

STANDARD OPERATIONS

ACTS 8.26-40 MAY 3, 2015

This morning we're going to take a break from our verse by verse studies through Revelation and instead take a look at a passage that I'm excited to share with you. It's a familiar story to some of us, but I love it because it shows us plainly and profoundly how powerful God's Word is, how the Lord has a *personal* love for each of us, a specific plan and desire for our lives. And it shows how we can be His operatives wherever He's placed us and that we can be effective in our service.

When I hear the word 'operative' most often I think of it in terms of *special ops*, where a highly trained individual is sent on a mission that few, if any, other agents would be able to accomplish. I think of Jack Bauer or James Bond or Jason Bourne. Apparently it helps to have a name that starts with 'J'. When I think of an 'operative' I think of guys like that, doing these elite and incredible things that defy logic.

But, in reality, that's only one way we use the word. In fact, 'operative' most commonly means something much *less* specialized, it simply means 'functional' or 'ready for use.' It means something has been put together properly and is powered sufficiently to operate functionally.

Now, as Christians, you and I are people who want to be ready for use. God says in His word that we are His operatives on the earth. We're told in the Bible that we've been set free by the Lord so that we can serve Him and serve others, that we're to keep watch and always be ready to be directed by the Holy Spirit to do service for our King.

What we want to consider today is how we function as operatives for Lord in our regular lives and learn how this all works as we submit to God's word and allow the Spirit to lead us and then the Lord using us to accomplish His great work.

What's great is that in Acts chapter 8 we get to see 3 different operatives, all at different levels of experience and capability, but each used by God to accomplish significant work. We get to see a demonstration of the power of the Word of God, and we also get a very small glimpse into how intricate and involved God's work all around us truly is.

So let's begin our story in Acts chapter 8, verse 26. There we read this:

Acts 8.26 - ²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is desert.

The first operative we want to study is an angel, who was sent by God to give a message of direction to Philip.

Couple of things here: First, from this we see that angels are still in operation in the Church age. We're seeing them a lot in our studies in Revelation and that they have some very unique roles during the Tribulation period, but even now they're a part of God's work on the earth. In fact, Hebrews 13 says:

Hebrews 13.2 - ² Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so *doing* some have unwittingly entertained angels.

Here in our passage we see an angel delivering a mission to Philip. So angels are definitely still out and about in the present age.

Second, when we think about the power and capability of an angelic being, all their strength and potential and effectiveness, doesn't it seem like he's *overqualified* to be sent on this simple errand? "Go tell Philip to go to Gaza." Couldn't the Holy Spirit have done that Himself?

Well, of course He could have. But don't miss this wonderful encouragement: God, in His grace, opens up His plan to include His creatures. Now, we're not angels, but I think there is a good principle for us to learn here. No service to God should be *beneath* us. It was absolutely *unnecessary* for the Lord to send this angel from one perspective, but it was His delight to include this angel in the ministry. God *wants* to include you in His work around the earth, certainly not because He needs us, but because He loves us.

My boys love to come out and help me wash our car. I use the term 'help' very loosely. Obviously they can't reach certain parts and, yes, in many ways I would do the job better and faster if I just did it alone, but I *want* to be with them. I want to spend that time together. I want to show them how it's done and have those laughs and smiles together.

God is our Master, but He is also our Father. Behold what manner of love our Father has given unto us that we should be called the children of God! That He should include us in the work He is doing to redeeming a lost and dying world.

Maybe today the Lord will give you some little opportunity to do something that is downright beneath your talents or abilities. But what a beautiful thing that God divides His grace down to even menial levels so that we can receive it and be a part of His work and be rewarded for it.

I love how the verse ends there: "This is *desert*." Just in case we didn't know! The book of Acts is setting a scene for us here. First of all, Philip was being asked to leave a city full of revival to go down to a deserted place. He had been hanging out in Samaria, preaching the Gospel, performing miracles. People were getting saved left and right. It was a genuine revival. And now the Lord says to Him, "I want you to leave and go sit in the desert." To get where he was supposed to go, geographically, he would've had to travel *back* through Jerusalem (Samaria was up north, Gaza was down south), meaning he'd have to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, if he was going to obey the Lord. You see, the reason why Philip was in Samaria was because Saul was waging a war against Christians in Jerusalem. He was brutally hunting them down and imprisoning them and killing them. On top of all this, Philip had no idea *what* he was going for or what he should do when he got there!

Here's the thing: Being a servant, being an operative, means obeying the orders we're given. As Christians, we no longer have the right to self-direct. And that's really not a bad thing, because we know that the Bible says the way that seems right to men ends in destruction. It says that when we go our own way, we go astray. But the reminder is here that God's word is often going to challenge us and demand surrender. It will confront us in such a way that we either have to disobey or bow before the Lord and say, "Nevertheless at Your word I will."

Will we cast the nets on the other side of the boat if and when the Lord asks us to? Even when it doesn't make sense or when it is *so much* more difficult or even dangerous to do so? Philip did. He's the second operative we want to focus in on and learn from.

Acts 8.27-29 - ²⁷ So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go near and overtake this chariot.”

I sometimes wonder how long Philip was hanging out on the deserted road before he had this encounter. I wonder if it was the first group of people that had passed him by or whether others had. What we can be pretty sure of is that, once he was there, he was waiting with *expectation*. Seeing down through the desert the blip of a caravan on the horizon, steadily approaching him, he would've undoubtedly thought, “Is *this* it? Is this the reason why I was sent here?”

Expectation is a very important thing in the life of a Christian. What I mean by that is living our lives in such a way that we *expect* the Bible to speak to our lives and our situations as we read it. We *expect* God to direct us to serve Him in specific ways. We *expect* the interaction of the Holy Spirit day by day. It's an essential attitude for Christians, because expectation is Biblical and it keeps us from missing the subtle opportunities that the Lord might bring to us. Probably none of us have had an angel show up and give us a direct message today, but we know that the Lord has given us today to do His work. Though every chariot we come across may not be an assignment for us, perhaps one of them is. That spiritual expectation will keep us in tune with what God may want to do.

How this Eunuch had heard about the God of Israel, we don't know. But, again, what a great testimony of the far-reaching grace of God. Drawing men from all over the world to His word that they might know Him and be saved. God's word and His revelation can cross any border. It can reach any person. The Lord is not slack, He is active and He is moving from place to place, heart to heart to reveal Himself and how men might be saved.

Now here we meet this fellow, an Ethiopian Eunuch, who had come to Jerusalem to worship and had gotten his hands on God's Word, specifically he was reading the book of Isaiah. Philip figured that out and took the opportunity to start a conversation with him.

Acts 8.30 - ³⁰ So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

Now, remember, we want to study Philip as an operative of the Kingdom, an example of how we can minister to people and be effective in our service to the Lord. How interesting it is that his first word to the Eunuch is not, “Hi there, I am a miracle worker,” or, “Hello, I am a great leader in the Church, let me tell you all the incredible things I have seen and done.” Instead, he says, “do you understand the Scripture you're reading?”

His focus and desire is to talk to this man about the Word of God, because Philip understood that the Word of God has power. It is alive and well and does not need to be smuggled in under a cloak of sensationalism. Throughout the book of Acts we can see the focus and importance placed by the early Church on God's word, teaching it and understanding it, rather than experience or feeling or sensationalism. The Apostles and deacons and church leaders were *preachers*, not *performers*. It is the *WORD* of God that matters most and it is the Word that advances the work of God. Philip thought so, and that's why he asked this question.

Acts 8.31 - ³¹ And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him.

As an operative, Philip was going to be used to bring this man to Christ. But he wasn't sent as a billboard, he was sent as a *guide*. We want to take care that we don't become placard Christians, but are *personal* Christians who *bring* people to the Lord, because we know the way to go and they do not.

And we see here that the Eunuch was in need of actual answers. He needed someone who could walk him through what God's word was saying and explain the sense to him. He didn't need just a little sign that said, "God: *THAT* Way." That's effectively what he had received back in Ethiopia. Somehow, at some point, he had heard about the God of Israel and in his heart he longed to know Him, He longed to be redeemed and restored. So he made this voyage. And, surely, once he made it to Jerusalem, having come all this way, being closer than ever to this God he was seeking, he would've asked the locals, "Where can I find your God?" I'm sure many people just pointed and said, "There's the Temple. Try over there." And he had gone and tried to worship there among the crowds and among the Pharisees, who of course did not have a real, living faith. Jesus said they had made the word of God of no effect. They had only a dead religion and no real connection to the God.

So, at the end of his trip, the Eunuch buys a scroll or two, packs up, and starts the long road home. But still, he's hungry for salvation. And he needed someone who would walk him through the message of the Gospel so that he might finally know the truth and be set free. He was in need of real guidance, not clichés. He didn't need to be berated or belittled. He needed someone who loved enough to help him understand.

It's hard to have love for our enemies or for strangers, but that's the kind of love we're called to as God's people. And that's the kind of love that changes lives and opens peoples eyes to what God's word is really saying. It's the kind of love Philip had.

Acts 8.32-34 - ³² The place in the Scripture which he read was this: "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth. ³³ In His humiliation His justice was taken away, And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth." ³⁴ So the eunuch answered Philip and said, "I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?"

The Eunuch found himself in what we call Isaiah 53, a wonderful chapter to be sure. In fact, 53 through 60 are really beautiful passages, but that means he would've read and learned quite a bit already. He would've already made it through Isaiah 20 and chapter 43 and chapter 45, where there are some not-so-encouraging things said about his home country, *Ethiopia!*

So here you are, one of the highest ranking officials of the nation, and this strange book from Israel, whose God you believe in, is talking to *you*, not only about judgments on your nation, but also your *personal* iniquity that would be laid on some Suffering Servant.

The Bible is alive and well and it speaks to each of us (and everyone else, for that matter) if we allow it to. It isn't antiquated or out of touch. It cuts right into who we are and where we are and what is going on in this world so that we might be reconciled to God. And here is a key thing to remember: The Bible speaks not just generally or generically, it speaks with personal precision to you and to me and to the circumstances and situations we find ourselves in. Certainly, many of you know this to be true, but we'll also see it proved in this story.

The Eunuch paused on this passage which says that Christ was led as a sheep to the slaughter and he didn't know what to make of it.

Acts 8.34-35 - ³⁴ So the eunuch answered Philip and said, “I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?” ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him.

Hopefully, as we're learning about how to be effective operatives in this story, we're also able to consider and celebrate the personal power the Bible has for us. Not that we get to have our own private interpretations, but that the Bible is a current message for God's people corporately and individually. God's word is not the vague, fortune cookie, double-talk that a lot of other philosophies try to pass off. It comes to us with active direction, personal application, and essential instruction for each day of our lives. It will by no means pass away. It's given to sustain us, not from time to time, but for this day and every other.

Be encouraged to always send people *back* to the Scriptures. You have questions? Go to the Word. You have struggles? Go to the Word. You need counsel? Find it in the Word because the Scriptures come to us *complete* with the power of God, not just generically or hypothetically, but *personally*.

I know this is true from personal experience, but more importantly from what we can see here. You see, Philip started right there from what we call Isaiah 53, verse 7 and started preaching to the Eunuch.

When I was going through this story I found myself wondering, “*Why Isaiah?*” I'm guessing this Eunuch, a man of great authority and wealth, probably purchased a full copy of the Old Testament, or at least every book that was available to him and not just this Isaiah scroll. Scholars note that the quote we read is not from the Hebrew manuscripts, but from the Septuagint, so it's possible he had a whole copy of what we call the Old Testament. Either way, this is the book and the passage that found its way into his lap at just the right time.

Why Isaiah? Because the Holy Spirit was not only working in Philip, he was working in this Eunuch as well and here we see a beautiful demonstration of how God uses His word to speak powerfully and precisely, person to person if they are willing to listen. There he would come across a passage that arrested his heart and attention, presenting him with his own sin but also the Savior, chapter 53. Suddenly he's in this conversation with some guy he met on the road, a guy who can't wait to talk to him about the very book he's reading. And then, in just a few paragraphs, over in what we call chapter 56 Philip would be able to read this to him:

Isaiah 56:1, 3-5 - This is what the Lord says...³ “Don't let foreigners who commit themselves to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will never let me be part of his people.’ And don't let the eunuchs say, ‘I'm a dried-up tree with no children and no future.’ ⁴ For this is what the Lord says: I will bless those eunuchs who keep my Sabbath days holy and who choose to do what pleases me and commit their lives to me. ⁵ I will give them—within the walls of my house— a memorial and a name far greater than sons and daughters could give. For the name I give them is an everlasting one. It will never disappear!

What a *perfect* book for this guy to be reading! What a comfort it is that we do not have to rely *solely* on ourselves to convince or influence people to believe in Christ. God sends us out with power and He sends His word out with power. While we minister from the *outside*, we can be confident that the

Holy Spirit is working intricately and personally from the *inside*, bringing all these elements together so that the Scriptures can cut right into us to show us who we are and who God is and what He has done for us and what desires for us.

What a beautiful moment. It should blow our minds how this is playing out. But then we remember that this story is to example and illustrate for us the *normal* operation of the power of God as we receive His word and His ministry and do His work.

It says that Philip preached Jesus to him. Now, maybe he wasn't real familiar with Isaiah. But he certainly was familiar with *Jesus*, not because he was an original disciple (*he wasn't*), but because he was walking with Jesus and pursuing Him and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. That made him *fully* operational and able to deliver this saving message to the Eunuch. That's what made him the kind of operative that God used to change the world: He simply functioned as a normal, devoted disciple.

Like the sermon given on the road to Emmaus, the text of this one is omitted, which is a bummer. But we know what the content of both of those sermons were: *Jesus*. He preached Jesus to him as Christ Himself had expounded the Scriptures to reveal Himself to the 2 on the road to Emmaus.

I may not be a Bible scholar, but if I'm a Christian, that means I have a Jesus to preach. I have a Christ who has been revealed in the Bible, whose message is simple and accessible. And, though Christ Himself would obviously teach a *better* message than me, He's given me the privilege of preaching to others, whether in the pulpit or the chariot. So, as I serve the Lord, I want to have more and more a *Jesus* to preach as I learn more about Him and draw nearer to Him day after day.

Acts 8.36 - ³⁶ Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, *here is water*. What hinders me from being baptized?"

What we learn here is that Philip didn't just deliver facts *about* Jesus. He also showed how a person can follow Christ as Savior and King. Who knows how long he talked to the Eunuch, but by the time they got to a body of water, this man understood that a person must choose to identify with Christ and own Him as Lord and Master and dedicate their life to Him.

When we're operating as preachers, we need to make the message a *personal* message. Not just *information* about God, but *imperatives* about following Him. That we are explaining that there is a choice to make and showing that we've made that choice ourselves, not just once, but each day as we live out the Christian life, following the Word, pursuing Jesus.

Acts 8.37 - ³⁷ Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

As an operative, Philip had a clear delivery of *how* a person could receive eternal life. He didn't add requirements or works to the Eunuch's shoulders. He said, "if you believe." The Gospel is rich, but it's simple. We should preach simply.

Acts 8.38-40 - ³⁸ So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. ³⁹ Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so 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.

As we wrap up our examination of Philip, we see here that even though he wasn't an apostle, he was still qualified to do all sorts of service for the Lord. He started out waiting tables, helping widows in the church. And then God used him to preach and to work miracles and be a part of a revival and baptize people and explain the Bible.

You and I are ministers of the Gospel just like he was, which means that we can be used like he was. The work of the Lord isn't reserved for a few, special operatives. Spiritual Jack Bauers and James Bonds. The Lord invites all of His people who are *ready* to function, ready to be powered up and sent out.

Now, I don't want to close this story without taking a look at just one more operative of the Lord's, and that's our 3rd example: The Eunuch himself. He got saved, and we're told that, coming up out of the water, he never saw Philip again because the Spirit raptured him away. And I found myself thinking, "*WAIT!* This guy has only heard *one Bible study in his life!* He needs more training and development and instruction!" If the angel was *overqualified* to deliver a simple directive to Philip, then we'd say this Eunuch was terribly *under-qualified* to bring the Gospel to an ignorant nation! A country where there were no Christians. No apostles. No miracle workers. There weren't any churches or Bible colleges or training programs.

But the Lord looked at this Eunuch and said, "Nope. He's good to go!" He would be the *only Christian* in Ethiopia upon his return, yet history reveals that the Gospel went out with power once he got back and revival broke out. He went home to a mission field with the Word of God, the indwelling Holy Spirit, and, though he wouldn't yet have an understanding of *every Scripture*, we know that he had all the training he needed to start being used by God, because he had been shown how to *get* an understanding of every Scripture, and that was to find Christ on every page. He knew Jesus, and he knew from Philip *how to read the Bible* to find Jesus. And, because of these reasons, the Holy Spirit said, "This guy is good to go. He doesn't need Philip anymore. He doesn't need a man to tell him what to think *about* the Bible, he has the Bible and knows how to read it with the indwelling Holy Spirit to complete him." He was sufficient because the Word is sufficient. Because God sends His word and His servants out with power and ability beyond any human reasoning or expectation.

And we read there that he went on his way excited and rejoicing, preaching just as Philip went his way preaching. He had now become another one of God's vineyard workers, sent throughout the world to save lives for time and for eternity. He was immediately equipped and deputized to be an effective operative for the Kingdom.

As we close, this is what we want to consider: We're God's operatives. Maybe we have specialized skills, maybe we don't. What matters is not our qualifications, but our functionality. Are we ready to function? Are the pieces in place for us to be used by God? Maybe the Lord will give us a great work to build today, maybe He'll put one brick in our hand and say, "Just go put that one brick over there." We can trust that whatever it is, it is significant in His elaborate plan for this world, and we can rejoice in the fact that He has commissioned us to be a part of His grace, and that God sends us out with power and direction. We're not meant to just float aimlessly as disciples, but to follow the way of the Lord. We are the sheep of His hand, He is our Shepherd, and He's a Shepherd who leads.

We function as we follow the Lord by obeying His word and living Spirit-filled lives. Lives that are submitted to Christ and devoted to Him. That's how we become like these beautiful examples in the Bible. They are inspiring, mind-blowing, but they're the normal, standard operations intended for us by our gracious God, our loving Father, our faithful Shepherd.