

RELUCTANT EVANGELIST

The opulent Titanic, 900-foot cruise ship, which sank on its maiden voyage from England to New York, caused the deaths of fifteen hundred people. The officers of the ship attempted to keep fourth class passengers locked in the lower decks so that the first class passengers could have the benefit of the lifeboats. But even then, some passengers were so concerned about their own status and comfort that they wished to have a lifeboat all to themselves, even though it meant others would perish.

Eva Hart, who survived the night of April 15, 1912, remembers when the Titanic plunged 12,000 feet to the Atlantic floor—two hours and forty minutes after an iceberg tore a 300-foot gash in the starboard side. Eva says, “I saw all the horror of its sinking, and I heard, even more dreadful, the cries of drowning people.” Twenty lifeboats and rafts were launched, but there were too few, and they were only partly filled. Most of the passengers struggled in the icy seas while those in the boats waited a safe distance away. The Titanic went under at 2:20 a.m., but only one lifeboat, No. 14, rowed back to search for survivors after the ship slipped from sight. All alone, it chased cries in the darkness, seeking and saving a precious few.

Incredibly, no other boat joined in the search and rescue. It is true that some lifeboats were already overloaded, but in virtually every other boat, those already saved rowed their half-filled boats aimlessly around in the night, listening to the cries of the lost and dying. They were afraid that unknown swimmers would cling to their craft, eventually swamping it. They were more concerned about themselves than others.

One of the most interesting narratives in the New Testament is that of the meeting of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. Philip was preaching in Samaria, and having a wonderful success for “the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake.” Acts 8:6. Multitudes were healed, and when those who had been bewitched with sorceries “believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.” Acts 8:12.

But in the height of this interest “the angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert.” Acts 8:26.

The natural inclination would be to question such an order, and to doubt if it came from the Lord. “Surely it is a mistake to leave such an interest as this,” some would say, and the people would feel that they could not possibly spare the man who had been the means of bringing them such light and blessing. “We must keep him with us to guide us in the way into which he has led us,” we can hear them say; “what shall we do if Philip leaves us?” But God would teach us that the church is not to be dependent upon any man; and also that when a minister of the Gospel has brought people into the truth, and established them, they are not to expect him to stand and hold the light for them to see by, but are themselves to be light-bearers to others.

So Philip “arose and went,” just as content and willing to go out into the desert, not knowing whom he should see or whether he should meet a single soul, as to remain and labor in the crowded city. An angel of the Lord called Philip to go to a particular place on the

road that crosses the southern desert between Jerusalem and Gaza. Once Philip was near that road, the Holy Spirit told him to approach a particular chariot traveling back to Ethiopia from Jerusalem.

“And, behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who had the charge of all her treasure, and had come to Jerusalem for to worship, was returning, and sitting in his chariot read Esaias the prophet.” Acts 8:27, 28.

See how mysteriously the Lord works, and how He times all circumstances to fit another exactly. The eunuch had been to Jerusalem to worship, but although all the apostles were there he had not received the light of the Gospel of Christ. He was devout, but uninstructed. Not in Jerusalem, “the center of the work,” with all its teachers, but in the lonely desert, he found the Lord.

And then that “accidental” meeting. How strangely it “happened” that just as the eunuch was reading aloud to himself a passage of Scripture that was dark to him, a man should come along and, overhearing him, should question him as to his knowledge, and be able and willing to enlighten him! Ah, but we know that everything had been planned beforehand. Philip was not the initiator of this evangelistic encounter. God was. Our hearts magnify the Lord’s saving work in drawing this man to himself. We do not read this story and think, “Wasn’t Philip a wonderful, clever, and bold evangelist!” Rather, we praise God. This is as it ought to be whenever we hear of a believer leading someone to faith, for then, in just the same way as in this Bible story, God is bringing two people together. We need to learn to see God’s work rather than thinking how courageous, intelligent, clear-speaking, and good we are as evangelists. I am not saying the human role is unimportant, for Philip needed to be obedient to the Spirit’s call; he needed to talk to the Ethiopian and to make the Scriptures clear to him. Yet, because of the way the story is told, we know that God is the One who is most to be praised when we read of this man’s conversion.

The angel of the Lord sent Philip just in time to meet the man at that spot. If Philip had stopped to question the Lord’s order, he would have been too late. His prompt, unquestioning obedience,—his willingness to leave a cityful of people, to go into the desert,—made him the means of giving the Gospel to one who would carry it to an entire nation. Philip left Samaria and went into the desert, to preach to all Ethiopia; but he did not know it when he started.

From this event, we may know that God is working to bring about many “accidental meetings” behind which we cannot see, and the outcome of which we never learn. The Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and if all were fully submitted to Him, fully acquainted with His voice, and prompt to move at every breathing of His Spirit, His will would be done on earth even as it is done in heaven.

The court official from Ethiopia was reading the Old Testament, and not just any portion of the Old Testament but one of the most beautiful and powerful of all the messianic prophecies. He was reading the song about the Suffering Servant who died for the sins of His people. This song, one of the most familiar passages of Scripture to Christians all through the ages, is found in Isaiah 53. The Ethiopian treasurer was reading about the suffering of Christ, and he wanted to know who it is that the prophet was describing. What an

open door, and Philip began at that passage and then explained the good news about Jesus!

We may be sure that it was not by chance that the Ethiopian was reading this Scripture. Again we would like to ask, “Why were you reading this passage of the Old Testament as you rode home in your chariot from Jerusalem? Had someone encouraged you to read it, someone you met while you were visiting in Jerusalem? Or was it simply the Holy Spirit urging your heart to read these words and wonder about them?”

“The place of the Scripture which he read was this, He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb down before His shearer, so opened He not His mouth; in His humiliation His judgment [not His good sense, but His right to a fair trial] was taken away; and who shall declare His generation? for His life is taken from the earth.” Acts 8:32, 33.

It was the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah that the Ethiopian official was reading, and when he asked of whom the prophet was speaking, “Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.” Acts 8:35.

Philip “preached unto him Jesus,” not merely about Jesus. But from the text we know that he must have told the story of Christ’s sufferings and death, for that is the one theme of the chapter. Thus we have it vividly set before us that to preach Jesus is to preach His death; we cannot know Jesus except as crucified. “Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” is the only thing necessary for anybody to know; and whoever should know it to perfection would know everything in the universe; for in Him “we have our redemption, the forgiveness of sins;” and we who were once enemies, “hath He reconciled in the body of His flesh through death.” Col. 1:14-22, R. V.

God was not reluctant regarding this man’s salvation—He was actively seeking out his soul and bringing him to salvation and new life in the Lord Jesus Christ! This man had a history before Philip witnessed to him on the desert road. God had already been at work in his life long before Philip was able to reap his harvest, a harvest that God had been preparing for just this occasion.

This reality of a history is true every time we see someone come to faith in Christ. Invariably God has been at work for a long time, drawing a person to Christ before a believer has the privilege of being a mid-wife at a new birth. When we recognize this truth of God’s long, hard labor each time He saves someone, we should be able to have a more accurate perception of our part in the process of conversion. We are not to think, “I am the man!” when we call someone to repentance or lead them in a prayer of faith for the first time.

Jesus had commanded His disciples to take the Gospel to their fellow Jews, to the Samaritans, and to the Gentiles. As we read the early chapters of Acts we find the apostles obeying the first part of this command, proclaiming Christ with boldness to their fellow Jews in Jerusalem. Yet they made no effort to go beyond their own people and reach out to non-Jews.

In Acts chapter 10, we read about what it took to get Peter, the leader of the apostles, to the point in his life where he was prepared to share the Gospel with a Gentile. We find Peter, in God’s providence, staying at the home of Simon, a tanner (9:43). Simon the tanner worked at curing and preparing animal skins so they could be used for clothing, rugs, wall

hangings, and tents. This work was considered unclean by the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, for Simon's profession required him to handle the skins of animals that were unclean according to the Law of Moses. Peter was staying in a home where all around him were reminders of the clean/unclean distinction that God had given to His people with the primary purpose of making them a nation that was set apart. Israel was set apart from the nations around it in every aspect of its life, not only in its commitment to serve God and in its public worship, but even in the kind of food the people were allowed to eat.

God had given these laws to teach His people that they were to be different from the pagan nations, that they were to be devoted to Him, that they were to be holy in all of their life. But by the New Testament period these laws had been expanded and applied to every conceivable situation so that Jews were required by their religious leaders to keep themselves totally apart from "unclean" Samaritan and Gentile "sinners."

In the home of Simon the tanner by God's providential guidance, Peter was being asked by God to think about what it means to be separate from the Gentile nations. Christ had on many occasions told Peter and his fellow apostles to go to the Samaritans and Gentiles.

God now gave a vision of an angel to Cornelius, telling him to send men to Joppa to the house of Simon the tanner (the angel even gave the house location) so they could bring Simon Peter back with them. Cornelius was not a typical pagan of the time, nor was he a typical centurion in the Roman army. He and all his family are described by Luke (10:2) as "devout and God-fearing. He gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly." He worshiped at the local synagogue, though as a Gentile he would never be invited to eat in the home of a Jew, nor would a Jew dine at his table. Yet, it is not possible to imagine an easier Gentile for Peter's first baby steps toward reaching out to the Gentiles. God was moving Peter from where he was in his attitudes toward non-Israelites and gently leading him to where he ought to be, to where he should have been long before.

While the men from Cornelius were on their way, Peter was up on the tanner's roof praying. As he prayed, it is probable that he was kneeling among animal skins, some clean and some unclean, spread out to dry on the flat roof. God showed Peter a vision that explicitly included unclean animals, and God told him to get up, kill, and eat. Peter, as usual, was slow to respond to the Lord's command or even to understand its meaning. His response, also as usual, was to protest at what the Lord wanted him to do: "Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean" (Acts 10:14). God replied to Peter that he should "not call anything impure or unclean that God has made clean" (Acts 10:15).

To make sure that on this occasion Peter understood, the Lord gave Peter the same instructions three times. Then the vision of animals was taken back up to heaven, and Peter was left to ponder its meaning.

While Peter was still reflecting on the vision, the men from Cornelius arrived, inquiring if Peter was at the tanner's house. The Holy Spirit told Peter that some men had arrived looking for him: "So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them" (Acts 10:19). The Lord assured Peter that these men had come for him in obedience to God's command. Peter was left in no doubt that God was going before him on this journey! He was being led by the hand every step of the way.

When Peter went down to meet the men, he asked why they had come looking for him, and they delivered Cornelius' invitation to him. Their reply was very carefully worded in order to assure Peter that it would be right and good for him to go with them. First, they told Peter that Cornelius, from whom they had come, was a righteous and God-fearing man. Second, they referred to the reputation Cornelius enjoyed among the Jews in Caesarea—he was highly respected by them all, and everyone knew that he was a friend of the Jews and of the synagogue. Third, they recounted for Peter the command of the angel of God to bring Peter to Cornelius' house so they “could hear what you have to say” (Acts 10:22).

When Peter arrived in Caesarea at Cornelius' house, he found a large gathering of people waiting for his arrival and for the message he brought from God. Cornelius' whole household was there, and in addition he had invited his relatives and close friends. So there was a crowd of Gentiles eager to hear from Peter. Before this assembly Cornelius, a man of authority, power, and dignity, fell in reverence at Peter's feet, for he knew that Peter was God's ambassador bringing God's Word to him. After making Cornelius stand, for he, Peter, was only a man, Peter went into the house with Cornelius to find the large and expectant group assembled there. His words to them were extraordinary in their lack of graciousness, in their insensitivity, and in the way they revealed Peter's continuing failure to understand why God wanted him there.

Try to imagine yourself as one of those assembled to listen to Peter, one who has interrupted the busy schedule of your day to make time to hear this man. You have been told that the man arriving is a messenger from God. Your highly respected centurion, friend, and relative has been visited by a fearful angel of God and was commanded to bring this man so you could hear from him God's true and sure word. But these are the first words you hear from him:

“You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?” Acts 10:28, 29.

How do you think you might have responded to being greeted like this?

Peter, in effect, told these Gentiles gathered to hear him that if it had been up to him he would not have come there. He was a Jew who did not associate with Gentiles or even visit them, and he suggested that was God's Law, for Jews equated “our law” and “God's law.” (We should note that actually God had not forbidden His people to eat with or to visit Gentiles.) Until very recently, Peter informed them, he had thought of Gentiles as impure and unclean, but now God had shown him that was wrong. So he had no objection (at last!), and here he was. But he still did not know why he was there and what he was supposed to do and say.

The book *The Greatest Generation*. It is a wonderful book about a great generation of Americans. But it talks about the racism which was rampant in the 40's and 50's, and the tremendous injustices which African Americans endured during the war. It also talks about Japanese Americans and the wrongs done to them at that time. They were herded into detention camps and lived in squalid conditions, even though they were citizens of the United States and had committed no crimes. They were also unwelcome in many churches

across the land, even though they were successful business people and often contributed more than their fair share to the prosperity of the nation.

Cornelius then recounted for Peter his encounter with the angel. Cornelius carefully mentioned everything he could that would help Peter to know that God had brought this occasion about. Cornelius was praying—clearly a customary activity for him. An angel appeared to him and commended him for his gifts to the poor and for his prayers, for God had taken note of both. The angel commanded him to send for Peter, and he was thankful that Peter had come. Peter's words lacked grace, but Cornelius' words were humble and respectful. Cornelius ended his account by reminding Peter that they were all assembled "in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us" (Acts 10:33).

There is some irony in these words, not from Cornelius, but from Luke in telling this story. What the Lord had commanded Peter to tell these Gentiles was the Gospel, the command of the Great Commission. Peter had received no other command from the Lord but this. The providential place to stay, the angel appearing to Cornelius, the vision on the rooftop, the direction from the Holy Spirit, the invitation of the Gentiles—each step on Peter's path that we have examined points to and reinforces Jesus' command to take the Gospel to the Gentiles.

After Cornelius' reminder of the Lord's command and the Lord's presence, Peter at last understood why he was there:

"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right." Acts 10:34-35.

It is to the church's shame that we have accepted, and at times even blessed, this kind of prejudice against certain groups of people. We have in our town an A. M. E. church. It stands for African Methodist Episcopal. The reason the church exists is because, to our shame, African Americans were at one time not accepted in white Methodist churches, and they were forced to form a denomination of their own. For years, we had the Methodist Church North and the Methodist Church South, because racism had divided the people.

Then Peter proclaimed the Gospel of Christ, and the Gentiles immediately responded. Peter did not have to issue an invitation, for while he was still speaking, the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Gentiles and they began to speak in tongues, just as the apostles themselves had on the Day of Pentecost. God wanted to make it abundantly clear to Peter, and to the other Jews who had come with him, that He accepted these new believers in Christ, even though they were Gentiles, even though they were not circumcised, even though they did not observe the food laws. God accepted and forgave them in Christ. God gave them His Spirit fully, just as He had given the Spirit to the leaders of the Jewish church. The Jewish believers who were present were astonished by what happened, for they had thought in their hearts, "Even if God lets a Gentile into the kingdom, surely such a man will be a second-class member!" But, no, for "the gift of the Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles" (Acts 10:45).