

Philip *as* Missionary



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: 2 Cor. 4:18, Acts 2:44–47, 4:34–37, 6:1–7, Acts 8, 21:7–10.

Memory Text: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8, NIV).

World mission was the main concern of the risen Christ during the 40 days between His crucifixion and ascension. The New Testament preserves at least five of His great commission statements: Matthew 28:18–20, Mark 16:15, Luke 24:47–49, John 20:21, and Acts 1:5–8. Together, they constitute the greatest assignment ever given to Christians. Among the commands was a geographical strategy for mission outreach, from its Jerusalem base to Judea and Samaria, then ultimately to the ends of the earth. This was a command that they, indeed, took seriously and set out to fulfill.

This geographical strategy is prominent in the mission work of Philip the evangelist. According to Acts 8, his work extended outward from Jerusalem in expanding circles. That is, it kept spreading farther and farther as time progressed.

Who was this Philip the evangelist? What does the Word of God tell us about him and the work that he did during the earliest days of the church? Finally, what lessons can we take away for ourselves from the inspired record of this early missionary?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 5.

Philip the Evangelist

“We do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18, NKJV). Think about what Paul is saying here, especially as we study this week about Philip the evangelist, someone of whom we know little except for the few references in the Bible. As we will see, though, Philip did a good work, even though most of what he accomplished we know little about. Who are some people whom you know of who have done great things for God but with little outward recognition? Why is it always important to keep the principle of Paul’s words in mind, especially if we do a work that doesn’t garner much acclaim or attention? See also 1 Cor. 4:13.

Philip was a popular Greek name that means “horse lover.” In the New Testament, there are four persons called by that name. Two had the additional name “Herod” and were part of the Herodian ruling family, which exerted a generally harsh rule over Israel in New Testament times. The remaining Philips had outstanding roles in mission.

The first, Philip of Bethsaida, was a disciple who was instrumental in bringing Nathanael to Jesus (*John 1:43–46*). Later, he brought Greeks to Jesus (*John 12:20, 21*).

The second Philip was designated “the evangelist” in Acts 21:8, to distinguish him from Philip the disciple. He first appeared in the Jerusalem church as a “table waiter” (*Acts 6:2–5*) who turned evangelist and missionary (*Acts 8:12*). His missionary service, extending over twenty years and supplemented by his four prophesying daughters, is mentioned in Acts. We know little else of his background.

“It was Philip who preached the gospel to the Samaritans; it was Philip who had the courage to baptize the Ethiopian eunuch. For a time the history of these two workers [Philip and Paul] had been closely intertwined. It was the violent persecution of Saul the Pharisee that had scattered the church at Jerusalem and destroyed the effectiveness of the organization of the seven deacons. The flight from Jerusalem had led Philip to change his manner of labor, and resulted in his pursuing the same calling to which Paul gave his life. Precious hours were these that Paul and Philip spent in each other’s society; thrilling were the memories that they recalled of the days when the light which had shone upon the face of Stephen upturned to Heaven as he suffered martyrdom flashed in its glory upon Saul the persecutor, bringing him, a helpless suppliant, to the feet of Jesus.”—Ellen G. White, *Sketches From the Life of Paul*, p. 204.

Waiting on Tables

Read Acts 2:44–47, 4:34–37. What kind of picture of the early church is presented here?

No question, things were for a time going quite well among the early believers. Of course, everyone is fallen, and before long some tensions started to rise.

Read Acts 6:1–7. What problems arose, and how did the church deal with those problems?

Rapid growth of the Jerusalem church brought with it social tension. Philip was appointed to a team to deal with it. Converts included underprivileged and economically challenged persons whose participation in the daily common meals placed increasing demands on church leaders. A murmuring about unfair distribution of food to Greek-speaking widows emerged. This was especially sensitive because of reminders by the Hebrew prophets not to neglect widows and orphans.

To resolve this serious issue, all twelve apostles gathered the believers and proposed the appointment of seven men, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, who would literally “deaconize [Greek for “serve”] tables” so the Twelve could “deaconize the Word” (see Acts 6:3, 4). All seven had Greek names, perhaps indicating a balancing of welfare service for the neglected Greek-speaking widows. Among them was Philip—the first time that this Philip is mentioned in the Bible.

The apostles argued that additional leadership was needed so that they should not be overworked by the administration of the resources necessary for communal life. They emphasized that their call was to devote themselves to the Word of God and to prayer.

What are some of the potentially divisive issues in your own local church, and how can you allow God to use you to help ease them?

Philip in Samaria

Saul, a future apostle and missionary, makes his first appearance in the Bible at the stoning of the deacon Stephen, the first Christian martyr. This wave of persecution only helped to further spread the gospel.

Read Acts 8:1–6. What was the result of the persecution of the church in Jerusalem?

Samaria was the first stop on the geographical spread of Christianity. Samaritans considered themselves descendants of Israelites left behind when Assyria exiled most of the Israelites in 722 B.C. The Jews, however, considered Samaritans to be descendants of foreigners that the Assyrians forcibly settled in Israel. Jewish-Samaritan relationships during the New Testament era were marked by tensions and outbreaks of violence. However, as we saw earlier, Jesus had already paved the way for mission work there when He dealt with the woman at the well, who, in turn, began to “evangelize” her own people.

Philip’s call to wait on tables now became that of a missionary evangelist to the Samaritans. As a refugee fleeing religious persecution in Jerusalem, he did not waste his time. He proclaimed that the Messiah, awaited by both Jews and Samaritans, had come (*Acts 8:5, 12*).

Read Acts 8:6–15. How successful was Philip’s ministry in Samaria?

Philip was used mightily of the Lord in this early foreign mission field. The statement of the woman at the well, that “Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” (*John 4:9, NKJV*), had now become a thing of the past.

What animosities, grudges, and prejudices that have poisoned your soul need to become “things of the past”? Isn’t it time to let it all go?

With the Ethiopian

According to Acts 8:26–39, Philip’s next contact was with the Ethiopian treasury administrator, bringing mission another step toward “the end of the earth” (*Acts 1:8, NKJV*). Philip was the link between Samaria and the Gaza mission. From Samaria, north of Jerusalem, Philip was called to Gaza, which is south of the city. His work in the north focused on a group; here it focused on a single person. In Samaria, Philip could proclaim Christ only from the five books of Moses, for this was all the Samaritans accepted; here he could also use the book of Isaiah, probably in Greek translation.

Read Acts 8:26–39. As you read, answer the following questions: What were the texts in Isaiah (*from Isaiah 53*) that the Ethiopian was reading, and why would they have given Philip the perfect opportunity to evangelize him?

In contrast to Philip’s work in Samaria, where he did miracles (*Acts 8:6*), all he did with the Ethiopian was study the Bible. What point can we take away from this for ourselves as we minister to others?

The Spirit of the Lord called Philip away as soon as he had finished explaining the “good news about Jesus” and had baptized the Ethiopian. Philip had no opportunity to transmit his beliefs and teachings to his new convert. The Ethiopian was left to embrace the Christian faith in the context of his African culture, guided by the Old Testament and the Spirit of God, which had already been working in him, for he already was a worshiper of the Lord and a believer in His Word.

Philip explained to the Ethiopian crucial Old Testament texts about the death of Jesus. Why must Jesus, His death and resurrection, be central to the message we give to the world? What is our message without Him?

Philip as Evangelist, Father, and Host

Philip, clearly, was anointed to do the Lord’s work. Commentators are divided on what “the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip” (*Acts* 8:39) means, whether he was simply told to go to Azotus (*vs.* 40) or was miraculously transported there. Either way, the crucial point for us is that Philip was a man surrendered to the Holy Spirit; and thus, God was able to use him to do a great work for Him.

Read Acts 8:40. What does it tell us about Philip that helps us to understand why he was named the “evangelist”?

Read Acts 21:7–10. What can we learn about Philip from these few verses?

At this stage of the story, we learn that Philip was a family man with four unmarried daughters. Philip’s call out of the deaconate into evangelism involved him in extensive travel. We know about the journey from Jerusalem to Samaria, then on to Gaza, followed by “all the towns” on the 50-mile (80-kilometer) coastline between Azotus and Caesarea. There were probably unrecorded journeys. Like all the pioneering missionaries, he would have been harassed, inconvenienced, and subjected to the “ups and downs” such commitments entail. Still, he managed his family to the extent that four daughters were deemed by the Holy Spirit suitable to receive the gift of prophecy. This testifies to good parenting and true godliness in this pioneering Christian missionary family.

The text reveals that the apostle Paul stayed with Philip “a number of days” (*vs.* 10, *NIV*). Twenty-five years earlier, Paul, then named Saul, had been an aggressive and fierce persecutor of the Christians (*Acts* 9:1, 2). His persecution of Jerusalem believers forced Philip to flee to Samaria (*Acts* 8:1–5). Now, years later, persecutor and persecuted meet in the home of Philip, who hosts Paul’s visit. What an interesting meeting of brothers and fellow workers with Christ in the great cause of bringing the gospel to the non-Jewish world!

In our work for others, why is it so crucial to never forget our first obligation, our families?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Gospel in Samaria,” in *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 103–111.

“When they were scattered by persecution they went forth filled with missionary zeal. They realized the responsibility of their mission. They knew that they held in their hands the bread of life for a famishing world; and they were constrained by the love of Christ to break this bread to all who were in need.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 106.

“And when His disciples were driven from Jerusalem, some found in Samaria a safe asylum. The Samaritans welcomed these messengers of the gospel, and the Jewish converts gathered a precious harvest from among those who had once been their bitterest enemies.”—*The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 106, 107.

Discussion Questions:

❶ As we’ve seen, the gospel breaks down barriers between people. At least, that is the ideal; the reality has at times been radically different. What is it about human beings, even among Christians—among those who understand that we are all the same before God, who understand that the Cross is the great equalizer—that we allow cultural, social, and other barriers to divide us to the great extent that they still do? How can the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which is so universal, discourage such prejudices?

❷ As we saw, the persecution of the early church caused believers to flee, and as a result, the gospel started spreading in ways that it might not have done without persecution. Though God was able to bring good out of it, we must remember that religious persecution is never good, never right, never justified. What should our attitude be toward those who are facing religious persecution, even if we don’t agree with their religious beliefs? See *Luke 6:31*.

Despair to Hope: Part 2

by CHENGHORN THEAN, CAMBODIA

That night Chen sold five books for five dollars each. She was convinced that God is the true God. But a month later, her husband told her to stop selling books. “Your work is bringing shame on me,” he said.

Chen’s husband demanded that she stop believing in Jesus and stop selling books. “I can’t do that,” she told him. “I believe in Jesus; I have seen His power at work. And I am selling books to feed myself because you refuse to give me any money.”

“If you refuse to give up this nonsense, I will leave you,” he said. But Chen refused to give up her new faith. When she was baptized a few months later, her husband left her and went to live with his mother and his sons.

For several years, Chen has tried to visit her sons, but she hasn’t been allowed to see them. Although her life is difficult, Chen has not let her personal troubles discourage her. She continues to sell literature to support herself and invites people to the church when they show interest in the books she sells. When people are too poor to buy a book, she urges them to come to the church to meet God. She shares her testimony with them and testifies that God is faithful to those who trust Him.

One woman who used to pay Chen to paint her nails asked Chen why she had become a Christian. Chen smiled and told the woman that God is a loving and powerful God, and He answers her prayers. As the two women stood talking outside the woman’s home, the woman realized that one of her precious earrings was missing. “We must find it!” the woman said, feverishly searching in the dirt for the missing jewelry. “I inherited this from my mother. I must find it.”

The two women searched together for the earring. Chen knew that if they didn’t find the earring, the woman might accuse Chen and the church. The earring was found. The woman was so impressed that Chen’s God could help her find her earring that she asked Chen to take her to Chen’s church on Sabbath.

Chen was crushed when her husband told her that he no longer wanted her for his wife. But Chen put her trust in God; and recently she met a Global Mission pioneer, and the two plan to marry. “Truly God has provided for all my needs,” she says with a gentle smile.

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The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Acts 8:26–39*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand that God can empower ordinary men and women for mission if they are faithfully committed to Him.

Feel: Be assured that God can give him or her the insight and wisdom needed to face challenges in his or her witness for Him.

Do: Open his or her heart and mind to God’s voice and recommit to responding to His call to service.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Equipping the Ordinary

A The early church was blessed and growing, but what happened that clearly showed they were still fallible human beings (*Acts 6:1*)?

B Philip was one of the deacons appointed to help with this crisis. How did the Holy Spirit later equip him even further—now to minister in Samaria (*Acts 8:5–13*) and to the Ethiopian eunuch (*Acts 8:26–39*)?

C Philip was the father of four daughters. How should we balance our priority to care for our family and the call to devote time to mission and service?

II. Feel: Facing the Unexpected

A When persecution of the church forced Philip to a city in Samaria, he took the opportunity to witness for his Lord. How do you think you would respond if persecution forced you to flee your home for another country?

B What comfort can we take from the way God worked in Philip’s life to equip him to face new mission challenges?

III. Do: Available for Service

A What practical steps could we take toward overcoming our fears and putting aside distractions to become more open to outreach and witness?

B What are the ways in which we are prepared to be available for whatever type of service God calls us to? How can we trust in His power rather than our own abilities?

► **Summary:** God equips His followers for all types of service and ministry; His only requirement is that we’re willing and open to His leading.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Acts 8:1–40*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Philip’s ministry takes place at a critical time for the early church, as the power of the gospel to reach all peoples begins to be revealed. It’s a time of radical adjustment for the church as the good news, for the first time, goes past Jerusalem and Israel—even, as Jesus foretold, to the ends of the earth (*Acts 1:8*). This opens the door to new questions and challenges, and the answers the early church found, and the way it responded, provide valuable lessons for us today as we seek to participate in God’s mission to the world.

Just for Teachers: This lesson introduces us to Philip, a faithful follower of Jesus who is suddenly plunged into an exciting life of missionary service that he could never have imagined. He fled persecution, confronted a sorcerer, preached to unbelievers, cast out demons, witnessed to a high official of the Ethiopian royal court, and discovered what it meant to be surprised daily by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Today, focus on the important mission lessons that can be drawn from the life of Philip. You have the opportunity to awaken in your class a sense of the excitement that gripped the early Christians as they began to understand Christ’s mission mandate.

Opening Discussion: As you read through the book of Acts, it becomes clear that there’s no way to stop the gospel. It finds its way to Macedonia, Ephesus, Damascus, and even to the heart of pagan Rome. Early in Acts, the apostle Peter’s rooftop experience signals that God has plans much wider than His Jewish people. And, sure enough, we see, through Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch, God’s plans to reveal Himself to the ends of the earth.

For first-century Romans and Greeks, Ethiopians lived literally at the end of the earth. And now the first recorded African convert is returning to his home country, the end of the earth, carrying the good news of Jesus Christ.

Consider This: For the first-century Christians, the ends of the earth meant lands that were geographically distant to Jerusalem. For twenty-first-century Christians, what are our equivalent ends of the earth?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: In this week’s lesson, we see the transformation in Philip from deacon to evangelist. In fact, he becomes one of the most effective missionaries in the early Christian church. Take the opportunity to focus your class on those attributes that made Philip an ideal candidate for the mission he was given.

Bible Commentary

I. “Ready to Serve” (*Review Acts 6:1–7 with your class.*)

The Bible gives us a mere line drawing of Philip rather than a fully realized oil painting. But there are clues to Philip’s character and the depth of his commitment to the gospel of Jesus.

We know that Philip was a deacon and was one of the seven chosen to help sort out the complaints about distribution of food. *Diakonos*, the Greek word for deacon, is translated elsewhere as “servant” or “assistant.” When Jesus tells His disciples that if anybody wants to be great he or she must be a servant, He uses the word *diakonos* (*Matt. 23:11*).

Deacons played a serious and important role in supporting the early church. In his first letter to Timothy, the apostle Paul writes that candidates should first be tested before being given the assignment of deacon (*1 Tim. 3:10*). They should have proven themselves as good husbands and fathers (*vs. 12, NIV*) and hold “the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience” (*vs. 9, NIV*). They must be honest, sincere, “worthy of respect,” and temperate (*vs. 11*). Obviously, the role of deacon was not something to give just to the first people who put up their hands for the position. Philip was a well-respected, faithful Christian who was willing to serve.

Consider This: How does willingness to serve with humility prepare someone for mission?

II. “Called and Gifted” (*Review Acts 21:7–10 with your class.*)

When Philip fled persecution in Jerusalem, he was known as Philip the deacon. By the time he returned, he had been transformed into Philip the evangelist (*Acts 21:8*). A lot had happened in the interim. We witness a humble man, willing to serve, who is endowed by the Holy Spirit for an important role (*Eph. 4:11*). We see that gift in action as he witnesses to the Ethiopian eunuch. We also learn that he was a powerful speaker and had the gift of performing signs and wonders.

Consider This: When Philip fled into Samaria to escape persecution, the Spirit was at work transforming adversity into opportunity. In what ways do we often fail to see the hand of God furthering His purpose through the challenges we face?

III. “Also for the Eunuchs” (*Review Acts 8:26–40 with your class.*)

A defining feature of Philip’s evangelism seems to be his work among outsiders, reflecting Jesus’ imperative to break down barriers that divide humanity (*Eph. 2:14–22*). The Ethiopian eunuch may have been rich and powerful in his home country (a region roughly corresponding with today’s Sudan), but among the Jews in Israel, he had two negative marks against him. First, he was a Gentile, and second, he was a eunuch—which automatically barred him from the “assembly of the LORD” (*Deut. 23:1, NIV*). (Some speculate, however, that the use of the word *eunuch* here simply could have meant a “court officer.”)

But a beautiful promise is found in the same book that Philip studied with the eunuch: “I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off” (*Isa. 56:5, NKJV*). Philip was given the privilege of sharing that blessing with the African eunuch.

Consider This: Philip, born and raised within Jewish culture, should have had a natural aversion to associating with a eunuch. What in his ministry experience could have helped break down this barrier of prejudice? What are the lessons here for us today?

IV. “Meeting People Where They Are” (*Review Acts 8:6–8, 8:30–35 with your class.*)

One of the key principles of biblical missiology is to meet people “where they are.” When ministering to the Ethiopian eunuch, Philip immediately engages him at his point of interest by explaining a passage he is struggling with in the book of Isaiah. Philip takes the opportunity to give a Bible study.

In Samaria, Philip preaches, but he also breaks down barriers and brings joy to the city through the signs he performed (*Acts 8:6–8*).

Thought Questions: In what ways does effective mission require us to be as knowledgeable about the people we’re trying to reach as the message we’re trying to communicate? How have our mission efforts, in the past, reflected the importance of understanding our “audience”? In practical terms, what does this require from us?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: With your class, explore the following question: In what ways can Philip’s ministry as deacon and evangelist serve as an example for our ministry today?

Application Questions:

- ❶ Discuss with your class cultural differences that might exist in the church today. For example, a lot has been written recently about Christianity in the “Global North” (the developed countries) and the “Global South” (the less-developed countries). What cultural differences might the church face in these two regions? What principles should guide the church in maintaining unity, despite such differences and backgrounds?
- ❷ Luke, the author of Acts, has a burden for those people living on the margins of society—the neglected, the ostracized, those looked down upon by the mainstream. He shows how the gospel is not only for fine, upstanding Jewish people. It’s also for the poor, the blind, the deaf, the disabled, and the foreigner. In the story of Philip’s ministry to the eunuch, Luke shows how Jesus is good news to a foreigner who would have been totally excluded from the Jewish community and temple. What practical things can we do to make our churches welcome all people?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: New Testament scholar F. Scott Spencer says that religion and society were both “sharply antagonistic to eunuchs in the Mediterranean world” at the time of Philip. So, the story of the Ethiopian eunuch’s conversion, baptism, and entrance into the Christian community would have been seen as “a radical transgression of prevailing cultural boundaries.”—F. Scott Spencer, “The Ethiopian Eunuch and His Bible: A Social-Science Analysis,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, vol. 22, issue 4 (1992): pp. 155–165. In the following activity, invite the class to consider how we treat people on the margins of our community.

Activity: Ask the class who they think might be considered modern-day eunuchs—people who are on the fringes of society or perhaps looked down on by others. If possible, make a list on a chalkboard or sheet of paper. How do we as a church treat this group of people? How does this group view the church? What practical steps can we take to change attitudes and show the spirit of Jesus to them?