

## Breaking Down Barriers

Lesson for May 21, 2023

**Unit III:** The Birth of the Church

**Scriptural Background:** Acts 8:26-40

**Printed Text:** Acts 8:29-40

**Key verse:** *“And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.”* (Acts 8:38, NIV)

The year was 1920. The scene was the examining board for selecting missionaries. Standing before the board was a young man named Oswald Smith. One dream dominated his heart. He wanted to be a missionary. Over and over again, he prayed, "Lord, I want to go as a missionary for you. Open a door of service for me." Now, at last, his prayer would be answered. When the examination was over, the board turned Oswald Smith down. He did not meet their qualifications. He failed the test. Oswald Smith had set his direction, but now life gave him a detour. What would he do? As Oswald Smith prayed, God planted another idea in his heart. If he could not go as a missionary, he would build a church which could send out missionaries. And that is what he did. Oswald Smith pastored The People's Church in Toronto, Canada, which sent out more missionaries than any other church at that time. Oswald Smith brought God into the situation, and God transformed his detour into a main thoroughfare of service.

Brian L. Harbour, *Rising Above the Crowd*

In this week's lesson, Phillip was detoured from many, to one. He went from winning multitudes, to winning one man, the Ethiopian eunuch: from a great revival to a singular witnessing experience. The Lord has no respect for worldly barriers.

### Key Terms

1. **Go near** (verse 29) – To approach; draw near; visit; Go to” (NIV).
2. **Invited** (verse 31) – Called to or for; exhorted; encouraged; summoned; “desired” (KJV).
3. **Join** (verse 29) – To glue; unite; cleave; adhere (to); cling to; “stay near (NIV).
4. **Reading** (verse 30) – To look at and comprehend the meaning of (written or printed matter).
5. **Scripture** (verse 32) – A writing; a passage of Scripture; plural: the Scriptures.
6. **Understand(est)** (verse 30) – To come to know, recognize, perceive; ascertain; realize; learn.

## **Lesson Background**

In Philippians 3:6, Paul said of his life before Jesus that he was so zealous in his religious faith that he persecuted the church. Saul's supervision of the execution of Stephen was just one example of this persecution. Stephen's death was only the beginning. The floodgates of persecution were now open against the Christians. Saul was only one of many persecutors of Christians. Now the Christians were forced to do what they had been reluctant to do – get the message of Jesus out to the surrounding regions.

Like Stephen, Phillip was one of the men chosen to serve the church family in practical ways when the dispute regarding Hellenist widows arose (Acts 6:5). He was one of those forced to flee persecution (Acts 8:1), ending up in Samaria. The Jews of that day hated the Samaritans. They considered them compromising half-breeds who corrupted the worship of the true God. "There was deep-seated prejudice, amounting almost to hatred, standing between the Jews and the Samaritans." (LaSor) Yet, Philip preached Christ to them. Because Jesus had worked in him there was no room for this kind of prejudice in his heart or mind. He wasn't a racist towards the Samaritans.

Now that the church is established in the city of Samaria, Peter and John go back to Jerusalem. God is working miracles, people are being saved, and lives are changed. Even impure spirits are leaving the city (8:7) showing God's total power Philip is successfully carrying out the Great Commission. Philip has been in the middle of a great revival and God tells him to go down to the desert. He's going to leave the crowds and the "success", and all God tells him is go head down to a certain road. But there was no objection; he went immediately at the command of the angel and was led to a man in a chariot. Philip was willing to go where God wanted him to go and to do what God wanted him to do. His obedience was like that of Abraham. He responded without apparently knowing what he was to do. The servant of God has learned one of his greatest lessons when he has learned obedience.

## **The Lesson In Depth**

### **I. A Prepared Preacher (Acts 8:29-35)**

Undoubtedly what Philip saw was a great caravan-soldiers, merchants, retinue-and in the midst a chariot (which would stand out over everything else), the chariot of the treasurer of Candace queen of Ethiopia. The man in that chariot had gone to Jerusalem on a spiritual quest.

He was an Ethiopian Gentile, not a Jew; but he had it in his heart, apparently, to know the God of Israel and had come all the way from Ethiopia to Jerusalem to worship the true God. He was probably a proselyte to Judaism. He had accepted the revelation God gave Israel so far as he understood it.

The Spirit directed Philip to overtake the chariot. It took real boldness for Philip to go right up to the Ethiopian's chariot and speak to him, but that is what the Holy Spirit told him to do. Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading. The man replied that he could not unless he had someone to guide him. God had directed the Ethiopian to that portion of Isaiah which spoke most clearly of Christ, yes to that passage, which of all passages of the Old Testament, spoke most clearly of Christ.

It was common in the ancient world to read aloud. Philip knew what the Ethiopian was reading by listening as he read. The passage which he read was this:

“He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth: In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? For his life is taken from the earth.” (Isaiah 53:7-8)

It is wonderful when we come to understand the great truths of Bible on our own, but God also has a place and a purpose for teachers among the followers of Jesus. To get more understanding from our Bibles, we must plunge in. Butterflies wander over the flowers in the garden and accomplish nothing, but bees plunge right down into the flower, and carry away essential food. We won't get anything if we just hover over our Bibles; we have to dive right in. (Dave Guzik)

Notice in this, that God is interested in individuals who truly love Him and want to follow Him. God has sent Philip a long way to just this one man. The Ethiopian sought help in understanding the passage from Isaiah he had been reading. We should never feel bad if we need to be taught before we can understand many things. Observe the wisdom of Philip's teaching approach. He began where the student was. Phillip saw he was interested in the word of God, and he knew he could teach the man the truth from God's word. The Ethiopian was a man of power, and at least in some way a celebrity. Yet, Philip knew he needed Jesus just as much as anyone else.

Phillip knew he needed to share the message of Christ. This is the proper subject for all gospel preaching. Too often today we focus on what we must do for God, but the Gospel begins with and is founded upon what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Philip preached Christ in Samaria (Acts 8:5) and he preached the same Jesus to this Ethiopian.

## **II. A Prepared Heart (Acts 8:36-40)**

The Ethiopian was ready to respond to the gospel. This was a work of the Holy Spirit. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?” This shows that the Ethiopian did in fact believe, and that he wanted to be baptized to declare his belief. He saw the truth of God and knew that it was for him.

Philip insisted that the Ethiopian believe with all his heart before being baptized. “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” This confession of faith, taken in all that it means, is the essential belief for anyone who will come to God. We must believe in the person of Jesus, in all that He is and has done as Christ. We must believe that He is the Divine Son, and that He is the Son of God sent from the Father to accomplish the salvation of all those who will believe with all their hearts.

At this moment, another prophecy of Isaiah was being fulfilled. This prophecy spoke of strangers, eunuchs, and other outcasts who would be given an “everlasting name” and called God's people: “*The Lord GOD, which gathereth the outcasts of Israel saith; Yet will I gather others to him, beside those that are gathered unto him*” (Isaiah 56:8).

Clearly, Philip immersed the Ethiopian in baptism. Suddenly, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away as he and the Ethiopian came out of the water. The joy of the Ethiopian, even after Philip's strange departure, shows that his faith was firmly rooted in God.

Phillip was then transported supernaturally in some way to the former Philistine city of Azotus, also known as Ashdod.

## Lesson Summary

This man to whom Philip ministered was an Ethiopian. The only reasonable conclusion is that he was black in color. The Ethiopian was a rich man, a man of power, and at least in some ways a celebrity. Yet Philip knew he needed Jesus just as much as anyone else. Philip did not hesitate for a moment to mount the chariot with the Ethiopian and to talk with him as a brother. We should never fear speaking about Jesus to those who are considered to be important people.

Philip had been preaching to a whole multitude. Sometimes there are men who will take an interest in a multitude but who will not take an interest in one man. Our time and work is never lost if we are engaged in leading one man to Christ. Jesus spoke to the multitudes, but He also spoke to individuals. He gathered His first disciples one by one. He put them to work that they might bring in others, but He spent a large part of three years in gathering and training twelve men.

The soul of this man was not important merely because he was a great man in his country. God is ever ready to help an honest inquirer, and this man might be of larger value in the church because he was in a position where he could the better make known the saving love of Christ to others of his countrymen.

- God comes to us in deserts of our lives (Acts 8:26)
  - God meets us where we are – when we earnestly seek to understand His word and His will, He hears us.
- “Phillip ran up to the chariot” (Acts 8:30)
  - How zealous are we in our responsibility to the Great Commission?
- How do we approach those who are “different” from us?
- Are you obedient to the Spirit's leading?
- How far, and to what extent, are we willing to go for the Lord?
  - Sometimes there are men who will take an interest in a multitude but who will not take an interest in one man.
  - Our time and work is never lost if we are engaged in leading one man to Christ.
  - Jesus spoke to the multitudes, but He also spoke to individuals.
  - Be attentive to the Guiding of the Holy Spirit **EVERYDAY** – you may be the link between God and someone earnestly seeking Him.
- The Gospel message is simple – the Gospel message **is Christ!**