

## Reading: Acts of the Apostles 8:26-40 Obedience and Discipleship

<sup>26</sup> Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is desert. <sup>27</sup> So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, <sup>28</sup> was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. <sup>29</sup> Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go near and overtake this chariot."

<sup>30</sup> So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

<sup>31</sup> And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him. <sup>32</sup> The place in the Scripture which he read was this:

"He was led as a sheep to the slaughter;  
And as a lamb before its shearer *is* silent,  
So He opened not His mouth.

<sup>33</sup> In His humiliation His justice was taken away,  
And who will declare His generation?  
For His life is taken from the earth."

<sup>34</sup> So the eunuch answered Philip and said, "I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?" <sup>35</sup> Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him. <sup>36</sup> Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, *here is* water. What hinders me from being baptized?"

<sup>37</sup> Then 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."

<sup>38</sup> So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. <sup>39</sup> Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing. <sup>40</sup> But Philip was found at Azotus. And passing through, he preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea.

New King James Version (NKJV)

### Preaching notes:

Our theme for today's reading is Obedience and Discipleship. These two words are so closely interlinked and related together. Christ centred discipleship – meaning to be both a faithful follower of Jesus (a disciple) and to help others do so (a disciple-maker), can only come from the obedience to God and His teachings. "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him" (John 14:23) and, "if you love Me you will keep my commands" (John 14:15) are two very clear examples of the interdependence between obedience to God and discipleship. Without discipleship, obedience is worthless, it is mere observance. Without obedience discipleship is ineffective, it is shallow, short-lived and unfruitful. This was as true for the early church as it is for us today. The account of Philip in this passage of scripture is an excellent example for us.

Following the persecution against the church that is underway in Jerusalem with the killing of Stephen, Philip is in Samaria – not in hiding – but preaching Christ to them. Multitudes heard and accepted the gospel and became believers. Remember that Philip is “one of the seven”, chosen to wait on the tables of the widows so that the apostles may concentrate on “the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:1-7). Philip demonstrates his obedience to God by being willing to seek and then undertake God’s will. How does he do this? He is just an ordinary man like any other, he is not a born orator or a raving extrovert. What sets him apart is his **willingness** to faithfully undertake what is required and to be under the authority of the leadership (the apostles), his **devotion** to the teaching of Jesus and the spreading of the gospel message and his **steadfast faith** in Jesus as the life-giver, the miracle worker and the redeemer from sin. These three personal attributes indicate that Philip is a man of Obedience and Discipleship. Philip, an ordinary man transformed by the extraordinary Holy Spirit living within him.

Philip is constantly hearing from God; he is in relationship with God and led by the Holy Spirit in all that he is doing. To leave his successful ministry in Samaria and go instead to the wilderness or desert requires absolute obedience and trust.

Philip’s response to the call from God to leave Samaria is, “he arose and went”. How does he know it is God that is telling him this and what is it for? This is one of the key lessons for us to learn from this passage. We will not always know the reason for the suffering, the dislocation or the change in circumstances, but we must always seek the will of God for our lives. If Philip was not obedient and had not left Samaria does it mean he is rejected by God? No, but it means he has stepped out of God’s perfect will and what was fruitful may now wither. Decline and division comes from disobedience to God’s will.

When Philip approaches the Ethiopian, we have a wonderful example of Discipleship, it is one person talking to another. One who has the Holy Spirit in his life and consequently the understanding and relationship with God and another who has an acknowledgment of God, (having been to Jerusalem to worship) and seeking knowledge (reading scripture). It is only by Philip being a disciple himself and within God’s will that he is able to lead the Ethiopian to be a disciple also. In much the same way as someone can only infect someone with a contagion if they themselves are infected, otherwise no amount of effort or schemes or investment will make the slightest difference, a new disciple can only be made by an existing disciple.

Philip, gently yet with the authority and truth of the Holy Spirit, unfolds the meaning of scripture and points the Ethiopian to Jesus.

The response of the Ethiopian is a desire to be baptised, not because he feels it is a “proper and normative” thing to do but because, having believed, he longs to be bathed in Christ’s death and renewed into His resurrection. William Barclay provides three reasons why baptism in these circumstances is the only response:

1. The symbolism of cleansing the soul, by being bathed in the grace of Christ, preferably in running water by full immersion.
2. It marked a clean break with the past, a line is drawn signifying newness.

3. A union with Christ, as the waters close over the head, it symbolises a death to the old as in Christ's death and the emergence is like a rising with Christ.

The Ethiopian "went on his way rejoicing", having been discipled (albeit for such a short time) by Philip he was going home a changed man, full of joy, to take the gospel to Ethiopia, the first nation of Africa to be evangelised. As for Philip, he continues in his obedience to God, making disciples in every place he goes.

As we close, Obedience to God may not be one of the most popular ways of expressing and living our "modern lives" and there are those who say that we must be relevant to the culture of the day. The early church were the complete opposite to the culture of their day and yet the Lord added to their number, from small beginnings, with Obedience and Discipleship Christianity spread throughout the known world. Amen.

Baptism quote paraphrased from William Barclay "The New Daily Study Bible -Acts" page 80.