

A REVIVAL IN THE DESERT

Acts 8:26-39

There are three actors in this thrilling story -- the Holy Spirit, a statesman, and an evangelist. The two men were complete strangers, and in various respects were entirely different. They were separated by the wide chasms of race, and of position. From the religious standpoint one had come to radiant certainty while the other was still reaching into the encircling gloom. Nobody expected these two to meet. Least of all did they expect to meet. Yet they did meet, to their own enrichment as well as to that of countless others.

After the martyrdom of Stephen, the enemies of Christ and His followers in Jerusalem had launched a terrific campaign to exterminate all Christians. God permitted this awful persecution of His children in order that the precious seed of His Word might be sown more widely. It was very obvious that, if His message were to be delivered His messengers had to be scattered. In this case, as in many others, the overruling providence of God made persecution very beneficial to the cause of Christ. So many times persecution has promoted the very thing it sought to destroy. Everywhere the dispersed Christians went as a result of the dreadful persecution, they preached the Word of God.

Conspicuous among those faithful Christians who were scattered from Jerusalem by bitter persecution was Philip, who had an eye trained to see the things of God, an ear trained to hear the voice of God, and a soul trained to sense the presence and leadership of God, and to obey Him. To escape death Philip had fled to Samaria, where he had continued his witnessing for Christ. Instead of wasting his time and energies in a tirade against the members of the Sanhedrin who had provoked the persecution of the Christians, Philip was faithful in proclaiming the good news that Christ had been crucified on the cross, had been buried in the tomb, had been raised from the dead, and had ascended. His message was blessed abundantly by the Lord, and the people gave heed unto the things which he spake. His teachings were substantiated by the miracles which he performed upon the lame, the palsied, and those who were possessed of demons. He magnified Christ so attractively that the people were aroused, amazed, and attracted.

Many believed on Christ, were saved, and were baptized into the fellowship of the church. Consequently, there was much rejoicing in the blessings of the Lord. What a joy it is to see a layman who loves the Lord enough to introduce the lost to Christ!

Just when Philip's soul-winning efforts were most successful and the prospects for the immediate future looked most promising, the Lord called him to go elsewhere. Suddenly and unexpectedly he was commanded to abandon his work and go south to a desert. From the human point of view, this did not appear to be a wise thing to do. Since Philip was in the midst of a successful and sweeping revival in the city, why should he leave and go to a desert where there was no prospect of success? This incident reminds us of the great truth that God's ways and man's ideas do not always coincide, but God always knows best and never makes a mistake.

Without a word of complaint or a single excuse, Philip obeyed the Lord promptly, in spite of the fact that many considered his action to be foolish. He departed without knowing the real purpose of his journey, but certain that he was not being led of the Lord to go on a fool's errand.

Traveling south, Philip reached the place to which he had been sent just in the nick of time. Had he hesitated, thought the matter over, or consulted his friends, he would have lost the opportunity of a lifetime. Presently, Philip saw a chariot coming towards him. Then, he heard the command of the Holy Spirit: "Go near, and join thyself to this chariot." Again his response was immediate, for he ran to the chariot, ready and anxious to witness for Christ.

Riding in that chariot was an Ethiopian eunuch, a man of great prominence and distinction, who exercised authority over all the treasures of Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians. Even though this Minister of Finance was a man of great prominence, prestige, position, pomp, possessions, and power, he was far from being satisfied.

This eunuch had come from far-away Abyssinia to Jerusalem to attend the great Jewish feast. Disappointed at not obtaining a personal knowledge of an experience with God, which was what he had hoped to receive, the eunuch was on his way home, still spiritually hungry, and still searching.

Before leaving Jerusalem, however, the eunuch either possessed or purchased a portion of the Old Testament scriptures. While winding his way homeward the eunuch was reading aloud, as was customary among Orientals, from the roll of Isaiah in search of additional truth about God for which his heart was hungry. He is a splendid example of an honest seeker after the truth. Reading the scriptures as he rode along, the eunuch had a longing for someone to lead him into the light. He was prepared to listen with an open mind to anyone whom the Lord might send to him for the purpose of instruction.

With eagerness, earnestness, and enthusiasm Philip ran to the chariot in which the eunuch was riding and asked him if he understood what he was reading. While it must have been a very strange experience for the eunuch to have an unknown man approach his chariot and ask him a question like that, Philip's face was so radiant and eager that the statesman thought that here is one who knows what I need to know. In other words, when the Lord's messenger arrived he found a prepared hearer. The Holy Spirit was working at both ends of the line, as is the case when any soul comes into right relationship with God.

God had prepared and commissioned Philip to go to the eunuch, and then He saw to it that the latter was in such a state of mind and heart that the eunuch would receive the Lord's messenger and His message. Before one can enlighten another spiritually, there must be on the part of one a possession of a knowledge and also the ability and the willingness to impart it, and on the part of the other a disposition to receive it.

After confessing that he did not understand what he was reading, the eunuch invited Philip to enter the chariot with him. Troubled in heart, earnest in spirit, and eager to learn, this diligent seeker after the truth was longing to know God. Recognizing this fact, Philip quickly and cheerfully accepted his invitation to ride with him in the chariot. Each felt that the other was the man he needed.

So far as we know, the eunuch had never heard the gospel of Christ. Nevertheless, he affords us a splendid example of the power of God's Word to prepare a soul to hear the gospel of Christ and to receive the Saviour. Observing that the eunuch

was reading from Isaiah fifty-three, Philip showed real wisdom by taking the same Scripture and from it preaching the substitutionary atonement of Christ. That opened the flood gates of God's grace for the eunuch. He understood clearly that Jesus Christ died as his substitute and that through Him he could have a saving experience.

Philip's example in beginning with the various scriptures which the Ethiopian was reading and preaching Christ to him teaches us how important it is for Christians to know the Word of God thoroughly enough to explain its teachings to those who do not understand them. So earnestly and effectively did Philip present the gospel of Christ to this man that he responded properly and promptly by receiving Christ as his personal Saviour and was gloriously saved. Our Lord said, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life" (John 5:24). He also said, "He that believeth on me hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John 3:36).

What a privilege Philip had that day! What a high and holy responsibility! For one brief moment those men came together at the crossroads. If Philip had failed, that Ethiopian would doubtless have gone back to his native land without this transforming experience of a personal encounter with the Lord. The one chance he had that day under God was at the disposal of Philip. If Philip had failed him, most likely it would have been a final failure. The eunuch proved to be a responsive hearer. A responsive hearer makes a good preacher. The pew makes the pulpit what it is.

As they traveled along, Philip taught the eunuch that it was the Christian duty of every child of God to follow Christ in scriptural baptism. Having a sincere desire to conform to the expressed will of Christ, he was anxious to be baptized. When they came to the place where there was ample water in which to be baptized, he requested Philip to baptize him. Of this event we read, "And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:38-39). If he had possessed one of our song-books, doubtless he would have gone his way singing:

"O happy day that fixed my choice
On Thee, my Saviour and my God!
Well may this glowing heart rejoice,
And tell its raptures all abroad!

'Tis done; the great transaction's done!
I am my Lord's, and He is mine;
He drew me, and I followed on,
Charmed to confess the voice divine.

Happy day, happy day,
When Jesus washed my sins away!
He taught me how to watch and pray,
And live rejoicing every day;
Happy day, happy day,
When Jesus washed my sins away."

Immediately after the eunuch's baptism "the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing." Now that he had the Lord Jesus, he did not need Philip. He had the same access to God that Philip had. No wonder that the eunuch "went on his way rejoicing" because he did not travel alone. The Lord was with him as he went to carry the gospel of Christ to the people of his own country.

The experience of being saved is enough to make anybody rejoice. The eunuch rejoiced because Christ had saved him and had satisfied the deepest desires of his heart. He was going back to a heathen land, and he would be the only Christian in the whole country. He was going back to spiritual isolation and quite probably to persecution and to death. Yet, he went on his way rejoicing because he had come to know Christ as his personal Saviour. He was happy that he had followed his Lord in baptism. He rejoiced also in the privilege of witnessing to others about Christ and what He could do for them. Great joy flooded his soul as he anticipated his increased usefulness to his people in telling them what Christ had done for him and would do for them if they would only trust Him. We, too, may be exceedingly happy in Christ and His blessed service, as we witness to our unsaved loved ones and friends about our wonderful Saviour.