

Text: Acts 8:26-40 (Pew Bible pg.1086)

Title: “Capable Witnesses”

INTRODUCTION

Open your Bibles to Acts 8:26 (Pew Bible pg.1086). I’m in the middle of a series of messages entitled “Witnesses.” That’s our identity as the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “You’ll receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses.” That’s who we are. Today we’re going to talk about being *capable* witnesses (because there is a skill to be learned). Let me read just the first few verses to get us started. Read Acts 8:26-30.

ILLUSTRATION – A few weeks ago I bought a new coffee maker. On the outside of the box it showed several pictures: a piping hot cup of gourmet coffee, a cup of hot tea with a slice of lemon floating in it, a steaming cup of hot chocolate with marshmallows on top, and refreshing glasses of iced tea and iced coffee. Just under those pictures were the words, “All this and more at the touch of a button.” So you might think that you could just take the coffee maker out of the box, push the button and instantly there was your cup of gourmet coffee. It says, “All this and more at the touch of a button,” but we know that there’s a lot more to it than that. You have to plug in the machine, and then fill the reservoir with water, and open the box of coffee packets, and insert one in the machine ... *then* at the touch of a button you’re on your way to a great cup of coffee. So it’s really not as simple as just touching the button.

As we think about the task of sharing Jesus Christ with other people, it’s not just a matter of saying a few magic words and puff ... out comes a new Christian. It doesn’t work that way. There’s much work that goes into it from God’s perspective and from our perspective.

There’s some important information earlier in Acts 8:

Acts 8:1 - On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

And as they were scattered, what happened?

Acts 8:4 - Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

So God’s sovereign plan for getting the Gospel to the nations is unfolding. And God often uses adverse circumstances to position us to where we will be His faithful witnesses.

Do you wonder why your company transferred you to a position that you were not all that wild about taking? Do you wonder why you’re having to go for treatments at a cancer clinic every week? Has it occurred to you that God is using adversity to position you to be His witness to a new group of people?

One of those Christ-followers who was displaced by persecution was this Philip. Let’s learn from him how to be a capable, skilled witness for Christ. For some of you this will be a huge step of faith. You will have to depend on God like you’ve never had to depend on Him before. But God is

faithful. His grace is sufficient and His strength and power is perfected in our weaknesses. So if you feel really weak when it comes to this, there's room for God's power to work in and through you.

1. A CAPABLE WITNESS RESPONDS TO GOD'S LEADING.

God has no trouble getting Philip's attention when He has something for Philip to do.

Acts 8:26 - Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."

It's important to see here that this all starts with God. There are three persons involved in this event Philip, the Ethiopian official and the Lord. And the Lord is the hero of the story. This all starts with God's heart of love for a lost man.

Notice that Philip is not told at this point to whom He is to speak. He is simply told to "Go south." Historians tell us that there were two roads that go down from Jerusalem to Gaza. The "desert road," as it is called here, would have been the one less traveled. God sends Philip to a deserted place where you wouldn't think anything was happening. But God knows otherwise.

Acts 8:27a - So he started out...

I'm impressed with Philip's raw availability to God. It took very little prompting from the Lord's messenger to move Philip in a new direction.

Now God doesn't deal with all of us the way He dealt with Philip. Sometimes God orchestrates things differently. He may redirect your path at the mall to where you suddenly encounter a friend you haven't seen in years. Why? Because God wants you to speak to them.

Take those promptings from God seriously. You may not think the timing is all that great, but God knows the unique circumstances in the other person's life.

So the Lord had captured the ear and the heart of Philip. When God said, "Go," Philip "started out."

Acts 8:27 - So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship,

Acts 8:28 - and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet.

Now this is what we call a "divine appointment." What is apparent is that God is already at work in this Ethiopian man's life. We're given some information here about...

- His nationality. He's an Ethiopian, from northeastern Africa.

- His profession. He is an important official in charge of the treasury of the queen of the Ethiopians. He would be the equivalent of the Secretary of the Treasury in our country. He's an important, wealthy man.
- His spiritual life. This Ethiopian man had gone all the way to Jerusalem to worship at the temple there. He's either a Jew or at the very least a seeker of the God of the Jews. We also see he has in his possession a copy of the book of Isaiah. He has a Bible, and he's reading it. He's a seeker.

Now why would God pick out this solitary figure traveling cross-country? Who knows? It is simply God's business at that moment to draw this man to Himself. We never know what God is doing and when or where is going to do it. We simply must be sensitive.

ILLUSTRATION - In my first pastorate the chairman of our deacons was a man named Ellery Lawrence. One Saturday I had, of all things, gone to the dump grounds to haul off some trash. I stopped by the church on the way home. It was Saturday, and I didn't think anyone would be there to see me or smell me in my dump clothing. It never fails when you think you'll never be seen, you'll be seen. Ellery Lawrence drove up into the parking lot of the church in his pickup truck, came inside the church and said, "Pastor, I've had Jimmy and Wanda Jackson on my heart. Let's go over and witness to them." I was trying to think of a way of getting out of it. I was tired and sweaty. "Ellery, I'm not dressed to go visit anyone." "That's OK pastor, hop in my truck and let's go." So I did, reluctantly. But what happened in the next hour changed my whole attitude. We sat in the living room of this lumber yard and his wife and shared Jesus with them, and they both were saved. The next Sunday, they came down the aisle making their decision public and requesting to be baptized. Two weeks later Wanda called me tremendously distraught. "Pastor, there's been an accident down at the lumber yard and Jimmy's been killed. Can you come?"

Driving to the Jimmy and Wanda's home I remember thinking how grateful I was for the sensitivity of Ellery Lawrence. Had we not gone that day, Jimmy would likely have spent eternity in hell.

There are people like that all around you. And God works to position you to connect with them.

Acts 8:29 - The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

Acts 8:30a - Then Philip ran up to the chariot...

Here again we see this all starts in the heart of God. The Holy Spirit is talking to Philip; and Philip is responsive to the leading of the Lord, this time directly by the Holy Spirit.

"Go to that chariot and stay near (literally "join") it..." This is a command to go and make a connection with the man riding in the chariot. One of the most important skills we have to develop is to just walk across the room and connect with people whom God wants us to impact.

This isn't something that comes naturally for most of us. Being a capable witness starts with being an available witness.

2. A CAPABLE WITNESS IS ATTENTIVE TO WHAT GOD IS DOING IN OTHERS.

Acts 8:30 - Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

Note: You will never invest in a non-believer’s life that God hasn’t already invested in. You will never love someone that God hasn’t loved first. God is already working. The very fact that He has brought you into contact with a person is an indication that God is sovereignly reaching into this person’s life. It always starts with God.

Philip knew how to get his foot in the door, so to speak. But that's a little difficult when the door is a car door (or a chariot door) and it's going down the road a good clip. I can just see Philip. He's running alongside the chariot, huffing and puffing. The Ethiopian's reading his Bible.

Or better yet, imagine their driving down the freeway. This guy’s got his Bible open on the steering wheel. Philip pulls alongside the Ethiopian’s car, rolls down his window and hollers out to him, "Hey, do you understand what you're reading?" The Ethiopian looks up from his reading and does a double take. Who is this stranger driving alongside? So he pulls over to the side of the road and invites Philip on board.

Philip does this so skillfully. He simply asks a question, "Do you understand what you're reading?" One common misconception about sharing Christ with others is that believers think they have to do all the talking. Actually, one of the greatest ways to demonstrate Christian love to a nonbeliever is to simply listen to them.

Acts 8:31 - “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

As God’s providence would have it, at that very moment the Ethiopian man was reading a portion of the Old Testament in which the prophet Isaiah was speaking about the coming of the Christ found in Isaiah 53. And Philip knew exactly what was in that part of Scripture.

Acts 8:32-33 - The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb 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 descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.”

The man is clearly puzzled by this.

Acts 8:34 - The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?”

Now here is where so many of us get off track. We’re responsive and attentive, but for some reason when the opportunity comes to make the transition to a conversation about the Gospel, we freeze up. So...

3. A CAPABLE WITNESS KNOWS AND EXPLAINS THE GOSPEL.

Acts 8:35 - Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

This is the key skill in sharing Jesus Christ with others. No matter what else is involved, you must tell them the good news about Jesus. If God gives you the opportunity to do this, don't shrink back. The power to save is the message of the Gospel. The message of the Gospel is all about what Jesus Christ did on the Cross. If we try to get some kind of decision from people without giving them that important information we are not doing NT evangelism.

How do you think Philip was able to pick up from where the Ethiopian was reading and taking him through the Scriptures to Christ? He had a good knowledge of the Scriptures. Prepare yourself by being familiar with the Gospel.

TALK ABOUT GOSPEL TRACTS AVAILABLE. At the end of the service you can come by a take a packet of five.

Now apparently something huge happens between v.35 and v.36.

Acts 8:36 - As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?"

Acts 8:37 – Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart you may." The eunuch answered, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

Part of the presentation of the Gospel is the call for a person to believe, to put their faith and trust, in Christ. The man confesses his faith in Christ. "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

Note: Your copy of the Scriptures may leave out v.37 with a note at the bottom of the page that this verse is not found in the most reliable manuscripts. And that may be true. However, something like what is said in v.37 must have happened because we're told...

Acts 8:38 - And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.

That leads me to the next characteristic...

4. A CAPABLE WITNESS FOLLOWS THROUGH WITH A NEW BELIEVER.

ILLUSTRATION - Hardly a week goes by that we don't hear a news story about a baby being abandoned in a garbage dumpster, on the steps of a fire station, or in an abandoned car. And those stories rip at our heart. But you know it happens all the time spiritually as well when a person is led to Christ, but there's no follow-through with them.

Every new Christian needs follow-through. When you help a person come to Christ, you are responsible for them. They are your spiritual children, so to speak. Don't abandon a newborn.

Acts 8:38 - And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.

One of the most important parts of follow-up for a new Christian is that they understand they should be baptized. Baptism is the public confession of faith that is expected of all believers. The Ethiopian man was confessing his faith in Christ to Philip, but also to his entourage that was accompanying a man of such importance.

Acts 8:39 - When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.

CONCLUSION

Friend, you may never know how God uses you. Philip didn't. He was whisked away by the Holy Spirit, just as quickly as he was brought to this desert road. Philip may have never known the joy that filled this Ethiopian man's life. It says that the Ethiopian never saw Philip again, but "went on his way rejoicing."

Neither did Philip know that the results of this one man's transformation probably touched an entire nation. Early church tradition tells us that this man went back to his homeland and became a powerful evangelist that God used to spark a great spiritual awakening in Ethiopia.