

# *To Samaria & the Ends of the Earth*

**WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY**

6<sup>th</sup> in a six-part series

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*Acts 8:26–40 (NRSV)*

<sup>26</sup> Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) <sup>27</sup> So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship <sup>28</sup> and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. <sup>29</sup> Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” <sup>30</sup> So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” <sup>31</sup> He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. <sup>32</sup> Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
so he does not open his mouth.

<sup>33</sup> In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.”

<sup>34</sup> The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” <sup>35</sup> Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. <sup>36</sup> As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” <sup>38</sup> He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. <sup>39</sup> When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. <sup>40</sup> But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

*The Holy Spirit empowered and enabled Jesus’ followers to carry the Good News to the ends of the earth and to bring a new way of life, a better way, to countless millions.*

*We are still part of this Spirit-guided mission.*

The gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are two volumes of a single literary work. Together, they tell the story of Jesus and the early church spanning more than six decades. The hinge point of the two volumes, ending the first and beginning the second, is Jesus’ ascension, i.e., his return to the Father. Before disappearing into the clouds, Jesus tells the gathered disciples that “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). This command from Jesus wasn’t new, but a reiteration of a promise made long before.

*A promise made and kept*

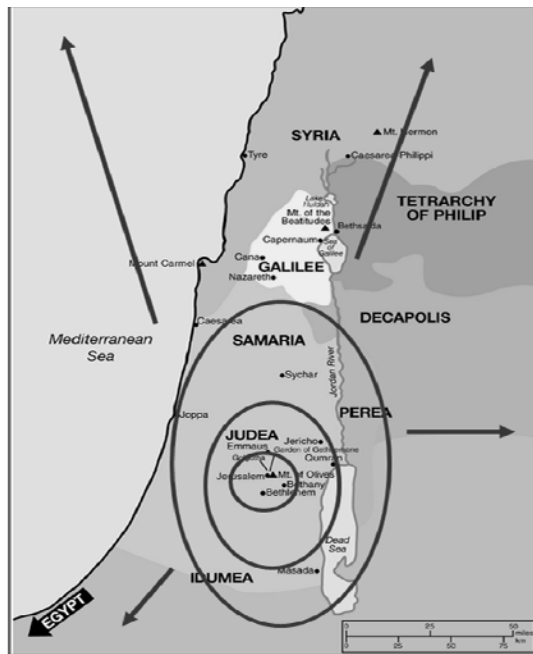
God makes many promises in Scripture. God promises Noah that never again will he destroy all life with a flood (Genesis 9:11). God promises Moses that he will rescue the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 6:2-8). Jesus promises his disciples that the Father would send the Spirit of God to help them and be with them forever (John 14:16).

God made some wonderful promises to Abraham as well. God will make Abraham’s family into a great nation. God will make Abraham’s name great. But the promise to Abraham that shapes all of God’s subsequent promises is this: “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:2-3). This is the purpose of it all; the end to which the other promises point. One day, all the nations will come to God.

God did not choose Abraham merely for Abraham's own sake. God did not save the Israelites from Egypt merely for their own sake. Rather, this was how God set about to renew and redeem all of humanity and all of creation from the damage wrought by the humans' rebellion in the Garden of Eden. When the children of Abraham, i.e., the people of God, heard God well, they understood that they were God's "treasured possession" and "holy nation" (Exodus 19:5-6) so that they could be the ones *through whom* God would rescue his good creation. More than 700 years before Jesus, the prophet Micah (4:1-5) spoke of a time when the nations would "go up to the mountain of the LORD," beating their "swords into plowshares" and their "spears into pruning hooks."

Strangely, the followers of Jesus claimed that in his death and resurrection, God had kept his promise, that he had been faithful to his covenant with Israel. Peter and the disciples, all Jews themselves, claimed that Jesus was not only the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, but also the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Jesus is not only, they said, the savior of Israel but the savior of the world. The time had come to fulfill the promise made long before to Abraham. Jesus' disciples were to "make disciples of all nations," (Matthew 28:19) and to be Jesus' "witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

*"To Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth"*



As illustrated by this map, you can think of Jesus' geographic instructions in terms of concentric circles that center on Jerusalem and then extend outward to Judea and then Samaria and then all the world.

Acts 1-7 concentrates on the work in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit arrives during the festival of Pentecost and Peter rises to preach a stirring sermon in the temple courtyards. 3,000 come to faith in Jesus Christ that day.

As the new community begins their life together, they devote themselves to learning and fellowship, to sharing meals and

prayers. Peter and John not only teach, they perform miracles (Acts 3). They are arrested and released (Acts 4). The community learns what it means to be a Spirit-formed people with whom God, in the person of the Spirit, is present. Two people not only test the Spirit, but they lie to the Holy Spirit as well. They both die as a result (Acts 5).

As the community grows, organization is needed and the apostles tap Stephen and others to see to the daily needs of the community, freeing the apostles to pray, to preach, and to teach (Acts 6). This same Stephen is also arrested and then stoned to death (Acts 7). The Holy Spirit is the one at the center of action across these stories. The Spirit is referred to 23 times just in the first seven chapters of Acts.

In chapter 8, Luke tells us that after Stephen's stoning and the severe persecution that followed, the believers do not back off. Instead, Philip heads north into Samaria to preach the Good News. Samaria was not Jewish, though the Jews understood them to be like distant cousins who had removed themselves from the proper worship of God. Many Samaritans respond to the word and Peter and John head to Samaria to make sure that the people are properly baptized and received the Holy Spirit, who is God's gift to all believers

(Acts 8:14-17). Not surprisingly, the apostles must teach the Samaritans and, in particular, a man named Simon that the Good News is neither magic nor is it for sale.

You'd think that Philip would get a rest, but no. One of God's angels shows up and tells Philip to head back toward Jerusalem and make his way south on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. On the road there is an Ethiopian eunuch<sup>1</sup>, a man of very high status, the "Secretary of the Treasury," to the Ethiopian queen. Here is Will Willimon's description of the man<sup>2</sup>:

Luke's audience would be fascinated with this Ethiopian. In the Greco-Roman world the term "Ethiopian" was often applied to black people. The Odyssey speaks of "far-off Ethiopians ... the furthestmost of men" (1:22-23). In other words, here is a person from an exotic land, the edge of the world, timbuktu, someone whose dark skin made him an object of wonder and admiration among Jews and Romans (cf. F. M. Snowden). This warns us not to consider the Ethiopian as a despised or deprived person—quite the opposite. He is a powerful, though exotic, court official, a well-placed and significant person who is receptive to the truth. He beseeches Philip to interpret for him and then to baptize him. Here is an earnest inquirer who reaches out and is graciously included into the actions of God.

The Spirit then tells Philip to run over to the chariot. After being directed to this place by an angel and now the Spirit, Philip surely grasps that this man is the one whom God wants him to meet. The eunuch is reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip asks the man if he understands what he is reading. The eunuch replies that he can't, for there is no one to guide him. So Philip sits down with the man and helps him to see that the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 has come and it is Jesus. Then, the man orders the chariot to stop so that he and Philip could go down to the water's edge. There, Philip baptizes him. Then, surely to the eunuch's astonishment, the Spirit "beams" Philip to Azotus, which is ancient Ashdod and is about 23 miles north-northeast of Gaza.

What is most important for us to grasp in these stories is that the Spirit of God is the one who is guiding things along and making things happen. The Good News is to spread ever outward and we are not speaking only of geography.

The Good News has spread from the Jews to the despised Samaritans and now to this Ethiopian. He has made a long pilgrimage to Jerusalem, which in itself was a measure of devotion among the Jews. The man studies Scripture as well as he can and worshipped the Lord God as well as he could, for eunuchs were not allowed in the temple. His castration means that he can never be a Jew, no matter his devotion to God (Deut. 23:1). The irony here is that the man is one of the outcasts he reads about in Isaiah, where God promises that even the "eunuchs who keep the Sabbath" and "hold fast to the covenant" will be given an "everlasting name that will not be cut off" (56:3-8). It is through Christ that this outcast is brought into the people of God.

God made a promise. God has kept that promise. And now God, in the person of his Holy Spirit, is working through his people to see that through the proclaiming of the Good News, truly, all the families of the earth will be blessed.

This is how we can out live our lives. We embrace our Lord who has reconciled us with God and in whom we share in God's eternity. We see, truly see, those in deep need all around us and we set ourselves to sharing with them what God has provided for us. And we go out into the world sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ that we have been blessed to receive. I suppose it comes down to this simple truth: the more we share, the more we live. And an abundant living is God's hope for us all.

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<sup>1</sup>Eunuchs often held important position in ancient middle-eastern kingdoms because they couldn't have children on whose behalf they would conspire against their employer.

<sup>2</sup>From William E. Willimon's commentary on Acts in the *Interpretation* series.

## Memorizing Scripture Verses – a review

For the last three months, many of us have been memorizing a new Bible verse or passage each week. So far, we've tackled a baker's dozen – thirteen. (Are there any bakers left who give out a baker's dozen? Does anyone even know what I mean?) For the next four weeks, we are going to review these in batches. It's a chance to test yourself, to catch up, or even to get started at this.

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new. (2 Cor. 5:17 NRSV)

This verse speaks to the Christian claim that everything changed with the coming of Christ. He inaugurated the arrival of God's kingdom and those who, by virtue of their faith in Christ, participate fully are new creations. We have been born anew (John 3) in Christ. Indeed, all the cosmos has been created anew and awaits only the consummation of God's rescue.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2 NRSV)

Because, as God's people, we have been born anew and are new creations, our minds must be renewed and reshaped into minds that can think themselves what will please God. And what is God's will for our lives? That our lives be characterized by what is good, acceptable and perfect.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

(Deuteronomy 6:4-5 NRSV)

Like all Jewish boys of his day, Jesus learned these words as the opening words of his daily prayer, the *Shema*. As an adult, Jesus told a skeptical Pharisee and lawyer that this was the greatest of all the LORD's commandments. Next week, we'll learn the second commandment chosen by Jesus, which is integral with and inseparable from the first.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The following questions for discussion and reflection are from the Fellowship Group curriculum for the current series, prepared by St. Andrew's preaching pastors.

1. Philip leaves a legacy with the eunuch. Philip deeply affected the eunuch's life but he didn't wait around for accolades or rewards from him. Philip moved on to the next thing God had for him to do. Have you ever ministered to someone and just moved on? How was God using you in the moment?
2. The people who started St Andrew 25 years ago have left a legacy that is affecting our lives and the lives of people in our city today. How has the ministry of St. Andrew affected your life?
3. How are you, through the church, affecting the lives of others in the church and in the city? If an example doesn't quickly pop into your mind, then think of how you could envision affecting people's lives through the ministry of St. Andrew. How could God use you to extend the ministry of our church?
4. What is your prayer for St. Andrew Frisco as it begins its ministry? Do you know people who could be a part of this new ministry? Do you know how to get them connected?
5. What will you do today to leave a legacy for your family, your friends, your faith, your church?
6. How can you empower others to leave legacies? How could you help a youth or a young adult find the value in making good decisions and building a good life worth remembering?
7. Who inspired you to live a life that makes a difference?

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Romans 1:8-17</b> Paul longs to visit the Christians in Rome; Paul knows that he is obligated to bring the Good News to everyone (see v. 14-15).</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, 1 Thessalonians 1</b> Paul is thankful for the believers in Thessalonica. The Lord's message "rang out" from them across all of Greece (see v. 8).</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Matthew 28:18-20</b> Jesus sends out his disciples. This is no less true now than it was then.</p>	<p><b>Thursday, 1 Peter 3:8-22</b> Peter is writing to comfort Christians who are suffering for being followers of Jesus and for doing good. See esp. v. 15-16. We are always to speak of Jesus Christ with "gentleness and respect." This can be easy to forget!</p>
<p><b>Friday, Luke 10:1-6</b> Jesus instructs his disciples that when they go out to proclaim the Good News, they are to look for persons of peace.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Weekly Joys and Concerns</b></p>

