

VI. The Progress of the Kingdom – The Ends of the Earth

The book of Acts is constructed upon Jesus' pronouncement that the apostolic witness to Him and His gospel would begin at Jerusalem and spread outward through Judea into Samaria and finally beyond the land of Israel to the distant places of the earth. Luke recorded that Jewish opposition supplied the providential impetus for that dispersion (8:1); from Jerusalem, the Church's gospel witness expanded like concentric rings in a pond – north to Samaria (8:5), south to Gaza (8:26), west to Caesarea (8:30) and then northeast into Syria (9:1-2). Notably, Luke's account has this expanding witness shifting from the apostles – who remained in Jerusalem – to Philip, who was one of the seven. Echoing the pattern of Jesus' commission, Luke tracked Philip's gospel ministry in Samaria and then south and west toward Gaza and the coastal region formerly possessed by the Philistines. As prophesied in the Scriptures and promised by the Lord, the gospel was permeating the land of Israel – ethnically as well as geographically.

The Spirit first gathered to the Messiah members of the house of Judah, but the uniform witness of the prophets was that Judah's ingathering would see a similar work of God among the sons of Israel (Ephraim). A remnant from both sub-kingdoms were to be reconciled to Yahweh in His royal Servant, the Son of David, and in this way Israel and Judah would be reconciled to one another. As it had been with the first David, so it would be with the second One (ref. again Jeremiah 30-33; Ezekiel 37; Hosea 1-3).

The reconciliation of the houses of Judah and Israel was now occurring as many among the Samaritans were coming to faith in Christ, but that wasn't to be the end of the story. The prophets had predicted this reunification, but had extended it to include the ingathering of the Gentiles. Through the atoning work of His Servant, Yahweh would restore Zion (His covenant "wife" who bears children for Him) in the "last days." She who had been stripped of her children and made desolate would be restored to bear an innumerable multitude of offspring – *offspring distinguished from their Israelite predecessors by the fact that they would prove to be faithful sons of their Father*. Yahweh was going to draw that new covenant progeny from Israel and Judah, but also from among the Gentiles: Zion would need to expand her environs to embrace sons and daughters taken from every tribe, tongue, nation and people (ref. Isaiah 49-54).

A. The Coastal Mission – Prelude to the Gentile Mission (8:26-40)

Thus Luke's progression in his record of the Spirit's work of renewal and ingathering: First Judah (Jerusalem and Judea), then Israel (Samaria), then the Gentiles. Very soon the Gentile mission would reach beyond Canaan, but it originated in the historical land of the Philistines with a single man and a providential journey to Jerusalem from Ethiopia (8:26-39).

1. The first thing to note about Luke's account of the Ethiopian eunuch is his pronounced emphasis on God's direct oversight of this man's saving encounter with His Son. Philip was focused on his ministry in Samaria, but the Lord interrupted, sending an angel to him and instructing him to immediately return to Jerusalem and there pick up the road that headed southwest from Jerusalem toward Gaza on the Mediterranean coast (8:26). Philip followed the angel's directive and, while walking along the Gaza road, came upon a eunuch who was a court official of Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians.

This man was a God-fearing Gentile returning to Ethiopia after traveling to Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel (8:27). Luke provides no explanation of how he came to know about Yahweh (he clearly wasn't a proselyte – Deuteronomy 23:1), but his commitment to Him is clear from the fact that he undertook an arduous journey of more than a thousand miles to worship Him. Even by chariot, this trip would have taken months. Beyond that, this Ethiopian had gone to the effort and expense of obtaining a copy of the scroll of Isaiah (and perhaps more texts), which in itself testifies to his devotion. He not only had a copy of the scroll, he was able to read it (likely in the Greek of the Septuagint translation) and was engrossed in doing so when his chariot came in sight of Philip.

Through a series of providences, the Lord had orchestrated a saving encounter between one of His servants and this devout Gentile, *but in a way that, at first glance, seems a little perplexing*. For God could have more easily accomplished this outcome by simply sending one of the apostles to meet this man while he was still in Jerusalem, and yet He chose instead this hour and place in the remote desert along the Gaza road. Luke gives no explicit explanation for this, but the development of his narrative and its relation to salvation-historical fulfillment provide clues as to God's purpose.

- First of all, Luke was careful to trace in parallel the two components of furtherance in the witness of the gospel: As the gospel spread *geographically* from Jerusalem outward, so it moved *ethnically* beyond the sons of Judah. This parallelism – which God Himself established – is both preserved and highlighted by having the first Gentile conversion occur in a Gentile region of Canaan.
 - By bringing the gospel to this Ethiopian man in this place, God was affirming His own design and procedure for building a global “house.” *But equally importantly, He was working so as to impress this fact upon His largely Jewish Church*. Jesus had informed His apostles of His intention to gather a people from every nation, but the early Church hadn't yet come to grips with the notion of Gentiles entering their fellowship. That would prove to be a trying process which would come to a head some years later at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). Acknowledgment and acceptance of a composite Church was going to take time and be realized in stages, and Philip's saving encounter with this Gentile man in a Gentile land was the first step in that process. The next step in Luke's account would be Saul's conversion and commission, followed by the pinnacle event of Peter's ministry to Cornelius' household and the Gentile participation in the Pentecost fulfillment.
2. The Ethiopian eunuch's journey betrayed a man who was zealously seeking after God. He had traveled to Jerusalem with the longing to worship Him at His sanctuary, not realizing that the temple was no longer the place of worship; he was unaware that it had found its fulfillment in the true Sanctuary. Now on his way back to Ethiopia, the eunuch was again seeking God, this time in His Scripture, but without any knowledge that He who revealed Himself there had come into the world in the person of the Son. This man didn't know how to find the God he sought, but He who had provoked the eunuch's longing in the first place was determined to reveal Himself to him. The sought-after God was about to be found, and the day of salvation was dawning upon the Gentiles.

3. The Lord had arranged this meeting by weaving together numerous providential threads, and His oversight didn't end with putting these two men in the same place at the same time. The Gaza road was busy with travelers and Philip likely would have let this particular chariot pass by without giving it a second thought. So also the eunuch, engrossed in his reading, probably wouldn't have even noticed Philip walking along the side of the road. But the Spirit who orchestrated this encounter and its circumstances made sure that neither man missed his divinely prepared appointment.

As the chariot came into sight, the Spirit impressed upon Philip that he needed to go up to it and engage its passenger. And as he approached – perhaps as yet unsure of what the Spirit was going to do, Philip could hear the eunuch reading aloud from the Isaiah scroll. The same Spirit who had directed Philip to the chariot had moved the Ethiopian to the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah's prophecy. At that moment it became clear to Philip what the Spirit had in mind: He had led the eunuch to a particular passage and He wanted Philip to interpret it for him, using it as a springboard to proclaim the One who is the subject of all the Scripture (8:28-30).

The passage the eunuch was reading is one of the most explicitly and powerfully messianic in the entire Old Testament, and so eminently suited to the purpose at hand. Luke noted a couple of verses from this section of Isaiah (8:32-33), indicating that those were the words Philip heard as he approached the chariot. But this citation also served to identify the context for his reader Theophilus. (Luke couldn't simply provide chapter and verse since those delineations didn't exist at that time). What is most important, however, is recognizing that these particular verses are epitomizing pointers. The eunuch had obviously read more than what Luke cites, and he intended his short citation to highlight the overall context. That larger section of Isaiah's prophecy concerns the work of Yahweh's Servant and the creation-wide restoration that flows from it (chaps. 49-55), and the eunuch's question ("of whom does the prophet speak?") must be applied that broadly.

The broader Isaianic context is also implied by Luke's description of Philip's response. Philip identified Jesus of Nazareth as the subject of the passage at hand, but then proceeded to preach Jesus and His gospel from the larger scriptural witness (8:35). As a man "full of the Spirit and wisdom," Philip had come to understand what the apostles did, namely that all the Scripture testifies of Jesus. (Here again Luke points to the fact that the test of the right understanding of any given Old Testament passage is the ability to properly use that passage as a springboard to proclaim Jesus and His gospel from the totality of the Old Testament scriptures.) Finally, the most significant indicator of the broader context – albeit one that is more subtle – is the very identity of the Ethiopian as an emasculated foreigner and the Spirit's saving purpose for him (ref. Isaiah 56:1-8).

In marked contrast to preceding accounts, Luke revealed nothing of the content of Philip's message. However, Luke's citation of the Isaiah passage, his statement regarding Philip's broad scriptural approach, his previous record of the sermons of Peter and Stephen, and his own personal conviction concerning the christocentricity of the Scripture, leave no doubt as to the general thrust of Philip's proclamation. Working his way through the fabric of the Old Testament witness, Philip "preached Jesus to him."

4. The eunuch listened to Philip's preaching and the Spirit moved upon him to embrace Jesus in faith. Luke didn't state this directly, but implied it from what happened next: As they proceeded along the road the chariot passed by a body of water and the eunuch requested that he be baptized (8:36). Evidently he had responded to Philip's message in a manner similar to the gathered crowd on Pentecost (2:37) and, like Peter, Philip had informed him that he needed to repent, believe the gospel and be baptized. (Luke's lack of an explicit affirmation of the eunuch's faith is the most likely reason for the qualifying statement in verse 37 – a statement absent from the oldest and best manuscripts.)
5. In the conviction of his new-found faith, the Ethiopian ordered the charioteer to stop and he and Philip entered the water together. Philip then baptized him, which brought their encounter to an abrupt end. Philip had come upon the man suddenly under the Spirit's leading, and his departure followed the same pattern. Immediately upon exiting the water the Spirit "snatched Philip away" (8:39) and the eunuch was left to go his way rejoicing.

The Lord had sent Philip to the Gaza road in order to intercept the Ethiopian and minister His gospel to him. Now, having fulfilled the divine purpose to bring that man into the everlasting kingdom, Philip found himself whisked away to Azotus, another ancient Philistine city to the north of Gaza. (Azotus was known as Ashdod during the earlier period of the Philistine kingdom and, along with Gaza, was one of the five leading cities of Philistia associated with its five rulers (1 Samuel 6:1-18)).

Some have noted Luke's language and, comparing it with Paul, concluded that Philip's translation to Azotus was a miraculous event (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:1-4; 1 Thessalonians 4:17). However, the text doesn't demand such an explanation, for this Greek verb is commonly used of a purely natural phenomenon (cf. Luke's one other use of it in 23:10). The verb expresses power or force that is compelling and perhaps even violent, but not necessarily supernatural (cf. Matthew 11:12, 13:19; John 6:15, 10:12, 28-29; Jude 23).

So in this case the context indicates that Luke chose this term in order to emphasize the effectual leading of the Spirit: He had driven and empowered Philip for his encounter with the Ethiopian, and now He was driving him and his witness throughout the coastal region as far north as Caesarea (8:40; cf. 21:8). Luke's language highlights, not a transport miracle, but scriptural fulfillment: The expanding gospel witness and its fruitfulness were the product of the Spirit's presence and power (Zechariah 4:1-10; etc.).

Considered as a unit within Luke's larger narrative, this account has a pronounced feel of abruptness and brevity. This is evident in all of its key features, including the way Luke brought several providences together quickly and with little explanation, the way he recorded the Spirit's leading and activity in the encounter, his lack of commentary on the eunuch's faith, his silence regarding the content of Philip's message, and especially the abruptness of the encounter itself. The best explanation for this takes into account Luke's "big picture" and draws upon the place and contribution of this episode in the flow and development of the entire book.

- After a brief summary of Philip's ministry, Luke turned his attention to the emergence of the Gentile ministry and its increasingly central place in the Church's gospel mission.

- Luke grounded that orientation and emphasis in Paul's conversion and commission as Christ's apostle to the Gentiles (9:1ff).
- From there he transitioned immediately to Peter's saving encounter with the Gentile Cornelius and his household (10:1ff), subsequently showing by means of Peter's explanation to the Jerusalem church that event's significance and importance (11:1ff).
- So also the present episode with the Ethiopian eunuch follows immediately upon Luke's account of the Samaritan mission, which again reflects the pattern of gospel witness articulated by Jesus in His commission to the Twelve.

By situating it as he did, Luke intended this incident to provide the transition between the Samaritan and Gentile missions. It builds upon the former, but, more importantly, points forward toward the latter. It lays the foundation for what will be the emphasis of the balance of Luke's account. *Literarily, this episode is a prelude that acts as a herald of the impending Gentile mission.* As a herald, it informs its audience of what is coming; most importantly, it does so by directing its hearers' attention away from itself to its subject.

This explains why Luke constructed his account of the Ethiopian eunuch the way he did: He gave it the feel of abruptness, brevity and vagueness because of its role in his larger narrative.

- By making it brief and sparse, Luke was communicating to his readers that this episode is to be understood as a pointer rather than a focal point. It points toward the formal, *apostolic* Gentile mission to come.
- Thus the parallelism between this incident and the Samaritan mission: Just as it was necessary for the Spirit's work through Philip in Samaria to be verified by the apostles, so it would be in the case of the salvation of the Gentiles and their inclusion in God's household. The ingathering of the formerly excluded Gentiles – here inaugurated and highlighted through Philip's ministry to this Ethiopian man – was to soon receive apostolic witness and affirmation in Cornelius' house and then through the apostle Paul.
- But for now, apart from apostolic witness, the Spirit Himself was testifying by precisely fulfilling His ancient promise through His prophets (Isaiah 56:1-8; cf. Ephesians 2:11ff).

During the time of preparation under the theocracy, no foreigner (non-proselyte) or emasculated person had any right to enter the assembly of God's covenant people. Such a one was "*without hope and without God in the world.*" But now, in the fullness of the times, Christ was "bringing near" those who were formerly "far off," uniting them with their Jewish counterparts to form one "new man" in the Spirit. Luke surely understood this Isaianic context and its promise (ref. Luke 19:46), and likely had it in mind when he recorded the salvation of the Ethiopian eunuch. This man, who epitomized all those non-Israelites separated from God and excluded from His covenant household under the Law of Moses, now embodied Yahweh's "end of the ages" fulfillment of His promise to gather such persons to Himself and receive them into His everlasting, all-embracing sanctuary. "*The Lord God, who gathers the dispersed of Israel, declares, 'Yet others I will gather to them, to those already gathered.'*"