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The Ethiopian Eunuch

Acts 8 v 26-40

Introduction

Do you read on the bus? Or the train? I used to travel into Glasgow a lot and read on the bus. Once I left Frankenstein on my seat and had to go to the depot to get it back. Nowadays I like to read books on the Kindle. It keeps your place and you can have lots of books on it, so I prefer it. One advantage, or disadvantage, is that no one else knows what you're reading, unless they hang over your shoulder to read the words.

Or unless you read aloud. I think that would be a bit distracting if someone did that on the bus. Imagine if everyone was reading out aloud.

And yet that's how people generally used to read. There are some accounts in early Christian times of people reading into themselves and it's seen as quite an extraordinary thing.

The Ethiopian eunuch in our passage today is reading aloud, and that's why we know he is reading from the book of Isaiah. Which is fairly heavy stuff for your holiday reading.

Context

We're in a part of the book of Acts set at the early days of the gospel being spread around. It's a dangerous thing to be a Christian, and Saul in particular is going about arresting and imprisoning Christians. However the Christians who are scattered around the country use it as an opportunity to preach the gospel wherever they go, reaching cities, towns and villages that they might not have done if they hadn't been persecuted by the religious establishment.

Philip and friends had had some good success in Samaria, and the villages surrounding it, and were heading back to Jerusalem

So it maybe seems strange that Philip should be told by an angel to go to the desert. A place without water, without food, and with very few people. But God had one particular person he wanted Philip to meet.

In the Desert

Let's look at the first few verses:

> *Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot."*
>
> *[Acts 8 v 26-29]*

Now often when I'm reading the Bible and it mentions towns or countries, I have to go to the maps at the back and work out where we are geographically. It's a sad fact that we know only too well where the city of Gaza is, with all that's going on there. But anyway, Philip was directed by an angel to go to the road that leads from Jerusalem in the hills to Gaza by the shore of the Mediterranean.

We see Philip being led by God quite a lot in this passage. In verse 26 an angel guided him, in verse 29 the Spirit prompted him, in verse 39 he is "carried away" by the Spirit, and in verse 40 we're told he "found himself" at Azotus.

How much are we directed by the Lord in our lives? I can think of times in my life when I've been quite sure I had the Spirit's leading, but also times when I wasn't sure at all what the Lord wanted me to do. There are fertile periods in the Christian walk, when we see clearly the path God has for us, and the results of his work. But there are also desert times, when his word seems scarce and results ever scarcer. Philip was being led into the desert to find one man to witness to, but it looks likely that this one man would carry the gospel to Africa.

This wasn't an ordinary fellow. He was a eunuch in the queen's court, with a high position looking after the treasury. I've read that Candace wasn't a name but more like a title, a bit like Pharaoh in Egypt. But this man was important and obviously had influence. I wonder what made him come to Jerusalem to worship. He obviously knew something about the true God.

Anyway, the Spirit prompted Philip to come closer.

Reading Aloud

So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he opens not his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth."

And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.

[Acts 8 v 30-35]

How do you approach someone you want to share the gospel with? Do you just walk up to them and say "I want to tell you about Jesus"? Some people do do that, but I'm not sure it's a very effective way. What Philip does here is find out what the Ethiopian is thinking about, where he is, and he uses that as a springboard for discussion. When he hears the words of the

prophet Isaiah he asks the question I think many of us ask when we read Isaiah - "Do you understand what you're reading?". It's a great question, isn't it? If the Ethiopian says "yes", Philip can ask questions and guide him to the gospel. In fact he says "no", and so Philip gets a chance to sit with him and explain how the scriptures point to Jesus.

Look at your Bibles! Where is the gospel? You might point to the first part of the New Testament, with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John's accounts of the life of Jesus. And you'd be right. But we also learn the gospel message in Acts, for instance when Peter speaks to the crowd, or when Stephen witnesses at his execution. We are taught much about the gospel in the letters. And the gospel is also clear in the apocalyptic writing of Revelation.

But the gospel message has always been in the scriptures. Right from the very beginning as God promised a redeemer to Eve, as he promised a blessing for the nations from Abraham, as he promised David a future successor with an eternal kingdom, as he showed Isaiah visions of his servant, coming to bring light to the nations.

What passage was the Ethiopian reading? It's from Isaiah 53 - one of the most clear pictures of the Messiah in the Old Testament. Who was Isaiah talking about? The Arm of the Lord, his Servant, his Anointed, who was sent to take the punishment for sin. Just a couple of verses before Isaiah says "by his wounds we are healed". Philip was able to say that this promised one had come, that he knew him, that this passage had been fulfilled and he was now able to know forgiveness for all his sins, because the Lamb had been sacrificed for him.

Baptism

How did the Ethiopian respond to this new teaching from Philip?

And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?"And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.

[Acts 8 v 36,38]

The eunuch believed that Jesus was the prophecied messiah, that he was the son of God, and that he had died for his sins. He was gloriously saved and right away he wanted to be baptised.

Did you notice the missing verse? We went from verse 36 to verse 38. Verse 37 was found in some early manuscripts but not in others. Now I'm no Bible scholar so I can't say which version is correct here, but I can understand why someone might have inserted a verse at this point. The Ethiopian man ask the question "What prevents me from being baptised?", but Philip doesn't provide the answer. For Bibles with verse 37 it says:

And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he replied, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

[Acts 8 v 37]*

It does make it clear, doesn't it? And there's truth in it, whether someone added it later or not. The essential requirement for baptism is that you are a believer. And we can ask questions to

ascertain that truth, to assure ourselves that their conversion is true, but we must be careful not to require more than is necessary for someone seeking baptism.

Water in the Desert

And so Philip baptised the eunuch. They managed to find enough water in the desert to carry out a baptism. Maybe there was a lesson for Philip. The Spirit had led him to a desert place and yet God had provided a man to hear the gospel, as well as water to baptise him. As he travelled back to Africa I wonder how many people he told, and how far the gospel spread because of this one encounter.

He didn't get to chat any longer though:

And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

[Acts 8 v 39-40

It sounds like Philip was miraculously transported away, and plonked back on the ground where his next assignment was. What did he do? He walked and he witnessed.

Application

We can take away a lot from Philip's encounter:

. Sometimes God will lead us to a desert place. It doesn't mean there is no blessing there.

. It's important to know your Bible well, and to see how the whole book points to Jesus.

. It's important to approach people where they are, show an interest in them, to get a chance to show them the saviour.

Sometimes we don't even get a chance to speak. A friend is going to the funeral of a relative this week. She has been told not to mention God. That seems harsh and unfair, but she can still be a witness for Jesus in that situation, no matter how much it seems to be a desert place.

Someone coined the phrase "Preach the gospel - use words if you have to" - there is truth there too.