

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Series: Next!

(studies in the book of Acts)

...for Dummies

(Acts 8:18-40)

Study #12

Introduction: The dummies guide to...

...for Dummies” is everywhere.

The first ...for Dummies book was DOS for Dummies. (1991). It gave instruction in the fine art of using the **Disk Operating System** in vogue for IBM compatible computers at the dawn of the computer age.

Since then, there has been no end to the proliferation of these books.

There are now hundreds (thousands?) of books in the ...for Dummies series, with topics ranging from computer programming to guitar playing to math to acupuncture to ancient Egyptian culture to quantum physics to Mormonism and prayer.

The books have obviously filled a niche. They speak to people who are early on the learning curve of a skill or a discipline or an area of knowledge. They help the “dummy” learn those all-important “first steps.”

Everybody is a dummy in something

I'll assume that if you have ever read a ...for Dummies book it was a helpful read. To be frank, every one of us here today could benefit from a ...for Dummies book or two.

There may be one or two Leonardo da Vinci types among us who are expert in several fields. But most everybody else has a strong suit or two complemented by remarkable ignorance in most other arenas.

Among other things, the ...for Dummies phenomenon has erased any sense of stigma for being a dummy. Stupid and foolish can't be fixed; but ignorance is easily fixed. Just learn. After all, everybody is a dummy about something.

Call me *dummy* or *newbie* or *beginner* - it doesn't matter. No need for embarrassment about being a *dummy*. Early on, you and I need help.

And what is true about being a dummy with respect to history, geography, science, or yoga is also undeniably true about matters of faith.

Faith dummies

I became a Christian in 1971, so I'm not exactly a beginner. But I remember being a beginner. The Gospel was beautifully explained to me by a wonderful woman who loved the Lord. I placed by faith in Jesus one night and He saved my eternal soul.

Following that night I floundered for a while after trusting Christ. But, then, not long afterwards, I made my way to a church and was wisely led into foundational truth that grounded me in the faith. There was actually a team of people who helped get this dummy off the ground and flying right.

Spiritual dummies (and you can be ASSURED that I don't mean anything negative by this!!) need people to come alongside of them to point them in the right direction, to help them understand the Gospel, to help them grow in grace.

Well, this morning we are going to look at a couple of scenes from the early church that demonstrate how to help people who are in the early stages of their spiritual investigation or their spiritual lives. The scenes are found in Acts, chapter 8.

And whether we are *dummies* ourselves or are helping those who are, we will all find tremendous help from God's Word.

Gospel explosion in Samaria!

Last Sunday we saw the Gospel begin to make inroads into a group of people that was not strictly Jewish. The message of Jesus literally exploded in an unnamed city in Samaria.

Many people there came to know the Lord and **[8:8] there was much rejoicing in the city.**"

Among those who believed was a certain man named Simon. Or, as he has been known for the past couple of thousand years, Simon Magus (Simon the magician).

Simon Magus and the Gospel

[9] Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great.; [10] and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, "This man is what is called the Great Power of God." [11] And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts.

Luke tells us that this Simon saw the miracles that Philip, the evangelist, was performing and was amazed. He also tells us that Simon believed and was baptized, just as others in Samaria believed and were baptized.

Following the many conversions in the city, the apostles Peter and John came to Samaria to see if the reports were all true that God had actually accepted Samaritans as He had accepted Jews.

A Samaritan Pentecost!

Well, God proved that He had indeed accepted the Samaritans!

He gave the newly minted Samaritan believers in Jesus the gift of the Holy Spirit as soon as the apostles laid their hands on them. God orchestrated a Samaritan Pentecost!

And the abnormal, delayed Samaritan reception of the Holy Spirit placed an exclamation mark on the idea that all believers in Jesus - Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles - are members of one family.

Immediately after this outpouring of the Holy Spirit the focus in Acts 8 shifts back to Simon.

Simon, the Sorcerer (part 2) (vv. 18-24)

Simon's GROSS Error (vv. 18-19)

We have already noted that Simon was impressed with the power Philip possessed to perform miracles (v. 13). More than that, he craved the ability to produce similar miracles.

And he thought that he had finally "broken the code" when he saw the signs of the Spirit being manifested as Peter and John laid their hands on the converts.

So, he made a simple request.

[18] Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, [19] saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."¹

Now I don't believe that Simon was offering money to be able to save people. I don't think he was offering money to purchase salvation for himself or others.

He was amazed at the miracles on display at the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And it was the ability to enable others to display these signs (speaking in tongues, perhaps more) by his own laying on of hands that he was seeking to buy.

Well, as you might imagine, Peter and John were appalled.

¹ Simon has been identified with his request for the last 2,000 years. In fact, the term *simony*, which denotes the purchase of ecclesiastical office or favor by money, stems from this incident.

Earlier, when they had encountered a lame man on the steps leading to the Temple they had freely confessed that they were unable to give silver or gold (Acts 3).

Now, they are being offered money and are just as certainly not about to receive it. In fact, they were shocked that it should even have been offered.

Not surprisingly, Peter has something to say to Simon about his offer.

Peter's SCATHING Rebuke (vv. 20-23)

[20] But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! [21] You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. [22] Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. [23] For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity."

Wow! That is one scathing rebuke. And we wonder what we are to make of it. What do Peter's words tell us about Simon?

Was Peter thinking of Judas Iscariot (who betrayed Jesus for money) when he said what he did about Simon perishing with his money? Was Peter saying that Simon, like Judas, was not saved?

Or, when he said that Simon had *"no part or portion in this matter"* are we to think of Jesus' words to Peter himself when he resisted Jesus' move to wash his feet (John 13:8)? On that occasion Peter was completely mistaken, but certainly not lost.

Actually, it is not terribly clear from Peter's words. And unfortunately, Simon's response to Peter's rebuke doesn't help much, either.

Simon's Response (v. 24)

[24] But Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

It is interesting that Simon doesn't immediately jump to prayer, but instead asks the apostles to pray for him. And there are a variety of explanations for why he didn't personally pray.

- Some who read this see it as a humble request from a believer that the apostles pray for him to receive fresh cleansing from God.
- Others see it as a recognition on Simon's part that he did not have a relationship with God and therefore couldn't pray.
- And still others see his request as a flippant dismissal of Peter's words. (*"You can pray if you wish. I'm not about to pray."*)

So, is Simon Magus saved, or is he not? There is a lot of debate among Bible scholars about Simon's spiritual condition!

One noted Bible scholar, Dr. Stanley Toussaint, lists seven reasons why he believes Simon Magus was not saved, and then, in a remarkable moment of candor, says, *"But we can't be sure. He might be saved."*

And Darrell Bock interacts with about ten theologians in his own commentary, all of whom represent different views - and then concludes that Luke leaves the matter open-ended.

Point: "Dummies" (young Christians) may fall into serious error

What I am about to do might be like "rushing in where angels fear to tread," but I'm going to tell you what I think.

When I read in verse 13 that Simon *"believed"* I take it that he put his faith in the message Philip was preaching, just like the rest of the Samaritans did. And evidently Philip thought that Simon was a believer or else he wouldn't have baptized him.

So, yes, I believe that he was saved. He believed in Jesus and was baptized as a believer.

"But," some will object, *"Simon thought that he could purchase the ability to impart the supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands! How could you say that a believer could do that?"*

Yes. I'll freely admit that he did that. And is it really surprising that having spent a long time (Acts 8:11; years?) as a satanically empowered sorcerer, Simon, after being a Christian for SEVERAL WHOLE DAYS (!), still had baggage from his former life that needed to be dealt with?

The story of Simon teaches me that people who are recently saved, may, from time to time, go off in dangerous directions.

Upon finding out that someone has committed a sin, fallen into error, or gotten mixed up in something they shouldn't be mixed up in, we should not automatically jump to the conclusion that he or she is not saved.²

That is one thing Simon's story teaches me. But there is something else.

While we SHOULD not necessarily doubt someone's salvation upon every evidence of sin, we SHOULD deal with the person, personally.

We should speak boldly and forthrightly. We should confront sin and we should direct the person who has strayed to repent and to return to a walk in holiness.

Just note Peter what Peter did NOT do. He didn't dismiss Simon. He didn't roll his eyes and say, "*What a loser!*" He didn't walk away from Simon in disgust.

He dealt with him. He continued to relate to him. He loved him well, even if he was stern and confrontational.

And it will be a measure of OUR love when we stay engaged with people who are dummies in Jesus. They "*believe and are baptized*" - and then they commit sin. And we passionately pursue them with life-changing purpose.

² Of course, sometimes those who appear to be saved aren't. They "believe" (but not in Jesus) and may even be baptized - but they aren't actually trusting Christ for the forgiveness of their sins.

When you are involved with people who are coming to Christ or who are in the very beginning stages of their journey with Jesus, as we are here at Northwest, don't demand that the growth trajectory will necessarily be meteoric.

Sometimes it will be. Sometimes it won't be. When it is not, lovingly but firmly direct and guide and instruct and admonish.

Well, the adventure in this Samaritan city comes to a close, and we watch as Peter and John head back to Jerusalem, preaching the Gospel as they go.

But, the eighth chapter of Acts is only half over!

Luke goes on to tell us how God re-positioned Philip the evangelist, by angelic command, for another category-busting, border-expanding opportunity for the Gospel.

Encounter in the Desert (vv. 26-38)

Philip Joins a Man in the Desert (vv. 26-29)

A re-commissioned Philip (v. 26)

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

All this time Philip has been in Samaria, north of Jerusalem. An angel now commands him to go to the southern region of Israel on a road going out of Jerusalem that leads to the ancient Philistine city of Gaza.

We know "Gaza" today as a city near the Mediterranean coast. Two thousand years ago, Gaza was a city near the Mediterranean coast!

This road that (still) leads from Jerusalem to Gaza descends some 2,400 feet in elevation and is the route that anyone would take who was traveling from Jerusalem to Egypt and then continuing south into deeper Africa.

Philip's obedience to the angel's command is recorded for us.

He traveled south out of Samaria into Judea, entered Jerusalem and then exited on the Gaza Highway. Not too far out of town, he met up with a man who was on his way to his home back in Africa.

A seeking Ethiopian (vv. 27-28)

[27] So he got up and went; and 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, [28] and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah.³

In the first century, the Ethiopians believed that their King was the child of the sun. He was regarded as too sacred a person to discharge the functions of royalty. So, the actual tasks associated with ruling were performed on his behalf by the queen-mother, whose title (not her proper name) was “Candace.”⁴

This man Philip encountered was a government official. In fact, he was the very powerful treasurer⁵ of the Kingdom of Ethiopia, the large territory south of Egypt stretching far into the African continent (much larger than the present-day Ethiopia).⁶

Our best guess is that this man was a Gentile by both birth and culture. Yet, he was a proselytized Jew, what was known as a “God-fearer” among the Jews.⁷

³ Ps. 68:31 anticipates the day when the Ethiopians will hear the news of salvation. ***“Ethiopia will quickly stretch out her hands to God”***

⁴ That was her name title, as “Pharaoh” was the title of the Egyptian King, and “Caesar” the Roman Emperor.

⁵ He was a eunuch, the type of man typically put in charge of a King’s harem. Eunuchs frequently rose to governmental prominence.

⁶ Ethiopia then is not the same thing as Ethiopia now. Probably what is currently central Sudan. Nearly 1,000 miles from the Mediterranean, also known as Nubia (Yamauchi, 2006).

⁷ His condition would not have allowed him to participate fully in Jewish worship. (but see Isaiah 56:3-5, where eunuchs will be restored to full worship in the end times)

He had adopted the religion of the Jews and worshiped the God of the Jews. He was just returning from a time of worship at the Jewish temple in Jerusalem.

And he was traveling by chariot. In those days, chariots used for traveling purposes would sit three people, two passengers and a driver.

There may have been a driver at the wheel, or there may not have been. But this man was at the front end of a long, five month journey, a tough journey on a flatboard on wheels.

When Philip, who was evidently traveling faster than the Ethiopian, was close to catching up to the chariot, the Holy Spirit - not an angel, got involved.

[29] Then the Spirit said⁸ to Philip, “Go up and join this chariot.”

Philip Evangelizes a Man in the Desert (vv. 30-35)

Admitting to “dummy-hood” (vv. 30-31)

Well, Philip didn’t have to be told twice! He approached, and as he approached, he overheard the African reading.

Now the common practice in the ancient world was to read out loud rather than silently, as we to, today. Reading aloud not only enhances retention (try it!), it allows the reader to “hear” the words of the author. The reader takes in with both eyes and ears when words are read out loud.

[30] Philip ran up (we are probably to understand that Philip began running after the Holy Spirit told him to join the chariot) ***and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?” [31] And he said, “Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.***

As has been observed by many, there are some things that we know and some things that we don’t know and some things that we don’t know that we don’t know.

⁸ Note that the Spirit (and the angel in verse 26) “spoke” to Philip. It was not an inner impression.

One thing that this Ethiopian man knows for sure is that he doesn't know what the prophet Isaiah is talking about.

Jesus, in the Old Testament (vv. 32-33)

[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. [33] "IN HUMILIATION HIS JUDGMENT WAS TAKEN AWAY; WHO WILL RELATE HIS GENERATION? FOR HIS LIFE IS REMOVED FROM THE EARTH."

The common understanding among Jews of the first century was that Isaiah 53 (and other "servant passages" in Isaiah) was either Isaiah describing his own experiences or Isaiah referring to the experiences of the nation of Israel.

Very few thought that it was a Messianic passage, because the Jews couldn't wrap their minds around the idea of a Messiah who suffered. And this Ethiopian's question shows that he was really wrestling with the text.

A request for insight (v. 34)

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

Now Philip was himself only a recent convert to faith in Jesus. But he was a Jew with a wealth of knowledge about the Old Testament. And he had evidently availed himself of the apostles' teaching while he had been in Jerusalem (Acts 2:42), so he knew a good bit about Jesus.

As Philip listened to the words of Isaiah, he understood that the Person being described here was Jesus.

So he was able, at a moment's notice, to explain Isaiah's words in terms of the life and death of Jesus.⁹

⁹ Jesus anticipated His own fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in Mark 10:45 and Mark 9:12.

Telling the best story ever (v. 35)

[35] Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.¹⁰

Point: Know Your Bible

Wouldn't you have loved it if Luke had included the details of this exchange? (Wouldn't you love to come across someone who asks for help in understanding Isaiah 53?) It's hard to imagine a better starting place for evangelism than Isaiah 53!

How did Philip do it?

Did he march all the way through the chapter, showing every instance where the life of Jesus parallels the words of the prophet? Maybe. Did he pick from other Old Testament Scriptures that spoke of the ministry of the Messiah? Probably.

He must have told what had happened in Jerusalem and throughout Israel during Jesus' three year ministry, and then of His death and resurrection.

Philip drew on his knowledge of the Old Testament and the apostles' teaching to share Jesus with someone who was seriously seeking God's truth.

And this leads me to the second thing I want to say to those who are involved with those at the earliest stages of spiritual investigation: Know your Bible.

The more thoroughly you "own" the Book, the more helpful you will be when it comes to sharing your faith with those who have not yet come to know your Jesus.

¹⁰ Verse 35 says that Philip "*preached Jesus to him.*" This means that he proclaimed good news and doesn't imply strictly one way communication. They may well have dialogued back and forth as Philip proclaimed/preached.

The wonderings about life and God that people are wondering are all addressed in the Bible.

- What is God like?
- Why is there evil in the world?
- How does it all end?
- Is there a point or any meaning to life?
- How can my sins be forgiven?

Did Philip get an easy passage to work with? Sure. Isaiah 53 is sort of the ultimate “cherry-picking” of great evangelistic texts. But it was the text he was given. And from it, because he knew it, he was able to tell this seeking Ethiopian about Jesus.

And if you and I want to be the sharpest tools we can be, tools that the Holy Spirit is pleased to use to help newbies, beginners, dummies, and seekers meet Jesus, we’ll immerse ourselves in the Bible.

After talking for some time, at a certain point it became clear that the Holy Spirit was drawing this Ethiopian official to faith.

Philip Confirms a Man in the Desert (vv. 36-38)

*[36] As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?” [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.”]*¹¹

Isn’t it interesting that this Ethiopian requested baptism. Where did he hear about baptism?

It’s possible, I guess, that he knew about it through Jewish sources, or that he had heard about Christian baptism while he had been in Jerusalem.

More likely, I think, he heard about it from Philip. Might Philip have told him about Jesus’ Great Commission and the obligation to baptize people in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit?

¹¹ Harrison, Bock, and most other commentators, take verse 37 as a gloss.

Wouldn’t he have told about how all those who had been saved in Jerusalem were baptized, and about how all of those who had believed in Jesus in Samaria had been baptized?

Doesn’t that explain how natural it was for this Ethiopian to point to the water and request baptism? He is now convinced that Jesus is the promised Messiah. He has placed his trust in Jesus for salvation. He asks, “*Can I be baptized, too?*”

Did you hear the desperation in his voice? “*What prevents me from being baptized?*” Remember. This man was not quite a man. He was a eunuch. He was limited in how fully he could participate in things Jewish, because there were limits placed on eunuchs.

He wants to know if he, a eunuch, can fully identify as a Christian.

“Will God accept me just as I am? Will there be limits on my participation in this faith, too? Baptism symbolizes salvation, full inclusion in the family of God - can I be baptized? Am I welcome?”

Philip says, “*Yep. As long as you believe. That’s the only thing required.*”

[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.

Right there in the desert, by baptism, Philip welcomed the first African into the Body of Christ!¹²

Point: Baptism Matters!

And here is the third thing I would say to beginners (“dummies”) and those who love them: Baptism matters.

For two thousand years, per Jesus’ instruction, baptism has been the identifying mark of the Christian disciple. It is the rite of passage symbolizing the journey from darkness to light.

¹² Several commentators note that in the ancient world, Ethiopia was regarded as “the end of the earth.” And what did Jesus say in Acts 1:8? That His followers are to be His witnesses to the remotest part of the earth. Already, the command is being fulfilled.

Baptism is the act that publicly declares, “*I have decided to follow Jesus.*” And it is the act that celebrates the welcome of God and every other Christian to the family of God in Jesus.

Folks, on the morning of August 8th, as a part of our time in worship, we are holding a baptism service here. If you are a believer in Jesus and have not yet been baptized, August 8th provides a great opportunity to come forward and be baptized.

Please prayerfully consider taking this very important step of Christian discipleship. And if you decide to move forward or want to know more about baptism, please call me so that we can set up a time to get together and talk about it.

Following this baptism, what became of Philip? Philip split, leaving the Ethiopian official to rejoice in the desert over his newfound faith, new life, and new family.¹³

It's All Relational (vv. 39-40)

[39] When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched¹⁴ Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing.

It may be that Luke has simply used a colorful way to describe Philip's sudden departure, not intending to imply a miraculous spiriting away at all.¹⁵

But I think it is more likely that Philip was supernaturally *raptured* away from the waters of baptism.¹⁶ One minute he was right there with the Ethiopian - and the next instant he was gone.

What is more intriguing to me than his departure, though, is to watch as Philip moves from this southern baptism spot forward.

[40] But Philip found himself at Azotus,¹⁷ and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea.

He continued traveling up along the coast, bringing the message of the Gospel to cities such as Joppa and Lydda until he came to the town of Caesarea.

When he arrived at Caesarea, he parked his camel and settled down, got married, bought a home, and raised a family. (see Acts 21:7ff). Why is this intriguing? Because Caesarea was a Samaritan city.

When Philip finally settled down, he landed in Caesarea. Remarkable indeed when we consider that Caesarea was in SAMARIA!

See, Philip didn't just march into Samaria as a marketer with goods to sell or as a mercenary on a short term assignment to notch his Bible with spiritual scalps.

Philip went to live with the Samaritans. He liked them. He loved them.

Is it important to know that young Christians may make errors? Yes. Is it important to engage them when they go astray? Yes. It is important to urge young Christians to be baptized? Yes.

But without LOVE motivating our engagements and our urgings, our best efforts will all fall flat. God LOVED the world so much that He gave His only begotten Son. And God wants us to LOVE the world that He LOVED as passionately as He does.

¹³ Church tradition (through Iraneus, a church father) tells us that upon his return to Ethiopia, this official became a missionary among his own people.

¹⁴ Philip was “snatched” from the water - same word used to describe the rapture of the church (1 Th. 4:17). Can also refer to a quick getaway (Acts 23:10).

¹⁵ John Stott and G. Campbell Morgan do not consider this a miracle.

¹⁶ Since the Spirit is the active agent involved in the snatching, I believe that something supernatural is likely in view.

¹⁷ Azotus is the ancient Ashdod, a Philistine city on the coastal plains some twenty miles north of Gaza.