

AN ETHIOPIAN ENCOUNTER

Acts 8:26-40

The book of Acts tells us the story of the spread of Christianity. It begins with a commission that is given to the apostles, but as we come to chapters 7-8, we find that the work of evangelism has spread outside the circle of the apostles.

Chapter 7	Chapter 8
Ministry of Stephen	Ministry of Philip
Stephen speaks to the synagogue of the freedmen in Jerusalem	Philip speaks to... <input type="radio"/> the Samaritans <input type="radio"/> an Ethiopian Eunuch
His ministry ends in martyrdom and leads to the persecution of the church	His ministry enjoys great success and leads many to Christ

Saul of Tarsus is seen as bookends on either side of these two sections. He is the one who is agreeing with Stephen's death at the end of chapter 6 and he is the one who is still persecuting Christians at the beginning of chapter 9.

Between these two events we are given several narratives of God's faithful messengers. In this passage, our attention is on Philip and an Ethiopian Eunuch and an encounter with the Lord.

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE LORD TAKE PLACE ON HIS TIMETABLE, NOT OUR OWN

25 And so, when they had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.

26 But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, "Arise and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert road. (Acts 8:25-26).

Philip was enjoying a thriving ministry in Samaria. There were many who were coming to know the Lord and great things were taking place. It is at this very time that Philip is told by an angel of the Lord to leave this very successful ministry and to go into the desert. Specifically, he is told to go to the desert road that goes down to Gaza.

The mention of Gaza might have been promising. Gaza was an old city, dating back to Philistine times. It was still on the trade route to Egypt although it had been destroyed and rebuilt on several occasions.

However Philip was not told to go to Gaza. He was told to go to the desert road that led to Gaza. He was told by this angel to leave his prospering ministry and to go out to a desert road in the middle of nowhere.

This brings us a question. If there was an angel of the Lord in the neighborhood, why didn't he take the gospel to this Ethiopian eunuch? It is because the commission of preaching the gospel has been given to US. Even God did it that way. His Son did not become an angel. He became a man. He became one of us. This is the incarnational principle of the gospel. It tells us that individuals are important. Philip is going to leave his congregation so that he can go and minister to a congregation of one.

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE LORD TAKE PLACE IN GOD'S PLACE

And he arose and went; and behold, there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship. (Acts 8:27).

We are introduced to a new character. He is the one to whom Philip has been sent. He is one for whom Philip will facilitate an encounter with God. This man is...

- He is from the kingdom of Ethiopia. This was a great African kingdom that lay to the south of Egypt.
- He is an educated man. We see this because he was reading the Scriptures. He knew how to read. We do not know what language he was reading. It could have been Hebrew or it could have been a translation.
- He was an important man. He was a court official to Candace. This was not a proper name, but rather a title. He was a court official to the queen of Ethiopia.

- He was a committed man. He had made a very long journey to Jerusalem to come and worship the Lord. That implies a high level of commitment. He had a burning desire to know God.
- He was an excluded man. He had come to worship at Jerusalem, but he was excluded there from the worship. He was not excluded because of his race. He was excluded because he was a eunuch. The law was specific on this point. No eunuch was to be permitted into the assembly of God's old covenant people. He had come to worship God and he came and found himself excluded from God.
- He was a lost man.

This eunuch had been to Jerusalem to worship, but he had not heard the gospel or come to know Christ during that time. It is possible to be in the vicinity of God's people and to never enter the family of God. In 1 Peter 1:10 we are urged to be all the more diligent to make certain that we are a part of God's family and not merely in the vicinity of God's people.

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE LORD TAKE PLACE THROUGH GOD'S WORD

28 And he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29 And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot."

30 And when Philip had run up, he heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" (Acts 8:28-30).

The Spirit arranged the meeting between Philip and the Ethiopian. Notice the eagerness of Philip. It is seen in the fact that he RAN up to the Ethiopian. Are you similarly showing an eagerness to share to gospel? You will if you are excited about the Lord and about His word.

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE LORD NORMALLY REQUIRE AN INTERMEDIARY

And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And

he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. (Acts 8:31).

This Ethiopian realized the need for some basic discipleship. He needed some help in understanding the Scriptures. Do you have that same hunger for understanding the Word of God? Have you gone to someone and asked for that same help that the Ethiopian requested?

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE LORD CARRY A FAMILY INVITATION

32 Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this:

*“He was led as a sheep to slaughter;
And as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
So He does not open His mouth.*

33 In humiliation His judgment was taken away;

Who shall relate His generation?

For His life is removed from the earth.” (Acts 8:32-33).

The specific section of Scripture that had caught the Ethiopian’s attention had to do with someone who died and who left open the question of His generation – that is, the question of whether he would have descendants. Why did this capture the attention of the Ethiopian? It was because he was a eunuch. He would have no succeeding generations of descendants. He looked at this passage of Scripture and he saw one with whom he could identify. This passage jumped out at him because he had also been cut off and was unable to relate any future generations.

You and I know that this Old Testament passage was a prophecy of Jesus. It pointed out the fact that Jesus died without ever having been married and fathering children. His life was removed from the earth and left open the question, *Who shall relate His generation?* Yet it is through his death and burial and resurrection that many sons have been brought into glory.

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE LORD ARE FACILITATED BY ALL OF THE SCRIPTURES

34 And the eunuch answered Philip and said, “Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself, or of someone else?” 35 And

Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. (Acts 8:34-35).

Not only this passage in Isaiah, but all of the Old Testament speaks of Jesus. Have you seen Him there? He is pictured in every sacrifice and ceremony ever described in the pages of the Older Testament.

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE LORD DEMAND A RESPONSE ON OUR PART

And as they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?"³⁷ 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."³⁸ 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).

Once the Ethiopian believed the gospel, he wanted to enter into an outward display of that faith. The initial outward display that God has ordained for today is baptism. We are called to manifest our inward faith in our outward lives.

Notice the question of the Ethiopian: *What prevents me from being baptized?* He had been prevented from going into the Temple and from worshiping the Lord there. But there was nothing to prevent him from being baptized.

My Baptist friends like to point to this passage, thinking it makes a point about baptism via immersion because it speaks of the Ethiopian going down into the water. The truth is that it speaks of both Philip and the Ethiopian going down into the water. In case you missed it, the passage adds that *Philip as well as the eunuch* went down into the water. Did this involve total immersion? Perhaps it did, but this passage does not say either way.

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE LORD RESULT IN MULTIPLICATION

³⁹ And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch saw him no more, but went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus; and as he passed

through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities, until he came to Caesarea. (Acts 8:39-40).

Philip and the Ethiopian each go their own way following this baptism. Indeed, they each go their own way with an abrupt suddenness. Philip is snatched away. The word that is used here is the same one that is used in 1 Thessalonians 4 to describe how believer will one day be “snatched away.”

Can I tell you the rest of the story? That Ethiopian eunuch went back home to Ethiopia. On his return, I am sure that he told others of his experiences. He had with him a copy of the Book of Isaiah and that would have been a valuable treasure to be passed down to ensuing generations.

Many years later, Christianity came to Ethiopia and the entire country was one of the first to convert as a country to Christianity. I like to think that it was as a result, at least in part, of the ministry of this Ethiopian eunuch. If this is the case, then it is notable that the prophecy of Isaiah goes on in the chapters following Isaiah 53 to give a promise to eunuchs.

*Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say,
“The LORD will surely separate me from His people.”
Nor let the eunuch say,
“Behold, I am a dry tree.”
4 For thus says the LORD,
“To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths,
And choose what pleases Me,
And hold fast My covenant,
5 To them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial,
And a name better than that of sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off.” (Isaiah 56:3-5).*