



## The Acts

### ***Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch***

**Acts 8:25-40**

After the episode recorded in the first part of this chapter, Peter and John stay in this city of Samaria for an apparently short time. But, while here, they testify and speak the word of the Lord. They then return to Jerusalem to resume their work with the church there. They seem to take some time in going back to Jerusalem, stopping in many of the villages of the Samaritans and proclaiming the gospel.

Samaria is somewhat of a "halfway station" between the gentile world and the Jews. Notice how great the emphasis is on the preaching in the towns of Samaria so early in the history of the Christian church. The apostles are indeed following the orders Jesus gave them in Acts 1:8. Suddenly the Samaritans do not seem to have the dreaded quality which the Jews had always ascribed to them. Our Lord Himself had not hesitated to speak to a woman of Samaria (John 4). The disciples must not call unclean that which their Lord has chosen. He also has His people here.

#### **A mission in the Desert**

But, the previous verse is only the connecting link to that which follows in this chapter. We have heard of large numbers being brought to the faith: 3000 at Pentecost, 5000 some time later, but there is also room in the gospel preaching for the individual. It surely is true that the more people we are able to reach with the gospel the better; but the Lord now sends Philip on an entirely different mission. By the word of an angel he now sends him south of Jerusalem to the road leading to Gaza, one of the main cities of the Philistines in the days of David, a road which is desert. This is hardly the place in which we would look for a mission field. There were other roads which led to Gaza, but he must go to the loneliest of them. Don't object that there are no people here. God will see to that. Philip is called to be obedient to the command which he receives and he must leave the results in the hands of the Lord of the harvest. How do we find mission fields? Is it only by counting the number of people in a place or the number of prospective believers? Then Philip would not have gone to the desert road that leads to Gaza!

#### **To an "outsider"**

The godly evangelist, Philip, obeys the command he has received. On this road awaits an experience for him which he will never forget and which will have far-reaching results. Although it is a desert road, there is a carriage driving along this road. It is not a common carriage, but one which speaks of the great wealth and power of its occupant. The man who is riding this carriage is an Ethiopian, a native from one of the African countries which we now call the Sudan. The Psalmist had written: *"Ethiopia shall haste to stretch out her hands unto God"* (Psalm 68:31). How could the gospel come to such a distant land in so short a time? The Lord has His own methods. This man was a eunuch, one who was not allowed to come into the assembly of Jehovah (Deuteronomy 23:1). Yet, that is the kind of person with whom the gospel first comes into contact (cf. Isaiah 56:3-5). Besides this, here is a man of great authority under queen Candace. This seems to have been the name of all the queens of Ethiopia as Pharaoh was the name of every ruler in Egypt. He was the finance minister of Candace, which may mean that he controlled her fortune or that he controlled all monetary affairs of the land, because these two things were often not differentiated. At least, here is a man of great wealth, of high position and of great ability. When Ethiopia stretched forth her hand to God, she did it by means of a man of stature.

## **Through the Bible**

This man had been in Jerusalem to worship. He was not a Jew, but he was a proselyte. He had come to the knowledge of the Jewish religion and had accepted it. It was worth a long trip to Jerusalem for him. He did this even though he was not allowed in the sacred places! Again, to show that he was a man of means, he had his own scroll of at least one of the books of the Old Testament! He was reading the prophecy of Isaiah. Had he already read Isaiah 56:3 "...neither let the eunuch say, *Behold I am a dry tree?*" This would have spoken to his heart. He is reading aloud.

The Spirit (note: not an angel) now tells Philip to join himself to this chariot. No doubt it means, come close to the carriage so that you will be able to talk to the occupant. Philip can hear the man read from the book of Isaiah in the Greek language. We have here a rather strange situation. This simple evangelist, on foot, catching up with and then trying to keep up with this chariot, this elegant carriage, and seeking to strike up a conversation with the man in the carriage. How do you approach such a person? But, the opening is evident. Philip is acquainted with the words which he hears this man read. The question is: does he understand what he is reading? That is exactly the question which Philip asks him. The answer is blunt if not brusque. He readily admits that he does not understand the words he is reading. How can I understand, he asks, unless someone shall guide me? He is not too proud to receive instruction from a man who seems to be far inferior to him in many ways. He asks Philip to come and ride with him in this beautiful carriage! They are both going the same way!

## **Prophecy leads to Christ**

There could have been many passages in Isaiah's prophecy which this man would not understand but which also would not give Philip the opportunity to bring Jesus Christ into the picture as well as this one does. He is reading from the 53rd chapter of Isaiah about the suffering servant of Jehovah. Is the prophet speaking about himself or is he speaking about someone else? This is a good question. It is the kind of question every thinking man would ask who was not acquainted with the New Testament. The Old Testament is a conundrum unless we have the key of the New Testament. The Jews of today still ask the same question as this Ethiopian Eunuch does and believe they have the answer when they say that the prophet is speaking of himself!

## **Christ crucified**

We are here dealing with the heart of the gospel. The One of whom the prophet speaks was "*led as a sheep to the slaughter.*" By this death he has accomplished a great deal. Thereby the humiliation is taken away and who will be able to measure the full effect of His sacrifice?

Not only the Jews but also many of the Biblical critics conclude that the prophet could only speak of himself. He had suffered a great deal and sought to bear it as well as possible. Is this all there is to it?

Despite the enormous economic differences between the two, the Eunuch has invited the right man to come to sit next to him. No doubt this Ethiopian has brought sacrifices and gifts to Jerusalem. He is about to hear of the greatest sacrifice ever made and the greatest gift ever given. The text offers a beautiful opening for Philip to preach Jesus to him. Jesus is the one of whom the prophet is speaking! The gospel has come. All the prophecies of the Old Testament have taken on new meaning. We must not conclude that the whole conversation of Philip with this Ethiopian is recorded here. Believing the gospel would take much more than the few words which are here recorded. All of the gospel preaching Philip did on that day to this Ethiopian can be reduced to this: he preached to him Jesus! What more is there? This includes all that the Savior has come to do and it says Who He is. Only upon the true preaching of the whole counsel of God is faith instilled in the hearts of those who hear it. Philip starts with the passage from Isaiah 53 which the man was reading, but he does not limit himself to this particular section. This Ethiopian hears the whole gospel, and the whole Old Testament comes to stand in a new light.

## **Baptism**

This is also borne out in what follows. Although it is a desert way, they come to a place where there is water. Philip must have told him about baptism! This is what this man wants. He wants to be a member of the body of Jesus Christ. He asks why he should not be baptized right now! Isn't this a little too soon? Verse 37 is not found in the best manuscripts and is therefore also omitted from most of our English versions. Let it be omitted! It makes very little difference. Very likely it was found on the margin of old manuscripts and so later found its way into the text itself. But, the thought of the words found in verse 37 is clearly true. Philip does not object to the baptism of this man. He must have received a clear profession of his faith before he would do this. Note: the Apostles did not have to be called to administer baptism to this individual as they had been called to give the Holy Spirit to the Samaritans who believed, as is recorded in the first part of this chapter. Both Philip and the Ethiopian enter the water and Philip baptizes him.

The Spirit then removes Philip from that place. We are not told how, but we are reminded of the way in which the Lord moved Elijah from one place to another. Then we read something very strange: *"and the eunuch saw him no more, for he went on his way rejoicing."* That is the reason he didn't see him anymore! He wasn't looking for him! He had a joy like he never had before. This was enough for him. This man can go back to his own country and spread the good news of salvation there. When Ethiopia stretches out her hand unto God, her hands are filled. This man has found his Lord. The gospel preacher may have gone; Jesus remains with him.

Philip is next found in Azotus, the old city of Ashdod, also a city of the Philistines in the time of David. This is not the place where he is to stay but he passes through the land until he comes to Caesarea. That is the place where we will meet him later. Wherever he goes, he, of course, preaches the gospel. What have these enemies of the cross done! They have been instrumental in sowing the seed of the gospel everywhere.

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### **Questions for discussion:**

1. What is the significance of the fact that this deacon, Philip, was used more as an evangelist than as a deacon?
2. What should guide us in picking a mission field?
3. How could a man from Ethiopia be acquainted with the religion of Israel?
4. Do we often read whole chapters of the prophets without knowing or understanding what we are reading? What should be done about this?
5. When should an adult be baptized? Do we wait too long or do we often admit one too quickly?
6. Is there much significance in the absence of verse 37 in some texts?
7. Could the gospel have spread so fast without persecution?