

You Shall Be of Me Witnesses--To Religious Foreigners

by Ron R. Ritchie

Three years ago my wife and I visited some of her cousins in France, and stayed with one family who knew we were Christians. To them, that meant that we were religious people, so as a favor to us they took us to see their priest. When we were introduced, the cousins told him, "They're just like you." Then they sat down and listened as we conversed.

This priest had been assigned by the Pope to be the sole shepherd of 50,000 Frenchmen. The man's heart was breaking because there were no new priests graduating from seminaries, so he had no hope of any help in his ministry. Two Arabs from North Africa who worshiped Mohammed were the only help he had. When we shared who Jesus Christ was, however, his eyes began to light up. We realized that we were talking to a born again priest, although I don't think he knew that. He was experiencing all the joy of being one with Jesus Christ and one with my wife and me, and tears started to come to his eyes. Before we left, we were hugging and kissing and praying for one another in that small village outside Toulon.

At the family dinner that evening, all we talked about was Jesus. Various cousins were running around trying to find their Bibles to ask the pastor (my wife) questions like, "Is this the right Bible? We're going to tell you what we think our relationship with God is and we'd like to know if it's the right relationship," and similar questions. At that table we discovered that there were three people who had accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and didn't know it. At about one o'clock, one young cousin, George, said, "I'm so mad. I never knew that Jesus Christ had to come into my life and be Lord." Another cousin, Christine, told us, "When I come to visit you in the United States I will become a Christian. I cannot become one in France because there is no one to teach me." Later, she did come to our house and became a Christian, and is now in her second year at Foothill College. Her mother writes to us from France and says, "I don't know what happened to Christine; all she talks about is Jesus. "

That evening we really saw how God works--he just wanted us to show up at dinner. We thought we were going to a family meal, but the meal turned into an all--night ministry. God can do all kinds of wonderful things if we just show up and make ourselves available to him. That night at dinner we had the joy of bringing a cup of cold water to a few religious strangers lost in a desert of ignorance. Before I fell asleep, I said to my wife, "I know why we're here; it's so obvious now."

In this series of messages we are studying a number of incidents from the Book of Acts in an effort to discover how we are to relate to the truth that is revealed to us in that book. We have discovered, for example, that we are living in the age of the Spirit, and that we have been given the Person and the power of the Holy Spirit; we have discovered too that we have been instructed by our resurrected Lord to "be of Me witnesses," and we have found that these stories are examples of normal, authentic Christianity. Today, we are in Acts 8, stage four of the Spirit's work, and in this fourth story we will be looking at a witness to religious foreigners. Jesus said to the disciples, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be of Me witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." We're about to see the Spirit in action in the remotest part of the earth.

Let me give you the context of this chapter, which has to do with an evangelist waiter who has a Greek background and speaks Hebrew with an accent, a man who is filled with the Spirit, a good reputation and wisdom. Philip was chased out of Jerusalem in the persecution of the church there, and was sent by God to the city of Samaria to preach Christ to the hated Samaritans, a people detested by the Jews for over 400 years. God used this waiter to shake up the whole nation of Samaria; many Samaritans believed, were baptized and received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the two nations, once bitter enemies, became one in Christ. They were no longer Samaritans and Jews, they were brothers in Christ.

Following this great ministry in Samaria, an angel of the Lord gives Philip his next assignment

1. Philip Meets A Religious Stranger In The Desert Acts 8:25-31

And so, when they had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans. But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, "Arise and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert road.) And he arose and went; and behold, there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship. And he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." And when Philip had run up, he heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

The Holy Spirit is the One who weaves the tapestry of the Church

Peter and John had prayed and raved hands on the Samaritans so that they would receive the Holy Spirit. This was what had drawn the two peoples into a oneness in Christ. It seems that the two apostles stayed in Samaria for a time, although we don't know how long. They did three things there, verse 25 tells us. First, "they solemnly testified." That was their dearest wish: they talked about how Jesus Christ related to them, how they came to know him. That is what testifying is. Second, "they spoke the word of the Lord," i.e., they made the word of the Lord shine forth. That is prophesying, telling people what the Word means and how it relates to them. And third, the apostles "preached the word to many villages of the Samaritans," on their way back to Jerusalem, a distance of about 40 miles.

Isn't it interesting that this is the same apostle John who, we read in Luke 9, wanted to call down fire upon the Samaritans who had refused to receive Jesus? But now John is preaching the gospel to those same Samaritans. What a marvelous Lord, who changes the hatred of our hearts into love! Seeing that John and Peter are leaving the city of Samaria, as Philip will too, the question in my mind is, Who will take care of the Samaritans? It makes a pastor's heart very nervous to see no one in charge. But in studying the Book of Acts it becomes quite apparent who is in charge of the church: the Holy Spirit is. All through Acts the Holy Spirit is the one who holds together the church, teaching and guiding and weaving the marvelous tapestry of the Kingdom of God on earth. To some people it's always a surprise to learn that the Holy Spirit is in charge of this. We saw earlier that when pastors John and Peter were in jail, 5,000 people came to know the Lord. Sometimes things go very well without pastors.

In Philip's case an angel spoke to him and said, "Arise and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza." If you were the young man who had just had a most exciting ministry and seen scores of Samaritans, those hated half-breeds, come to know the Lord, and then an angel showed up and said, "Sorry, we've got to go now," you'd probably say, "Wait a minute. You don't understand. What do you mean, go? We're going to break this group up into house churches, then we've got two baseball games lined up . . ." But the angel says, "Let's go." And Philip went. He was controlled by the Spirit of God; he understood that God was doing something in history, and he was part of it, so he was not going to get in the way.

"Arise and go," the angel told Philip. Angels are always showing up in Scripture--especially in the Book of Acts. Twice Peter was released from jail by an angel. There are angels in this room. Hebrews tells us that angels are, "ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation." (Heb. 1:14) Bishop Festo Kivengere tells a wonderful story of how he escaped from the persecution of Idi Amin in Uganda. Festo was on Amin's death list and was trying to escape to Kenya. He and his family got lost in the mountains during his escape, and a man came out of the bush and asked, "Where are you going?" Festo said, "To Kenya," and the man said, "You go this way." They traveled all night, and at dawn they got lost again. Again, a man appeared out of nowhere and asked the same words, "Where are you going?" "To Kenya," replied the bishop, and again the man said, "You go this way." Later that morning the fleeing family walked into Kenya to freedom.

The Holy Spirit is fulfilling our Lord's commission through you and me, his church. Our responsibility is to rest in him, to be sensitive to his voice and to show up, knowing that he will use us. That was Philip's understanding of God and his Spirit, so he had great confidence in doing what the angel told him to do.

You know, the Holy Spirit is always bringing us more ministries than we can possibly handle, so we have to continually go to the Lord to find which ministries he wants us to be involved in. On Friday night last, for instance, my wife and I thought we were going to have dinner with a young couple in a home they are house sitting. When we got to the house we saw a man from India taking a photograph of some people in the driveway. For a moment I thought he owned the house. I offered to take a picture of him with his family, and he was delighted to accept. He introduced himself as a recently retired lieutenant--colonel in the Indian army. We had a conversation, and he said he had something to give me which he would send over with the children. While we were having dinner, the kids come over with a paper, and next thing the family arrived and stayed an hour, talking about all kinds of wonderful things. We ended up hugging each other there in the livingroom; the dinner got cold, and we had to put it back in the oven. You see, if you just show up, if you're sensitive to the Spirit of God and live the normal Christian life it's amazing what God will do through you. This man gave me his address, and I'm going to write to him about the Lord. The question is not whether there are ministries or not, it's which one should we buy up.

So Peter and John go to other Samaritan villages, Philip is called away for an exciting ministry on a desert road, and the Samaritans are left in the hands of the Holy Spirit. Philip travels some 40 miles toward Jerusalem, then down westward, toward the Mediterranean Sea, another 30 miles. Somewhere in that area he's walking along a desert road, and suddenly, the text says, "Behold!" Wouldn't you say that too if you were alone on a desert road and saw a chariot with an Ethiopian eunuch in it? This man was coming back from worshiping God in Jerusalem. He has come from Ethiopia all the way along the Nile up through Egypt, along the Mediterranean, through Gaza and through the hills of Jerusalem--1,500 miles. Now he's going home, another 1,500 miles. This eunuch has a powerful position as treasurer for Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. He probably was a proselyte, and if so would not be admitted to the inner sanctuary of the temple. He had another strike against him too, in that he was a eunuch. In Matthew 19, responding to a statement on marriage by the disciples, Jesus said that there are three kinds of eunuchs: those who were born that way from their mother's womb, eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. We don't know why this particular individual was castrated, but we do know that there were all kinds of political reasons for doing this in those days. Deuteronomy 23:1 says, "No one who is emasculated, or has his male organ cut off, shall enter the assembly of the Lord," but here is this eunuch worshiping the Lord and reading Isaiah. Little did he know that one prophecy, Isaiah 56: 1-5, was about to be fulfilled:

Thus says the Lord,
"Preserve justice, and do righteousness,
For My salvation is about to come
And My righteousness to be revealed.
How blessed is the man who does this,
And the son of man who takes hold of it;
Who keeps from profaning the sabbath,
And keeps his hand from doing an evil."
Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the
Lord say,
"The Lord will surely separate me from His people"
Neither let the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree. "
For thus says the Lord,
"To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
And choose what pleases Me,
And hold fast My covenant,
To them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial,
And a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which
will not be cut off.

Philip is standing there on the road and he sees a chariot coming by. The Spirit says to him, "See that chariot?" Philip said, "Yes, how could I miss it? I'm on a desert road and there's not a lot of traffic!" "Well, go up and talk to him," says the Spirit. I don't quite understand how the Spirit talks to us. Scripture tells us that God's Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are children of God, so that spiritual men and women hear his voice and respond. I was at Lyons restaurant at 6:30 one morning preparing to teach. I finished breakfast, went outside, and met a black man who said to me, in accented English, "Excuse me, are you going to Sunnyvale?" I said no, I wasn't. Something inside me, however, said, "Take this man to his house in Sunnyvale. I thought, "But I've got plans. I've got to go to church, I don't want to go to Sunnyvale..." So I put him in my car, discovered that he was a Nigerian student at Stanford University, and he had just finished the night shift as a dishwasher at the restaurant. Next thing I knew I invited him to church, and waited for him to change. Now he comes to church here and sits under the word of God. And guess what his name is? Philip!

Philip now asks the Ethiopian eunuch, "Do you understand what you're reading?" and the humble response is, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me? How can I know unless someone interprets for me, unless someone can make sense out of what I'm reading?" Philip will go on to interpret what he is reading, as we will see, by "preaching Jesus to him. "

Now if you're ever told by the Spirit to leave Sacramento and go to Santa Barbara, and along the way you stop at a rest stop and you see a black limousine there with a man sitting in the back reading Isaiah, and you stick your head in the window and say "What are you reading?" and this man says, "I just bought this new Bible but I don't understand what it means," you should tell him just what Philip here tells the Ethiopian eunuch!

2. PHILIP PREACHES JESUS Acts 8:32-35

Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: "He was led as a sheep to slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He does not open His mouth. In humiliation His judgment was taken away; Who shall relate His generation? For His life is removed from the earth. "

And the eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself, or of someone else?" And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.

The eunuch is reading from the Septuagint, from a scroll which he perhaps bought in Jerusalem, and he comes up with this amazing question, "Of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself, or someone else?" Philip probably answered, "Sir, the prophet is speaking of the Servant of God, the suffering and bruised but triumphant One who conquered death and who is going to appear one day on the stage of history." This passage has been a real problem to many, especially Jewish people looking for the Messiah, as most of the Old Testament Messianic passages speak of the Jewish Messiah appearing on the stage of human history in glory, power and victory over Israel's enemies, as the great King and Peacemaker. The idea of the suffering Messiah was foreign to the Jewish mind, and this Ethiopian is having the same problem; he can't figure out the passage. But even the disciples did not understand the Scriptures and the suffering Servant until Jesus in his resurrected body said to them, "O foolish men and slow at heart to believe in all the prophets have spoken. Was it not necessary for the Christ and Messiah to suffer these things, and to enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and the prophets he explained to them the things concerning himself in all of the Scriptures." (Luke 24:25-27)

Philip taught the Ethiopian that the "He" in Isaiah's words, "He was led as a sheep to slaughter; and as a lamb before his shearer is silent, so He does not open his mouth," was Jesus, the Man whom John the Baptist later called, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

Jesus is your Passover Lamb, he told the eunuch; God laid upon him all of our sins and he voluntarily died in our place. When Jesus was arrested on false charges he remained silent before his shearers, the Sanhedrin, refusing to defend himself. "In humiliation and judgment he was taken away," wrote Isaiah. Jesus' judgment was erased by his death, following his unjust trial. "Who shall relate his generation"--none of his race stepped in to protest that his trial was a miscarriage of justice. "For his life is removed from the earth"--Jesus died on

the cross, but God raised him from the dead, Philip told the Ethiopian, and to those who confess their sins and repent of them, Jesus would give them eternal life and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Part of our witnessing is to know the Scriptures

Philip was only a waiter, but he knew the Scriptures. The disciples were only fishermen, but they knew the Scriptures. Part of our witnessing is to understand the Scriptures, the Old Testament and the New. It is imperative that we continue to bathe ourselves in the Scriptures. This week I played the tapes of the New Testament recorded by Jack Bradley. I played tape after tape, just bathing myself in the gospels. Learn the Scriptures so that too too can "Be of Me witnesses. "

Philip began to preach Jesus from Isaiah 53, but he didn't stay in that passage. He went on to show how Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament. Philip knew his Bible. The apostles and the disciples knew the Old Testament Scriptures. Through the Holy Spirit they knew how to apply them to the Messiah, as well as to the basic human needs of men and women.

Something happens between verses 35 and 36, because the religious stranger becomes a brother.

3. The Religious Stranger Becomes A Brother Acts 8:36-40

And as they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" He ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch; and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch saw him no more, but went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus; and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities, until he came to Caesarea.

What happened? Philip began to preach that Jesus Christ was the Messiah, and the Ethiopian eunuch, a proselyte Jew who knew the Old Testament, now saw that Christ was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies; so he repented of his view of who Jesus was, accepted him by faith as Lord and Savior, his sins were forgiven, and he was given the gift of the Holy Spirit. The next thing the Ethiopian needed to do, according to Philip's teaching, was to show by an outward symbol, water baptism, the inner reality that by Christ's death, burial and resurrection on his behalf he had cut off his old life and entered into his new life in Christ.

So the Ethiopian needed to be baptized. As he and Philip rode along in the chariot, they "came to some water" (verse 36), and the eunuch said, "Look! Water!" I ask you, have you ever seen a pool of water in a desert? Be realistic. I traveled all over the Sahara desert and would have loved to have seen a pool of water. I saw a Coke machine, but I never saw a pool of water. Philip baptizes the new convert, and as they came out of the water, "the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away." The word "snatched" means seized, grabbed with force. Here we go again. The Holy Spirit is in charge of his church. He just wants Philip to be involved in part of this man's story. Philip wasn't with this man when he was chosen to hold all the honor and responsibility of being treasurer for the queen of Ethiopia; Philip wasn't around when he was converted to Judaism; he wasn't there when the Ethiopian had a hunger for the Word; he wasn't there when the man bought the scroll of Isaiah. But he was there on a desert road and did what God wanted him to do, then he was snatched away by the Spirit. He does not get to see the end of the story, and we don't either, although we do have reason to believe that this conversion marked the introduction of the gospel into Africa. And what about the Ethiopian eunuch? He was so excited about what happened to him he went driving along by himself, rejoicing, which is a manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit.

What a marvelous text this is! Here we have an illustration of how hungry the world is to hear the gospel. Notice that we've been talking about a religious stranger. Here is a passage about a man who had part of the truth, but not the whole truth. Here was a humble man, asking to be taught. How many more are out there asking the same question? What opportunities we have! May God give us one more week to witness. We are living in the age of the Spirit, who has given us his power to enable us to witness to a hungry world. He just wants us to be available, to show up. One day we may be ministering to a whole group of people who are

coming to the Lord in handfuls, while another day we may be standing on a freeway, fixing a flat, and one person shows up. Let us be ready and available at all times to "be of Me witnesses. "

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