

# THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL

## THE CHURCH ON MISSION

### THE SPIRIT WHO EMPOWERS

#### A Spirit Empowered Evangelist

The world believes in ‘chance encounters’ while Christians believe in ‘divine appointments’ given to us by the Living God Himself. Study of scripture reveals that there are no accidents. Events do not occur by chance. We experience divine appointments for many reasons throughout our Christian walk. One of the chief reasons is to give us opportunities to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

Our last lesson concerned the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Today our lesson focuses on Philip. He is not the same Philip who was among the original 12 disciples. Philip, the evangelist, was among the seven men whose original responsibility in the early church was to ‘wait on tables’ and to look after the Greek-speaking widows and probably all of the poor in the Jerusalem church.

Something so traumatic as the stoning of Stephen could have easily shutdown the ministry and caused the new converts to Christ to hunker down and be silent and keep the good news to themselves. I feel certain that was what the Jewish leaders were hoping they would do. But, they did not.

Following the stoning of Stephen, due to necessity many Christians scattered from Jerusalem. Philip became an evangelist and in Samaria was preaching the gospel, working miracles, and bringing many to faith in Christ.

In *Acts 8, 9, and 10* we find the record of three remarkable instances of conversion to Christianity. The New Testament reveals God’s great salvation was made available to representatives of the three ethnological divisions of the human family. The descendents of Noah (Ham, Shem, and Japheth) originated three people groups. Chapter 8 gives the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, a son of Ham. Chapter 9 relates the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, a son of Shem. Chapter 10 tells of the conversion of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, a son of Japheth. Today’s focus is Philip’s witnessing journey to a son of Ham – the man from Ethiopia in today’s lesson. In the following two lessons we will look into the conversions of a son of Japheth and a son of Shem.

Philip sets an example for us: Be available and obedient to the Spirit’s prompting.

*Read Acts 8:26-29 (ESV)* <sup>26</sup> Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is a desert place. <sup>27</sup> And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship <sup>28</sup> and was returning, seated in his

*chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah.<sup>29</sup> And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.”*

It is an important to recognize that Philip was **obedient** when he heard the call of God to change his mission field. He already had a ministry. He was evangelizing in Samaria and there was a great response of the Samaritans coming to know the Lord. The Samaritans were a people group that the Jews had been convinced that God did not want in His kingdom. In fact, the Jews were surprised when God poured out His Holy Spirit on the Samaritans.

The church did not simply ‘stumble upon’ the idea of evangelizing the Gentiles; it did so in accordance with God’s deliberate purpose. Sometimes the Lord calls us to go and sometimes the Lord calls us to stay. As His followers we must be equally open to the call – no matter if it is to go or it is to stay. We just need to remember that God’s ways are not our ways. It might have been easy for Philip to ignore the call of the Holy Spirit to a desert road in Gaza – he might have reasoned – there is nothing there – I should continue in Samaria. But, the Lord had a plan.

Ethiopia should not be confused with modern-day Ethiopia which is the hill country to the east of the Upper Nile. Ethiopia in Philip’s day was south of Egypt. The eunuch was probably from the ancient kingdom of Meroe also called the Nubian Empire or Cush. The inhabitants of this area were black. The Greek word from which the word Ethiopia is derived means “people with the burnt face.” The Ethiopians’ queen was Candace. Candace was a title to the Ethiopians like the title of Caesar to the Romans.

Eunuchs were normally deprived of their manhood; however, in the language of the day, a eunuch could simply refer to a government official. The high position of the official as the royal treasurer is emphasized. He had come to Jerusalem *to worship* there. We are not given the reasons why but it is clear he was a genuine seeker with an open heart. He had probably been in Jerusalem during some of the religious festivals and was now on his way home, riding, as befitted his status, in a chariot and he had obtained a scroll containing part of the Jewish Scriptures. He was undoubtedly a man of means – but he was using those means to seek the Lord. The scroll from which the eunuch was reading contained this promise. **Isaiah 55:6 (ESV)**<sup>6</sup> “*Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.*” The Savior that the eunuch was seeking had promised in **Matthew 7:7 (ESV)**<sup>7</sup> “*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.*”

Okay – so here’s Philip – he is out in a ‘seemingly’ God-forsaken desert and he hears someone reading God’s Word. Could that be his purpose for being there? This man was a high government official in a fine chariot why would he even acknowledge the presence of a common man like Philip? But, the Spirit nudged Philip to step up and share!

Guide people through the scriptures and show them.

**Read Acts 8:30-35 (ESV)** <sup>30</sup> So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” <sup>31</sup> And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. <sup>32</sup> Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. <sup>33</sup> In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.” <sup>34</sup> And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” <sup>35</sup> Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.

So many times we hesitate to witness because of fear of rejection. Here we find a clear example in scripture that there are people desiring to hear God’s message of hope. The man in the chariot was open to the words of a common man. A total stranger arrived at his chariot inquiring whether he understood what he was reading. He could have been insulted by that question or he could have been fearful that Philip was a robber. Remember this – neither the seeker nor the evangelist allowed cultural and social differences to stand in the way of hearing or sharing the gospel.

I love how the eunuch answers Philip’s question with a question *How can I, unless someone guides me?* It verifies what Paul would later write in **Romans 10:14 (NIV)** <sup>14</sup> *How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?*

Take a tip from Philip’s personal witnessing style. Philip began the discussion where the man’s interest was focused – in this case the Old Testament prophecies of Isaiah, and then Philip explained how Jesus Christ fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecies. When we share the gospel, we should start where the other person’s concerns are focused. Then we can connect God’s Word to their concerns. The opportunities are many – illness, divorce, financial difficulties – it may be questions about the church itself – what you believe about a moral dilemma, or end time events. When God provides an opportunity, that is our ‘foot in the door’ to speak His name. Let’s do not remain silent. Do what Philip did – tell the person about Jesus. The story always comes together from Genesis to Revelation – the point of the story – the witnessing endeavor is always to bring the seeker to Jesus! How sad it would have been if Philip had not been prepared to share the Good News – that is connecting the Old Testament prophecy with Jesus. Yes, you can lead someone to Christ with nothing more than the knowledge of **John 3:16** and please do not hesitate to do that. However, we are much better equipped to go deeper into witnessing when we saturate ourselves in the Word of God. It might even be your daily Bible reading that is your answer to someone’s life changing question.

Warren Wiersbe writes of the Ethiopian: This Ethiopian represents many people today who are religious, read the Scriptures, and seek the truth, yet do not have saving faith in Jesus Christ. They are sincere, but they are lost! They need someone to show them the way. Could it be that more people are

not coming to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ because God's own children are remaining silent and not showing others The Way?

Some question how could Isaiah be the author of the entire book of Isaiah. They cannot fathom how it was possible that Isaiah, living in B.C. 700, could give the name of Cyrus in his prophecy and tell how Cyrus would set the Jews free from captivity 170 years before any of it happened. Nonetheless, that is exactly what Isaiah did under the power of the Holy Spirit. In reality it is not any more astounding that Isaiah under the power of the same Holy Spirit, foretold of the coming of the Messiah with amazing detail.. As the Ethiopian read the prophecy, he just could not put the entire picture together alone. He needed help.

When the Spirit of God uses the Word of God something is going to happen! Philip under the Spirit's leading invited the Ethiopian to make a response to the Living Word!

Lead others to respond in faith.

*Acts 8:36-40 (ESV)* <sup>36</sup> *And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" (KJV)* <sup>37</sup> *And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. (ESV)* <sup>38</sup> *And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.* <sup>39</sup> *And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.* <sup>40</sup> *But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.*

**Acts 8:37** is not found in all the New Testament manuscripts. The content of verse 37 is sound theology although the expression of style seems different from Luke's and the verse is missing from many of the manuscripts. Obviously, the conversation led to the topic of baptism. They first came together in a desert area and then we find they reached a stream of water. The Ethiopian was eager to be baptized. Philip and the Ethiopian would not have been alone on this ride – there was certainly a driver and probably numerous others who witnessed the baptism that day. Philip was miraculously whisked away by the power of the Holy Spirit to his next witnessing field. You know what that means – the eunuch was left on his own to share the good news to his friends, his family, his world.

The Ethiopian came to know the Lord in a chariot of all places because Philip, the evangelist, was obedient to his call and came along side that chariot! Let's be like these two men of faith in today's lesson from different races and different backgrounds who came together by divine appointment then separated from one another to continue their shared mission!