

STANDARD OPS

ACTS 8:26-40 JANUARY 22, 2020

When I hear someone described as being an “operative” I can’t help but think in terms of *special* ops. People who have “a very particular set of skills” like Jack Bauer or James Bond or Jason Bourne (Apparently, it helps to have JB as initials). These elite operatives are called in to do the impossible - sent on missions that few, if *any*, other agents would be able to accomplish.

But being “operative” isn’t just for 00’s or Delta Force. In it’s everyday sense the word ‘operative’ simply means “functioning or having effect.” It describes something that is ready for use. Something that’s put together properly and powered sufficiently to operate according to its purpose.

You and I are meant to be *operatives*, carrying out incredible heavenly functions in the world today. Our purpose is not simply to *commemorate* the work that began on the Day of Pentecost, but to *continue* it in our day to day lives.

The Book of Acts is not meant to simply be impressive to us or even just inspirational as we see what these Christians did so long ago, it’s mean to be *instructional to us* as Christians who carry on where they left off. When we get to the last page of Acts we notice that there is no conclusion. It’s more like the end of *The Fellowship Of The Ring*, where there’s no resolution at all. Instead, the team splits up to take on quests of their own. They have a common set of goals, but will walk different roads, fighting the good fight in different parts of the world until the King returns.

That’s us. We’re sent out on mission, empowered and directed by God to fulfill His incredible purposes. What we want to consider as we look at our passage tonight is how we can properly function as operatives for the Lord.

In our text we’re given 3 different operatives to study. They’ve got different backgrounds, different circumstances and they’re all at different levels of experience and capability. But each of them will be used by God to accomplish significant work.

We begin in verse 26.

Acts 8:26 - ²⁶ An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip: “Get up and go south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is the desert road.)

The first operative is an angel, sent by God to give a message of direction to Philip. We, of course, are not angels. We’re not going to become angels. But what can we learn from his part in the story? Well, there’s a devotional thought for us in his example. Think about the amazing power and capability of an angelic being. All their strength and potential and effectiveness. They who stand in the presence of God and can travel between time and eternity. Doesn’t it seem like this angel is *overqualified* for the errand he was sent on that day? “Go down to Samaria and tell a guy to go to Gaza.” Philip was a man who knew how to follow God’s leading. Why didn’t the Holy Spirit simply pass along this message?

He could have, but God *loves* to include His creatures in His work. He has no need of any servants, yet He loves to utilize them all the time. It’s an incredible attribute of His grace. What He could easily do Himself He shares with His family so that they can be a part of His everlasting work and then be *rewarded* for it.

My little daughter, Nora, loves to come out and ‘help’ me wash my truck. I use the term ‘help’ very loosely. Obviously she can’t reach certain parts of the car and, yes, in many ways I would do the job better and faster if I just did it alone, but it’s *fun* to have her help. It’s a silly time together. And I enjoy showing the kids how to do the job and sharing laughs and smiles together. God, our Father, feels this way to a much, much greater degree.

This angel also demonstrates for us an important aspect of being fully operational: No service to the Lord should be *beneath* us. It was, in a sense, unnecessary for the Lord to send this mighty angel, but it was His delight to include him in the work. And the angel didn’t balk or complain.

Maybe in the coming days the Lord will give you some *small* opportunity to do something that is downright beneath your talents or abilities. Be like this angel and do whatever you’re given to do. What a beautiful thing that God can divide His work down to even menial tasks so that we can participate and be rewarded for them.

The verse ends: “This is the desert road.” Luke is setting a scene for us here. Philip, you’ll recall, has been busy in a vibrant time of revival and miracles in Samaria. People are getting saved left and right. Now the Lord says: “Leave all that and go sit by yourself in the desert.” Sometimes we think of when the Bible says that when we’re faithful over small things we’ll be given greater things and it’s easy to start thinking of serving God in terms of upward mobility. That our ministry will continually be growing in prominence and influence and scope. But the Lord doesn’t use material measurements like we do. Here, Philip is being told to *leave* the crowd to go speak to an individual. He doesn’t know that yet. Like Abraham, the Lord simply told him, “Head *that* way.” The way was back down *through* Jerusalem and to Gaza in the south. Why had Philip left Jerusalem? He was escaping violent persecution. And so God was asking him to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. There was no time for Philip to take the coastal highway. The window of opportunity to accomplish this new mission was short. To obey God, Philip would have to trust Him with his very life.

Being an operative that’s used by God means obeying the orders we’re given. As Christians, we no longer have the right to self-direct. And that’s not really a bad thing, because if we go our own way we’ll inevitably go astray. And we know we can trust the Lord and that all His ways are good. But the reminder here is that God’s word is often going to challenge us and demand we *surrender*. It will confront us in such a way that we either have to disobey or bow before our King and say, “Nevertheless at Your word I will.”

Philip was willing to obey this surprising command. And he is the next operative we want to look at.

Acts 8:27-29 - ²⁷ So he got up and went. There was an Ethiopian man, a eunuch and high official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to worship in Jerusalem ²⁸ and was sitting in his chariot on his way home, reading the prophet Isaiah aloud. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, “Go and join that chariot.”

I wonder how long Philip was hanging out on the deserted road before this encounter. Was the eunuch’s caravan the *first* one that passed by? We don’t know. What we can be confident of is that, once Philip was in place, he must have been waiting with real expectation. Looking down at the horizon, he saw a blip that slowly grew large as it came toward him. He would’ve undoubtedly thought, “Is *this* it? Is this the reason why I was sent here?”

Expectation is an essential part of our proper operation as Christians. We're to expect God's word to be speaking to us. We're to expect God to direct us. We're to expect God to do things when we gather together to worship Him. We're to expect God to bring people into our path that He wants us to minister to and share the Gospel with. Expectation helps us to stay focused on heavenly things rather than be distracted with the cares of this world. And having this spiritual expectation will help us to not miss the subtle opportunities the Lord might bring our way. Probably none of us had an angel show up and give us a message today, but that doesn't mean the Lord doesn't have some mission for us to be a part of. Though every chariot we come across may not be our assignment, perhaps *one* of them is. That expectation will help us stay in tune with what God may want to do.

We don't know how the eunuch had heard about the God of Israel. But he had and he believed. Or, at least he *wanted* to believe. And that, in and of itself, is another testament to the far-reaching grace of God, drawing people from every place that they might know Him and be saved.

Here we meet this fellow who had come to Jerusalem to worship and while in town two significant things had happened. First, he would've learned that, as a non-Jew, he did not have full access to the Temple. That probably wouldn't been unusual for someone who had direct contact with the Queen in her palace. Not only that, but he would've also learned that, as a *eunuch*, he could never be regarded as a full part of God's family, at least as far as the Mosaic law was concerned. There were specific prohibitions directed at eunuchs. This is *probably* not what he envisioned when he first set out on this trip.

But, the second thing that happened while he was in town was that he got a hold of God's word. At least the book of Isaiah. It could've been the whole Old Testament. Now, on the long road back to Africa, he's reading aloud from the scroll.

Acts 8:30 - ³⁰ When Philip ran up to it, he heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you're reading?"

Philip is such a great example to us of how to be an effective operative for the Lord. His first words to the eunuch aren't, "Hi there. I'm Philip, the great miracle worker." They weren't, "I'm Philip, an amazingly spiritual man." He doesn't even introduce himself. Instead, in kindness he says, "does that book you're reading make sense to you?"

His focus and desire is to talk to this man about the word of God, because it is the *word of God* that has power. It is alive and well and does not need to be smuggled in under a cloak of hype or sensationalism. Again and again we see the Christians in Acts focusing on the teaching and understanding of God's word rather than focusing on experiences or feelings or manifestations. The apostles and men like Stephen and Philip were *preachers* not *performers*. And it is God's word preached through us that advances His work.

Acts 8:31 - "How can I," he said, "unless someone guides me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

Philip has been sent on a mission 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 billboard Christians. Silent. Motionless. We're sent out to do the *personal* work of bringing people to Christ and bringing Christ to them.

You know, the eunuch was in need of actual answers. Actual guidance. He needed someone who could explain what God's word was saying and interpret the truth for him. The Bible reveals that the unbelieving world is *unable* to receive the truth without the ministry of the Holy Spirit. And we're the ones God has sent to accomplish that ministry, through preaching, so that people might believe.

The eunuch needed more than some little sign that said, "God's that way." That's effectively what he had somehow received in Ethiopia. Somehow, at some point, he had heard about the God of Israel and, in his heart, he longed to know Him. So he makes the trip to Jerusalem. And, surely, once he finally made it to the city, he would've been asking the locals, "Where can I find the God of Israel?" And probably a lot of people just pointed, "The Temple's over there." And when he went to try to worship there, among the crowds and among the Pharisees who, of course, had no real, living relationship with God, they who had made the word of God of no effect, so the eunuch found no real answers, but was left with even more questions.

At the end of his trip, he buys a scroll or two, packs up and starts off home. But he's *still* hungry for salvation. And he needed someone to walk him through the message of the Gospel so that he might finally understand the truth. He needed real guidance, not clichés. And the Lord had sent Philip for just that purpose at just the right time.

Acts 8:32-33 - ³² Now the Scripture passage he was reading was this: He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb is silent before its shearer, so He does not open His mouth. ³³ In His humiliation justice was denied Him. Who will describe His generation? For His life is taken from the earth.

The eunuch found himself at what we call Isaiah 53. Which means that he would've read quite a bit already. Specifically, he would have already made it through Isaiah 20 and 43 and 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.

This is a reminder that the Bible actually speaks to each of us 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's going on in the world around us so that we might be reconciled to God. It speaks not just generically, but with *precision* to you and me and to the circumstances we find ourselves in.

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 The eunuch replied to Philip, "I ask you, who is the prophet saying this about —himself or another person?" ³⁵ So Philip proceeded to tell him the good news about Jesus, beginning from that Scripture.

Philip's mode of operation here was to bring the eunuch *back* to the Scriptures. They needed to be explained, but *that's* where the answers were going to be found. Not in feelings, but in revelation. This passage demonstrates that God's word has real power for us and for others. It is a current message for God's people corporately and individually. It comes with active direction, personal application and essential instruction for each day of our lives.

This story is a profound example of just how personal and just how powerful God's word is. Why Isaiah? Why was *that* the scroll in the eunuch's lap that day? 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. There he had 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.' ⁴For 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. ⁵I 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 sure that the Holy Spirit is working intricately and personally from the *inside*, bringing all these elements together so that the Scriptures can cut right in and show us who we are and who God is and what He has done.

Acts 8:35 says that Philip preached *Jesus* to him. Like the sermon given on the Road to Emmaus, the text of this message isn't recorded. But we know what the *focus* of both of those sermons were: *Jesus*. I may not be a Bible scholar, but if I'm a Christian, that means I have Jesus to preach. I know the Messiah who has been revealed in the Bible. And though Christ Himself would obviously teach a *better* message than me, He's given you and me the privilege of preaching to others. Whether we're in a pulpit or a chariot. What made Philip fully operational for this mission was that he was obedient, he was full of the Holy Spirit, and he had a Jesus to preach. And we can have more and more to preach *about* Jesus as we walk with Him and draw near to Him day after day.

Acts 8:36 - ³⁶ As they were traveling down the road, they came to some water. The eunuch said, “Look, there's water! What would keep me from being baptized?”

Clearly, Philip didn't just deliver facts about Jesus, he told the eunuch how a person must *follow* Christ as Savior and King. We don't know how long this conversation lasted, but by the time they got to a body of water, the eunuch understood that a person must choose to publicly identify with Christ and dedicate their lives to Him.

As operatives, we must make the message of the Gospel personal by not just sharing information about God, but sharing the imperatives about following Him.

Acts 8:37 - ³⁷ And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart you may.” And he replied, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”

Philip didn't add any requirements or works to the eunuch's shoulders. He was clear and straightforward. God had been orchestrating countless elements to bring this situation together, and then, in that moment, we see how simple it is. Because the Lord has done all the heavy lifting.

Acts 8:38-40 - ³⁸ Then he ordered the chariot to stop, and both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him any longer. But he went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ Philip appeared in Azotus, and he was traveling and evangelizing all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Philip didn't have to be an apostle to qualify for all sorts of service to the Lord. He was a man ready to be used, ready to obey. Whether that meant waiting tables or preaching a message or having a conversation or interacting with demon possessed people, he was fully operational. And, as a result, he changed the world. And even though he had been used to work miracles, *this* was the better work that day.

You and I are ministers of the Gospel just like he was. We, too, can be used in God's great work. The work of God isn't reserved for just a few special operatives like James Bond or Jack Bauer. The Lord invites *all* of His people who are *ready* to function, *ready* to be powered up and sent out.

But there's one more operative in the story that we can learn from. And that's the eunuch himself. He got saved and we're told that, coming up out of the water, he never saw Philip again. But he goes his way rejoicing, back home to Ethiopia, as the *only Christian in the entire nation*. I found myself thinking, "Wait! This guy how only heard *one* Bible study in his life! He needs more training and development and instruction!" If the angel was *overqualified* for his mission, the eunuch seems to be terribly *under-qualified* to bring the Gospel to an entire country. There were no churches there. No Bible schools. No apostles. No miracle workers.

But the Lord looked at this eunuch and said, "You're good to go!" He would be the *only* Christian in Ethiopia upon his return, but church history records that, through him, the Gospel went out with power. He had returned home as an operative, powered up, with the word of God in his hands and the Holy Spirit in his heart. And though he wouldn't yet have an understanding of *every* Scripture or every teaching, we know he had all the training he need to *start* being used by God. He had been shown by Philip how to *get* an understanding of God's word, and that was to find Christ on every page. And, with these equippings, the Holy Spirit marked him as ready to operate. He was sufficient to start because of the sufficiency of Scripture and the power of the Holy Spirit within him.

The encounter ends with the eunuch heading south, rejoicing. Philip heading north, preaching. Where there had been 1 servant of God, now there were 2. The eunuch had 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.

So, as we close, we remember that we are 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 in God's service? Are the pieces in place for us to be used by God? Maybe the Lord will give us a great work to be a part of. Maybe He'll just put one little brick in our hand tomorrow and say, "Just go put that one little, spiritual brick over there." We can trust Him either way and know that, if He's sent us out to work, the work is significant in His elaborate plan for this world. And we can rejoice that He has commissioned us to be a part of it in His grace. We can trust that God sends us out with real power and real direction. We're not meant to just float aimlessly as disciples, but to follow His orders.

We are operatives who are able to accomplish incredible, impossible things because of the power of God working in and through us. And we stay operational as we trust, obey, allow ourselves to be led and rely on the word of God in whatever situation we find ourselves in.