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Bible Study

Acts 8 – Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

"Building upon our Desire for God"

Introduction and Background

We are now in the Fast of the Apostles. The purpose of this Fast is to ask the Holy Spirit to renew us and to develop within us the zeal to preach the Good News, just as the Apostles had done after the Resurrection and Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. Today, we will look at the mission of Saint Philip, and particularly his mission to the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-40).

What has happened up until this point in the Book of Acts? In Acts 6, we read that the Apostles chose seven deacons to administer to the widows who were being neglected in the daily distribution (Acts 6:1-7). Toward the end of chapter 6, Saint Stephen, one of the seven, was seized and brought before the Jewish council and was accused of speaking blasphemous words against the temple and the law (Acts 6:8-15). Saint Stephen delivers a powerful speech in chapter 7 (Acts 7:1-53), which ends in his martyrdom (Acts 7:54-60).

Saul consented to Saint Stephen's death and then there arose a great persecution, which resulted in the Christians being scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1). Among those scattered to the region of Samaria was Saint Philip, one of the seven and not the apostle. Then we read about the conversion of the Samaritans, their baptism, and their receiving the Holy Spirit. This fulfilled the Lord's command to His disciples to preach in Samaria (Acts 1:8). Also mentioned is the story of Simon the Sorcerer who wanted to purchase with money the power of the disciples to lay hands and give the Holy Spirit.

Let us now turn to Acts 8:26-40. We see in these verses the sincere desire of the Ethiopian Eunuch to know God. How can we also develop this desire? There three lessons we can learn from this passage: 1) We need to **set a goal**, 2) We need to **discipline ourselves** to achieve that goal, and 3) We need to **approach all things humbly**.

#1 Set a Goal

Unless we have a clear goal of what we want, we can never achieve it. Consider basketball players who train and play games throughout the season. What motivates them? A trophy and NBA championship ring.

Also, we need to realize first that our life here is temporal. Where will we end up after we pass away? Would we like to live in the Kingdom of God in all joy, knowing that we will never be separated from Him? Can we stand the thought of being separated from Him eternally?

So, first we need this sincere desire to know God and to be united with Him. If we have a goal, then everything (yes, *everything*) that we do in this life must relate to this goal; otherwise, it is a waste-of-time activity.

Clearly, in the passage that we just read, the Ethiopian Eunuch had this desire. First, he came all the way from Ethiopia to worship in Jerusalem. Second, he was a man of great authority; presumably, he was a very busy man in charge of the queen's treasury, but he still took the time out to go and worship. Third, we find him reading the Bible even though he does not understand what he is reading.

In order to unite with God, we need a clean and pure heart. How do we achieve this? Through discipline...

#2 Discipline Yourself

We see in the Ethiopian Eunuch an example of discipline. He was traveling through the desert. It was hot. He was traveling all the way from Jerusalem after worshipping in the temple. He was tired. And still his bible is open and he is from Isaiah. Moreover, he does not even understand what he is reading.

Many of us do not discipline ourselves. It is a narrow road that leads to the kingdom of heaven and it requires that we do not fall to the left or the right.

Often times, we make the excuse that unless I am coming to God with pure love, I cannot come to Him. Or unless I can achieve pure and right prayer without any distraction, I should never pray. Or unless I understand everything in the Bible that I am reading, then I shouldn't be reading the Bible. These are excuses and tricks the devil can play on us to prevent us from acquiring a pure heart. Imagine a little one-year-old child who thinks to himself, "Unless I can walk perfectly from the first time, I refuse to take my first step." Guess what? That child will never learn to walk. One of the fathers said, "If you wait until you reach pure prayer and then start to pray, you will never pray."

It is true that we want to come to God because we love Him and that we want to do all righteousness out of love, but we do not all start at this level in our spiritual life. We need to discipline ourselves and strive to attain a pure heart. The person starting his

spiritual life does so because he fears condemnation because of his sins. He fears the wrath of God. He fears death, and realizes he's not ready for it.

In disciplining yourself in prayer and in reading the Bible and in fasting, you will grow in your love for God. In fact, because you are doing those things, you are already demonstrating a kind of love in that you desire to be with God. So, you may not like fasting the first time you do it. You may not approach the Bible with excitement when it comes time read. But, the love for these spiritual activities will grow within you once you start doing it. Do you think that the child enjoys walking within the first steps he takes? Of course not, he falls and hurts himself. But he keeps trying and as the child walks more steadily, he realizes that he loves to walk around and run freely and play.

A story from the desert fathers: Some brethren went to the desert to visit a great old man, and they said to him, 'Abba, why did you come here to endure such hardship?' And the old man said, 'The whole time of the hardship I give myself here does not equal a single day of punishment.'

3 Approach All Things in Humility

Lastly, we see in both Saint Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch models of humility. In order to receive instruction on the way and grow in our desire and love for God, we need to realize that we do not know everything. We must also be ready to receive instruction.

First, Saint Philip does not approach the Ethiopian Eunuch arrogantly. He first obeys the instruction of the angel of the Lord to go to the desert. Then, he does not say to the Ethiopian, "I am an apostle and I know everything, so let me teach you." He asks simply, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

Second, the Ethiopian Eunuch openly confesses that he does not understand what he is reading and is awaiting any kind of instruction. When he sees water on the road, he asks humbly, "What prevents me from being baptized?" We see, here, desire mixed with humility.

We also pray that we can have this kind of humility. Too many of us take on the attitude of "I've read this Bible passage before. I've heard this lesson before. I know everything there is to know about this topic."

How can we achieve humility? We must first and foremost develop a relationship with a spiritual guide and a father of confession. Second, we must come as empty vessels waiting to be filled. Therefore, every drop of instruction that we receive will be very satisfying.

GLORY IS DUE TO OUR GOD UNTO THE AGE OF ALL AGES. AMEN.