

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Arise and Go: Philip - the willing servant

Greetings and welcome to *Truth for Today*, where we are concluding our short series about serving the Lord entitled, "Arise and Go". Two weeks ago, Paul Thomson took up the story of Jonah, under the title "The disobedient servant", while last week David Hughes showed us that Ananias in Acts 9:10-19 was a reluctant servant. Who can blame Ananias for hesitating when he was sent to counsel Saul of Tarsus, an erstwhile fierce enemy of the Christians in Damascus and other places? My title for today's talk is "Philip - the willing servant" and is based upon the early chapters of The Acts of the Apostles.

To provide some context for Philip's service, we must look at Acts 6, where conditions in the infant church in Jerusalem are sketched out for us by Luke, the writer of Acts. It was a time when many people in Jerusalem responded to the preaching of the apostles by becoming believers in Jesus. Despite this growth in numbers, or perhaps because of it, a problem arose that could not be neglected, as Acts 6:1 reveals. Before I read it I ought to say that all our quotations in this broadcast are from the English Standard Version of the Bible: "*Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution*" (Acts 6:1).

From this it can be seen that the widows among the Greek speaking believers, or Hellenists, were not receiving the daily allowance of food. Provision for widows was a practice that was an essential element of practical Christianity, as the leader of the Hebrew Christians in Jerusalem makes clear in a later letter, when he insisted that widows must not be forgotten (James 1:27).

To deal with this, the apostles called a meeting of the believers explaining that their task of teaching and preaching was too heavy a burden to allow them to supervise the distribution of food to the widows. Acts 6:3-5 sets out the apostles' resolution: "*Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.*"

This is the first time Philip is mentioned in the Acts, though perhaps I need to emphasise that this is not that Philip who was one of the original twelve disciples. Our Philip was a member of one of the Hellenist synagogues of Jerusalem. I trust you noticed the qualities that were required of Philip and his fellow disciples who were chosen to distribute the food, along with other tasks, so enabling the twelve apostles to devote the whole of their time to preaching and teaching.

From Acts 6:3-5, these seven men were "*...of good repute, full of the Spirit and wisdom...*" so we can confidently claim that these qualities were manifested in Philip, as he was one of the seven. I trust that each one of us, speaker and hearer alike, endeavour to maintain a good reputation wherever we live. Are we known for our honesty, friendliness and loyalty to the Lord? Scripture makes it clear that it is impossible for us to be a believer in the Lord Jesus without having the Holy Spirit, for as Paul wrote: "*Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him*" (Romans 8:9). It is all too possible for us not to be filled with the Spirit, because at various times we might have quenched Him or grieved Him owing to our worldliness or unholy lifestyle.

In this first reference to Philip, in Acts 6:5, we find that his service was looking after the needs of the elderly widows. Not a very glamorous job, one might say, or an area of Christian service where we could shine and be noticed by the church at large. Alan Redpath once termed it "looking after the benevolent fund of the church", which meant that Philip and his colleagues would need wisdom and patience to decide between genuine need and "free-loaders", to use a modern term. Not for him standing at the front of an admiring throng preaching a scintillating sermon, yet he still needed all of the Spirit's power, even in the obscure place, performing what might seem to some a trivial task. Do I need to remind you that the title of this talk is "Philip - the willing servant"? The challenge of this paragraph is our willingness to serve the Lord wherever we are sent by Him and whatever the task. If our service is an index of our love for Him, what does your service indicate to others in your family, or at work, or in the community generally? There is a hymn that I learned at Sunday School seventy years ago, which sadly has gone out of favour:

*“There is a story sweet to hear,
I love to tell it too;
It fills my heart with hope and cheer,
'Tis old yet ever new.*

*It says He bore the cross for me,
And suffered in my place,
That I from sin might ransomed be,
And praise Him for His grace.*

*Oh, wondrous love, so great, so vast,
So boundless and so free!
Lord, at Thy feet myself I cast;
My all I give to Thee!”*

William Asbury Williams (1854-1938)

Such sentiments are easy to sing when young, but far more difficult to put into practice when we are older. The point is if we really appreciate His love then we ought to give Him our all, as the hymn suggests.

The next reference to Philip is in Acts 8, where he has had to leave Jerusalem owing to the violent persecution against the church there, engineered by Saul of Tarsus and others. It did not cause Philip to cease evangelising, as Acts 8:4-6 makes clear: *“Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip when they heard him and saw the signs that he did.”*

We learn from John 4:9 that there was ill feeling between Samaritans and Jews, partially caused by Jewish insistence that the Temple in Jerusalem was the only place that true worship could occur. Talking to the Lord, the unnamed woman of Samaria stated this, but please notice the Lord's answer: *“Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship’. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father”* (John 4:20-21).

The Lord goes on to say that that hour had arrived when the Father would be worshipped in spirit and in truth (John 4:23). I believe that, in essence, Philip was announcing to the despised Samaritans that they could be amongst such a company of worshippers. They did not need either a temple on Mount Gerizim, or the Jerusalem Temple on Mount Zion, in order to worship the living God.

On leaving the Lord, the Samaritan lady went back to her town proclaiming that she had met the Messiah (John 4:28-29), a proclamation which caused many to believe (John 4:39). This is exactly the same message that Philip was preaching, as we read a minute or so ago from Acts 8:4-6, where Philip insisted that Jesus was the Christ or Messiah. Many Samaritans responded to Philip's preaching, believing the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. So convinced were they that they asked to be baptised and became disciples of the Lord. One of these was Simon, who practised magic in Samaria (Acts 8:10), but sadly, his faith did not seem to affect his manner of life as he tried to buy the ability to pass on the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:18-19). Previous to this he was deeply concerned with magic, so his unchanged attitude demonstrated that he was more interested in miraculous signs than God's reign in his life.

The rest of the account of Philip's evangelisation of Samaria is contained between Acts 8:14-25. I only wish to point out the fellowship that existed between Philip in Samaria and the “mother” church in Jerusalem. When news reached Jerusalem of the response in Samaria to Philip's programme of evangelism, Peter and John were sent to ascertain the genuineness of the converts (Acts 8:14-17). Jerusalem was not independent from Samaria or Samaria from Jerusalem. Acts 8:25 illustrates a further tangible sign of the unity that existed between the disciples in the early church: *“Now when [Peter and John] had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.”*

I do not think I am stretching Scripture when I suggest that Philip would have accompanied Peter and John, for at least part of the way, sharing the preaching as he did so.

We now move on to the most well-known of the episodes in Philip's life, but before we consider it can I remind you all, especially any who have just joined us, that you are listening to a broadcast from *Truth for Today*. Our subject is “Philip - the willing servant”, and we are just about to consider his meeting with the Ethiopian eunuch. The whole account is recorded in Acts 8:26-40 from where I shall read Acts 8:26-27: *“Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Rise up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ This is a desert place. And he*

arose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship."

One thing that strikes me as important from that account is the obedience of Philip to the request to leave Samaria to travel on a desert road towards Gaza. He could have countered by pointing out the part he played in the successful evangelism in Samaria. Why did he have to leave a thriving centre of service to go elsewhere? Philip already knew the truth of Romans 14:4, where Paul states that "...it is before his own master that [the servant] stands or falls." In the words of the title of this talk, Philip was indeed a willing servant.

Fifty years ago when I entered the classroom for the first time as a teacher, my first headmaster requested that all his staff should demand instant obedience from the pupils. I believe that generally it was good practice, though perhaps some listening might disagree. What is important for each one of us is the necessity of instant and complete obedience to the Lord's command, not unwillingly, I would suggest, but rather in the spirit that Philip demonstrated. We are the Lord's servants, so we go where He sends and do what He says. There is a hymn that gently tells this important truth:

*"Then in fellowship sweet
We will sit at His feet,
Or we'll walk by His side in the way;
What He says we will do,
Where He sends we will go,
Never fear, only trust and obey."*

John Henry Sammis (1846-1919)

We do not know if Philip wondered why he had to leave Samaria. We do know that he obeyed which is the important action.

What cheers my heart is the sight of Philip running to greet the Ethiopian: "*So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' And he said, 'How can I unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him"* (Acts 8:30-31).

The Scripture the Ethiopian was reading was Isaiah 53, which describes the sufferings of the Servant of the LORD. From the earliest days of Christianity, the Lord Jesus has been identified as the Suffering Servant. These are the verses, particularly Isaiah 53:7-8, that Philip used to introduce the good news of the Lord Jesus to this important man. I wish to call attention to the connection Philip made to the Lord Jesus and this extract from Isaiah. Obviously, what we call the Old Testament was the only Scripture available in those days, yet we at *Truth for Today* believe the Old Testament is still as much part of God's Book as the Gospels or the letters of Paul. To utilise a title used by Graham Scroggie we are convinced that the *Unfolding Drama of Redemption* begins at Genesis and ends with the book of Revelation.

The result of Philip's ministry was that the Ethiopian became a believer in Jesus, which he showed by being baptised on the ground of his confession that Jesus Christ is the Son of God (Acts 8:36-38). Two thousand years later this is still the baptismal confession, so I pose the question regarding our belief in Jesus. We, like Philip, wish for our friends and neighbours to become believers in Jesus, but what do we want them to believe about Him? The King James Version is quite clear, for it records the Ethiopian stating that he believed that Jesus Christ is the Son of God (Acts 8:37). I ought to point out that some modern translations omit Acts 8:37, as it is not included in some of the better manuscript sources. That being so, one of the commentaries I trust and value explains that the omitted verse adds nothing to the narrative except to make explicit what is already implicit.

We all at *Truth for Today* believe and preach that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; in fact we would go as far as to say that these two truths are an essential foundation for our Christian life. If we have not been convinced by the Spirit of God that Jesus is the Christ and that He is also God incarnate I would suggest that we are not Christians in the New Testament sense of the word. I would also quickly add that our lives should reflect the values and ethics of the New Testament, one element of which is being a willing servant of the Lord.

As we approach the end of our time together, there are just two more points that I wish to focus on in our study of Philip. The first of these is in Acts 8:40, "*But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea."*

I have said previously that Philip was a willing servant, which is just what Acts 8:40 shows. Wherever he went, Philip spoke plainly of the Lord Jesus for he was forever in his Master's service.

My last point is the last reference that Scripture gives of this man Philip, selected originally to wait on tables, and is found in Acts 21:8: *“On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him.”*

We have seen how Philip evangelised in both Samaria and the maritime plain of Palestine. We see him now in Caesarea which is where we left him in Acts 8:40. For about twenty years he has been living and evangelising in that city, built by Herod the Great as the port for Jerusalem. Notice that Luke writes that we stayed in the house of Philip (Acts 21:8), including himself along with Paul. I can't help wondering if this is where Luke obtained the information about the Ethiopian that we have just been looking at. Like any historian, Luke would be looking for material for his history of the early church that we call "The Acts". They stayed there *“many days”* according to Acts 21:10 so they would have had occasions for many conversations.

This, the last reference to Philip in the New Testament, is also the only named reference to an evangelist, which is an honourable title for a man who was first selected to distribute food to Christian widows. He is also still known as one of the seven, which would indicate his importance as a leader in the early church. The original apostles were always known as "the twelve". I believe that "the seven" had similar importance amongst the Greek speaking, or "Hellenist" Christians, in the early church. Be this as it may, what is important is that many years had passed since Philip became a believer in the Lord, yet he is still known as "the evangelist", still willingly serving the Lord. Was Philip alive when Paul was imprisoned at Caesarea, as we read in Acts 24:22-27? There is no mention of him in the account of Paul's time at Caesarea. Perhaps he was old and infirm, or moved on to a different city, or even been called to the presence of the One he loved and served for so many years. For our purposes it matters not, for we have seen that he was well worthy of the title of our talk today "Philip - the willing servant". May we, in our time, be faithful servants of our gracious Lord and Saviour.

I end today with the promise of my prayers for the Lord's blessing upon you all. Many thanks for listening to this *Truth for Today* talk, number 1078 from our series "Arise and Go."

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