

Acts 8:26-40. The Odd Couple: Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch.

How would you know if God was speaking to you? If God spoke to you today would you be able to discern God's voice from the millions of random thoughts and ideas your mind develops each day, or from the whispers of the world? And if you could, would you obey his call?

Those questions leap out from this passage don't they? And as we go through this passage this morning I want you to hold those questions at the front of your minds because we need an answer. Christianity is not a religion of rules but is a call into a living, loving, serving relationship with God himself who comes to live in Christians by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit works in us to convict us of our sin and bring us to Jesus, then helps us grow into the likeness of Jesus by walking in God's way. As we study God's word and hear it taught the Spirit illuminates God's wonderful truths about holiness and godly living so we know the right way to live. We might call those truths God's general revelation or general will – things that all Christians should be doing as they grow in Christian maturity.

But the Spirit also directs our lives as individuals. God calls us to speak and act to his glory in situations that are unique to us. And so we need to be able to discern God's voice clearly if, like Philip here, we are going to be able to hear and obey God's specific call on our lives and see God work through us. We'll come back to that question at the end, but keep it in mind as we look at this passage together.

Firstly though let's see where we are in the account of the early church. When we left chapter 7 Stephen had just been martyred and the church had been scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, with only the apostles remaining in Jerusalem. Philip, one of the 7 men chosen to handle the food distribution, went down to Samaria and, like many of the other believers, he spoke about Jesus everywhere he went. Verses 6 and 7 tell us that Philip was able to perform miracles of healing and deliverance to reinforce his claims about Jesus. Many were healed and many, it seems, believed the gospel, so much so that some of the apostles, Peter and John, came down from Jerusalem to help in the evangelism campaign. As a result many were filled with the Holy Spirit and the church continued to grow as the mission moved from town to town.

Can you imagine how exciting that would have been? I get a huge thrill out of seeing people investigate the claims of Jesus at our Identity Courses and right now I'm meeting up with one guy and going through Christianity Explored 1-to-1, and it's such a joy to see his faith and understanding grow. But imagine if there were people coming to know Jesus every day! Imagine if by this time next week there were 10 or 20 or 30 new believers and that that continued week after week after week in new parts of the town. Wouldn't that just be the most exciting thing you had ever been part of? You'd want to stay and keep doing it, wouldn't you? Caribbean holiday? Cancel it! Tickets to the FA Cup Final? Give them away! Nothing would be as exciting as that! And then an angel of the Lord appeared to Philip, and told him to head south on the road to Gaza, and leave others to do the work! What? There's so much good stuff going on here! Why would he want to leave now? Why? Because God had got something else for him to do instead, something only Philip could do.

Perhaps that's why it was an angel of the Lord who appeared to Philip with this message, because if he was to leave such an important and successful mission behind he needed a clear call from God. And that's what he got! And Philip, to his great credit, obeyed. Perhaps that's not surprising: angels are pretty rare in the Bible so if an angel of the Lord came to me I think I'm pretty much guaranteed to do what they asked of me. And I suspect you'd be the same too.

And what was he called to do? It seems pretty odd doesn't it? 'Go south on the desert road towards Gaza.' Normally angels bring tidings of great joy or severe warnings that have a national or worldwide impact but here Philip has to take a walk. And it isn't to a great city or a people who haven't yet heard of Jesus – it's so he can meet one man. Philip has left a successful mission where many are coming to know Christ and where miracles are happening daily to go and tell one man about Jesus. Astonishing!

Perhaps it a reminder that even events that seem insignificant to us may have consequences we can't imagine, and who knows how great a witness this man had when he returned to his own land. But perhaps it also speaks of God's love and care for each person. God's love for you and for me, for your neighbour, for your spouse, your colleague, your enemy is so great that he gave his Son that they might have eternal life. People matter to God. Individuals matter to God. People are saved one by one, and this one, this man, mattered so much that God sent Philip to meet him in the middle of nowhere so he might know Jesus for himself.

We don't know much about him, not even his name, but Luke tells us that he was a Ethiopian eunuch who had an important job working looking after the treasury for Candace – which seems to have been the office of the Queen Mother- in what would now be southern Egypt or Northern Sudan. He is clearly a believer in God, hence his trip to Jerusalem to worship, but whether he was a Jew by birth or a convert to Judaism is unclear. We do know that he was reading the scriptures and had plenty of unanswered questions.

So having been sent by an angel of the Lord to head along the Gaza road Philip is then prompted by the Holy Spirit to go and walk alongside the chariot. Philip was now in the right place at the right time to overhear the eunuch reading out loud a passage from Isaiah 53. And since he was in the right place at the right time Philip took up his courage and asked a question: "Do you understand what you are reading?" It's pretty innocuous isn't it? No one could be offended by what Philip said, but by speaking up at the right place at the right time Philip began a wonderful conversation which led to the eunuch's conversion.

We don't know how all the conversation went, but perhaps it developed like this:

"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter; and as a sheep before the shearer is silent so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendents? For his life was taken from the earth?"

Do you understand what you are reading?

How can I unless someone explains it to me?

I'd love to help.

Then come up here and let's talk! Tell me, the person in Isaiah 53, is the prophet talking about himself or someone else?

He's talking about someone else. But before I explain that – have you just been to Jerusalem?

Yes, I went to worship God.

Did you make sacrifices?

The priests did. God is holy after all.

But we know that the blood of bulls and goats cannot fully take away sin, so why bother? What will they achieve?

They show I want to be made right with God. I'm admitting my guilt and asking for his forgiveness. The sacrifices are a sign of my desire to be right with God and a request for his mercy. What else is there?

That's a great answer, and a great question, but the sacrifices the Law requires point to a greater one and for all sacrifice that has now been made. That's the sacrifice the prophet Isaiah was speaking of, where one who was totally innocent was deprived of justice so that those who are guilty might be spared punishment.

So who is the writer speaking of?

The writer was pointing forward to Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was righteous and powerful in word and deed yet he was handed over to the Romans by wicked men who put him to death on the cross. Look back in Isaiah 53. We are those sheep who have gone astray and yet the Lord has laid on Jesus the iniquity of us all. Jesus was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities so that through his death we might be healed. Jesus is the end of the law. He fulfilled God's righteous demand for a perfect sacrifice for sin.

But Isaiah goes on to speak of God extending his days and him knowing his children? How can that be?

Well spotted! Because Jesus was righteous, death could not hold him. He rose from the dead on the third day in accordance with the scriptures and we have seen him with our own eyes. As David wrote in Psalm 22, 'God would not let his Holy One see decay.'

So where is Jesus now? Can I see him? I want to see him too!

After 40 days Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father in Heaven – but he sent us a Comforter, the promised Holy Spirit, to be with those who trust in him. By his power I have come to tell you the good news that all who call on the name of the Lord will be completely forgiven, saved from judgment and adopted into God's family as his beloved children. Do you believe this?

I do! I believe that Jesus is the Christ; that he is the one Isaiah spoke of. Stop the carriage! Here is water and I want to be baptised!

Now I suspect that their conversation was much longer than that, with far more questions, perhaps over a few hours. Almost certainly the eunuch would have had all of Isaiah in front of him, not just those verses quoted in the book of Acts, but I hope it shows how starting with that passage Philip could have told the eunuch about Jesus. If that's new to you today, I wonder what you made of it. Are you convinced of the truth? Are you ready to believe as the eunuch did? I'd love to chat with you about that after the service, if that's the case.

As for this Ethiopian, what's the result? Not just a convert and a baptism, but a life filled with joy, and a great testimony. And after the Eunuch had been baptised, Philip was taken away by the Spirit, perhaps miraculously but perhaps with another spiritual nudge to walk away, but the Ethiopian eunuch no longer needed Philip because he now had Jesus and the Spirit. And who knows the influence and witness he had when he arrived home.

Now there are lots of things we could focus on here. We might start by pointing out that Christ is clearly taught in the Old Testament. All scripture points either directly or indirectly to Jesus and all of God's promises are fulfilled in him. So when you read the Old Testament we need to read with New Testament glasses, noticing the original context but always seeing it's fulfilment in Christ. So don't neglect the Old Testament.

We might also stress again the need to be equipped and ready to give a reason for the hope we have in Jesus. We've seen that a lot over the past few weeks and it's true. Turning up in the right place at the right time was one thing, but Phillip needed to be willing and able to talk about Jesus when he arrived or God's glorious planning would have counted for nothing. So get ready! Who knows when God will give you that opportunity!

But the main point I want to bring out today is that this happened because Philip heard the voice of God and obeyed his call. So let's come back to the question I asked at the beginning: How would you know if God was speaking to you?

Now you might be sitting there thinking that God won't speak to me because the Bible is complete and there is nothing more to add. And that's partly true. God has revealed everything we need to know about him and the way to be saved through Jesus in his word the Bible, and there is and will be nothing to add to that. That's one of the reasons we know that Islam and Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses have got it wrong because they not only look to a newer revelation from God but that new revelation contradicts God's word the Bible. God has said all he will say about himself and the way to be saved and the way we should live – and those things are true in every context and in every age.

But, God's general will, those things contained in scripture, doesn't prevent him from seeking to direct us in ways that are specific to us and our situations. Your calling is not my calling. Your circumstances and opportunities and talents are not the same as mine – and just as we come to God individually so he directs our lives individually. As he spoke to and guided Philip God will speak to and guide us, if we are prepared to listen and ready to obey.

You also might be thinking that God won't speak to you because you are simply too far down the righteous pecking order. He might conceivably speak to holy people, like Bishops (and oh that he would!) but he won't bother with you. But let me remind you that God called Samuel in the night when he just a small boy; that he appeared to Jacob the thieving, lying runaway; and that he sent an angel to Mary, a poor servant girl. God is interested in all his children: old, young, rich, poor, and since as Christians we are adopted into his family don't you think it would be rather normal for a Father to speak to his children? It would be rather weird for him not to, wouldn't it? If God loves us, of course he will speak to us.

So how does this work? Should we expect angels, as guided Philip here? Well angels are even pretty rare in the Bible so I wouldn't wait around for that. So how can we find out what God is calling us to do?

1: Read the scriptures.

If you want to know how to live in a way that pleases God, read the Bible, and read it again and again. Study God's word with your home group, come to church to hear it preached, but get to know the Bible. As you do, God will reveal himself and his will to you – and that will be enough to guide you through most of life.

You see whilst the Bible won't tell you what job to do it will tell you the kinds of things Christians should avoid, and anything dishonourable or immoral or that ends up mistreating the poor or exploiting the weak is clearly a no no. The Bible won't tell you who to marry but it will make clear they need to be a believer of the opposite sex. The Bible won't tell you what to wear or what to eat but it will tell you to consider other believers and non believers in what you do and to do all things to glorify God.

There is great freedom for the Christian following God but if you want to know you are living an obedient life you simply need to stick to the general will of God revealed in the scriptures and you'll be fine! God will guide you in all your ways as you know and submit to his commands.

But sometimes God will have a distinct call on your life – a way for you to serve, a place for you to go, a calling for you to fulfil that is unique to you. It could be a big, whole life thing like a career to pursue or a place to move to. Or it could be a momentary thing, like Philip in Acts 8. This encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch was something for him to do on one day only. It would not define Philip's life but it would change the eunuch's life and bring God great glory! So how might God speak to us in that case? Are you ready?

2. In any way he chooses!

God could send you an angel or speak in an audible voice or write a message on the wall to tell you what to do. God can do those things, but in my experience God usually speaks and calls in far more subtle ways. Those calls might come from a book, a casual conversation, a sermon, or a thought that flashes through your mind, but somehow you won't be able to let the thought go. We might call it a nagging thought, a persistent prod, a sense of unease with your current circumstance which simply will not go away until you act. I'm sure you know the kind of thing I mean. You know in your know-er that you are been directed in a certain direction.

If it's something small, like a feeling that you should call someone or visit someone then my advice is to pray and obey. If it's something huge and life changing, I'd wait to make sure it is from God and ask him to confirm that thought in other ways. I'd also suggest talking to a wise and godly friend – perhaps your prayer partner or home group leader. Come and talk to me if that would help. Chatting things through and praying with other people often helps to clarify things and settle nerves. But at the end of the day hearing God's voice and sensing his call is the easy part: obeying is often much harder.

But one thing to remember: If it is God calling you then what he asks will always, always, always be in line with the Bible. God will not call you to kill, to steal, to lie, to be unfaithful to your spouse or to marry an unbeliever. Neither are you going to be called to give away all your possessions so that your family have nowhere to live or lead a violent revolution against the government, however much you might like that idea. When God calls it will always be in line with his revealed will in the Bible.

Now of course sometimes we might be wrong. We may sense a call from God to visit someone but when we go we find they are out or busy. If that happens, have we been disobedient if we do what we thought was right?

I don't think so. In fact, not to answer such a call is probably sinful because are acting against our own consciences. And as long as what we do is godly and wise, no wrong will have been done. In fact I suspect God would be rather pleased by the fact that we wanted to please him, just like a mother might be delighted to receive breakfast in bed from her children at 6am, even when she's been up all night. If we delight in God and are seeking to do his will, God our Father in Heaven will be delighted also. And if we are committed to seeking his will and obeying his call, we are likely to be prompted to act or pray more often.

And if you are feeling rather scared either about obeying or not being called let me finish with three bits of encouragement. Firstly, God loves you and his plans for you are for your good – you can trust him. Secondly, if you fail to act remember we have a God whom loves us and promises to forgive us. He is not a mean ogre, but a loving and kind Father. And finally, if you are worried that God might not have a specific call for you, don't sit around waiting! Get on with what he has called you to do already! Look for ways to serve him where you are in your neighbourhood, at work, and here at church; study his word and get to know him better; tell others about Jesus; live a life of love and generosity, and learn to listen to those prompting. Rolling stones are much easier to steer. And those already active in God's kingdom are easier to use. That was the case for Philip, and it will be the case for us. John Stott the wonderful preacher and author, apparently used to make up each day and say 'Good Morning Lord! How can I please you today?' What a wonderful attitude to have! God is calling you to serve him and please him. Are you listening? And will you obey? Amen.