

The Way of the Spirit

I. Introduction

- A. The Christian life is repeatedly described in Acts as “the Way.” Before believers were commonly called Christians, they were known as people who belonged to the Way. That theme begins emerging here. An angel sends Philip to the road—the *hodos*—leading from Jerusalem to Gaza. On that road, Philip meets a man who asks for someone to guide him—to show him the way—through the Scriptures. Philip begins with Isaiah and leads him to Jesus. In the following chapter, Saul will pursue the people of “the Way,” only to be confronted by Jesus on the way to Damascus. Luke is showing us that the gospel is more than a set of ideas to believe. It is a way along which the Spirit leads us—and that way always leads to Jesus.

II. The Way of the Spirit

A. The Spirit sends us along unexpected roads.

1. The mission Jesus gave his Church was to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus commands his disciples to make disciples of all nations. In Acts 1:8, he tells them that they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Acts 8 shows this mission beginning to unfold.
2. Last week, we saw Philip travel to Samaria, where many believed in Jesus. Verse 25 tells us that after this, “they”—presumably Peter and John—began returning to Jerusalem. Philip, however, is given different instructions. An angel of the Lord tells him, “Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” Luke then adds, “This is a desert place.” The road south from Jerusalem led toward Gaza, the last place to find water before entering the desert on the way to Egypt.¹
 - a) It does not sound like a promising ministry assignment. Philip is sent away from the other disciples, away from home and familiarity, and away

¹ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, 43 vols., *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, ed. David Dockery (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Publishing Group, 1992), 223.

from the visible fruit he has just witnessed in Samaria. He is told to leave a thriving work among crowds and walk down an isolated desert road. The word translated “south” can also mean “at noon,” raising the possibility that Philip is being told to travel through the desert during the hottest and least hospitable part of the day. Either way, the command seems strange: go to an unlikely place at an unlikely time, apparently without being told why.

3. Yet Philip obeys. And on that desert road, he encounters an Ethiopian eunuch traveling home from Jerusalem. To Philip, this may have seemed like a surprising encounter; within God’s mission, however, it was deeply purposeful. Ancient writers commonly described Ethiopia as lying at “the ends of the earth.” With the gospel reaching the Samaritans and now an Ethiopian, the geographic movement Jesus described in Acts 1:8 is already taking shape.²
4. The desert road was not a detour from the mission—it was where the Spirit was advancing the mission. Places that appear empty, inconvenient, or unpromising to us may be precisely where God intends to work. The Spirit often leads us away from what seems fruitful and familiar so that the gospel can reach people we would otherwise never encounter.
5. **Reflection Question:** What unfamiliar or inconvenient “desert road” might the Spirit be inviting you to walk—and what reluctance is keeping you from going?

B. The Spirit is at work before we arrive.

1. The mission of the church is directed by the Spirit.
2. By the time Philip arrives on the desert road, God has already been at work in the Ethiopian eunuch’s life. This man has been seeking God, long before Philip arrived on the scene. The eunuch has traveled nearly fifteen hundred miles from Ethiopia—ancient Cush, in the region of modern-day Sudan—to worship in Jerusalem. Yet because of his condition as a eunuch (Deut. 23:1),

² Ajith Fernando, *Acts, The Niv Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998), 283.

his participation in Israel's worship would have been limited. He has come seeking God, but he remains on the margins.³

3. Still, he does not abandon his search. On the journey home, he is reading from his own copy of Isaiah and wrestling with Isaiah 53. He has traveled a great distance, worshiped as fully as he was permitted, and opened the Scriptures with a desire to understand. He does not yet know who the passage is about, but God is already at work to reveal the meaning of the text. God has sent Philip to the right place, at the right time, to the right person.
 - a) Theologically, we refer to this as **providence**: "The doctrine of providence teaches Christians that they are never in the grip of blind forces—fortune, chance, luck, or fate. All that happens to them is divinely planned, and each event comes as a new summons to trust, obey, and rejoice, knowing that all is for one's spiritual and eternal good."⁴ This encounter is not due to chance, luck, or fate—but rather providence—God has orchestrated this moment.
 - b) This conviction is part of our philosophy of ministry at RVF. We begin with the presupposition that God is already at work. He is present in a situation before we enter it and active in a person's life before we meet them. The church's mission, therefore, is not something we initiate and then ask the Spirit to bless. The mission belongs to God and is directed by his Spirit.
4. Our role is to follow his lead—to listen, pay attention, and learn to recognize the places and ways he is working. We must resist the temptation to "use" the Spirit to accomplish what we have already decided is important. We do not force our agenda onto people or situations. We discern what God is

³ David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. ; Apollos, 2009), 292-94.

⁴ J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology : A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1993), 56.

doing, come alongside his work, and faithfully participate in it. The Spirit goes before us; our calling is to pay attention and follow.

5. Reflection Question: Where might the Spirit already be at work around you, and how can you come alongside what he is doing rather than imposing your own agenda?

C. The Spirit guides us through Scripture to Jesus.

1. When Philip approaches the chariot, he hears the Ethiopian official reading from the prophet Isaiah: “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.” —Acts 8:32–33
2. The Spirit has brought Philip alongside this man at the precise moment he is reading from Isaiah 53—the passage describing the suffering Servant of God (Isaiah 52:13-53:12).
 - a) 52:13-15—the Servant’s suffering and exaltation will benefit many nations.
 - b) 53:1-6—details the suffering and rejection, the punishment by God was for our transgressions.
 - c) 53:7-9—The Servant was willing to suffer and experience injustice.
 - d) 53:10-12—It was God’s intention to make his life ‘an offering for our sin’, to justify many, and bear their iniquities.
3. The Spirit who inspired the Scriptures is now using those Scriptures to lead this man toward Jesus.
4. Philip begins with a simple question: “Do you understand what you are reading?” The official responds, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” He recognizes that reading the words is not the same as understanding their meaning. He needs someone to guide him.
 - a) This is one of the essential roles Christians play in the work of the Spirit: we come alongside people, listen to their questions, and help them understand how the Scriptures point to Jesus.

5. The official then asks the central question: “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” Verse 35 tells us, “Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.” Philip starts where the man is, but he does not leave him there. He guides him from the text to Jesus.
 - a) Isaiah 53 gave Philip a clear path for proclaiming the gospel. Jesus himself, as well as the NT writers often connect the Suffering Servant of Isaiah to Jesus himself (cf. Mark 10:45; Lk. 22:37; Jn. 12:38; Rom. 10:16; 1 Peter 2:21-25).
 - b) Jesus is the suffering Servant who was rejected and subjected to injustice. He willingly gave himself as an offering for sin, bore our transgressions, and died in our place. Yet suffering and death did not have the final word: God vindicated and exalted him through his victorious resurrection.
 - (1) Jesus is not merely one subject among many that we proclaim. He is the heart of our message and the One we want people to encounter. John Wesley expressed it, “We must offer them Christ.”
 - c) Something to note—this was particularly good news for this man. As both a foreigner and a eunuch, he may have experienced exclusion during his visit to Jerusalem.⁵ Yet only a few chapters beyond the passage he was reading, Isaiah records God’s promise to eunuchs and foreigners “I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.”—Isaiah 56:5
 - (1) The man who may not have been fully welcomed at the temple is now welcomed by Jesus, the One in whom everything the temple anticipated has been fulfilled. The one who feared being a “dry tree” is given a place in God’s family and an everlasting name. This was not

⁵ Polhill, 224.

good news merely in the abstract; it was good news specifically for him.⁶

6. This encounter also gives us a picture of personal evangelism. Philip does not begin with a rehearsed speech. He listens, waits for an opening, and asks a well-timed question. He begins with what the man is already reading and the questions he is already asking—but he faithfully guides him to Jesus. We must know the Scriptures well enough to meet people where they are and then help them see where the whole story leads. Our message is Jesus: who he is, what he has done, and the welcome he extends to those who have felt excluded and far from God.
7. Reflection question: When someone opens the door to a spiritual conversation, am I prepared to meet them where they are and guide them through Scripture to Jesus?

D. The Spirit leads us into faithful obedience.

1. Throughout this passage, Philip demonstrates a pattern of sensitivity to the Spirit and immediate obedience. He goes in a difficult and counterintuitive direction, leaving a fruitful ministry in Samaria for a deserted road. He approaches the person the Spirit identifies, speaks when the opportunity is given, baptizes the Ethiopian when he professes faith, and then continues proclaiming the gospel when he arrives in Azotus. Philip does not need to understand the whole plan before taking the next step. He simply listens and responds to what God places before him.
2. The Ethiopian official also responds in obedience. He has traveled a considerable distance to worship, he is searching the Scriptures, and he humbly acknowledges his need for guidance. When Philip explains the good news of Jesus, the official does not treat it merely as interesting information. Seeing water along the road, he asks, “What prevents me from being baptized?” The gospel calls for a response, and baptism becomes his

⁶ Dean Pinter, Tremper Longman, and Scot McKnight, *Acts, The Story of God Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2019), 213.

immediate, public identification with Jesus and his people. He receives the good news and acts upon it.

3. Both men demonstrate the same pattern: sensitivity to the Spirit followed by immediate obedience. Philip obeys by going, speaking, and continuing to proclaim. The Ethiopian obeys by believing and being baptized. Neither man is given every detail of what comes next, but each faithfully responds to what God has made clear.

- a) This is what Paul later describes in Galatians 5 as walking by the Spirit, being led by the Spirit, and keeping in step with the Spirit. Keeping in step means allowing the Spirit to determine both the direction and the pace of our lives. We do not run ahead of him, and we do not remain behind when he calls us forward. The way of the Spirit is traveled one faithful act of obedience at a time.
- b) God may not reveal the entire road ahead of us. He often gives us only the next step: go to this place, approach this person, begin this conversation, receive this truth, or publicly identify yourself with Jesus. The question is not whether we can see the whole journey. The question is whether we will obey what the Spirit has already made clear.

4. Reflection question: What step of obedience has the Spirit already made clear that I have been delaying?

III. Closing Thoughts

- A. The way of the Spirit is not always predictable, but it always leads toward the purposes of God and the person of Jesus. Our calling is to remain attentive and obedient—to go where the Spirit sends, recognize where he is already working, guide people toward Jesus, and take the next step he places before us. We may not see the entire road, but we can trust the One who leads us along it.

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