

PHILIP AND THE ETHIOPIAN

– MARCH 19. – ACTS 8:26-40. –

ANOTHER FAITHFUL DEACON IN THE EARLY CHURCH – A GENTILE FEELING AFTER GOD – COORDINATION OF DIVINE PROVIDENCES BRINGING THESE MEN TOGETHER – DEACON PHILIP'S SKILLFUL USE OF TACT – DIVINE BLESSING UPON HIS EFFORTS – THE GOSPEL ONLY TO THE MEEK – THEY WILL BE TAUGHT OF GOD – LESSONS FOR TODAY.

"Understandest thou what thou readest?" – Acts 8:30.

DEACON PHILIP, the instrument of Divine providence in starting the Ethiopian eunuch in the narrow way of discipleship – and through him probably introducing the "good tidings" into Africa – was just such a man as the Lord is pleased to use as His mouthpiece in the service of the Truth. Having proven himself faithful in the inferior work of serving tables, he had been advanced, and been made an ambassador for God in the preaching of the Gospel at Samaria; and the present lesson shows him still further guided and used of the Lord in His blessed service. There is an encouraging lesson here for all who have the same spirit – the same desire to serve the Lord and His cause. Faithfulness in little things is sure to bring larger opportunities.

We are not informed by what means the Lord "spake to Philip," sending him to the road in which he would find the eunuch's chariot. We may be sure, however, that the indication was sufficiently clear to Philip to be more than a mere guess or impression. We are to remember, too, that it was at a time when the Lord used miraculous means of communication, more than at present – doubtless for the very purpose of establishing the faith of His servants as well as their work. Today we walk more by faith, less by sight and miracle. Yet so bright is the light shining upon the Divine Plan and Word that we

may safely say that we have much advantage every way, even over those of that time. We are to remember that up to the time of this lesson there were no New Testament writings; nothing, therefore to guide the Apostles and early Evangelists except the more or less miraculous interpositions of God's providence.

Even after we have learned of God's particular care for all of His people, we are inclined to surprise that a solitary individual should be so particularly cared for as was this eunuch – that a special messenger should be sent to him for his instruction in righteousness. Very evidently Divine providence does not regard the going of all mankind to this same degree. Very evidently there was something in the character of this eunuch, something in his heart-attitude toward God, that was pleasing and acceptable to the Lord, and caused the working of this miracle on his behalf – that he might have needed instruction in the Truth.

AN EARNEST TRUTH-SEEKER

The eunuch belonged to the kingdom of Meroe, which lay on the right bank of the Nile River, from its junction with the Atbara as far south as Khartoum, and thence to the east of the Blue Nile, to the mountains of Abyssinia. He was a court officer, evidently deeply religious, who had come in contact with, and been impressed by, the Jewish religion; and in his religious fervor he had gone up to Jerusalem to worship, and to gain additional knowledge of the true God. His case, like that of the Samaritans and of Cornelius, indicates that this occurrence was after the close of Israel's "seventy weeks," of special favor; for this eunuch was not a Jew in the fullest sense – eunuchs not being fully accepted as proselytes, nor granted the privileges of the congregation. – Deuteronomy 23:1.

Up to this time the eunuch, like Cornelius and the believing Samaritans, had been a part of the Lazarus class, **[R5864 : page 73]** lying at the gate of Dives, desiring to be fed with some crumbs from the bountiful table of blessing and promises which God had

spread for Israel. Now the change had come. The House of Israel had been cast off; the end of Israel's special favor as respects the Gospel had come; and the time to receive the Lazarus class to Abraham's bosom had arrived. Philip as an angel, or messenger, of the Lord was sent to carry this representative of the Lazarus class to the arms of Father Abraham, as a true child of Abraham, through faith.

The eunuch had been at the head center of the religion which he esteemed to be the true one. He had come away from Jerusalem with a manuscript copy of one of the holy Prophets – Isaiah – a treasure in those times, very costly. That this manuscript was written in the Greek language, and not in the Hebrew, seems to be indicated by the word Esaias, which is the Greek form of Isaiah. He was hungering and thirsting for the Truth, and making his best possible endeavor to obtain it, as is evidenced by his purchase of the manuscript, and his long journey, and his reading. That he was doing more than simply reading – that he was studying – is evidenced by his language to Philip. Can we wonder that God's special providences would be manifested toward such an one – toward a person of such a condition of heart, hungering and thirsting for the Truth? We cannot wonder at it. It is in full accord with the Lord's promise, that such shall be filled; that such seekers shall find; that such knockers shall have the door of Truth opened unto them. Let us remember that we are under the care of the same God, and that He changes not; and let us learn the lesson that He is as well able today as ever to assist the sincere Truth-seeker.

Another lesson connected with this matter pertains to times and seasons. God could have directed the eunuch to the meeting of the Church at Jerusalem, and to the instructions of the Apostles there. But this probably would not have been so favorable for the eunuch. After receiving the Apostolic instruction he might have referred the matter to the Scribes and Pharisees, and have received in return explanations more or less confusing. In the Lord's providence he

quite likely heard something of the Christians, and their claims that Messiah had come and had been crucified, and he quite probably knew the other side of the story – that the chief priests and teachers claimed that the whole matter was a fraud, an imposition. Possibly these very thoughts had led him to procure the manuscript he was reading, and had brought him into the attitude of mind favorable for the reception of the Truth when Philip expounded it.

A HELPING HAND

Let us learn from this, not only in respect to our own affairs, but also in respect to the general service of the Truth, to trust implicitly in Divine Wisdom and Power – to remember that "The Lord knoweth them that are His," and that He knoweth best how to bring them in contact with the Truth. Properly learned, this lesson will not slack our hands in the Divine service – for true servants will still be anxious and ready to serve, as was Philip – but it will serve to strengthen our hearts and to take from us that fearfulness that is a hindrance to the peace of many of God's children. Let us not fear for the Lord's Word, but remember His declaration through the Prophet, "My Word, that goeth forth out of My mouth, shall not return unto Me void; it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it."

The chariot probably overtook and passed Philip in the road, the eunuch driving leisurely, in order that he might read. He was reading aloud, after the custom of that time and country, and according to the injunctions laid upon the people by the Jewish teachers. Indeed, it was one of the Jewish rules that the faithful, in traveling, should read if they had no companionship. We are not informed how the Spirit told Philip to hail the eunuch. Possibly in the same miraculous way in which he was sent to this road, or possibly having been sent to this road, he was on the look-out for the object of his mission; and hearing the eunuch reading from the prophecy, Philip may have understood at once that this was the

favored person, and a favorable time for the message to the service of which he had been consecrated.

This gives us a suggestion – all of the Lord's people, in proportion as they desire to be the servants of the Truth, should be continually on the alert to note opportunities for service, and should expect to be guided and used of the Lord. All of the Lord's people are ministers, servants of the Truth; and each should seek to use every opportunity presenting itself, knowing not which may be specially prospered of the Lord. Wherever we see evidences of devotion to the Lord and to His Word, we should be continually on the alert to extend a helping hand. We should, as Philip did, *seek* an opportunity for conversing with such, with a view to giving them the help which they need, the very assistance which the Lord has extended to us through some channel. We are to be on the alert to pass along the blessing which we have received, and to esteem that this is the chief business of life with those who have consecrated themselves to the service of the King of kings.

Philip's inquiry, "Understandest thou what thou readest?" may not always be well received; but it was a very direct way of approaching his errand. It is well to use tact; but we have the thought that many of the Lord's people are inclined to use too much tact, and are not sufficiently direct in their endeavors to present the Gospel Message. Had Philip been too much under the control of this wrong sentiment respecting tact, he might have talked to the eunuch quite a while about the weather, the crops, his home in Ethiopia, the peace and prosperity of that country, its exports and imports, the religious status of the people, etc. Thus he might gradually have gotten his hearer's mind quite off the most important of all subjects. Considering that he heard him and knew the subject of his study, we cannot think of a better introduction to his message than the method and language which Philip adopted: "Understandest thou what thou readest?"

This was a test question, so to speak. If the eunuch did have an understanding of what he was reading he would take no offense at this, but would gladly have said, "Yes, friend, I thank God that I do; and the knowledge is very precious to me. Do you also understand it?" But had he been of the wrong condition of heart his answer might have been, with more or less manifestation of offense, "What is that to you? Mind your own business!" Or had he been of a hypocritical cast of mind, like the Pharisees to whom Jesus spoke, he would have professed a knowledge of the subject; and then to cover his own ignorance of it, he would have made some general remarks and have turned the conversation into another channel.

We are not to expect those who are in a Pharisaical condition to receive the Truth from us, any more than from the Lord. We are to know, according to the Lord's Word, that the Truth is purposely hidden from all not in the right attitude of heart to receive it – that it is indefinite, indistinct, unintelligible to them. This is one difficulty with the teachers of churchianity today. Like the Pharisees and Scribes and chief priests of old, they say, "Are we blind also?"⁸ They *claim* to know; but *we* know [R5864 : page 74] that *they* know that they *don't* know. Therefore, as our Lord said to their prototypes, their blindness continues; for no one can expect to be taught of God while in that self-sufficient and dishonest condition of mind which boasts of knowledge and of the faith which it lacks.

A MEEK, TEACHABLE SPIRIT

All those to whom the Lord specially sends the Message of His grace during this Gospel Age are in considerable degree like this eunuch of our lesson – earnest, honest, Truth-seekers, not afraid to acknowledge that they do not know, and neither afraid nor ashamed to receive whatever assistance the Lord may provide. The eunuch did not stop to inquire of Philip, "Are you a priest? or a Pharisee? or a Doctor of the Law?" It was sufficient to him that he held in his

hand what he believed to be a Message from God; and that he knew it contained various statements, promises, etc., which he did not understand. He believed that the God who gave this prophecy was both able and willing to furnish an interpretation of it, and he was seeking that interpretation; and whoever could give such an interpretation as would shed light upon his questions would by that means be proven a teacher of God, a servant of the Truth, a light-bearer.

The eunuch's answer implied this, when he said, "How can I understand, unless some man should guide me?" So earnest was he in his quest of the Truth that the bare suggestion of assistance implied in Philip's question was sufficient to arouse fully his interest; and he entreated Philip to have a seat with him in his chariot, and thus grant him the benefit of whatever information could be given. We are not surprised that a heart so noble, and yet so humble and teachable, should be specially favored of the Lord, and have a messenger sent specially to him for his instruction, while others by the million were passed by – not esteemed worthy. It is the same today; and while the Lord does not generally direct His people in such a miraculous manner as He directed Philip to the eunuch, we nevertheless have general instructions along the same line; viz., "Preach the Gospel to the *meeke*." "He that hath an *ear*, let him hear." – Isaiah 61:1; Matthew 13:9; Revelation 2:7.

Our Message, as the Prophet declares, is to bind up broken hearts, and not to break hearts; we are to preach to the meek, and not to the froward, the Gospel of Christ. The hard hearts and the froward, God will deal with in another way. He will break them upon the anvil of affliction, trouble and discipline in His own due time and manner. Meantime, in this Gospel Age, He is seeking for the Bride amongst those who are already broken and already to some extent meek and teachable. We should not waste our time in futile efforts, contrary to this Scriptural rule. Let those who have not the Gospel, but who have merely a message of reformation, preach

political reforms, social reforms, moral reforms. The Lord's Word to His consecrated, the Royal Priesthood, is, "Preach the Good Tidings to the meek, bind up the broken-hearted!"

THE GOSPEL TO THE MEEK

It was evidently not of chance, but of providence, that the eunuch had under consideration the particular part of Isaiah's prophecy which refers to our Lord Jesus as the Lamb before His shearers opening not His mouth in protest; telling about His humiliation, and how His life would be taken from the earth; and instituting a query respecting His posterity. (Isaiah 53:8.) No wonder the poor eunuch was mystified! No wonder the Jews were all mystified! Unquestionably this prophecy, like the majority of prophecies, could be but imperfectly comprehended until fulfilled – could be understood only in the light of its fulfilment, and then only by those in a proper attitude of heart and under the instruction, the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We should notice in this connection: (1) that while the Scriptures are "the Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God," able to make wise, they cannot be understood until the Lord's due time; (2) that they can be understood only under the leading and instruction of the Holy Spirit; (3) and yet, the Holy Spirit was not exercised upon the Truth-seeker either through the Scriptures or through any mental process, but through the living representative of the Spirit – through the Gospel Message delivered by a fellow servant. The true child of God, the real Truth-seeker, following the proper lines, and properly trusting to the Lord, according to His Word, will neither ignore nor reject the assistance which God has been pleased to render through teachers in the Church. He will merely seek to find such teachers as God shall raise up, and the distinction between these and sectarian teachers; and one of his best, safest and surest methods of knowing the teachers whom the Lord

will raise up, will be by their ability to make simple, clear, plain, the Word of God – "written aforetime for our admonition."

This was the only credential offered by Philip in his ministry of the Truth. He had been taught of God through the Apostles, and was now able, in turn, to communicate to the hearing ear of the eunuch the simple story of how Christ had come into the world to redeem the world, had died for man's sins, had arisen, and ascended up to glory; that now, meantime, before blessing the world through Christ according to promise, God was calling out an elect Little Flock to be joint-heirs with Jesus in the Kingdom; and that just as soon as this election should be completed the Messiah (Jesus the Head, and the Church, His Body) would be manifested in glory and in ruling and blessing power to the world of mankind – the long-looked-for Messiah, whose work had been foretold by "all the holy Prophets since the world began."

Philip undoubtedly further explained to the eunuch, that those who accepted Christ as their Savior, and who desired to become His disciples, taking up their cross to follow Him, should give their assent to this matter by baptism. Apparently it did not take the eunuch long to decide what his course should be; and his readiness of heart to follow the Lamb whithersoever He would lead, is indicated by his promptness to be baptized.

Philip was ready to receive him as a fellow-member of the Church of Christ, and ready to give him the symbol of introduction into the Body of Christ – baptism – as soon as he gave evidence of having accepted the Lord, and having made consecration to Him. He made no request that the eunuch learn the catechism, nor that he confess something else such as well-meaning but mistaken men in the Dark Ages promulgated as necessary and as explanatory of the Bible. Neither did he say, "Now I will write your name; and you will be considered a member of the Church on that account, and I will

procure for you some authority to preach the Gospel in Ethiopia." No; at that time the subject had not been confused and befogged as it is now. Philip preached the Gospel in its simplicity, and the eunuch received it in like manner; and with the Gospel itself went the right and authority to declare it. "He that hath My Word, let him speak My Word." (Jeremiah 23:28.) All who have received the anointing of the Spirit, the unction from the Holy One, are thus recognized as members of the Royal Priesthood, and fully commissioned to tell forth the good tidings, as opportunity and circumstances may properly admit.

=====