

Sermon—May 15-16, 1999
Powerful Encounters in
The Book of Acts
Acts 8:1-5, 26-40

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Divine Appointments

About twenty-six years ago a college freshman was walking around her campus with a sense of anticipation. All morning she felt something inside of her stirring. God was preparing her for something. And so this college freshman walked from class to class and kept saying, “God, what is it that you’re doing? I feel like you’re about to do something really big. What is it you’re doing?” This college freshman was a Christian, barely 18 years old; had been a Christian for a couple of years. But, she felt like God was prompting her towards speaking but she didn’t know to whom or in what situation. So with this unusual sense that something was in the works she went to a class and sat down waiting for the lecture.

A moment after she sat down this guy came over and sat down next to her. She had seen the guy before; he used to sit in back of the class with his feet up, smoking a cigarette. He didn’t even take his feet down when he raised his hand to ask the professor about something or challenge the professor on some issue. She figured the guy had to be at least a sophomore or junior because he seemed to know what he was talking about. So when she looked up and she saw this guy coming towards her she immediately had the thought vividly cross her mind, “This is it, this is what you were waiting for.” Her heart just leapt and a short time after the class was over,

the girl explained to him how to become a follower of Jesus and what had happened in her own life after she had become a follower of Christ.

If you haven't guessed it by now, the freshman girl was my wife, Marlene and I was the guy who used to put my feet up. Over the last 2 ½ decades, I've repeatedly thanked God for bringing Marlene across my path and I've also thanked Marlene for being obedient enough to God's prompting that she would speak to someone she was so intimidated by.

I know a lot of you could tell similar stories of chance encounters, unusual sorts of happenings where somebody crossed your path and you were either able to explain to them the way they could have a relationship with God or you had it explained to you, at a time of need, the way to have a relationship with Jesus Christ.

A few years ago I was at an ice cream shop with my daughter up here in Westerville. We were waiting in line when a young woman in front of me turned around and said to her husband, "Oh my gosh! That's him in back of us, that's the guy I was telling you about." It turned out that this young woman named Susan had just become a Christian and was attending our newcomers' class. Her husband was not yet Christian and so they were in line at this ice cream shop and she was saying "I just know if you met Rich, my pastor, that you guys would be able to talk and you would also enjoy coming to church." As she said, "If you just met Rich, you'd enjoy talking

with him,” I walked up in back. Divine appointments. And shortly after that, Hank gave his life to Christ.

About a dozen years ago when I was still teaching at Ohio State, I was walking across the campus and bumped into a friend who was chatting with someone I didn’t know. He said, “Rich, I was just talking about you.” I said, “Really, what about?” He said, “Well, my friend here is Jewish and I was explaining to him that I had a Jewish friend who believed in Jesus as I did and now here you are.” Divine appointment.

I can literally point to dozens of situations in my life over the last two and a half decades where I had the opportunity to bump into someone who God was preparing for an encounter with Himself. By divine appointment, I mean one of those chance encounters where you cross the path with someone who God is preparing to meet not just you, but God is preparing that person to meet with Him. And God, who reigns over all and arranges all circumstances, orchestrates things in such a way as to prepare the heart of the seeker and to prepare you so that you bump into one another at just the right moment in order that a seeker might find him.

As we continue in our study of the book of Acts, I’ve called today’s talk, “Divine Appointments.” Let’s pray.

We read in Acts 8, verse 1, “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea

and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church, going from house to house; he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there.”

When we speak of divine appointments, a sovereign encounter between a Christian and another person, the Bible relates to us the unpleasant fact that we Christians have a divine appointment with persecution. Acts Chapter 8, versus 1-5 takes place on the heels of the martyrdom of the first Christian martyr, the killing of a man named Stephen. And, in Acts, Chapter 6 and 7, we read about Stephen, his witness to Christ and as a result of his clear witness to Christ, Stephen was murdered. In fact, so close is the connection in the New Testament between sharing one’s faith and being persecuted for it that the New Testament word for “being a witness” is the Greek word, “martus,” from which we get the English word, “martyr.”

It was the case in New Testament times that a person who was going to bear witness to Christ was opening themselves up for martyrdom; that’s what happened to Stephen. And we read in verse 1 of chapter 8 that a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem. Now, this word “persecution” is confused and, I think, misunderstood by Christians in our country. But we need to talk again about what persecution is and what it isn’t. See, my experience is that virtually everything

that is called persecution by Christians in this country is not even remotely related to the biblical idea of persecution.

I like what the British preacher, Martin Lloyd Jones said. He said “The Bible doesn’t say ‘Blessed are those who are persecuted as Christians because they are seriously lacking in wisdom and are really foolish and unwise,’ rather the Bible says ‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.’” And, isn’t it the case that much of the reason why we Christians have such a hard time is because we bring things down on our own heads by being busybodies and annoying and pests and self-righteous religious nuisances. And most reasonable people just generally hate nuisances.

It is not persecution when 90,000 people at The Ohio State University horseshoe boo a plane that flies over with an anti-gay message. That is not persecution. It is legitimate disgust for hatred of people. It is not persecution when students at Ohio State scream at a campus preacher who is indiscriminately telling people they are going to hell without knowing whether they love Christ or not. It is not persecution when a boss disciplines an employee who is spending all of the boss’s money and time talking with others at work about church or about religion instead of putting in a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay. Nor is it persecution when a newly saved 16-year old experiences a hostile response from his parents because he loudly announces they are completely washed up regarding all of their long-held religious

views and they've raised him the wrong way and they need to straighten themselves out with God.

Our lack of wisdom, our lack of sensitivity, our lack of gentleness often brings on our own heads rejection that does not arise to the level of biblical persecution. You see, there is one reason and one reason only that Christians have a divine appointment with persecution and that is because they are so identified with Christ, so absorbed with following him, so caught up in doing what he wants, obeying and imitating him, being willing to speak up when he tells him to speak up, that people hate the Christian for it.

Maybe you're a student and you decide to challenge a teacher or a professor respectfully regarding some very erroneous statements they're making about Christianity or Christians. Maybe you decide to speak up in class when a professor or a teacher is advocating abortion or euthanasia or sex outside of marriage. And as a result of your speaking up you are ridiculed, you are penalized in term of your grade, you are ostracized by others around you. Perhaps you decide to speak at City Council regarding the new sex-ed curriculum that would be introduced to city school students and you're ridiculed in the paper for advocating abstention rather than a program of condom distribution. You're called a Neanderthal, you're called unrealistic, you're called woefully behind the times, you're called a fundamentalist, you're called a Puritan, you're called an ultra right winged zealot.

Perhaps, because of your speaking up or refusal to go along with certain management practices at the company that you work at, you are not promoted, you are criticized unfairly on your evaluations. You see, the whole issue of biblical persecution boils down to who is it that people are angry with? Are they angry with us or are they angry with Christ? If they're angry with Christ and we suffer because we're being loyal to what he said and what he did, that's Christian persecution. And that is a divine appointment that God has for every one of you who claims to be a follower of Christ.

It says in Philippians 1, verse 29, "It has been granted to you, it has been appointed for you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him but also to suffer for him." 2nd Timothy 3, verse 12, "In fact," Paul writes "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Indeed the whole book of 2 Timothy is a manual regarding handling unfair suffering. I challenge you to read through 2 Timothy and underline all the words that somehow have to do with suffering or the call to endurance or perseverance in the face of opposition. You could do the same thing in 1 Peter; just underline some of these New Testament books regarding how normal persecution is for the Christian.

If you are a follower of Christ, God has an appointment between you and persecution. Now if you are like me or like every other human being who has ever walked the earth, you don't like this message. You're happy with divine appointments that result in miracles taking place and people getting saved and

marriages getting healed. But, an appointment between you and suffering, that's not a necessary part of the Christian life. That's just, you know, an added option for a few very aggressive Christians. It's like power door locks or a CD player in your car. You can get your basic car or you can get it with the options. You can have your basic Christian life or you can have your Christian life with persecution. According to the New Testament, persecution is standard equipment for all followers of Christ. It's like the tires on the car or the engine or the steering wheel. You don't have a car unless you have some of these things. You don't have Christianity unless added to it you suffer persecution.

And, of course persecution comes in all kinds of forms. It can simply be some harassment that you get because of your faith, maybe you're ridiculed, maybe some ostracism, maybe you're not included in some activities at work or in school; you're isolated socially. It could proceed up to being beaten. In some countries today, like the Sudan or Iran, having your property confiscated, being put in prison, all the way to being put to death. Here in Acts chapter 8, we read that the persecution was quite severe. It resulted in the execution of Stephen and in the imprisonment of men and women. Verse 2, "going from house to house, Saul dragged off men and women and put them into prison."

Why is persecution standard equipment for every true follower of Christ who is consistent in following Jesus? Why? Why the opposition? It's very simple—because you love Jesus and the world doesn't. Now, we try to minimize the

opposition of the world to Christ, we try to look around at our neighbors and friends and we say, you know, everyone is so nice, these are good people. And many of them are good people and they love their families and they're honest in business and they give to charity and you say "These good, honest, hardworking, family loving, charity giving people couldn't really hate Jesus." My mother couldn't really hate Jesus. My best friend from elementary school, my non-Christian boyfriend or girlfriend, they couldn't really hate Jesus. Is it really true that the world hates Christ? The Bible says, sadly, it's true.

In John 14:20 Jesus said, "I've chosen you out of the world, that's why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you, 'no servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me they will persecute you also. They will treat you this way because of my name for they do not know the one who sent me." You see, we always want to pretend that the world is broken into friends of God, enemies of God, and nice people. And, we hate passages that say we're either for Christ or against him.

It's out of love that we suffer. Would you not stand with your spouse if some friend, somebody at work, was maligning them, wouldn't you defend the honor of your spouse or your best friend or your roommate? Wouldn't you take time to sacrifice and stay up and pay the money if your child was in need? Or take the time to talk with them or be inconvenienced? Why do you sacrifice? Why do you do these

things for someone else out of love? Why does a Christian suffer? Because a Christian loves Jesus and the world doesn't love him.

The world hates the absolutes of Jesus. The world hates the absolute exclusive claims of Jesus. The world wants to relativize the message of Jesus, and the Christian is holding on to Jesus' absolutes. Jesus says "No divorce outside of a few minor exceptions." The world hates that. Jesus says "No sex outside of heterosexual marriage." The world hates that. Much of the church today hates that. Jesus says, "Forgive everyone who has injured you, no matter what they've done." The world hates that. The world hates the exclusive claims of Jesus where he says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one can come to God except through me."

Exclusive claims of Christ are never popular. And the Christian says this is the only way that a person will ever find truth and life if through Jesus.

You will see the truth about the multicultural mosaic that the western world celebrates. Oh we want to affirm everyone and respect everyone and tolerate everything, but the truth about the multicultural mosaic of the entire western world is that it always follows the ABC rule. You know the ABC rule, anything but Christianity, anything but Christ. Christ after 2000 years still remains the stumbling block because of his absolute claims, because of his exclusive claims, because to believe in Christ is to admit our hopelessness and wretchedness without him and that is the ultimate assault on our pride.

You see, I believe that the greatest single issue regarding the extension of the gospel in this world, the single issue I believe regarding the extension of the gospel at your high school, if you're a teen, at your college if you're in college, at your workplace, in your family, to your neighbors and friends, the greatest single issue facing the extension of the gospel is the individual Christian's willingness to suffer for the sake of Christ. You know there's nothing great ever achieved without some kind of depravation.

There's no great football player playing for Ohio State who isn't going through some kind of rigorous program of training and deprivation and suffering, weight work, running in the rain, running in the cold, being beaten up in practice. You can't be a great pianist and spend all of your time hanging out with your friends. You have to discipline yourself and sit down at the piano hour after hour, deprive yourself regarding relationships. There is no one who is a physician who hasn't gone through years of schooling and a long internship and a residency where they have to stay up night after night. You can't be a great mother, you can't be a great leader, you can't achieve anything in this world without suffering. And the gospel cannot be extended to young adults, to inner city adults, to people living on your dormitory floor, to people in your apartment building or in your nice suburban neighborhood without suffering. Without at least some people being willing to say, "I'll pay for this. I'll give up some money for this. I'll give up some social standing with my grandmother, with my aunt or uncle, with my co-workers, with my neighbors, and with my customers. I am willing to suffer some kind of personal embarrassment, to

be not well thought of. A few will say, I'll give up my house, my home, my family, my land, to go across the world to bring this message to someone who is unreached. I'll go into missions.

The gospel can't be extended without the willingness on the part of you and me and other genuine followers of Jesus Christ, to suffer for its sake. And this, by the way, is the law of the harvest. Jesus says in John 12:24, "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it stands alone, but if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it but the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me and where I am, my servant will be also. My father will honor the one who serves me." The law of the harvest is in order to have many seeds, one must die. You want many seeds in your family, you must die. You want many seeds in your school, you've been praying for some of your fellow students to be converted, you have to die, you have to risk some embarrassment. Somebody's not going to like you because you like to talk about Jesus.

You want the environment at your work to change? You have to die. You've been praying for your neighbor, some grain of wheat has to fall to the earth and die, there's no other way.

A pastor named Bruce Porter told a story of a memorial service that was recently held for Cassie Bernall, other students and 1 teacher who died in the Columbine shooting in Littleton, CO. I'm sure some of you have read this in the paper; others of

you heard it on the radio. One girl, Rachel Scott was killed because she had a Bible. The killer shot her in the leg, taunting her saying, "Go be with him now" before killing her. But, from eyewitness accounts of other surviving students, it was told that when Cassie was confronted by one of the gunmen, she gave a bold testimony of her faith. The killer asked, "Do you believe in God?" And she answered, "Yes, I do." She was instantly gunned down. This made a major impact on other students who knew of Cassie's Christian testimony. The spirit of the martyrs lives on. A service was held in Denver and thousands and thousands of teens attended. One of the speakers described the Christian life as a life of carrying the torch from Jesus to the apostles handed off from generation to generation and person to person. And, he challenged the assembled group of students who were at this memorial service and he said, "The torch has fallen from the hand of Cassie Bernall. Who among you will pick it up?" Hundreds of teenagers leaped to their feet and rushed forward and said, "We will." I ask, "Will you?" You know if any event in the last decade has the power to change American culture it is the words of Cassie Bernal, "Yes I do."

This event at Columbine has sent a shock wave through the nation. In our own time, in this country, someone died for believing in Jesus. Brothers and sisters, those of you who are followers of Christ, do not shrink back from clearly identifying with Jesus. The words of the killer are still hanging in the air, "Do you believe in God?" Don't cover over the hard edges of absolutes that Christ, our Lord, announces. Don't try to blunt the edges of exclusive claims that Jesus makes sharp. Don't take away

the force of the gospel. Wear persecution for Christ as a medal of honor. It says you belong to him.

We see the gospel spread beyond the confines of Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria. And, then down in verse 26 we read “Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘go south to the road—the desert road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ So he started out and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah, the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, ‘Go to that chariot and stay near it.’” Not only does God have an appointment for you who are Christians with persecution, but he has an appointment for you with truth seekers.

Philip was one of the seven men that the apostles chose to oversee the distribution of food to Greek widows. I mention this because so often in the church today, we have people in the church whose job it is to speak, and we have a different set of people whose job it is to do good to others, to give out food or to pull out a twenty dollar bill from their wallet and stick it in an envelope for someone in need. But, apparently in the early church, job functions were combined. People both spoke and their speaking was made credible because of their actions.

You know, Christianity stands a much better chance of being accepted by seekers of truth when our words don’t stand alone, when we combine words with deeds.

Words without corresponding actions have ultimately no impact. But words combined with deeds, man that is powerful. I love what's going on the church through Project Compassion, where dozens and dozens of people are meeting with men and women and families who had been affected by AIDS. And they're showing people another side of Christianity, a side of love and welcome, a side of kindness and giving. Talk about good deeds, being friends with someone who's dying of AIDS--that's good deeds. Spending a day helping your neighbor roof his house or bringing a meal over to a family where mom has just had a baby, or cleaning her house—good deeds.

St. Francis was reported to have said to his young trainees, "Everywhere you go, preach the gospel and when it is absolutely necessary, use words." Great counsel for the Church in America that's losing credibility, where we've got heaping piles of words spewing out from various Christian television programs and radio programs. But, unless they're backed up by a life and a church witness of good deeds, as one philosopher put it, "Saying Jesus saves has so lost its impact, that we might as well run around the streets yelling 'Exxon, Exxon.' It's just as meaningless without the credibility of deeds."

Well, it says that an angel told Philip to go south to the road, the desert road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. For those of you who aren't familiar with the geography of Israel, Gaza is about 50 miles southwest of Jerusalem, near the coast, by the Mediterranean Sea. And, right by Gaza the road trailed off into the desert that

led down to Egypt. And Philip has one of those divinely ordained appointments, one of those chance encounters with an Ethiopian eunuch. We're probably talking about a black African from the area that is now known as the northern Sudan. Now, this is a pretty powerful prompting from the Lord. Philip met an angel and the direction from the angel is a bit weird. Go out to this desert road 50 miles from here.

I don't believe that most divine appointments involve encounters first with angels and then a set of unusual instructions—get off the highway here, drive there. Oh, I admit there are stories like that but I am always concerned that the sharing of those stories cause either the average person to become bizarre (“I had a thought race through my mind—drive to Chillicothe and wait there 4 hours”) or we wait around for an angel before we will do anything. Most of the divine appointments, friends, for you and for me are right in our neighborhoods, right at our workplace. We're just going about doing our normal business, trying to be good people and serve God, and we don't need an angel necessarily but we have an inner prompting to connect to someone—a bank clerk, a cashier at a gas station, a coach of a baseball team that our kids are on. We just have an inner prompting that God wants that person, or he at least wants us to engage that person. And, all that the Lord is looking for is simple obedience.

Now listen, if you have a long track record of clearly picking up the voice of God, then when the Lord says “Drive down to Chillicothe,” fine, drive down there. But, if you're a novice at this sort of thing, I believe that God in his mercy and grace is going

to lead you gently by the hand the way a father would walk with a 2-year old. A father usually wouldn't start with a 2-year old by saying, "Let's run the high hurdles today." What the father simply is looking for is simple obedience. Friends, the kingdom of God advances in this world as you obey the simple promptings of the Holy Spirit who lives in you. When God, the Holy Spirit, prompts you to give someone a call or to give someone a word of encouragement, do so, and the kingdom of God will advance. When God the Holy Spirit prompts you to write a note thanking someone for their help in your life or reconnecting with someone with whom you've been unreconciled, do so and the kingdom of God will advance. When God prompts you to forgive or to give money, do so and the kingdom will advance. It was Philip's simple obedience. It was my wife Marlene's simple obedience. It was the simple obedience of thousands of people that led those of you who are Christians to the place where you are today as Christians.

This particular person that Philip encountered had been sovereignly prepared by God. It says, "He started out and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasure of Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship and on his way home was sitting in his chariot, reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, 'Go to that chariot and stay near it.'" This man had been sovereignly prepared for the divine appointment with Philip. There is a doctrine in Christianity regarding how the gospel goes forward. It is the doctrine of prevenient grace. Prevenient grace means that grace comes first. It means grace goes ahead of us. Prevenient

grace means that if someone is going to be open to hear about Jesus and respond to him positively, it is because God went ahead of us to prepare their hearts. It's not our great arguments or persuasive abilities. Ultimately, a person's heart being open is the result of God's work ahead of us.

God goes ahead of us through the prayers of parents and grandparents. Very often when I talk with someone, I have a feeling that God has prepared this person through someone else's prayers and I'm just the answer to many people praying. We take so much credit for the work of God. We are standing on the shoulders of other people. We might boast, "Hey, I'm 11 feet tall!" but it's because we're standing on the shoulders of someone who is 6 feet tall. God goes ahead of us in a divine appointment through other churches, perhaps through a Sunday school teacher who planted a seed back years ago regarding something that is said, something that was shown about Jesus. God goes ahead of us in divine appointments, this idea of prevenient grace, especially through the prayers of others.

God goes ahead of us through pain, the pain of life in this world. You know, there are two things that prepare us for an encounter with Jesus—one is pain and the other is success. It is really unfortunate that for most of us, we need pain to drive us to God. We need pain before we become Christians and we need pain after we become Christians. But there is a reality that very few people change at a core level of their being. Very few people make major changes without pain and so the pain of a divorce, the pain of separation, the pain of rejection by one's mate. The pain of a

discovery of an affair. The pain of a broken engagement. The pain of breaking up with a girlfriend or a boyfriend. The pain of a loss of a parent or a loved one through death. The pain of a miscarriage. The pain of a business failure. The pain of the bondage to some addiction.

Pain that leads people to Christ often simply involves reaping what we've sown. Where we've lived in a way contrary to what God would have and now we're experiencing the consequences – rebellious kids as a result of unwise parenting, sickness as a result of unhealthy habits or sinful living, legal or financial problems from some unwise stewardship or the breakdown of our marriage due to our neglect or harshness or infidelity. The Holy Spirit often uses this. Reaping what we've sown is used by the Holy Spirit to awaken us to our need for Christ.

Pain drives us to God and this Ethiopian eunuch, I believe, knew pain. See, by labeling him a eunuch, you know something of what had to have happened in his life before the divine appointment with Philip. Eunuchs, men who have been emasculated, were not allowed by the Old Testament law found in Deuteronomy 23, verse 1 to “ever enter the temple courts in Jerusalem.” So even though he had journeyed hundreds of miles to worship God from his home country, no matter what he did, he would never be accepted as a full Jew under the interpretation of the law in his day.

So the man was coming back from Jerusalem, I believe, with a very clear understanding that he just didn't fit in the community of God's people. The message was driven home to him loud and clear, "You do not belong here, you are not welcome." The circle was drawn and as he drove that chariot back home he knew he was outside the circle. He experienced the pain of alienation from the church and I believe this man was prepared by God for this divine encounter by the emptiness of his success. Not only the pain of the alienation but the emptiness of his success. It says he was not only a eunuch, but "an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace." Candace is actually just a title, not a name, it means Queen Mother of the Ethiopians.

You know, it is precisely when people have reached their goal in life, precisely when they have reached the pinnacle of the mountain that they've been climbing that folks feel most strongly the emptiness of their life. Now while you're climbing and reaching for the brass ring, while you're striving, you're too busy to recognize that the ring in fact is brass but when you grab it, many many successful people have this sharp sense of "Is that all there is?" There are 2 things that drive people to Christ; one is failure but the other is the emptiness of success. "I've got it all. I have the home in the suburbs. I've got a successful job. I've got 3 great cars and 2 okay kids, and the golf club membership, and the ski vacation, and the closet full of clothes. And is that all there is to life? Is there anything that meets an inner thirst for meaning?" Friends, you don't have to meet some down and outer to have someone who is thirsty for God. All around are "up and outers," people who are successful

but who are going through a 2nd divorce. People who are struggling with kids who are on drugs. Why do you think so many athletes and actors and politicians who are at the top of the heap are drug users and alcoholics? They are trying to escape the emptiness, the utter meaninglessness and boredom of life without Christ. Any of you ever experience the emptiness of success? Friend, don't be intimidated by someone else's success. Success without Christ in your heart is empty and all the clothes and traveling and shopping in the world won't fill that emptiness.

This man had been sovereignly prepared by God. Do you see the preparation of this man's heart for the divine appointment? Do you see the stirring going on inside? Do you see his desperation? He felt distant from God's people. He's rejected, alienated, he felt different and despite his success, thirsty. There's a sense of meaninglessness. And, he had one thing going for him. This man was a true seeker. You know, there are a lot of people on the road who are asking questions inside, are asking about overcoming life's boredom. They want to get rid of their inner anxiety. They would like just once to have all the meaninglessness of the world sorted out, to know that somebody was in control, that somebody was there that was good, who loved them. That there really is a father in heaven who cares for them and for their families and for their lives.

But this man went further; he wasn't just absorbed with the questions. He was able to recognize and be open to the answer when it came running towards him in the person of Philip. It says, "Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man

reading Isaiah the prophet. 'Do you understand what you're reading, Philip asked?' 'How can I,' he said, 'unless someone explains it to me?' So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him." You know, there are 2 kinds of questioners. There are people who just love the search, they love asking questions, they love the inquiry and there are others who not only love the search but they love the finding. They not only ask the questions, but they want the answers.

The British writer G.K. Chesterton once encountered a philosopher who said, "I open my mind to truth the way a flower opens to the sun—open, open, every opening." G.K. Chesterton said, "I open my mind to truth the way I open my mouth to food, so I can bite down on something solid again." This man was interested in biting down on something solid. It's great that you have questions about Christianity, about Christ, about God, about life, about your future, about meaning. But as the answers come to you, are you willing to bite down on them when they come? This guy saw the answer coming to him in the person of Philip and he said "Come on up on the chariot, talk to me, I'm willing to listen."

And Philip was a sensitive sharer. This eunuch might have had his encounter with God years before in Jerusalem if any of the good religious people who streamed to the people had done what Philip had done, just listened to the man, heard his questions. You know, it's important for us to recognize that this man was likely a black African gentile and Philip was a Caucasian Hellenistic Jew. Philip could have said, "You know, what do I have to offer to this person who is so different than me.

Before I can engage him in conversation, I need to study the history of Ethiopia and be able to contextualize the gospel in a fashion that is acceptable to this man.

Here's my point. You know, I think sometimes a lot of evangelism training and missions training is actually disempowering for the average person. The average person says, "I don't have the technical expertise. What do I know about sharing with a Buddhist or a Jew or an African." Friend, as you're being prompted by the Spirit concerning someone who may be different than you ethnically or racially or religiously, and you're wishing to be obedient to the Spirit, do not be intimidated by your lack of knowledge of everything regarding that person's culture as if, you know, you're just going to make a big blunder of it all. The thing that wins someone is very rarely the technical knowledge of someone else's culture. Sure, in love, it's appropriate for you to learn about others and learn to speak their language; sure it is. But I have specific expertise in cross cultural evangelism because the woman who shared with me and led me to Jesus met her first Jewish person a week before she met me.

My wife Marlene grew up in a completely waspoid suburb in the west part of Cleveland where every single person was either a white Protestant or a white Catholic. She had no specific knowledge of Judaism at all. I came from the heart of New York City. I was completely different than her culturally. She did not win me by coming up with a Jewish name for Jesus. She won me the way that most people are won—by her obvious authenticity. She was the real deal as a Christian. I did

feel loved by her. I did feel accepted. I did feel like she believed what she was telling me about and she lived it. If you're the real deal, if you really care about this other person. If you're a lover, if you're kind, if you care about other people, then you don't have to read the Talmud to share the Gospel with a Jewish person, or thoroughly understand the Bhagidvagita to talk with your Hindu neighbor, or wear some Malcolm X cap to share with an African American. Just be full off Jesus.

I'm not saying it's wrong to learn. I'm not saying it's wrong to study, but sharing your faith is not primarily about mastering a technical body of knowledge. It's about Jesus shining through you, humbly, lovingly, truthly, authentically, genuinely—you can do it.

And we start with where the person is, not with where we are. Philip said, "Do you understand what you're reading?" And in verse 32, we read that "The eunuch was reading this passage of scripture: 'He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the 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.' The eunuch asked Philip, 'Tell me please who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?' Then Philip began with that very passage of scripture and told him the good news about Jesus." He started with what the Ethiopian was reading, what he was curious about, his question.

Listen, I want you to picture for a moment a raging river and on one side is a not-yet Christian seeker and on the other side the Christian witness. There are two approaches to sharing one's faith—one approach is the Christian witness yells across the river and says "Hey, friend, it's just great over here. Let me tell you how incredible it is. On this side of the river I've got peace. I know my sins are forgiven. My marriage is being put back together. I've been freed up of a lot of habits. My relationships are getting right. Friend, just swim over here because it's really good over here." That's one approach. And that's the approach that most people take. "World, come over here. We'd love to have you join us."

The other approach is the approach that Philip took. He began with where the person was. He built a bridge over the river and walked over there. "Friend, if what's causing you to ask questions is pain, let me speak into your pain. If it's a divorce, if it's an illness, if it's a broken relationship – if what's driving you to Christ is you are reaping what you've sown, let me help you with that. If what's driving you toward God is success and the emptiness and the sense of 'there's got to be more,' let me talk to that. The best communication in response to a divine appointment is beginning with where a person is and helping them across the bridge to connect with Jesus. Not just shouting "come on over, we'd love to have you," but going over and walking them across the bridge, or better yet, being the bridge over which they can walk to Christ.

And Philip told this Ethiopian the message plainly. It says, "Philip began with that very passage of scripture and told him the good news about Jesus." What did he tell him about Jesus? He probably told him that Jesus was the one from Isaiah 53 who is acquainted with grief and acquainted with pain, and that God doesn't stand aloof, he understands. He probably told this man that some of the pain in his life was the result of his own sin against God and that God sent his son to be the sin bearer, to carry away the guilt of his sin. He probably told the man that much of his inner emptiness was the result of not having a relationship with Jesus Christ. That if he was thirsty he could come to Christ and drink for Jesus said, "If anyone of you thirsts, let him come to me and drink." He probably told the man that he could roll off of himself all of the meaninglessness, all of the anxiety, all of the hopelessness that he felt, that he could roll it onto the one who was sent to save him. He told the man about Jesus and he called him to respond, to receive Christ.

We haven't finished with our divine appointment by sharing in some sort of abstract way about Christ. We must call people to a decision. What are you going to do with Jesus? Let's pray.