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## **Answering the Call**

**Acts 8:26-40**

**Intro:** The movement of the Gospel message from Jerusalem and Judea into Samaria was centered on the ministry of Philip. Philip was one of 7 Hellenist believers who had been appointed by the Apostles to carry out an important service in the church at Jerusalem. But, it appears that although they had been ordained to perform a specific ministry of service, these men didn't consider themselves limited to that work. At least 2 of them turned out to be great preachers. They were knowledgeable of the OT Scriptures and were men of great courage too. Stephen rose to prominence quickly and took a stand for the Gospel before the most powerful religious body in Israel and paid for it with his life. Then the baton was passed to Philip and it wasn't long before he became an effective evangelist too.

Now Philip is on the scene, and he is proving to be another outstanding believer. He earned the title of evangelist because when the church was scattered by persecution, he made his way to Samaria where he preached Jesus. And, although there was some drama surrounding Simon the Sorcerer, the Gospel message that Philip preached brought great joy to the Samaritans as they were delivered from physical ailments, spiritual bondage and most of all: from the guilt of their sin! But, as we will see from our text today, Philip was not only a faithful preacher; he was also an obedient servant of the Lord.

**26** – Here, Luke records for us God calling Philip to another ministry opportunity. The fact that God called Philip is not that surprising but the setting in which God calls him is surprising and is due our attention. This was a time of unusual blessing for the church. To judge from **vs25**, it seems that the revival in Samaria was still growing. Peter and John had been sent by the Apostles to inspect the work in Samaria and as they journeyed back to Jerusalem to report, they also preached the Gospel in many villages of the Samaritans along the way. But, Philip was an important part of this, being the chief evangelist. He was the front-line man. He seemed to be utterly indispensable. Yet it was at precisely this moment when God called him to leave the area.

Another important fact about this call was the area to which Philip is being sent. He was in a good area, doing a good work, reaching many people. But the angel of the Lord said he wanted Philip to go down to the desert road that stretches south to Gaza on the way to Egypt. God was directing Philip to leave a location that was experiencing a massive impact of the Gospel to go to a place where there weren't many people at all, if any!

Isn't it interesting that God called Philip at that time and to that place? We're not told that Philip balked in any way, apparently because he didn't. He was submissive to God's plan and what God called him to do he did joyfully. But if we had been in his place, would we have raised some objections? I can think of a few right off the bat; like "God, you know I'm busy here, doing the work you called me to. Why don't You send Your angel there to handle this situation, whatever it is?" The problem with that is: God hasn't given the commission to spread the Gospel to angels; He's only given it to His people. Angels have never personally experienced God's grace; thus, they can never bear witness of what it truly means to be saved.

I might've said, "OK, Lord, but not now. We'll get to that region eventually—in the proper time. We're in the middle of great blessing here in Samaria, and it would be a great mistake to turn our backs on it. Or, "Not me." (said humbly). Or even, "Lord, I'm not the only Christian around. I am involved in work here. What about all those Apostles sitting around in Jerusalem. They received the Great Commission too. In fact, they received it from Jesus directly. Why don't they go? They're not doing anything except checking up on my work to see if I am doing it right." Or, "All right, Lord, but not there. Not to the desert. Nobody lives down there. This is where the people are, right here in Samaria."

I doubt Philip had any of these thoughts because Philip knew something we need to know, something that'll be very helpful in our lives: God's ways are not our ways; His thoughts are not our thoughts. How do we know this? We know it because God tells us (**Isa 55:8**). This means that although Christianity is not an irrational thing and none of us are called to be irrational, still, when we're engaged in spiritual work there will always be things we will not fully understand. We'll ask, "Why does God do that rather than something else?" That is just the way it is going to be.

The Christian walk is accompanied by a multitude of questions: "Why is this happening? What are You doing? Is this right?" occasionally we get answer but often, those answers are unsatisfactory. The real answer from the human perspective is that there really is often no answer, at least not one we can comprehend. God's ways are just not our ways. We just don't know what God's doing. That's where our problem is.

We always expect God to level with us, to clue us in, to spill the beans and let us know what's up, what's going to happen We want this, not just because we're interested in God's plans but more likely, because we'd like to decide

up front whether or not we'll do it! This is exactly why God doesn't tell us up front. If we saw where God was bringing us to in our Christian walks, we would more than likely check out because it's not something we're able to handle in our present level of spiritual maturity. It's something we must grow into, mature into as we learn more about God and grow in both our faith and our experience of Him. God had a wonderful plan, not just for Philip but for an entire Gentile country but He only told Philip to, "Go to Gaza." He didn't tell him anything else.

Of course, He didn't need to. When Philip was given this call, he didn't know what God was going to do with him. It probably didn't make sense to him to leave Samaria and go to the desert. But that's what God told him to do; so he did it. When it comes to a choice between our way of thinking and what God says, there's no real choice. We must do what God says. That's the only way to find blessing. G. Campbell Morgan said, "If Christ is hindered, it's because some Philip is not willing to go." As we will see, Philip was not the only one being lead of the Spirit.

**27-35** – On the road to Gaza Philip came upon an Ethiopian eunuch. He was part of a history that might have gone back one thousand years. He was from the same the Queen of Sheba had come from in the days of King Solomon. Meaning, there had already been a link between that area of the world and Judaism. The Queen of Sheba had been greatly impressed by King Solomon, and Solomon had certainly shared the Jewish Scriptures with her. We don't know how much of that influence survived in her kingdom but here is an Ethiopian who had gotten the idea that there was a religion in Jerusalem that he should investigate if he was serious about finding God.

So he made the long trip to Jerusalem. Not many would have been able to do it. It was hard to travel in those days, and this was a very long and costly journey. But he was an important man, the keeper of the treasury of what was known to be a very rich country. He was free to go because of his position. It's not likely that he heard anything about Jesus during his visit, as odd as that may sound. He wouldn't have spoken Hebrew or Aramaic. He probably knew Greek, since it seems he's reading from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT.

Although he hadn't heard about Jesus, he had certainly entered into the religious life of the Jews. I wonder what he found in the religious life of Judaism in those days. We know what Jesus found and what the early apostles were finding. The religious leaders of the nation had great traditions; they had the OT; but they had become hopelessly legalistic. They were more concerned with the jots and tittles of the law than with its spirit. I guess this Ethiopian must have been sorely disappointed by he discovered in Judaism: too much politics and not very much faith

Sadly, it's not much different today. People go to churches hungering and thirsting after God, but instead of finding God they find people who are concerned about rules, or politics or power. Yes, we live in a consumer culture where people choose churches like they choose anything else – what's in it for me? But, there are those occasional few who come to the end of themselves and go to church to seek God and all they find is a group of knuckleheads who want to take advantage of each other and them as well, if they stick around long enough!

This man didn't find God in Judaism but he did find something. He found God's word, the religious texts of Judaism. And, he was reading them! Although he hadn't found much in the actual religion of Israel, he was reading the Word of God. Maybe he had started at the beginning. He may have read about Isaiah's call to the ministry: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple" (**Isa 6:1**). He may have read of the seraphim singing, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts" (**Isa 6:3**). If he had come to this chapter, he would have said to himself, Ah, this is what I long for. I want to know God, the holy God. I want a vision of the One for whom my soul is thirsting.

As he went on, did he read about the sins of the people and of the fact that sin bars the sinful one from God? Did he read about God's holiness and his just judgments of human sin? Did he read this great invitation? Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters . . . Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost (**Isa 55:1**). If he had read this, he must have understood something about himself. He must have realized that although God invites us to come to Him, we are unable to approach Him because we are sinners. Regardless, at this point of his journey he'd come to **Isa 53:7-8** He was puzzled as he read. What is this about? Of whom is the prophet writing? Is he writing of himself?

It was at this moment that Philip was directed by the Spirit to catch up to the chariot and approach it. There are no accidents in the life of God's people. Philip came at precisely the right moment, when the Ethiopian had reached what most people consider to be the very heart of this prophecy, which means it's the heart of the OT. In those days people generally read everything out loud, so Philip had already heard him reading Isaiah. Philip was bold enough to ask if he understood what he was reading. It was an inoffensive question that implied a subtle offer to explain the passage if the Ethiopian official was interested in hearing one. He did, so Philip began to expound the passage.

He was reading the chapter that portrays Jesus as the Suffering Servant who came to be our Savior. This passage

contains the principle of substitutionary atonement. In fact, they're the strongest statement of this principle in the OT. They show how Jesus has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows (53:4). They show how He was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities (5). They show how we all, like sheep, have gone astray but that the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (6). As he explained the meaning of these words to the Ethiopian, Philip told him about Jesus, the One who had fulfilled this prophecy precisely just a short while before. At the same time, the Ethiopian began to understand the Gospel because the Spirit of God was opening his mind to God's truth. It's not enough for the lost sinner to desire salvation; they must also understand God's plan of salvation. It's the heart that understands the Word that eventually bears fruit. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God (Rom 10:17). This Ethiopian official believed on Jesus Christ and was born again!

**36-38** – How did this man know that believers were supposed to be baptized? Maybe Philip mentioned this in his witness. It could be that the Ethiopian had seen people being baptized while he was in Jerusalem. Throughout the Book of Acts, baptism is seen as an important part of the believer's commitment to Christ and witness for Christ. That's why converts weren't baptized in those days, unless they first gave a clear testimony of their faith in Jesus.

The devil has the knowledge of God in his head but he hates the truth of God in his heart. God requires His truth not just in our heads but in our hearts as well. We may intellectually know that Jesus died for the sins of the world but do we know in our hearts that He died to cleanse our sins? The only proper response to the message of the Gospel is to believe it with all your heart. Anything less is a travesty of faith and an out-right rejection of God's love and grace.

I'm glad Philip didn't get hung up on some church procedure concerning baptism. That happens sometimes in churches today but not that day. No, this man declared his faith in Jesus Christ (37b) and his desire to be baptized as a public testimony of the spiritual reality that had just occurred in his heart. So, right there in the desert in the presence of his entourage, which probably had no idea what was going on, this high-ranking official of the Court of Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, was baptized. He came to God not as the treasurer of the Ethiopians, not as an important man, but as a sinner availing himself of the blood of Jesus Christ, who had died in his place.

**39-40** – Note: it took a miracle to get Philip to that location and took another to move him from it. This was certainly a strange event, but not unprecedented. In John 6 the disciples try to cross the Sea of Galilee in the middle of a storm and fail miserably until Jesus comes to them walking on the water. When He enters their boat, they're immediately at the shore! A similar thing will happen when the church is finally taken up in the Rapture.

But, here's the really odd part. Despite Philip's sudden and unexplained disappearance, the text says this new Ethiopian Christian went on his way rejoicing! Why is this significant? It shows that his faith and thus, his joy; was firmly rooted in the truth of God's Word and the presence of His Spirit in his life, not Philip's presence. Although God didn't permit Philip to do the necessary work of discipling this new convert, we can be sure He provided for it when he returned home. He had the Word of God and he had the Spirit of God and that was enough to change a country and a culture. The Coptic Christians of Egypt, a greatly persecuted minority in their country; can trace their spiritual heritage back to Ethiopian official.

No doubt, Philip went on his way rejoicing too and he had a great ministry after this. He appeared in Azotus and worked his way up the coast to Caesarea, preaching all along the way. He eventually settled there and had a family. Later, Paul and Luke with visit with Philip on their last journey to Jerusalem and by that time he will have 4 unmarried daughters who were prophetesses.

A few observations: 1) This Ethiopian official had experience all of Judaism he possibly could and had found it unsatisfactory. He was returning home as empty as he had left it. Yet, his heart still yearned to know God and God did not ignore that yearning heart! God sees every yearning heart and He will take the necessary steps to bring His love and truth to every true seeker. If a heart is genuinely seeking after God, He will move mountains and hearts to get the truth to them by whatever effective means possible.

2) This was a divine set-up from the start. God moved on this man to seek for answers and He moved on Philip to be willing to go and provide those necessary answers. God directed Philip to the right person at the right time. We're not likely to have angels instruct us but we can experience the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our witnessing if we are walking in the Spirit and praying for God's direction. One of our greatest responsibilities in sharing the Gospel is to pray for open doors. Then, after praying for that, we must stay alert for the opportunities God provides.

3) Philip opened his mouth and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him. This can be done, because the Bible from beginning to end is about Jesus. The whole Bible points to Jesus in one way or another. We really can begin at any passage and find where it leads to Jesus. Philip knew his Bible so he was ready when the Ethiopian asked for an explanation.

Compare the ministries of Stephen and Philip: both were full of (or controlled by) the Holy Spirit, by faith and wisdom; both loved the Lord and completely gave their lives over to His work. Yet, one's ministry was short and (initially) unfruitful while the other's was long and productive. The reality is: their ministries were the same. They both did exactly what the Holy Spirit led them to do and they both did it obediently and faithfully. The only difference between their ministries was not in their witness but in the hearts of those who heard their witness. Both men gave their lives to the ministry and both were used effectively by God to change the civilization on 3 different continents: Asia, Africa and Europe! ☺