

Philip – an inconvenient ministry

Acts 8:26-40

cck/8am and 10am/8 June 2008

We have been looking at various characters in the OT and learning lessons from their walk with God. I want today and next Sunday to look at two minor players in Acts whom we rarely consider in any depth and reflect on what God has to say to us through their walk with the Lord and some of the principles we see working out in their lives. So we look today at Philip.

Christ Church scattered – a theme we have considering for a number of years now – the impact we have out there is vital.

I invite you to reflect on where you find yourself right now in terms of ministry and what God has called you to as a follower of Jesus.

We are all called to ministry no matter what stage of life we are in or where God has placed us.

Where are you spending most of your working week?

Where do you spend most of your out of work time?

Let's look at Philip. There are five points I want to draw attention to as we reflect on where God has placed us and the ministry we are exercising there.

1. Opportunities for ministry come in inconvenient ways

Some times we find our selves thrust into situations of ministry at inopportune times and inconvenient situations.

Philip was chosen with Stephen to be a server at the tables for the widows. He was a background sort of guy and who did the equivalent of feeding the hungry. Feeding the hungry people do wonderful ministry. But they did not sign up for preacher, praying for healing and casting out demons. Philip was part of the FTH team along with Stephen.

Then Stephen was murdered, and then followed a time of persecution and the church scattered. Philip, we are told went down to Samaria and began to preach there.

Acts 8:1-8

¹And Saul approved of their killing him (Stephen).

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ²Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. ³But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

⁴Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. ⁵Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there.

Philip goes to Samaria. Samaria was not on the list of places to see before you die of any self respecting Jewish believer. The name of the city he went to is not even mentioned. Does it really matter what city it was, the fact is it was in Samaria – enough said!

Samaria was not a first choice destination for a devout Jew. Samaritans were despised half Jews. But Philip grabs the opportunity and begins to proclaim the Messiah.

Some times we are pushed into situations which are not of our making or necessarily our first choice.

Our job send us – community service has sent young graduates from Christ Church to all sorts of places around SA that they would not have chosen to go to.

Financial circumstances lead us to live in a suburb that would not be our first choice.

Various circumstances put us in places we not necessarily choose to visit.

Philip landed up in Samaria because he was shoved there and he was no doubt still smarting from the tragic death of his co-worker, Stephen. That did not stop him proclaiming Jesus as Messiah.

⁶When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. ⁷With shrieks, evil^o spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸So there was great joy in that city.

Philip's proclamation of "The Messiah" was in word and action, but it was his actions drew attention to what he was saying and got people to listen.

The results were that

- evil spirits came out of people – i.e. there was spiritual liberation.
- people were healed – the paralysed and lame were made well - they could move again – i.e. there was physical liberation –
- there was joy in that unnamed city – i.e. there was emotional freedom

Opportunity for ministry sometimes comes in unfortunate ways and at inconvenient times.

Some times it is in the wake of a death of a friend or some one close to us.

What opportunity is God setting before you right now that you have not been able to see as such because you have seen it as an inconvenient intrusion into what you had planned?

2. Listen to prophetic promptings

We skip now a few verses and pick up Philip's story at chapter 8 verse 26.

It reads ...

²⁶Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."

In this story we see Philip responding to prophetic revelation from God that is direct and specific.

1. Go south

That is the first prophetic word he gets. "An angel of the Lord" is another way of saying "The Spirit of the Lord". The point is God spoke to him and it was clear enough ...

"Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."

Go north on the road to Springbok.

Not much detail you must admit. But the very importantly he responds.

²⁷So he started out, ...

He took the first step of obedience, and on his way he met the Ethiopian. More detail followed. But he took the first step in obedience to what God had told him to do.

A very important lesson in growing to hearing God's voice and moving in prophetic revelation is obeying when he does speak to you.

2. Go up to the chariot.

²⁹The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

He gets the next bit of the instruction.

If he had go the whole message at once – go south and talk to this African Politian as he travels along in his chariot - he would probably not have gone south.

God gives us the revelation we need when we need it.

Now it does not say it as such but I reckon that by this stage Philip is getting the hang of things and my surmise is that he says at this stage, "OK Lord, I am here in the desert where you told me to go. I have met this Ethiopian. What do I do know?"

3. Ask him if he understand what he is reading

The third bit of prophetic revelation.

Application: As we grow in the hearing the voice of God I have found that it is important to ask the second and third question.

If I am praying about the service and I sense that God says that he wants to remind people of the joy of our salvation, I then in prayer ask, Lord, what does that look like? What do I need to do differently as I lead the service?

If I am dealing with a tricky issue in a meeting I ask, Lord what is the out come you desire for us? If I sense in the Spirit that God is saying I want you to be clear about what you are doing? I can then ask, Lord, what is coming against us being clear?

Ask the second and third question.

And don't you want to know what God's strategy is for the tricky meeting you are going into?

If he is the Lord of all and knows the beginning from the end, and if we are serving him ultimately, why would we not want to get his perspective.

Eg: I was praying for a guy this week in Durban. He had been injured in a cycling accident. He told me he had been for prayer many times. As we began praying I just asked the Lord, what is stopping this man receiving healing? I sensed the prompting of the spirit to ask him who caused the accident because there could be an issue of unforgiveness involved. He said oh it was his fault entirely. He was to blame. So I asked, have you forgiven yourself? Tears welled up in eyes, and said, you are onto something there.

Don't you want to know what questions to ask?

Listen to the prophetic revelation that God gives you. Ask the 2nd and third question.

Philip did. What happened here would not have happened if he had not been open to and obedient to the voice of God speaking directly and specifically to him.

3. Enter their world

As we take lessons from Philip and reflect on where God has placed us, we need to consciously enter this world and the place God has put us.

This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship,²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet.²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

³⁰Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

³¹"How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

Philip listened and look around to see what was happening.

He went up to the chariot as directed. He looked and he listened. He asked questions. He accepted he invitation.

He was actively engaged and expectant. He knew God had him there for a purpose.

Key basic things for us to note: Look, listen, ask questions, accept invitations.

4. Point people to Jesus

Now we come to a key moment in this story.

³²This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

³³In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.
Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.”^o

³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” ³⁵Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

Philip told the man the good news about Jesus.

Now the passage he was reading from Isaiah is one we Christian know well. It is one of the servant songs in Isaiah which we understand to be referring to Jesus the Messiah.

1 Peter 2:21ff Peter writes about Jesus as the suffering servant drawing from Isaiah 53.

Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

²²“He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”^o

²³When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” ²⁵For “you were like sheep going astray,”^o but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer (Guardian) of your souls.

This man had been to Jerusalem to worship. The fact that he had a scroll of the prophet Isaiah indicated he was a wealthy influential man. They were not freely available. So he had obtained this scroll in Jerusalem and was reading it aloud as he journeyed home. But in the circles he had most likely moved in there was no place in Jewish teaching for a suffering Messiah. That was anathema.

So who is the prophet speaking about – himself or some one else?

What a wonderful opening question! An opportunity to speak about Jesus and tell this man the good news of God’s love for all human kind and his grace extended to all who respond to his love and obey him.

I would imagine he would have in the course of this study he would have said lets turn on to chapter 56 and got him to read Isaiah 56:3-5

³Let no foreigners who have bound themselves to the LORD say,
 “The LORD will surely exclude me from his people.”
 And let no eunuch complain,
 “I am only a dry tree.”
⁴For this is what the LORD says:
 “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
 who choose what pleases me
 and hold fast to my covenant—
⁵to 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.

Can you imagine what this would have done to this man? The message of the Gospel of Jesus brought home right to the core of his very identity as a human being.

I am sure that Philip being open to the promptings of the Spirit would have opened the scriptures to him sensitively and gently brought this man to see that Jesus knew all about his deepest needs and that in his plan this man was included in God’s covenant of grace established through Jesus death and resurrection.

The people we are meeting with are grappling with deep issues. They are people in pain. They have children who are their delight and challenge. Or they don’t have children and agonise over their future and what legacy they will leave behind.

People it is our task to point people to Jesus. Be ready to run a quick Alpha Course, explain the good news and minister grace to those who give us openings and ask us questions.

Point them to the one who bore our sins on cross. The one by whose wounds we are healed. The one who is the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls.

The importance of the baptism request is that this man was making a commitment to Jesus. He was indentifying with Jesus in death and resurrection.

Bring them in!

5. Be ready to step out of your comfort zone

Then lastingly read ...

³⁶As they rode along, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “Look! There’s some water! Why can’t I be baptized?”³⁸ He ordered the carriage to stop, and they went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

³⁹When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰Meanwhile, Philip found himself farther north at the town of Azotus. He preached the Good News there and in every town along the way until he came to Caesarea.

Now the answer to the Ethiopian Eunuch’s question was, “Plenty!”

There were plenty reasons why he should not be baptised. He was Gentile. At this stage Gentiles had not been admitted into membership of the church. The whole Peter and Cornelius events comes in chapter 10. This conversion and baptism of a Gentile slips in.

He was a Eunuch. Not able to be a Jewish proselyte and included in the covenant of the people of Israel. We won’t go into anatomical details but he was not able to be circumcised.

There was plenty to prevent him from being baptised.

I reckon there was a further prophetic revelation for Philip at this point.

I can see him saying to Lord, “OK you got me this far. You got me on the road in the desert. You linked me up with this foreign politician. You got me this invitation. You opened the way for us to look at the Scriptures together. Now he is asking for baptism. How do I answer his question?”

I can imagine the Spirit saying, “Go for it Philip!”

Some times we will find ourselves having to step right out of our comfort zones.

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- 2. Listen to prophetic promptings**
- 3. Enter their world**
- 4. Point people to Jesus**
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