



LIFE GROUP CURRICULUM

**WHATEVER IT TAKES**  
*for the gospel*

COTTONWOOD CREEK CHURCH

## **Lesson 5: Whatever It Takes To Make the Most of Every Opportunity**

**Main Passage: Acts 8:26–40**

**Focus Verses: Acts 8:29–30a**

*The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”<sup>30</sup> Then Philip ran up to the chariot...*

**Big Idea: God uses those who are willing, flexible and available for His purposes.**

### **Introduction:**

We must do whatever it takes to make the most of every opportunity. Ephesians 5:16 commands us to “*make the most of every opportunity because the days are evil.*” Colossians 4:5 also says, “*Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.*” We see this in action in Acts 8. We have opportunities every day to make much of the name of Jesus!

### **Five Steps To Seize Every Opportunity as a Gospel Opportunity:**

#### **1) Stay CONNECTED With God**

**Acts 8:26**, *Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.”*

As we open Acts 8, we are introduced to a believer named Philip who gets an unusual calling from the Lord through an angel. As Philip is going about his day, he is seemingly called out and told to “Go!” Acts 8:4 records Philip’s ministry and that in his preaching he had brought joy to the city of Samaria. Now we see Philip again, this time called to go, not to a city, but to an individual. Philip was connected with God and as a result, he was in tune with where God was leading. As he went, he knew the Gospel, preached the Gospel, lived out the Gospel and the Lord used him in this story.

It would be an awesome thing to hear the audible voice of an angel telling us what to do! But though this angel spoke to Philip for a specific time and purpose, we can still learn something from this encounter. In many ways, we have something better than an angel: We have the Word of God. Like a parent to a child (see 2 Timothy 3:16–17), the Bible teaches, rebukes, corrects and trains us to have a relationship with God. Further, we also have prayer. As the Word is God’s mouth, prayer gives us God’s ear—that’s how we stay connected with Him!

### **Discussion Questions:**

- What are ways you can stay connected with God?
- How do you know when God is speaking to you?
- When you think, God is speaking to you do you act on it, or look for another sign?

## 2) Maintain MARGIN in Your Life

**Acts 8:27**, *So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship,<sup>28</sup> and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet.<sup>29</sup> The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”<sup>30</sup> Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet.*

Not only did Philip drop what he was doing, but he ran to the chariot! Philip had enough margin in his life to go where God called him.

When you stay connected with God, He calls you to go and do. One of the greatest hinderances to the Lord using you is that you stay too busy to use. We often prioritize our “stuff” so that there is no margin to be moved outside of our plans. Satan wants to keep you too busy to make the most of every opportunity. He wants to keep you so self-focused and concerned with what you have going on that you fail to go where God leads. But to do whatever it takes for the Gospel, we must prioritize His leading over our plans.

### Discussion Questions:

- How can the worries of this world distract or even prevent us from hearing and responding to the Lord?
- What measures have you taken that help you to remain available to God throughout the day?
- How could He use you in one specific person's life today?

## 3) Foster a GENUINE CARE for People

**Acts 8:30**, . . . *“Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.<sup>31</sup> “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.*

Staying connected and maintaining margin are important for seizing Gospel opportunities, but they are worthless if you fail to care for the people. Jesus looked at the crowds with compassion, knowing that they were a sheep without a Shepherd. Philip didn't go into this conversation with his own agenda, he asked good questions and met the Ethiopian where he was. The difference between seeing God's moving as obligations or opportunities lies in our care and concern for people.

Every person is made in the image of God and is in desperate need of salvation. To make the most of every opportunity we must see people like Jesus and Philip saw them: Image bearers in need of a Savior.

### Discussion Questions:

- How would you rate your love for people on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest)? How would others rank you?
- What were your actions toward others that determined your rating?



#### 4) Guide People to the WORD

**Acts 8:32**, *This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. <sup>33</sup> In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.” <sup>34</sup> The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” <sup>35</sup> Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.*

Philip understood that this man needed Jesus. All of Scripture unquestionably points every person face to face with salvation in Jesus. When we take advantage of the opportunity the Lord has put before us, we should always drive people to the truths that are found in Scripture: the God who created us; the sinfulness of humanity; the effects of going our own way; God’s work in bringing salvation since the beginning; the fullness of God’s Word revealed in Jesus; salvation in Christ alone; how we should live; and where we place our hope. To make the most of every opportunity, we need to get people to the truth of the Word.

#### **Discussion Questions:**

- How often do you share and discuss the Bible in your everyday conversations?
- What is your primary source of wisdom and advice in your life?
- Do you share the Gospel when an opportunity arises or do you make the excuse this is not the time?

#### 5) Call People to ACTION

**Acts 8:36**, *As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” . . . <sup>38</sup> And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.*

As Philip presented the Gospel, he called this man to believe. And we see the Ethiopians response: “What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” As we seize opportunities for the Gospel, we must call people to action. We must ask questions that cause them to think through the Gospel implications in their life. Ultimately, as we seize the opportunities for the Gospel, we must help guide that person to take the next step toward God’s way and away from their own.

#### **Discussion Questions:**

- How are we sometimes guilty of placing obstacles in the way of others when they are trying to respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit?
- What does a “Whatever It Takes” attitude look like in our responsiveness to the Gospel opportunities we encounter every day?
- Do you feel equipped to share the Gospel?

## **Lesson 5 Additional Commentary (Acts 8:26–40)<sup>5</sup>**

### ***The Witness to the Ethiopian Treasurer (8:26–40)***

Having established the mission to the Samaritans, Philip then became involved in an even more far-reaching missionary breakthrough, as he was led to witness to an Ethiopian. Indeed, Philip's witness to the eunuch may be considered the first conversion of a Gentile and in many ways parallels the story of Cornelius in chap. 10. Ethiopia was considered "the end of the earth" by the Greeks and Romans, and Philip's witness to the Samaritans and the Ethiopian comprises a "foretaste" of the completion of Christ's commission (1:8) by the whole church in the subsequent chapters of Acts.

A pronounced emphasis is on the activity of the Spirit in this passage. In fact, chaps. 8–10 witness an ever-increasing degree of the Spirit's involvement. It has already been seen in the "Samaritan Pentecost" (8:17). It is more pronounced still in Philip's conversion of the eunuch. Paul's conversion is depicted as totally due to God's activity apart from human agency (9:1–30). Finally, the conversion of Cornelius and his fellow Gentiles caps the picture and emphasizes God's activity more thoroughly than any of the preceding narratives. All of these conversion stories mark major advances in the Christian mission, and the heightened emphasis on the Spirit underlines that all the initiative lies ultimately with God, even through a variety of means. The story of Philip and the eunuch falls into three natural parts: the preparation (vv. 26–29), the witness (vv. 30–35), and the commitment (vv. 36–40).

#### THE PREPARATION (8:26–29)

God's initiative in this story is unquestionable. An angel of the Lord came to Philip in a vision and called him to witness in a most unlikely place. The angel was God's mouthpiece and was the functional equivalent to the Spirit, who continued to lead Philip throughout the story (vv. 29, 39).

**8:26** The place of witness was the road to the south of Jerusalem that leads to Gaza, the last watering place before the desert on the route to Egypt. Obeying the divine directive, Philip started out and on his way encountered an unusual prospect for witness. He was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, an official in charge of the queen's treasury (v. 27). The Ethiopia referred to is in all probability the ancient kingdom of Meroe, the ancient Nubian empire that lay south of Aswan between the first and sixth cataracts of the Nile. It is not to be confused with modern Ethiopia, or Abyssinia, which is in the hill country to the east of the upper Nile. The ancient kingdom of Meroe was a flourishing culture from the eighth century B.C. until the fourth century A.D. Referred to in the Old Testament as the Kingdom of Cush, its population consisted of blacks. This remote, advanced culture was an object of endless curiosity for the Greeks and Romans and represented for them the extreme limits of the civilized world. Their kings were viewed as incarnations of the sun god and held a primarily ceremonial role. The real administration of the kingdom was in the hands of powerful queen mothers who had the title of "the Candace."

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<sup>5</sup> John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 221–228.

**8:27** In modern terminology the Ethiopian whom Philip encountered would perhaps be called the Minister of Finance. Whether he was an actual physical eunuch is not certain. In the ancient world slaves were often castrated as boys in order to be used as keepers of the harem and the treasury. Eunuchs were found to be particularly trustworthy and loyal to their rulers. So widespread was the practice of placing them over the treasury that in time the term “eunuch” became a synonym for “treasurer” and did not necessarily imply that the one bearing the title was castrated. In the present passage it is likely that Philip’s Ethiopian was an actual physical eunuch, however, since the terms “eunuch” and “official over the treasury” are both given. His physical status was then highly significant for the story. He had been on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and was in all probability, like Cornelius, one of those “God-fearing” Gentiles who believed in the God of Israel but had not become a proselyte, a full convert, to Judaism. In his case, as a eunuch, full membership in the congregation of Israel was not even possible because of his physical blemish (cf. Deut 23:1). He could visit the temple in Jerusalem, as he had done; but he could never enter it.

**8:28–29** Probably not by accident, the eunuch was reading from a scroll of the prophet Isaiah as his carriage lumbered slowly homeward (v. 28). In all the Old Testament, Isaiah holds forth the greatest hope for the eunuch in his picture of God’s ideal future, a future that promises them a monument in God’s house, a name better than sons and daughters, an “everlasting name which will not be cut off” (Isa 56:3–8). Little did the eunuch know that he was about to experience the fulfillment of those promises. And little did Philip know his own role in their fulfillment. He probably was still wondering why in the world God had sent him to this lonely place, and perhaps he was a bit bemused by the strange spectacle of the carriage plodding in front of him with its exotic passenger and retinue of servants. Philip had to be prodded by the Spirit: “Go to that chariot and stay near it” (v. 29). Philip had no idea what he should do. The Spirit assumed the lead all the way.

#### THE WITNESS (8:30–35)

**8:30–31a** Complying with the Spirit’s directions, Philip ran up to the slow-moving wagon and began to trot alongside it. He heard the Ethiopian as he read aloud from the text of Isaiah (v. 30). There was nothing unusual about this. The letters on ancient manuscripts were often crowded and difficult to decipher, and reading aloud was the customary manner in that day. Philip’s question to the eunuch contains a play on words that is not reproducible in English: “Do you understand [*ginōskeis*] what you are reading [*anaginōskeis*]?” “How can I ... unless someone explains it to me?” replied the eunuch (v. 31). His response enunciates a basic principle that runs throughout Luke-Acts concerning the interpretation of the Old Testament prophetic texts—the need for a Christian interpreter. The disciples themselves had needed such guidance, and Christ had “opened ... the Scriptures” for them (Luke 24:45). They in turn sought to explain the Scripture in light of Christ to the Jews in Jerusalem. How indeed would this Gentile pilgrim from a distant land understand the real meaning of Isaiah’s servant psalms without a guide?

**8:31b–33** Responding to the eunuch’s invitation, Philip mounted the wagon and sat down beside him. Luke produced the text from which he had been reading, the Septuagintal translation of Isa 53:7–8. The passage is one of the most difficult texts to interpret of all the servant psalms and even more obscure in the Greek than the Hebrew. In general, however, it depicts the basic pattern of the suffering, humiliation, and exaltation of Christ. The picture of the slaughtered lamb evokes the image of Jesus’ crucifixion, the lamb before his shearers, that of Jesus’ silence before his accusers. The deprivation of justice reminds one of the false accusations of blasphemy leveled

at Christ and the equivocation of Pilate. But what does “who can speak of his descendants?” mean—that his life was cut off short or perhaps the opposite, that the tragedy of his death had been followed by a whole host of disciples who had come to believe and trust in him? In addition to the silent suffering and humiliation, the question concerning descendants likely was a point of identification that attracted the eunuch to this text. There is no question what the final phrase would mean to a Christian like Philip. When Christ’s life was taken from the earth, it was taken up in the glory of the resurrection, exalted to the right hand of God.

**8:34–35** Isaiah 53:7–8 was not the whole story, just the starting place for Philip as he “opened the Scriptures” about Christ to his Ethiopian inquirer. The Ethiopian’s question was extremely intelligent and not a little informed: “Who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” (v. 34). Contemporary Jews debated about whether the prophet was speaking of his own suffering or of that of the nation as a whole or of the Messiah. One cannot doubt how Philip answered him. What we would like to know is what other texts Philip shared with him. Perhaps we have them already, in the many scriptural proofs in Peter’s speeches earlier in Acts. Most striking of all, of course, is that the eunuch was reading from the servant psalms of Isaiah, the Old Testament texts that point most clearly to the suffering death of Christ. What a perfect introduction for Philip to share the gospel! This was surely no mere coincidence. It is further evidence of the Spirit’s activity in the whole incident.

#### THE COMMITMENT (8:36–40)

**8:36** Philip had shared the gospel with the Ethiopian treasurer and had surely ended on a note of invitation and commitment. The wagon passed a pool of water, and the Ethiopian was ready. “Is there anything to prevent my being baptized *right now*?” (author’s paraphrase). Many have sought to determine the exact site of the spring in question, but surely the more significant consideration is that at precisely the critical time they came to water, there along the arid route they were traveling (cf. v. 26). The coincidences are too numerous to be coincidences. The Spirit was in *all* of this. Significance has often been seen in the verb “hinder/prevent” which the eunuch employed when asking if there was any reason why he should not be baptized (*kōlyō*, v. 36). Some see this as part of an early Christian baptismal formula uttered before the baptism of new candidates: “Is there anything to hinder their being baptized?” Surely F. Stagg’s view is more on target. The verb indicates that barriers have been removed, hindrances to the spread of the gospel to all people. In this case a double barrier of both physical and racial prejudice had fallen. A eunuch, a Gentile, a black, was baptized and received into full membership in the people of Jesus Christ.

**[8:37]** Verse 37 is omitted from the NIV text of Acts, and for good reasons. It is not found in the early manuscripts of Acts and seems to be a later scribal addition. It is given in a footnote of the NIV and consists of a profession of faith on the part of the eunuch. Evidently a scribe felt this was lacking and so provided the missing confession of faith. He did not need to do so. Luke had summarized Philip’s sharing the gospel with the eunuch in v. 35, and one can assume it included an appeal for the eunuch to respond. The eunuch’s desire for baptism would indicate a favorable response to Philip’s appeal. The added verse, however, has considerable value. It seems to embody a very early Christian baptismal confession where the one baptizing asked the candidate if he believed in Christ with all his heart, to which the candidate would respond by confessing Jesus Christ as the Son of God. This old confession is of real significance to the history of early Christian

confessions and would be appropriate to the baptismal ceremony today. To that extent we can be grateful to the pious scribe who ascribed to the eunuch the baptismal confession of his own day.

**8:38–39** Verse 38 relates the baptism of the Ethiopian treasurer. Since the verb employed is *baptizō*, which always carried the idea of total submersion, there is no reason to assume that the eunuch was baptized in any other way than the consistent New Testament pattern of immersion. When the two emerged from the water, they departed in opposite directions. Philip disappeared, being snatched up by the Spirit, much like the prophet Elijah (1 Kgs 18:12; 2 Kgs 2:16). The Spirit had led him to this encounter. Now, the witness completed, the Spirit closed the scene and transported Philip to further witness in the coastal cities to the north. The eunuch continued southward on his long journey home. Somehow it did not now seem so arduous. He was filled with joy, a genuine manifestation of the Spirit's work in his life.

*Summary.* Many interpreters have seen parallels in this story to various Old Testament traditions. Many of the same places occur in Zeph 2—Ethiopia, which is identical with Cush (Zeph 2:12; 3:10) and the Philistine cities of Gaza and Ashdod, which is identical with Azotus (2:4). The strong picture of Philip's control by the Spirit reminds one of Elijah. The most interesting correspondences, however, are to be found in the Emmaus story of Luke 24:13–32—the presence of travelers, the sudden appearances of Jesus and Philip, the opening of the Scriptures to a new understanding of Christ (Luke 24:27; Acts 8:35), and the disappearance of Jesus in the breaking of bread and of Philip on completion of the baptism. The differences are too great to argue that Luke based either story on the other, but perhaps he saw a pattern of common witness to strangers in the stories, with Philip very much following the example of his master in witness through the interpretation of Scripture. Whatever one makes of such parallels, they do not comprise the main point of the story. The main point is the remarkable missionary advance taken in the conversion of the Ethiopian. Even were he a “God-fearer,” the witness was still to a *Gentile* and in this instance a Gentile who was not eligible for full proselyte status within Judaism because of his physical status as a eunuch. It was a radical step for a Jew, even for a Hellenist Jew like Philip. Still, Philip was not the radical. The *Spirit* was the radical. Philip's openness to the Spirit's leading enabled this major progress toward fulfilling Christ's commission for a worldwide gospel.

What became of the Ethiopian eunuch? Later church fathers relate that he became a missionary to Ethiopia. Such traditions are often legendary and should not be accepted uncritically. More certain evidence dates the evangelization of the Nubian area as beginning in the fourth century. Archaeology has uncovered a flourishing Christian community there between the fifth and tenth centuries. One is tempted to see the converted treasurer as at least planting the seed. It is in any event of interest to note that the first converted Christian “foreigner” in Acts was an African, and one could say that the mission began there, long before Paul ever took it to European soil.

**8:40** Verse 40 concludes the story of Philip's missionary activity. He appeared in Azotus, Old Testament Ashdod, and traveled about, preaching in the coastal cities. Finally arriving at Caesarea, he seems to have settled there. In Caesarea he appeared in Acts on the occasion of Paul's visit with him (Acts 21:8) some twenty years or so after the events of chap. 8. We are told that at the time he had four unmarried daughters who all prophesied (21:9). Like their father, evidently they were open to the Spirit. All in all, Philip's accomplishments had been considerable. He had pioneered the Samaritan mission. He had paved the way for the Gentile mission. Peter would later follow



him in this with the conversion of Cornelius—interestingly in Caesarea—just as Peter followed him in Samaria. Peter was instrumental in securing community endorsement of the new missionary efforts, but Philip stood in the background as the Hellenist who first caught the vision.

## **Lesson 5: Whatever It Takes To Make The Most Of Every Opportunity – Missionary Story**

### **Adoniram Judson (August 9, 1788 – April 12, 1850)**

Adoniram Judson is one of the earliest American missionaries to leave the United States to take the Gospel to another country. In spite of his father being a pastor and him being reared in a very devout and Godly home, Adoniram became a deist while attending college and professed that he no longer believed in the existence of a personal God or Savior. Following his college graduation, Adoniram ran a school for a short time before going to New York City to become an actor.

An event that happened while he was traveling as an itinerant actor ultimately brought Adoniram back to the faith of his father. He was spending the night in a small inn and in the next room a man lay dying. Adoniram heard his groans most of the night. The next morning Adoniram asked the innkeeper at the desk about the man in the room next to him and learned that the man died before morning. Adoniram asked the man's name and was shocked to learn that the man who died was a friend of his. In fact, it was the friend who had influenced him to leave his childhood faith. Adoniram was stunned by the thought of what awaited this friend after death; and rather than continue his journey, he immediately returned to his father's home.

Judson enrolled at Andover, a newly founded divinity school. He did not enroll as a ministerial student but as a special student because he had not yet come to grips with his own relationship with God. It is said that he often took long walks in the woods behind the college and on December 8, 1808, he wrote in his journal that he had made a solemn dedication of his life to God. A few months later he made a public profession of his faith and joined the Congregational Church in Plymouth, Massachusetts, where his father was the pastor.

Several months after making that solemn dedication to God, he read a sermon by an Anglican chaplain for the East India Company in which the chaplain told of the need for the Gospel message in that part of the world. He also told of how he was advocating for missionaries to be allowed to come to the territories controlled by the East India Company. That sermon, along with a book about Burma that Judson read, influenced him greatly and it was not long until he determined that he should go as a missionary to India or Burma.

Over the next couple of years, Judson became part of a group of like-minded young men who had also determined that God's plan for their life was to take the Gospel to other countries around the world. A new Board for Foreign Missions was formed in June of 1810. This would prove to be a key event in Adoniram's journey to the foreign field as it would provide supporters as well as a sponsoring agency. That same month, Adoniram met Ann (Nancy) Hasseltine and at first sight fell in love with her. Just a little over a month after meeting her for the first time, Adoniram wrote to Nancy's father to ask if he could marry her. Mr. Hasseltine said that the decision was Nancy's to make, and he would support her no matter her decision. Suffice it to say that about 18 months later, Adoniram and Nancy were married and the next day, they along with Samuel Newell and his new wife, set sail on a small cargo ship headed for Calcutta.

The Judsons left America as Congregational missionaries. During the four-month voyage to Calcutta, Adoniram carefully studied the New Testament. His primary purpose was to discern the difference between the beliefs of the Congregationalists and the Baptists on the subject of baptism. His study brought him to the conviction that the Baptist view was correct. This was a hard thing for Judson because he knew that by taking this position, he would be cutting ties with his friends and his supporters. He and

Nancy agreed on this issue and after arriving in India, the Judsons asked William Carey's associate, William Ward to baptize them.

Making the decision to be baptized by immersion and to become Baptists resulted in Adoniram resigning from the Congregationalist American Board, which left them in a foreign country with no base of support and no sponsoring agency. In addition, even though the sermon that Adoniram had read about the East India Company's chaplain advocating for missionaries to come to that area, neither the East India Company nor the local authorities were friendly to new missionaries arriving there to preach the Gospel.

The political and government situation in India resulted in the Judsons not being allowed to stay in the country and their only option was to get on a boat headed to Rangoon, Burma. The trip to Burma was difficult and resulted in Nancy going into labor and delivering their first child who did not survive. This was only the first of many tragedies that Judson and his family experienced while in Burma. Nancy and two additional children born after they arrived in Burma, died and were buried in Burma. Adoniram and his second wife, Sarah Boardman Judson had eight children and three of them did not survive childhood. Sarah died shortly before her forty-second birthday. Emily Chubbuck Judson was Adoniram's third wife and she survived Adoniram by four years.

Despite suffering the many tragedies of death and being held in prison for 17 months in insufferable conditions, Judson's work in Burma was monumental.

Judson was diligent, disciplined and innovative. Initially after his arrival in Burma, he found it difficult to engage people in conversation because he was a foreigner. He noted that one of the customs of the Burmese men was to congregate in zayats. (Something like a tea house where men would gather for beverage and conversation.) So, Adoniram built a zayat on the street near his home to have a place where the Burmese men could gather and gave him the opportunity to have conversations with them. Long term this did not prove to be as successful as Adoniram thought that it would. However, it did provide an entrance into the community and two months after building the zayat, Adoniram baptized his first convert.

Judson is best known for translating the Bible into Burmese as well as creating an English/ Burmese dictionary which was long considered to be the standard and was widely used for many years. (Judson died before he completed the Burmese/English half of the dictionary.) However, Adoniram Judson never failed to make the most of every opportunity and to do whatever was necessary to share the Gospel with the people of Burma no matter whether they were village peasants, prison guards or the emperor himself.

**Adoniram Judson did whatever it took to make the most of every opportunity to share the Gospel.**