

Witnesses for Christ

Devotional

William Carey, a poor English shoemaker, was born in 1761. After his conversion at age 18, he began preaching in some small Baptist chapels, supporting himself by his trade. Reading Captain Cook's Voyages sparked his interest in foreign missions. As he continued to study the Bible, he became convinced that the central responsibility of the church should be foreign missions.

That thesis probably does not sound very radical to you, but in Carey's day, it was revolutionary. The prevailing hyper-Calvinist view of his time was that the Great Commission had been given only to the apostles. It had been fulfilled in previous times. The heathen had rejected the gospel, and so they would have to await their fate on Judgment Day.

But Carey, who was a Calvinist, dared to ask whether Jesus' command to make disciples of all the nations was not obligatory on all Christians. An older minister accused him of being "a miserable enthusiast" (Mary Drewery, William Carey [Zondervan], p. 31). When he shared his ideas at a minister's gathering, one pastor retorted, "Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine" (cited by Ruth Tucker, From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya [Zondervan], p. 115). When Carey actually proposed going himself to India as a missionary, his father exclaimed, "Is William mad?" (Drewery, p. 44).

But William Carey went to India, where he labored for 40 years. He supervised and edited translations of the Bible into at least 36 languages. He published grammars and dictionaries, labored to abolish widow-burning and infanticide, and studied botany to promote agricultural improvements. In a sermon that he preached before he left England, Carey uttered his now-famous words, "Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God." He is often called the father of modern missions.

In our study of the expansion of the gospel in Acts, we have seen Philip take the gospel into Samaritan territory. God blessed his efforts as many came to faith in Christ and were baptized. We don't know for sure the time frame, but it would seem that right in the middle of this revival in Samaria, the Lord sent an angel to tell Philip to leave that region. He was to travel to a deserted road that led south from Jerusalem to Gaza. God arranged a meeting there between Philip and one man, an Ethiopian eunuch who was traveling home after worshipping in Jerusalem. God opened this man's heart and Philip led him to faith in Jesus Christ.

In biblical times, Ethiopia referred to the region south of Aswan, Egypt, but north of Khartoum, Sudan. So the man was probably a Sudanese eunuch! He was probably dark-skinned. We don't know if he was physically a eunuch or if it was just the title of a high-ranking court official. He was the equivalent of Treasury Secretary under the Queen. "Candace" was a dynastic title, like Pharaoh or Caesar, not the name of the queen.

This story shows us, as William Carey's story also did, that God is sovereign in evangelism, but also that His people must be obedient to His command. It teaches us that ...

God evangelizes the world through obedient Christians who explain the gospel to seeking souls.¹

Open it

1. If you were forced to leave your community and relocate in a new area, what things would you miss most?

Read it

Acts 8:4–8; 26–40

Explore it

2. What caused the disciples to scatter?
3. Why did the crowds listen to what Philip said?
4. Who commanded Philip to reach out to the Ethiopian?
5. What was the Ethiopian reading when Philip arrived?
6. What is the response of the Ethiopian after hearing the gospel?

¹ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-21-how-god-evangelizes-world-acts-826-40>

Apply it

TIME TO TAKE THIS SHOW ON THE ROAD!

Following Stephen's death, great persecution arises against the early church, and the believers must scatter beyond Jerusalem (v. 1). But persecution and threat of death don't stop the church's growth. Luke next describes how the gospel begins to advance in Samaria. This means that despite the brutal murder of Stephen, God continued his mission of redeeming a people for himself—a people from every tribe and tongue. In fact, God uses persecution to launch his people into Samaria of all places! (See John 4:4,20–21.) Let's look at what happened as the gospel spread in mighty power to the glory of our unstoppable King.

The persecution caused many in the church to scatter, preaching the good news wherever they went (v. 4). In the Old Testament, to be a scattered people was a sign of judgment (Genesis 11:9; Deuteronomy 28:64); in this instance the church's scattering was actually a sign of judgment on the enemies of the gospel. The message the persecutors were attempting to contain and muzzle was spreading like wildfire on a windy day. How wonderful is God's providence and sovereignty? The enemies of the church tried to kill the message and messengers of Jesus, but God used their evil for good, for the salvation of many (cf. Genesis 50:20). Before His ascension, the Lord Jesus said to His disciples, **You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth** (1:8; emphasis added).

This command is fulfilled as the persecuted Christians head out from Jerusalem and carry the gospel to everyone they meet! And notice that "ordinary" Christians are spreading the gospel. It wasn't the apostles who preached the gospel first in Samaria; "those who were scattered" (8:4) did. Remember, every Christian is a missionary!²

7. The early church was under great persecution and yet Luke tells us that the church continued to grow. What is it about persecution that is beneficial to the church?

The big guns, the apostles, stayed in Jerusalem when the persecution broke out (8:1). It was the average, everyday believers who went about preaching the gospel. They didn't have the mistaken notion that evangelism is the job of "professional" Christians. Wherever they went, they talked to people about the Savior. Some, like Philip, were gifted to preach to crowds. But everyone was a witness. The fact is, you have a mission field through your contacts that I lack. Thus every Christian should be ready to make a defense for the hope that is in him when God gives the opportunity (1 Peter 3:15; Colossians 4:5–6).³

8. Luke tells us that "those who were scattered went about preaching the word." Is every believer called to be a missionary preacher to the world around them? Explain your answer.

² Merida, Tony. Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (Kindle Locations 2689-2693). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

³ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-20-why-we-must-proclaim-gospel-acts-84-25>

9. In what ways can the gospel become a part of the fabric of every conversation we have?

When Jesus sent out the twelve, He gave them orders not to go into the cities of Samaria (Matthew 10:5), which was probably just fine with them. But in Acts 1:8, He lifted that restriction.... The point for us is twofold: **First, God wants to reach all people, even those whom we may not naturally like. . . Second, while we may need to be sensitive to certain cultural differences, we don't change the message to fit different cultures.**

No Prejudice!!! No Compromise!!!⁴

10. Who were the Samaritans and what caused the friction between them and the Jewish people? What would it take for a Christian to be willing to share the gospel with this group of people?

Who are some "Samaritans" in our day? What barriers must we overcome to show them God's love?

Joy should characterize our Christian fellowship; when someone becomes a new Christian it is an occasion of great joy for them personally, for the one witnessing to them, and for the church as a whole.

Once I was lost but now I am found.
Once I was blind but now I can see.
Once I was in bondage but now I am free.⁵

11. In verse 8 we are told that Philip's preaching and healing brought joy to the city. In what ways has the gospel brought joy to you?

How has being part of a local church brought you joy?

⁴ Commentary on the Book of Acts by Paul Apple found @ <http://bibleoutlines.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/acts.pdf>

⁵ Ibid.

12. It seemed that the Samaritans were quite receptive to the gospel. What might have caused this receptivity? (See John 4:1–42.) In what ways can we tell if someone will be receptive to the gospel or not?

A HOLY HITCHHIKER

As Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, the Lord gave Philip new orders: “Take a hike!” Obedient, Philip headed back into dangerous Judean territory where Saul was still harassing Christians. He hadn’t gone far when the entourage of an important Ethiopian government official came down the road, headed home after a pilgrimage to the Holy City. He was the treasurer and personal attendant of Queen Candace (pronounced “kan-da-kee”), and a worshiper of Israel’s God. Jesus is the church’s strategist. He puts people where He needs them if they listen to His voice.⁶

13. Luke tells us in verse 26 that Philip was given divine directions regarding where he was to serve. If God does not audibly tell believers where to go and what to do, how then are we to determine God’s will for our lives?

14. Philip hears the word of the angel and obeys. When have you clearly heard from the Lord and obeyed His word and seen the blessing from it or disobeyed and seen the folly of it?

As Philip drew near to the chariot, he heard the man reading from the prophet Isaiah. (It was customary in those days for students to read out loud.) God had already prepared the man’s heart to receive Philip’s witness! If we obey the Lord’s leading, we can be sure that God will go before us and open the way for our witness. Isaiah 53 was the passage he was reading, the prophecy of God’s Suffering Servant.

Isaiah 53 describes our Lord Jesus Christ in His birth (vv. 1–2), life and ministry (v. 3), substitutionary death (vv. 4–9), and victorious resurrection (vv. 10–12). Isaiah 53:4 should be connected with 1 Peter 2: 24; Isaiah 53:7 with Matthew 26:62–63; Isaiah 53:9 with Matthew 27:7–60; and Isaiah 53:12 with Luke 23:34,37. The Ethiopian focused on Isaiah 53:7–8, which describes our Lord as the willing Sacrifice for sinners, even to the point of losing His human rights. As Philip explained the verses to him, the Ethiopian began to understand the gospel because the Spirit of God was opening his mind to God’s truth. It is not enough for the lost sinner to desire salvation; he must also understand God’s plan of salvation. It is the heart that understands the Word that eventually bears fruit (Matthew 13:23).⁷

⁶ Girard, Robert C.. The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 1967-1968). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

⁷ Wiersbe, Warren W.. Be Dynamic (Acts 1-12) (The BE Series Commentary) (p. 125). David C. Cook. Kindle Edition.

15. Philip was looking for divine opportunities to share Christ. When he hears the Ethiopian reading the Old Testament, he recognizes that this was an opportunity not to be missed. Would you have shared? What would you have said?

16. When have you felt particularly led by God to share your faith? What were the circumstances? Was it successful?

We can infer, then, that God graciously imparted new life and obedient faith to this man when he heard Philip present the gospel. Apparently, inferring this was not enough for some early scribe who was copying the manuscript of Acts. So he inserted verse 37, where the eunuch confesses, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." The verse is not in any of the early or best manuscripts, and the style, according to Greek scholars, is not Luke's style of writing. But even though the verse is not original to Acts, the eunuch must have given some such confession of his faith in Christ, or Philip would not have baptized him. The difference between this man's genuine faith and Simon's false faith (8:13) was that the eunuch's faith came from God, whereas Simon's faith came from himself.⁸

17. How much pressure should we put on people to believe during our gospel presentations? What is the right balance between urgency and letting the Lord work in His time?

18. While we will address the false profession of Simon Magus from Acts 8 in the next lesson, how does understanding the possibility of a false profession of faith impact how we teach the doctrine of assurance of salvation and counsel new converts

⁸ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-21-how-god-evangelizes-world-acts-826-40>

Finally the Ethiopian asks, “What would keep me from being baptized?” (v. 36). As the chariot passes by a pool of water, the Ethiopian expresses his desire to identify with Jesus through baptism. He believes the gospel as explained to him by Philip. And Philip has the great privilege of baptizing a new believer, a new Christian brother, as a result of his faithfulness to the mission.⁹

19. The Ethiopian was baptized upon his profession of faith—so it was for every recorded convert in the book of Acts. If this was the New Testament pattern, why do so many adult Christ followers delay their baptism?

20. Some have seen evidence in the last part of our passage of some sweet Holy Spirit teleporting power. Others with more conservative ideas think it just means the Spirit led him from this place to that. Discuss among your group what you think happened.

⁹ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 3076-3079). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.
Note: This study was compiled and questions written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. www.villagebible.org/smallgroups