



Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No. 1254-8

Acts 8

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May 4, 2003

The Adventures of an Evangelist

SERIES: *Understanding the Church*

A few years ago I was standing by my car out in front of a fast food restaurant when a well dressed young man drove up, got out of his car and walked up to me. He said, "Is this your car?" I said it was. He said, "Wow this is a nice car! What year is it?" I said it was a 1989. He said, "Wow! This car is in great shape for a 1989!" I was beginning to like this guy! I told him I try to take good care of it. But he didn't stop there. He asked me if I used it to commute, and I told him I commuted about 20 miles up to Foster City each day. He asked me what I did for a living, and I told him that. I kept thinking, "Why is this guy so friendly, taking all this time with a total stranger?" And then it hit me, "I'll bet he's trying to sell me something." So I asked him where HE worked and he said he was in business for himself. I started to get suspicious and so I asked him what he did. He said something like, "I help people realize their dreams." I knew that if I didn't do something quick he would soon be trying to help me realize my dreams. And so I changed the subject.

I came away from there thinking, "That guy was good. He reeled me in simply by complimenting my seven-year-old car with 151,000 miles on it. All because he had a product he believed in." I couldn't help but think, "Perhaps we Christians could learn something from him. Not that we're salesman, and not that we rely on our sales techniques, but shouldn't we be just as excited and thoughtful about sharing Jesus with those we come into contact with?" And yet, let's face it, when it comes to what we call "witnessing," most of us are feel embarrassingly weak. We know it's something we ought to do; many of us even want to do it more, but we still feel that this area of our Christian life isn't quite what it should be. Paul Harvey said it well. He said, "Too many Christians are no longer fishers of men but keepers of the aquarium."

Why is it that we struggle so much in this area? It usually boils down to a number of reasons. *For some of us it's ignorance.* We've come to think that evangelism is only for certain people in the church, perhaps the super-spiritual or those with an outgoing personality. *For some of us it's fear.* We're just plain scared. We're afraid we're going to do something to mess the whole thing up. We're afraid we're going to offend someone or make them angry. We're afraid that person might ask a question we can't answer and we'll end up looking stupid. *For others, the problem is apathy.* It's hard to admit, but many of us just don't care that much. We worry more over keeping our front lawn green than we do over our next door neighbor's salvation. Some of us have lost sight of what's really at stake.

We've been doing a series of studies on the church. Last week we began to talk about God's heart for the lost and how when one sinner repents all heaven rejoices. That's because the inhabitants of heaven understand that eternity is at stake. This morning, I want to bring this down to a very personal level. I want to talk about how God uses us to reach the lost. To do

that I want to look at a man very much like you and me, who probably overcame many of the same things we'll have to overcome to be a witness for Christ. His name is Philip. This is not the Philip that Jesus chose as one of his twelve Apostles. This Philip was a layman; not a professional. He is found only on the pages of the book of Acts. In Acts 6 he's introduced to us not as an evangelist but as one who helped organize the distribution of food to widows. Before Philip ever began to cut his teeth as an evangelist, he learned to be a servant.

THE ADVENTURES OF AN EVANGELIST ACTS 8

The bulk of Philip's story is found in Acts 8. Here is where we see him earn his reputation as an evangelist. Chapter 8 is a turning point in the book of Acts. In vv. 1-3 we read that a great persecution arose against the believers in Jerusalem, instigated by Saul who later converted and became the Apostle Paul. As a result of that persecution, Christians were forced to leave Jerusalem. One of those Christians was Philip. Look what Luke tells us in vv. 4-8.

"Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. So there was much rejoicing in that city."

1. Trust: Notice how God used the persecution in Jerusalem to push these Christians out of their safe little nest. The word here for "scatter" means "sow like a seed." Philip and other Christians were now being sowed like seeds around Palestine and the message of Jesus was now being heard by those who never would have otherwise heard it. What must have felt like a tragedy was in fact God's plan.

Could it be that God is orchestrating the events of our lives for the greater purpose of spreading the gospel? Notice in verse 4 it says, **"they went about preaching the word."** They didn't plan a witnessing campaign. They didn't plan any of this. They were forced out of Jerusalem under some difficult circumstances. Yet they didn't become discouraged or cowardly; they trusted that God was still in charge and they seemed to share Christ with even more passion than before. Think about the circumstances of your life. The loss of a job, the need to move, a rejection letter from a school you hoped to get into. Disappointments to us, but God plants us where he wants us.

I've seen that happen so many times in my own life. I once got declined admission to Stanford, and it was a

disappointment. But God rerouted me to another school, much less impressive, by the way. And yet, it was there he used me in ways he might never have used me at Stanford. Look at the deeper purpose of even some of the most difficult circumstances of our lives. You see, we have a plan, but God's plan is to scatter us like seed to reach the lost.

I was away this weekend in L.A. for my daughter's college graduation. Just this morning I flew in from L.A. and as we flew over Foster City, I was able to find our church down below. It looked so small down there, and as I looked at it I thought, "There we are, like a little seed planted in Foster City!" That's true, you know. God planted us here to reach the lost. That's true of us as a church and it's true of us as individuals. Some of us would rather not be here, but we have to believe it's God who planted us here. You wouldn't have the same neighbors and co-workers somewhere else. He plants us where He wants us to reach the lost.

2. Passion: So Philip went to Samaria and began preaching and healing and casting out demons. He had tremendous success there, and many came to Christ. It's important to realize what a pioneer Philip was in sharing Christ with Samaritans. Samaritans and Jews hated each other! John 4:9 tells us that Jews had no dealings with Samaritans. Their prejudice was both racial and religious. And even though Jesus had broken down that barrier when he talked to the Samaritan woman by the well, most of the early church had not yet really caught on that the gospel was for all people. But Philip had caught on.

There's a song we teach our children, but its words are worth all of us remembering. "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world." How about us? Are we willing to cross the racial, religious and cultural boundaries that keep people away from a relationship with Jesus Christ? Are we willing to move outside our comfort zones because we can't stand the thought that a certain group of people might conclude that the gospel is not for people like them? One of the most unfortunate things that's happening in the world today is that there are many people in the Middle East who believe that the Christian faith is for the Western world. And that's keeping people away from knowing Jesus Christ. That should break our heart, and we should be thinking of ways to break down those walls.

3. Sensitivity and Obedience: Philip comes into the picture again starting in v. 26. Listen to what happens.

"But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, 'Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a desert road.)

I've never had an angel appear to me. I have never seen an angel - except for the one I married! But you have to read between the lines here to appreciate this. There is a revival going on in Samaria but an angel comes to Philip and tells him to head in the opposite direction. The road to Gaza went all the way to North Africa. Luke wants us to know how crazy this must have seemed because he adds that this was a desert road. In other words, it's very

unlikely that anybody would be on that road.

How easy it would have been for Philip to be so caught up in the excitement of that Samaritan revival where God was so clearly at work that he wasn't sensitive to a new direction. But he listened to God. Even though God hadn't told him why he should go down that road, he went without a struggle. He didn't say, "Well, I'll have to pray about this." He just went, that's all.

Part of being a witness is learning to be sensitive and obedient to the sometimes crazy ways the Holy Spirit might lead us. We have to be flexible enough to lay down our plans and our preconceived notions of how God works and where we should go. God may move us away from where all the action seems to be. You see, it's not our ability that matters, but our availability. Philip was available to the Spirit of God, aware that God has the right to ask us to do things that at the time are utterly baffling. It's a matter of putting ourselves at God's disposal and saying, "Here I am! I'll go anywhere you want me to go. I'll do anything you want me to do."

So Philip obeys the Lord and look who he runs into.

"So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship,..." (v.27).

Philip sees this African man riding in a chariot. This was an important man. He was the treasurer for the queen mother of Ethiopia. We all recognize that people who are down and out need God. But people who are up and out need God too. People like this often hunger after God because, having arrived at the top of their field, they're still empty. Their accomplishments haven't done anything for them. Apparently that was this man's condition. He was looking for God, and reading the Scriptures. He might have even been a Jewish convert who had come to Jerusalem to worship. It's interesting, according to Deut. 23:1 eunuchs were banned from worshipping in the temple. As we'll see, his whole experience in Jerusalem was disappointing; he left with more questions than answers. There are people out there like that, you know. People that the Holy Spirit has been working on, softening their hearts. They're disillusioned with religion, but still have a deep hunger in their soul.

4. Methodology: Watch how Philip moves in on this man.

"...and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go up and join this chariot.' Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, 'Do you understand what you are reading?'" (vv.28-30).

He takes the initiative. That had to be hard. Imagine initiating a conversation with a foreign dignitary. Initiation is always the hardest part for me. But notice he does so without being offensive or putting the man down. He starts right where the man is at; he hears him reading a familiar passage of Scripture and asks him a question about it, *"Do you understand what you are reading?"* Questions are often a great way to take the initiative with someone. Here's some examples:

"Say, I notice you're reading the paper there. Do you have any idea what's gone wrong with the world these days?"

"I'm always fascinated by people's heroes. Who in your opinion was the greatest person who ever lived?"

"What do you think about that plane crash? How do you

handle the possibility of something like that?

Questions can be a great way to start, but let me just say a word here about methods. When it comes to sharing our faith, there's no one method that's best. So much of that depends on who you are and who the person you're speaking to is. Perhaps the most important thing to remember is to be yourself, be sincere, and be sensitive to where that person is at. Start with some common ground that you might have and then gently try to move it deeper. Really listen to where they're coming from. If you don't know the answer to a question, tell them. And if they are not ready to make a decision, try to leave the door open for more conversation at another time. If this man had responded to Philip by saying, "What do you care if I understand or not?" I don't think Philip would have pushed it. This story is not about methods, it's about letting the Spirit of God lead.

I can remember a number of years ago Lynn and I were traveling through Europe with backpacks. We met up with an Australian couple in Switzerland who we hit it off with and so we decided to travel together for awhile. Now back in those days Lynn and I had a lot of zeal but little tact. We began to share the Lord with them and got into some good conversations. They weren't believers and at some point we decided to push the issue with them. We wanted to close the deal. Well, they got offended, and then we got offended that they were offended. They weren't ready but we kept pushing until they practically had to tell us to shut up. The next morning we woke to find that our traveling companions were long gone! Now sometimes that can't be avoided, but sometimes the problem is us.

Now as we will see, in the case of this Ethiopian, he was different. He was ready.

5. The Holy Spirit: After Philip asks if he understands what he is reading, listen to what the man says.

"And he said, 'Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this:

'He was led as a sheep to slaughter; and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he does not open his mouth. In humiliation his judgment was taken away; who will relate his generation? For his life is removed from the earth.'

The eunuch answered Philip and said, 'Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?'" (vv.31-34).

This guy is what I would call "ripe for the picking." He says he needs someone to "guide" him, which was an indictment on the Pharisees who were called guides. He just "happens" to be reading from a passage in Isaiah which is all about Jesus and his suffering on the cross. He's even willing to invite Philip into his chariot to help him understand the passage.

The Holy Spirit prepares individuals to hear the gospel. I'll tell you, this is great news! It takes all the pressure off of us. Whether or not a person comes to Christ ultimately is up to God, not us. Our job is to look for people whom God has already prepared. *Reader's Digest* records the story of a man who took his car to be repaired. He planned to have it driven to his home when the work was done. But the man who was delivering the car couldn't read the house number. He was about to telephone the shop when he noticed a garage door opener on the visor. He decided he would simply keep pressing the button while he drove

down the street, until a garage door opened up. That's great picture of how we are to act as believers: going through life loving people, making ourselves available to them, with our thumb on the button, to see who is open; waiting for God to lead us to open hearts. We need to go to places where God is already at work and we don't always know where that is.

I heard a story about former Secretary of State James Baker that illustrates how the Holy Spirit prepares individuals. Part of Baker's job was to deal with the then Secretary of the former USSR, Eduard Sheverdnadze. Baker liked Sheverdnadze. As soon as Baker became a Christian, he said the first thing that came to his mind was winning him to Christ. Baker has a ranch in Wyoming, and after a diplomatic event in 1989 he invited Sheverdnadze to his ranch. At dinner, Baker presented him with a pair of western cowboy boots. Then Sheverdnadze presented Baker with a gift of his own. It was an enameled picture of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Then Sheverdnadze said to Baker, "You see, Mr. Secretary, even we Communists are changing our minds about spiritual things." Later, the two went fishing and Baker shared his faith with him. It wasn't long before Sheverdnadze opened his heart to Jesus Christ. God had prepared that man's heart. When God does that, all we have to do show up!

One of the greatest mistakes we can make is thinking that people really don't want to hear about Jesus. It's true, some people don't. But, Jesus told us, *"Open your eyes, the fields are white for harvest"* (John 4:35). There are all kinds of people who are dying to get some answers. Our job isn't to talk someone into being a Christian who doesn't want to be; our job is to find those people who God has already prepared. It's his work and we just get to go along for the ride.

6. The message: So this man asks Philip to explain who this passage is talking about. And look what Philip does in v. 35.

"Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him."

From the Scripture he preaches Christ to him. You know, our message is incredibly simple and simply incredible. Our message is Jesus Christ. We see the same thing up in v. 5 where it says he "proclaimed Christ." You don't have to be a theologian to tell people about Christ. Our job is not to tell people about the church or about angels or even about how to live the Christian life. Our job is simply to tell them about Jesus. That doesn't mean we can't talk about other things or answer honest questions, but it's so easy to talk about all those other things and never get around to talking about Christ. He's the real issue. So focus on him.

Joni Earekson Tada writes about attending the funeral of Corrie Ten Boom a number of years ago. Corrie was a wonderful old woman who told the story of how her faith in Christ helped her forgive her Nazi captors in her book, *The Hiding Place*. Joni writes, "Several pastors spoke about Corrie's life, reading excerpts from her books or recounting incidents from her ministry. They all talked about her love of Jesus. One pastor said Corrie had instructed him to speak at her funeral about Jesus' love - not about Corrie Ten Boom. That was so like Corrie! Jesus was always at the center of her

thoughts and words. She rarely spoke of the 'Christian walk' or 'the Christian experience.' She didn't speak of Christ as though he were some creed, doctrine or lifestyle. What's more, she didn't just say, 'The Lord,' as in 'I love the Lord' or 'The Lord told me this.' She always named him. She said, 'The Lord Jesus.' She spoke about a person, a person she loved more than anyone else, and she was careful to always name him with confidence and pride."

You see, that's what will draw people - our love for Jesus, a person, not a religion. Not our technical descriptions of the Christian life, but our sense of wonder and love for Jesus.

7. The goal: Perhaps that's what convinced this Ethiopian to believe Philip's message. Look what happens next.

"As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?' And Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' And he answered and said, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.' And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing" (vv.36-39).

The man believed and was baptized and went away rejoicing. That's always the ultimate goal of witnessing - to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ, visibly expressed in the act of baptism, and resulting in a kind of inner joy that can't be matched by the world.

Now the Lord had a witness in Africa. Africa was Christian way before North America or Europe ever was. Aren't you glad that Philip was obedient to the Holy Spirit's leading? You never know how the Lord will use what seem to be the smallest decisions we make.

The next thing you know, Philip is snatched away by the Spirit. Don't ask me to explain that. Maybe he was just so excited and caught up in the joy of the moment that he lost all sense of time and found himself in Azotus before he knew it. Or perhaps this was a miracle, like a Captain Kirk experience. Sometimes the Spirit works in ways that we can't explain and the best thing to do is let it be.

Either way, Philip lands about 20 miles north in Azotus, along the coast. Look at v. 40.

"But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea."

There are no divine directives here, no angels, but Philip continues to share Christ as he moves north and then settles in Ceasarea. After this we hear nothing of Philip until 20 years later. In Acts 21 Paul is passing through Ceasarea on his way to Jerusalem. Guess whose house he stays at? The same Paul who had forced Philip to leave Jerusalem is now staying at Philip's house! Philip had four unmarried prophesying daughters. Can you imagine living with four unmarried prophesying daughters? But Philip had settled down and had a family. And he had earned a nickname, too. They called him "the evangelist." He had exercised his gift of evangelism right in his own home. He had led his daughters to Christ and those girls became well-known as prophets in the early church.

CONCLUSION

And that's the end of Philip's story. Why do you think we have a Philip on the pages of Scripture? I believe it's because we need a reminder that being a personal witness is as basic to the Christian life as breathing and eating. It doesn't always take a Peter or a Paul or a Billy Graham to be effective in spreading the good news about Jesus. God wants to use people like Philip, too. People like you and me. Ordinary people like you and me, who overcome our fears, who cross barriers, who listen to the Spirit, who love Jesus so much they can't help but talk about him. Philip's life isn't meant to be a guilt trip for us. Philip's life is simply meant to be an invitation. An invitation to a part of the adventure of seeing our Father draw men and women to himself. God's going to get the job done, but if we're not seeing it happen, we're the ones who are missing out.

Let me challenge you to answer these questions this week: Who is the one person in your life you think the Lord is preparing to hear the message of Jesus? Who is the Holy Spirit nudging you to take the next step with? Take that step and let the Lord use you to reach the lost.

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