



Leaders Note

Acts 8: 26-40 Used Incredibly!

Thought

An important thing to remember about Philip is that he started out in Acts as, well, as a waiter of sorts. Along with Stephen and five others, he served tables ensuring that none of the needy widows were neglected. We frequently call them the first “deacons.” Deacon is our transliteration of the Greek word diakonos — usually translated “servant” or “minister.”

To be a deacon or a minister sounds a bit auspicious and important (the word servant has so far escaped that aura). Minister comes from Latin and literally means “a doer of small things”. God calls for people willing to do small things, and Philip heard the call and was proficient in the first line of kingdom tools: tables and pots and pans and scrub brushes. He was a first rate doer of wee things, which qualified him for the work in Samaria that we witness in the first half of Acts 8 — and for the divine appointment in the second half. The same selflessness that was on display in Samaria, contrasted with the pompous displays of a mover and shaker wannabe named Simon, shines just as brightly in his encounter with a high official from Ethiopia. “At noon, head south,” declared the angel voice. Philip didn’t balk but walked, to what end he hadn’t the faintest. Servants just do. If he was wondering why, he had not long to wait. What was no doubt a mini convoy made it’s way down the road towards him. “Join yourself to the chariot,” intones the Spirit. A recitation of prophetic mystery. An eager invitation. An opportunity seized. A wet eunuch, drenched and dripping with Good News. And then most remarkable of all...

The exit.

Having clanged his cymbals at the appropriate moment, Philip is snatched away without so much as a “See you later.” On to the next task, the next bell ringing, the next divine summons. And the eunuch seems to scarcely even notice.

Context

The road from Jerusalem to Gaza: Gaza was the southernmost of the five chief Philistine cities in south-West Palestine and the last settlement before the desert waste stretching away to Egypt. The fifty-mile journey from Jerusalem to Gaza trailed off at its south western terminus into patches of desert.

Philip heard the eunuch reading: Biblical culture was a very vocal culture. The ancient practice was always to read aloud, so libraries would have been noisy places! To “meditate” on something was not necessarily to sit in silent contemplation but to audibly regurgitate a text repeatedly.

Tell me who the prophet is talking about: While in Judaism at this time the concept of God’s Servant carried messianic connotations in certain contexts and among certain groups, there is no evidence that anyone in pre-Christian Judaism ever

thought of the Messiah in terms of a Suffering Servant. What rabbinic interpretations are available relate the suffering either to the nation of Israel or to the wicked Gentile nations. Though it is true that the certain Jewish elements were in the process of forming the concept of a suffering Messiah (such as at Qumran), a doctrine of a suffering Messiah was not a popular theological stance at the time. Mainly because the Jews wanted God to sort those Romans out!

The Spirit of God suddenly took Philip: The word picture here shows sudden and forceful action on God's part and no resistance on Philip's part. And the Eunuch is just happy he found Jesus — or that Jesus found him.

The Eunuch: It is difficult to determine from the text itself how Luke wanted his readers to understand the Ethiopian eunuch's relation to Judaism. It is also uncertain how first-century Judaism would have viewed a eunuch coming to worship at Jerusalem. While Deut 23:1 explicitly stipulates that no emasculated male could be included within the Jewish worshipping community, Isa 56:3-5 speaks of eunuchs being none-the-less accepted by the God of boundless loving kindness should they seek him and serve him wholeheartedly. Nor is it clear what the Ethiopian's physical condition was, for the word "eunuch" frequently appears in secular Greek writings as a euphemism for high military and political officials, without necessarily suggesting emasculation. Therefore, we are probably justified in taking this eunuch as a governmental officer in an Oriental kingdom and in emphasizing two facts when considering his relation to Judaism: (1) he had been on a religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and (2) he was returning with a copy of the prophecy of Isaiah in his possession, which would have been difficult for a non-Jew to get. The ancient kingdom of Ethiopia lay between Aswan and Khartoum. It was ruled by a queen mother who had the dynastic title Candace and ruled on behalf of her son the king, since the king was regarded as the child of the sun and therefore too holy to become involved in the secular functions of the state. The minister of finance in the Ethiopian government had become either a full proselyte or a "proselyte of the gate" and had gone to Jerusalem to worship at one of the Jewish festivals. He was now returning home reading Isaiah and the interpretation of the Servant passage of Isa 52:13-53:12 troubled him.



Learning Session

Read the above passage and share some of the contextual information. Then pose this open question: Can anyone share about a time when you felt a “divine nudge” to do something — and you followed it. What happened?

Allow some brave souls to share their stories and then break up into smaller groups to discuss these questions:

- What do you think is the “secret” of really tracking with the Lord in practical ways like Phillip does?
- What really speaks to you as you read the Ethiopian’s conversion experience? How does his conversion experience compare with your own?
- When faced with a divine opportunity like this, what is your typical response? Are you better than you were 2 years ago?

Get together for a time of feedback. One of the key points that needs to be made from this passage is availability. If we are available, then God is able to use us. Being available means to obey! We all need to be in that place where we are willing for God to break through with His Kingdom at any time, unfortunately for us people no time is the right time. But, if we work against this and start obeying in the small things He leads us to do, then we are more likely to be asked to do bigger things (as well as being better placed to respond). Ask if anyone needs to step up and start doing some things that God is prompting them to do. Hold one another accountable.

Discussion Questions

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