

Philip
and the
Ethiopian
Eunuch

INCLUDED
A Moving Story

WESLEYS' THOUGHTS

What shall I do my God to love,
my loving God to praise?
The length, and breadth, and height to prove,
and depth of sovereign grace?

Your sovereign grace to all extends,
immense and unconfined;
from age to age it never ends;
enfolds all humankind.

Throughout the world its breadth is known,
wide an infinity;
so wide it never passed by one,
or it had passed by me.

My trespass was grown up to heaven;
but, far above the skies,
in Christ abundantly forgiven,
I see your mercies rise.

The depth of all-redeeming love
what angel tongue can tell?
O may I to the utmost prove
the gift unspeakable!

Come quickly, gracious Lord, and take
possession of your own;
my longing heart vouchsafe to make
your everlasting throne.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)
Singing the Faith #436



BIBLE PASSAGE | ACTS 8:26-40

Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

“Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.)²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.”³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?”³¹ He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.³² 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 silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.”

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?”³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.³⁶ As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.



DISCUSSION

Who was Philip?

We meet two Philips in the New Testament. There is Philip, the disciple who may have originally been a disciple of John the Baptist, whom Jesus called, who then went to call his brother Nathaniel, who people asked about Jesus (“Sir, we would see Jesus”). This Philip asked Jesus “Where will we buy bread to feed all these people?” in the introduction to the feeding of the 5,000. He was a disciple who pointed the way to Jesus and to who Jesus was on all the occasions in which he is mentioned, even when (as in the feeding of the 5,000) he doesn’t quite get it right. The second Philip is appointed as one of seven deacons in Acts 6 when the Hellenists complained that their widows were being ignored in favour of the Hebrew widows in the daily distribution of food. Which Philip is the Philip who meets with the Ethiopian Eunuch? Well, it could be either. There is a strong body of opinion that it is Philip the Deacon who became Philip the Evangelist. On the other hand, the Philip who we understand the disciple to be is exactly the kind of person who would respond to God’s call and explain Jesus to the Ethiopian Eunuch. Deacon or Disciple, Philip responds and is able to explain the meaning of the Isaiah passage that the Ethiopian is reading in a way which is so real, so meaningful and so convincing, that when they reach water, the Ethiopian immediately asks if he can be baptised.

This traveller from afar (and Ethiopia was considered the ends of the earth in those days), who worked for a Queen in a time where patriarchal systems were more usual, and who would also have been looked down upon because he was a eunuch is brought into the flock and Philip is then removed in an unusual and miraculous way.

As a young mother, I was asked to hand over my new born baby daughter to a nurse to be weighed and checked. The nurse had a nose piercing and I struggled to give her my baby. I would have said that I had no problem with people having piercings anywhere they liked, but my mother was a nurse, and nurses weren’t supposed to have nose-piercings, they were supposed to look like my mother! How I struggled to let go of my baby when faced with this unexpectedly. We don’t hear how Philip felt when faced with this foreign man, but we can imagine that ever since they had been forced to leave Jerusalem and then travel to Samaria and onward, they would have been constantly facing challenges to their thinking. After all, for Philip, the Jews were the chosen people and now he is living out Jesus’ final injunction to go into all the world and preach the Gospel.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- When faced with questions from someone of another faith or country, how might you best respond?
- Have you ever felt that you have failed to respond as well as you might?
- Has there been a time when sharing your faith with someone in this way has helped you to understand it better?
- For Philip, there may have been an initial wondering if God really meant him to speak to the Ethiopian, so unusual would this have been in his context. Are there people in your life who you may instinctively step back from sharing the Gospel with?
- Who do you find it easiest to talk to about the things of God?



RESOURCES

Further study

The Ethiopian was reading a passage from Isaiah and it was this that Philip was able to explain to him in terms of the coming of Jesus. How might you interpret one of the following Old Testament passages to someone reading them if you were in the same position?

- Isaiah 40:3-5
- Isaiah 6:9-10
- Isaiah 61:1-2