

Philip and the Ethiopian

Philip is one of my heroes. He is not one of the twelve apostles, or listed as a member of the ruling council of the



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Jerusalem church, or described as a renowned planter of churches across the Roman Empire or the author of a single New Testament letter. Philip inspires me by his appearance at key places, his concern for others and his willingness to share Christ wherever he went.

This study presents a unique turning point in the spread of the gospel from “Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and even the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Modern Christians often seem to be tangled up in trying to find out where we should go to witness and serve God. Philip is busy serving and sharing God’s love, whether in his home church in Samaria or on the lonely road from Jerusalem to Gaza. Most of us have gone through some form of “witness training” in which you ask a series of carefully structured questions, followed by a closure that is a sale of the product and prayer. Such programs have been popular for years, but are not as effective as we imagine. What if the Christian witness was built on sensitivity to the Holy Spirit, building a relationship and allowing a person to think and express their needs? Sharing God’s love is most effective when you desire to join God where he is at work and when God Spirit opens your heart and mouth to communicate his grace in Christ.

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch surprises us with their coming together on a desert highway in the midday heat, arranged by the Holy Spirit. The Ethiopian is described as a eunuch, meaning he was castrated. Such sexual mutilation was not uncommon in some kingdoms for men serving royal females. This particular man had been to Jerusalem, probably on government business. Ethiopia (a.k.a. Cush) was a far away kingdom of strong and wealthy dark-skinned people. Rome considered it to be at the edge of the known world. The eunuch was traveling home on a highway that connected to Gaza and turned south to Egypt. He would have most likely joined the Nile River, where he sailed south and connected to another highway to Ethiopia.

An interesting note is that this

Ethiopian is traveling in his own carriage while reading a very expensive scroll of Isaiah. He must have been educated and wealthy to possess such a scroll. Had he hoped on this Jerusalem visit to convert to Judaism? Had he been rebuffed by the Jewish teachers because Deuteronomy 23:1 teaches that castration excludes a man from entering the assembly of the Lord? This man is a paradox: powerful as a government official and rejected by a religion he sought to follow, socially important and yet unwanted by those who professed to worship the only true God. But he is still searching as is shown by his study of Hebrew Scriptures.

We do not know how the angel from God spoke to Philip so clearly: “At noon, take the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza” (8:26). There have been times when God spoke to me very clearly, without written or spoken words, and I was compelled to act. How does one explain such an experience, even when the outcome is a blessing? Imagine the sight of Philip, running as fast as he could to catch up to the carriage of a significant person on a desert road in the scorching heat of the sun. Then, running alongside the carriage, Philip saw and heard this exotic foreigner reading Isaiah!

Between pants for breath, Philip managed to call out, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The carriage stopped as the Ethiopian admitted he needed someone to explain the text. The passage is from Isaiah 53:7-8, describing one who has been humiliated, silenced, denied justice and has no one left to tell his story. Then follows a question from a man who is earnestly seeking, a man who has already been rebuffed by some Jerusalem religious leaders: “Tell me, about whom does the prophet say this? Is he talking about himself or someone else” (v. 34)? The Spirit of God opened the Ethiopian’s heart and Philip’s mouth as the hope of God’s love was presented to a man who thought he was going home empty. God can do wonderful things if we are out in the world open-hearted and willing to share his love.

For the first time in the book of Acts a non-Jew becomes a follower of Jesus. If this foreigner, a eunuch from Ethiopia and rejected by Jewish legalism, can be saved by Jesus Christ, then anyone can be born into the family of God.

As the carriage moves along the dusty road the Ethiopian sees a watering

Formations

May 21, 2017

Scripture: Acts 8:26-40

place and excitedly asks Philip, “Look! Water! What would keep me from being baptized” (v. 37)? Both men step into the water and Philip baptizes the Ethiopian. Suddenly the story concludes as the Spirit sends Philip away to Azotus, where he continues to share Christ all the way to the provincial capital Caesarea.

By the time the New Testament books were written, the gospel had spread across the Roman world. Without mass transit, electronic communications, a corporate structure, printing presses, or a worldwide funding structure, the message of Christ traveled from person to person, in spite of cultural barriers and violent opposition. And the church is still there!

Observing the course of Philip’s life, we are reminded that, even though life can take many unexpected turns, God is with us all along the way. I have a very long list of people who have helped many come to faith in Christ:

- Mrs. Wilhite, a lifelong children’s Sunday School teacher, beloved by generations that she helped come to Christ
- Jim, who invested his life as a baseball coach and witness for Christ
- Louise, who visited in the home of every young person who showed up as a guest at church youth events
- The Smiths, who visited every first-time guest at our church
- John, the college football coach who made sure his team knew I cared about them and would be their friend

We may think Philip’s life is exotic and amazing, but the unifying element in each of his stories is that he loved God, and wherever he found himself was an opportunity to serve and share God’s love. Are you paying attention to opportunities to share Christ through your actions and words? If all God had to work with were missionaries and pastors he would be short-handed! Everyone who follows Christ, regardless of position, education or resources, has the ability to care about others, offer friendship and understanding and help them understand how much God loves them. Pay attention to those traveling the road with you and you may be as surprised and blessed as Philip.

Retired after more than 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.