

Food for Thought—Philip the Evangelist

Image below

Rembrandt's painting of Philip and the Ethiopian Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

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I have always liked the story of Philip the Evangelist, and there are a number of things to ponder in it.

The story begins when the early Christians in Jerusalem begin to be severely persecuted. In response, many Christians leave Jerusalem and scatter, sharing the good news of Christ in the places they pass through and the places they settle. This is a good reminder that God can use hard times for good.

Jesus had indicated many times to the disciples that the good news was for the Samaritans, but this is the first time, it appears, after the resurrection that the gospel has been taken there. Philip is entering new territory both geographically and spiritually. It is a good reminder that God sometimes pushes us into new territory (territory we might not have

entered without that push).

The people of Samaria listen gladly to Philip; they have seen miracles of healing and deliverance through Philip, and they have recognized the reality they see. God doesn't always use miracles as the means of getting people's attention (sometimes He might use the evidence of a person's changed life or a markedly different attitude from the world's attitude). But it is an encounter with some form of God's reality which will cause people to listen and open their hearts. These Samaritans listened, opened their hearts, became believers, and there is "great joy" in Samaria (Acts 8:8).

When the disciples in Jerusalem hear what is going on in Samaria, Peter and John come, and even more ministry ensues. One significant thing I notice here is that Philip is just fine with that. There is nothing to indicate that he was jealous of them nor that he felt territorially about the revival. This is important. Resentfulness is poison and kills. But in absence of jealousy and resentment, life flourishes.

Next, we come to Simon the sorcerer. He had been a spiritual bigshot in Samaria, but when Philip comes, Simon too becomes a believer. When he sees Peter and John's ministry, he wants to buy from Peter an ability to endow the power of the Holy Ghost. Peter bluntly tells him that the gift of the Holy Spirit can't be bought and that Simon's heart is not right. He tells him to repent and ask God's forgiveness. Simon's response is interesting. He seems afraid to pray to

God directly; he instead asks Peter to pray for him. Simon couldn't quite see God as a person he could have a relationship with. And, Simon seemed to see the Holy Spirit as a commodity rather than a person.

What happened with Simon? Did Peter say "OK, I'll pray for you"? Did Simon try to pray and repent? Did Simon's wrong approach to God mean that he hadn't really believed on the Lord ever? The Bible doesn't make that totally clear. Several early church writers indicate that a Simon Magus became an enemy of the church and an influential gnostic or syncretic leader. Whatever was going on with Simon, however, it was not a good thing, and Peter perceives and tells Simon (and us) that the root cause of Simon's wrong heart is... bitterness (and the bondage of sin). I would've expected Peter to name involvement in the occult or something like that as the core of Simon's messed up ideas and desires. But apparently bitterness had been what started him on a wrong path, perhaps the thing that even led him into sorcery in the first place. We tend to underestimate the destructive power of bitterness.

Next the Lord tells Philip to head for the road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza. It must've seemed a little strange. God had sent Philip to a place full of people who were ready to hear the gospel (Samaria). His new orders send him to a place in the wilderness where the chances of finding anyone to speak to were slim. He obeys, and finds that there is someone there out in the middle of nowhere—the Ethiopian Eunuch struggling to understand a scripture passage (Isaiah 53). Wow! What were the odds of that? And God tells Philip to do another odd thing—to approach the Ethiopian (he was a VIP in the Ethiopian court, and I know I'd feel a bit embarrassed and awkward jogging over to his moving chariot and striking up a conversation), but Philip didn't let the awkwardness stop him.

Philip knows well the passage the Ethiopian is struggling with, and explains to him whom the passage is about—which is what the Ethiopian is puzzling over. Philip explains that it is about Jesus and his self-sacrificial suffering. This is a reminder that we need to do our best to understand the scriptures and our faith and be ready to answer questions.

Right after the Ethiopian is baptized, Philip is suddenly snatched away by God and zapped to Azotus (long ago the city of Ashdod of the Philistines—a place, like Samaria, which used to be a very bad place spiritually). Now, this zapping a person from one place to another never happened to any other disciples or apostles—only to Philip. Again, what did Philip NOT do? He did not teach the people at Azotus to venerate teleportation. No, Philip's eyes remained on the Lord. He shares the good news to the people of Azotus and other towns in that region and finally settles in Ceasarea (which is where we see him again in Acts 21, clearly still walking strong with the Lord).

Finally, when the Ethiopian gets on the road again, headed for Ethiopia, verse 39 tells us he went on his way "rejoicing." Joy was in Samaria; Joy is with the Ethiopian. Joy is a hallmark of the Lord's presence.

--Sally