



LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

SERIES: *THE SPREADING FLAME*

Catalog No. 1242

Acts 8:26-40

13th Message

Gary Vanderet

January 12th, 2003

In these studies on the history of the early church from the book of Acts, the apostle Peter is the dominant personality in chapters 1-5. The main players in chapters 6-8 are Stephen, the first martyr, and Philip the evangelist. These two men were among the seven selected to wait on tables and care for the Hellenistic widows in the young church in Jerusalem. They became the leaders of the movement that went out from the city into the Greek-speaking Gentile world, ordinary laymen through whom God accomplished great things.

Last week, in chapter 8, we looked at Philip's very successful ministry in Samaria. As a result of the dispersion produced by Saul's persecution, Philip went to Samaria from Jerusalem and began ministering there: "Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. So there was much rejoicing in that city" (Acts 8:5-8).

Despite that widespread response to the gospel, however, our text today begins with these words:

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.) (Acts 8:26, NASB)

How strange that the Lord would call Philip away from a successful ministry in Samaria and send him off to an uninhabited region (that is the meaning of the term translated desert). This was an international road leading from Jerusalem to what we know as the Gaza Strip, and continuing down into Egypt. It was a desert road, devoid of villages and settlements. It seems odd that the Lord would remove Philip, a seemingly indispensable member of a growing congregation, with its accompanying opportunities and needs, and send him off on a lonely desert road.

Philip's immediate obedience to this seemingly strange command is impressive. If it were me, I would have had a few objections. I might have said, "I'll go, Lord, but not now. We are in the midst of a great blessing here in Samaria. It would be a mistake to turn our backs on it." Or I might have said, "Why me? I'm already involved here. Why not send one of the apostles from Jerusalem. They aren't doing anything apart from

checking up on my work to see if I'm doing it right." Or I might have said, "You want me to go where? A desert? No one lives there! Am I going to speak to lizards? Haven't I proved myself worthy of a broader ministry?"

Philip doesn't protest, he responds.

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, and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah. (8:27-28)

Philip was walking along this road to Gaza when the God of surprises shocked him. Over a hill there appeared a chariot, occupied by an impressively dressed black man. It was probably an imposing caravan, because this man was a cabinet member in the Ethiopian court. Candace was not a personal name, but a title for the queen mother of Ethiopia. She carried out certain administrative duties for the king, who was considered to be an offspring of the sun, and too sacred to become involved in the everyday management of the nation.

This is not referring to Ethiopia as we know it today. This country was located in what we know as Sudan, in the interior of Africa. Gold mining and iron smelting had made it a very wealthy, powerful nation. The man in the chariot was the treasurer to the queen, a position of great responsibility, rather like that of our former Secretary of the Treasury, Paul O'Neill. Imagine you are walking down the highway from Brawley to El Centro in the southern California desert, and over the brow of a hill comes Paul O'Neill in his limousine. This is what confronted Philip on that day.

This powerful official had a searching heart, however. He had just completed a thousand-mile religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and was reading from the scroll of Isaiah, evidently purchased there. We don't know about his religious background, whether he was a Jewish proselyte or simply a God-fearer.

Whatever the man's religious background, he was, as Kent Hughes puts it, "a noble man on a noble search."¹ We all recognize that people who are down and out need God. But people who are up and out need God too. At times public officials hunger after God because, having arrived at the top of their profession, they still are unsatisfied. Their accomplishments have not done anything for them. Apparently that was this man's con-

dition. He was looking for God, and reading the Scriptures.

So intense was his hunger he had purchased the scroll of Isaiah. This was not a book. The scroll probably was made up of a couple of rolls, each about the size of a 5-pound coffee can, weighing up to 50 pounds. He was reading out loud, which is what people did in those days. Today, every time we turn around we see text on a printed page, but back then people rarely read anything. If they read at all it was poorly. The man was probably spelling out the words as he went along.

This encounter was not just sovereignly directed, the exact moment they met was prepared by the Spirit.

Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 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 shearers 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 answered Philip and said, "Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?" Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. (8:29-35)

Notice the sovereign timing of this event. At the very moment when the chariot passed Philip, the man was reading from Isaiah 53, the great passage that predicts the coming of the Messiah, the suffering Savior. There is no better place in the Old Testament from which to preach Jesus.

The hand of God can be seen throughout this story. Not only is Philip led by the Spirit, the Ethiopian official is prepared by God for this encounter. Notice that the text is different from our translation. That is because the man was reading from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT—a freer translation that doesn't correspond exactly to ours. Luke quotes verses 7-8, which speak of a servant of God who experiences deep suffering. This servant makes no protest although he is humiliated, deprived of justice, and put to death. The Ethiopian asks Philip whom the prophet is referring to. Prior to the time of Jesus, no one knew to whom Isaiah 53 referred. People didn't know if this passage was speaking of the nation of Israel or a prophet. The doctrine of a suffering Messiah was unthinkable in Jewish religious circles. It was Jesus who applied Isaiah 53 to himself. He understood his death in the light of it and taught his disciples to read it that way.

No doubt Philip took this man through all twelve

verses of Isaiah 53. He might even have inserted the name of Jesus into the text as he read:

*But Jesus was pierced for our transgressions,
Jesus was crushed for our iniquities...
And by Jesus' scourging we are healed; (v 5).*

*Jesus was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet Jesus did not open his mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So Jesus did not open his mouth (v 7).*

We don't know how long they rode together, or the other Scriptures that Philip shared, but they probably had a much longer conversation than is recorded here. The Ethiopian was convinced and marvelously converted. Maybe he ended his reception of the gospel with an appeal to be baptized, like Peter did at Pentecost. The eunuch was not only convinced, he wanted to take the next step.

As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" [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."] 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. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing. 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. (8:36-40)

There in the desert, in the presence of the treasurer's entourage, Philip baptized the eunuch. He came to God, not as the secretary of the treasury, but as a sinner availing himself of the blood of Jesus Christ who died in his place.

Just as the sharing of the gospel in Samaria produced great joy in the city, so this eunuch went away rejoicing. These two men went their separate ways. Philip disappeared, but he wasn't missed, for this Ethiopian now had Christ, and was returning to the interior of Africa. Ireneaus, one of the early church writers, who died in about AD 200, records that the man became an evangelist throughout all of central Africa. And Philip went on his way, carrying the gospel to city after city. Eventually he came to Caesarea. This is where we find him, some twenty years later. Luke had joined Paul by this time, and he wrote, "We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for a day. Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied" (Acts 21:7-9, NIV). Here is Philip, twenty years later, no longer in the spotlight, but still plugging away at the job that God had given him. In fact, his whole family was involved

in ministry.

In closing, I want to make some observations from this passage that are applicable to our lives.

The first thing to note about Philip's ministry in Samaria, and to this Ethiopian, is the power of the gospel. As John Stott notes, "The people with whom he shares the gospel are very different in race, rank and religion."² The Samaritans were of mixed race, half-Jewish and half-Gentile, while the Ethiopian was a black African. It appears that the Samaritans were common citizens, whereas the Ethiopian was a rich man with great influence. In terms of religion, the Samaritans respected Moses but rejected the prophets. Before their conversion they had allowed themselves to come under the spell of Simon the sorcerer and his occult powers.

The Ethiopian, on the other hand, had a strong attachment to Judaism, perhaps as a convert. This led him to go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and to read one of the many prophets rejected by the Samaritans. Yet despite their differences in racial origin, social class and prior religious affiliation, Philip presented both with the same good news of Jesus. That is why the apostle Paul wrote, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom 1:16, NASB).

Paul wasn't ashamed of the gospel; it is the only thing that can change people. Education doesn't change them. It just makes them more intelligent in their evil. Bettering social conditions doesn't change people. Doing something for them physically is good, but it doesn't change their hearts. The only thing that can change the heart of a man or woman is the gospel, the good news about Jesus.

Another thing that stands out in this passage is that Philip was a layman, not a professional. He wasn't theologically trained. He didn't go to seminary. Yet it is obvious that he was knowledgeable in the Scriptures. How many of us could take that passage in Isaiah 53 and preach Jesus to one who asks? This is a good reminder of the importance of growing in our knowledge of the Scriptures. Philip was an ordinary believer who had a vital, powerful ministry wherever he went. He is the only person in the Bible to be called an evangelist. We sometimes think of evangelists as professionals, like Billy Graham. Certainly there are many in pastoral ministry who have gifts of evangelism. But the most effective evangelists are lay people. And that is what Philip was, a layman.

A second observation from this passage is that it is not our ability that matters, but our availability. Philip was available to the Spirit of God. He was aware of God's sovereignty, and sensitive to his Spirit. It is simply a matter of putting ourselves at God's disposal, and saying, "Here I am! I will go anywhere you want me to go. I will do anything you want me to do."

Have you done that? This is what God desires, as

Paul says in Romans 12. God is pleased when we offer our bodies; it is the most reasonable worship that we can carry out. We don't have to come to a church service and sing in order to worship. Just offer your body to God and he will put it to its intended use. Let us say to God, "I will let you schedule my day. I have made plans, but you have the right to interfere and interrupt. I will simply trust you to put me in the right place at the right time, so that I can meet the right people and say the right things." That is when Christianity becomes exciting. If you are bored by the Christian life, you don't understand this principle. One predictable thing about the Spirit of God is that he is utterly unpredictable. You never know what he is going to do next. If we put ourselves in his hands, he will use us in ways that exceed our expectations.

Reader's Digest records the story of a man who took his car to be repaired. He planned to have it driven to his home when the work was completed. The man who was delivering the car couldn't read the house number, however. He was about to telephone the shop when he noticed a garage door opener on the visor. He decided he would simply keep pressing the button while he drove down the street, until a garage door opened up. That is a wonderful illustration of how we are to act as believers: going through life loving people, making ourselves available to them, with our thumb on the button, to see who is open; waiting for God to lead us to open hearts. We need to go to places where God is already at work, and we don't know where that is. Now the Christian life isn't always like that. Sometimes it is routine and pedestrian. But every once in a while God puts something in your life that reminds you that he is at work.

There is a great illustration of this in Acts, on the occasion when Paul went to Philippi. Desiring to evangelize that intellectually-minded Greek city, he found a group of women down by the riverside. That was where God was at work. We don't have to start the work of God. Our job is to find the place where he is already at work, to find the person with whom he is already in touch. How do we do that? Do we wear a special antenna? No. It's up to God. Our part is to make ourselves available to him.

In the story of the woman at the well, Jesus was on his way up to Galilee when he met her. The text says he had to go through Samaria. Why was that? It is because he wasn't a racist. Most Jews would have taken a much more circuitous route. Jews hated Samaritans. Jesus didn't know what was going to happen that morning; he had laid aside his omniscience. He stopped at the well, which is where people stopped, and sent his disciples into town to buy food. He engaged this woman in conversation, and led her to water that didn't come from Jacob's well—the water that "springs up to eternal life." How did he know that? It was because every morning he said, "Father, I want to do what you are doing. I want to say what you are saying. I want to make

myself available to you, to be put to my intended purpose." That is what it means to befriend people. It may result in a long-term friendship or remain just a brief contact, but it is a matter of making friends wherever we go.

This leads me to a final observation: Philip loved people. Someone has said, "People don't care what we know until they know that we care." It's possible to become so preoccupied thinking about the presentation of the gospel that you forget the person. God has called us to love people. Red, yellow, black or white, they are precious in his sight. Are they precious in our sight? Racism is a sin. Bigotry is a sin. These are superficial differences that make no difference at all. Philip wasn't put off by the fact that this man was black. It didn't matter.

The fact that he was not a Jew didn't matter, either. Philip saw that he had something that transcended any cultural difference, and that was a hunger for God in the heart of this man from Ethiopia.

This is the adventure of life in the Spirit. May God grant that we will be full of the Spirit, full of the gospel, and full of compassion for people. May we be available to be a channel of his grace to those around us.

© 2003 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino

1. R. Kent Hughes, *Acts* (Wheaton: Crossway), 120.
2. John R.W. Stott, *Acts* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity), 163.