

The Continuing Acts of Jesus: Teleportation and the Unpredictable Spirit

Acts 8:26-40
August 20, 2017
Dan Hoffman

Imagine the consternation trying to keep track of someone as full of the Spirit as Elijah.

In 1st Kings 18 we get this incredible story of Obadiah, a servant of wicked king Ahab and a lover of YHWH. Kings tells us that when Jezebel was killing off the LORD's prophets, Obadiah took a hundred and hid them in caves – he was a man who was willing to risk his life to please God.¹ But then one day Obadiah is out for a walk and he bumps into Elijah who tells him “go tell Ahab to come right here and meet me.”

Now Elijah is a guy the whole kingdom has been trying to find for three years ever since he prophesied God was going to punish the land with a drought and it came true. But he had been a hard guy to get a hold of. He never answered his phone, he didn't post anything on Facebook. And when people did manage to track him down he had a tendency to call down fire from heaven.² Imagine the consternation!

So when Elijah gives Obadiah this straight forward message to relay “go tell Ahab ‘come meet me’” Obadiah takes his seemingly friendly offer as a death threat from God. He responds: “What have I done wrong, that you are handing your servant over to Ahab to be put to death. As surely as the LORD your God lives, there is not a nation or kingdom where my master has not sent someone to look for you.... But now you tell me to go... and say, ‘Elijah is here.’ I don't know where the Spirit of the LORD may carry you when I leave.... If I go and tell Ahab and he doesn't find you, he will kill me.”³

You see, the result of Elijah being so tuned in to participating with God was that he had no idea where he might end up next week. The Spirit of the Lord would carry him off and use him somewhere else without giving any notice. Imagine the consternation of trying to control or even anticipate what he Spirit might do.

...

Our text today follows this incredible precedent. So please grab the Bible from the pew in front of you, or use the one on your device, and open up to Acts chapter 8. We will be picking up in verse 26 today as we continue the story of Jesus using Philip to increase His glory and expand His kingdom.

[Read Acts 8:26-40]

If you were with us last week you know that today's text is part two in the Philip story. As we pick up Philip is right in the middle of a very successful evangelism trip through Samaria. In verse 14 Luke tells us Samaria had accepted the word of God, so while we don't have any numbers, the sense is that everyone in the city was coming to Jesus.

¹ 1 Kings 18:4

² 1 Kings 1:10

³ 1 Kings 18:9-12

And right in the middle of this God tells Philip to go south to that desert road between Jerusalem and Gaza. Leave Samaria where everyone is becoming a Christian, and go to some deserted desert road. God's thoughts are not our thoughts are they?

Now there is all sorts of crazy wrapped up in this. So first of all we don't know how Philip received this word from God. Luke says an angel spoke to him. Was this in a dream, was it a vision. We don't know. But whatever it was Philip is convinced this is from God so much that he is willing to immediately leave a successful ministry behind. Philip just entrusts Samaria to God and leaves. Have you ever been part of a thriving ministry and then considered leaving? People don't do this by default!

A second crazy thing about this is that God chooses Philip to do this at all. I mean Philip is busy doing some awesome stuff for God in a different town, and this Ethiopian has traveled to Jerusalem. Now at this same time we know there are a bunch of Apostles just sitting around there wondering what's next. They didn't leave when the persecution started. And so it would have been a piece of cake for God to arrange for Peter to meet this seeker. But that would have been too easy. So instead he sends for Philip. God's strategies are higher than our strategies.

Connected to this, a third crazy thing is that to get to this desert road Philip had to go back to Jerusalem. And the reason he was in Samaria was that he had just fled Jerusalem all of a week or so earlier. If God was really set on Philip meeting this Ethiopian why didn't he send the Eunuch to Jerusalem a bit sooner? God's timing is not our timing.

On top of all this God had not told Philip why he was to go back through danger and then out into the desert. It's a bit like God telling Abraham "leave your country, and your family behind, and head out to a place where I will tell you when I'm good and ready."⁴

But like Abraham and Elijah, Philip is so interested in partnering with God that he obeys. And then God reveals the next step just as he is supposed to take it. So first it is find this desert road, and then in verse 29 the Spirit says: "Go to that chariot and stay near it." He doesn't tell him why, or what he is supposed to do there. And Philip obeys and starts jogging beside the chariot. Can you imagine how awkward that would be? But what we get next is a story about an incredibly unlikely man encountering Jesus and ultimately, Jesus growing His kingdom to the ends of the earth.

...

So this Ethiopian eunuch had traveled up to Jerusalem to worship God – this would have been somewhere between an 800 and 1000 KM. And he had done this on a chariot without air conditioning or leather seats! Now this eunuch was a servant of the Ethiopian queen, and obviously quite rich as he is able to purchase a scroll of Isaiah. Remember there are no photocopiers, so someone had to carefully hand write out this entire scroll and Isaiah is a big book. It would have taken at least weeks to accomplish this and so this scroll would have been really expensive.

⁴ Genesis 12:1

But in all this God is sovereign over every detail. Just as Philip arrives the man in the chariot just happens to be reading Isaiah 53, which is one of the greatest prophecies about Jesus the Messiah that exists in the Old Testament.

And in this moment Philip realizes that God has lead him here to this really strange man. You see, of all the people in Jerusalem and Samaria who needed to encounter the grace of Jesus, God had sent Philip to this one foreigner in the middle of the desert whose nationality and sexual impotence might have made him think that the God of Israel would never have any time for him.

You see in the Old Testament there was a rule about foreigners and especially eunuchs not having the right to enter the temple.⁵ And yet he had come all this way to Jerusalem anyway. Now how he got to this point in his faith is anyone's guess, but after arriving in Jerusalem he found himself leaving without getting what he was looking for. He had come looking for God, but left having just been sold a scroll he couldn't understand.

Hopeless. But God's plans were higher. And so it was on his way home, long after he would have been expecting anything, that this man encounters grace.

So, verse 35 tells us, starting with this passage Philip unpacked the gospel for him. And Isaiah 53 is full of the gospel.

He is reading verses 7 and 8 when Philip runs up and these verses are about Jesus refusing to defend Himself but instead embracing death – becoming like a lamb led to the slaughter – suffering humiliation and injustice, all to accomplish His plan of our salvation. But these verses of prophecy don't stand alone. Immediately before them the eunuch would have read:

Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4-6)

This is the substitutionary atonement of God's Messiah prophesied 700 years before Jesus set foot on earth. And Isaiah writes that this Messiah would take our pain and suffering and the punishment of our transgressions upon Himself, and in return pour His healing salvation into us.

⁵ Deuteronomy 23:1; Leviticus 21:16-20

A few verses later the eunuch would read that while our Messiah would die, death wouldn't triumph; He would live again. Isaiah penned the words:

After he has suffered,
 [the Messiah] will see the light of life and be satisfied;
 by his knowledge My righteous servant will justify many,
 and he will bear their iniquities.
 Therefore [God] will give him a portion among the great,
 and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
 because he poured out his life unto death,
 and was numbered with the transgressors.
 For he bore the sin of many,
 and made intercession for the transgressors. (Isaiah 53:11-12)

It's an incredible text that outlines so much of the salvation narrative. And as Philip unpacks this the Ethiopian's mind is opened and he believes. And he recognizes that belief requires obedience and so he asks Philip, verse 36, "What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" He wants to declare his allegiance to Jesus, Isaiah's Messiah.

...

In the baptism curriculum we use here at the church we place a lot of emphasis on making sure that the person who is interested in getting baptised is there for the right reason. We want to know that they have a real faith, and they are actually pledging to live the rest of their life for the glory of God. And we put this emphasis here because, in part, of the words in verse 37. Go ahead and look at that verse.

...

Do you notice that it actually isn't there? There is no verse 37 in the text. Actually you may see a little footnote, and if you follow it to the bottom of the page you will see Philip's response to the Ethiopian's question "What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" And the note says:

Some manuscripts include here "Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart you may." The eunuch answered, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

And then Philip baptizes him.

Now this verse isn't original to Acts – Luke didn't write it. But very early, probably around 100AD one of the scribes who was copying this out included these words. And it is very unlikely that he just made them up. Rather most theologians believe, these words were taken from an early baptismal catechism. So before you were baptized you had to affirm that you believed that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

And this tradition is still common in the church today. So one of the questions I asked Emma earlier was "Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and are you trusting Him as your personal Savior?" To which Emma responded, I do and I am. It's a way of outwardly affirming an internal faith.

...

But back to Philip, the story ends with him being taken up to Azotus by the Spirit which is about 28 KM's north of Gaza. Philip gets teleported away. God made him walk all the way to this desert road. He had to walk in obedient faith, not knowing what he would find. But after he had been used to give the gift of grace to this eunuch God moved him on to his next plan. And so Philip just picks up where he left off, preaching from Azotus to Caesarea.

And this is the last we hear of either Philip or this eunuch in the Bible.⁶ But tradition picks up what the text only hints at, and tells us that this Ethiopian went home and became a powerful evangelist of the gospel winning his country for Christ.

Now here's a side note: in the first century, Ethiopia, which is on the horn of Africa, down below Egypt, was considered one of the ends of the earth. So already in chapter 8 we see the beginning of the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy.

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

...

Now all this is great, but what's the point for us? Is this just a cool story about something that happened to a guy named Philip 2000 years ago, or is there encouragement and conviction here for Fort George today?

Well the answer is "yes." Yes, this is a cool story about God working in the life of Philip 2000 years ago. Be encouraged by it. But also know that there is no promise here that God is going to teleport you or me anywhere. This is descriptive not prescriptive.

But also, because Paul writes:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Then "yes", there is also something here that can equip us for every good work Jesus wants to accomplish through us today. And this is where we need to focus.

...

I think the main point of encouragement for us here is to expect God's leading in our lives. Now as I say this what I don't mean is that if an angel doesn't show up in your bedroom then you shouldn't talk to your neighbours about Jesus. You can't make that argument from Acts because the vast majority of the faith sharing in this book is done without an angel telling anyone anything.

⁶ With the exception of one verse 13 chapters later where there is a mention of Philip's four daughters (21:9)

In verse 4 of this very chapter Philip set off to evangelizing Samaria without any angelic direction, and he ends up in Caesarea again without any direct leading. So don't let the absence of angelic intervention hold you back from doing everything you can to partner with Jesus in the expanse of His gospel.

But probably the biggest theme throughout the book of Acts is that even though Jesus has ascended back to Heaven nothing has changed. He is still committed to all the things He was committed to when He was walking around. The only difference is that now instead of being one man, by His Spirit He is present in millions of people around the globe. We are living in the days He spoke of where we would do even greater things than He did because He has gone to the Father.⁷ So friends, we should expect God to move in and through our lives and our church to impact the world around us. Brothers and sisters, God is on the move in Prince George. Amen?

...

But this also means that we aren't in control. When the Spirit is involved, there is no promise that He is going to bless the plans we set out to accomplish. Rather the promise is that He will invite us in to participate with His plans.

And so the challenge here is for us to be sensitive to His prompting, and then be willing to step out and take risks without knowing exactly where the next step lies. Philip's story is just one of the stories in Scripture where God's leading came a step at a time. Go down to that desert road that leads to Gaza. Don't ask why? Don't expect to have all the answers. Just go. And then go check out that chariot. No word as to who to expect there or what to say. Just go.

But it is when God's people step out in faith and follow what they believe God is calling them to do that we find ourselves entering into a miraculous partnership with the God of the universe as He increases His kingdom.

...

I'd like to close today with another brief word on the Youth Group Saturday evening service that will be starting here in a couple weeks. And the word is, Spencer, and myself and some of the other people who are working to pull this off are really excited about something that God seems to be doing.

This last year we witnessed some incredible growth in our Youth Group and a good number of kids coming to faith for the first time.

Now the truth is, most of the nuts and bolts about exactly what this is going to look like, or what it might become, are totally unknown at this time. God hasn't guaranteed this is going to fly (or teleport), or that it is going to grow into its own church or anything like that. All we know for sure at this point is that God seems to be on the move among the young people He has brought into our path, and we need to do something about this. We can't keep the gospel to ourselves, we have to seek to bring it to them in a way they can understand.

⁷ John 14:12

And so without many of the questions answered, and without a lot of the risks calculated – I'll just admit to that – we are optimistically setting out to see what God might do.

So we will be holding a youth and young adult service here at the church on Saturday evenings starting in September on a trial basis. And as this gets going we are going to try all sorts of different things and hopefully find something that works. Our goal is to bring the light of Jesus Christ to the young people of Prince George in a language they can understand. And so we are calling this meeting "Lighthouse." But other than that, at this point we know very little about what might happen.

But here's the commitment from me and from Spencer and the deacons. As we get going we will be telling stories in our Sunday morning service about what God is doing on Saturday nights. And then on November 5th, once we have tried a few things, and hopefully found a couple that work, we will hold a town hall meeting for our congregation and seek to answer any questions we can.

But at this point we feel a bit like Philip or Obadiah. God seems to be up to something, and we want in. But very little of this feels like we are in control or really have any idea what to expect next. While we've got plans, Jesus only seems to direct one step at a time. And so, to be honest it is a bit scary! But it is also incredibly exciting. Friends, if Jesus starts doing something among the youth and young people of this city, we here at Fort George are going to have front row seats. And there is nothing more exciting than being part of what God is doing. Amen?

Let me pray for us.