

# Explore the Bible: Obedient

April 12, 2016

*The Explore the Bible lesson for May 1 focuses on Acts 8:26-39.*

## **Pushing the Boundaries**

The New Testament book of Acts records the earliest days of the church were centered in Jerusalem. The movement of the gospel beyond Jerusalem occurred because of the large-scale persecution of the church after the stoning of Stephen. The believers were scattered, although the apostles remained in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). But the persecuted are preachers, and their scattering is like the scattering of seeds that bring forth fruit.

The preaching of Philip receives special attention in Acts 8. This is the Philip mentioned in Acts 6:5 as one of the seven chosen by the church to administer the offerings. He is often called Philip the Evangelist, to differentiate him from Philip the Apostle. Philip preached in Samaria with incredible results. The Gospels make clear the divide that existed between Jews and Samaritans in the first century, but Philip bridges that divide by preaching Christ (Acts 8:5). In Acts 8:26, Philip is sent in a different direction. A direction and a road are his only instructions from an angelic messenger.

His next instruction from the Spirit is to catch up to a chariot and stay close. In that chariot is an Ethiopian government official who is a eunuch. Philip has a variety of reasons to stay away.

He is divided from this man by ethnicity. The reference to Ethiopia in the first century referred to an ancient and important kingdom in northeastern Africa whose area would have included, but extended beyond, the modern-day nation of Ethiopia.

He is divided from the man by wealth and position. Philip would have had more in common with the anonymous man driving the chariot than the man riding in it.

Philip is separated from the Ethiopian by religion. This man's relationship with Judaism is not spelled out exactly, but there are abundant indications that he takes the Jewish faith seriously. The believers, though of course all Jews themselves, are in the midst of intense persecution by those who took the Jewish faith seriously. He has gone to Jerusalem to worship and is now headed home. This would have been a major undertaking in the ancient world. He is studying Jewish scripture. Yet the most he likely could hope for was to be a "God-fearer," a Gentile who worshipped Israel's God. He could worship in Jerusalem, but he could not enter the Temple, because he was a eunuch (Deuteronomy 23:1).

### **The Man Without a Future**

Across the ancient world, royal courts used castrated men to serve in royal households and, as in the case of the Ethiopian, important government positions. A servant rendered impotent in this way was bound to seek the good of the royal family, since they were the only "family" he could ever have. He could not build a future for himself and so was bound to building the future of the royal house. The prohibition of the Mosaic Law against eunuchs entering the Sanctuary was intended to highlight the holiness and the wholeness of God. A eunuch by definition was not whole.

What then drew this man to the Jewish faith? We cannot say for sure, but is interesting to note how often the Old Testament speaks of Ethiopia in positive terms (Psalm 68:31, 87:4, Zephaniah 3:10). It is also very interesting that a few chapters over from the passage Philip and this man discuss together is the promise of Isaiah 56:3-5:

*Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say,*

*“The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.”  
And let no eunuch complain,  
“I am only a dry tree.”*

*4 For this is what the Lord says:*

*“To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,  
who choose what pleases me  
and hold fast to my covenant—  
5 to them I will give within my temple and its walls  
a memorial and a name  
better than sons and daughters;  
I will give them an everlasting name  
that will endure forever.*

A foreign eunuch? Check and check. If this man did not already have these verses marked as his favorites, he surely did soon after this encounter with Philip.

The question nearest at hand, however, is Isaiah 53. This chapter is the culmination of Isaiah’s Servant Songs, which climax in the Servant’s suffering and death for the sins of the people. The Ethiopian wants to know more about this Servant. Is it the prophet himself? Or is it someone else?

Acts 8:35 records the beautiful sentence, “Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.” Good news—this passage is about Jesus and how he bore the sins of many. Good news—though he died, he is risen. Good news—those who believe in him can have life in his name. Good news—it doesn’t matter your race. It doesn’t matter that your future was taken away. You can have a new future in Jesus Christ. Good news—you are not a dry tree. Jesus promised a hundredfold inheritance of houses, farms, brothers and sisters, mothers and children in the present and in the age to come (Mark 10:29-30). Good

news—you don't have to be a man without a family. You can be part of the family of the Messiah. You can bear the name better than sons and daughters, an everlasting name that will endure forever. You belong to Jesus.

The man's response in Acts 8:36 is equally beautiful. "Why shouldn't I get baptized?" Is there any reason to exclude this man from the family of faith? None at all.

### **Holy Ghost Moving Company**

After the Ethiopian is baptized, the Holy Spirit has somewhere else for Philip to be, and so the Spirit moves him there rather directly. This is the most dramatic work of the Spirit in the chapter, but not the most important. Moving a man instantly from one place to another is logistics. That's small potatoes for the Creator of the universe. More important is the work of the Spirit in salvation.

Philip heard the Spirit's prompting and obeyed. "Go south," "get close," these were specific instructions. Although Luke does not mention it specifically, the Spirit inspires Philip's question and Philip's preaching. The Spirit had been leading the Ethiopian, perhaps for many years, to the God of Israel and to this place at this time. The Holy Spirit moved a man to salvation. And the Spirit did it through the obedient evangelist willing to respond when the Spirit led. Gary Tyra writes that missional faithfulness means "obeying the Holy Spirit's promptings to speak and act prophetically into people's lives so as to represent to them the reality of the risen Christ, and then to prayerfully trust the Holy Spirit to do his work of conviction in their lives."