

Acts 8:26-40, No. 18**“The Next Step”****January 3, 2016****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

I have made a point of this repeatedly in our consideration of Acts to this point, but it is very important to remember. The narrative of Acts is very definitely *not* an account of everything that Luke might have included in a history of the earliest church, as if what we are told is everything Luke knew to tell us. Luke culled from an immense amount of material the scenes that he thought, and the Holy Spirit before him, were most important either for their representative nature – that is, they depict for subsequent generations of Christians the nature and calling of the church in the world – or for their theological significance – that is, they demonstrate the very nature of salvation itself, the experience of it, and the way that it comes to pass. Our text this morning is significant for both of those reasons and was certainly chosen for inclusion in Luke’s narrative for those reasons. Otherwise, this episode concerns the coming to faith in Christ of one individual – among the thousands who were being converted in those days – and a man of whom we will hear nothing more. There is, in other words, something about the story of this man’s salvation that we need to know and appreciate.

Text Comment

v.26 It is worth our noting that in Acts the Holy Spirit intervenes to direct the progress of the gospel only when what God intends is not what would seem most reasonable. Why leave Samaria where the Spirit is working among many people to go out into the desert where no people are to be found? Ordinarily in Acts decisions about where to invest evangelistic effort were made for simple and obvious reasons.

In any case, Philip was to take the main road from Jerusalem to Egypt and Africa.

v.27 Ethiopia, in those days, was the area south of Egypt we know today as part of Sudan. Candace was not a personal name but a royal title for the queen mother who was the partial ruler of the country because the king was regarded as divine, his person too sacred to soil his hands with the affairs of state.

As a eunuch, this official, no matter his interest in and agreement with Jewish theology, would not have been allowed to become a full proselyte of Judaism because he was maimed. Therefore, we have here the fulfillment of the day of grace promised in Isaiah 56:3-5:

“Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.’ And let not any eunuch complain, ‘I am only a dry tree.’ For this is what the Lord says, ‘To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant – to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial with a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will never be cut off.’”

This eunuch was likely a God-fearer – the technical term for a Gentile who was a Jew in all but circumcision – who worshipped the God of Israel as best he could given the limitations imposed upon him by his situation. He had worshipped in Jerusalem and was on his way home.

- v.30 In the ancient world people typically read aloud, not silently as we do. So Philip immediately recognized what the man was reading. This “chariot” was not the sort Charlton Heston drove in *Ben Hur*, but a cart drawn by oxen. In other words, it wouldn’t have been moving very quickly. See the two men, if you can, with the scroll in one man’s lap and the verses being read and explained as the cart jolted along the way.
- v.34 He had been reading from Isaiah 53 - he’d already read the fabulously important verses that precede this particular text that is cited here - what better passage could there possibly be for an evangelist to be asked to explain! Talk about a “divine appointment.” All the more given the eunuch’s question: “who is this written about?” And there was need for interpretation. Clear as Isaiah 53 is to us now, the events of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus were the key that unlocked the treasures of that ancient prophecy.
- v.36 Obviously Philip had spoken to the man at some length about salvation and how it was appropriated by sinners: faith, repentance, and baptism. But it seemed so abrupt that some ancient scribe - perhaps worrying that the man was not heard to confess his faith prior to his baptism - smoothed things out by adding an interpretative comment, what you see in your margin as v. 37. You’ll notice that there is no verse 37 in your ESV. That’s because scholars do not believe, and rightly so, that verse 37 actually belonged to Luke’s original. Indeed, it is thought by some that the two sentences of the scribal addition, may have originally belonged to an early baptismal liturgy, the words that were said immediately before the baptism first by the minister, then by the catechumen. With that addition, perhaps originally a marginal note that later found its way into the text, we are assured that the eunuch clearly confessed his faith before he was baptized and the proper order was preserved. No doubt he did, but that was assumed in Luke’s text, not actually stated.
- v.39 In other words, this man had been made a Christian in every important way. He had come to understand the faith, he had believed and embraced it for himself, and he had been baptized. So Philip could send him home thoroughly incorporated into the body of Jesus Christ. Notice what any alert reader of Acts ought to notice. The eunuch went on his way rejoicing, but there is no mention of any visible demonstration to prove that the man had received the Holy Spirit. That would no longer always, or even regularly, occur upon a person’s conversion.
- v.40 Azotus is the ancient Philistine city of Ashdod. The church father, Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* III, 12, 8) reports that the eunuch returned to his homeland preaching Christ as the Son of God. But whether he was simply basing that conclusion on his reading of Acts 8 or had additional information we cannot say.

Philip went up the coast to Caesarea where we next meet him, twenty years later, the father of four prophesying daughters, when Paul passes through at the end of his 3rd missionary journey.

The theme of the book of Acts is found in the words spoken by the Lord to his disciples before his ascension to heaven: "...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and *you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*" Acts is the story of that prophecy coming to pass. The early chapters of the book tell the thrilling story of the gospel's early and dramatic progress in the capital itself and its surroundings. Then in the first part of chapter 8 we read of the penetration of Samaria with that same Christian witness. The Samaritans, as we said, were not Jews but they were sort of Jews: they read the same Bible, they had many of the same convictions, they worshipped the same God, and they too were expecting the Messiah. The Ethiopian eunuch was a Gentile, but he was at least a God-fearer, that is, a man who revered Israel's God and was familiar with Israel's religion. It was for that reason that he made the long journey to worship in Jerusalem and it was for that reason he was reading Isaiah. So you see, we are slowly working our way out toward the ends of the earth. We have not yet, and won't for some few chapters yet, witness the embrace of the gospel by Gentiles who had no previous contact with Judaism or loyalty to it. The progress so far has been step by step, but it is following the direction laid down by the Lord himself: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the uttermost ends of the earth. Here, so far as we know, we have the first true Gentile convert, even if he were already a Jew theologically. One scholar described him as "a very strong representative of foreignness within a Jewish context." [Tannehill in Peterson, 291]

Don't miss the epoch making significance of this long ago event in a faraway desert. This Ethiopian eunuch is the first of a vast multitude of human beings, including almost all of us, who have found the living God but before Pentecost would never have found him. We take this for granted – that the good news is for everyone –; but for half of human history it was not so. The good news was almost – not absolutely but almost – exclusively the property of the Jews. We take it for granted that there are Christians everywhere – among every tongue, tribe, and nation on the earth – but for thousands of years it was not so. See yourself in this man, for in a very real way, his history is your history, his life your life.

But there is more here than simply the gospel's next step toward the ends of the earth. Here is another dramatic, memorable picture of salvation. We have already considered, in a sermon on Acts 2:37-41, the reality of conversion, the radical change that takes place in a human life when a man or woman, boy or girl, becomes a follower of Jesus Christ. But there are a number of pictures of *conversions* in the book of Acts, partly perhaps for emphasis – what is more important that our becoming thoroughly familiar with the nature of salvation – but partly to teach us that this change comes to pass in many different ways. We will have still another, yet more memorable account of a conversion in the next chapter of the book, that of the apostle Paul, and a number more after that.

Here we have a particularly beautiful demonstration of the fact that Christian witness is, or at least can be, a vital instrument in the transformation of a person's heart and life.

This is, without question, a beautiful picture of Christian evangelism, but like many such pictures we are given in Acts only some of its features are relevant to us today. We certainly are not free to conclude from this episode that we are obliged to talk about Christ only to those to whom the Holy Spirit directs us in some striking way or to those who ask us to explain the gospel. But what we do learn here, as we have already a number of times in Acts, is that we should be on the lookout for any and every opportunity to give a reason for the hope that is within us. Indeed, the image of Philip *running* to meet the eunuch in his chariot is surely a picture of the enthusiasm with which Christians should embrace the opportunity to share Christ with others. To believe in Jesus most people will need a Christian both to explain why they should believe in him and to encourage them to believe in him.

And there is practical wisdom here. Surely we are to take note of Philip's apt question: "Do you understand what you are reading?" So often questions are the easy way into a serious conversation about life and salvation. "Why are you crying?" "Can I help?" "What did you mean by that?" "Why do you believe that?" and so on.

But, more obvious in this passage is the hand of God. We are his witnesses only; the issue is in God's hands, not in ours. It was the Lord who picked Philip up and placed him in the desert, in the path of this man. Obviously the Lord intended this encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian. He set Philip down in the middle of nowhere. Why? Because a man was coming along whom he intended to save. Who was this man? He was a man who had already come a long way toward the truth. He was at least theologically a Jew. He had embraced an understanding of God – the one true God – and the world that made immediate sense of the gospel when he heard it. This man was ready for the good news. God knew all that. Philip did not.

More than that, the Lord arranged for Philip to encounter the eunuch while he was reading Isaiah 53, the passage in the entire Old Testament that anyone of us would choose if we wanted to explain to someone who Jesus was and what he would do.

"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

And then the Ethiopian eunuch asked Philip, "Who is 'him'?" I think of so many stories through the ages of just the right verse or passage of Holy Scripture falling upon the ear or under the eye of a man or woman at the very moment he or she needed that a word from God. When Augustine opened his Bible his eye fell on the last verse of Romans 13, exactly what he needed to hear. In the paroxysm of confusion and spiritual paralysis, because of his guilt and his sense of his own sin, "put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lust thereof" was precisely what he needed to hear. When William Cowper was at the point of decision, wrestling with the fact of his sin and guilt and unsure what to do, his eye fell upon Romans 3:25, where the death of Jesus is explained as the atonement for our sins. Or think of the great 19th century Anglican evangelical bishop J.C. Ryle who was converted in part by hearing Ephesians 2:8 read in a church service with great emphasis and frequent pauses:

By grace – are you saved – through faith – and that not of yourselves – it is the gift of God.”

Or William Haslam, converted by his own sermon on the text from Matthew 16: “Who do men say that I am?” Chrysostom, the great early Christian preacher contrasted the Ethiopian’s conversion with that of the Apostle Paul in the next chapter. His point was that this man received no supernatural vision of the exalted and ascended Christ as Paul did but he still believed. Why? Chrysostom’s point: “So great a thing is the careful reading of the Scriptures.” [In Stott, 161]

Now none of those men was converted as was this Ethiopian by a single conversation with a Christian. In those other cases there were events and conversations and experiences and influences that led up to the decisive change. That is certainly more often the case with converts. The ground has to be prepared and the seed planted and watered before it can sprout. And, of course, so it was with this eunuch who had, by some means, already embraced the teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures, such as he understood them. Such would be the case with Lydia in Acts 16. Hearing Paul once was all it took because she was already a God-fearer.

But it is not always the case. Sometimes the Lord demonstrates the sovereignty of his grace, his power over the human heart by drawing an unbeliever to him suddenly and with no apparent preparation of the ground. Such will be the case of the Philippian jailer in that same chapter 16. I love the story of Abdul Masih – that was the name he chose for himself after becoming a Christian: Servant of the Messiah – like this eunuch a wealthy and influential man, though in his case a devout Muslim who lived in what is now modern India in the later years of the 18th and early years of the 19th century. He was a highly regarded and highly sought after Islamic religious scholar, who had no intention whatsoever of exchanging his Muslim faith for Christianity; none at all. But visiting Kanpur on one occasion he happened to hear Henry Martyn, the great English missionary, preaching on the doorstep of his home to a group of assembled folk, mostly poor, many of them beggars. He heard of Christ and salvation and he believed and forsaking Islam became a Christian, being baptized on Pentecost 1811, and, in time, ordained a Christian minister under Reginald Heber, Bishop of Calcutta and author of the hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy.” Abdul Masih was Henry Martyn’s only Indian convert, so far as we know, but many came to Christ through that convert’s ministry. Another divine appointment; another man who had no idea when he awoke that morning that his life was about to change and would never be the same.

And still we are not done with the demonstration of the Lord’s orchestration of this encounter. As the two men talk, as real understanding, faith, love, and joy begin to dawn in this man’s heart, they came upon some water – hardly an ordinary occurrence in that part of the world – enough water for a baptism, so that Philip and the Ethiopian would not part company until the African was well and truly a Christian, inwardly and outwardly.

I don’t know about you but I never cease to be fascinated by stories of men and women coming to Christ. So many different stories of God’s grace at work. Some come imperceptibly, born and raised in Christian homes, imbibing God’s grace and Christ’s salvation with their mother’s milk. But many converts also come gradually, their faith the lasting fruit of much cultivation by Christian witnesses. Some come suddenly as this man. For some it is a great struggle, finally to

be willing to leave one's past behind – think of C.S. Lewis –; for others, the past is forgotten in a moment. Think of the Apostle Paul. And as Luke has taught us in the book of Acts, in these accounts of people coming to faith in Christ we learn what salvation is and how God places it in the human heart.

But they all have some things in common and among them this. If so much of the emphasis here falls on the hand, the work, the plan, and the power of God, why then Philip at all? Why didn't God simply illuminate the man's mind by himself? Why use Philip? Because, as we learned at the outset of Acts, it was always God's intention to use his people and their witness in the salvation of the world; to give them a share in this greatest work!

What we learn here is that God himself is an evangelistic entrepreneur, always looking for the next opportunity, *always eager to put together an unbeliever with a Christian witness*. All he requires of us is a willingness to bear our witness to Jesus. And ever since that is what Christians have been: pioneering witnesses, thinking up ever new ways to tell others about Christ: from those who preached in the streets to find unbelievers who would never come to church and who perhaps had no Christian acquaintances – such as the mass evangelism in Samaria of which we read in the previous paragraph –, to those cultivate a single friend as a potential believer in Jesus, as Philip did here. From those who wrote gospel tracts for widespread distribution, like the tract that a friend of my parents, Tim Pietsch, a missionary in Japan after the Second World War, standing on a Tokyo railroad station platform, handed unaware to Mitsuo Fuchida, the lead pilot on the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the reading of which tract made Fuchida a Christian and, eventually, a Christian minister and evangelist. Or think of the wealthy friends of John Newton – we are going to sing in a few minutes, Newton's *Amazing Grace*. Newton had lots of wealthy friends and what they would do was to invite their friends to sumptuous dinners, the kind of dinner invitation you would never refuse if you were a member of that part of the British class system, and, perhaps unbeknownst to the guests, perhaps not, at that dinner John Newton would be asked to give a talk on the Christian faith to those people sitting at that sumptuous table. Or think of all the lunch time Bible studies being held in various cities around the country where people are being invited to become acquainted with the Bible and the good news. And on and on. Through the ages Christians have thought of so many different ways, in effect, to get a Philip next to an Ethiopian eunuch for a conversation about Jesus Christ and salvation.

That is our calling from God, and Luke is reminding us of that fact in this memorable passage: to take every opportunity to tell others of what we have learned ourselves about Jesus Christ and salvation. That is all we are asked to do. We don't have to rewrite the message, we have simply to tell others what we have learned of Christ. We need do nothing more, but the Lord would have us do that!

Many years ago I came across this piece of Winston Churchill's biography. His parents, if you know Churchill's story, were not particularly devoted to their son's heart and life. His father's political career, their extra-marital affairs, the unending round of parties, the preoccupations of upper-crust British life consumed most of their time and there was little left for a boy who craved his parents' attention but rarely received it. Churchill was raised by his nanny, a Mrs. Everest, whom from an early age he called "Woom." It was Mrs. Everest who provided what his

parents did not: the warm affection and the sympathy, understanding, and unfailing attention that a child requires. The years passed and the time came for Winston to leave home for boarding school. Listen to Churchill's biographer William Manchester tell what happened next.

“Public-school boys – that would be in our nomenclature private school boys – then were ashamed of their nannies. They would no sooner have invited one to Harrow than an upper-class American boy today would bring his teddy bear to his boarding school. Winston not only asked Woom to come; he paraded his old nurse, immensely fat and all smiles, down High Street, and then unashamedly kissed her in full view of his classmates. One of them was Seely, who later became a cabinet colleague of Winston's and won the DSO in France. Seely, the war hero, called that kiss “one of the bravest acts I have ever seen.” [*Last Lion*, 156-157]

What Churchill was doing, you see, was bearing witness; witness to what his nanny had done for him and meant to him. Well, that is our calling, yours and mine. That is what we have been asked to do; just that: to kiss the Lord Jesus in the High Street, to wear our affection for him and loyalty to him on our sleeve, and always to be ready to seize an opportunity to commend him to others. You don't have to be smart or well-read or a practiced speaker to do that. You don't have to be clever at repartee or know backwards and forwards the arguments for the existence of God or replies to all the typical objections that unbelievers raise. You have only to be a Christian with a grateful heart and a desire to see others saved as you have been saved. God will do the rest. But, remember, Winston was the only one who kissed his nanny in the High Street. Most boys, no matter what they owed to their nannies, perhaps no matter that they wished they had had the courage to do the same thing, were too ashamed, too afraid of what others might think to do the same. True enough, sometimes silence is golden, but often enough it's just plain yellow!

So, picture this scene in your mind's eye. Philip seeing the man approaching in his chariot, perhaps a much more impressive looking man than Philip himself, perhaps rather obviously wealthy and important in a way that Philip was not. Certainly a man of that stature was not traveling alone; he would have had servants, at least a small entourage. As he draws nearer Philip can hear what the man is reading. He must have realized in a moment that he had been brought to this exact point for no other purpose but to talk to this man. And he must have been beside himself with relief to know that the man happened to be reading Isaiah 53! Right in Philip's wheelhouse! But it was still Philip's good sense that prompted him to ask the Ethiopian: “Do you understand what you are reading?” And from there came the conversation that changed the man's life forever.

Now it won't usually be like that for us, to be sure. But if we are prayerful for opportunities, if we are ready and willing to take advantage of the situations we encounter in conversation with others, if we're willing to ask the question, there will be more than enough occasions for us to kiss the Lord in the High Street and to bear our witness to him as the world's savior and Lord. So, take Philip as your inspiration. Ask the Lord to make you what Philip was and to give you opportunities like he gave to him.

Lord, lay some soul upon my heart and love that soul through me.
And may I nobly do my part, to win that soul for thee.

And when I come to the beautiful city, and the saved all around
me appear,
I want to hear somebody tell me: It was you who invited me
here.