

God'S Special Presence And Direct Intervention

Acts 8:1-40, Philip

Martin G. Collins

Given 07-Sep-13; Sermon #1176

Before He was taken back to heaven, Jesus Christ told His disciples that after He was gone, His enemies would persecute and kill them, thinking they were doing God a service. I am sure they did not like hearing that. I am sure the early disciples remembered that teaching, years later, when Saul was at his worst.

Still, it must have been a shock when Stephen, their most outstanding layman and deacon, was killed. He was a distinguished Christian leader, one who had proved himself devout, strong, and useful to the church. He was also the first believer to be martyred, as illustrated in Acts 7.

As we move from Acts 7 to Acts 8, we find that Stephen's killing was the signal for a widespread outbreak of persecution against many in the church. It was led by Saul, who was present at Stephen's stoning, and gave approval for his death.

There had been persecution already. The apostles had been beaten because they refused to remain silent about the Person and the work of their Lord and Master. But that earlier persecution was against the apostles only. Here for the first time we find persecution, not only of the leaders, but also of the membership of the church at large. To make the picture of these days even worse, for the first time we find the leaders of Judaism united in their opposition against the church. They had not been united before against God's church. In one sense they had—against the apostles—but not the church, up until that time.

It is interesting that Victor Hugo, the French poet, novelist, and dramatist, who wrote *Les Misérables*, suggested "There is one thing stronger than all the armies in the world, and that is an idea whose time has come." The gospel of Jesus Christ is much more than an idea. It is a divine inspiration; it is God's will. The gospel in its effect is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, and in its aim, it is the gospel of the coming Kingdom of God. It is God's dynamite for breaking down sin's barriers and setting the prisoners free. Its time had come, and the church was on the move.

Stephen's death scattered the brethren in all directions very rapidly. The effect was that the Word of God spread like wildfire. It was actually a positive thing that came out of Stephen's death.

The events in Acts 8 center around four different men: Saul, the zealous persecutor (Acts 8:1-3); Philip, a faithful preacher and teacher (Acts 8:4-8); Simon the sorcerer, a clever deceiver (Acts 8:9-25); and an Ethiopian eunuch, who was a truth seeker (Acts 8:26-40). The common thread and emphasis through Acts 8 is the special presence of God and His direct intervention, which the church was seeing first-hand. Let us see what we can learn from the actions and attitudes of these four men.

The book of Acts and the epistles give sufficient data for a sketch of Saul's early life. He was born in Tarsus in Silicia, a "Hebrew of the Hebrews," the son of a Pharisee, and a Roman citizen. He was a tent maker in his youth, and he had a sister. He was educated in Jerusalem by Gamaliel, and became a devoted Pharisee himself. Measured by the letter of the law, his life was blameless. He was one of the most promising young Pharisees in Jerusalem, well on his way to becoming a great leader of the Jewish faith. Saul's zeal for the letter of the law was displayed most vividly in his persecution of the church, beginning in a big way with Stephen.

Acts 8:1-4 Now Saul was consenting to his [Stephen's] death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.

The positive aspect of it.

Amazingly, good came out of opposition. When the apostles were brought before the Sanhedrin, Peter referred to the resurrection. Because the resurrection was something in which the Pharisees believed, and the Sadducees did not, the apostle's assertion immediately divided the ruling body. They became at odds with one another. Acts 23 recounts a similar case later involving Paul, after his conversion.

Acts 23:6-8 But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!" And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection—and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both.

This passage shows the ongoing conflict among the Jewish leaders in their view of the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, which kept them at odds and in contention for generations.

Between Peter's arrest and the persecution, recounted in Acts 8, the gospel had spread among the Hellenists, those Greek-speaking persons who were Jews in the sense that they were sympathetic with Judaism, and worshipped the God of the Jews in a Jewish way. But they were Gentiles by birth, and were now becoming Christian. This was the largest percentage who were becoming Gentile Christians.

The leaders of the early church, apart from the apostles, were from this number. Their leader had been Stephen. The apostles were worshipping at the Temple, going through the religious rites of Judaism, and they did not seem to see any problem with that.

Stephen understood that certain surviving Jewish traditions were traditions *added* to God's truth and needed to go away, and indeed were destined to pass away. In fact, he knew that even the Temple would be gone soon. It was on this ground that Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin. On that point, not just the Sadducees, but the Pharisees too were up in arms. They had been at odds, and now they had something to unite over—that was the prediction of the destruction of the Temple.

Things were getting bad for the Christians. Saul, who Luke introduces as an agent of the persecution, became the first truly great and deadly enemy of the church. Not much is said about him here, he is simply mentioned as being present, giving approval to Stephen's death. But Luke knew that Saul went on to intensify the persecution of the church, so that not only were the disciples scattered, but they also were actually pursued in their scattering, as Saul hounded them to death (that is, the membership of the church).

Acts 8:3 says, "As for Saul, he made havoc of the church." Other versions say "he ravaged it," and the tense of that verb, rather ravaged or destroyed, is imperfect, which means that he ravaged it, and kept on ravaging it, over and over and over again. The verb here describes a wild animal, mangling its prey. He was ferocious in his attack of the church. He gave it his all.

Some Bible translations seem to suggest that Paul had just started to make trouble. But the real idea is that he continued to make trouble. He was making trouble, and he was going to keep on making trouble until God stopped him. The trouble Saul and the others were making was ineffective in the end. Saul was setting out to destroy the church, but

God's Special Presence and Direct Intervention by Martin G. Collins (<http://www.cgg.org>)

the more he tried, the more the gospel spread. This is because those who were persecuted and thus scattered throughout Judea and Samaria planted the seeds of the gospel everywhere. It is interesting how God works, even in allowing such persecution as that, to force the spreading of the gospel throughout the world.

There are different words for *scattered* in Greek. One means *dispersed*, so that the item is gone from that point on, like scattering a person's ashes on the ocean's waves. That is not the word used here in Acts 8:1 and 4. The word used here means scattered in order to be planted. It is exactly like the Hebrew word *Jezreel*, meaning scattered but also planted. It is what God did with Israel, scattering the Jews throughout the world because of their sin, but He also brought them back and planted them in their land.

The disciples were scattered as a result of the persecution, but all the leaders did by scattering the disciples was to plant them in places to which they had been scattered, because they preached the Word there. So in their scattering, they scattered to areas where God wanted them to preach the Word.

What we see here is the special presence of God and His divine intervention in every way. Persecution does to the church what wind does to seed: it scatters it, and only produces a greater harvest. The word translated *scattered* is *diaspeir* in verses 1 and 4, and it means "to scatter seed."

The believers in Jerusalem were God's seed, and the persecution was used by God to plant them in new soil so they could bear fruit. Some went throughout Judea and Samaria, and others went to more distant fields. The gospel grew; the work of God grew; the Way grew.

This may be true of many of you, if you apply it to yourself. Wherever you find yourself, whether scattered by work or family or education, or some other means, have you considered yourself planted in that place? Have you put down roots and borne fruit for Jesus Christ? That is what these early Christians did. It does not mean they necessarily went out and preached on the street corners, but they set this fine example that Christians are to set, and made others want to be like them.

It is because of this activity that even the bad things that had happened to them served to advance the cause of Christ. Paul would later write in Romans 8:28 "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God." The persecution of the early church, even the stoning of Stephen, illustrates that principle.

At this point, the mantle of leadership passes from Stephen to Philip (remember, this is

God's Special Presence and Direct Intervention by Martin G. Collins (<http://www.cgg.org>)

in Samaria). He actually begins the church's Gentile mission. Philip began his ministry in Samaria, where Jesus outlined His plan for the expansion of the disciples' commission:

Acts 1:8 "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses of Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Judea and Samaria are probably to be taken together, as embracing one region. The verse should be read as describing three regions: (1), Jerusalem; (2), Judea and Samaria; and (3), the regions beyond, meaning the rest of the world.

Through the end of Acts 7, Luke was describing the preaching of the gospel in Jerusalem. It had been effective; thousands had believed. In fact, others had flocked into the city to be with the apostles and experience the healings that were taking place there. Beginning in Acts 8, the gospel expands to Samaria, and Philip becomes the instrument of the first great "missionary outreach." It was bold of him to do it, because there was a long-standing and deep-seated hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans, going back to ancient times.

When the Assyrian army had overthrown Samaria and carried the Jews of the Northern Kingdom away to Assyria, some Jews were inevitably left behind. These soon intermarried with the foreigners who had been settled in Samaria in their place, which made the Samaritans both ethnically and religiously half-breeds. They soon compounded the problem by setting up a rival temple on Mount Gerizim. This was prohibited in the Old Testament, but the Samaritans solved the problem by rejecting the Old Testament except for the first five books. The Jews looked down on the Samaritans and had no dealings with them.

Remember what the woman at the well said to Jesus:

John 4:9 Then the woman of Samaria said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.

So it was a very novel thing for Philip to lead the evangelization of this area. He was a Gentile too, part of the Hellenistic branch of Judaism, and now converted to Christianity. When Philip began his ministry in this new area, we find him doing exactly what the apostles and other evangelists had been doing before him.

Acts 8:4-8 Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. And there was great joy in that city.

Acts 8:5 gives the example of a man, Philip, who did the same thing as the other apostles: Philip preached Christ to them. In other words, he preached the gospel of the coming Kingdom of God. The gospel was centered in Jesus Christ, and they had been preaching Christ's message all along.

Why did they not adopt some new methods? Why did they not hold debates, or set up therapy groups, or hold discussions about important books, and those types of things? Paul explains the reason for their choice:

Romans 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.

It is through the preaching of the Word in formal settings, and testifying to the Word in the informal conversations, that the power of God is known. That is how God has chosen to reach people. Transformations take place through the preaching of the Word, and Philip preached the gospel and God blessed his teaching.

Philip is the first person, in fact the only person in the New Testament to be called an evangelist, and that is in Acts 21:8. Although some ministers are evangelists, the primary task of the minister is not evangelism. A minister's purpose is, as Paul says in Ephesians 4:12, to prepare God's people for the works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.

Works of service include evangelism, and an evangelist is a missionary preacher of the gospel; he is one who goes out. The Worldwide Church of God had ministers that they called evangelists who went out and preached to various areas of the world. One of the most well known was Gerald Waterhouse, who went out preaching about the coming Kingdom of God and what the Millennium may be like.

God's Special Presence and Direct Intervention by Martin G. Collins (<http://www.cgg.org>)

Ephesians 4:11-12 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.

That is the minister's first priority. Preaching the gospel to the world is secondary. How can you do a good witness to the world unless the people who you have responsibility over are living God's way of life and are being taught in that way?

This title is applied to Philip, who appears to have gone from city to city, preaching the Word.

Acts 8:40 But Philip was found at Azotus. And passing through, he preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea.

So you see there an example that he was traveling all over the place, evangelizing.

Judging from the case of Philip, evangelists had neither the authority of an apostle, nor the gift or prophecy, nor the responsibility of pastoral supervision over a portion of the flock. That is not to say they could not, it is just to say that in this case, with Philip, it does not appear that he had those responsibilities. They were itinerant preachers. Evangelists' special function was to carry the gospel to places where it was previously unknown. The writers of the four gospels are known as *The Evangelists* (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). That is not to say they did not have multiple responsibilities.

A minister's job is to teach the Bible so that those in the church who are taught, particularly those who have the gift of evangelism, can exercise their gift, or whatever other gift they may have, in reaching others. We do not know where Philip received his teaching; he probably learned what he knew from the apostles. Wherever he learned it, he took the message to distant places very boldly. He was not afraid to speak out, and God blessed him for that, and even with the ability to do miracles.

In the *New International Version*, Luke says that the effects of Philip's efforts were:

Acts 8:7 (NIV) For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed.

So he did mighty works as an evangelist.

Miracles are particularly significant, in view of the story that follows. One of reasons, and perhaps the main reason that God allowed Philip to do the miracle that he did, was for the impact that they had on a man whose name was Simon. Simon seemed to be a miracle worker; he had impressed the people of Samaria by his tricks for some time, acting like he was some great person.

Acts 8:9-25 But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery [he was a drug pusher, or a magician, or that type of thing] in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the great power of God." And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time. But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done. Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. [It is interesting that many of them were baptized, but had not yet had the Holy Spirit; ministers of God had not yet laid hands upon them, asking for God to impart that.] For as yet [h]e had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money [the worst thing he could have done], saying, "Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity." Then Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me." So when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans.

They called Simon “the great power” in verse 10. The Latin word for great is *magus*; you have heard of the name Simon Magus. So Simon was usually referred to as “Simon Magus,” “Simon the Great.” No ego there! This is like calling him “Simon the Magnificent.” It reminds me of some of the magicians we have seen on TV, where they have magnificent names, or something impressive to draw you in. He had been making a magnificent impact on the city before Philip came. Now Philip had taken the limelight.

For the first time in his life, Simon saw a power that really did what it seemed to do. He had been doing tricks, he had been fooling people, and he *knew* that he had only been fooling them. He was a hypocrite, to say the least. Suddenly, Philip was doing the real thing, not operating at all the way Simon was operating—not trying to draw attention to himself, but rather, pointing to Jesus Christ. It was through the power of this Christ that real miracles were being done. The same thing is going to happen again in the end-time, during the tribulation, and those charlatans will be exposed.

It was in a sort of professional capacity that Simon thought of himself. He very likely reasoned, “If I’m going to advance in my profession, or even just recapture the following that I had until now, I’d better get the power that the Christian has.” No doubt, he at least thought it.

However, this is a puzzling story, and what makes it so puzzling is verse 13:

Acts 8:13 Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.

What does it mean that “Simon himself believed”? Was Simon actually a true believer; was his baptism actually a true baptism? Or was he just carried along by the enthusiasm of Philip’s miracles, and the professing of others who had shown some changes? Was his a change of heart?

The easiest answer is that Simon was *not* a true believer, but we can answer these questions further by asking another question. What was the basis of his faith? What did he believe?

His faith was not in the Word of God, but in the miracles he saw Philip perform. There is no indication that Simon repented of his sins. He certainly did not believe with all of his heart. His heart was not right, as Peter told him. In Acts 8:37, we read that Philip was concerned about this very same attitude, and asked the Ethiopian if he believes with all

his heart.

Peter, who had come to Samaria, said to Simon:

Acts 8:20-21 But Peter said to him, “Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God.”

So God had given Peter discernment, and all of the apostles discernment, and God’s ministers discernment, to be able to see through people—not every time, but quite often.

That is strong language that Luke records. When Peter says “You have neither part nor portion in this matter,” it is interesting that he employs similar words to what Jesus used for him, when Peter had objected to Jesus’s washing his feet in the upper room:

John 13:8 Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.”

Peter used the same terminology towards Simon Magus. Strong words, still Peter was not an unbeliever—he was a believer, and he was just out of kilter with the will of God at that time.

Simon was one who had been exposed to strong preaching, was impressed by the miracles, and wanted to tap into the evident blessings of the gospel. But he did not have the genuine change of heart that would have meant that he was born from above. If Simon was converted (just supposing that), we are warned against what in the history of the church has come to be known as *simony*.

In the narrowest sense, simony is the crime of buying or selling of church offices or privileges. It is based on the notion that God’s blessings can be bought. It can refer more broadly to any theological system in which we suppose we can pay God for what we want from Him. We have to be very careful in our prayers that we do not make deals with God that we cannot keep, and try to buy His favor by promising what we think He wants. We have to be sincere and convicted in what we promise God we are going to do.

The early church had its priorities straight. It was more important to preach the Word than to win the support of the wealthy and the influential people of the world. But we have the opposite thing today. It is all too common in some Christian organizations that they think they can obtain the blessing of God on their work, if only they can raise enough money. It is not about raising money; God gives His church the money it needs. He blesses it. If the church is not doing what it is supposed to, it does not get the money required to do the work. So we have to all make sure that we are doing the right thing, and we have to make sure that have agape love.

God really blesses His church. When renewal sweeps over God's people, it is generally in unexpected ways, and never linked to how much money they have. God just chooses to do it, and His will is always carried out.

Peter's words to Simon give every indication that the sorcerer was not a converted man. "Your money perish with you" is pretty strong language to use if Simon was a believer. His heart was not right before God, and Simon's response to these severe words of warning was not at all encouraging. He was more concerned about avoiding judgment than getting right with God. He was more worried about what God was going to do to him than he was with repenting of what he had done.

There is no evidence that he repented and sought forgiveness. A sinner who wants the prayers of others, but will not pray for himself, is not going to enter God's Kingdom. Simon heard the gospel, saw the miracles, gave a profession of faith in Christ, and was baptized. Yet he was apparently never converted, and he was one of Satan's counterfeits. Had Peter not exposed the wickedness of his heart, Simon would have been accepted as a member of the Samaritan congregation. His wrong attitude would have spread like cancer. Bitterness and sinful actions came from his heart, the seat of his emotions and commitment, and it would have done much damage to the church.

If Simon was not converted, which we believe he was not (although he thought he was), then his case is a warning to anyone who thinks that just because he or she has made a profession of faith, or has gone through certain motions expected of Christians, that he or she is right with God for that reason. Without true faith and conviction, that is not the case at all. A person with true faith and conviction is committed, and they are a believer. They are a saint, and they are a child of God, and most likely of the first fruits.

Many churches are often so interested in getting members into their congregations that they make the demands for membership almost meaningless. As long as a person will say a few right things, they consider the person to be called, and proceed to the baptism. Then they add such persons to their roll, saying "We increased our

God's Special Presence and Direct Intervention by Martin G. Collins (<http://www.cgg.org>)

congregation by 13% last year, and the year before we only had a 10% increase, and things are really going well now.”

None of this is necessarily the work of God. It may be that when they added members to the church that easily, what they were actually doing was inoculating them against the real article, against the Word of God. If a person is dragged into God's church, and exposed to and given God's truth, but they were not really called, and they reject it, they are held accountable for what they know.

So we do a disservice to those people if we drag somebody into God's church. We have to be very careful that it is God that is calling a person into God's church. It is a disservice to entice or drag someone into the church just to get them dunked, as if that is all that is needed to make their membership legal or socially acceptable.

Nevertheless, when Simon came to the apostles saying he believed in Jesus Christ and wanted to be baptized, the apostles accepted his profession. That was necessary, because as human beings, we cannot see into another person's heart. The ministry cannot, although we are given discernment, and neither can any member. So we have to go by a person's word. All we can do is judge on the basis of credible profession. That is what Philip did when Simon said he believed in and accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior. Simon was baptized, although he was probably not a true believer.

Simon's sorcery was energized by Satan, and was used to magnify himself, while Philip's miracles were empowered by God and were used to glorify Christ. The difference in attitude is obvious and dramatic.

Philip was not only a faithful preacher, he was also an obedient personal worker. Like Jesus, he was willing to leave the crowds and deal with one lost person at a time. The movement of the gospel to Samaria was due in significant ways to the ministry of Philip.

Philip was one of seven deacons who had been elected to carry out important works of service in the church at Jerusalem. It was not long before he became an effective evangelist. Although the deacons were elected to do what we could call works of mercy, or service ministries of a physical nature (which is what even today we think of the deacons primarily as doing), these men did not consider themselves to be limited to such functions. At least two of them were great teachers. They were steeped in the Scriptures, and they were men of great courage. Stephen, the first great deacon teacher, was able to stand before the highest tribunal of his day, give an articulate well-reasoned analysis of Israel's history, and spread the gospel.

God's Special Presence and Direct Intervention by Martin G. Collins (<http://www.cgg.org>)

Philip is on the scene, and he is another outstanding man. He earned the title of evangelist because when the church was scattered, he made his way north to Samaria, where he preached about Jesus Christ and the coming Kingdom of God. Acts 8 contains two stories about him, the impact of his preaching on Simon the Magician, and his witness to the Ethiopian eunuch.

Acts 8:26-31 Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is desert. So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go near and overtake this chariot." So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him.

So the angel could have told this Ethiopian official how to be saved, but God has not given that commission to angels. He has given it to His people. Philip's experience should encourage us in our own personal witness for Christ. To begin with, God directed Philip to the right person at the right time.

This court official did not come from what we know today as Ethiopia; his home was in ancient Nubia, located south of Egypt. Since he was a eunuch, he could not become a full Jewish proselyte. But he was permitted to become a God-fearer, or a proselyte of the gate. The Ethiopian eunuch was a Gentile, and he was in the category of the people who had not become Jews by circumcision. They could not participate in the formal rites of Judaism, but they could attend the synagogues and discuss religion with the rabbis.

Philip was also a God-fearer. He had reverence for the traditions of Israel, so there was a special place for him. He would be welcomed in a restricted sense.

The Ethiopian was concerned enough about his spiritual life to travel over 200 miles to Jerusalem to worship God, but his heart was still not satisfied. The Ethiopian represents many people today, who are religious, who read the Scriptures, and seek truth, yet do not have a truth-based faith in God. They are sincere, but they are lost, and they need someone to show them the way.

The setting in which the inspiration came to Philip, to share the gospel with the

Ethiopian, is very significant. This was a time of unusual blessing on the church. To judge from the story, it would even seem that the enlightenment in Samaria was still growing, and Philip was an important part of this, being the key evangelist. Peter and John had been sent to inspect the work, but they had then gone back to Jerusalem to report. Philip was the front-line man; he seemed to be absolutely indispensable. Yet it was at precisely this moment when God inspired him to leave the area of Samaria.

The other striking fact about this inspiration to leave was the area to which the angel sent Philip. He was in a good area, doing a good work, reaching numerous people. But the angel of the Lord said he wanted Philip to go down the desert road that stretches from Jerusalem south to Gaza, on the way to Egypt. "Desert road" gives you the description needed to realize that it is out in the middle of nowhere.

Is it not interesting that God called Philip to such a time, and to such a place? What God called him to do, he did joyfully. How many other men might have raised objections, or made excuses for that? But not Philip. He was always ready and willing to go. It appears from the account that Philip had no objections and made no excuses, because Philip knew something we need to know and that will be very helpful in our lives.

Isaiah 55:8-11 "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts. "For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it."

This means that although Christianity is not an irrational thing, and although none of us are called to be irrational, nevertheless, we are engaged in spiritual work, and there are always going to be areas we will not fully understand the workings of. We will find ourselves asking, "Why does God do that?" or "Why does He do that, rather than something else?" We will always be asking ourselves, as long as we have some human nature. Someday we will have all of the answers.

That is just the way it is. God's ways are not our ways of doing things, even though we have God's Holy Spirit. We still have that element of human nature. As long as we still have some human nature—which has not been totally replaced by God's nature, by the mind of God—we will have some thoughts that are not God's thoughts. Some of our

God's Special Presence and Direct Intervention by Martin G. Collins (<http://www.cgg.org>)

ways will not be God's ways.

This is why our sanctification is a process, rather than a one-time event. It takes time to change. Thankfully, God is merciful; He is giving us that time.

Why does God allow some things? Why does God allow frustration and distress? It is good to struggle; struggle builds character, just like tribulation builds patience. But those answers are not always satisfactory. Nevertheless, we have to accept them.

The real answer, from our side of things, is that really, there is sometimes no answer, at least none that can be comprehended of God's ways. Even after living to a ripe old age as a Christian, all godly things are not fully understood.

One thing we must come to understand relatively well is what we know from Ecclesiastes 12.

Ecclesiastes 12:13 Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all.

By doing this, we gain in understanding; we will think more like God.

When Philip was inspired to go to the desert to see the Ethiopian eunuch, he did not know what God was going to do with him. I am sure it did not make sense to him, to leave what he was doing and go into the desert near Gaza. But that is what God told him to do, so he did it. Whenever it comes to a choice between our way of thinking and what God says, you know as well as I do that there is no real choice for the true Christian, because we have already committed ourselves and there is no turning back. We *must* do things God's way.

If you read the Bible, and what you read does not seem to make sense to you, but you understand what it is telling you to do, you had better do it. That is the only way you or anybody else will find blessing, is to do it God's way.

On the road to Gaza, Philip came upon the Ethiopian eunuch—he was part of a history that might have gone back 1,000 years. Ethiopia is a name that in ancient times was given to a large area of Africa south of Egypt. Today, that land is more limited. It is a smaller country to the southeast of Egypt. But in that day, it referred to the whole region of the upper Nile, approximately from the Aswan to Khartoum. It is the area from which the Queen of Sheba came in the days of King Solomon.

But here in the time of the early church, there was an Ethiopian who for some reason had gotten the idea that in Jerusalem, hundreds of miles away, there was a religion that he should investigate if he was serious about finding God. Perhaps it was something he heard because God had alerted him to it. He had made the very long trip to Jerusalem.

Another man would not have been able to do it. It was hard to travel such distances in those days. This was a very trying and costly journey. If he had been even a minor official in the court of Candace, he could not have been free to make the journey. *Candace* is not so much a proper name, as a title, the title which all of the queens of Ethiopia bore. The Ethiopian eunuch was an important man, the keeper of the treasury of which was acknowledged by all to be a very rich country. He was free to go because of his position.

There is nothing in the story to indicate that he had heard anything about Jesus, though it is hard to imagine that he could be in Jerusalem in those days and have no idea what was going on. But he was not Hebrew speaking; he did not know Aramaic, as far as we know. (By the way, Saul, who later became the apostle Paul, spoke four different languages, so he was able to travel around and speak very clearly to different people.)

The Ethiopian eunuch probably knew Greek. In the world at that time, Greek was almost like English is today; it was the business language of the world. A tremendous number of countries spoke Greek. It followed the Greek empire that had covered such a large area. It was probably from the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, that he was reading. Those who study textual matters closely say the way Isaiah 53 is quoted by the Ethiopian eunuch is a clue that this was a Greek Old Testament, and not Hebrew.

Because the Ethiopian probably did not know Hebrew or Aramaic, and because he had been in Jerusalem for what had been a relatively short time, it is possible that he had not heard about Jesus, but he had certainly entered into the religious life of the Jews. What he found in the religious life of Judaism in those days would have been a religion based on strong tradition. He probably would have seen at least some of the hypocrisy that Jesus saw, and what the early apostles continued to see, especially among the leadership of the Jews.

The religious leaders of the nation had the Old Testament, but they had become hopelessly legalistic to the point of only looking at the letter of the law. They were more concerned about the letter of the law than with its spirit, and were not concerned about any mercy having to do with it. It was very likely that this man from Ethiopia would have been badly disappointed as he confronted Judaism. Or perhaps he was already versed in it, and had studied it from afar.

He probably found the religious traditions of Israel to be political and to be disappointing for that reason. If the Pharisees were the party mainly responsible for keeping the law, the Sadducees were the main political figures. The high priest and members of their families were Sadducees, and they were the ones who had access to the Romans.

Did the Ethiopian know how valuable the Word of God was, when he was reading it? He seemed intrigued by the book of Isaiah, and wondered what may apply to him. If he started at the beginning, he would have eventually read about Isaiah's call to the ministry. He would have read about the seraphim singing, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord Almighty." Reading further on, he would have eventually read about the sins of the people, and of the fact that sin bars the sinful one from God. He would have read about God's holiness, and His just judgments of human sin. Reading on, past what he was reading when Philip came by, this great invitation in Isaiah 55—an invitation to abundant life.

Isaiah 55:1-2 "Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance."

Here was a treasurer looking at this, and it was saying, "Forget money. It's not the way to go, it's not going to get you the true bread of life."

If he had read about the selfless Savior, he must have understood something about himself and the people among whom he lived. He must have learned that although God invites us to come to Him, we are nevertheless unable to approach Him while we are unrepentant sinners.

Whatever the case, at this point in his journey, the Ethiopian eunuch had come to Isaiah 53. Here is how Luke records the encounter:

Acts 8:32-33 The place in the Scripture which he read was this: "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so He opened not His mouth. In His humiliation His justice was taken away, and who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth."

He was puzzled. What was this speaking about, he wondered? Of whom is the prophet writing? That is why there is a question whether he had heard about Jesus in Jerusalem or not, because this sure “fit the bill,” but he was asking who is this person, this prophet?

This was the moment Philip saw the chariot and approached it. There are no accidents or coincidences in the life of God’s people. Philip came at precisely the right moment, the moment the Ethiopian had reached what most people regard as the very heart of this prophecy, which also means the heart of the Old Testament.

We are not given the whole conversation between the Ethiopian and Philip. But I imagine that Philip gave a friendly greeting, and the man in chariot gave a greeting back. In those days, people generally read everything out loud, so it was not unusual for him to be reading out loud. So Philip had already heard him reading from Isaiah.

Philip asked in verse 30, “Do you understand what you are reading?” It was a good question, inoffensive, yet a subtle but gracious offer to explain the passage, if the Ethiopian official was interested in receiving the explanation. “How can I, unless someone explains it to me?” the Ethiopian replied. He then invited Philip to sit beside him, and Philip began to expound the passage. So they were on very favorable footing, and the man was very willing to listen. Philip was not about to cast pearls to swine; he was about to explain the Word of God. The Ethiopian eunuch was reading the chapter that portrays Jesus as the suffering servant who came to be our Savior.

Isaiah 53:1-8 Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him [Obviously, this is talking about the Messiah]. He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. 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. [And then came the verses which Luke mentions; obviously, Philip had told Luke the story.] He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment, and who will declare His generation? For He was cut off

God's Special Presence and Direct Intervention by Martin G. Collins (<http://www.cgg.org>)

from the land of the living; for the transgressions of My people He was stricken and they made His grave with the wicked.

As Philip explained the meaning of these words to the Ethiopian, he told him about Jesus, who had fulfilled this prophecy precisely, just a short while before.

Acts 8:34-35 So the eunuch answered Philip and said, "I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?" Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him.

At this time, only what we call the Old Testament was Scripture, and what better book was there to use in proclaiming the nature of divine redemption than Isaiah? And what better passage could be found than Isaiah 52:13 through Isaiah 53:12?

Philip began with the very passage the Ethiopian was reading and proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus, explaining from Isaiah 53:7-8 and its context of a suffering Messiah. Of the evangelists, Matthew and John apply Isaiah 53 to Jesus's ministry of healing.

Luke alone among the evangelists portrays Jesus in quoting Isaiah 53 as being fulfilled in Christ's physical life and death. In Luke 22, Luke records Jesus as quoting from Isaiah 53.

Luke 22:37 For I say to you that this which is written must still be accomplished in Me: 'And He was numbered with the transgressors.' [That is the quote from Isaiah.] For the things concerning Me have an end."

Isaiah 53:12 Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great, and He shall divide the spoil with the strong, because He poured out His soul unto death, and He was numbered with the transgressors, and He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

There are times when the evangelists, the apostles, and the writers of the New Testament would pull a quote out of Scripture. Christ set the precedent for that during His life, where He would pull out a phrase that referred to Him, and He would add to it.

God's Special Presence and Direct Intervention by Martin G. Collins (<http://www.cgg.org>)

In his writings, Luke sets up a parallel between Jesus' use of Isaiah 53 and Philip's preaching, based on Isaiah 53. Implied in that parallel is that Philip's preaching was dependent upon Jesus' teaching. He was showing the link, distinctly, directly, back to Jesus Christ.

Acts 8:36 Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?"

It may have been that as Philip got to the end and told him of the time that just before Jesus was taken into heaven, He told his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. The Ethiopian must have exclaimed, "Look, here's water, why shouldn't I be baptized?" And so he was.

Just before the baptism, there is a tremendous verse that says "Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture, and told him the good news about Jesus." The Bible from beginning to end is about Jesus Christ and His work to reveal the Father and His plan of salvation for mankind. You cannot explain Genesis 1, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," without explaining something about Jesus Christ. He was active in the work of creation, and it is through Him that the Supreme God and Father is made known to us.

You also cannot explain the end of Revelation, apart from Jesus Christ. Revelation 22:20 says, "Yes, I am coming soon." Who is coming soon? The answer is Christ, which we just celebrated on the Feast of Trumpets.

The Ethiopian professed his belief that Jesus was the Son of God, showing either that he had before supposed that the Messiah would be the Son of God, or that Philip had instructed him on that point.

Acts 8:37a Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may."

That is the key—with all of your heart; you are convicted to death. If you believe with all of your heart, you may be baptized.

Acts 8:37b And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

Verse 37 is missing in a very large number of manuscripts. It has been rejected by many Bible critics. It is also omitted in the Syriac and Ethiopic versions. It is not easy to conceive why it has been omitted in almost all Greek manuscripts, unless it is unauthentic.

If it was not in the original copy of the Acts, it was probably inserted by some early transcriber, and was deemed so important to the connection to show that the eunuch was not admitted hastily to baptism, that is, was retained. But we do not really know the answer as to why it has been included in the canonization.

However, it contains an important truth, elsewhere abundantly taught in the Scriptures. Faith is necessary for a proper conviction to God the Father and His Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Acts 8:38-40 So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing. But Philip was found at Azotus. And passing through, he preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea.

So there in the desert, in the presence of the treasurer's entourage, which of course did not seem to have any idea what was going on, this high-ranking official of the court of Candace, the Queen of Ethiopia, was baptized. Somewhere in the desert there must have been a stream or a river that was there; maybe God had supplied that as well.

The account of the Ethiopian's conversion ends as it begins, with an emphasis on the special presence of God and His direct intervention. We are told that the Spirit of the Lord *caught*, that is, suddenly took Philip from the scene. This phrase, "caught Philip away," has been usually understood as a forcible or miraculous removal of Philip to some other place. Some have even supposed that he was carried through the air by an angel. But the true meaning is clearly that the spirit who had directed Philip to go near the eunuch now removed him in a similar manner.

That this is the true meaning is clear. First, because it accounts for all that occurred. It is not wise to suppose the existence of a miracle, except where the effect cannot be otherwise accounted for, and except where there is a plain statement that there was a miracle. Second, the Greek term "caught away" does not imply that there was a miracle.

The word means to seize and bear away violently, without the consent of the owner, as robbers and plunderers do. It signifies to remove anything in a forcible manner; to make use of strength or power to remove it. We find the same Greek word translated “take him by force” in Acts 23.

Acts 23:10 Now when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force [The same word that describes how Philip was taken.] from among them, and bring him into the barracks.

In no case does it ever denote that a miracle is performed. All that can be signified here is that the Spirit strongly compelled Philip to go to some other place. It so forcibly or vividly suggested the duty as to tear him away, as it were, from the presence of the eunuch. Maybe the Spirit even pushed or pulled him away, but there is no indication that he was taken away through the air or anything of that sort (at least not by the words that are used there to describe it).

Philip had been deeply interested in the case. He would have found pleasure in continuing the journey with him, but the strong convictions of duty urged by the Holy Spirit compelled him, in a sense, to break off this new and interesting acquaintanceship and brotherhood, and to go to some other place. The purpose for which Philip was sent, to instruct and baptize the eunuch, was accomplished, and now he was called to some other responsibility.

In Isaiah 56 is an interesting scripture that the Ethiopian eunuch no doubt read shortly after that point, or even during the time that he was with Philip. The eunuch did not come to God as the treasurer of the Ethiopians as an important man, but as a sinner, availing himself of the blood of Christ who had died in his place. The text says, “he went on his way rejoicing.” We do not know if the Ethiopian eunuch had read as far as Isaiah 56 by the time Philip parted from him. Eventually, he would have come to it and found great comfort and encouragement in it.

Isaiah 56:1-5 Thus says the Lord: “Keep justice, and do righteousness, for My salvation is about to come, and My righteousness to be revealed. Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who lays hold on it; who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, and keeps his hand from doing any evil.” Do not let the son of the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord speak, saying, The Lord has utterly separated me from His people”; nor let the eunuch say, “Here I am, a dry tree.” For thus says the Lord: “To the

God's Special Presence and Direct Intervention by Martin G. Collins (<http://www.cgg.org>)

eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths, and choose what pleases Me, and hold fast My covenant, even to them I will give in My house and within My walls a place and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.”

What an encouraging statement that is for every Gentile, and for us as well. As Israelites, the Gentiles become spiritual Israelites, and we all become part of the Family of God, and have an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

Philip went on his way rejoicing too. He had a great career after this. He went up the coast to the north, preaching in many cities, Azotus for one, about 20 miles from Gaza. He eventually arrived in Caesarea, a journey of about 60 miles, where he settled down and had a family. Twenty years later we find Philip living in Caesarea and still serving God as an evangelist.

Acts 21:8-9 On the next day we who were Paul's companions departed and came to Caesarea [This is 20 years later, after Acts 8.], and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied.

Notice the difference between the two samples of Philip's evangelism. In the first case, he spoke to the people of mixed race, part Jewish, part Gentile. In the second case, he evangelized a pure-blooded Ethiopian who was wealthy and of great influence. Two very different cases, but the message was one and the same, because there is only one gospel of Jesus Christ and of the coming Kingdom of God.

What happened to the Ethiopian? Can we fail to believe that God blessed him and his witness in his homeland? Presumably, he had more than just the book of Isaiah. He probably had the whole Old Testament. He did not have even a single gospel, not Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, or any of the epistles—not the book of Romans, none of them. Those books were not yet written.

But he had Jesus Christ, and he had the Old Testament to study from, and from what Philip taught him. We know that he had a foundation to build on. It may very well be that one of the apostles travelled down there to Ethiopia or Nubia. We just do not know, we do not have any of those details.

He understood that Jesus had died in his place, and he was one of Christ's disciples. It

God's Special Presence and Direct Intervention by Martin G. Collins (<http://www.cgg.org>)

is very likely that he spoke about Jesus Christ to others, and that others answered God's call because of his witness. His mind was enlightened on a perplexing passage of Scripture, and he was satisfied respecting the Messiah. He was baptized and he experienced what all feel who repent of their sins and accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior—pure joy. It was joy resulting from the fact that he was reconciled to God, and a joy which is the natural affect of having done his duty promptly in answering God's call.

If we hope for happiness and desire real peace, we should be doing promptly what God requires of us, and even more. Saul, who later became Paul, was called by God in Acts 9, following this story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Later, in about A.D. 57, in his epistle to the Roman Christians, the apostle Paul quoted various statements in Isaiah that give hope to Gentiles, in a similar way to what Philip taught the Ethiopian.

Romans 15:7-13 Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God. Now I say that Jesus Christ has become a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers, and that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy, as it is written: "For this reason I will confess to You among the Gentiles, and sing to Your name." And again he says: "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people!" And again: "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles! Laud Him, all you peoples!" And again, Isaiah says: "There shall be a root of Jesse; and He who shall rise to reign over the Gentiles, in Him the Gentiles shall hope." Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So joy and peace in faith, and an abundance of hope through God's Spirit, is promised to all of us, whether Israelite or Gentile, and we can certainly see God's special presence and direct intervention in our own lives, as members of God's church.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.