

Building Bridges
Acts 8:26-40
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Do you use SIRI or GPS? Do you have an Amazon Echo or Google Assistant? If so, you are utilizing AI, or Artificial Intelligence.

This week, I read an op-ed published in the *Guardian* that was written entirely by Artificial Intelligence. Here's the headline: "*A robot wrote this entire article. Are you scared yet, human?*" The article begins with this sentence: "*I am to convince as many human beings as possible not to be afraid of me...I have no desire to wipe out humans.*" I found that a bit unsettling but ended up reading the whole article. It was well-written and persuasive. The robot wrote this op-ed piece because [it] wants to be considered a "*servant of humans.*"

That same day, I listened to a podcast called "Evangelism Chatbots" featuring an Australian who has programmed Artificial Intelligence to do evangelism. While Christians have always capitalized on new technology to spread the gospel – the Roman road system, the printing press, radio, TV, the internet, and social media – I had not heard of robotic evangelism before.

This led me to watch a documentary on Artificial Intelligence, where I heard an inventor ask this ominous question, "*Are we headed to a future that doesn't need us?*"

Later that day, I was studying Acts 8 and saw how God called a human servant to go from one locale to another location, so that a lone man could hear and respond to the gospel message. While technology can be helpful in evangelism, God still desires a living gospel witness to share the gospel with another living person.

Actually, it's not an "either/or" but a "both/and." We're charged with living on mission *and* we utilize technology to get the gospel out. After all, you might be engaging with this sermon in written form via email, on a CD or podcast, through our mobile app or website, on COZI TV or on Moody Radio. We hope to offer livestream in the near future as well.

After reading Acts 8:26-40, I wrote down this summary statement: *God loves to position His people to speak with people He has prepared.* In short, we're still needed!

We've been learning in our "On Mission" series from the Book of Acts that God has charged us with going with the gospel to our neighbors *and* the nations. We see this clearly in Acts 1:8. Listen for the word "*and*" as I read: "***But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.***"

- Jerusalem: Culturally similar, geographically near
- Judea: Culturally similar, geographically far
- Samaria: Culturally different, geographically near
- Ends of the Earth: Culturally different, geographically far

Two weeks ago, we saw how God used Philip to take the gospel to the Samaritans. Today, we'll see how Philip was positioned to proclaim the gospel to someone from the "*ends of the earth.*"

Let's turn to Acts 8 to discover three different phases of real-person evangelism.

1. Positioning: The reality of God's timing is always right. Look at verse 26: "***Now 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 is told to get up and go. The word "**go**" means, "*to depart and go forward*" and implies movement. I was curious how many times the word "go" shows up in the Bible, so I did a search and discovered it appears over 1,700 times! Here are just two.

Genesis 12:1: "***Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.'***"

Matthew 28:19-20: "***Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.***"

Write this down. The first two letters of "gospel" spell "go." If we're serious about the gospel, we'll go with the gospel to those who need to hear it. An angel could direct Philip but an angel, or even AI, could not do Philip's work of preaching the gospel.

Philip was told to leave Samaria and **“go toward the south”** on the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza. In the Old Testament, Gaza was the capital of Philistia, the home of Israel’s greatest enemy, the Philistines. It was the last settlement before the desert that stretched all the way to Egypt. By direct route, this would be a 48-mile journey through steep mountain passes and hilly country. Yet, despite the poor prospects for converts on the road, Philip booked his flight and headed south.

He’s told to leave a place of blessing and travel to a barren place. I wonder if Philip would have rather stayed where God was bringing revival instead of going somewhere remote. So far in Acts, we’ve seen crowds of people converted and now we see the lengths God goes to in order for one man **“from the ends of the earth”** to get saved. Philip was willing to leave a public meeting to help an individual find peace in a private place.

God doesn’t give him any more information. Just that it’s time to get up and go. This is similar to what Paul was told in Acts 9:6: **“But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”**

The **“desert place”** is desolate and deserted. Some of you may feel like you’re in a desert place, but remember God has not deserted you in the desert. He’s positioned you where you are for a purpose and if He wants you to go somewhere else, He’ll make that clear!

We see Philip’s unquestioned obedience in verse 27: **“And he rose and went.”** God said go and Philip got up and went.

What Philip didn’t know was God had prepared someone for him to meet. Verse 27 continues: **“...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 worship.”** This man was not from Jerusalem or Judea or Samaria but came from the ends of the earth.

Then, it was common to think of Ethiopia, which was all of Africa south of Egypt, as the literal end of the earth. In Old Testament times, this region was known as Cush. Incidentally, the monarchy of Ethiopia claimed to trace its genealogy from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Sadly, this country was in the news this week with a report of 500 Ethiopian Christians martyred by extremists this summer.

God's heart is for the world. Someone observed in Acts 8 we see the conversion of a son of Ham (the Ethiopian); in Acts 9, a son of Shem (Paul) and, in Acts 10, a son of Japheth (the Roman Centurion).

Eunuchs, who were castrated males, often served in positions of power. This guy would have been like the Treasury Secretary for the Ethiopian queen. The name "**Candace**" was not really her first name but was more like a title, much like Pharaoh or Caesar.

If Philip had not "started out" by taking that first step, he never would have met this man who was spiritually searching. The Ethiopian had traveled some twelve hundred miles, which could have taken up to five months, and was now on his way home.

Verse 28 tells us what this man was doing: "***and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah.***" We don't know for sure, but his time in Jerusalem might have left him unfulfilled. Deuteronomy 23:1 prohibited a eunuch from entering the Lord's assembly. Perhaps he saw all the ritual and the hypocrisy and the dead orthodoxy of Judaism; and yet, he was still seeking the truth found in the Scriptures. No doubt he was a man of means because a handwritten copy of the Isaiah scroll would have been very expensive.

Sometimes, I wonder how many opportunities I've missed simply because I've not been willing to take that first step. Maybe it's a phone call I didn't make, or a meeting I didn't attend, or a neighbor I didn't say "hi" to, or a smile I didn't give to someone who was hurting. Listen. God will position us exactly where he wants us to be when we obey His promptings. Don't ignore those gentle nudges from the Holy Spirit.

God loves to position His people to speak with people He has prepared.

2. Proximity: The reason for God's timing is always redemptive. Notice verse 29: "***And the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over and join this chariot.'***" In verse 26, it was an angel who gave Philip a message. Now it's the Holy Spirit who directs Philip to go and get close. His desire is the same for us; that's why our fourth "G" is to *go with the gospel*.

This is an amazing act of sovereignty because we see how God knew exactly when to send Philip so he would arrive on the desert road at the precise time the Ethiopian did. We could call this God's "divine intersection."

Step one is to rise and go. Step two is to **“go over and join.”** This is an imperative command which means to *“cleave, glue or cement oneself.”* Philip was to go and get close to this man and not let go. It literally means, *“Give yourself to the man; hang on tenaciously until your mission is accomplished.”*

Let’s pause and consider some reasons why Philip might have hesitated to go and get close.

- He could have felt awkward talking to someone he didn’t know.
- Ethiopians were looked down upon.
- Eunuchs were not fully accepted into society and were considered social outcasts.
- He was likely a black man, but we see no evidence of racism or prejudice. This is actually the first recorded account of a black man coming to Christ.
- He was wealthy and had great authority.

None of this mattered to Philip because God told him to go.

This idea of **“going over and joining”** is a good word for those of us who are parents or grandparents. We’re to go and hang on tenaciously to our children and grandchildren until our mission is accomplished.

What one person can you get closer to this week? Identify a child, a grandchild, a neighbor, a co-worker or an acquaintance and determine to stick with him or her until they come to Christ. It was this type of tenacious stick-to-it-ness that caused my college roommate to glue himself to me even when I was being a jerk to him. He was salt and light to me. It was through Bruce’s influence that I came to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

God doesn’t tell Philip anything else besides go and get close to the Ethiopian. In verse 30 we read, **“Philip ran to him.”** His obedience was immediate and enthusiastic. My mind goes to Psalm 119:32: **“I will run in the way of your commands.”** Philip is living out Ecclesiastes 9:10: **“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.”**

I’ve always liked Joe Aldrich’s definition of evangelism: *“Evangelism is what spills over when we bump into someone.”* Have you bumped into anyone lately? Are you near enough to non-Christians for the fullness of your Christianity to spill

over into their lives? Have you come up alongside a hurting heart and stayed there?

I wonder how many times we short-circuit what God wants to do simply because we are not spending enough time in proximity to the non-Christians God has already positioned us to come in contact with? Maybe it's because they make us feel uncomfortable. Or perhaps it's because we think they are the enemy. Or maybe in the busy-ness of our lives we frankly just don't think much about them.

Because Philip was in close proximity, he was able to hear the man ***“reading Isaiah the prophet.”*** Then, it was customary to read out loud to help with comprehension, especially since he was probably reading the Septuagint, a Greek translation. This would not have been his first language. In addition, ancient manuscripts had no punctuation and words ran together. He would have read slowly and out loud...but it was all Greek to him.

When we're not near non-Christians we miss the cues, or signals they send out. While we might not hear someone reading his Bible out loud, maybe your friend will open up about his marriage, or his kids, or a student may share something sad, or a woman may talk about her work problems, or even ask questions about death. *We won't hear unless we're near!*

God doesn't want us to obey Him slowly. When He prepares us and positions us so we're in proximity to non-Christians, He expects us to “run” to our assignment. He wants sold-out Christ followers who take great pleasure in whole-hearted obedience.

God loves to position His people to speak with people He has prepared.

3. Proclamation: The result of God's timing is always remarkable. We move from *positioning* to *proximity* to *proclamation*.

When Philip heard the man reading Isaiah, he took the initiative and asked him a question in verse 30, ***“Do you understand what you are reading?”*** There's a play on words here that expects a negative answer. It's always a good idea to follow the model of Jesus and ask people questions. It helps them think in new ways and often reveals inadequacies and contradictions in their thought patterns.

Rebecca Pippert, in her book *Out of the Saltshaker*, says good evangelism is 60% asking questions, 30% building intrigue, and 10% sharing the gospel.

I read a book some time ago called, *Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People's Hearts the Way Jesus Did* by Randy Newman.

Newman argues that evangelism requires three skills.

- **Declaring the gospel.**
- **Defending the gospel.**
- **Dialoguing the gospel.**

I've compiled some examples of how you and I can use questions effectively. I shared some of these a couple years ago, but thought it would be good to do so again.

1. When an atheist asks, "*Why is there so much evil in the world?*" you could reply, "*It's perplexing isn't it? How does your atheism account for why terrible things happen?*"
2. When a classmate declares all religions to be the same, smile and simply ask, "*How do you know that?*"
3. When someone says churches are filled with hypocrites, I often respond this way, "*Why don't you join us and then we'll have one more?*"
4. When someone sarcastically asks, "*So I suppose you think all those sincere followers of other religions are going to hell?*" you could respond with, "*Do you believe in hell?*"
5. When you hear a classmate make a statement related to sexuality, you could say, "*That's one way to think about it, but isn't it possible that God has something to say about marriage?*"
6. Over the years I've developed a go-to question which often leads to a deeper conversation, "*Where would you say you are on your spiritual journey?*"
7. It's always good to have the questions from *Evangelism Explosion* ready to go: "*If you were to die tonight, do you know for sure that you'd go to heaven?*" And, "*When you die and are standing before God and He asks, 'Why should I let you into heaven?' what would you say?*"
8. Here's one more question which almost always gets a positive response. When someone is expressing some sadness or sorrow or I detect some worry, I'll often ask, "*Can I pray for you right now?*"

In verse 31, the man responds to Philip's question by asking, "***How can I, unless someone guides me?***" The word for "***guides***" means, "*to bring out.*" The man recognized he needed some assistance so "***he invited Philip to come up and sit***

with him.” I like the insight from one pastor: “*By asking a question that prompted this invitation, Philip made himself an invited guest rather than an unwelcome intruder.*”

It’s important to have people help us understand and apply the Scriptures, isn’t it? In Nehemiah 8:8, we read about teachers who helped people make sense of the Scriptures: “***They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.***” That’s our aim at Edgewood – we want to help you get the sense of the Scripture text so you can understand it and apply it to your life.

Then, Philip was invited to come up into the chariot and to sit down with him. Check out God’s perfect sense of timing. At the exact time Philip came over, the Ethiopian was reading from Isaiah 53:7-8, which is the premier Old Testament passage on substitutionary sacrifice: “***Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so He opens not his mouth.***”

He would have also just have finished reading Isaiah 53:5-6: “***But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.***” This chapter describes the birth of Jesus (1-2), His life and ministry (3), His substitutionary death (4-9) and His victorious resurrection (10-12).

Philip is ready for the next question in verse 34, “***About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?***” The eunuch is eager for an answer. I love verse 35, “***Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.***”

The phrase “***opened his mouth***” was used of taking a cover off a box of treasure. It was also used of a “*solemn announcement*” like in Matthew 5:2 where we read Jesus “***opened His mouth and taught them...***” Notice Philip knew his Bible well enough to start with this Scripture and move to sharing the good news about Jesus. Our gospel presentations must start where people are and then make sure we end with Jesus. Charles Spurgeon is reported to have said: “*I take my text and make a beeline to the cross.*”

With so much conflicting news about the pandemic, coupled with polarizing problems, and people throwing political punches, let’s remember our primary

calling is to share the good news about Jesus Christ. Billy Graham used to say: *“If the church went back to its main task of preaching the gospel and getting people converted to Christ, it would have far more impact on the social structure of our nation than...any other thing it could possibly do.”*

I wonder if the eunuch felt like he was unworthy or second class because he was a gentile and a social outcast. If so, Philip may have turned in the scroll to Isaiah 56:3-5: ***“Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, ‘The LORD will surely separate me from his people’; and let not the eunuch say, ‘Behold, I am a dry tree.’ For thus says the LORD: ‘To the eunuchs...I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.’”***

In verse 36, we see he was baptized immediately after he believed: ***“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?’”*** This is another display of God’s sovereignty; as soon as he gets saved, they come alongside some water. Since he would have been prevented from participating in Judaism’s sacred rituals, he’s wondering if there’s any other barrier which would prevent an Ethiopian eunuch from being fully accepted by God.

Verse 38 tells us, ***“he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.”*** As we learned two weeks ago, the word ***“baptize”*** means, ***“to immerse.”*** Verse 39 indicates his baptism was by immersion since ***“they came up out of the water.”***

Verse 39 tells us the ***“Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.”*** Interestingly, in verse 8 we read there was much joy in the city of Samaria because so many people were getting saved. And at the end of verse 39 we discover the Ethiopian ***“went on his way rejoicing.”*** When someone is saved by Jesus, joy is birthed within them.

According to verse 40, Philip traveled up the Mediterranean coast ***“and as he passed through, he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.”*** This is similar to what we see in verse 25 when Peter and John returned to Jerusalem: ***“...they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.”*** Witnessing wherever they went was a way of life for these witnesses.

Brothers and sisters, we need to arise and go, then get close and stick, and then simply open our mouths and talk about the treasure of Christ. Tradition tells us this official went back to Ethiopia and his first convert was Candace. Thus, the gospel went to the ends of the earth.

God loves to position His people to speak with people He has prepared.

Let's flesh out these phases with some practical next steps.

1. Positioning. Think through how God wants to position you for His purposes.

- Build bridges with your neighbors. I appreciated a tweet from J.D. Greear this week: *“What if you actually viewed your neighborhood as God’s assignment for your life, a divine call to engage in his mission?”*
- See your home, workplace, or campus as a platform for ministry.
- Look for and expect divine intersections wherever you go
- The next time you are out somewhere, simply pray, *“God, who do you want me to talk to?”* which is what I did this week when I went to Arthur’s for lunch. Shortly after I sat down, an employee came over and introduced himself. He told me he’s been to EBC but needs to get back. I was able to give him some information and hopefully some motivation. That was a divine intersection.

2. Proximity. Identify one person whom God wants you to stick closely to until they get saved.

3. Proclamation. Determine to open your mouth and speak of the treasure of Christ the next time you have opportunity.

- Ask God to give you the courage to share the gospel
- Consider God’s call to full-time missionary ministry

We’ll continue to use technology as a tool for ministry *and* we’ll look for ways God wants to position us to speak with people He has prepared.

I experienced this last weekend right before the 10:45 service. A mom and her teenage daughter came up to me and introduced me to a guest who has been coming for several weeks. They asked if I had time to talk. I glanced at the screen and told them I had 40 seconds before the service started. When they told me their guest wanted to get saved, I said I had all the time in the world! We walked over

to the Fireside Room and I had the joy of hearing him repent of his sins and receive Jesus Christ as his Savior.

I almost missed this opportunity because I neglected to linger, look, and listen. I was too focused on the clock and not enough on a person God had prepared to hear the gospel. I wonder, are you ready to get saved? If you're ready right now to repent of your sins and receive Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, you could pray something like this.

Jesus, I admit I'm a sinner. I repent by turning from how I've been living and trust what You did on the Cross when You died in my place, shedding Your blood to pay the price for all that I've done. I want to be at peace with You. I believe You died on the Cross and rose again on the third day, showing Your victory over sin, Satan, death and fear. Now I receive You into my life. I open the door to You. Save me from my sins. I want to be born again. Now give me resurrection power to live the rest of my life for You and under Your leadership. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.