

Main Idea: In Acts 8:26-40, we see a divine appointment in which God orchestrated three events for His glory. We’re going to examine the account, and then consider what we must do to make the most out of the divine appointments in our lives.

- I. See God in the contact (26-29).
 - A. He prepared Philip (26).
 1. God told Philip what to do.
 2. Philip walked by faith.
 - B. He prepared an Ethiopian (27-28).
 1. The man was important.
 2. The man was religious.
 3. The man was searching.
 - C. He prepared a meeting (29).
- II. See God in the conversation (30-35).
 - A. Philip asked a question (30-31).
 1. In so doing, he obtained information.
 2. In addition, he obtained an invitation.
 - B. The Ethiopian shared his frustration (32-34).
 1. He could read what the Bible says.
 2. He couldn’t understand what the Bible means.
 - C. Philip began a Bible study (35).
 1. He started where the man was.
 2. He took the man to Jesus.
- III. See God in the conversion (36-40).
 - A. He transformed the Ethiopian (36-38).
 - B. He transported Philip (39-40).
 - C. He took both men to further divine appointments.

Make It Personal: If we’re to make the most of divine appointments...

1. We must be available.
2. We must be prepared.
3. We must live with God’s agenda, not our own.

Scripture Reading: Luke 14:15-24

Divine appointments. Life is full of them. The problem is, however, we often miss them. Though most of us would heartily confess our belief that God is in control of every detail of our lives, we don’t always live with that perspective.

The fact that when you went out to eat last week, you were seated at the third table on the left side of the room, rather than the second table—a coincidence? The fact that Sally was your waitress rather than Marge—another mere coincidence? The people that sat at the table next to you—were they there by chance?

The truth is, God is sovereign. Furthermore, our sovereign God is orchestrating the events of our lives to accomplish His sovereign plan. He’s forming a people for His praise, rescuing helpless sinners from every nation, language, and tribe. That’s His agenda.

What’s more, the Lord has determined to use His people to reach and other people and introduce them to His Son. That being the case, life is full of *divine appointments*.

“Just what is a divine appointment?” you ask. We’re going to see one this morning. It involved Philip and a government official from Ethiopia, and it’s found in Acts 8.

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this text, see the Acts series preached at WBC in 2001.

If Acts 8 says anything to us, it's that God's ways are not always our ways. In Acts 8, God allowed persecution to strike and scatter His church. As a result, His people fled for their lives. Some ended up in Samaria, one of which was Philip.

At first, it didn't make sense. Why would God allow a man like Saul to persecute His people? Why didn't He do something about it? Then it became apparent He was doing something. He used the persecution to fulfill Acts 1:8, and to take the gospel to new territory in Samaria.

Philip spearheaded the effort (see verse 5). As a result of his preaching and miracle-working, crowds heard about Jesus, and many Samaritans became disciples.

Last time we considered the effect the gospel had on one man, a sorcerer by the name of Simon. This week, we'll see how it impacted another non-Jew, an influential man from Ethiopia.

In Acts 8:26-40, we see a divine appointment involving Philip and the Ethiopian. It's a fascinating story in which God orchestrated three events for His glory. If we are going to make the most out of the divine appointments in our lives, we need to learn to see God in three ways.

I. See God in the contact (26-29).

Nothing just "happens" in a world where the Sovereign rules. God specializes in arranging providential contacts. He brings people together. In churches. In the checkout line. On ballfields. On airplanes. In classrooms. To bring about this particular contact, God prepared three things.

A. He prepared Philip (26). "Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.""

This kind of reminds me of what God often did with Elijah and Elisha. He gave them special jobs to do and used angelic messengers in the process. Hebrews 1:14 says that angels are "ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation." In Philip's preparation, two things occurred.

1. God told Philip what to do. Please note that the instructions were very specific. This was no vague "hunch" like people sometimes claim to have today, "I just have this feeling God wants me to do such-and-such."

No. God told Philip exactly what to do: Go south to the road. Not just to any road. Go to the *desert* road, the one that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza. God gave Philip some very specific instructions.

On the other hand, there were a lot of unanswered questions in the assignment. Why go there? The angel didn't say. And where exactly on the Desert Road was he to go? After all, the stretch from Jerusalem to Gaza was fifty miles. Again, he didn't say. And what was he supposed to look for when he got there? Again, no answer. Just *go*. That was God's instruction.

Think of how this must have sounded to Philip. He had a great ministry going in Samaria. He'd led many to Christ, and had even cracked the hard case of Simon the sorcerer. The new church obviously needed his teaching ability. And surely, the Lord wouldn't want him to leave this successful ministry to go—where?—to an obscure place in the desert?

Philip must have wondered, "Why would the Lord want me to leave this fruitful ministry to go to the *desert*? You find people in cities and towns, not in deserts." It didn't make sense.

Philip could have resisted, and he could have sounded rather pious in doing so. After all, he wasn't living in sin. He was already serving the Lord.

But not Philip. God told him what to do, and he did it. Why? Because...

2. *Philip walked by faith.* Verse 27 says, "So he started out." Where would he end up? He didn't know, nor did he need to know. When you walk by faith you do so one step at a time. You walk in the light God gives you today, knowing that tomorrow's light will come when needed.

Dear friends, God's ways are not always our ways. He has a much bigger and clearer perspective on things than we do. That's why He gives the marching orders. And that's why our job is simply to obey with the full confidence that His will is best.

So Philip obeyed the Lord. Not because it made sense. Not because he was dissatisfied where he was in Samaria. Certainly not because it was an opportunity for job advancement. He obeyed because he wanted to please his Master.

E.g.—

Are you willing to go wherever and do whatever the Lord wants? His will may not always make sense at first, but it will always be best.

Think about something. The Lord could have sent the angel directly to the Ethiopian to tell him how to be saved. Instead He sent the angel to Philip, who told Philip to go.

That's God's way. God didn't give the great commission to angels. He gave it to His people, to *us*.

B. He prepared an Ethiopian (27-28). We're told how in verses 27-28, "So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship,²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet."

Somewhere along the way—Luke doesn't tell us where—Philip ran into an international traveler from Africa, an Ethiopian.

By the way, modern day Ethiopia is quite smaller than the region called Ethiopia in biblical times. In the Bible, Ethiopia refers to a large area of Africa south of Egypt, located between the Egyptian city of Aswan and the Sudanese city of Khartoum. It corresponds to the modern region called Nubia. This is the area that the Queen of Sheba came from to visit Solomon.

We learn some significant details in the text about the man Philip met.

1. *The man was important.* I wonder what went through Philip's mind when he saw this entourage in the desert. This must have been an impressive site. Since the man was in charge of all the treasury of the queen, we can assume he was traveling in an elaborate caravan.

Candace is not so much a proper name, but a title, like Pharaoh or Caesar. This man was what we might call the queen's Minister of Finance. This was a costly journey, again underscoring that this was an important man.

2. *The man was religious.* He'd traveled all the way to Jerusalem to worship, a distance of at least two hundred miles. Quite likely, this man was not Hebrew speaking. He probably was black.

We're told he was a eunuch, which was not uncommon for government officials in those days. If it's true that he'd been emasculated, he would have been denied full access to the temple (Deut 23:1), and unable to participate fully in the Jewish worship services. In fact, he would not have been allowed to become a full proselyte to Judaism.

3. *The man was searching.* There must have been an emptiness in his soul, a yearning to know God, for him to make such a costly and even dangerous trek. He was looking for answers to the meaning of his life. We have all been created by God and will never find lasting fulfillment until we come to know Him personally.

Apparently, while in Jerusalem the man made a purchase and obtained a copy of the book of Isaiah. He must have paid a pretty penny for that scroll. Not many people had books in those days, let alone a portion of the Bible. The fact that a Gentile obtained the Hebrew Scriptures indicates this was a serious seeker. Because God was at work in his heart, he was searching for answers.

He was definitely looking in the right place, too. And he was about to find answers.

Perhaps you, too, are searching. That's good, but make sure you search in the right place. If you want to know God, you'll find Him in the Book by which He has revealed Himself to us.

So God prepared Philip, this eunuch from Ethiopia, and something else.

C. He prepared a meeting (29). "The Spirit told Philip, 'Go to that chariot and stay near it.'"

Remember, Philip's walking by faith. He'd obeyed his first instruction—*Go south to the desert road*. Now he receives his second instruction—*Go to that chariot*. The first time it was an angel. Now it's the Spirit Himself.

Again, notice the command is both specific *and* vague. Go to *that* chariot. But then what? What if this powerful government official says, "What are you doing trespassing near my chariot?"? Philip would feel kind of foolish, wouldn't he?

Once again, only enough light for one step at a time. I like Kent Hughes' commentary on the scene, "And suddenly there stood Philip, God's hitchhiker. "Have Spirit, will travel."²

Ian Thomas tells how he got on an airplane once and was so tired he planned to sleep. But then he heard a "psst" and then another "psst." He turned toward the sound, and heard a man say, "I am reading in the Bible about Nicodemus in John 3, and I do not understand it. Do you know anything about the Bible?"³

The week before last Sherry and I met a school teacher from south of London, England, vacationing in the Dominican Republic. She teaches at an all-girls catholic school, and she's Mormon. When we told her we were from Ohio, she said she had a nephew who got a scholarship to play basketball at a small college in Ohio named Shawnee State University. She was amazed when we told her we lived eight miles away.

It's amazing to watch God work. He specializes at orchestrating contacts. So often we miss them. We're in a hurry. We're so busy we don't have time for the people God brings into our lives. Let's resolves, by His grace, to learn to see God in the contact.

II. See God in the conversation (30-35).

Watch what Philip did with the contact in verse 30, "Then Philip ran up to the chariot." Although the Ethiopian's caravan must have been impressive, Philip wasn't intimidated. After all, why should an ambassador for the Lord of the universe feel uncomfortable before a mere servant of a human? The Spirit said, *Go*, and according to the account, not only did Philip go, he *ran* up to the chariot!

² Kent Hughes, *Acts*, p. 120.

³ As told by Kent Hughes, p. 120.

Recently I ran across a challenging comment on courage by Charles Spurgeon in his book, *An All-Round Ministry: Addresses to Ministers and Students*.

May you also possess the grand moral characteristic of courage! By this, I do not mean impertinence, impudence, or self-conceit; but real courage to do and say calmly the right thing, and to go straight on at all hazards, though there should be none to give you a good word. I am astonished at the number of Christians who are afraid to speak the truth to their brethren. I thank God that I can say this,—there is no member of my church, no officer of the church, and no man in the world, to whom I am afraid to say before his face what I would say behind his back. Under God, I owe my position in my own church to the absence of all policy, and the habit of always saying what I mean.⁴

As Philip walked up to the chariot, he heard something that must have caused his heart to skip a beat. The Ethiopian was reading a text out loud.

That may strike us as odd, but in ancient times, people usually read out loud. They did so for a couple of reasons. For one, the print in ancient documents was hard to read, with letters often placed in block form with no spaces between them. For another, since there weren't many books there weren't many experienced readers, and it's easier for beginners to sound out words aloud.

It's *what* the man read that caught Philip's attention. He was reading God's Word, specifically Isaiah the prophet. Now Philip's beginning to see why the Lord brought him here!

I love what Philip did next. We could improve our evangelistic efforts a whole lot if we'd follow his example.

A. Philip asked a question (30-31). “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.” A simple question, yes, but how strategic. Why did Philip ask that question? He gained two things from it.

1. *In so doing, he obtained information.* Verse 31, “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?”

What did Philip learn from that answer? Here's a man who has a Bible, but doesn't understand it. In fact, he's willing to admit he doesn't understand it. And what's more, he's willing to admit he needs someone to explain it to him.

Friends, just because a person has a Bible doesn't mean he's a Christian, nor that he understands it, nor even that he wants to understand it. We mustn't make assumptions. We need to learn to ask questions, to find out where people are spiritually.

By asking this question, Philip got some valuable information.

2. *In addition, he obtained an invitation.* Verse 31 concludes, “So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.”

First Philip was willing to get involved. Now he's invited. Maybe we'd receive more invitations like this if we were willing to get involved in people's lives and ask good questions.

I've discussed the Bible with non-Christians in some interesting places before. In living rooms, across kitchen tables, beside hospital beds, in restaurants, on a fishing boat, in offices, in a car, and in my study. But never in a chariot!

⁴ Spurgeon, Charles. *The Essential Works of Charles Spurgeon* (Kindle Locations 566-570). GLH Publishing. Kindle Edition.

Brothers and sisters, if we're serious about making Christ known we must be willing to go *where people are*. The early church didn't do evangelism in church on Sunday morning. Nor on Sunday evening. For that matter, they didn't do evangelism in church. When they came to church, they gathered for worship and edification. Then they scattered for evangelism.

So Philip began the conversation with a question. Then the Ethiopian spoke up.

B. The Ethiopian shared his frustration (32-34). Luke says, "The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture."

Stop there for a moment. When Philip approached the chariot, the Ethiopian was reading Isaiah 53. We can assume then that the man had already read the first part of Isaiah. Perhaps he read about Isaiah's call to the ministry in chapter 6. If so, he learned from Isaiah's vision of the seraphim that God is *holy*. And as he read through chapters 1-39 he learned that a holy God will judge sin. Then as he moved into chapter forty and beyond he learned that God desires to have compassion on undeserving people.

But how can a holy God demonstrate compassion towards sinners? How can He be consistent with both His justice and mercy? On what basis can sinful people enter into a right relationship with Him, the holy One? The answer comes in chapter 53. And the answer relates to the Ethiopian's confusion.

Luke says, "The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth."³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."

Answer this. Who is Isaiah talking about? Who was it that was led like a lamb to slaughter and did not defend Himself, who was deprived of justice and died in humiliation? The answer is *Jesus*.

We know that, don't we? But the world is full of people who *don't* know that. Like this man, two things are true of them.

1. *He could read what the Bible says.*

2. *He couldn't understand what the Bible means.* In fact, listen to his question, "The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?"

The Bible doesn't make sense to the non-Christian. Oh, he may know some Bible facts, but he can't make sense of them. And the reason he can't is that he doesn't know the Author (see 1 Cor 2:14).

Watch what Philip did to help his new friend. He didn't share his opinions. Rather...

C. Philip began a Bible study (35). "Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

Right here's a great evangelistic "method," if you want to call it that. It's an evangelistic Bible study. I encourage you to try it, and if you do, follow these two guidelines modeled by Philip.

1. *He started where the man was.* That is, he started with the man's question. Then...

2. *He took the man to Jesus.* That's the goal of evangelism, to tell people about *Jesus*. Certainly, not about our church traditions, and views on politics. But not even about a lot of issues the Bible addresses, like church and politics. That's not what this unsaved person needs to know. He needs to know...about *Jesus*.

Know this. The Bible, from beginning to end, is a book about Jesus. Though His name doesn't appear the Old Testament, He is the main character of both Old and New Testaments. And Philip actually preached Jesus from the Old Testament.

Think about this carefully. You can't understand Genesis 1:1 ("In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth") without talking about Jesus, because Jesus is God. In fact, according to Colossians 1 He is the person of the Godhead who performed the creative act. You can't explain the Passover in Exodus apart from discussing Jesus, for the blood placed on the door-frames merely anticipated the shedding of Messiah's blood. You can't understand the sacrificial system in Leviticus without understanding who Jesus is, for the lambs of OT times merely foreshadowed "the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." And on we go through the Old Testament, as the biblical account prepares the world for the coming of Messiah.

Yes, Philip told this man about Jesus. There is no other name that can save, dear friend. Do you know Him? We're studying a divine appointment this morning. This may be *your* divine appointment, too. Are you a sinner? Believe in Christ today, and you will be saved from your sins and receive the gift of eternal life.

In the case of the Ethiopian, God orchestrated a contact, then a conversation, and we need to see Him in the contacts and conversations He brings into our lives.

III. See God in the conversion (36-40).

God accomplished three things that day...

A. He transformed the Ethiopian (36-38). "As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?"

It happened somewhere between Jerusalem and Gaza. The Holy Spirit regenerated the Ethiopian's heart, and he accepted Jesus as his Savior and Lord.

But he was no "closet Christian." He knew—apparently because Philip told him—that he needed to make his profession public. He needed to be baptized.

Notice his question wasn't, "Why *should* I be baptized?" but "Why *shouldn't* I be?" If you are a Christian, you need to make it public through believer's baptism. He knew that.

The oldest and most reliable manuscripts do not contain verse 37. In some later manuscripts, it says, "Then Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' And he answered and said, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.'"

We can be sure the Ethiopian did make a profession of faith, hence his desire for baptism. And so it happened—verse 38, "And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him."

What a day! God created a meeting in the desert in order to transform the heart and life of a man from Africa.

For Philip it was mission accomplished so God moved him to his next assignment in unforgettable fashion.

B. He transported Philip (39-40). "When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.⁴⁰ Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea."

Instant transportation! As soon as he came out of the water, Philip ended up about twenty miles away in Azotus (the OT city called Ashdod). The Spirit "took him away,"

reminiscent of Elijah. This must have shocked the Ethiopian, but no mention of it in the text which simply says he went home rejoicing.

Philip began a new ministry. From Azotus he moved up the coast some sixty miles until he put down roots in Caesarea. He literally “preached his way home,” as Wiersbe puts it.

God did something else that day.

C. He took both men to further divine appointments. Twenty years pass before we see Philip again in Acts. Turn to Acts 21:8. There we see Philip again. He is still living in Caesarea and had earned the title “evangelist.” Paul actually spent the night in his house. Interestingly, in that reference we’re told Philip had four unmarried daughters who prophesied, apparently having caught their father’s zeal for evangelism.

You might say, making the most of divine appointments is contagious. Our kids see it, and so do others. I love being around those who have an eye for what God is doing.

E.g.—

What happened to the Ethiopian? We don’t know for sure. As the Ethiopian continued his trek home that day, he didn’t have a church waiting for him. He probably didn’t know a single Christian in Ethiopia. He didn’t have a New Testament—it hadn’t even been written yet.

But he had Jesus. Irenaeus says that the Ethiopian went home and became a missionary to his people. And it all happened, humanly speaking, because of one man’s recognition of a divine appointment.

Just step back and ponder again what we’ve just seen. Philip just “happened” to show up on a desert road at the same time as a seeker from Ethiopia. The man just “happened” to be reading his Bible. He just “happened” to be reading Isaiah 53, and just “happened” to be struggling with a question concerning it. Philip just “happened” to know the answer. There just “happened” to be water.

Mere coincidences? Not on your life. Our sovereign God orchestrated the whole episode. To Him be the glory!

You say, “Is this true only of Bible characters?”

No. Beloved, our lives are full of divine appointments. But we must have eyes to see them, and then make the most of them.

Make It Personal: If we’re to make the most of divine appointments...

1. *We must be available.* Frankly, I know a lot of people who aren’t *opposed* to God’s work. They’re just not *available* for it. They’ve got their own agenda mapped out. They wouldn’t mind seeing their neighbors get saved. They just don’t have time to get involved themselves.

“Who, *me*? You want me to invite my neighbor over to my house for lunch? I couldn’t do that. My house isn’t ready for guests. Besides I’m too busy.”

It dawned on me in preparation for this message that Philip was a busy man. Surely, he had other things he could have done besides take a trip to the desert to tell one man about Christ. Philip was a church administrator, one of the Seven. He already had a successful ministry going in Samaria. Possibly he had family responsibilities, if those four daughters were in his life yet.

But he dropped it all to go, at the Lord’s command. He was available. Are we?

In October 1857, J. Hudson Taylor began to minister in Ningpo, China. While there he led a Mr. Nyi to Christ. The man was thrilled and wanted to share his faith with others.

“How long have you had the good tidings in England?” Mr. Nyi asked Hudson Taylor one day. Taylor acknowledged that England had known the gospel for many centuries.

“My father died seeking the truth,” said Mr. Nyi. “Why didn’t you come sooner?”

Hudson Taylor had no answer to that penetrating question.⁵ I challenge you today. If we want to make the most of divine appointments, we must take steps to make ourselves available.

2. *We must be prepared.* Philip made the most of an open door because he was prepared. When asked biblical questions, he knew and gave biblical answers. And the Holy Spirit didn’t “drop” those answers into his head out of nowhere. He had prepared himself as a diligent student of God’s Word, so when the door opened he was ready to walk through.

Is that true of you? Are you preparing yourself so God can use you?

We may be thinking, “I don’t seem to have many ‘divine appointments’ in my life to share Christ with others. Why not?” This may be the answer. Maybe we’re not prepared.

What would happen this afternoon if the following occurred? Suppose you saw your neighbor sitting despondently on his front porch, his head in his hands. And suppose you approached him and asked, “What’s the matter?”, and he said, “There has to be more to life than this. I can’t go on.”

What would you do? Could you use God’s Word to give him hope? Could you minister to his soul by sharing the life-changing truths of Scripture?

Suppose you were going to build a house, and in the process of interviewing prospective builders, you asked the question, “How soon could you start?” To which one man offered this reply, “I’d love to build your house for you. How soon could I start? Well, let’s see. I don’t have a hammer, and my saw is kind of rusty, and I’ve never read anything about building codes. But it won’t take me too long to get ready. I really want to build that house for you, and I’ll make you a great deal!” No way are you going to hire that fellow, right?

Now answer this. Are you prepared to introduce someone to Jesus? If the answer is “no,” then consider two things. First, a question. Why be surprised? Why should we be surprised if God does not give us opportunities to share Christ when He knows we wouldn’t be prepared if He sent them?

Secondly, a challenge. Prepare yourself. Take advantage of opportunities to learn God’s Word. Get the tools you need. Get ready, then hold on to your seat!

The following observation by William LaSor is right on: “It is a fallacy, I believe, and one that has seriously hurt the missionary program of the Church, that men and women should think that they can take the gospel to Africa or China, or India when they have not yet learned to evangelize men of their own culture and social and racial kind. By what right do I assume that I will be a success with the Hottentots if I have been a failure with the young people of my own church or school or club? Would I expect to clear the bar at six feet if I have never yet been able to get about four-feet-one? Such a question sounds silly. It is no less silly to think that we can ignore the transitions in Christian witness

3. *We must live with God’s agenda, not our own.* If Philip had lived for his own agenda, he never would have gone to meet the Ethiopian in the desert. But he lived for God’s agenda. Let’s resolve to do the same in our lives every day.

⁵ Warren Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary*, p. 438.