

PHILIP AND THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH:  
A CHAMPION FOR THE LORD  
ACTS 8:26-40

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The cover story of *Parade* magazine several years ago was entitled "What Makes a Champion." (PROJECTOR ON--- PARADE MAGAZINE) The author, apparently a sports reporter, had interviewed hundreds of Olympic athletes over the years. He tried to determine what it is that makes an Olympic champion.

He could not find one particular quality that was the key to athletic success. He did find certain themes that seemed to factor into what it was that set the gold medalists above the rest. A foundational factor, of course, is genes. Certain physical abilities were essential. The author discovered that some had found success as the result of overcoming various disabilities. Track star Wilma Rudolph (WILMA RUDOLPH) wore a leg brace until she was eleven. She earlier suffered from polio. In her effort to overcome that disability she discovered that she could run fast.

Other champions seemed to have an uncommon courage and determination. (PROJECTOR OFF) Some seemed driven to please a loved one. Others attributed their success to a great coach. With the anniversary of D-day on Friday and Memorial Day just a little before that we are reminded of champions who went off to war to defend our country. Most of them did not think of themselves as champions. But Tom Brokaw rightly remembered them as the greatest generation.

Some of us in our younger years dreamed of being a champion in some particular sport. As a kid I dreamed about being a champion in lots of sports. When it was spring and summer I dreamed about being a great baseball player. When it was fall I dreamed about being a great football player. When it was winter, I dreamed about being a great basketball player. Perhaps I am not alone in that. Most of us never had the natural ability to make that kind of success a reality.

As we have grown older and have become involved in careers and education and families, we have perhaps dreamed of being a champion in other pursuits. We have dreamed of being a great businessman or a great writer or a great teacher or a great doctor or super mom or a great golfer.

Claiming to be Christian people many of us have also dreamed about being champions for God. We realize that becoming part of God's family is nothing that we can earn. It is only a gift that can be received by trusting in Christ. But once we are truly Christians, there is some say that we have about what we do with our relationship with God. Some of us have dreamed about doing great things for God, or at least things that have some eternal significance.

The reality is that greatness in God's judgment is possible for every one of us. Being champions for God is not beyond the grasp of any of us. That does not necessarily mean that we will be famous. But we can have eternal significance in our realm of influence. God has given us a manual that describes how we can achieve it. There is no one passage in the Bible that gives us a complete and exhaustive description of how that greatness can be achieved. But the passage before us this morning provides a beautiful model for how to have a life that has eternal significance.

We have been looking at the history of the early church as recorded in the Book of Acts. I have suggested that v. 8 of #1 provides a theme for Luke's account. Jesus there says to His disciples, **"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."** We have seen thus far in our study that Jerusalem has been filled with this witness about Jesus. Last time we saw that this witness has begun to expand beyond Jerusalem. Today we will take a closer look at an individual who played a key role in this expansion. This guy was truly a champion for God.

I.

When we looked at the first part of #8 last time, we were introduced to Philip. (PROJECTOR ON--- I PHILIPS USE OF HIS SPIRITUAL GIFT) Verses 4-25 described PHILIP'S USE OF HIS SPIRITUAL GIFT. Carl Lewis won nine gold medals in track and field. In the *Parade* article he (CARL LEWIS) is quoted as saying, **"A lot of it is in the genes. I couldn't have lasted this long without being blessed with my physical makeup."** The physical assets that Carl Lewis started with were obviously beyond his control.

In a similar way we Christians start out with spiritual gifts that are beyond our control. First Corinthians #12 v. 11 (1 CORINTHIANS 12:11) speaks of these spiritual abilities: **"All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills."** Some spiritual gifts by their very nature involve more prominence and recognition from other people. But the key to success in the Lord's view is making faithful use of whatever spiritual talent and natural ability we are given.

Philip clearly had the gift of evangelism. We were introduced to him first in #6 where he was listed as one of the seven men who were chosen to distribute aid to the widows in the church in Jerusalem. Apparently he was faithful in fulfilling that practical responsibility. But his real spiritual talent was as an evangelist.

When persecution arose in Jerusalem against the Greek-speaking Jews who had become followers of Jesus, Philip moved to Samaria. (JUDEA, SAMARIA, GALILEE) Samaria, which was to the north of Jerusalem and Judea, was the first stop outside of Judea that Jesus had mentioned in His command and prophecy that the gospel was to be taken to the ends of the earth. The first part of the chapter tells us that Philip did indeed serve as a witness to these Samaritans, who were half Jewish and half Gentile by ancestry. He was a powerful evangelist. Luke says that he also performed miracles.

Many, many people responded to his witness. Eventually Peter and John came down to see what was going on and to support this outreach of the gospel. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Philip was successful largely because he made great use of his spiritual gift. Christians can be given jobs that don't seem to make the best use of their talents. They can be persecuted. They can be banished to Samaria. But faithful Christians, Christians of championship caliber, will use and develop their spiritual gifts no matter where you put them or what you do to them.

God has given His children spiritual gifts like faith and helping and encouragement and teaching and giving to be used in building up the church, the body of Christ. Imagine how we parents would feel if we wrapped up presents for our kids at Christmas time, put them under the tree, and passed them out on Christmas day, but our kids just laid them aside without even opening them, let alone trying them out.

Can you imagine how the Lord must feel when he has given us gifts through the Holy Spirit as well as natural abilities, yet we never develop them or use them or sometimes never even figure out what they are? Champions for God will always develop and use their spiritual gifts.

II.

A second factor that made him a champion was PHILIP'S OBEDIENCE. (PHILIP'S OBEDIENCE) That is described in vv. 26-31. Verse 25 speaks of "they" going back to Jerusalem. It is not clear in that verse if the "they" is referring only to the apostles Peter and John. The fact that the angel in v. 26 tells Philip to go south from Jerusalem may suggest that Philip had gone to Jerusalem with the apostles.

Exactly when and where this angel appeared to Philip is not stated. But we saw last time that Philip was engaged in a very successful evangelism campaign in Samaria. Many people were coming to faith in Christ. I suspect that it was tough for Philip to leave this campaign when he was having such a key role in it. There were so many people to be followed up. But if the call from God did first come to Philip while he was still in Samaria, he did not seem to hesitate. He obeyed.

According to v. 26 an angel told Philip, "**Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.**" Luke adds the note, "**This is a desert place.**" (GAZA ROAD 2) Archaeologists have found a road that goes to Gaza through the desert. It was paved with stones, which would have made it suitable for chariot travel.

The word translated here as "south" literally means "the middle of the day." Occasionally in Greek writing of this period it means "south." This is because the sun was in the southern sky in the middle of the day. But in its only other appearance in the New Testament the word clearly is a reference to the noon hour. In all but a couple of its appearances in the Greek translation of the Old Testament it also has the meaning of

“noon.” So my suspicion is that the verse should be translated as **“Rise and go at noon to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza”**

The Lord had set up a divine appointment for Philip, and that encounter involved being at a certain place at a certain time. It required prompt obedience from Philip. Philip could have thought, “Let me finish my lunch first and have a little siesta. Then I’ll get right on it.” Or he could have been tempted by the thought: “That’s the hottest part of the day. I’ll wait a couple of hours until the sun is not so hot. Then I’ll get started.” If he had gone along with either of these thoughts, he would have missed his important appointment. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Exactly how this angel appeared to Philip is not stated. Perhaps it was in a dream. Perhaps it was in a literal, physical appearance. Clearly it was not some mere inner urging. But as Philip was walking down this road in the middle of the day, I wonder if he had doubts about what he was doing there. “Maybe it was just my imagination. Maybe seeing that angel in a dream was all in my head. What in the world could the Lord want with me on this deserted road? There were people back in Samaria who needed me.”

But Philip was obedient to the Lord. Verses 27 & 28 tell us, **“And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah.”**

Ethiopia (PROJECTOR ON--- ETHIOPIA) was located south of Aswan on the upper Nile River in what is mostly Sudan today. “Candace” was a title much like “Pharaoh” was used for the kings of Egypt and “Caesar” for the Roman emperors. The Ethiopians regarded their king as an incarnation of the sun god. He was regarded as being too holy to be involved in daily business affairs and practical matters. So for many years it was the queen mother called “Candace” who held most of the political power. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The Ethiopian in our story was secretary of the treasury in Candace’s administration. Holding such a high position he no doubt had aides and servant who were with him. In fact it says that he was reading while he was riding in the chariot. So somebody else had to be driving. Keep in mind also that Luke was writing this book originally to another government official who was a Gentile. He was Theophilus who worked for the Roman government.

The term “eunuch” was not always used to describe someone who had been physically neutered. In the Ancient Near East some men were physically neutered by leaders in government. They found that these men were better suited to do things like taking care of their harems and running their households. They also had one less temptation when they were put in other positions of power. The Greek term was also used to refer simply to high officials in government. So we cannot be sure if the official here was physically a

eunuch or not. The fact that Luke uses a separate term in v. 27 to describe the man as a court official may imply that he was also physically a eunuch. But we cannot be sure.

According to Deuteronomy #25 v. 1 no one who was a eunuch could enter the assembly of the Lord. So this Ethiopian perhaps could only worship in Jerusalem from the outer court of the temple. He could also not be a full Jewish convert according to Jewish rules of the time. Obviously he was a foreigner. That was an additional obstacle. But in spite of all of these factors he was a genuine worshiper of the God of Israel.

How did this guy acquire that faith? We do not know. Ethiopia did have contact with Judah and Israel over the centuries. At one point the ruler of Ethiopia seems to have been an ally of Hezekiah. Somehow this royal official had come to have faith in the God of Israel.

(PROJECTOR ON--- SEPTUAGINT MANUSCRIPT) He also had a copy of the Book of Isaiah. It was apparently a Greek translation since the quotation that we have in our passage follows more closely the Greek translation of Isaiah than the Hebrew manuscripts that we have of it. The eunuch was reading it when his entourage overtook Philip. The Ethiopian was having a hard time understanding the portion that he was reading. According to v. 29, **“And the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over and join this chariot.’”**

How did the Spirit say this to Philip? Was it just an inner impression, or was it an audible voice, or was it something else? We are not told. There is a danger in placing too much dependence on inner impressions or subjective feelings concerning the Lord’s direction. It is especially a problem when Christians say that God has told them to do things that contradict His Word or principles in His Word. The direction here was clearly from the Holy Spirit.

Whatever means the Spirit of God used, Philip was obedient. According to v. 30, **“So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’”** In ancient times people seldom read silently to themselves. Part of the reason was that there was no punctuation and no spacing between words, [just as in the Greek manuscript that you see in the middle on the screen]. It was often easier to make sense of passages by reading them aloud.  
(PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 31 adds, **“And he said, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.”** Though the eunuch was an educated man, he did not have false pride. He was teachable. The word “invited” in the original Greek actually has a stronger nuance. The eunuch “urged” Philip to join him.

So a second key in Philip’s usefulness to the Lord was his obedience. His attitude was not: When I get a chance, I will do this. Or: If it fits into my schedule, then I will follow through. Philip was obedient, and he was prompt about it.

There is a lesson here for us. Christians who are useful for service to the Lord are obedient Christians. They are obedient in the small things as well as the big things. They make their focus of obedience God's Word. If God says it, that settles it. None of us does it perfectly. But champions in God's book are individuals who make obedience a high priority.

### III.

Philip was a champion not only because of his use of his spiritual gift and because of his obedience, but also because of his Biblical knowledge. (PROJECTOR ON--- PHILIP'S BIBLE KNOWLEDGE) PHILIP'S BIBLE KNOWLEDGE is stressed in vv. 32-35. The eunuch was reading Isaiah #53 vv. 7 & 8. The Jews then and now have struggled with the interpretation of this passage. Who is it who is being slaughtered and humiliated? Jewish interpreters have suggested that it is Isaiah himself or the nation of Israel or Gentile nations. Before the coming of Jesus there was little thought given to the possibility that this could be speaking of Israel's Messiah. The Jews did not want to consider the possibility that there would be a suffering Messiah.

But Isaiah was speaking about the Messiah. The providential hand of God was clearly evident. The eunuch's reading of this passage provided a perfect opportunity for Philip to explain the death of Christ. In v. 34 the Ethiopian asked Peter to explain who the prophet was talking about. Verse 35 says, **"Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus."**

We don't know exactly what Philip said. He certainly told the man about the life and death of Jesus. (ISAIAH 53:6) I wonder if he might have then backed up to v. 6 of Isaiah 53: **"All we like sheep have gone astray;/ we have turned— every one— to his own way;/ and the Lord has laid on him/ the iniquity of us all."** Philip might then have explained the doctrine of sin. He might have explained that all are sinners, and that the wages of sin is death, or separation from God. On the cross Jesus bore the penalty for the sins of humanity.

To be rightly related to God in Old Testament times one had to approach God through the nation of Israel. The Ethiopian had tried to do that. But he was still a foreigner. (ISAIAH 60:2-3) I wonder if Philip might next have gone to #60 vv. 2-3: **"For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,/ and thick darkness the peoples;/ but the Lord will arise upon you,/ and his glory will be seen upon you./ And nations [Gentiles] shall come to your light,/ and kings to the brightness of your rising."**

(ISAIAH 56:3) Perhaps Philip went next to Isaiah #56 vv. 3-5: **"Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say,/ 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people';/ and let not the eunuch say,/ 'Behold, I am a dry tree.'/ (ISAIAH 56:4) For thus says the Lord:/ 'To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,/ who choose the things that please me/ and hold fast my covenant,/ (ISAIAH 56:5) I will give in my house and within my walls/ a monument and a name/ better than sons and daughters;/ I will give them an everlasting name/ that shall not be cut off.'"**

Philip no doubt explained that Jesus was the Messiah and that by faith in Him and His death on the cross for the sins of humanity he could be rightly related to God. He could have direct access to YHWH, the God of Israel, without having to be a Jewish convert. The eunuch responded by believing in this Jesus. (PROJECTOR OFF)

A key in this incident to Philip's usefulness was his knowledge of the Scriptures. He was dealing with an educated man. But because of Philip's study of the Bible, he was able to answer his questions and point him to Christ.

Knowledge of the Bible is foundational today as well for our usefulness to the Lord. (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 PETER 3:15) The apostle Peter said in his first epistle, "... **always [be] prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect...**" Knowledge of the Bible is essential to do that. A key part of our usefulness is our grasp of the Bible.

(PROJECTOR OFF) J. I. Packer, a famous Anglican teacher and writer, once wrote, **"Western Christianity has become superficial and shallow: we do not give ourselves time to soak ourselves in Scripture, and stunted spiritual development, which includes undervaluing of the Bible, is the unhappy result. We need to be clear that, other things being equal, it is the Christians who eat up the Scriptures on a regular basis who are likely to achieve most for our Lord Jesus Christ in the future, just as it was Bible-fed Christians who achieved most for him in the past."** If we want to be champions for the God who is there, we have to commit ourselves to study and intake of the Bible.

#### IV.

The last factor in his model of Christian success was PHILIP'S CULTURAL FLEXIBILITY. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. PHILIP'S CULTURAL FLEXIBILITY) I find that coming out of vv. 36-40. Philip's message must have contained reference to water baptism as the outward sign of faith in Jesus. For v. 36 says, **"And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, 'See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?'"** Orthodox Jews would not have regarded this man, if he was physically a eunuch, as qualified to be a full member of the believing community. But Philip's experience in Samaria confirmed that the gospel was not limited to those who were of the Jewish faith, to those who were fully kosher. His experience also demonstrated that the gospel was not limited to those who were ethnic Jews. For the Samaritans were half breeds. They were part Jewish and part Gentile. This Ethiopian had no Jewish blood. While he was a worshiper of YHWH, he was ethnically a Gentile, so it would seem.

So according to the New Testament record the first ethnic Gentile, though he may already have been a proselyte, a follower of the Jewish God, was this man. He was a eunuch from Ethiopia. This means that he was also a black man. Isn't that interesting? The Lord chose as the first Gentile member of His church one who happened to have dark skin. Black is beautiful in God's eyes.

This Ethiopian was also from the very highest economic and social class. Yet Philip was not intimidated or put off by any of these cultural barriers. Philip himself had been transplanted to Jerusalem. He was a Hellenistic Jew, which means that he was born and raised in another part of the Greek-speaking Roman Empire. But he, or possibly his parents, had moved to Jerusalem, probably to be near the temple. Recently he had been forced to flee Jerusalem because of religious persecution. So he had become a refugee of sorts.

There were religious and ethnic and economic and social barriers that could have kept Philip from dealing with this Ethiopian eunuch. But Philip had learned cultural flexibility. The primary basis for the cultural flexibility was the command of Christ in Acts 1:8: **“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”** The church and its members cannot reach the ends of the earth with the gospel if there is not cultural flexibility.

Notice also that Philip did not say that the Ethiopian needed to have more teaching before he was qualified to be baptized. He did not say that he needed to have a probationary period. Sometimes in the church we delay longer than is probably good in baptizing new Christians.

Verse 37 probably reflects a later addition to the original record written by Luke. That is why it may be omitted from some of your Bibles. Verse 38 tells us, **“And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.”** The fact that they went down into the water suggests that the kind of baptism involved immersion. Immersion in water was part of the ritual that was required for a Gentile to become a Jewish convert. So the Ethiopian, as a worshiper of the God of Israel, may have had some familiarity with the concept of water baptism.

(EIN Yael) There is a place on the road to Gaza five miles southwest of Jerusalem called Ein Yael. Ein Yael has a spring with an abundant water supply. Archaeologists have discovered evidence of a Christian settlement that dates back to at least the seventh century and maybe earlier. Perhaps this was the place where the Ethiopian eunuch was baptized.

With his fellow Ethiopians looking on, this high official was apparently immersed in water in the name of Christ. Verse 39 tells us, **“And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.”**

Just how Philip departed is not explained. The word for “carried” in the New Testament is used to describe the rapture in 1 Thessalonians #4. It is also used in 2 Corinthians when Paul says that he was caught up to the third heaven. So it is possible that there



was some kind of miraculous departure here. If that is true, it was further testimony to the Ethiopians of the validity of Philip's message.

The eunuch then went away rejoicing. The Bible says nothing more about him. A church leader of the second century by the name of Irenaeus claims that the official became a missionary among his own people.

(AZOTUS CAESAREA) As for Philip, Luke says that he found himself at Azotus on the Mediterranean coast. Later he came to reside in Caesarea, further up the coast. Further along in the Book of Acts we will find reference to Philip again when he is living at Caesarea. Both Azotus and Caesarea were predominantly Gentile cities. Philip, the Hellenistic Jew, was indeed culturally flexible. He recognized that the marching orders from Jesus meant that the gospel had to cross cultural barriers. (PROJECTOR OFF) Philip was willing to go wherever the Spirit of God directed him and to speak to whomever the Lord brought across his path.

If we want to be great in God's eyes, we need to learn from the example of Philip. He used his spiritual gift. He was obedient to the Lord. He was knowledgeable in the Scriptures. He was culturally flexible. We may not get a lot recognition in this life. But if we focus on living according to these principles, we can count on being champions in God's estimation.

Philip Anschutz (PROJECTOR ON--- PHILIP ANSCHUTZ) is a billionaire. The Forbes newsletter this week estimated that this 85-year-old has \$16.9 billion in assets. He started out in oil and expanded his empire to include railroads, the telecom industry, and sports teams.

Philip Anschutz is also a Christian. He attends an evangelical Presbyterian church in Denver. A *Fortune* magazine article said that Anschutz is **“working deliberately and diligently”** to do **“something significant in American Christianity.”** He has certain gifts and talents. He has a lot of money. He is seeking to be obedient to the Lord. He has a large charitable foundation, which he uses to give a lot of money away to Christian causes.

Anschutz, in a way, is also seeking to be culturally flexible. He has tried to figure out how he can promote moral and family and Christian values in our culture. Years ago he became upset about the Hollywood movies that were polluting the culture. So he created his own film company. That company has produced movies like “Ray” and “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.”

At the same time Anschutz is not out to glorify himself. He is known to have given only three interviews in the last four decades. One newspaper called him the wealthiest person in America that nobody knows about. He keeps a low profile. He seems to be more concerned about glorifying God.

I realize that there are only a few billionaires in our congregation. But chances are that we have spiritual gifts and abilities that Philip Anschutz does not have, and it is certain that we have people connections that he does not have. We can be champions for Christ if we use the spiritual gifts that we have, if we obey God's Word, if we cultivate our knowledge of the Bible, and if we exhibit cultural flexibility. Our responsibility is for the use of our gifts and talents in our little neck of the woods.