

Grace Church
Roanoke, Virginia

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Lesson #21

ACTS
Philip and the Eunuch
Acts 8:26-40

DO you feel as though your Christian life is so programmed, so predictable, so organized, so scheduled that there is no place for the unexpected, unpredictable and unanticipated? If God were to speak to you about doing something for Him which is out of the ordinary, would you be responsive to His will? Most of our Christian lives are lived in a routine and ordinary way (that is normal) but occasionally the ordinary is invaded with the extraordinary, supernatural workings of God. We all have our schedules and programs but God who has the freedom to interfere, the freedom to overrule our plans and programs, may break through the ordinary routine to bring the extraordinary through the sovereign, vital, fresh ministry of the Holy Spirit who moves in a way which no one can predict or anticipate.

In the story of Philip and the Eunuch, we have the perfect example of how God breaks the ordinary routine to do something very extraordinary. God took two men and so intertwined their lives that the perfect will of God was done. Their lives dovetailed so much so that it was obvious that the divine hand of God was mightily at work.

PREPARATION OF PHILIP (Acts 8:26, 27a)

“But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip,” -- Philip, the deacon and evangelist, had an angel suddenly appear to him. Philip was conducting a very successful evangelistic campaign in Samaria and in the midst of this mighty revival an angel brings him a message from God. You may ask if it is still possible to see an angel today. My answer is yes, but it is not the normal experience of a Christian. It would be an extraordinary experience. However, angels in an invisible way are ministering to Christians all the time. Angels are all about us and if one should appear to us, he should not be rejected and what he says should be obeyed. I personally have never seen an angel and I know of no one else to whom an angel has appeared, but I think this may be possible today.

Ray Stedman makes some interesting comments about angels. He says,

There have been well-documented experiences and incidences of the appearance of angels recorded in church history beyond the New Testament period. Many missionaries and others still tell us stories of this, so it has not ceased entirely. And I believe that, as we draw nearer to the days of the return of Jesus Christ, we may well expect to see a return of angelic manifestations.

“Saying, ‘Arise and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (This is a desert road)” -- Philip was given an unexplained command to leave Samaria and to go south, taking the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza. Philip was commanded to leave a prospering ministry in Samaria where revival was taking place and go out into the lonely desert where there was nobody. Humanly speaking, this was a crazy command and it probably did not make much sense to Philip but he was a man of obedience. Why would anyone leave a city where thousands of souls were being saved and go out in the desert? Only God knew why and Philip obeyed. As the poet said, “It is not for you to reason why. It is just for you to do and die.”

God just doesn't ask men in the twentieth century to do what seems to be humanly crazy. He sometimes asks a doctor or a lawyer to give up his practice and to go into fulltime Christian work. Sometimes he asks a business man to leave one city and move to another for no apparent reason. Whenever He does this, God has a plan and we are just to be obedient and wait for Him to reveal it to us.

“And he arose and went;” -- Philip gave immediate, unquestioned obedience to God's command and he went not knowing where he was going or why he was sent. Philip did not say, “Well, I have to pray about this.” He did not rationalize, “I'm the leader in Samaria and the revival cannot get along without me.” Nor did he reason, “Well, how could this be a step to a larger field of service (which often means how can I get a salary raise).” He went, knowing his steps would be directed by God, trusting God to give him further revelation of this extraordinary assignment. Philip was a servant and a servant obeys his Lord.

A number of years ago there was a mighty Welsh Revival. The leader of that revival was Evan Roberts, a Methodist preacher. People were flooding into the churches, souls were being saved, people began gathering at nine o'clock in the morning for a service at eleven o'clock. There was singing and testifying as people told of their new found faith in Christ and were thankful for converting grace. A minister came from London to study this phenomenon of revival. He found the church full and climbed through the window, close up at the front. He had come to see the great Evan Roberts, but he saw no preacher. The people were singing and testifying and praising God. After awhile, looking at his watch, he said to a man sitting in one of the front seats, “Where is Evan Roberts? I've been waiting an hour and a half to hear him.” The answer he got startled him. The man replied, “I'm Evan Roberts; you see they can get along without me. But they cannot get along without the Holy Spirit!”

PERSON AND POSITION OF THE EUNUCH (Acts 8:27b)

He Was a Black Man. “And behold, there was an Ethiopian . . .” -- While not all Ethiopians were black, the majority were and most Bible scholars agree that the Ethiopian Eunuch was probably a black man. This, then, would be the first account of a black man coming to Christ, for we know that the gospel is for all races of men without distinction. Philip did not have so many hang ups about blacks that he refused to witness to them about Jesus Christ.

He Was a Eunuch. “. . . eunuch,” -- He was an emasculated or castrated male. Eunuchs were often given high positions in government because they were not subject to sexual temptations and sexual bribes as were other men. According to the Old Testament, no eunuch could have full privileges in Israel. “No one who is emasculated, or has his male organ cut off, shall enter the assembly of the LORD (Deut. 23:1). If the Ethiopian Eunuch was a proselyte to Judaism, he was a second class proselyte.

He Was a Man of Great Authority. “. . . a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure;” -- This man was a high ranking official in the government of Ethiopia. He was the Secretary of Treasury. He was a powerful man and his influence extended throughout Ethiopia and Egypt. He was obviously a rich man for he could afford a fancy chariot, a vacation to Jerusalem and had money to buy a scroll of the Book of Isaiah which was quite costly.

He Was a Religious Man. “. . . and he had come to Jerusalem to worship.” -- The Ethiopian Eunuch was probably a second class proselyte to Judaism or he may have been just a worshipper of God, being influenced by the monotheism of Judaism. Whatever, he had traveled some twelve hundred miles to worship in Jerusalem. He had an interest in the Scriptures and was willing to tackle one of the toughest doctrinal books in the Old Testament, the Book of Isaiah. He was obviously a very intelligent man and a true searcher for truth. Like a good Jewish proselyte, he desired to make at least one pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the starting place of his Judaistic beliefs. He probably longed to come to Jerusalem to make sacrifices, to pray in the temple, to see the religious sites and to talk to the High Priest. Perhaps he had become somewhat dissatisfied with Judaism and felt that going to Jerusalem would spice up his religious experience. When he got to Jerusalem, he was probably let down because he found a materialistic, colds ritualistic religion. He saw the dead orthodoxy of traditional Judaism. Probably the Ethiopian Eunuch left Jerusalem a disappointed and disillusioned man about Judaism. But he was still seeking to know the truth, so he bought himself a scroll of the prophet Isaiah and began to read for himself. This scroll was probably the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint. The Eunuch was not saved, but he was genuinely seeking to know the truth.

PREPARATION OF THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH (Acts 8:28)

“And he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah.” -- Obviously this man was searching but why was he searching for truth? One reason may be that while he was in Jerusalem he came into contact with Christians who were claiming that Christ was the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises concerning Messiah. Perhaps these Christians had challenged the Eunuch to read the Old Testament to see if Christ really was the long promised Messiah. The Eunuch had to know and would not be satisfied until he did know. Yet, what was causing such a great hunger in his heart? Obviously God was drawing him to salvation. God was preparing this man to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. The Eunuch was one of God's elect and God was moving on him, and he was greatly concerned about getting him the message of salvation in Christ. Dr. S. Lewis Johnson says, “One sheep is enough to move the heart of God to love and His hand to action.” God, through the years and through various circumstances, had been preparing the Ethiopian Eunuch to believe. He was searching because God was moving and the day of his appointed salvation was drawing nigh. God was not only preparing the Eunuch but He was also sending Philip with the message of Christ to him. It was divine providence that these two men should meet, for an eternal transaction was about to take place. When Philip came, he was merely picking the ripe fruit which had been prepared by God.

When God has a soul He is going to save, He will get the message of Christ to that person by one means or another.

POINTED QUESTION (Acts 8:29, 30)

“And the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go up and join this chariot.’ And when Philip had run up, he heard him reading Isaiah the prophet,” -- Someone may get the idea that the Eunuch was sitting in the chariot with the reins in one hand and the Book of Isaiah in the other. Not so, for he was not traveling alone. He undoubtedly had servants and minor officials with him and surely he had some security police. He had a canopy over his chariot and a private chauffeur. This man was riding in style.

The Spirit of God spoke to Philip to go up to this man's chariot and witness to him. Philip was sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit and obeyed when God told him to speak. Notice Philip's enthusiasm and excitement. He ran to the chariot. He could hardly wait to see what God was going to do in this situation. Philip did not say, “I don't want to witness to a black man!” Or, “How can I, a puny little layman witness to the Secretary of Treasury?” Or, “I don't want anything to do with social weirdos like emasculated males!” Or, “I can't witness to this man; he is out of my social class!” No, Philip ran to witness.

When he got along side the chariot, he heard the man reading the prophet Isaiah aloud. Ancient manuscripts had no punctuation and words were run together. Therefore, it was often the custom to read slowly and out loud. We can just imagine the puzzled and bewildered look on the Eunuch's face as he tried to comprehend what he was reading, but it was all Greek to him.

“. . . and said, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’” -- Notice carefully that Philip took the initiative. He tactfully asked a question, hoping that it would open an opportunity to witness for Christ. Had Philip waited for the Eunuch to ask him a question, he may never have had an opportunity to witness.

In all of our witnessing experiences, we should seek to take the initiative to open the door for the gospel. We should also be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit so that when He tells us to speak we will do it in obedience.

“And he said, ‘Well, how could I unless someone guides me?’” -- The Eunuch was reading and pondering over the Scriptures but he could not understand them. He could grasp the concepts but had no real spiritual understanding of the truth. He needed help to understand and God sent him that help in Philip, who knew the Scriptures and knew how to be an effective witness for Christ. Philip was God's instrument to bring the Eunuch the truth of Christ. The Holy Spirit would open the Eunuch's mind and heart to the truth but Philip was the messenger of the truth. The Holy Spirit is the cause of salvation; Philip was but a vehicle for the truth,

but without Philip the Eunuch would have never understood the truth.

The Eunuch's question is the haunting question of the seeking heart which echoes down through the ages. How can I understand unless someone helps me understand? That was a desperate cry for help. His soul was parched. His heart was empty. His mind was confused. The Ethiopian represents any seeking soul in this world. It may be your neighbor next door who is reading the Bible but does not understand it, or the hungry heart in France who is seeking reality or the Indian in the jungles of Brazil who wants more light about God. The question, "How can I understand?" is a very haunting question to a troubled soul.

In his biography, Hudson Taylor tells of one incident where he led a Chinese man to Christ. The man asked Hudson Taylor, "How long have you known the good news of Christ in your country?" Hudson Taylor said to this man who was full of joy in his new found faith, "We have known it for a long time . . . hundreds of years, actually." The man, an ex-Buddhist leader, said, "Hundreds of years! And you never before told us? Why, my father sought for the truth for such a long time and never found it before he died! Oh, why did you not come and share the good news sooner?"

This verse teaches the importance of teachers. Quite often you will hear Christians say, "I'm just going to read the Bible for myself; I don't need any body else to teach me. I don't need Bible dictionaries, concordances and commentaries. I'll just read the Bible and what God says to me I will take action on." God, however, has given teachers to help us understand. Spurgeon used to say, "I never could understand why some set such value on what the Holy Spirit said to them, and so little value on what He said to anyone else." We all need people who know the Scriptures to help us understand the Scriptures.

"And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him." -- What an act of humility by this great and eminent man! He humbled himself, admitting, even as intelligent as he was, that he knew nothing about the spiritual understanding of the Bible. Perhaps one of the reasons he was such a great man was that he knew his limitations and was not so proud to ask for help. He was intelligent enough to know he did not know. He allowed a plain commoner to teach him the Word of God. Philip was wiser than the Eunuch because he knew God and apparently the Eunuch sensed this.

PASSAGE IN ISAIAH (Acts 8:32, 33)

"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. IN HUMILIATION HIS JUDGMENT WAS TAKEN AWAY; WHO SHALL RELATE HIS GENERATION? FOR HIS LIFE IS REMOVED FROM THE EARTH.'" -- The Eunuch was reading Isaiah 53 and verses 7 and 8 in particular. This is probably the greatest Old Testament passage on the Messiah, and it gives the truth of the gospel as clear as any Old Testament text. God had prepared it so Philip would arrive when the Eunuch was reading a gospel passage. God's timing is perfect and the Eunuch was ripe fruit ready to be picked by Philip the evangelist.

Isaiah 53:7-8 are all about a suffering person, and the Eunuch probably reasoned, "If this is a reference to Messiah, why must he die? Why must he suffer?" He could not match this concept with other passages in the Old Testament which depict Messiah as reigning. He was to be a great Prince, a conqueror, one who would deliver from oppression and suffering, one who reigns and sets up a glorious kingdom. If this was Messiah, the Eunuch could not understand how He could both suffer and reign.

PLEADING OF THE EUNUCH (Acts 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 Eunuch begged Philip for an answer. His hungry soul had to know whether this was Isaiah or someone else, namely the Messiah. His searching heart was obviously getting closer to the truth, but he was not yet saved.

PREACHING OF JESUS BY PHILIP (Acts 8:35)

“And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this scripture he preached Jesus to him.” -- Philip preached the gospel of Christ to the Eunuch from Isaiah 53. This passage was a springboard for other passages in the Old Testament which pointed to Messiah. He preached Jesus to the Eunuch. He undoubtedly explained to the Eunuch how Jesus was God's son, truly God and truly man; how He came by a supernatural virgin birth; how he lived a perfect life; how He died for sinners; how He rose from the dead and how He promised eternal life and the forgiveness of sins to all who would trust in Him as personal Lord and Savior. He taught the Eunuch all these truths from the Old Testament, turning from one passage to another.

Surely Philip went back over Isaiah 53 to make sure that the Eunuch understood that Christ as a suffering Messiah, had to die for sinners before He could reign over men.

“Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him” (Isa. 53:4-6).

Philip must have told the Eunuch that God caused the sins of all of God's people to fall on Christ. God's judgment fell on Christ and this happened when Christ cried out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?”

We don't know what transpired between Philip and the Eunuch during this time but perhaps I can reconstruct what I think the conversation was all about. Just when the Eunuch was about to receive Christ, he said, “I'm so sinful. While I was faithful to the Queen, I have been ruthless in my dealings with men. God could never forgive me and accept me!” Philip quietly turned to Isaiah 53:11b and read aloud, “My servant will justify many, as He will bear their iniquities.” “That is a wonderful truth,” says the Eunuch, “but have you forgotten that I am a hated and despised Gentile?” Philip turning to Isaiah 54:3 reads, “Thy seed shall inherit the Gentiles.” (KJV). “Praise God, Gentiles can be saved,” said the Eunuch, “but you know I am a rejected eunuch, and even if I accepted Christ I would have to be a second or third or fourth class Christian.” And again Philip turns to Isaiah 56:3-5, “Let not the foreigner who joined himself to the Lord say, ‘The LORD will surely separate me from His people.’ Neither let the eunuch say, ‘Behold, I am a dry tree.’ For thus says the LORD, ‘To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths, and choose what pleases Me, and hold fast My covenant, to them I will give My house and within my walls a memorial, and a home better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off.” Each argument put up by the Eunuch was knocked down by Philip as he pointed him to the Scriptures. Then Philip turns to the Eunuch and quotes Isaiah 55:1, “Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.” Come Eunuch! Come wealthy man! Come eminent man! Come sinful man! Come religious man! Come intelligent man! Come seeking man to Christ who is the water and he who drinks of Him shall never thirst! Then the light dawned. The Eunuch cried out, “Praise God, I take Jesus as my Savior. I bow to Him as my Lord!” This was an exciting event. Perhaps the Eunuch was crying for joy of a new found salvation, and Philip was having a tear in his eye for the joy of being God's instrument in the salvation of a soul.

If the Eunuch had possessed one of our modern day hymn books, do you not suppose he would have broken out with this song:

O happy day that fixed my choice
On Thee, my Savior and my God!
Well may this glowing heart rejoice,
And tell its raptures all abroad!

Tis done; the great transaction's done;
I am my Lord's, and He is mine;

He drew me, and I followed on,
Charmed to confess the voice divine.

PRACTICE OF BAPTISM (Acts 8:36-39)

“And as they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?’” -- The Eunuch's conversion was immediate, and somewhere in the conversation, Philip must have instructed him about the Great Commission given by Christ. “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20-21). The Eunuch saw either a lake or a stream or pool of water and asked for baptism. Notice the Eunuch asked to be baptized but Philip was not begging him to do it.

“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.’” -- Verse 37 is not part of the better Greek manuscripts but it surely seems like reliable early church practice. Philip put up one condition only for baptism - belief in Christ from the heart. Philip had learned his lesson from Simon Magus who had all the externals of Christianity, including baptism, but was not saved because His “heart was not right before God.” Simon was a phony, a sham, a pretender because the intention of his heart was not toward Christ. He had knowledge of Christ but he did not have a heart for Christ. Intellectual knowledge of Christ saves no one but only a heart commitment to the Christ of Scripture saves. Philip wanted to make sure the Eunuch was not like Simon Magus and that he clearly understood the gospel and was committed from the heart to it. The Eunuch made his confession from the heart. He confessed “Jesus” who is Savior; “Christ” who is Messiah and the “Son of God” who is the unique Son of God because He is the second person of the Trinity. It is essential to confess Jesus as Lord-God if one is to be truly saved.

“That if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation” (Rom. 10:9-10).

“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.” -- The Eunuch was baptized as a testimony to the saving grace that had taken place in him. He made an outward confession of the inward reality of Christ. We know that the Eunuch's baptism had nothing to do with salvation because salvation is not of works but of grace. However, he was baptized in obedience to Christ's command in the Great Commission. The mode or way of baptism is not clear in this passage. At first glance it seems like immersion but the words “they went down into the water” and “they came up out of the water” can equally be translated “they went down to the water” and “they came up from the water.” If this verse teaches immersion as the Baptists claim then both Philip and the Eunuch went under the water for the text says, “They both went down into the water.” Whether this verse teaches immersion, pouring or sprinkling is open to debate and in my opinion it is not worth arguing about. The important thing is that the Eunuch, as a believer in Christ, was baptized to show outwardly that he had been identified with Christ spiritually by faith and had come to new life in Jesus Christ.

Perhaps the poet can put the sacraments into proper perspective better than I can:

The sacraments are holy signs
And precious Gospel seals;
They 'xhibit what the Lord designs,
And what His Word reveals.

But these are not themselves the grace;
Which signs and seals set forth;
The supper's not the-sacrifice,
Nor water the New Birth.

The sacraments were never meant
A substitute for grace;
They're not the truths they represent,
Nor must they take their place.

Sinners may publicly profess,
And signs and seals receive,
Of what they never did possess,
Or what they don't believe.

Men may baptize, but 'tis the Lord
Regenerates the heart;
None but the Spirit, by His Word,
That blessing can impart.

Preserve us, Lord, from self-deceit,
From resting on a sign;
Bestow what symbols indicate,
And give us life divine.

Let none who preach the Gospel hide
This solemn truth from men;
They may with water be baptiz'd
Yet not be born again.

“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 he went on his way rejoicing.” -- After Philip led the Eunuch to Christ, there was a sudden departure. As far as we know the Eunuch had no follow-up but he had Christ in his heart who would direct him. Philip went on preaching in Palestine, and the Eunuch went back to his own people as the first missionary to Ethiopia.

Because of Philip's sensitivity to the leading of the Spirit, the Eunuch was saved and the gospel then began to go to the uttermost parts of the earth. The Eunuch went away rejoicing because he knew Christ.

PREACHING THE GOSPEL (Acts 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.” -- Wherever Philip went he preached the gospel of Christ, telling men of salvation. Witnessing was a way of life with these early Christians. They had great confidence that if they would preach the gospel faithfully, God would win men to Christ through their ministries.

Apparently Philip settled down in Caesarea. Perhaps he got married and raised a family. However, he did not stop preaching Christ but he made Caesarea his permanent home. There he continued his work as a lay evangelist and deacon. Twenty years after the record in Acts 8 we read of Philip still persevering and serving Christ. “And on the next day we departed and came to Caesarea; and entering the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, we stayed with him. Now this man had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses” (Acts 21:8-9).

CONCLUSION

For you who are not Christians, there is a great lesson for you in Acts 8. Eminence, education, wealth, sincerity, religion, interest in the Bible are not enough to save a man from the guilt and penalty of sin. It is only Jesus who can save - not Jesus and baptism, not Jesus and confirmation, not Jesus and church membership,

not Jesus and the sacraments, not Jesus and my denomination, not Jesus and philosophy, not Jesus and social action, not Jesus and good works, not Jesus and my particular brand of theology, not Jesus and culture. No! Only Jesus can save for He is God, Savior, King, Master and Lord! Have you come to Christ? Have you turned to Him as a guilty, hopelessly lost sinner? Have you bowed to Him as the Son of God? If you will accept Christ as Lord and believe with all your heart He is your Savior, you shall be saved.