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THE PROBLEM WITH LEARNING GERMAN Acts 8:26-40

In the original *Star Wars* movie as he is observing Obi Wan Kenobi trying to train Luke Skywalker in using a light saber and the Force, Han Solo says, “hokey religions and ancient weapons are no match for a good blaster at your side, kid.” Let’s be real clear that there is no “Force.” That was fine for a sci-fi movie, but it is not a part of reality.

However, in the *Star Wars* universe the Force supposedly existed as an invisible thing that had great power and influence on people and events. Han Solo didn't buy the idea of some force he couldn't see and much preferred a very tangible power that was quite visible. Though far from an exact analogy, those same things could be said of God. He is invisible, but the Bible claims he has great power and can exert influence on people and events in real life, even today. However, most people in our culture line up much more with Han Solo. Hokey religion is no match for a good blaster at your side. Give me a huge bank account and powerful weapons any day over a supposed God I cannot see, hear or touch. The Bible tells us to walk by faith, not by what we can see. Many people think you'd have to be crazy to do that.

But is it possible that God is much more of a force, if you’ll excuse the expression, than we typically think? Today we are going to look at an incident in the life of one of the first Christians that suggests that God can and should have a great deal of effect on our lives. The story is in Acts 8:26-40.

PHILIP OBEYED AN UNUSUAL COMMAND

Philip, who was one of the first generation of Jesus followers, was an impressive man. In Acts 6 when a problem cropped up in the church over the distribution of funds that had been donated to help the neediest members of the church, the apostles told the people to pick 7 men to oversee that task. They had to be men who were “known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom” according to Acts 6:3. I can understand that. They were going to be managing the money, always a ticklish issue. So the church chose some wise men of great integrity. The first one listed as chosen was Stephen, who would become the first martyr for Christ, and the second was Philip. So Philip was widely known as a wise and godly man in whom the Spirit of Jesus was clearly evident.

After Stephen's death persecution of the first Christians increased dramatically in Jerusalem, so many of them relocated. Among those was Philip. But he didn't just run away and hide. He did an astounding thing. He moved to Samaria and began telling the people there about Jesus. This was surprising because there was intense racial prejudice between Samaritans and Jews. Philip plowed right through that racial barrier. It would be a little like a white guy going into the most dangerous slum of south central LA and telling the folks there about Jesus. He began leading many Samaritans to faith in Jesus. Up to that point the only people who were Jesus followers were Jews. Philip was the first person to breach the confines of the pure Jewish race with the good news of Jesus. God used him to perform miracles that astounded the people and convinced them that his message was indeed from God. A church began among the Samaritans.

Philip was having a big effect. It was in the middle of this booming new ministry that we encounter verse 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.'" This didn't make much sense. It would be like if a pastor started a church in San Diego and it grew exponentially. Hundreds of people started finding faith in Jesus and their lives were being dramatically changed. The church was exploding in numbers, and then in the middle of all of that excitement the pastor suddenly announces he is leaving. But he's not leaving for an even bigger or more impressive ministry. He's going out into the desert along Interstate 8. Not to a town, mind you, just out there along the freeway in the desert some place.

That just seems crazy. Think of how many lives were being impacted there in Samaria. Who knows what great things Philip could do if he stayed with that ministry? Why in the world would he ever think it a good idea to walk some 70 miles out to a lonely desert road? We can't know Philip's thoughts. My guess is that he found this order to be mystifying. What was this about? Philip likely knew the stories of how Moses, Elijah and Jesus all had times in the wilderness. Maybe this was his time to go to the desert. Maybe he would be tested in preparation for future ministry. Or maybe like Moses God would meet with him there and give him a whole new direction in life. Philip had no idea why he was going to that desert road. He knew that God had given him a direct order to go, so without any hesitation, off he went.

GOD HAD A DIVINE APPOINTMENT FOR PHILIP

So we see Philip walking along the mostly empty road to Gaza not sure why he was there, just knowing he's supposed to be there. As he was walking down the road he encounters a man riding in a chariot. This was an important and powerful

person. We are told that he was an Ethiopian. That doesn't mean he was from the modern day country of Ethiopia. Rather he was from that general region of Africa. Scholars today suspect he likely was from what is today Sudan. He was either Jewish or a Jewish convert, for he had traveled all the way from his homeland to worship in Jerusalem as God had ordained in the Law of Moses.

He is described as a eunuch. That doesn't mean that he was physically a eunuch. By that time "eunuch" had become a term for any important official in a royal court. So he may or may not have technically been what we think of as a eunuch. Either way, Philip was about to have a "unique" encounter.

The Ethiopian was in charge of the treasury for his queen, who is called Kandake, or in some translations Candace. So he was the secretary of the treasury, thus a powerful and important man. You get a sense of his lofty stature from two things. First, he was riding in a chariot rather than walking. That meant he was a man who had considerable financial resources. That impression is much strengthened by the fact that he was reading from his own personal copy of the Book of Isaiah.

This was surprising because writing materials were hideously expensive in that day. But it wasn't just the cost of paper and ink that made anything written exorbitantly costly. To get a copy of some written material you couldn't just Xerox an existing copy, nor could you go down to the bookstore and buy a copy. You would have to commission a scribe whose job would be to painstakingly copy by hand every letter of the material you wanted. So not only did you have to pay for the expensive materials, you had to pay to hire the scribe, and that didn't come cheap. Writing actually was a rare skill back then because when would you ever have either the opportunity or the need to write something? The Law of supply and demand means if you have a rare skill that it will be expensive for people to hire you to employ it. People generally couldn't even think of affording to buy their own copy of even a part of the Old Testament. A local synagogue might band together to purchase one copy that would be shared among the congregation. So for this man to have a copy of Isaiah, and possibly other parts of the Old Testament, in his personal possession, meant he was a very wealthy man indeed.

Verse 29 tells us that the Holy Spirit tapped Philip on the shoulder and said, "Go over by that guy's chariot and stick with him." Philip did what the Spirit directed him to do. When he got close he heard the guy reading out loud from Isaiah. He read, "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter and as a lamb before its 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."

I think that was Philip's paraphrase of what the man was reading. It was from Isaiah 53. That passage was very confusing to this sincere African man. In that section of Isaiah the servant of the Lord plays a large role. Isaiah 42:1 says, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations." Verse 4 says, "He will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope." In Isaiah 49:6 God said to this servant, "I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." So this servant it seems is going to rule and bring justice and rescue to all the nations of the earth. He will not falter until he does this.

That servant was understood by many to be the Messiah. This Messiah would rule over all the world. And then comes chapter 53. Verse 3 says of this Servant of the Lord, "He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised and we held him in low esteem." Verse 5 says, "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities." Verse 8 says "He was cut off from the land of the living" and verse 9 says "He was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death."

This person would be rejected, despised, would suffer and would be killed and put into a grave. How is it possible that this same person would reign and establish justice all over the world? How could it be said of him that he would not even falter, but he would also be rejected and killed?

Philip asked the Ethiopian if he understood what he was reading, and the man answered, "How can I unless someone explains it to me?" Was Isaiah himself the servant of the Lord? Were these just poetic descriptions of his own suffering as a prophet? But how could he describe himself as bringing justice to the nations? Was he speaking of Messiah, as many believed? But if he was, how can one reconcile these two pictures of a Messiah that reigns but is also rejected and dies? And what does it mean that he took our transgressions upon himself?

Verse 35 says, "Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus." He explained how Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, how he fulfilled the messianic prophecies, how he lived a perfect life, but was rejected and executed, but that in his death he took upon himself punishment for the sins of everyone. He told him how Jesus rose from the dead, and how he now offers forgiveness, righteousness and eternal life to all the world, Gentiles

included. He will some day return and reign forever, so he fulfills both aspects of the picture of Isaiah's servant of the Lord.

No one else in history could correctly make the claim to fulfill Isaiah's prophecies. But Jesus did. The Ethiopian was convinced. He rejoiced to know God had provided forgiveness and hope for him, that Messiah had come. He wanted to be baptized in the name of Jesus as a demonstration of his new faith in him. So when they happened upon a creek in the desert, Philip baptized him. As soon as they did so the two men went their separate ways. The Ethiopian headed south toward home, and Philip went north preaching in coastal towns until he reached Caesarea in the far north of Israel.

There is a string of unusual coincidences here. Philip just happened to leave a burgeoning successful ministry. He just happened to walk out into the middle of nowhere. He just happened to encounter this devout man. The man just happened to be reading one of the most crucial passages in all the Old Testament pertaining to Messiah. Had Philip not gone to that desert road, had he not encountered that man, had the man been reading some different part of the Scriptures, say Leviticus, none of this likely would have happened. But everything lined up perfectly for Philip to tell this man about Jesus and lead him to faith. In fact none of those things "just happened." How many times have you watched a police show on television and someone says, "I don't like coincidences." Coincidences are the dead giveaway that someone had a plan. In this case it is obvious that the Spirit of God was at work. Just like we saw God moving pieces around on the chessboard of this world to accomplish his purposes in the story of Esther, so he is at work here. He had a plan to bring that one particular man into the kingdom of Christ.

IMPLICATIONS

This is an unusual story. The book of Acts tells the broad story of how the church of Jesus Christ started from a small number of at most 500 people and in a matter of a few decades mushroomed into a kingdom of thousands of people spread all over the Roman Empire. In the middle of that story comes this account of how one random individual was brought to faith in Christ. Some think Luke included this story because it tells how the Gospel spread into Africa, assuming that the Ethiopian went home and told others about his faith. But Luke says nothing about that. We have no idea what that guy did after his encounter with Philip. There is no indication whatsoever that he became the toehold of the kingdom in Africa. Maybe he did evangelize his home region, but we don't know that. He simply disappears from view after this incident. If this was intended to tell us about a major movement of the gospel into a new geographical region it is safe to say that Luke

probably would have told us about that. It was very clear later in Acts when Paul made the first inroads into Europe. So why the story of this random convert? Some might say that Luke wanted to send the message that the Gospel of Christ is for all races. He did say that, and it certainly is true, but there is zero mention of this man's race, so that seems unlikely. So what are we to take from this story?

GOD IS REAL AND ACTIVE

I believe that part of the reason Luke included this story in his history of the spread of the church was to remind us that God is very real and that he can impact lives in our world in surprising ways. In fact, one thing this story reminds us of is that this great God cares about even one random individual. He cares so much about just one man that he took a leader out of a dynamic ministry and sent him on a mission to reach that one man.

We put our faith in a God we cannot see because we are convinced by the evidence of creation and by the testimony of reliable witnesses of events that clearly establish his reality and his character. However, in our day to day lives we do not see or hear him with our physical senses. Since those senses are the ways we interact with our world and gain information about it, we might easily disregard the reality of God in our world. Luke wants us to understand that he is at work even when we cannot see him. There was no visible revelation of God in this incident, and yet his hand is all over the details of this story.

I don't think the message here is that we should all expect God to work in our lives exactly as he did in Philip's. I think this story is recorded precisely because it is so unusual. So we should not go around expecting God to send an angel to instruct us to do some inexplicable thing. But we should expect that since our God is real and is active in the world we should look for him to work in our circumstances at times.

Sometimes there is something of a disconnection between our faith in God and the way we live. At an extreme people may claim faith in Jesus but never concern themselves with how he wants them to live. For many Christians, even serious ones who seek to apply God's truth to their lives and obey him, there is little to no sense of his activity and presence in their experience. It's almost like some of the things we learned in school. When was the last time life presented you with a quadratic equation to solve, for instance? We had to learn about such things, but with no expectation we'd ever use them.

When I was in high school and had to take a foreign language, I took German. Why did I take German? It was so I might be able to communicate with the massive wave of German immigrants that were flooding the area where we lived in Bakersfield. They were everywhere and being unable to communicate with them was a real problem. Uh, no. I don't recall a single German immigrant who lived in Bakersfield. There was no such German expatriate community there. I really have no explanation for why I took German. My best guess is that I mostly did whatever my big brother did, and he took German. He took German because he briefly lost his mind when he entered high school. My point here is that I never had any expectation that knowing German would have any relevance whatsoever for my daily life. I never had a single moment where I thought knowing German might actually be useful one day. I'm pretty sure most schools these days don't even offer German.

So for a few years my rudimentary Deutsch enabled me to translate a few of the lines spoken by German soldiers in World War II movies. But now I can't even do that. My German is all but gone, save for a few random lines like "It's time to eat." And "wait a minute, I don't have my notebook." Oddly I have had precious few opportunities to use those phrases.

Sadly, knowing God for many of us becomes sort of like me learning German. We have little, if any, expectation that it will ever intersect with how we actually live. The problem with that is if knowing God is merely an academic exercise that has no relevance or use in our experience, we should not be surprised if our knowledge of God starts to become as rusty and useless as my German has become. It was never very firm because it didn't relate to anything in my world and now it is little more than a distant memory.

There are Christians who kind of overdo this idea of God being present and active in their world. They decide that God must have worked in their choice of the shoes they wore today or in the menu item they ordered at the restaurant. We should not get silly about this, but we should expect to see God actually at work in our lives. In other words, we should expect him to be real, present and active. We should be looking for him to direct us, and listen for his voice. And we should expect to see him work. Our God is alive, powerful, present in our world and he is at work.

In his book, *The Safest Place On Earth*, Dr. Larry Crabb tells a fairly amazing story. He was at a place in his life where he had developed a message he felt he should devote his life to, but he needed to know it was God leading him, not just his own thinking. He was to speak at a seminar one weekend. In the minutes before

he was to speak the audience was singing some worship songs. He prayed and asked God to give him a certainty about his message that he could not deny, then asked God if he could let him know that weekend. A few moments after he had finished praying a man he didn't know suddenly showed up and sat in the empty chair next to him. He asked if he could have a brief word with Crabb. Larry wasn't enthusiastic about this, in fact he thought the man a bit rude since he was just about to speak, but he agreed, being polite. The man introduced himself then said, "We have never met, but since the day we invited you to our church the Lord has put you on my heart. I feel like he wants me to say something to you. I planned to wait until after the seminar but I feel I need to tell you now. It will only take a minute." Now Crabb was intrigued. The man said, "I sense that you want confirmation from God that your new direction in ministry is from him, and that you want it this weekend. I believe God has called you to what you're now doing and he wants me to tell you that this weekend you'll know." Yikes. How could that man know those things? Clearly he was listening to the Spirit of God.

PHILIP WAS LED BY THE SPIRIT

One thing obvious in this passage is that Philip is first told by an angel to do something that from a usual human perspective made little sense, and he did it. He didn't balk, he didn't question it, he didn't argue about it, he didn't point out how much more useful he could be where he was in Samaria. He just did what the angel told him to do. Notice also that somehow according to verse 29 the Holy Spirit told Philip to go stand near the chariot of the Ethiopian. He didn't ask why, he just went. Not only did he go, but he went with the expectation that the Spirit had something for him to do that related to the Ethiopian.

Philip was being led by the Spirit. Galatians 5:16 says, "Walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." What is the flesh? As used in Galatians it does not mean our physical flesh. It refers to human nature that has been distorted by the fall so that we turn everything inward. We make everything about self. So when we live by the flesh everything is about what we want, it is about getting what we need and want through our own ability and effort. Unfortunately this flesh is a total sucker for temptation and is prone to disobey God.

The natural state of all of us is to live by the flesh. When we live by the flesh we naturally seek to gratify its desires. As we have seen recently some of those desires will be neutral things, but the flesh will twist them so they are out of place or destructive to us or others. How might the flesh have impacted Philip? I can envision a couple of ways. First, when he was in Samaria he was playing a central role in a dynamic ministry that was exploding. God was using *him* to make it

happen. He, Philip, was the catalyst. What is going to happen if he suddenly bails out on the ministry? That's going to be a disaster. This is not the time to leave. In short, he would not have obeyed the order given to him because he'd be focused on what the flesh wanted, which would be some glory for Philip as a guy God was using mightily.

Then he is told by the Spirit to go talk to the Ethiopian. Those of us who are maybe a bit more introverted can easily imagine him thinking, "I'm not going to just walk up to some guy I've never met and take it on myself to tell him the meaning of what he's reading. If I try to do that I'm going to look like a kook." In other words, he could easily be defeated by self-consciousness, which is a big tool of the flesh.

Because he walked by the Spirit, he was led by the Spirit, Philip did not pursue the desires of the flesh. Instead he carried out the will of God and in so doing, at least for one man, he became a game changer. That man's life was forever changed because of Philip.

Why should I care about that? Why should it matter that living by the Spirit means I won't live by the flesh? Romans 8:8 certainly should be enough of an answer. "The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life." The flesh tells us its desires will give us life, but it only produces death. Galatians 5:19-21 says, "The acts of the flesh are obvious; sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy, drunkenness and orgies and the like." You might say, "Well that's not me. I've never been involved in sexual immorality, debauchery, drunkenness or orgies and I certainly am not involved in witchcraft." Perhaps not, but how about discord, jealousy, envy, selfish ambition and dissension. I guarantee that you've had some of those. A life full of discord, being eaten up by selfish ambition, envy and jealousy is not life to the fullest.

So the message here is that Philip reminds us that the choice before us is the choice between life and death. That choice boils down to letting the Spirit lead us on one hand, and living by the flesh on the other. At every moment of your life you are choosing one or the other.

Unfortunately the flesh, that insistent thing in us, is part of fallen human nature. Doing what it says feels natural. In other words, it seems normal, reasonable and right. To not follow it will feel unnatural. For Philip to leave an exploding ministry seemed to make no sense. So we should know that the flesh will appeal to us in a

voice so loud it is hard to ignore. But it perversely leads us to live and think in ways that sap us and those around us of life. So we must live by the Spirit.

What does that mean? Live and trust in God's grace. Live by the reality of the gospel. Believe what God supplies is enough at all times. Know his Spirit is in us, and listen for his guidance, seek his will continually.

THE SPIRIT WANTS TO LEAD US

God wants us to live to the fullest. Jesus said that is why he came. That only happens as we live by the Spirit, not by the flesh. The flesh shouts at a decibel level that nearly drowns out all other sound that we can only find life by doing what it says. But that is a deadly lie. To the extent that we live by the flesh we get not life but death. We get fear, anger, damaged relationships, guilt, shame, distance from God, envy, emptiness and hopelessness. We can actually be led by the Spirit everyday of our lives. Live not by the flesh, but by the Spirit.

God also will lead us in what we should do in life. Ephesians 2:10 says, "We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." God is making divine appointments for you. He has works for you to do just as he did for Philip. They may not be as dramatic as Philip's but they will be just as real.

In his book, *I Became A Christian And All I Got Was This Lousy T-Shirt*, Vince Antonucci tells of one occasion when he told his wife he was going to a favorite all you can eat restaurant for lunch. She objected to his idea of gorging himself on pizza and the delicious cinnamon rolls at this place. But he told her that he felt like he was supposed to go there, that he had this odd sense that the Lord wanted him to. She was dubious, but he went anyway. While he was there at one point he noticed a young woman who kept looking at him. He wondered why she was checking him out, but finally she got up from her table, walked over to him and said, "Do I know you?" He thought maybe he should tell her he was married and save her some embarrassment, but finally just said, "No, I don't think so, " since he didn't recognize her. She said, "Are you sure?" Being a pastor he thought perhaps she had been to his church and recognized him from that. So he asked if she'd ever gone to his church. She said, "No, I used to go to church, but it was a long time ago. I've been thinking maybe I should go back. My husband just left me so my daughter and I just moved back here to my home town. Anyway I thought for sure I knew you." He affirmed he didn't know her. Puzzled she said, "Please don't think I'm weird, but the whole time I've been here I've had the sense that I should talk to you. I figured it was because I knew you. Do you have any idea why I might feel

that way?" He said, "Please don't think I'm weird, but do you think it's possible God was leading you? You've been thinking you need to go back to church, then you feel like you should go talk to a stranger and he turns out to be a pastor." This opened up a fruitful conversation about the Lord and her life. He was led by the Spirit, and he listened.

The Holy Spirit will lead us. Most of his leading will be about obeying God, doing the right thing. But there may be those prompting to call a person, write them a note, pray for them, reach out to them in some way. We should expect the Holy Spirit to actually be present and real and leading us as we go through life.

Sometimes they might be as startling. David Dykes is a pastor and author in Texas. In his book, *Do Angels Really Exist?* he told a pretty amazing story. This is not some weird, fanatical Christian who sees demons and miracles around every corner. He is a really solid, reasonable guy. He was training a couple of guys on how to share their faith. They went to the address of a person who had expressed interest in the gospel, but no one was home. They turned from the door to go back to their car, but a man sitting on the front porch swing of the house next door called out to Dykes. He said, "Tony isn't home tonight, but I know that James would like a visit from you," and pointed to the house on the other side. Dykes is often on local TV, so assumed the guy recognized him. He didn't know who James was, but went to his house anyway. When they rang the doorbell an elderly couple answered the door and invited them in. He explained who he was and what they were doing and asked if they could share the good news with them. Both James and his wife were eager to hear the news about Jesus, and they both quickly accepted him as their Lord and Savior. Dykes told James he had never talked to anyone who was more ready to receive Christ. James said, "Last week the doctor found a large spot on my lungs and he suspects it's cancer. I've smoked all my life. Two nights ago lying in bed I was unable to sleep, so I said, "God, I know nothing about you, but if you're real, I need you. Please send someone to tell me about you." That explained his openness, but then he said, "How did you know to come to my house?" Dykes said, "Your neighbor 2 doors down was on his porch swing and he suggested we drop in." James got a puzzled expression on his face and said, "That house has been vacant for months. Nobody lives there." Dykes said he figured that it must have been some stranger who just happened to know about James' situation. But then they left the house and his two friends said, "Pastor, are you going crazy? We didn't see anybody sitting on that porch swing."

Dyke concludes with wise advice. "Don't wait for God to send an angel to you. Go and he will guide you." That's great advice. I told you some of these stories to

affirm for you that God is very much alive and active in our world today. So as you go today, as you go this week, keep your ear open to the Spirit's prompting. Keep your eyes open. Ask God to lead you and look for him to set up those appointments, those good works for you to do. When you hear him prompt you, do what he says!