



Philip the Evangelist by Rubens

As I read this morning's passage from Acts 8, I was reminded again about how much this figure of Philip the Evangelist can teach you and me. Philip, this Philip from Acts is not the same one as Philip the Apostle. No, this Philip from Acts Chapter 8 was a common man, probably a man who didn't have a great deal of formal education; maybe he hadn't even finished high school. We know that Philip was of Greek origin, and not a member of the Jews who represented the "in crowd" in the new Christian church. You see, this Philip was kind of an outsider. This Philip that we read about this morning was one of the first Deacons chosen by the church, whose job it was to wait tables.

Hmm... Not a particularly exalted position, right? So, here we have this high school drop-out from the wrong side of the railroad tracks, whose job it is to wait tables at the local rest-home. Now how could God possibly do anything with such a loser???!

Well, the truth is, God can do amazing things with losers like you and me. Philip did have one thing going for him. We read that he, just like his friend Stephen, was filled with the Holy Spirit, and full of the wisdom the Spirit of God provides (see Acts 6:3). And maybe this is the first thing we need to learn from Philip, which is that God really will equip those he calls, and He will precisely prepare them for His purpose (see Rom. 8:28; 1 Thes. 5:24; Mt. 10:19; Lk. 12:11-12).

There is great value in academic preparation. A mind really is a terrible thing to waste. And Jesus warns us against embarking on endeavors for the Gospel without first evaluating the costs and risks involved (see Lk. 14:28). But sometimes I come across a situation where an individual has been putting off for many years committing himself to a particular mission, or ministry, or service for the Lord because he didn't feel sufficiently prepared. And in that type of situation, I long to remind the person of the old Nike Commercial: "Just Do it!" The Lord really does equip those He calls according to His purpose. And Philip the evangelist knew that. So when the Angel of the Lord comes to Him and tells Philip, "Rise and go!" Philip rises and **he's gone!**

If one lesson that the evangelist Philip teaches us is about being willing to respond to God's call with the absolute faith that God will perfectly equip us for that call, another lesson we need to learn here is about how God uses adversity. At this point in Acts, the persecution of the Christians has begun. Stephen, Philip's friend and fellow deacon has been martyred (see Acts 7:54-60). At this time, a certain zealous Jew has begun leading a kind of hit squad, seeking out Christian house churches, and dragging Christian men and women off to prison. By the way, the name of this particular zealous Jew who led these paramilitary goon-squads was Saul of Tarsus (see Acts 8:3). And by this point, the Church itself, confronted with these persecutions had been scattered to the four winds from its central home in Jerusalem (see Acts 8:1).

So what does Philip do? He runs and hides, right? He goes to ground and starts worshiping in secret, right? Well... no, not really! Philip leaves Jerusalem, heads north toward Samaria, and when he gets to a town - perhaps what is now Nablus in the West Bank - Philip goes into the streets and starts proclaiming the Gospel to anybody who will listen (see Acts 8:5). And boy do they listen! And Philip starts performing miracles in the name of Jesus, casting out demons, and healing cripples. And he starts Baptizing people to the faith. And the Church grows like wildfire!

If you study a map of where the Church is mentioned in its first 25 years, you see that at the time of the Resurrection of Jesus, the Gospel is mentioned within a limited area of just 100 miles, between Jerusalem and Capernaum. By the year 40 AD, mention of the Gospel had spread to the northern shores of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, to Paul's home of Tarsus.

Then, by 48 AD, the Gospel had reached the furthest part of Asia Minor along the Aegean Coast, to Ephesus and Troas. By 52 AD, the faith had leapt the Aegean Sea, and spread north into Greece and Macedonia.¹ And by 60 AD, just one generation after the Resurrection, the Christian faith was shaking the power base in the Capital of the known world, in Rome itself. How was this possible??? How could the life of just one man and His twelve friends have spread so far with such amazing speed?

Well, part of the reason for this viral pandemic of the Gospel across the known world was the persecution and dispersion of the Christian communities. And Philip the Evangelist was right there in the middle of all this forced emigration. But he did not give himself to despair. Because, filled with God's Holy Spirit, Philip knew that God had a plan. Philip knew that God could use even adversity to His purpose. So Philip went on glorifying God and witnessing to the Gospel of Christ, even in the depths of this adversity. And just look at the glorious way that God used this Spirit-filled testimony of this one determined Christian! What a difference Philip made in the building of the Kingdom of God, even in the midst of – ***even because of*** – the adversity with which he had been faced.

If the first thing that Philip can teach us is that God really does perfectly equip those whom He calls; and if the second thing we can learn from Philip is that God can use even adversity for the building of His Kingdom; then the final thing that Philip can teach us is that we don't necessarily get to see God's ending to a story.

Acts 8 relates to us the conversion and Baptism of this Ethiopian court official. Now this man was one of the trusted rulers of the Empress Candace, who controlled a vast region between the Upper Nile at Aswan, all the way to present day Khartoum in The Sudan.² This Ethiopian court official was one of the most powerful men on the entire African continent. And doubtless, God had chosen this particular officer to steer the lives of thousands of people toward the Gospel truth, by this man's own conversion and Baptism at the hands of Philip that day on the road to Gaza. But did you notice what happened to Philip? The Bible says that as soon as this Ethiopian official rose from the waters of his Baptism, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, toward the Mediterranean Sea and a town called Azotus (see Acts8:39-40).

You see, Philip doesn't get a chance to stick around and see the full results of God's work. He doesn't get to see the final ending of the story. Philip doesn't have the right to actually witness the full fruition of God's plan through the life of this powerful official, this new convert to Christianity. Because that's just not the way our life as witnesses to the Gospel works.

It's just like Paul said: some of us plant, some of us water, and God causes the growth (see 1Cor.3:6). But none of us are ever promised that we get to stick around long enough to be witnesses to the full flowering of the blessings of God in somebody's life. As witnesses to the Gospel, we are always moving on, you and I. We Christians are always packin' up and movin' on. We're always moving on to our next stop in our journey of Christian witness.

The account of Philip the Evangelist in Acts 8 is cause for such great hope. Here we see an account of the huge difference that even the most humble of human beings can make in the building of God's Kingdom. If we will only have faith that God will perfectly equip us for the task to which he has called us this day. If we can just remain secure that God will use even the adversity of our lives in the building of His kingdom. And if we can truly come to understand that, as faithful witnesses to the Gospel, our task is always just one small part in the redemption of this world and its people. If we can embrace these truths, then by the power of the Holy Spirit of God, our walks through this world will surely be journeys of rejoicing, and of victory, his victory.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen. jwb† 04-29-18

¹ See chart, NIV Study Bible, p. 1709.

² See NIV Study Bible Footnote, pl. 1609, 8:27.