

Philip's Leagcy

How many times have you been impressed by the dramatic testimony of a missionary guest in your church or the biography of a person who survived persecution because of their faith? We thrill to the stories of Peter, John or Paul, as we should. But is it not equally impressive when someone consistently lives a Christian witness against the challenging influences of our everyday world?



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When I grow up I want to be like Philip! When we first met Philip he was one of seven laymen chosen to help the neglected widows and children in the earliest days of the church. Then we watched as this servant (deacon) was the first to share the good news about Jesus with the Samaritans and to tell a man from the edge of the known world about Jesus. Philip could do it all: serve the marginalized, heal, cast out evil spirits, interpret the Scriptures, baptize and lead his own family to faith in Christ. Yet in the unfolding narrative of the early church, Philip is often overshadowed by more dramatic individuals and events.

Early in my ministry I visited with a dear lady from my church who had just been diagnosed with cancer. She had lost both her husband and son in war years before. She said to me, "My life hasn't counted much for Christ and now it's over." "Aunt Dee," I said, "you do not realize how much your life has meant to so many people. All these years you have loved and taught generations of children about Jesus and helped them accept Jesus as their Savior. Your life has been a source of encouragement and strength for others who have faced the loss of someone they loved. God has blessed you with a ministry that few can begin to equal." There are millions of saints whose names we will never know – but God knows. There is no such thing as an "ordinary saint," for it is in the ordinary that God accomplishes the extraordinary! Philip comes to our attention first as a table waiter in the Jerusalem church and our last glimpse

of him is as a faithful father and hospitable host in Caesarea.

Acts is a remarkable account of the gospel overcoming barriers to reach the fringes of the Roman Empire. But Luke's approach also shows the gospel breaking down barriers within individual lives and relationships. Our final glimpse of Philip shows how the grace of God overcomes hostility, fear and resentment. Philip's story begins when he fled the persecution of believers led by Paul (Saul of Tarsus) in Jerusalem (Acts 8:3). Now Paul, missionary to the Gentiles, is in the same kind of danger. Paul sails from Tyre to Ptolemais, then goes on to Caesarea, where he finds safety and hospitality in the home of Philip. The man who once feared Paul now becomes a friend and protector, as God transforms a fearful past into a hope-filled future! The New Testament version of hospitality is much more than coffee and doughnuts after church (Rom. 12:13 and I Tim. 3:2).

The Bible often reminds us that forgiveness is evidence of true faith. We see in this brief story about Paul finding shelter in Philip's home that forgiveness has made Philip's heart a place of compassion for a former enemy. A prophet named Agabus, from Judea, came to warn Paul that if he goes to Jerusalem he will be arrested and handed over to the very authorities who crucified Jesus. Philip joins with the others in urging Paul not to go. Grace overcomes all obstacles, even bitterness, when we allow God's Spirit to work within us.

There is yet another beautiful testimony in our final glimpse of Philip. Years have passed and Philip is living quietly in Caesarea as the father of four daughters. They are now mature in years and in faith, the text describing them as "involved in the work of prophecy" (v. 4). Remember at Pentecost Peter had preached from Joel 2:28-32, foretelling "your daughters shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17). The biblical concept of prophesying includes events such as Agabus warning about the future for Paul.

But by New Testament times prophesying also included proclaiming

Formations

May 28, 2017

Scripture: Acts 21:7-14

the gospel or preaching. Already in the first century church, women were preaching, and there seems to be no alarm registered here! Evidently Philip's personal faith was as consistent within his home as in the outside world. Some years ago, counseling a teenager in my church, we came to the core of her personal faith struggle when she shared, "Why should I believe God cares about me ... my parents do not live as Christians in my home, yet they are leaders in this church?" Now, as a young adult, she lives in another state and has nothing to do with the church or Christianity. Philip's daughters remind us that when the grace of God shapes our lives at home and in the community, the results are positive. Philip is no more perfect than any of us. But we have seen him in dramatic settings as well as ordinary life where he has served God quietly and humbly.

So, how does your life compare to this man who seems spectacular on some occasions and ordinary on others? Wherever Philip went he discovered opportunities to share Christ and minister. Do you have a neighbor who does not know Christ or who simply needs hope? Do your children have friends who are not involved in church? Can you sponsor an international student and through that kindness use hospitality as a witness? Is there a women's shelter, a ministry to underprivileged children or a program where you can volunteer and witness for Christ? God does not expect you to be as bold as Paul or as mobile as Philip, but to simply be available when and wherever the Holy Spirit is working.

Aren't you glad to have read Philip's story? Following Jesus has nothing to do with unusual talent, a flamboyant personality or exotic places. Wherever you find yourself there are people who will respond to the grace of Christ in your living and in your speaking. Philip is a powerful example.

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.