

Christian author... pastor... and conference speaker... Ray Stedman used to say:

We Christians tend to dig channels for the flowing of the river of God. We dig a channel, then we line it with concrete, and we say, "Come, O River of God and flow now through this channel that we have dug for you." And to our dismay there is just a little trickle of water that comes down through, while the great flood of the Spirit's power is moving out through the mud flats somewhere, where we do not think he belongs at all.

This is the lesson that God is forever teaching us... and certainly it is what is being brought out by the account we come to in our study of Acts this morning.

For the last several weeks you have heard me say that the book of Acts **describes** for us... how God started His Church here on earth. ... People often want to take things that they read from this book... and make something that is meant to **describe**... into something to **prescribe**. In other words believers will take a passage like we studied last week when the Apostles came from Jerusalem to investigate the revival in Samaria... that Philip had been part of. The Apostles laid hands on the new believers... and THAT is when they received the Holy Spirit.

Our passage last week describes how God united two groups of people who had an absolute hatred for each other... and made them into one church... who would submit to the authority of the Apostles in Jerusalem. The new believers of Samaria had to receive the Holy Spirit from the Apostles – or else the Church in Samaria would have nothing at all to do with the Church in Jerusalem (and the Apostles)... and the Church of Jerusalem would have continued their own prejudice against the

Samaritans... even thought they were brothers and sisters in Christ. This the best way to unite them. ... So our passage last week described God's activity in a very unique circumstance. It was not recorded for us as the prescription for how we receive the Holy Spirit today.

I am going to treat our passage today from Acts... different than how I treated last week's passage. The reason I will do so... is because so many other passages of Scripture... seem to indicate that believers of our 21st Century should be experiencing the same kind of leading by the Holy Spirit in our lives... that we will see in Phillip's.

Here is the take home truth from our passage... that I would like for you to consider as we study our passage: **Divine appointments await us if we are obedient to God's leading.** ... That will be Philip's experience as described by our verses of study... and (as the testimony of many other Scriptures declare) - it can be ours.

The testimony of Scripture is that the Lord of all creation wants to do His work through us. ... Our seeking the Spirit's guidance and obeying what He wants us to do and say... is the way He works to bless the world." *God's sovereign work plus man's obedience brings the touch of God to needy human lives.* Put another way, there are all kinds of "chance" meetings ready to take place in a life that is sensitive and obedient to God's leading.

So we are going to study a passage that describes several different ways that the Holy Spirit led Philip... and see what we can learn about how He will lead us in our own lives. ... All throughout and especially as we conclude today's study... we will examine whether or not it is right for us to

assume that the Holy Spirit still leads His followers... in the same manner today... as He did with Phillip. Then... as we conclude today... I want to present some guidelines for how we can increase the likelihood of our distinguishing the Holy Spirit's voice from our many other influences. (How do we know it is God's actual leading?)

Today's passage shows the creative strategy of the Holy Spirit... the freedom to interfere... the freedom to override a program... and to change it... and to make something new. ... What a message for us to consider! I believe that the evangelical church of our day... has suffered terribly by ruling that out... by so organizing everything that there is no room for the Spirit to move. ... That is why I quoted Ray Stedman at the opening of this message. We tend to make concrete channels... and then we pretend that it is the only way for God to move in... and subsequently He only sends a trickle. (Shocker!)

Have you ever seen an advertisement (in the newspaper or on a sign in a store front) that a local church has scheduled a revival?

REVIVAL AT THE FAIRGROUNDS!

Beginning June 15th and ending June 24th!

Well... how do you schedule the Holy Spirit that way? ... That always appeared ludicrous to me. ... It would be like having all the weather men of the United States meet together to plan where the hurricanes are going to be next year... or the tornadoes. ... You cannot schedule a tornado... and you cannot schedule the Holy Spirit. ... He must be free to move in ways beyond our planning. ... He oftentimes moves in line with what has become

the norm... but the wonderful thing about the Christian life is the freedom that God has to break through and to change our schedule.

John 3:8 (ESV)

The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

The wind is an apt symbol of the sovereign direction of the Holy Spirit. There is no formula to insure that He will work in a particular way in... around... and through... the believer. He goes wherever He wills; you cannot predict Him.

Look with me now... at our first verse of study in Acts chapter 8. Phillip had been fruitfully serving God in one place... and God needed to move Phillip in a definite way... So He used an indisputable method to lead him.

Acts 8:26

As we left off last week in Acts chapter 8... Phillip was in the zenith of a revival in Samaria. Phillip's ministry began as a lay-deacon humbly doling out the widow's portions in the Jerusalem church. But it soared to unimagined heights when persecution hit. Though he was not a "pro," God's power coursed through him to the despised Samaritans, and large numbers of them believed the good news and were saved. Phillip was not one of the Twelve or the Big Three... but he really had something going in the Samaritan crusade. Even Simon the magician had been defeated. The entire town was recognizing God's truth and knew Phillip was from God. Because of all these new converts... certainly there was much follow-up to do. They needed to be trained and disciplined. If he left now... Simon might

step back in... and lead the people astray again. ... A new church needed to be developed and led by Spiritual leaders. ... A massive effort needed to be put into play. It was a busy and very happy time — a TRUE Holy Ghost revival... was happening... unadvertised... and probably not even in a tent at the fairgrounds.

But suddenly the Lord told Phillip to take a hike... to... of all places... the desert! ... Philip went from an exciting city and a growing congregation... to a lonely desert road... and a congregation of one. ...It would have been so easy to be discouraged. ... *"Lord, do you really want me to go to the desert? There is nothing there but lizards. Have I not proved myself worthy of a broader ministry? I have been faithful in the small things—I even waited on the widows. And now the desert? Lord...!"*

Several matters could have caused Phillip to hesitate. ... *"OK... God... I will definitely pray about it... I'll even send a letter to the Apostles and ask them what I should do... and then I will get back to You..."*

This was not a glamorous site... and it would require a good deal of effort for Philip to travel from Samaria to this new site. (But let me tell you something) - Serving God often requires considerable effort and hardships. Don't ever think because the task is difficult that God would not call you to do it! ... *"Lord, I can't teach that Bible Study!" "God, working with the youth would stretch me beyond my limits... so I know You are not asking me to do it!" "Lord, I need an occasional Sunday to sleep in... or go fishing. If I did that then I would have to commitment myself to being at Church every Sunday... (This must not be You leading me...)"*

Now... I want you to notice something else. There is no indication... whatsoever... at this point as to why God was leading Phillip to leave the bustling revival and go to the desert. For those of you who have read ahead... you already know that God had a certain individual... who God wanted to include in His kingdom. But at this point all Phillip knows is that he is to go to a road leading to Gaza... out in the desert some place.

What would be the first question you or I would ask...? Wouldn't it be **WHY**...? *"I need an explanation, God!... I want a full understanding – if You expect me to obey You..."*

God leads an obedient servant... which is what we see in Phillip. Phillip does not hesitate because of the busy spiritual awakening and obvious need for him to remain in Samaria... or because the place he was told to go did not seem very pleasant... or because he was not provided with all the details for the move. Whenever we obey what God has already made known to us – He reveals more.

John 14:21 (ESV)

Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him."

Obedying what we already know... is the key to Christ revealing MORE of Himself and His will to us. ... And this is what Phillip illustrates.

Do you remember how God led Phillip to Samaria... where revival broke out... and now God is leading again... this time... away from Samaria...? At the beginning of Acts chapter 8... last week... we saw that it was because of the great persecution (led by Saul of Tarsus – who would later become

Paul). The Holy Spirit led Phillip through circumstances to Samaria. That is one way that He leads believers. ... In verse 26... we come across a different way of His leading. This time... it is through an indisputable medium of an angel.

Hebrews 1:14 tells us that angels are "ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation." All of us, all the time, are being touched by the ministry of angels, though we usually do not see them. The point is, God guided Philip in a new way, and Philip was enough in touch to respond.

When we are in touch with the Holy Spirit... we will be sensitive to his guidance—sometimes through difficulties... sometimes through a subjective inner voice... maybe even through angels.

I've never had an angel appear to me. I have never knowingly seen a Heavenly angel. ... You may ask, "*Does God still work through angels today?*" and the answer I would offer... is a resounding "*Yes! He does.*" ... But they are not always visible. That is the difference. The ministry of angels, according to the Hebrews 1:14... goes on all the time. ... All of us, all the time, are being touched and affected by the ministry of angels, but we do not normally (as an everyday experience) see them.

Now... there have been well-documented experiences and incidences of the appearance of angels recorded in church history beyond the New Testament period. ... Many missionaries and others tell us stories of this... so it has not ceased entirely. In two weeks we will have some missionaries with us... who have intrigued me with accounts that I believe about their

ministry... which have included angelic manifestations. ... And I believe that, as we draw nearer to the days of the return of Jesus Christ, we may well expect to see an increase of these manifestations.

But, at any rate, here is an unexpected agency through which the Holy Spirit works. An angel appears to Philip and gives him an unexplained command to go south and take the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza. He could not have picked an emptier stretch of road... no cities or villages... nothing! ... And the wonderful thing is the way in which Philip obeyed this command of the angel.

Acts 8:27

"He rose and went" (our verse tells us). That is the only way to respond to a Divine call. Philip did not argue that he was having great success where he was or that it would be a hardship for him to travel. Divine calls have more priority than success or hardships.

The man's position was very high in the government of his country. He was in charge of the money of the queen. He would be a good one... especially after his conversion, for he would be very trustworthy. ... Without getting too far ahead in the story... the country where this trustworthy government official was from... was in a region that would become (in the centuries to come) a major center for the development of Christian Theology – North Africa. ... This man must have had a tremendous influence to bring a region to Christ from which the brightest early church fathers grew up... were trained... and wrote their books. ... God was doing something HUGE in history... by leading Phillip to this man.

Acts 8:28

The man had been worshipping in Jerusalem... having travelled there from his own country. Here he is returning in his chariot reading what...? A copy of Isaiah. ... Now let me tell you – the Gideon Society did not exist back then... and no body passed out free Bibles. ... If you had your own personal copy of the Scriptures... (or any portion of it) you had to apply a great deal of money and influence. ... And being a Gentile... this worshipper would have had to pull a lot of strings... and *then* pay a considerable amount of money to have his own copy. It must have meant a great deal to him. He was a sincere seeker... willing to go to great lengths... to know the truth about God.

As Philip drew near to the chariot... he heard the man reading from the Prophet Isaiah. ... (It was customary in those days for students to read out loud.) ... God had already prepared the man's heart to receive Philip's witness! ... If we obey the Lord's leading... we can be sure that God will go before us and open the way for our witness.

Acts 8:29

"And" tells us the important lesson about the sequence of instructions regarding Divine service. Obey what you know to obey, *"and"* you will be shown more.

Philip now receives his 'fine-tuning' instruction... this time attributed directly to the Holy Spirit; the Spirit said, **Go to that chariot and join it....** God reveals what we need to know – when we need to know it.

Acts 8:30-31

Philip, obedient as ever, ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. When Philip came to the Ethiopian, he was reading right where the prophet spoke of Christ. ... Philip's prompt obedience resulted in his experiencing a further revelation of God's leading... This was a golden opportunity. (Again – God sometimes leads us through circumstances.) Those who complain that nothing ever seems to work out for them in their service for God... should take an introspective look to see if they have any disobedience... or sluggishness to obey. THAT might be the problem.

I believe that there are a lot of people in your world and my world who are saying the exact same thing as what the man in the chariot said – *“How can I understand... unless someone guides me?”* – But we are being disobedient or sluggish to obey. ... There is a tremendous need for Bible guides. Tyler and I are praying for more men to step into that role for our youth. There is critical need for human guides and conversation partners who will 'come alongside' and journey with new converts and seekers... both young and old... listening to their questions... and sharing the true meaning of God's Word. ... 'How can I understand unless someone explains it to me?' is a heart-cry that echoes loud today.

Acts 8:32-34

Isaiah 53 was the passage he was reading, the prophecy of God's Suffering Servant. Isaiah 53 describes our Lord Jesus Christ in His birth (Isa. 53:1-2), life and ministry (Isa. 53:3), substitutionary death (Isa. 53:4-9),

and victorious resurrection (Isa. 53:10-12). ... The Ethiopian focused on Isaiah 53:7-8, which describes our Lord as the willing Sacrifice for sinners, even to the point of losing His human rights. As Philip explained the verses to him, the Ethiopian began to understand the Gospel because the Spirit of God was opening his mind to God's truth.

Acts 8:35-40

Philip's experience ought to encourage us in our own personal witness for the Lord. ... God directed Philip to the right person at the right time. You and I are not likely to have angels instruct us... but we can know the guidance of the Holy Spirit... if we are walking in the Spirit... poised to listen... and praying for God's direction.

Philip is snatched off the page of Scripture... just like Elijah was... as 2 Kings 2:11 describes. He is not needed here anymore. The Ethiopian rides off the pages of Scripture in his chariot. He went on his way, rejoicing.

Now what about this Ethiopian man? The first great church was not in the United States, nor was it in Europe, nor was it in Jerusalem, nor was it in Asia Minor. The first great church was in northern Africa. The Ethiopian evidently went back and through his witness and his influence, a church was begun there. You would find it very profitable to read about the early church in North Africa.

Philip was no longer needed. His task was done. It was time for him to move on, so the Spirit of God took him away. The word for "caught away" (hērpasen) is strong. It means to be snatched away quickly, immediately,

miraculously. It is the same word used for the rapture of the church (in 1 Thes. 4:17.)

Philip was then taken to witness in the coastal region, first in Azotus ... then in Caesarea... where he seems to have settled. (We will see that he is still there when we get to Acts 21:8).

The normal Christian life ought to be expecting that God could intervene in any way that He sees fit... for His Own purposes. ... God does whatever is necessary to instruct and guide believers. He is not limited to our theories and beliefs. He has at His disposal all the power and all of creation to use as He wills. And He will use whatever is needed to reach anyone who is truly hungry to know the way of salvation.

Do you remember the take home truth that I announced at the beginning of today's message...? ... **Divine appointments await us if we are obedient to God's leading. That was Philip's experience, and it can be ours.** But we need to be able to recognize His leading.

So here are 5 GENERAL characteristics of God's voice... These are some remnants from the research I did for my doctoral dissertation on a related topic. ... There is a lot more that can be said about HOW God speaks. (This is just a primer. It barely scratches the surface. I will only list five – out of so many. ... Some... I already covered in our study.) ... And please remember that the leading of the Holy Spirit is like the wind. We saw that in John 3:8 (earlier.) There is no absolute formula... no absolute predictor or tell-tale sign that will always be the case.... but Scripture does provide us with a few clues and descriptions of God's leading.

#1. God can (and does) speak in a subjective manner deep within us.

Philippians 2:13 (ESV)

for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

God works on our “wanter.” He makes us (desire... will... want...) what He wants.

Hebrews 4:12 (ESV)

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

God speaks in a subjective manner deep within us.... making us want what He wants... and also deep within us where we cannot distinguish what are our thoughts (soul)... and His thoughts (spirit)... ... God speaks in my innermost spirit. But I speak (and Satan also...) speaks in my innermost soul. It is very difficult to tell what is of spirit and what is of soul. But God's Word can divide these two. His Word is able to help us determine if our thoughts are coming from God through our spirit... and which thoughts are coming from ourselves or from Satan - through our soul. Saturating ourselves with God's Word prepares us – just like it did the Ethiopian – to be led correctly.

God speaks through Scripture and it is energized by the Holy Spirit, Who lives within us. The importance of reading... studying... and meditating on God's Word cannot be overemphasized. The Christian who is earnestly seeking to know and do the will of God... must be a student of the Word of God. The Spirit will fully reveal divine truths to us – as we read and study the Bible

Psalm 119:105 (ESV)

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

#2. God tends to speak with gentle leading. God was teaching this to Elijah in 1 Kings 19:11-13. He showed Elijah that He was not in the swirling wind... the violent earthquake... or the raging fire. When all was still... God spoke with a gentle whisper. ... You know what that tells me...? God seldom pushes... and demands... and drives... like an aggressive... assertive... used-car salesman.

#3. God's voice produces freedom. Look at what Jesus said:

Matthew 11:30 (ESV)

For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Satan loves to put people in bondage – God loves to set them free. Even when the task God leads us too calls for us to endure hardship – there is an overriding sense of freedom.

#4. God tends to speak when we are seeking Him. We saw that with the Ethiopian and also we see it with Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 29:13 (ESV)

You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.

#5. God speaks with truth that is to be tested by the Word of God. Any voice that we hear of His leading will never contradict Scripture. If it does... than you know it is not from God.

Divine appointments await us if we are obedient to God's leading.

That was Philip's experience, and it can be ours.