

Waking the Sleeping Giant - 20

Seize the Opportunity!

Read: Acts 8:1-8; 26-40

It's easy to turn inward and become focused on ourselves. It's only natural. After all, we're programmed that way. All our lives we grow up thinking that we are the most important person we know. We spend our time trying to please ourselves. Slowly, as we mature, we learn that others are important too, and when we come to Christ, and embrace His mission, we should begin to focus on others in a big way.

Yet even Christians can fall into the trap of becoming refocused on themselves because at the very core of human nature there is a tendency toward selfishness. It's a part of what we call the old nature. It's habitual, and habit patterns are very hard to break. Sometimes it takes powerful forces or events to blast us out of these comfortable patterns. But unless they are changed, we will quit growing.

The early Church found itself in such a situation. They had seen a great move of God in their lives. It had begun at Pentecost, and the Church in Jerusalem had become dynamic. But the message needed to get out of Jerusalem. Jesus intended for it to be preached to everyone, so God did one of those things that He does when His people get complacent - He shook them up as we saw in the last sermon.

Persecution arose against the Church and they were scattered. Only the apostles and a core group stayed in Jerusalem, and those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the Word. God took the salt and poured it out of the saltshaker, where it could do its job. The early Church had not lost its desire to share the good news, but it just needed a push to get it out where the people were.

The desire to share Jesus should be natural for Christians. If you love Jesus, you want to share Him with others. The desire is there, but even when God thrusts us out into the marketplace, sometimes the opportunities pass us by. In the hustle and bustle of human life, our encounters with people are brief and fleeting. We hurl past one another like speeding chariots on an old Roman road. How do we catch those chariots of opportunity? How do we keep those witnessing opportunities from passing us by?

The story of Philip's witness to the Ethiopian eunuch is a story of a divine appointment - of a seized opportunity to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. It's the story of how one man caught the chariot of opportunity and led another man to Christ.

The first thing necessary is a searching sinner. In order to lead someone to Christ, you have to have someone who needs to be led. There must be someone who has been prepared by the Holy Spirit. That is essential. Among all the other important elements necessary in the witnessing encounter, two are fundamental. You must have a sinner; and you must have a soul-winner. Whatever the method or program, all have one thing in common - a lost person encounters a saved person, a sinner encounters a soul-winner. The searching sinner in our text is the Ethiopian eunuch. It says about him in verse 27, that he was an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. Several things stand out about him. The first of which is that he was respectable. He was a court official of the queen.

You might say that he was a member of her cabinet. In the East, eunuchs often attained positions of great authority and power. Our Scripture text indicates that he was in charge of the treasury of Ethiopia. His title could have been Secretary of the Treasury. This was no menial job. We see some indication of his status and prestige in verse 28. It says that he was sitting in his chariot. Very few people could afford the luxury of having their own chariot in those days. This was the luxury BMW or Mercedes of that day. It was his status symbol. Here was a man of great influence and wealth. Here was a man with great authority and power. Here was a man of status and prestige. Here was a very respectable citizen indeed. But he was still lost.

It's possible to be the most respected citizen in the community, to be a person of prestige and power, influence and wealth, and be lost and on your way to an eternity without Christ. The Bible says in Romans 3:23, *"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* A person's status, position, prestige, influence, wealth, education and authority do not save them from the consequences of sin. Only a personal relationship with Jesus transfers one from the roll of the lost to the roll of the saved.

We also need to see that this man was religious. In verses 27 and 28 we learn that this man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading from the book of Isaiah the prophet. He was on his way back from worshipping God in Jerusalem. Here we have what was known as a Gentile God-fearer. This was a person who believed in the true God, but who had not become a full proselyte of the Jewish religion. Somewhere along the line, he had become convinced that the God of Israel was the true God and now he had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

No doubt, he desired to come there and learn the truth about God. I'm sure his heart was eager with anticipation as he set out for Jerusalem. There he can visit the holy Temple, make his offerings, converse with the Rabbis, walk in the court of the Gentiles, talk to the Priests and Levites. The scholars of the law could explain the finer points of faith to him. Perhaps his position as a court official would provide an open door to the Sanhedrin council. Perhaps he could even get an interview with the High Priest.

So, he set out on his journey. It was a journey of perhaps 1,500 kilometres. He journeyed long up the Nile and then across the desert sands of Sinai, and finally, through the hill country of Judea. Then there it was - the Holy City. The great walled city appeared before his eager eyes. And there in the midst of the city was the Temple of God, bathed in golden splendour, like a fiery beacon on Mt. Moriah. At last, he had arrived. But his journey was to end in disappointment.

What he found in the Holy City was hypocrisy, materialism, intolerance, exclusivity and sectarianism. What he found there was not a living faith, but a dead Judaism. And so, the Scripture says that he was returning, sitting in his chariot, reading the Scriptures, trying to make sense of his faith. This is a sad picture of religious humanity without Christ.

The tragedy of our day is that so many people attend religious services yet go home with empty hearts. There are thousands in our country today who have joined a religious organisation but have not met Jesus yet. Religion is not the door to a genuine encounter with God, in fact, it is the greatest barrier.

We also need to see that this man was receptive. We notice in verse 28 that he was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. God had prepared this man to hear. Here we have a searching sinner whose heart is empty, whose life is unfulfilled, but who is receptive to the truth. He is typical of many today. Often people we encounter today are inwardly looking for something that's real. They know their life is unfulfilled, but don't know how to find that fulfilment. They're open, receptive and ready for someone to share the truth with them.

They are like this Ethiopian – they're searching. Here was a man who was responsible but lost, religious but lost, receptive but lost. He is like so many of your friends, your co-workers, your neighbours, even some in your family. What a searching sinner needs is a soul-winner. And that's who this man found in Philip. Philip was one of the first deacons in the early Church, but he knew the highest calling of any Christian was to be a soul-winner. So, Philip began to preach the Gospel. We see him down in the city of Samaria, proclaiming Christ to the multitudes gathered there and a revival broke out. People were being touched by the power of God. Multitudes were being saved, and the Scripture says that there was great rejoicing in that city.

What we need to notice about Philip is that he was open to being led by God. In the midst of that great revival in Samaria, he was in tune with the leading of the Lord. He was listening and open to what the Holy Spirit would say to him. In verse 26 it tells us that an angel of the Lord said to Philip, *"Go south to the road - the desert road - that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."* Because he was open, God was able to speak to him through this angel, and Philip heard the word of the Lord.

Philip was also obedient. God spoke to him and told him to leave that great revival meeting and go down to a virtually uninhabited dusty desert road. Philip could have said, *"Wait a minute, Lord, things are going well here. Revival has broken out, the Spirit is moving, people are rejoicing. I'm having the time of my life. I can't go just yet."* But Philip didn't say that. Philip obeyed. If we want to be soul-winners, we must be both open and obedient to the word of the Lord and to the leading of the Spirit. If we don't want the chariots of opportunity to pass us by, we must be in tune with the Spirit's leadership and responsive to His call. Philip was, and so he journeyed down this desert road toward Gaza.

Philip was not only open to the leading of God and obedient to the word of God, he was also quite observant. It was on this road to Gaza that he spied a chariot with an Ethiopian eunuch sitting in it, reading the Scripture. Our passage says in verse 29, that the Spirit told Philip, *"Go to that chariot and stay near it."* The Spirit directed Philip to the chariot and Philip discerned an opportunity to share Jesus Christ.

In verse 30 it says that Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. *"Do you understand what you are reading?"* Philip asked. Philip was observant enough to note an opportunity to share Christ from the Scripture. So, he asked a leading question to get the conversation started. We see the result of this in verse 31.

After Philip asked the Ethiopian if he understood what he was reading, the Ethiopian said, *"How can I ... unless someone explains it to me?"* So, he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Because Philip was open, obedient and observant, he had caught this chariot and now had an opportunity to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

If we want to be used by God to bring people to Christ, we must also be open, obedient and observant. We must be open to the leading of the Lord, obedient to go and share our faith, and observant enough to seize all opportunities to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. We cannot afford to pass by or let ourselves be passed by those chariots of opportunity. We must seize every opportunity to share our faith in Christ, and those opportunities only come when we place ourselves in contact with people.

Notice also that there was a Scripture involved in this witnessing situation. This is not by accident, but by God's design. If we would be effective, we must be prepared to use Scripture to bring people to Christ when God leads us. This Ethiopian eunuch was reading from Isaiah 53, and from that passage of Scripture Philip shared the Good News of Christ.

We need to understand that the Scripture is inspired. In short, it's God's book. From beginning to end, it is God's revelation to us. It is inspired by the Holy Spirit. That is why the Ethiopian eunuch was reading it and that is why Philip helped him understand it.

Secondly, we need to understand that the Scripture is instructive. The Scripture reveals Christ to us. Here, the Ethiopian was reading from the Old Testament, from the book of Isaiah. Christ is the central theme of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. In Philip's day, all they had was the Old Testament. The New Testament wasn't written at that time. And so, here in the book of Acts when we see them reading or preaching from the Scriptures, it's from the Old Testament. But they're preaching Christ from the Old Testament. From Genesis through Malachi, Christ is the central theme. The Bible is instructive in that it reveals Christ. Today, it's even easier for us because we have the New Testament which speaks directly of Christ.

Thirdly, we need to understand that the Scripture is indispensable to bring people to Christ. When we share the Gospel with people, we need to share from the Word of God. It is the Word of God which has the authority we need to convict and convince people of their need.

Finally, this witnessing encounter ended with a supernatural salvation coming to this Ethiopian eunuch. Salvation is something God does by His Spirit. We can't save anyone. We can only share the Good News with them. It is the Holy Spirit's job to convict them of sin, to convince them of their need for a Saviour and to open their heart to the incredible love of God in Christ. This is what happened to this Ethiopian eunuch.

The first thing that happened was conviction. We see the Ethiopian saying in verse 36, *"Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptised?"* They were travelling along that dusty road, Philip was preaching Jesus from Isaiah, the Holy Spirit was moving in the Ethiopian's heart, and now he expresses a desire to come to know this Jesus. God was at work, and the Ethiopian was convicted of his need.

The second thing that happened was confession. In some of the later manuscripts verse 37 says, And 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."* Faith is a heart matter. The Ethiopian wanted to be baptised. In other words, he wanted to make a commitment to Christ. He asked if he could and Philip said, *"If you believe with all your heart."* The Ethiopian confessed his faith in Christ. He said, *"I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."* And as Paul tells us in Romans 10:10, *"For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved."*

Then finally, we have a commitment. The Ethiopian followed through on his faith and confession and was baptised. Verse 38 says that he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptised him. Here was the follow-through. Baptism is often the first step of obedience for the believer.

Baptism, in itself, doesn't save anyone. But those who are saved desire to follow the Lord in baptism. The Scripture says that we are to *"repent and be baptised."* Baptism is an outward symbol of an inward work of grace. It is a public confession of faith, indicating the Christian is willing to live for Jesus. In this act we see the Ethiopian eunuch's commitment to follow the Lord. In this passage of Scripture, we see a man brought to Christ because of the faithful witness of a sensitive soul-winner. We see an opportunity seized by an obedient Christian to share the Gospel with a respectable, yet lost man. We see God using His Word to reveal Christ and the Spirit of God working in the heart of someone who was searching for answers.

All this was made possible because a searching sinner came in contact with a sensitive soul-winner. God desires that we all be the kind of sensitive soul-winner that Philip was. This kind of commitment on the part of believers to share their faith in Christ is what made the early Church so great. The early Church was effective in spreading the Gospel throughout the known world because it was made up of believers who saw themselves as ambassadors for Christ and agents of the Kingdom of God.

Now the most famous part of this story comes at the end after Philip had led this Ethiopian eunuch to Christ. The Scripture says, in verses 39 and 40, that when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch never saw him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and travelled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Philip's work was over and the Spirit snatched him away. The Ethiopian looked around and could not find Philip. But he rejoiced that he had found the Lord. Philip found himself elsewhere all of a sudden. But he didn't look back. He just kept preaching the Word. So should we, wherever we find ourselves.

So, the questions before us all today are simple, but confronting: Are we seizing the opportunities God gives us every day to share our faith and tell others about Jesus? Are we even looking for those opportunities? Do we trust God to prepare the hearts of those people to Whom He leads us to share the word of our testimony? Are we actively praying each day for those divine opportunities where God leads us to 'that' person, like He led Philip to this Ethiopian? If we can't answer 'yes' to questions like that, then I fear there is only one question before us: Why are we still here?