**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ACTS-031. A MEETING IN THE DESERT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"26.* *And the angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert. 27. And he arose and went: and, behold, a man of Ethiopia, an eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who had the charge of all her treasure, and had come to Jerusalem for to worship, 28. Was returning, and sitting in his chariot, read Esaias the prophet. 29. Then the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot. 80. And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest? 31. And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him. 32. The place of the scripture which he read was this, He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened He not His mouth: 33. In His humiliation His judgment was taken away; and who shall declare His generation? for His life is taken from the earth. 34. And the eunuch answered Philip, and said, I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man? 35. Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus. 36. And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? 37. And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. 38. And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. 39. And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing. 40. But Philip was found at Azotus: and passing through, he preached in all the cities, till he came to Caesarea."*

*Acts 8:26-40*

Philip had no special divine command either to flee to, or to preach in, Samaria, but an angel of the Lord and afterwards the Spirit, directed him to the Ethiopian statesman. God rewards faithful work with more work. Samaria was a borderland between Jew and Gentile, but in preaching to the eunuch Philip was on entirely Gentile ground. So great a step in advance needed clear command from God to impel to it and to justify it.

**I.** We have, then, first, the new commission. Philip might well wonder why he should be taken away from successful work in a populous city, and despatched to the lonely road to Gaza. But he obeyed at once. He knew not for what he was sent there, but that ignorance did not trouble or retard him. It should be enough for us to see the next step. We walk by faith, not by sight, for we none of us know what comes of our actions, and we get light as we go. Do to-day's plain duty, and when to-morrow is to-day its duty will be plain too. The river on which we sail winds, and not till we round the nearest bend do we see the course beyond. So we are kept in the peaceful posture of dependent obedience, and need to hold our communications with God open, that we may be sure of His guidance.

No doubt, as Philip trudged along till he reached the Gaza road, he would have many a thought as to what he was to find there, and, when he came at last to the solitary track, would look eagerly over the uninhabited land for an explanation of his strange and vague instructions. But an obedient heart is not long left perplexed, and he who looks for duty to disclose itself will see it in due time.

**II.** So we have next the explanation of the errand. Luke's Behold! suggests the sudden sight of the great man's cortege in the distance. No doubt, he travelled with a train of attendants, as became his dignity, and would be conspicuous from afar. Philip, of course, did not know who he was when he caught sight of him, but Luke tells his rank at once, in order to lay stress on it, as well as to bring out the significance of his occupation and subsequent conversion. Here was a full-blooded Gentile, an eunuch, a courtier, who had been drawn to Israel's God, and was studying Israel's prophets as he rode. Perhaps he had chosen that road to Egypt for its quietness. At any rate, his occupation revealed the bent of his mind.

Philip felt that the mystery of his errand was solved now, and he recognised the impulse to break through conventional barriers and address the evidently dignified stranger, as the voice of God's Spirit, and not his own. How he was sure of that we do not know, but the distinction drawn between the former communication by an angel and this from the Spirit points to a clear difference in his experiences, and to careful discrimination in the narrator. The variation is not made at random. Philip did not mistake a buzzing in his ears from the heating of his own heart for a divine voice. We have here no hallucinations of an enthusiast, but plain fact.

How manifestly the meeting of these two, starting so far apart, and so ignorant of each other and of the purpose of their being thrown together, reveals the unseen hand that moved each on his own line, and brought about the intersection of the two at that exact spot and hour! How came it that at that moment the Ethiopian was reading, of all places in his roll, the very words which make the kernel of the gospel of the evangelical prophet? Surely such coincidences are a hard nut to crack for deniers of a Providence that shapes our ends!

It is further to be noticed that the eunuch's conversion does not appear to have been of importance for the expansion of the Church. It exercised no recorded influence, and was apparently not communicated to the Apostles, as, if it had been, it could scarcely have failed to have been referred to when the analogous case of Cornelius was under discussion. So, divine intervention and human journeying and work were brought into play simply for the sake of one soul which God's eye saw to be ripe for the Gospel. He cares for the individual, and one sheep that can be reclaimed is precious enough in the Shepherd's estimate to move His hand to action and His heart to love. Not because he was a man of great authority at Candace's court, but because he was yearning for light, and ready to follow it when it shone, did the eunuch meet Philip on that quiet road.

**III.** The two men being thus strangely brought together, we have next the conversation for the sake of which they were brought together. The eunuch was reading aloud, as people not very much used to books, or who have some difficult passage in hand, often do. Philip must have been struck with astonishment when he caught the, to him, familiar words, and must have seen at once the open door for his preaching. His abrupt question wastes no time with apologies or polite, gradual approaches to his object. Probably the very absence of the signs of deference to which he was accustomed impressed the eunuch with a dim sense of the stranger's authority, which would be deepened by the home-thrust of his question.

The wistful answer not only shows no resentment at the brusque stranger's thrusting himself in, but acknowledges bewilderment, and responds to the undertone of proffered guidance in the question. A teacher has often to teach a pupil his ignorance, to begin with; but it should be so done as to create desire for instruction, and to kindle confidence in him as instructor. It is insolent to ask, Understandest thou? unless the questioner is ready and able to help to understand.

The invitation to a seat in the great man's chariot showed how eagerness to learn had obliterated distinctions of rank, and swiftly knit a new bond between these two, who had never heard of each other five minutes before. A true heart will hail as its best and closest friend him who leads it to know God's mind more clearly. How earthly dignities dwindle when God's messenger lays hold of a soul!

So the chariot rolls on, and through the silence of the desert the voices of these two reach the wondering attendants, as they plod along. The Ethiopian was reading the Septuagint translation of Isaiah, which, though it missed part of the force of the original, brought clearly before him the great figure of a Sufferer, meek and dumb, swept from the earth by unjust judgment. He understood so much, but what he did not understand was who this great, tragic Figure represented. His question goes to the root of the matter, and is a burning question to-day, as it was all these centuries ago on the road to Gaza. Philip had no doubt of the answer. Jesus was the lamb dumb before its shearers. This is not the place to enter on such wide questions, but we may at least affirm that, whatever advance modern schools have made in the criticism and interpretation of the Old Testament, the very spirit of the whole earlier Revelation is missed if Jesus is not discerned as the Person to whom prophet and ritual pointed, in whom law was fulfilled and history reached its goal.

No doubt much instruction followed. How long they had rode together before they came to a certain water we know not, but it cannot have been more than a few hours. Time is elastic, and when the soil is prepared, and rain and sunlight are poured down, the seed springs up quickly. People who deny the possibility of sudden conversions are blind to facts, because they wear the blinkers of a theory. Not always have they who anon with joy receive the word no root in themselves.

As is well known, the answer to the eunuch's question (v. 37) is wanting in authoritative manuscripts. The insertion may have been due to the creeping into the text of a marginal note. A recent and most original commentator on the Acts (Blass) considers that this, like other remarkable readings found in one set of manuscripts, was written by Luke in a draft of the book, which he afterwards revised and somewhat abbreviated into the form which most of the manuscripts present. However that may be, the required conditions in the doubtful verse are those which the practice of the rest of the Acts shows to have been required. Faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God was the qualification for the baptisms there recorded.

And there was no other qualification. Philip asked nothing about the eunuch's proselytism, or whether he had been circumcised or not. He did not, like Peter with Cornelius, need the evidence of the gift of the Spirit before he baptized; but, notwithstanding his experience of an unworthy candidate in Simon the sorcerer, he unhesitatingly administered baptism. There was no Church present to witness the rite. We do not read that the Holy Ghost fell on the eunuch.

That baptism in the quiet wady by the side of the solitary road, while the swarthy attendants stood in wonder, was a mighty step in advance; and it was taken, not by an Apostle, nor with ecclesiastical sanction, but at the bidding of Christian instinct, which recognised a brother in any man who had faith in Jesus, the Son of God. The new faith is bursting old bonds. The universality of the Gospel is overflowing the banks of Jewish narrowness. Probably Philip was quite unconscious of the revolutionary nature of his act, but it was done, and in it was the seed of many more.

The eunuch had said that he could not understand unless some man guided him. But when Philip is caught away, he does not bewail the loss of his guide. He went on his road with joy, though his new faith might have craved longer support from the crutch of a teacher, and fuller enlightenment. What made him able to do without the guide that a few hours before had been so indispensable? The presence in his heart of a better one, even of Him whom Jesus promised, to guide His servants into all truth. If those who believe that Scripture without an authorised interpreter is insufficient to lead men aright, would consider the end of this story, they might find that a man's dependence on outward teachers ceases when he has God's Spirit to teach him, and that for such a man the Word of God in his hand and the Spirit of God in his spirit will give him light enough to walk by, so that, in the absence of all outward instructors, he may still be filled with true wisdom, and in absolute solitude may go on his way rejoicing.