot wanted to understand it.

The answer of the chariot rider was the humble and honest response of a prepared heart: Unless someone guides me how could I possibly understand what I am reading? (Acts 8:31) Realizing that Philip recognized the passage and was interested in making it understood the Ethiopian invited Philip into the chariot (Acts 8:31). Opportunity met Preparedness.

Two years of teaching by the apostles (AD 33 - 35) had led to a deep understanding of how the Old Testament was *all* about the Messiah (John 5:39; Luke 24:27). Having drawn near Philip is able to hear more clearly what God is doing to promote this man's salvation. In close proximity it was easier to perceive the segue that the Spirit is providing for this one man. In our text the tremendous truth that now comes forward is this:

Those who would reach the lost cannot be found lacking in the great essential of unconditional willingness. The self-led evangelists goes where it makes sense to go. And he will gladly go to whom he wants to go. But where the destination cannot be derived and where the place is full of people for whom he has no natural affection he will not be sent. He is conditionally willing to be God's mouthpiece. In his hands the sharing of the gospel is not according to the Spirit's leading but according to his logic and his liking.

But the leading of the Spirit, from a human perspective, need not be logical (John 3:6-8; 1 Corinthians 2:15-16). And the leading of the Spirit need not be likeable.

It is sufficient for those who would be used by God to reach the lost to know that the grace of God goes before us to places we would not go and to people we do not know preparing hearts to hear the gospel. What God wants in us is an unconditional willingness to be witnesses (Acts 1:8); He wants us to be led by His Spirit to bring about His plan for diversity.

Prepared by God to Hear (Acts 8:34-35)

³⁴ So the eunuch answered Philip and said, "I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?" ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him.

This is like walking into a coffee shop and having someone ask you about the meaning of John 3:16. Philip, in a way reminiscent of the Lord with the disciples on the walk to Emmaus, meets the man where he is and preaches Jesus (Luke 24:27). It was more than an explanation of the passages; the word preach carries the connotation of an exhortation unto something more than intellectual ascent. Philip called the man to choose Christ.

A genuine presentation of the gospel calls the dying to receive the cure for terminal illness through a decision to put their trust in Christ. Unfortunately many presentations of the gospel amount to asking those near death if they would like a breath mint. It is not enough to ask a person who is not saved if they agree with the facts of the gospel. We need to ask for a decision.

It is interesting to note that Isaiah was likely unable to truly understand what he was writing about (1 Peter 1:11). He only knew that the Spirit of Christ in Him was indicating things concerning the Messiah.

Ready to Receive Jesus (Acts 8:36)

The eunuch was accustomed to being told that he was not allowed to participate in this, to not come into the inner court, and to not have a part in various aspects of the Jews' celebrations (Deuteronomy 23:1). Is this going to be any different? His heart's desire is to receive Jesus; the Ethiopian eunuch wants to be associated with Jesus. But is he qualified? "If you believe with all your heart, you may," was the response.

Great God Almighty! Where the law forbade the Lord forgave. The gospel says, "Oh sinner, believe and be made well."

What happened as a result? The Ethiopian eunuch was baptized right then. None of this modern days believing in Jesus and then waiting days, weeks, months, and years to get baptized.

Questions for Missional Community Discussion

1. Are there people that I have a natural affection for? E.g., am I partial to the culture or ethnicity (German, Japanese, American Indian, Nigerian) that I come from? Are there people that I have an aversion to (Number 12:1-16)?
2. What happens when there is an opportunity to have a conversation with people from each these two groups mentioned in the previous question? Will I initiate or do I have to be prodded by the Spirit to interact with people that I do not have natural affection for?
3. Where do I get information about other ethnicities and cultures? Do I learn about other races from the source or through other groups that I assume give it to me straight?
4. What happens when Jesus directs me to go to places I do not like (Jonah 1:1-3; Acts 8:27, 30)?
5. What happens when Jesus is leading me into witnessing opportunities with people for whom I have no natural affection?
6. Prayerfully consider initiating conversations with people unlike yourself. This may mean a meeting with someone that is naturally distrustful of your attempt to talk with them (John 4:7-9).