

Acts 8:26-9:19a ~ Teacher's Lesson
Highways to Heaven

Overview: The key verse to Acts is 1:8 (read loud in unison). Acts has 28 chapters can be divided into three sections:

Jerusalem Chapters 1-7 2 years	Judea & Samaria Chapters 8-12 13 years	End of the Earth Chapters 13-28 14 years
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Introduction: Despite our best evangelistic efforts, sometimes a church simply does not see numerical growth. Our job is to be faithful to witness. Conversions are God's responsibility, as we will see today as we study about two highway conversions (a eunuch from Ethiopia and a bad guy named Saul).

******How did God make sure that an Ethiopian eunuch heard the Gospel (8:26-40)?** God sent an angel to direct Philip southward from Samaria to the road that ran between Jerusalem and Gaza, a city 50 about southwest of Jerusalem (the much disputed Gaza strip derives its name from this city).

Application: God will do what it takes to see that certain people hear the Gospel, and He prefers to use us in that process. Just as God predestined the end (salvation) He also predestines the means (evangelism).

1. Why did Luke want us to know that this was a desert place (8:26b)? See 8:36. Perhaps it was to make the point that there were few travelers on this road, thus highlighting the divine appointment that was soon to take place. It was a strange command.

Mysterious Ways: God truly moves in mysterious ways. God directed Philip away from a conversion hot spot (Samaria) and into the desert for the sake of one man. The Eunuch had just come from Jerusalem, yet God didn't direct one of the apostles to explain the Gospel to him there where he could have been discipled. God's ways are not our ways.

What did this Ethiopian do for a living (8:27)? He was a high government official: treasurer for Queen Candice (a generic title like Caesar or Pharaoh) of the Ethiopians.¹

Word Study: "Eunuch" (27) is from *eunouchos*; *euné* means "bed" and *echo* means "to hold"; thus, a bed keeper the superintendent of a harem. These men were emasculated to make them suitable for the job.² Although it may simply have evolved into a title (like "Candice"), it never-the-less was common then for eunuchs to serve in the royal court.³

¹ Biblical Ethiopia was located in the modern nation of Sudan (Douglas, 355).

² Thayer, #2135.

³ Johnson, 155.

2. What can we learn about the Ethiopian's religion from 8:27b? That he had gone to Jerusalem to worship suggests he was an African convert to Judaism. He probably had come into contact with Judaism through Jews living in Ethiopia (modern Sudan).

Have you ever wanted to share the gospel with someone, but were unsure how to begin the conversation? How did Philip begin the conversation (8:30)? The eunuch was already prepared. Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading. God opened up a natural way for Philip to begin speaking about spiritual things. He didn't have to kick the door in!

How did Philip know the eunuch was reading from Isaiah the prophet (8:30)? At that time in history no one read silently. Augustine, for example, puzzled over bishop Ambrose's habit of reading silently, as though it were something truly odd.⁴ Ancient documents were written with no spaces between the words, so reading aloud helped the reader separate out the individual words in a block of letters.⁵ Thus, Philip heard him reading—aloud—and recognized it as Isaiah.

3. What does the eunuch's answer (8:31) tell us about Bible interpretation? It shows that correctly understanding the Bible is extremely difficult at first without someone more experienced to help at first. None of us would ever dream of waltzing into a pharmacy to compound drugs without having first been trained. So too understanding the Bible correctly takes training.

Application: The Bible means what the authors said it meant. The early church had the letter of the apostles and they knew the apostles in person. If someone new misunderstood what the apostles had written, the church could quickly correct him. This living memory of what the apostles mean by what they wrote is preserved in the *regula fide*, or rule of faith as recorded in the ecumenical creeds. If a person isolates himself from the historical church, he is going to make a lot of interpretive errors.

******How did Philip lead the eunuch to the Lord (8:32-40)?** Philip used Old Testament prophecy to convince the eunuch about Jesus. Being able to talk to others about Jesus is a skill every Christian needs to develop! It takes preparation and practice.

4. How is it that the eunuch just happened to be reading a Messianic passage (8:32-33, Isaiah 53:7-8)? This was surely due to the Spirit's leading, who is working behind the scenes to bring the elect to salvation.

What is the answer to the eunuch's question (8:34)? See 8:35. The prophet said this about someone else: Jesus the Messiah.

ESV John 5:39 You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me . . .

⁴ Ibid., 155.

⁵ Bruce, 187.

Based on 8:35-36, how did the eunuch respond to the good news about Jesus? He obviously believed and so wanted to be baptized.

Application: Believing in Jesus and being baptized go together in the New Testament. Anyone who claims to believe but who refuses to be baptized may not really believe.

Review: What is the significance of water baptism (8:36)? It is an outward sign of a person's inward faith. It expresses repentance and commitment; it is the sign of entering into discipleship with Jesus.⁶ It symbolizes the washing away of sins and being buried and raised with Christ.

5. What can we learn about how people were baptized from 8:38-39? Both men went "down into" the water then they "came up out of" the water. If the early church merely practiced sprinkling or pouring, there surely was already enough water in the chariot. However, the word *baptizo* means to immerse. The men went down into the water so Philip could immerse the eunuch.

Application: *Have you been baptized by immersion since you believed?*

What odd thing happened after the men came up out of the water (8:39-40)? The Spirit snatched Philip away and the eunuch went on his way rejoicing! It was a divine meeting and a divine parting!

Application: Oh that we all might be so sensitive to the Spirit, moved by the Spirit, and used by the Spirit as was Philip.

What did Philip do as he traveled between Azotus and Caesarea (8:40)?⁷ He preached the Gospel! Evidently Philip was from Caesarea and remained there once he reached home (Acts 21:8).

******What happened to Saul on the road to Damascus (9:1-9)?⁸** Saul unexpectedly encountered the resurrected Lord Jesus!

According to 9:1, what misguided pursuits occupied Saul's time? See Galatians 1:13-14. Saul was active in persecuting the church.

⁶ Johnson, 122.

⁷ Azotus (8:40) was formerly known as Ashdod. It is 20 miles north of Gaza and close to the Mediterranean. Caesarea was a city on the Mediterranean, about 60 miles northwest of Jerusalem. (Johnson, 93, 155).

⁸ The capital of Syria, Damascus is about 135 miles NE of Jerusalem. That Luke did not record how there came to be a church in Damascus shows the selective nature of his account. It is likely these were Christians from Jerusalem who had been scattered by the persecution.

6. What is the significance of the word “still” in 9:1? See 7:58-8:3. It suggests an uninterrupted continuity of persecution.

ESV **Galatians 1:13** . . . I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.

How did Luke describe Christianity in 9:2? He called it “the Way”.

7. Why did Luke describe Christianity as “the Way” (9:2)? See *John 14:6*. It was probably because Jesus declared Himself to be the way (Jn 14:6).

ESV **John 14:6** I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Word Study: “Way” (9:1) is from *hodos*, “road” or “highway”. This Greek word is the basis for the electronics words electrode (a way for electrons), diode (*di* + *hodos*, two ways), anode (*ana* + *hodos*, another way or a way up) and cathode (*kata* + *hodos*, way down).

What physical sensations did Saul experience when Jesus confronted him (9:3-9)? A light from heaven flashed around him so brightly that he was blinded for three days. He fell to the ground and heard a voice speaking to him.

ESV **Acts 26:13** . . . a light from heaven, brighter than the sun . . . shone around me . . .

Why did Saul fall to the ground (9:4)? It was probably from fright.

What did the men traveling with Saul see and hear (9:7)? They were stunned into speechlessness. They heard the voice⁹ but did not see the speaker. Unlike Saul, they were not blinded.

8. What does the word “Lord” mean as used by Saul in 9:5? It is from *kurios* and fundamentally means “master, owner, sir”. It was most often used simply as a title of respect; servants commonly addressed their masters as *kurios*. When the Jews translated the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek, they used *kurios* as a title given to God, the owner and ruler of the universe.¹⁰ It was commonly used to translate God’s name (Jehovah). As a Jew who was well familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures, Saul probably realized this was a divine encounter, a theophany. Thus Saul may have used “Lord” in the Hebrew sense of a title for God. He was about to learn that the God who appeared to him was none other than Jesus.

9. Jesus asked Saul why he was persecuting Him (9:4-5). Jesus had been crucified, had risen from the dead, and had ascended into heaven several years prior to Saul coming on the scene. In what sense was Saul persecuting Jesus (9:4-5)? See *Matthew 25:40*. To persecute Christians is to persecute Jesus.

⁹ “Voice” (9:7, 22:9) is from *phoné*, which can also mean “sound, tone”. Considering Acts 22:9, the men heard the voice but could not understand it.

¹⁰ Thayer, #2962.

ESV **Matthew 25:40** . . . you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.

What did Saul do for the next three days (9:9)? He sat without sight, and neither ate nor drank. The average person can go three to five days without water before he dies.¹¹

10. Why do you suppose Saul neither ate nor drank for three days (9:9)? Like Elvis Presley, he was “all shook up!” His whole world had been turned upside down as he realized he’d been wrong about everything.

Application: God most assuredly knows how to get our attention. Sometimes people will say, “I think God is trying to get my attention” as if God is poor at getting our attention. If God wants your attention, He will get it. There is no “trying” to it.

Perspective: Was your own conversion any less supernatural than Saul’s? Why? Not everyone’s conversion is as dramatic as Saul’s, but all are equally miraculous. Saul is a poster boy for divine election and God’s sovereignty in salvation.

******What scary assignment did Jesus give a disciple named Ananias (9:10-19a)?** Much to his horror, Ananias was told to seek out the dreaded Saul to lay hands on him to restore his sight. It seems that Saul’s reputation had preceded him!

How do you suppose Straight street got its name (9:11)? When Damascus was redesigned by the Greeks it was laid out in a grid pattern. The longest of these straight streets ran 1500 meters (.9 miles) east to west across the city and was called Straight street. It still exists but was renamed under the Muslims conquerors.¹²

Based on 9:11, what had Saul been doing the past three days? He had been praying!

11. According to 9:12, how had the Lord prepared Saul for a visit from Ananias? The Lord gave Saul a vision of a man named Ananias coming to restore his sight.

Insight: We are not alone when we evangelize. God has already been working behind the scenes to prepare the elect to hear the Gospel.

12. What was Ananias afraid would happen if he went to Saul (9:13-14)? He was afraid he’d be arrested!

How did the Lord answer Ananias’ objection (9:13-16)? Jesus told Ananias that He had chosen Saul to serve Him.

¹¹ “How Long Can The Average Person Survive Without Water?”, ScientificAmerican.com. Accessed September 21, 2017.

¹² “Straight Street, Damascus”, Sacred-Destinations.com. Accessed September 21, 2017. Douglas, 260.

Based on 9:15, what mission did the Lord have for Saul? The Lord chose him to carry His name to the Gentiles, kings and Israel.

13. Even though Saul was a chosen instrument of the Lord, what trials did the future hold for him (9:15-16)? See *2 Corinthians 11:23-28, Philippians 1:29-30, 1 Thessalonians 3:1-4*. It held suffering. Paul later summarized his sufferings:

ESV 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 . . . labors . . . imprisonments . . . countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

Application: The same is true for every believer:

ESV Philippians 1:29-30 For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

ESV 1 Thessalonians 3:1-4 . . . when we could bear it no longer . . . we sent Timothy . . . to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction . . .

How did Saul get his sight back (9:17-18)? Ananias laid hands on him, something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight.

Application: Praise God for Ananias' obedience. Similarly, we should be obedient when asked by the Lord to do scary things. It is scary to witness to people. It is scary to picket the abortion clinic. It is scary to talk to our elected officials.

What did Ananias say to Saul that indicated he believed him to be a Christian (9:17)? He called him "brother" Saul.

Based on 9:17, what two things did Ananias come to do? He came to help him regain his sight and to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

14. Before he even ate, what was the first step of obedience that Saul took (9:18-19a)? Saul rose and was baptized. Notice that he did not even eat any food until after he had been baptized! Similarly, Jesus said:

ESV John 4:34 My food is to do the will of him who sent me . . .

Application: New Testament baptism is by immersion and for believers only (not infants). It commonly described as the first act of obedience by a new believer. *Have you been baptized by immersion since you believed?*

So What?

15. What can we learn about evangelism from these two highways to heaven?

- a) First, notice how God sovereignly prepares people for salvation (the Eunuch).
- b) Like Philip, we should be sensitive to the Spirit's leading in evangelism. It has been said that God evangelizes the world through obedient Christians who explain the Gospel to seeking souls.¹³
- c) Also, we should consciously count on the Holy Spirit's power to work in the lives of the elect. Charles Spurgeon who used to say over and over to himself as he climbed the stairs into his high pulpit, "I believe in the Holy Ghost, I believe in the Holy Ghost."¹⁴
- d) Be prepared to present the Gospel to seekers, as was Philip.

16. Did Saul really have a choice in his conversion? Why? See Romans 9:15-18. God made him willing in the day of salvation!

ESV Romans 9:15-18 . . . "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

ESV 1 Timothy 1:16 . . . I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

Application: Saul's dramatic conversion reminds us that God can and does convert the most unlikely of people.

17. Divine election in salvation is a controversial topic. Did Jesus choose Saul or did Saul choose Jesus (9:16)? See also Galatians 1:13ff. Acts 9:16 makes it clear that Jesus chose Saul: "He is a chosen instrument". Also, considering the way Jesus blinded Saul, knocked him to the ground, and spoke authoritatively to him, there seems not to have been much choice on Saul's part. God knew what it would take to convince Saul, and He did what it took.

ESV Galatians 1:16 . . . he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me . . .

**** = ask this question before reading the text aloud. Doing so will cause focus.

- These lessons are designed for a 45 minute session and are based on the text of the ESV.

¹³ Steven J. Cole, "Lesson 21: How God Evangelizes the World", Bible.org. Accessed September 22, 2017.

¹⁴ Ibid.

- You can hear this lesson being taught at SermonAudio.Com/NTRF.

Stephen E. Atkerson
NTRF.org
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