

Understanding the Book

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer
Autumn Ridge Church, Rochester, MN
February 19-20, 2011

No. 7: The Best of Books
Scripture: Acts 8:26-40

The Bible describes the church as a family and before we look at God's word I want to present an item of family business.

The matter concerns The Center and the direction we should go from here. A year ago we voted as a congregation to build The Center and to start a capital campaign called Sharing Hope.

When the pledges came in we knew we did not have enough funds to finish the building. So we decided to complete the large multipurpose room leaving the classrooms, the kitchen and the other parts unfinished. As money became available we would then complete these rooms.

We made the decision not to go into debt for this building. We would only spend what we received. We are resolved to stick to that principle.

It has been encouraging to see the progress on The Center since we broke ground last fall. We look forward to the building being opened in May.

In my own mind I thought that once the Sharing Hope campaign was completed we might have a smaller campaign to see if we could finish the building in three or four years time.

However, there is a new development that I want to tell you about. Because of favorable prices for materials and lower bids than expected from the subcontractors we have been able to build more of The Center than we anticipated.

Initially we thought we had enough money to complete half of it. But it now appears we have enough money to complete three quarters of it. This is very good news and I believe that a large part of the credit must go to our Building Implementation Committee who have done a splendid job managing the funds.

As a result of this surprising progress the question has been raised should we try and finish off the entire building now rather than wait until later as we had originally planned? There are some obvious advantages to doing this.

First we would be able to use all of the building now instead of waiting for several years.

In addition there are possible savings.

For example we have learned that if the contractor takes all their equipment away in May and then brings it back later it will cost \$50,000 to move everything off site and then back on again.

We get nothing for that \$50,000.

It is just the cost of interrupting the project.

We also have been made aware that materials prices are going up. Copper and drywall are increasing.

We don't know the exact amount but it could cost as much as \$100,000 or more to complete The Center later.

However, there is a down side to this.

It may be wise to stay the course.

We are not even a year into our Sharing Hope Campaign so it is early to talk about extending it.

We have done a lot of fundraising recent for The Center, the Compassion Evangelical Hospital, and our mission and ministry budget.

Our congregation has responded magnificently.

We don't want to go back to you too often.

Nor do we want to be known as the church that always asking for money, even for very good causes.

At our Elder Board meeting a week ago we looked at these two sides of the issue and we couldn't decide which course to take. We know this isn't a moral issue of right or wrong but it is an issue that has implications for our church whatever decision we make.

So we decided to ask for your help.

The book of James says, "If any of you lacks wisdom he should ask God who gives generously to all . . . and it will be given to him."

The truth is we lack wisdom about The Center.

We don't know what to do.

So we are asking that you pray with us.

Together let us ask God to guide us and direct us so that we make the right decision.

Once you have prayed, please let the Elders know what you hear God saying. Tell us whether you think we should finish The Center now or wait till later.

On the screen are listed some ways you can contact the church leadership. All of our Elders and pastors want to be available to you to hear your comments, to answer questions and to get a sense of where the Holy Spirit is guiding this church.

Members of the Building Implementation Committee will be available in the Ministry Center to answer your questions.

Last week I was reading Philippians chapter 2 where Paul says, **"Make my joy complete by being likeminded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose."**

Our desire in waiting on God in prayer is that we will be likeminded so that we go forward together under the banner of Jesus Christ.
So please use the next few weeks to pray and talk together so that we may discern the will of God.

Whether or not we complete The Center now or later there are opportunities for us to save money by helping with both cleaning and construction.
Everybody high school age and older can participate.

You can indicate your interest in helping two ways.
First you can put your name, phone and email on your Welcome Card and write, "I'll help with The Center."
Then drop it in the offering bag.

Second, you can stop by the Ministry Center and sign up there.

Now on to the word of God.
Please open your Bible to Acts chapter 8 and take out your message outline as we look together at one of the most thrilling passages of the New Testament under the title of **"Understanding the Book"**.

This is a magnificent portion of scripture.
It has much to teach us about evangelism, obedience and even baptism. But first and foremost it speaks to us about God and the way he operates in the world. The first truth we notice is that **GOD DIRECTS HIS WORK.**

"Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza'." (v 26)

A new stage for the gospel is about to begin.
A country is about to be penetrated with the good news for the first time. But it is God who is directing the work. It is not the Apostles or the seven deacons who have recently been appointed.

It is an angel of the Lord who gives detailed direction to Philip.
Philip was sent to the desert road that goes for 60 miles from Jerusalem to Gaza near the Mediterranean Coast.
It continued on to Egypt and the African Continent.



However let's notice that for God's work to be done two things need to happen.

First, **Philip needed to listen.**

Philip had to be open to the voice of God.

There is not much point in God's angels speaking if God's agents are not listening.

This is an appropriate reminder to us as we begin this period of waiting on God.

We don't want to jump to conclusions about The Center.

We must listen before we speak.

We must understand before we obey.

We may not have angels speaking to us, but we certainly have the Spirit of the Lord speaking to us.

Now what does the Spirit of the Lord sound like?

Occasionally he might be an audible voice but most of the time he is an inner voice.

We are praying or reading scripture and an impression comes to our mind.

For myself I can't always distinguish whether it is God or just my wandering imagination so I put it to the test. When I am praying and a person comes to my mind I either pick up the phone or I email them.

I ask if I can pray for them or help in any way. Sometimes they are simply glad to hear from me but at other times it is clear that God has prompted me to make that call. One of the exciting things about the Christian life is expecting God to speak and developing a listening attitude.

Second **Philip had to be willing to do the unexpected.**

When the angel speaks to him Philip is involved in the greatest revival since the Day of Pentecost. What makes it extraordinary is that it is taking place among the Samaritans. These were a race of people who were loathed by the Jews and the feeling was mutual.

Before he left earth Jesus told his church to go into Samaria. In obedience Philip has gone to Samaria and the Holy Spirit has anointed his ministry in a powerful way. Evil spirits were cast out, people were healed and many believed. Luke tells us, **"There was great joy in that city." (v 8)**

Now God is telling Philip to go off into the desert.

It doesn't make sense unless you accept that God directs his work and knows what he is doing. Why leave a revival to go on a retreat?

But Philip is not only listening to God, he is obeying God for we are told, **"So he started out." (v 27)**

Sometimes in life God calls us to do the unexpected. From our vantage point it seems absurd, but from God's perspective it makes perfect sense for he sees the whole picture not just the single line of the drawing that is apparent to us.

If you are involved in a ministry draw strength from this grand truth that God directs his work.

Listen to what he has to say, even if it involves risk. Indeed especially if it involves risk.

For as John Eldridge writes, "Life is not a problem to be solved but an adventure to be lived.

God has rigged the world in such a way that it only works when we embrace risk as the theme of our lives, which is to say only when we live by faith."

The second grand truth to emerge from this passage is that **GOD CARES FOR THE INDIVIDUAL.**

He sent Philip out into the desert to meet just one man.

That is God's way. He not only cares for the masses and the throngs, he cares for one person.

Out of all the billions of people in the earth God knows you. He knows your name and he knows about all you.

God desires for you to have his very best.

So let's meet this man that was so dear to God's heart.

He was an Ethiopian.

The Ethiopia of those days corresponds to what we now call the Upper Nile.

It stretched from Aswan to Khartoum.

This Ethiopian had traveled 200 miles to Jerusalem to worship. He might have been a Jew by birth, as the Jewish dispersion had spread to North Africa, or he may he have been a God-fearer.

That is a Gentile who converts to Judaism.

But there was a problem. He was a eunuch.

He is a victim of the oriental harem.

The Old Testament Law said that a eunuch could not go into the temple to worship because of his physical mutilation (Deuteronomy 23:1).

As a eunuch he has to stay at a distance.

But the prophet Isaiah had foretold a time when eunuchs would be welcomed into God's kingdom.

That time is has arrived.

This poor man has no hope of posterity or family.

But God is going to give him eternal life and a forever family.

This Ethiopian held a very important position as Secretary of the Treasury for Queen Candace.

Candace was not a literal name but a title given to the Queen Mother, just as the title Pharaoh was used to refer to the King of Egypt.

There are two ways that God cares for this Ethiopian.

First **God provides his book.**

This busy man wants to redeem the hours spent on his journey. So he does what many of us do on a long plane ride. He reads.

He didn't have a Kindle but he did pick up a scroll at the Temple bookstore when he was in Jerusalem.

It was the prophecy of Isaiah.

That was perfect for his needs. Isaiah wonderfully tells the story of the gospel. It is the reason why it is the most quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament.

This important man is reading it.

What a marvelous example to those who govern our national affairs. Here is a leading politician of his day reading the word of God.

The Scripture will help any leader make wise decisions when they are concerned with the affairs of state.

So this Ethiopian is holding God's word in his hand.

The only problem is he doesn't understand it and if you have ever read the prophecy of Isaiah you can sympathize.

It is very hard going in parts.

At times you just have to shake your head and say "I haven't a clue."

But God cares for this man.

The Lord not only provides his book.

God provides his servant.

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

Now Philip was one of the seven deacons appointed in Acts 6 to help the apostles distribute food.

He is also one of the best evangelists of his day.

In obedience to the Spirit of God Philip goes up to the chariot and jogs along beside it.

It can't have been going very fast unless Philip was an Olympic sprinter.

Philip can hear this Ethiopian official reading the prophecy of Isaiah.

In those days everybody read out loud.

Reading quietly to yourself wasn't invented for centuries.

So all the servants traveling with the Ethiopian would hear the scriptures as well.

Philip asked, **"Do you understand what you are reading?" (v 30)** One of the best ways to build a relationship and present the gospel is to ask questions. This puts people at ease. It is non-threatening.

It reveals what they are interested in.

Jesus was always asking people questions and Philip is following his example.

The Ethiopian replies, **"How can I, unless someone explains it to me?" (v 31)**

Here we see that the Bible needs to be explained.

That is the privilege we have as Christians.

We look for opportunities to explain God's truth.
So the Ethiopian invited Philip to sit with him in the chariot.

Next comes the glorious truth that **GOD ANNOUNCES GOOD NEWS ABOUT JESUS.**

The eunuch was reading this passage.

"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." (v 32-33)

That is part of Isaiah 53. It is a remarkable chapter.

It prophesies the Messiah's birth, life, ministry, substitutionary death and victorious resurrection.

The Ethiopian is focusing on the verses which describe the Messiah as the willing sacrifice for sinners.

The Ethiopian asked the natural question, **"Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" (v 34)**

The Ethiopian is really asking, who is the one upon whom all our sins and iniquities are laid?

Who is this by whose stripes we are healed?
Who is this Lamb who suffers without a word?

Philip knew the answer to that question.

Jesus had applied Isaiah 53 to himself on a number of occasions.

So, **"Philip began with that very passage of scripture and told him the good news about Jesus." (v 35)**

Philip preached Jesus. That is always good news.

First Philip would speak about sin, that black condition of the human heart. He would explain that all of us have sinned and come short of the glory and expectation of God. All of us have fallen.

Then he would speak about the judgment of God upon sin, which is death.

God himself has linked the chain of sin and death together so that no person can break it.

The wages of sin is death. The soul that sins must die.

Then we can hear Philip telling the good news of Jesus and the atoning blood of the Lamb of God.

That he died for our sins according to the scriptures and was buried.

Philip would speak of the glorious resurrection of our Savior who was raised for our justification, and who will return again some day.

Philip told this seeking Ethiopian the good news about Jesus. That is what people need to hear. This is what they long for.

In Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Libya, Iraq and Bahrain (and Madison), people are demonstrating in the streets.



They think they want political freedom but the real yearning in their soul is for spiritual freedom.

Every one of those dear people need the good news of Jesus and that is what Philip explained bumping along in that chariot in the desert.

As Philip explained the good news of Jesus the Ethiopian was oblivious to the scenery and the heat.

For the truth of the gospel had captivated his heart.

He wanted to respond in some way.

God anticipates our need before we have it for **GOD OFFERS THE JOY OF BAPTISM.**

As they traveled along the road, they came to water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" (v 36)

"Philip I have heard what you are saying.

I believe that Jesus is the suffering servant of Isaiah 53.

I want to know him and follow him.

I want to be baptized into his death and resurrection.

I want to be washed clean and have a new start."

If you have a New International Version you will notice there is no verse 37 in this chapter.

Instead you find it in the margin because this verse is not found in the best manuscripts.

It was added later probably from a baptismal liturgy that was used by the early church.

Here is the missing verse, **"Philip said, if you believe with all you heart you may. The eunuch answered 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God'." (v 37)**

That verse may not belong in the Canon of Scriptures but it certainly belongs in Christian experience.

Every one of us needs to come to that place where we believe with all our heart that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

So the Ethiopian stopped the chariot.

“Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.” (v 38)

Philip would have baptized this new convert in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Notice this is believer’s baptism.

That is the biblical order.

You believe, then you are baptized.

The water mentioned was probably a wadi or an oasis.

It is likely that caravans had stopped there to water their camels. There is no need for us to imagine the place was deserted. It is quite probable there was a considerable congregation sitting on the bank.

Baptism is to be a public witness of our faith in Christ.

The Psalmist had predicted the day when Ethiopia would submit herself to God.

(Psalm 68:31)

That day has dawned.

Then we read something rather remarkable.

“When they came out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again.” (v 39)

Philip’s work was done. He was now needed in Azotus which is about 19 miles away.

When Philip signed up to be a preacher he didn’t know he would be called to do time travel. But he is not the first.

It also happened to Elijah in the Old Testament and to Jesus in the New.

We know God doesn’t waste his miracles so why does he whisk Philip away?

I think it was to tell the Ethiopian that a miracle had taken place in his soul and that Philip had been divinely sent to him and now was supernaturally removed from him.

It was a divine confirmation to the Ethiopian just after he had become a believer.

It would strengthen him in his new faith.

And the reality is that the Ethiopian doesn’t need the servant now for he has the Savior.

He doesn’t need the evangelist because he has the evangel.

As he went on his way in his chariot, he had God’s book in his hand and the Spirit of Jesus in his heart.

That explains why, **“He went on his way rejoicing.” (v 39)**

Over the years I have had the thrill of baptizing hundreds of people. If I had to describe their reaction in one word it would be joy. I have never seen a person look miserable after they were baptized.

Joy is the consequence of obedience.

This weekend two folk are being baptized in our church.

We rejoice that they have discovered that God cares for them as an individual.

They have heard the good news about Jesus.

They believe in their heart that he is the Son of God.

They are now experiencing the joy of baptism.



The Church Father Irenaeus tells us that when the Ethiopian went back to his own country the Spirit gave him power, "To preach what he had himself believed."

Can you see him at the end of his long journey?

He is riding into the gates of Meroe, the ancient capitol of Ethiopia.

He is singing and rejoicing in the Lord.

He is explaining to all those who will listen "I have found the Lord. I have found him of whom Moses and the prophets spoke.

I have found the Savior of my soul. I have found God."