

EXPOSITION OF ACTS

Message #19

Acts 8:26-40

There is a very famous conversion story in the history of the church concerning Augustine (A.D. 354-430), the famed theologian and bishop of Hippo that truly does show the amazing dynamics of the sovereignty of God in saving an individual. Augustine was a pleasure seeking hedonist who fell into deep sin. When he was eighteen years old he moved in with a woman with whom he lived for thirteen years. He had a godly mother whose name was Monica, but he disregarded the Bible as just a bunch of allegories. One day, in A.D. 386, when Augustine was thirty-three years old he was walking in a garden in Milan. He said that he heard the voice of a little boy or girl that said “Take it and read, take it and read.” He took a Bible and he opened it to Romans 13:13-14 and instantly “the light of faith flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled.” In his confessions, Augustine said he had never seen or heard those children playing in that garden before. He said, he could not even think of a game the children could play that would say “take it and read it.” Now I ask you this question – who could orchestrate a moment in a garden to have a little boy or girl say words that would cause a heathen to read Romans and be saved? There is only one answer; Augustine was saved by the sovereignty of God (Augustine, *Confessions*, p. viii, 12). God had little children playing in the right spot at the right time and the man who would become the great theologian who would influence Luther and Calvin and us was saved by the grace of God, and the sovereignty of God.

There is a story even more dramatic than this one. It is a story inspired by God and it shows up right here in the Book of Acts. It is the story of a faithful man of God who is used by God to share Jesus Christ to another individual so that God could sovereignly save him. The whole story radiates the sovereignty of God not only in nations, but in the lives of individuals.

You do not have to be some professionally trained person to preach the truth about the grace of God. You don't have to have a degree and you don't have to be licensed or ordained to be greatly used by the Sovereign God. Down through the centuries God has sovereignly used individuals to make a powerful impact on the world because they loved Jesus Christ, knew the Scriptures, had a handle on grace doctrine, and they communicated it to others. One inspired Biblical example of this is Philip. The lesson to see here is this:

GOD SOVEREIGNLY DIRECTS HIS FAITHFUL PEOPLE TO WITNESSING SITUATIONS SO THEY MAY SHARE TRUTH ABOUT THE GRACE OF GOD FOUND IN JESUS CHRIST SO HE MAY SAVE HIS ELECT.

Years ago, I was in an airport in Cincinnati waiting to catch a flight back to Kalamazoo. I had just completed a lecture series on Daniel at Frontier and I was flying home. As I sat in the terminal, a lovely, tall, black girl sat down next to me and I decided to witness to her. So I struck up a conversation with her and began by asking where she was going. She told me she was flying to New York and from there she was flying to her home in Ethiopia. I proceeded to ask her if she were a believer in Jesus Christ, and come to find out she was a believer and she came from a godly home in Ethiopia. The reason the Gospel went to Ethiopia is because of this text right here in Acts 8. She and her family were linked to Acts 8.

There are five evangelistic facts we want to see from this text:

EVANGELISTIC FACT #1 - God sovereignly directed Philip to Gaza. 8:26

Now Philip was in the midst of a very powerful and successful evangelistic campaign in Samaria. He is preaching the Gospel of God's Grace, and amazing things have been happening including the toppling of the satanic world. Great numbers of people were responding (8:6).

But eighty miles away, in another location in Gaza, was a guy from Ethiopia who was reading through the prophet Isaiah and God wanted to save him, so He will direct Philip right to this spot. In other words, as Philip was faithfully ministering and proclaiming God's Grace in Samaria, God directed him to go elsewhere so that the communication of God's Grace Gospel could reach a particular individual.

According to **verse 26**, an angel spoke to Philip and told him to go there. Now the word "spoke" indicates that the angel did speak to Philip. We may ask how did the angel speak? Well the Greek word (*λαλεω*) is one that means to talk or speak or say something in some audible way (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 263). The aorist tense indicates that this was at one point of time. We may conclude that there was a specific moment of time when this angel spoke to Philip and told him to go to the desert road that drops out of Jerusalem south.

There are things that happen in Acts that don't happen today. For example, we don't have angels speak to us. I do think that the Holy Spirit may impress upon us a certain course of action. I have had that experience and I know many of you have as well. I do know I have made decisions on occasions, and there was a real sense of anxiety thinking it was the wrong decision. But this was not true with Philip. He received a direct communication from an angel to go to the road that leads into Gaza.

There was an old Philistine city that was located about fifty miles southwest of Jerusalem named Gaza. It sat on the verge of a desert. To the south and west of Gaza was nothing. Why in the world would God direct Philip to leave the amazing revival of Samaria to travel to this lousy, dirty, dusty spot? The answer is God had one key individual He intended to save. Gaza was not the specific target; an Ethiopian eunuch, a key person to Queen Candace, was God's target.

Our responsibility is to communicate God's Grace Truth to the big world and to the individual. As we journey through life, we do not know how or where God will sovereignly use us.

EVANGELISTIC FACT #2 - God sovereignly directed Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch. 8:27-29

Notice the first part of **verse 27**, "he arose and went." Probably when Philip left Samaria he believed there would be another big revival like Samaria. But this evangelistic situation would be entirely different. What we do see with Philip was an attitude that was that of immediate obedience. Our job is to be faithful to God and communicate His Grace Truth when the numbers are huge and when the numbers are small. Philip is moving from a bigger ministry to a

seemingly smaller ministry. He is going from multitudes to one. But the numbers are God's business, not ours. Great men of God can speak to thousands, but they also can speak to one. Our job is to be faithful just like Philip. We don't know for sure if Philip announced that he was leaving to the church of Samaria. Truth is Philip is an evangelist, not an apostle or Pastor/Teacher, and the evangelist is responsible to take the Gospel wherever God directed. More than likely Philip informed the Samaritans that God was directing him elsewhere.

According to **verse 27**, there was an Ethiopian eunuch who had gone to Jerusalem to worship who was on his way home to Ethiopia. The distance from Jerusalem to Ethiopia was between 600-700 miles. So this is a long trip; the equivalent of a distance from Kalamazoo to north of Atlanta, Georgia or Kalamazoo to Kearney, Nebraska. Now if a chariot did 30-50 miles per day, this trip would take between 15 to 25 days. Plus, chariots were mostly open so in bad storms, typically travel would stop. There was one man God wanted to sovereignly save and he was quite an amazing man and we want to meet him. There are eight amazing observations we want to make about him:

(Observation #1) - He was an Ethiopian . **8:27a**

We may assume from this that this is a black man, because that typically is the color of Ethiopian nationals. This is one of the smartest men and most spiritual men you will ever meet in the N.T.

(Observation #2) - He was a eunuch . **8:27b**

What this means is he had some sort of surgical operation by choice that indicated he was devoting himself to political service.

(Observation #3) - He was a high ranking court official . **8:27c**

This eunuch was a court official of Candace. Now Candace was the queen of the Ethiopians. Candace was actually not the name of an individual, but it was a queen's dynasty name, just like Caesar was a king's dynasty name. Eusebius who wrote his church history 250-300 years after Jesus Christ said that Ethiopia is "a country traditionally ruled by a woman" (*The History of the Church*, p. 74). Strabo said there was a queen named Candace who fought against the Romans during the days of Caesar Augustus, and Pliny said there was a queen of the same name who flourished during the reign of Emperor Vespasian (Horatio Hackett, *Commentary on Acts*, p. 113). This eunuch was a very high ranking officer in the court of Candace.

(Observation #4) - He was in charge of the queen's treasures . **8:27d**

This tells us he could be trusted and it tells us he had a mathematical mind. He was a man who could be trusted and he was obviously highly respected. Candace was the queen of the Ethiopians and this man was in charge of all her kingdom money.

(Observation #5) - He had gone to Jerusalem to worship . **8:27e**

This man was interested in truth about God. In fact, the word “worship” (προσκυνεω) indicates he had gone to Jerusalem with the idea of reverently worshipping God (*Ibid*, p. 386). This man was no spiritual lightweight. He had a heart that wanted to worship God in a very reverent way. It is very probable that He had heard things about Jesus Christ. He had probably heard about His death and resurrection and that He had claimed to be the Messiah. When the eunuch got to Jerusalem to reverently worship God, it is very likely that he was completely disillusioned with the worship he found. He probably had heard news about the church, but the church had scattered, and the religious worship of Judaism was nothing more than some rigid, legalistic, man-made system that was dead.

I think today that if you go to most churches you will find that true reverent worship is missing. Most churches do not promote a reverence for God and His Word; they promote some emotional, shallow religious experience that means nothing.

However, while he was in Jerusalem he purchased a copy of Isaiah. Copies of Bible manuscripts were very rare and very expensive. But he obviously was a man of great spiritual dimensions and he had traveled to Jerusalem to worship and he purchased his own copy of one book of the Bible.

(Observation #6) - He was traveling in a chariot . **8:28a**

Now Candace did not hand out official chariots to average people. This Ethiopian was a very high ranked, esteemed man in her court and he had an official chariot. He was traveling in the limousines of his time. More than likely he was traveling in a four wheeled open chariot that was pulled by horses. This was the kind of chariot that was used in processions. Since according to **verse 30** Philip will have to run to catch it, we may assume that the speed is approximately 5-6 miles per hour.

(Observation #7) - He was able to read the prophet Isaiah. **8:28b**

Not only did this man have an intelligent systematic mind that could count money, he also was a man who could speak and read at least two to three languages. Since he had actually gone to Jerusalem to worship, he probably knew some Hebrew.

But the Isaiah manuscript that he has purchased and is reading is a copy of the Septuagint, which means he knows Greek and reads Greek. The O.T. was originally written in Hebrew, but about 300 years before Jesus Christ, it was translated into Greek (called the Septuagint). Upon close examination of the Isaiah text quoted in **verses 32-33**, we may assume this Ethiopian knew Greek because he is reading a Greek copy of the Hebrew Old Testament. Plus the language of Ethiopia today is called “Amharic”. So this Ethiopian is a very intelligent man with a brilliant mind.

By the way, it is interesting to know that “Ethiopia is home to a remarkable mosaic of peoples, languages and cultures. More than eighty languages are spoken with the greatest linguistic diversity found in the southwest” (*Grolier International Encyclopedia*, Vol. 7, p. 253).

So this man is very intelligent. One other thing I want to point out:

(Observation #8) - This Ethiopian is a very honest man without any big ego. **8:30-31**

He will admit that he doesn't understand what he is reading and that he needs a teacher, and he will let a white guy get up in the chariot with him to teach him.

EVANGELISTIC FACT #3 - God used Philip to carefully teach Isaiah 53. **8:30-35**

Now as Philip is going along, the Holy Spirit says to Philip “go up and join this chariot” (v. 29). Again, this is apparently some audible communication. The Holy Spirit says to Philip go catch that chariot. Now you and I do not have angels or the Holy Spirit audibly speak to us today. In fact, if we hear voices, we need to make an immediate appointment with a shrink. But this is the beginning of the Church Age and these kinds of things were happening.

Now I want you to observe what happens in **verses 30-31**; Philip immediately runs up to the chariot and he hears the Ethiopian reading Isaiah 53, and Philip says “Do you understand what you are reading?”

Now it was normal for people to read things out loud because the ancient manuscripts did not have any spaces between words. It was actually easier to make sense of a text by carefully reading out loud. When I was taught Greek and when I taught it here, I made the students read Greek out loud, which is exactly what this Ethiopian was doing.

One other thought to keep in mind; if Philip does not run when he hears Isaiah 53 being read, the eunuch would have been out of chapter 53 and into chapter 54. In just a few more verses, he would have been beyond Isaiah 53. So it is good that Philip ran.

Now remember this Ethiopian eunuch is one of the most influential men in the world; but what he really needs is a true understanding of the Bible. It does not matter who the person is, whether the guy on the street or the guy in the White House; what he needs is a true understanding of God's Word as it relates to Jesus Christ. From the man in the factory to the corporate executive on Wall Street, they all need the same thing; Jesus Christ and accurate knowledge of the Word of God.

Now this eunuch is one of the smartest men in the world and he is being asked what could be viewed as a humiliating question; and if he had been some egotist or racist, he would have probably said “well, I read the Bible all the time; of course I know what I am reading.” He could have said “I've read the Scripture multiple times, so who are you white boy, to talk to me?” But that is not what the eunuch said; he honestly and humbly said “unless some teacher who knows what this means teaches me, how in the world could I understand this?” He invited Philip to climb up and instruct him.

A couple of years ago I was paying a visit to someone at Bronson Hospital, and as I walked into the floor area where you are greeted before you go to the hall there was a woman reading Revelation, and she had some books that frankly were lousy books, to try to help her understand Revelation. I knew from the books she had that she wouldn't be able to understand it. She had her Bible open to Revelation 7, which deals with the 144,000. I asked her if she understood the book of Revelation, and told her that I had studied that particular book for years and had taught it in church and in a Bible college. She got mad. She was arrogant and rude. I was going to try to help her unravel a text and answer her questions and she wanted no part of it.

This eunuch was not like that at all. He wanted to be taught what the text meant. He was honest. He knew his limitations. He wanted someone who knew the Scriptures to unlock them for him. By the way, **this shows us something very important about the early Church Age, and that is to accurately understand the Scriptures, we need a teacher who knows what it says.**

Now the eunuch was reading Isaiah 53:7-8. He asked Philip, who are these verses talking about (**Acts 8:34**). Here was a man who truly wanted to know God's Word. Now notice **verse 35**, it is straightforward and right to the point. **Philip preached Jesus . Isaiah 53 is talking about the saving work of Jesus Christ.**

EVANGELISTIC FACT #4 - The Ethiopian eunuch desires to be baptized in water. **8:36-38**

We must assume that Philip backtracked to all the events pertaining to Jesus in the Book of Acts. He took the eunuch back to John's baptism and Jesus' baptism. We have already seen different baptisms in Acts. In fact, we just saw a water baptism that had occurred before one received the Holy Spirit (8:15-17). It is interesting to notice that there is no record that the people were baptized again after they received the Holy Spirit; but they had before they received it.

Now Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch are in a chariot and come across some water, which was rare on this dusty road and the Ethiopian eunuch wanted to be baptized in the water. Philip did not tell him that he had to be baptized in water, but the eunuch asked Philip, who said he could be baptized if he truly "believed in Jesus Christ in his heart."

Now **verse 37** does not exist in the oldest manuscripts of Greek. There are two possibilities for this: 1) A carelessness of scribal copying, which is very unlikely since the scribes were very careful to copy everything in a text; 2) It was an addition made in the 6th century to support believer's water baptism.

Six observations we make from this text about baptism:

- 1) It appears to have been a Holy Spirit led baptism – not some legalistic church mandate.
- 2) It was water baptism – real water was used.
- 3) It was a believer's baptism – The Ethiopian believed Jesus was the subject of Isaiah 53.
- 4) It was an immediate baptism – there was no waiting to see if his faith took.
- 5) It was an unwitnessed baptism – no big crowds or public testimony of faith.
- 6) It was a non-apostolic baptism – Philip was not an apostle, but he did perform this baptism.

EVANGELISTIC FACT #5 - Philip is led by God to another area to preach . 8:39-40

As soon as the man came up out of the water, Philip disappeared.

Two interesting things are brought out about this:

- 1) The Ethiopian went home rejoicing. Why? Because he now has a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Historical tradition says that this Ethiopian went back to Ethiopia and became the first Grace Age evangelist to northern Africa. This Ethiopian is responsible for the Gospel going to Africa long before it went to Europe or America.
- 2) Philip found himself transported north about twenty-five miles to Azotus.

He kept on preaching truth about the grace of God. If you will believe on the Lord Jesus Christ you will be saved.

Philip gives us a true picture of a powerful layperson evangelist. He was just a faithful person who went to church. He sat under apostolic teaching; he knows the Scriptures and how they connect to Jesus Christ, and then he communicates that from place to place.

We lose sight of Philip after this until about twenty years later in Acts when the Apostle Paul will stay with him in his house in Caesarea (Acts 21:8-9). He was still faithful and still an evangelist whose whole house, including his daughters, were focused on God's Word.

The sovereignty of God is involved in every step of your life. If you are a believer, you focus on understanding God's Word and God will put you in various contexts and He will use you.