



Philip ... the Evangelist

Acts 8

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PHILIP ... THE EVANGELIST

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A young guy in his late twenties came to our church in Austin. He was confused about his direction in life and needed someone to talk to. So I offered to meet with him. One meeting turned into a dozen meetings. When we talked about his marital problems, I had to be a counselor. When he asked for career advice, I had to be a father. When he asked me spiritual questions, I had to be a pastor. But mostly, I was just a friend. After a lot of time, a lot of talking, and a lot of lunches, he accepted Christ. Jesus was the answer to all the issues he had, and all it took was me being a friend.

Friendship is so often the key that opens a person's heart to the Gospel. When historian Michael Green wrote about the spread of the Gospel in the 1st and 2nd centuries, he wrote a lot about friendship.¹ Jesus befriended Andrew. Andrew told Peter. Peter told Cornelius. Ananias told Saul. Pantaenus told Clement. Justin told Tatian. Felix told Octavius. Origen told Gregory. Philip told an Ethiopian, and the Ethiopian told his queen and his country about Jesus.

The book of Acts records the birth of the Church and the thirty-year period following the resurrection of Jesus. The book is filled with dramatic events and incredible stories of faith. Those who were there heard His teaching and witnessed His miracles. They saw Him die and they saw Him alive again. They believed Jesus was the Son of God. They were convinced it was true. They were compelled to talk about it. And they were courageous to take a stand. They are our mentors and there is so much we can learn from them.

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian is recorded in Acts 8. There are several lessons we can learn from their conversation about sharing our faith. Most important is *letting the Spirit lead us and give us the words to say*.

THE LIFE OF PHILIP

The number one excuse for not sharing our faith is fear. We're afraid of not knowing what to say or afraid of being ridiculed. But the greatest evangelist in the New Testament had more to fear than any of us.

Following the stoning of Stephen, "a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem" (Acts 8:2, NIV). Christians were dragged from their homes and thrown into prison. They were threatened and even beaten. Acts 8 says they "scattered" in every direction. Families were on the run dragging their children behind them.

One of these men was Philip.² And yes, he was afraid, because he had seen his good friend Stephen stoned to death. To us, it's a story with black letters on a white page. For Philip, his friend's body was lying in the dirt covered with blood. We fear we might offend someone. Philip feared he might be stoned to death. The greatest evangelist in the New Testament had more to fear than any of us.

Acts 8 says, “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said ... and they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 8:4-6, 12, NIV).³

Something deep within Philip allowed him to face persecution and keep preaching anyway. What was it? The resurrection! The resurrection proves that Jesus is the Son of God and that everything He said is true. Just like Peter and John and Stephen, Philip was convinced it was true, he was compelled to talk about it, and he was courageous to take a stand.

LESSONS FROM PHILIP

Acts 2, 3, and 4 record public speeches by Peter. Acts 7 is Stephen’s public sermon which provoked his stoning. Acts 8 is the one-on-one conversation between Philip and the Ethiopian, and there are several lessons we can learn from their conversation about sharing our faith.

Lesson #1 – Make up your mind to live life on mission. Threatened by persecution, Philip fled to Samaria and “began proclaiming Christ” (Acts 8:5, NIV). Acts 8 says he traveled about “preaching the Gospel to many villages” and “he preached Jesus” (Acts 8:25, 35, NIV).

Philip knew what he believed, he knew what he would die for, and he made up his mind what he was going to live for. Philip made up his mind to live his life on mission. And that’s a decision each of us must make. To go beyond attending church or attending Bible study to living life on mission and telling others about Jesus.

Jesus calls us “fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19). He said, “You shall be My witnesses” (Acts 1:8). Paul told Timothy, “Do the work of an evangelist” (2 Timothy 4:5). Paul said, “We are ambassadors for Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:20). That’s our calling. That’s our job description. Every one of us has the responsibility, and the privilege, to testify to the reality of Jesus in our lives. So, if we believe the Gospel is true, then we must make up our minds to live life on mission.

Lesson #2 – Respond to the Spirit’s leading. “An angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Go south to the desert road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ And he got up and went” (Acts 8:26-27, NIV). In Samaria, God used Philip to lead hundreds to Christ. Now, an angel directed him to a desert road. It didn’t make sense to leave such a fruitful place, but Philip listened to the angel. “He got up and he went.”

Paul reminds us of this when he said, “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25, NIV).⁴ That’s the key to sharing our faith. “Keep in step with the Spirit.” Let the Holy Spirit guide you and prompt you. It could be in a restaurant, in your neighborhood, at the office, or at a party, and you sense God prompting you to walk over to someone and start a conversation. We must be ready and willing to respond to the Spirit’s leading.

Lesson #3 – Look for opportunities and look for the person God is guiding you to talk to. “On his way Philip met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury

of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, ‘Go to that chariot and stay near it’” (Acts 8:27-29, NIV).⁵

The meeting between Philip and the Ethiopian, along a dusty desert road, was a divine appointment. God arranges divine appointments all the time and places non-believers in our path. We must be alert and see the opportunity and listen to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

At business functions, an African-American Muslim man was often left standing alone in his predominately white profession. But at one function, there was an exception, when another man “walked across the room, stuck out his hand, and introduced himself.”⁶ This friendly man was a white Christian. The two talked about business, about their families, and had a normal conversation. And surprisingly, the Christian asked the Muslim to explain his faith. The Christian listened with respect, and later the Muslim listened with respect as the Christian explained his faith. A friendship developed that night. Working in the same profession, their paths crossed several times, and there were more functions and more conversations. And months later, while alone in his home, the Muslim man accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior. And it was because a believer in Christ sensed a divine appointment and simply walked across the room and began a conversation.

Jesus said, “Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest” (John 4:35, NIV). Jesus said people are ready. So look for opportunities. Look for the person God is guiding you to talk to.

Lesson #4 – Initiate the conversation by asking questions. “Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ Philip asked” (Acts 8:30, NIV). There are good questions and there are bad questions. Don’t start by asking “Have you been washed in the blood?” or “Are you prepared for the Great White Throne judgment?” There are better questions than those. But why ask questions? Questions show you are interested. Genuine questions are non-threatening. And questions give insight into what a person thinks so you know how to steer the conversation.

When I meet someone, I usually ask, “So, what do you do for a living?” Then they ask me what I do. When I tell them I’m a pastor, they run away. Not really. I purposely ask questions to show interest in them. I ask questions about their job and their family, and I talk about sports and the weather. Then I will come back around and say, “What kind of church background did you have?” And depending on their response, I might ask, “Was that experience positive for you?” If not, I might ask, “What turned you off from religion?” or “So what do you believe now?” I might say, “Well, at our church, we believe ... Have you ever thought about it that way?” And then I might offer, “I’ve really enjoyed talking with you. Would you be open to getting together to talk about this some more?”

Asking questions shows you are genuinely interested. And asking questions forces you to listen. Listening is the greatest form of love. Listen to their story. Listen to their beliefs. Listen to their heart. Listening will help you determine if you need to build a “head bridge” or a “heart bridge.”⁷ Asking questions will help steer the conversation to the Gospel.

Lesson #5 – Just sit down and talk to people. When Philip asked if he understood what he was reading, the Ethiopian said, “How can I, unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him” (Acts 8:31, NIV).

I love snapshots in the Bible. “He invited Philip to come up and sit with him.” We can visualize the Ethiopian reaching down and helping Philip into the chariot. We can imagine them squeezing together on the chariot bench. We can imagine them reading the scroll as the chariot bounced along the road. I love how this verse simply says Philip sat with him.

Just sit down and talk to people. It’s about two people talking. Showing interest, being a friend. Asking questions, answering questions. The Ethiopian admitted what is true of every non-believer. “How can I understand unless someone explains it to me?” Every non-believer needs someone who will sit down and explain it to them.

Lesson #6 – Open your mouth and say something. Don’t miss the simplicity of this. “Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him” (Acts 8:35, NAS). I believe it’s a cop-out to say, “I share my faith by the way I live.” Yes, God is honored when we live good lives. But no one becomes a Christian by observing how good you are. The Gospel requires words. “Philip opened his mouth.”

When God called Moses to confront Pharaoh and demand the Hebrews be released from Egyptian slavery, Moses begged the Lord, “Please, don’t send me. I’m not eloquent. I wouldn’t know what to say. I get tongue-tied. Please Lord, not me.” But the Lord said, “Who has made man’s mouth? ... Is it not I, the Lord? Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say” (Exodus 4:11-12, NAS). And He will do the same for us. Just open your mouth and He will give you the words to say.

Lesson #7 – Focus on Jesus. “Philip ... preached Jesus to him” (Acts 8:35, NAS).⁸

Non-believers are going to challenge you. They are going to complain about hypocrites in the church. They are going to complain about religion in politics. They are going to challenge your belief in creation. They are going to call you homophobic and narrow-minded. And you need to be ready to respond. But most important, focus on Jesus. I believe it’s the love of Jesus, the sacrifice of Jesus, the forgiveness of Jesus that eventually melts a person’s heart and makes all those other issues fade away.

Acts 8 says, “The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture (from Isaiah 53), ‘He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth’ ... Then the eunuch asked Philip, ‘Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?’” (Acts 8:32-34, NIV).⁹ Isaiah 53 is about the Messiah, it’s about Jesus. And Philip told him about Jesus.

Tell people about Jesus.¹⁰ Tell them how much He loves them. Tell them that no matter what they have done Jesus is willing to forgive them of everything they have ever done wrong. Tell them that He sacrificed His life on the cross for them, that He paid the penalty for their sin. Tell them that “there is salvation in no one else” (Acts 4:12, NAS). Tell them that Jesus is “the

way, and the truth, and the life,” and that no one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6, NAS).

The 2nd century bishop and historian Irenaeus wrote about the Ethiopian 100 years later. Names him Simeon Bachos, and writes, “This man went into the regions of Ethiopia, to preach what he had himself believed.”¹¹ History shows he was the first convert in Africa and that the Gospel spread through him. Why? Because Philip was looking for opportunities. Because Philip responded to the Holy Spirit’s leading. Because Philip sat with him. Because Philip opened his mouth. Because Philip focused on Jesus.

Back to Lesson #1 – *Make up your mind to live your life on mission*. After baptizing the Ethiopian, the Bible says, “The Lord snatched Philip away ... and Philip found himself at Azotus ... and he kept preaching the Gospel to all the cities” (Acts 8:39-40, NAS).¹² Earlier in Acts 8, what was Philip doing? Preaching the Gospel. When he met the Ethiopian, what did Philip do? He shared the Gospel. After this divine appointment with the Ethiopian, what did Philip do? He “kept preaching the Gospel to all the cities” (Acts 8:40, NAS). And twenty years later, the Bible refers to him as “Philip the evangelist.”¹³

Philip knew what he believed, he knew what he would die for, and he made up his mind what he was going to live for. Philip made up his mind to live his life on mission. And that’s a decision each of us must make. We can learn a lot from Philip, and I hope you will pray through these lessons until they become a way of life.

In his research on the early church, historian Michael Green describes the passion of the early Christians. “They were passionately convinced of the truth of the Gospel. They were persuaded that men and women were lost without it. (The Gospel was) the key to eternal life, without which they would perish. They shared in God’s love (and wanted) to pour it out on a needy world. They (embraced) the Great Commission. They sought to penetrate society with the Gospel which had such a profound effect upon them ... It affected everything they did and everyone they met ... In the early days, the quality of their lives was *blazingly distinct*.”¹⁴

What motivated them? One, their *sense of gratitude*. Michael Green writes, “They did it because of the overwhelming experience of the love of God which they had received through Jesus Christ.”¹⁵ What motivated them? Their *sense of responsibility*. Green writes, “They lived their lives under the eye of God, and they were determined to please him in all they did.”¹⁶ They were motivated by their *sense of concern*. They lived with an “awareness of the peril of those without Christ ... They really believed that those without Christ would suffer eternal loss, and this thought drove them to reach others with the Gospel.”¹⁷ Michael Green ends his book declaring evangelism as “the Church’s first priority. Evangelism was the very lifeblood of the early Christians, and so we find (in Acts 2:47), that ‘day by day the Lord was adding to their number those who were being saved.’”¹⁸

CONCLUSION

May it be true of us as it was true of Peter and John and Stephen and Philip. They were convinced it was true, they were compelled to talk about it, and they were courageous to take a stand.

In his final words to the Colossians, Paul said, “Pray that God may open a door for the message ... Proclaim it clearly ... Be wise in how you act toward outsiders. Make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Colossians 4:3-6, paraphrase).

Our simple, passionate prayer should be, “Lord, give me an opportunity and give me the words to say.”

The question is – who? Who are you praying for? Who do you know and love and care about that needs Jesus? Who is God leading you to talk to? Who?

Again, a simple prayer. “Lord, please open the door for me to speak to _____. Give me an opportunity and give me the words to say. And may the Holy Spirit convict them of their need and convince them of the truth. As You open the door, may I open my mouth, and may You open their heart.”

NOTES

¹ Michael Green records several stories of personal evangelism in his book *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970, 2003).

² “Philip the evangelist” (Acts 8:5, 21:8) is not to be confused with Philip the apostle (John 1:45). He was one of the seven men chosen to serve the Greek widows, highly respected and spiritually mature (Acts 6:1-5). Twenty years later, Paul and his team lodged at Philip’s house, along with his four daughters (Acts 21:8-9).

³ See Bock, pages 324-326, on the background of the Samaritans. Who were a bi-racial, bi-religious people despised by the Jews. John makes this note, “For Jews do not associate with Samaritans” (John 4:9, NIV). Yet, Philip’s heart was opened to the Samaritans, and he preached the Gospel to this despised people. The movement of God caught the attention of Peter and John, who came to see for themselves and who helped the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit.

⁴ See also Romans 8:14.

⁵ This man was an Ethiopian, an African, a foreigner. He was a highly trusted official of Queen Candace of Ethiopia, in charge of the royal treasury. He must have been personally rich because he owned his own scroll of Isaiah. He was also a eunuch, a castrated man in the queen’s service, and eunuchs not allowed to fully participate in Jewish religious life because of their deformity. There were regulations regarding eunuchs in Deuteronomy 23:1. “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.” Yet, this man had been to Jerusalem to worship. In other words, he was searching for the truth, he was seeking God.

⁶ Bill Hybels, *Just Walk Across the Room* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), page 23.

⁷ Norman Geisler and David Geisler, *Conversational Evangelism* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2009), page 111.

⁸ In this divine appointment, Philip explained that Isaiah’s prophecy was talking about Jesus. Then the Ethiopian said, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?” And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him” (Acts 8:36-38, NAS). The NASB 1995 includes verse 37, while some versions do not. The reason is because Greek manuscripts from the 9th-12th centuries include verse 37, while most older manuscripts, dating back to the 2nd century, do not include verse 37. So, the consensus of scholarship is that verse 37 was not in the earliest manuscripts of Acts. This is one of a few copyist issues that exist through the generations, none of which alter the meaning of the text. However, the point of verse 37 is consistent with the rest of the New Testament. Belief before baptism. Baptism does not make someone a Christian, faith does. Baptism is symbolic, an outward sign of an inward reality. The Ethiopian’s eagerness to be baptized was not so he could be saved, but because he had been saved during that chariot ride. Acts 8:27 referred to the man as an Ethiopian and as a eunuch. He was a foreigner and a eunuch. If Philip explained Isaiah 53 to him, it’s probable that he also explained Isaiah 56 to him. Which says, “No **foreigner** who becomes a follower of the Lord should say, ‘The Lord will certainly exclude me from his people.’ The **eunuch** should not say, ‘Look, I am like a dried-up tree.’ For this is what the Lord says, “For the **eunuchs** who observe my Sabbaths and choose what pleases me and are faithful to my covenant, I will set up within my temple and my walls a monument (to them) that will be better than that of sons and daughters ... As for **foreigners** who become followers of the Lord and serve him, who love the name of the Lord and want to be his servants ... I will bring them to my holy mountain. I will make them happy in the temple where people pray to me. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar ...” (Isaiah 56:3-8, NET). When the Ethiopian read that, he would have surely said, “That’s me! God accepts me!”

⁹ John referred to Jesus as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29, ESV).

¹⁰ Paul said, “I know nothing except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2).

¹¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III.12.8. Irenaeus writes about the Ethiopian, “This man (Simeon Bachos the Eunuch) was also sent into the regions of Ethiopia, to preach what he had himself believed, that there was one God preached by the prophets, but that the Son of this God had already made His appearance in human flesh, and had been led as a sheep to the slaughter, and all the other statements which the prophets made regarding Him.”

¹² The Greek word for “snatched” is ἀρπάζω (harpazo). It’s sudden, even violent. This word is also used to describe the rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

¹³ See Acts 21:8.

¹⁴ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970, 2003), pages 17, 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, page 274.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, page 282.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pages 293, 382.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, page 388.