



Acts: The Church Unleashed- Session 5

Acts 8:26-40

Introduction

Describe a movie or book where the people fall in love through a “chance encounter.” Why are we drawn to these stories? What makes them intriguing to us?

What “chance encounter” story have you experienced in life? How would your life be different if you didn’t have your “chance encounter”?

In the Scriptures, there are no accidents; there is no such thing as chance. Rather, chance encounters reveal themselves to be divine appointments: consider Joseph in Egypt; David fighting Goliath; Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. For the Christian, this way of seeing the world is a call to pay attention.

Transition: There’s a thread throughout the Gospels and the Book of Acts that accentuates the reality of God’s providence and planning. People find themselves suddenly prompted to hit the road, or they suddenly show up just in time to encounter Jesus or the apostles. Through these many surprise encounters, God built up His church. On one such occasion, recorded in Acts 8, a disciple of Jesus was sent to the middle of nowhere without any clue as to why.

Understanding

- 1. Be available and obedient to the Spirit’s prompting (Acts 8:26-29).**

Have a volunteer to read Acts 8:26-29.

26 An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip: “Get up and go south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is the desert road.) 27 So he got up and went. There was an Ethiopian man, a eunuch and high official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to worship in Jerusalem 28 and was sitting in his chariot on his way home, reading the prophet Isaiah aloud.

29 The Spirit told Philip, “Go and join that chariot.”

This little story bears great significance in the Book of Acts, both in how it paints a picture of Spirit-prompted mission and for its symbolic power.

To start, let’s look at the **literal significance**. In this time, Ethiopia was about as far away as you could get. To talk about Ethiopia would be like talking about the other side of the world, even though on modern maps we don’t think of these regions as so far apart. So in the minds of the original readers of Acts, the introduction of an Ethiopian to the story, especially one who had to come to Jerusalem in search of God, was a big deal. It introduces the global scope of the gospel message—it’s a word for the nations, not just the Jews—and it shows us the universal hunger in the heart of humanity for God.

Let’s also see the **symbolic significance**. When we think about sharing the gospel with a lost world, we often focus on the hostility and resistance that Christians experience. That’s not without justification; often the world’s reaction to the gospel is visceral, violent, and harsh (as we saw in the previous session). But that’s not always the case. The story of the Ethiopian reminds us that the Lord is working in the hearts of many to draw them to Himself, and they are responding. In this case, the Ethiopian knew enough to come to Jerusalem to look for Him, but in many cases, people will look wherever some semblance of hope and spirituality can be found.

How have you witnessed people looking for hope and meaning in all the wrong places?

Who is someone far from God that we are seeking to lead nearer to Jesus? What challenges do you face in sharing with them?

Just a few verses earlier, Philip was enjoying a thriving ministry in Samaria (8:4-8). So, one could imagine that a command like this might be met with some inner resistance. Any thriving work is hard to leave and doing so takes a great deal of faith. Philip, of course, had such faith and hit the road, traveling through the wilderness until he encountered a single chariot bearing a single Ethiopian man.

What excuses could Peter have used to not go? How have we used the same excuses in our lives?

The Holy Spirit sent Philip in spite of all of these things, inviting him to overcome several layers of fear and resistance. His prompting ran against commonsense expectations, reminding us that the kingdom of God advances in surprising and counterintuitive ways.

What are some ways you've been surprised by how God has led you, your church, or your friends to be on mission?

How can we cultivate a heart willing to respond obediently to the Spirit's leading, no matter the risks?

Transition: Notice how Philip took the steps of obedience and approached the chariot and heard the Ethiopian reading the Scriptures.

2. Guide people through the Scriptures and show them Christ (Acts 8:30-35).

Have a volunteer to read Acts 8:30-35:

³⁰ When Philip ran up to it, he heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you're reading?"

³¹ "How can I," he said, "unless someone guides me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the Scripture passage he was reading was this: He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb is silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who will describe his generation?

For his life is taken from the earth.

³⁴ The eunuch said to Philip, "I ask you, who is the prophet saying this about—himself or someone else?" ³⁵ Philip proceeded to tell him the good news about Jesus, beginning with that Scripture.

God was laying the groundwork for this encounter. The Ethiopian was immediately receptive to Philip, inviting him up onto the chariot to explain the Scriptures to him. Not only that, he *happened* to be reading a passage from the Book of Isaiah that overtly talks about the sacrificial death of Jesus. The whole conversation was teed up for Philip to point this man to Jesus. From this story we can see three points that reflect how we should share Jesus.

- **The Messenger of Truth:** Philip didn't have the credentials of a Bible scholar or a teacher of the law; again, he was an ordinary guy. But because he was filled with the Spirit and because of what he'd seen and experienced in his own life of faith, he responded with confidence and clarity. **What encouragement does that give for you to learn the truth of the Scriptures?**
- **The Source of Truth:** For people lacking any background with the Bible, it can be overwhelming. To make matters worse, there's no shortage of hucksters and swindlers who will use the Bible for their own selfish purposes. It's been used to justify the reign of despots, sustain the institution of slavery, and pad the pockets of innumerable criminals masquerading as pastors and evangelists. It's no wonder, then, that when Philip showed up at the side of the chariot, the Ethiopian lamented, "How can I [understand it] unless someone guides me?" **How does your view of the authority of Scripture affect how you share Jesus with others?**
- **The Message of Truth:** Bible teachers who are faithful to both their task and their text will always end up talking about Jesus. The whole story of the Bible, from one end to the other, points to Him. The story of Israel and the whole of the Old Testament are about anticipating Jesus. We see it in how they longed for a king, though all their kings fell short of the glory they aspired to. We see it in the high demands of the law, which no man can attain. We see it in the countless laments in the Psalms and Prophets, where the brokenness of the world is displayed and the people cry out, "How long, O Lord?" Yet we can see how Jesus is the hero of the story in what he did in the cross and resurrection to restore all humanity to Himself. **How has Jesus been the hero in your own personal story? How can you share that story with others?**

What are some reasons we might feel intimidated to try and explain the Scriptures to an unbeliever?

What ways or tools have you found that help to explain the Bible to people?

Why is it valuable to know what the Bible says instead of what our opinion of the Bible says?

Transition: Philip's faith was what made him able and willing to follow the lead of the Spirit as he was sent here and there, and it was what made him able to hear God's Word and see Jesus in it. This encounter leads him to call for a response.

3. Lead others to respond in faith (Acts 8:36-40).

Have a volunteer to read Acts 8:36-40.

³⁶ As they were traveling down the road, they came to some water. The eunuch said, "Look, there's water. What would keep me from being baptized?" ³⁸ So he ordered the chariot to stop, and both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him any longer but went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ Philip appeared in Azotus, and he was traveling and preaching the gospel in all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

All of the elements of true conversion are on display here:

1. The Ethiopian was *eager* to believe, not compelled, and certainly not pressured to convert.
2. Philip had explained how the passage of Scripture he was reading pointed to Jesus, whose death and resurrection reconciles us to God.
3. Phillip also explained enough so that the Ethiopian was eager to identify with Jesus through baptism.

"What would keep me from being baptized?" he asked. That question was crucial. Some might have offered a variety of reasons not to baptize him: he was an Ethiopian, not an ethnic Jew; he was a eunuch; he was a foreigner. But of course, Philip, filled with the Spirit, didn't put any stock in those hindrances. It is clear the Ethiopian believed what he heard about Jesus—that He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world—and so, Philip baptized him without delay.

How do the details of this story fulfill Jesus' Great Commission to His disciples (Matt. 28:18-20)?

As this story concludes, we see the two parted ways even more suddenly than they came together. What's implied here is that something more than meets the eye took Philip away. It's as if the Spirit carried him away and deposited him in Azotus. The Ethiopian, filled with the joy of being a new Christian and filled with the Holy Spirit, went on his own way back to his home,

where one must imagine that the Spirit continued His work and the story of Jesus spread and grew roots in Africa.

It is always tempting to cling to spiritually rich, joy-filled moments (Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration in Matthew 17). The Bible shows us that these moments, as rich as they are, are temporary. We are not meant not to “stay put” in the past or even the present but to keep moving forward. For Philip, ministry in Samaria was thriving, but the Lord called him away to meet the Ethiopian; he was then carried to Azotus and from there traveled on to Caesarea—but all the while, he was doing the work of an evangelist, calling people to believe in the good news of Jesus Christ.

Why is calling for a response vital when sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with others?

In what ways is God calling you to move beyond your place of comfort to do His will?

Application

The most ordinary of circumstances might be a divine appointment. A “chance encounter,” as the world often sees it, might be a crucial moment in someone’s life. There are no coincidences. The Holy Spirit accompanies us, guides us, and provides us with these opportunities.

Spend time in prayer today as a group for people that you know that are far from God that need to hear the gospel. They may be family or friends that simply need to hear about Jesus from us.

When we surrender to the authority of Scripture in our lives, we begin to see it more clearly as the message and source of truth. Then we embrace the call to go and be a messenger.

What is a way that you could this week share about the message and source of truth of Scripture in your life? Share your action step this week and hold each other accountable to take them together.

Evangelism and conversion really are that simple. We can share “just the facts,” however, without asking people to make something of them. But the goal of evangelism isn’t just to share

what we know with people; it's to invite them to join us in following Jesus. The hope of an evangelist is to help someone see Jesus as Lord and that His life, death, and resurrection takes away the sins of the world and brings us home to God the Father. In Philip's short conversation with the Ethiopian, this miracle happened. He saw Jesus as Lord and was ready to follow Him into the waters of baptism.

Do you need to personally respond to the gospel and make it public? Maybe you have never been Scripturally baptized in a public way through immersion. Maybe you have been saved after you were baptized before but realize that you need to make it public in this way. Contact someone at the church today about setting up a time to make your profession of faith public.

Quotes/Illustration

Acts 8:26-29

“I want to tell people about the meaning of the cross. Not the cross that hangs on the wall or around someone's neck, but the real cross of Christ...With all my heart I want to leave you with the truth, that he loves you, and is willing to forgive you of all your sins.”¹

–Billy Graham

Mission of the Church

The church is a sign and instrument of the kingdom of God, a people united by faith in the gospel announcement of the crucified and risen King Jesus. The mission of the church is to go into the world in the power of the Spirit and make disciples by proclaiming this gospel, calling people to respond in ongoing repentance and faith, and demonstrating the truth and power of the gospel by living under the lordship of Christ for the glory of God and the good of the world.

Acts 8:30-35

“Contrary to our gut reaction, feeling lost or confused is not a bad sign for a student [of the Word]. It is actually a sign that our understanding is being challenged and that learning is about to take place. Embracing the dissonance of feeling lost, rather than avoiding it (giving up) or dulling it (looking for a short-cut), will actually place us in the best possible position to learn. We must extend ourselves permission to get lost and patience to find our way to understanding.”⁵

–Jen Wilkin

Acts 8:36-40

“The instrument that Philip uses is the Word of God, not such an indescribable and imaginary word—as some ‘angelic’ and fanatic theologians dream—but the very same word that is contained in the Scriptures. For out of these must come all sermons, and the whole doctrine of salvation is taken, neither must we look for any new kind of doctrine unheard of until this day.”¹⁰

–Rudolf Gwalther (1519-1586)

“As part of the Spirit’s work through us for the ‘common good,’ He empowers us to be His witnesses...It is true that God may have called you to be exactly where you are. But it’s absolutely vital to grasp that He didn’t call you there so you could settle in and live out your life in comfort and superficial peace. His purposes are not random or arbitrary. If you are still alive on this planet, it’s because He has something for you to do. He placed us on this earth for purposes that He orchestrated long before we were born (Eph. 2:8-10).”¹²

–Francis Chan

Commentary

Acts 8:26-29

“God took the initiative and directed Philip to take the road south from Jerusalem to Gaza. The direction of the mission continued outward, away from the center (8:1,4), but this time it involved greater intentionality on the part of Philip and more specific geographical guidance from God. A ‘desert’ or wilderness road (probably the northern route from Jerusalem to Gaza) at noontime...would be primarily populated only by those whom God wanted Philip to meet. Philip displayed instant, unquestioning, complete obedience to the command, ‘Get up and go’: he got up and went.”²

–William J. Larkin

Acts 8:30-35

“The Old Testament does not stand on its own, because it is incomplete without its conclusion and fulfillment in the person and work of Christ. No part can be rightly understood without him. In this sense it is about Christ. God’s revelation in Scripture is progressive, moving by stages from the original promises given to Israel, until the fullest meaning of these promises is revealed in Christ...Thus Christ, and therefore the New Testament, interprets the Old Testament.”⁴

–Graeme Goldsworthy

Acts 8:36-40

“Acts 8:37 (‘And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart you may.” And he replied, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God”’) appears only in [manuscripts] of the Western family and is thus omitted from this translation...It appears to be a scribal addition, likely motivated by the fact that the original text of Acts does not recount the eunuch making a confession of faith. The call to believe with all one’s heart in a confession is unusual, and Barrett...argues that ‘believe’ is used in two distinct ways within the verse. Barrett goes on to say that although the verse is not original, it is one of the earliest witnesses for how confession took place in the church. It is probably a second century addition that reflects practice at that time.”⁹

–Darrell L. Bock