

To review the events from Chapter 6, John Stott's comments on 6:8-12:24 are helpful:

After the coming of the Spirit and the counter-attack of Satan (whose overthrow Luke has celebrated in 6:7), the church is almost ready to initiate its world-wide mission. So far it has been composed only of Jews and restricted to Jerusalem. Now, however, the Holy Spirit is about to thrust his people out into the wider world, and the apostle Paul is to be God's chosen instrument to pioneer this development. But first, in the next six chapters of the Acts [*i.e. Stott is speaking of Acts 6-12*], Luke explains how the foundations of the Gentile mission were laid by two remarkable men (Stephen the martyr and Philip the evangelist), followed by two remarkable conversions (Saul the Pharisee and Cornelius the centurion). These four men, each in his own way, together with Peter, through whose ministry Cornelius was converted, made an indispensable contribution to the global expansion of the church . . .

Philip the evangelist (8:4-40) had the distinction of being both the first to share the good news with the despised Samaritans and the means by which the Jewish-Samaritan barrier was broken. He then led the first African to Christ, the Ethiopian eunuch, and baptized him.

The simultaneous conversion and commissioning of Saul the Pharisee (9:1-31) were an indispensable prelude to the Gentile mission, since he was called to be pre-eminently the apostle to the Gentiles.

Cornelius the centurion (10:1-11:18) was the very first Gentile to be converted and welcomed into the church. The gift of the Spirit to him plainly authenticated his inclusion in the Messianic community on the same terms as Jews, and so overcame the narrow Jewish prejudice of the apostle Peter.

Only after these four men had played their part in Luke's developing story was the scene set for the first missionary journey recorded in Acts 13 and 14 (Stott, 125-126).

8:26 But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, "Arise and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert road.)

8:27 And he arose and went; and behold, there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship.

8:28 And he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah.

Philip, who had been having great success witnessing to the Samaritans, was directed to go south to Gaza by an angel. Gaza was about 60 miles away and was the last water stop in Israel along the Mediterranean coast before entering the desert on the way to Egypt. The angel's command may have struck Philip as strange since he was having an impact for Christ in a populated area and the road was a desert road that had few travelers on it. However, there on the road he met another traveler, a eunuch.

Eunuchs were castrated men who often served as keepers of harems, however, this was also a term used to refer to a court official (Marshall, 171). If this man was a eunuch in the former sense, he could not have been a Jewish proselyte (Marshall, 171). Luke may have used this term to generate an association with Isaiah 56:3-8 and see this story as a fulfilment of Isaiah (or perhaps fulfilling Psa. 68:31). This was an important person, a powerful man; he was a treasurer to the queen of Ethiopia (Candace is not a personal name but a dynastic title of the Queen Mother who performed duties on behalf of the King— Stott, 160).

The Ethiopian was reading the scroll of Isaiah (Isa. 53:7-8), probably suggesting that he was a “God-fearer” who had gone to Jerusalem to worship. The fact that he owned his own copy of Isaiah indicated that he was a wealthy man for not many owned any portion of the Scriptures.

8:29 And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot."

8:30 And when Philip had run up, he heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

8:31 And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

The Holy Spirit, not the angel of verse 26, directed Philip to join the Ethiopian. As he ran up to the Ethiopian man, he heard him reading the Book of Isaiah aloud. The timing was no accident; it was orchestrated by God. Philip immediately asked the man if he understood what he was reading. The Ethiopian humbly admitted that he needed an explanation to which Philip happily obliged. Jesus had provided the key to understanding the OT to the disciples; Philip then passed it onto others.

8:32 Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: "He was led as a sheep to slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He does not open His mouth.

8:33 "In humiliation His judgment was taken away; Who shall relate His generation? For His life is removed from the earth."

8:34 And the eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself, or of someone else?"

The passage was Isaiah 53:7–8, the Messianic passage of the suffering servant as the sacrificial lamb.

The text says that this man was like a lamb led to slaughter whose life was removed from the earth. Philip probably uses these two truths to explain that Isaiah was prophesying the death of Jesus.

8:35 And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.

To “open one’s mouth” is used when something weighty follows. The question from the Eunuch led Philip to preach the gospel from the Scriptures. The Ethiopian understood, and as soon as they passed water asked if he could be baptized.

8:36 And as they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?"

(8:37 And 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.")

8:38 And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch; and he baptized him.

Acts 8:37 is missing from the earliest, most reliable manuscripts and is probably not original with Luke. What is clear is that Philip preached the gospel and even explained baptism, no doubt much like Peter did in Acts 2:38.

Verse 38 states that they both went into the water. It is argued that if this was baptism by immersion, it would mean that Philip baptized himself since it says, "they (plural) both went down into the water." Therefore, it is argued that this is speaking of baptism by pouring. However, one conclusion does not lead to the other. Is it necessary for two men to go down into the water for one to pour it on another? Although this verse cannot be used as evidence for baptism by immersion, it is not hard to imagine that both went into the water (waist deep?) before the eunuch was immersed - just as the earliest images and paintings in Christian art suggest. The bottom line is that the mode of baptism is not mentioned at all and the scene could fit either pouring or immersion. Other passages are not so forgiving (e.g. Mk. 1:8).

8:39 And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch saw him no more, but went on his way rejoicing.

8:40 But Philip found himself at Azotus; and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities, until he came to Caesarea.

With the baptism completed Philip was caught up and disappeared from the scene. He found himself in Azotus about 20 miles north of Gaza. Stott mentions that some understand this as a 'supersonic ride' undertaken with 'miraculous velocity.' The Greek verb for "took away" normally means to snatch or seize, as at the rapture. However, it's not necessary that this be seen as a miracle. The same wording is also used in Acts 23:10 when Paul is taken away for his protection. The point is that Philip left and was not seen by the eunuch again (Stott, 162). We need not rule out a miracle, but it is not essential that we insist on one either.

The conversion of the Ethiopian meant that the gospel was spreading to a new ethnic group. It had gone to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and now even to a Gentile who lived in "the uttermost part of the earth" (Act 1:8). The whole story also emphasizes how active God is in the process; the church did not just stumble upon reaching the Gentiles, it was sent to them by God. Historically, the Hellenists are responsible for reaching the Gentiles more so than Peter (Marshall, 170).

In this passage Philip demonstrates the heart of an evangelist. He goes where God tells him to go, is sensitive to open hearts that have been prepared by God, readily shares the gospel, presents the message from Scripture, and unhesitatingly crosses cultural lines.

Philip then abruptly disappears from the story and equally abruptly Saul appears.

**9:1 Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest,
9:2 and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.**

“Now that Stephen and Philip have contributed their pioneer preparations for the world mission of the church, Luke is ready to tell the story of the two notable conversions that launched it. The first was of Saul of Tarsus, who became the apostle to the Gentiles, and the second of Cornelius the centurion, who was the first Gentile to be converted. Saul’s conversion belongs to this chapter and Cornelius’ to the next” (Stott, 165).

The persecution of the church by Saul was described in 8:3; it is now mentioned again in verses 1 and 2. Saul was threatening to kill Christians if they did not cease proclaiming Christ.

It's debated if he really had the legal authority to kill Christians, since execution was the sole right of Rome. Thus, some conclude that he is expressing what he would have liked to do to them. If Saul could find them, he would arrest them and hand them over to Roman authorities to be tried and executed, if possible.

**9:3 And it came about that as he journeyed, he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him;
9:4 and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"**

Saul was on his way to Damascus when about noon (Acts 22:6), without any warning, he was surrounded by an intensely bright light, a light brighter than the sun (Acts 26:13). Most understand the bright light as being the divine glory of God, so it's not surprising that it resulted in blindness. The living God was confronting Saul and Saul heard a voice asking him why he is persecuting Him. Christ is so united with believers, He is identified with them so much, that what is done to them has been done to Him.

In Matthew 25:35-40 Jesus said to the disciples:

35 'For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in;

36 naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.'

37 "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You drink?

38 'And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You?

39 'And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?'

40 "And the King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, *to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.*'

**9:5 And he said, "Who art Thou, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,
9:6 but rise, and enter the city, and it shall be told you what you must do."**

Saul's question, "who are you, Lord?" does not necessarily mean that Saul recognized Jesus as Lord, rather it was a polite way of addressing a heavenly being, comparable to the word "sir." The reply indicates that Jesus was the one who spoke to him.

"Paul's zeal for the cause of God had turned into an attack on the God who raised Jesus from the dead. Such a way of life could not continue; he must get up and go to the city where he would be given fresh instructions about his future task. It is a sovereign command, and it is assumed that Paul will obey it if he really is concerned to serve God" (Marshall, 179).

9:7 And the men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one.

Paul's traveling companions saw the light (Acts 22:9) and heard a voice, but did not understand what they were hearing (Acts 22:9). The revelation that Saul had received was for him alone.

**9:8 And Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing;
and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus.**

9:9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Jesus told Saul to arise and go to Damascus to receive further instruction. Saul's blindness is a sign of his helplessness before God. For three days he sat in darkness and fasted, processing what has taken place.

"He who had expected to enter Damascus in the fullness of his pride and prowess, as a self-confident opponent of Christ, was actually led into it, humbled and blinded, a captive of the very Christ he had opposed. There could be no misunderstanding what had happened. The risen Lord had appeared to Saul. It was not a subjective vision or dream; it was an objective appearance of the resurrected and now-glorified Jesus Christ. The light he saw was the glory of Christ, and the voice he heard was the voice of Christ. Christ had interrupted his head long career of persecution and had turned him around to face in the opposite direction" (Stott, 170).

Saul's conversion can only be attributed to the intervention of God in Saul's life. He had only hatred for Christ and His church. In 8:3, the Greek word used of Saul "ravaging" the church is also found in Psalm 80:13 of wild boars devastating a vineyard. In 9:1 Saul was described as "breathing" threats against the

church – a word used elsewhere of the panting or snorting of a wild beast. A little later, in 9:21 Paul is described as “destroying” the church in Jerusalem. The verb used there can be translated as “mauled.” “This, then, was the man (more wild animal than human being) who in a few days’ time would be a converted and baptized Christian. But he was in no mood to consider the claims of Christ. His heart was filled with hatred and his mind was poisoned by prejudice. In his own language later, ‘a raging fury’ obsessed him (26:11). If we had met him as he left Jerusalem and (with the benefit of hindsight) had told him that before he reached Damascus he would have become a believer, he would’ve ridiculed the idea. Yet this was the case. He had left out of his calculations the sovereign grace of God” (Stott, 169).

Paul readily acknowledges in his writings that it was God who saved him and not he who sought God. In Galatians 1:15-16 Paul says that it was God who “called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles.” In Philippians 3:12 he says, “I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.” In 2 Corinthians 4:6 he states that it is the “God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” And then in 1 Timothy 1:16 he says, “I found mercy, in order that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience.” He then concludes “Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen” (I Tim. 1:17).

9:10 Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Behold, here am I, Lord."

9:11 And the Lord said to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying,

9:12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight."

As these things were happening to Saul, God was also preparing Ananias in a dream to take the next step in Saul's conversion. Ananias was called to go to the house on a street called Straight and lay hands on Saul so that he might regain his sight.

9:13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Thy saints at Jerusalem;

9:14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon Thy name."

Ananias, however, knew the name of Saul and was aware that he was an enemy of the church. Ananias' question is used by Luke to demonstrate the wonder of Saul's conversion.

9:15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;

9:16 for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."

22:14-16 is the parallel of what is being said here. There it appears that divine instruction is given to Saul by Ananias regarding his future role. Ananias said, “The God of our fathers has appointed you to know

His will, and to see the Righteous One, and to hear an utterance from His mouth. For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard.” Here Luke simply informs us that Saul is a chosen instrument who would bear the name of Christ before Gentiles, kings, and the people of Israel. He would also suffer for it.

2 Corinthians 11:24-28 details some of Paul’s suffering for Christ. Paul says:

24 Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes.

25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep.

26 I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren;

27 I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

28 Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches.

9:17 And Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

9:18 And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he arose and was baptized;

9:19 and he took food and was strengthened. Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus,

9:20 and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

Ananias did as God had commanded him to do.

All of Saul's symptoms were immediately reversed. He could see, he took food and drink, and he understood the gospel. The scales falling off of his eyes also picture the removal of blindness from his heart.

Saul was immediately brought into fellowship with the disciples. From the moment Ananias met him he was addressed as “brother” (9:17). He was baptized immediately as the eunuch was (8:38; 9:18), and he spent time with the disciples (9:19). Once liberated and prepared for his mission, Saul out to preach the gospel.

The conversion of Saul is not about Saul of Tarsus; it is about an Almighty God who can save judgment-deserving sinners. Paul said in 1Timothy 1:13-17, “I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. And yet I was shown mercy, because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,

among whom I am foremost of all. And yet for *this reason I found mercy, in order that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience, as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.* Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”