

A Gospel Seed is Sown in Ethiopia, Part I

Text: Acts 8:26-40

Introduction:

During the great persecution, which had taken place following the martyrdom of Stephen, many in Jerusalem were forced to flee outward, into all of Judea and Samaria. We have been following Philip's work in Samaria, where many had come to faith in Christ, having heard the Gospel preached by Philip, with the accompaniment of miraculous signs and wonders.

This morning, we continue to follow Philip, now, as an angel of the Lord orders him to head south and west, into the territory of Gaza, where he is to minister the Gospel to a high ranking official from Ethiopia. Let us then begin working through the text, before drawing some important principles out of it.

I. The Conversion of an Ethiopian

"Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, 'Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' This is desert ["a deserted place"]. So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, was returning."

Philip is having great success in Samaria, but we are told that an "angel of the Lord" appears to him, and sends him down beyond Jerusalem, toward the west coast, near the Mediterranean Sea, to a city called "Gaza." This is the territory, which the Philistines of David's day, used to occupy, and now it is a deserted place [God's judgment had fallen upon the Philistines in times past]. And, we are told that Philip got up and went.

Now, putting ourselves in Philip's shoes, we might begin to question God here, "Lord, why should I head down to a place that is deserted and hardly inhabitable? So much good is happening right here in Samaria! Or why not send me to another area that is well populated, so that more can be achieved by my Gospel labors?" But Philip doesn't question the angel of the Lord, does he? And notice, Philip is not given any further instructions concerning what he ought to expect there. He is just told, "Arise and go," and he "arises and goes," without question.

Philip's faith embraces God's sovereign will here, recognizing that, as the creature servant, he can whole heartedly obey God, according to every individual step that God gives him, when God so chooses to give him another step, even if it is in the direction of a barren wilderness.

Would it be that we would have such faith, brethren, willing to be faithful and trust God right where He has us, and wherever He leads us [during times of trial and times of rest], even and especially when we are unsure of the ultimate destination. [Also address the philosophy of some well known, well respected teachers/preachers, who will only go where so many hundreds can gather to hear them. They want to make the most of the opportunities they will take, viewing their gifts in more of a pragmatic sense. But what of those areas where not so many people can gather? What of Gaza and the Ethiopian eunuch? Is there only room for a great preacher, like Philip, in Samaria or in high population places, or is there room for such a one in Gaza or in an inner city somewhere?]. Needless to say, God sends, and Philip goes!

And what does Philip find, there in Gaza? He finds an Ethiopian eunuch, riding in a chariot. He is a prominent man in Ethiopia; a high official with great authority, who served under Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians [had charge of all her treasury]. And we are told that this man was riding back to his own country, having just spent time in Jerusalem, seeking to worship God, at the temple. He is a "God fearing" gentile, whom God is preparing to meet, with the glorious Gospel of His grace in Christ!

Now brethren, before we move on, and address the interaction between Philip and the Ethiopian, I want to comment on a few points of interest here:

1- Notice, how this man's exalted position in Ethiopia, makes him an ideal candidate for grace. Now granted, God can use a flea to accomplish His work (He is no man's debtor, He needs no man, and He often uses the foolish things of the world to confound the wise), but by way of this high official, Ethiopian [clearly well trusted by the queen--he was over all her treasury], God will plant a Gospel seed in Ethiopia. And so, although Philip is given only a one man audience in the desert of Gaza [which is itself, still no small matter---there is rejoicing in heaven over the salvation of one lost soul]...but the potential for great things to happen through this man of great influence is tremendous as well. Look at how Philip himself has already been used in Samaria! God can do wonderful things through even one minister of the Gospel, but this man; a man of great repute, will be sent forth with the Gospel of grace, as a precious influence to a people in a far away land (indeed, the "ends of the earth.")

Consider that Ethiopia was even beyond Egypt, and beyond the borders of the Roman Empire, for that matter! And in this one man, we begin to see that final stage of our Lord's great commission from Acts, chapter 1, begin to break ground! The Gospel of the risen Christ had poured out of Jerusalem, into all of Judea, into all of Samaria, and now it was starting to make its way into the gentile regions, at the ends of the earth, as it were! And here, it is carried into Africa, beyond Egypt, on the back of a single Ethiopian of great influence! We are not told of the fruit of this man's labors, but we can bet that he had a wonderful testimony, when he got back to his own land! [Note: God saves people in government and high office-- Caesar's household, the palace guard heard Paul's testimony--in Philippians...etc]

2- Notice, how this man's lowly position in Jerusalem, made him an ideal candidate for grace. Indeed, he was well respected in Ethiopia, but he had two biting marks against him in Jerusalem. In fact, you might be tempted to say, "Why would a man of such great authority and prominence, periodically leave the land where he was due all manner of respect and honor, only to enter a land, where he would be seen in a far lesser light?" Only one answer: he was a man, who feared YHWH! Taking such steps of faith confirm this, along with his willingness to take on humility in a foreign land. Consider the two biting marks against him:

a) He was a gentile. He was an obvious gentile. He had dark skin, and stood out like a sore thumb among the Jews. But as a gentile, he could not enter beyond the "Court of the Gentiles," in the temple at Jerusalem. His position of prominence in Ethiopia, offered him no benefit in this regard, at Jerusalem. He could not enjoy any means of fellowship among even the common Jews, because of this.

b) He was a eunuch. He was castrated below the belt. He had a physical defect, which would have further excluded him from among the people. In the Law of Moses, in Deuteronomy 23:1, we are told, "He who is emasculated by crushing or mutilation shall not enter the assembly of The Lord." And so, he was doubly barred from the fellowship of God's people.

Needless to say, brethren, the fact that he made this long trek to Jerusalem, where his natural prominence from his own country, would be sacrificed for a robe of humility, made him a precious candidate for the grace of God. The fact that he humbly acknowledges his need of help from Philip, in understanding the Scriptures, further confirms his humble state of mind, before God. And so, he was a precious seed, in the hands of God, ready to be made useful unto his own people, after being confronted by the power of the Gospel by Philip.

3- Notice something very interesting about the glorious mystery of God's providence, here, brethren. Where did this eunuch just come from? [Jerusalem]. Who is at Jerusalem? [The Apostles; God's most gifted servants]. Why then does God wait to reach this man, at a seemingly most inconvenient time for the church? Could God not have introduced him to His grace, while he was at Jerusalem? Why, now, send Philip, away from his present successful ministry among the Samaritans, all the way down south, past Jerusalem, and into a barren wilderness, to meet a man, who could have just as easily heard the Gospel in Jerusalem...by the Apostles of our Lord! This would seem like a pragmatic failure on the part of God, wouldn't it? It would seem like a mishandling of resources, wouldn't it? The eunuch was in Jerusalem; the Apostles were in Jerusalem; why not kill two birds with one stone? Well, brethren, as The Lord would have it, He kills a lot more than two birds with one stone, but His birds are different than ours, aren't they.

Consider what we do know about the consequences of this providence:

a) It shows us that the most coveted ministry ought not necessarily to be where the most people are, but rather, wherever God would have us minister. Whether it is a big audience in Samaria, or a one man audience in Gaza (where the further results may never be seen or heard of by Philip), the critical note here, is that Philip followed God's orders, as they came. The angel of the Lord said, "Arise and go here," and Philip "arose" and went there. [Compare to Jonah]. The most coveted place ought to be, wherever God wants us to be.

b) Certainly, Philip's personal faith was increased here. Indeed, there is a sanctifying sense to this call. God is not merely after results and what we might consider greater opportunities. He is after holiness in His people, as well. ["Behold, My servant Job"]

c) As a result of this, Philip winds up preaching the Gospel all the way up the coast, until he comes to settle in Caesarea--Further north than Samaria, but at the coast (vs. 40). He winds up planting seeds in regions, which others will water later on. [See also Acts 21:8]

We will continue the narrative, next time, Lord willing.

Amen!!!