

A THRILLING ENCOUNTER

Acts 8:26-39

This story tells us of a surprising, thrilling and enriching encounter between two men who were complete strangers, and who in various respects were entirely different. They were separated by the wide chasms of race and of position. One was a statesman, and the other was an evangelist. 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 themselves expect it. Yet they did meet, to their own enrichment as well as to that of countless others.

There are three actors in this thrilling story. First, there is the Holy Spirit, Who brought this unexpected and all but impossible encounter to pass. Second, there is this high officer from Africa. Third, there is Philip the evangelist.

Philip, a man who had a genuine Christian experience, was one of the seven who were chosen to assist the apostles in carrying on the Lord's work at Jerusalem. Chosen as a deacon because he was filled with the Holy Spirit, Philip 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 of God and to obey Him.

After the martyrdom of Stephen, the enemies of Christ and His followers in Jerusalem 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, the deacon who found refuge in Samaria, where he 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.

While wending his way homeward, the eunuch was reading aloud the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, which delineates the sufferings of Christ. With eagerness, earnestness and enthusiasm Philip ran to his chariot and asked the eunuch 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 felt at once that here is one who knows.

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 thoroughly prepared to listen with an unprejudiced and open mind. Upon recognizing the eunuch's longing to know God, Philip quickly and cheerfully accepted his invitation to ride with him in the chariot. Each felt that the other was the man he needed. As is so often the case, the Holy Spirit was working at both ends of the line. He 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 he would receive the Lord's messenger and His message through His servant. Before one can enlighten another spiritually, there must be on the part of one a possession of a knowledge and both the ability and the willingness to impart it, and on the part of the other a disposition to receive it.

So far as we know, the eunuch had never heard the Gospel of Christ before. But, he affords us a splendid example of the power of the Word to prepare a soul to hear the Gospel of Christ and to accept the Saviour. Philip showed real wisdom by preaching Christ, for He is the substance of all Gospel preaching. He is a theme which can never be exhausted by all the sermons of all the ages.

When seated by him, Philip seized his golden opportunity by tactfully beginning with the very scriptures which the Ethiopian was reading and preaching Christ to him. His example teaches us how important it is for Christians to know the Word of God so thoroughly that they can 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. Believing what Philip told him, he accepted Christ as his personal Saviour.

Upon being convinced that Christ was the Lamb of God Who taketh away the sin of the world, the eunuch immediately believed on Him, or received Him as his Saviour, whereupon his sins were forgiven and he was saved. Wasn't it wonderful that he accepted Christ as his Saviour the first time he heard the Gospel?

After the eunuch had heard the old, old story of Christ and His love and had truly believed on Him, he passed from death unto life. 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.

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 songbooks 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."

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.