

A DIVINE APPOINTMENT

ACTS 8:26-40

“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.

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, was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet.

Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go near and overtake this chariot.” So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him.

The place in the Scripture which he read was this (It just happened to be a passage that foretold of Jesus, Isaiah 53:7): “He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so He opened not His mouth. In His humiliation His justice was taken away, and who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth.”

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

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?" 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." So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.

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. But Philip was found at Azotus. And passing through, he preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea."

Steve Jobs was the computer whiz who founded Apple Computers in the early days of the exploding PC industry. Jobs was stunned by the tremendous growth that his startup company experienced and realized he needed help. Jobs had a good handle on the developmental and technological side of the business, but he needed some expertise on the managerial side.

Steve Jobs decided to hire an experienced executive who could provide his budding company with some good business savvy and overall leadership.

He scheduled a trip to New York City to recruit John Sculley - at the time, a top executive at Pepsi-Cola.

Jobs spent several days trying to persuade Sculley. He extolled the potentials of Apple Computers and the computer industry. Yet, he sensed the conversation going

nowhere. He had the sinking feeling that John Sculley wasn't interested in his offer... so He made a *last ditch pitch* to sell the executive on his company...

In desperation, Steve Jobs looked John Sculley in the eye and challenged him, "Mr. Sculley, do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water, or do you want a chance to change the world?"

Later in his autobiography, John Sculley says that was the question that jarred him, and forced him to examine the direction of his life. Shortly thereafter, John Sculley left PepsiCo and joined Apple Computers.

This AM, I want to challenge you in the same way Jobs challenged Sculley, "Do you want to spend the rest of your life on superficial stuff - selling sugared water, or do you want a chance to change the world?"

Since becoming a Christian I've discovered the most immense thrill on earth is to be used by God to lead another person to Jesus. Base jumping, sky-diving, bungee cords, hang-gliders - are tame in comparison.

When we cooperate with the Holy Spirit in someone else's salvation we're not only changing the world, we're populating heaven. In comparison, making money, and hobbies, and sports, and business taste like *bottled boredom*. Do you want to invest the only life you've got - your time, energy, resources on sugared water - *or are you interested in changing the world?*

If you like living on the cutting edge. If you enjoy high-stakes, spine-tingling, risk-taking, adrenalin-pumping, incredibly significant activity seek no further.

Join the grand adventure - be a witness for Jesus.

In Acts 8 Philip takes up the challenge to change the world. His story teaches us three important truths...

First, **lost people matter to God**. Second, **God maneuvers His people to reach lost people**. Third, Philip **maximizes the opportunity God gives him**.

Here's our outline:

what **matters**,
how we're **maneuvered**,
and ways we can **maximize** our opportunities.

First, we need to be reminded that **lost people matter to God**. In the chapter prior to Acts 8, the Church had experienced explosive growth. The church at Jerusalem no longer grows by *addition* - it *multiplies*.

Now in Acts 8 the same phenomenal growth occurs in Samaria. There are now tens of thousands of believers in Jerusalem - thousands more in Samaria.

You'd think God would have enough to worry about... Yet, despite the colossal crowds in these two strategic centers, the Lord sees an African diplomat from Ethiopia, no doubt with his entourage, on a deserted road headed in the opposite direction. He's seeking salvation. It prompts God to dispatch a disciple named Philip to share the Gospel with this Ethiopian.

That God sent Philip was amazing. If you read the first half of Chapter 8 you discover Philip was the man spearheading the revival in Samaria - *the point person*.

God was using Philip to initiate the work. Wouldn't it be a better utilization of personnel to keep the general in Samaria, and send a private to this lone traveler?

Apparently not! God had such love for the Ethiopian he removed Philip from the action in Samaria and sent him to one solitary seeker on a deserted country road.

It proves how much God loves each individual.

You might be a number to the bank, or an ID code at school, but when God looks into the crowd He recognizes each one of us personally. It's true, *people matter to God*. As Augustine once put it, "*God loves each one of us as if there were only one of us to love.*"

Remember in Luke 15 Jesus reminds us that God is like a shepherd with 100 sheep, yet if just a single sheep strays, he leaves the 99 to search for the one.

Obviously, God cares about each of us specifically!

Realize, **Jesus never met a person He didn't love.**

He never saw a person He did not value. When He visited Matthew's party He even rubbed shoulders with seedy people like tax collectors and prostitutes...

These were the kind of people you and I might be nervous around - *people who kept the tattoo parlor in business*. They had funny colored hair and pierced body parts. These were the disenfranchised - the down and out. We're talking the *seriously strayed sheep*...

Everyone of them mattered to Jesus!

When the religious crowd criticized Jesus for being interested in the underbelly of society, He answered their

objections, "Those who are well do not need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

Hey, Jesus cares for the person who makes us uncomfortable... *The guy who drinks, and smokes, and goes to wild parties... the girl who cusses like a sailor, and only speaks the name of Jesus when she's swearing... the person who's sugar and spice when you're around, then cuts you down behind your back...*

Jesus died for the neighbor with the barking dog...

The driver in the car who's slowing you down...

Your rival on the team who's after your position...

The clerk at the check-out who takes your money...

The co-worker or classmate who's a nuisance...

Jesus cares for the people on the outside of your circle - *those who don't look, act, talk, or think like you.*

One author writes, "You have never looked eyes with another human being who isn't valuable to God."

Jesus died for everyone you've ever met. People matter to God, and they need to matter to us. I don't want to reach heaven, and hold the nail-scarred hand without having cared about the folks He died to save.

First, lost people matter to God, but second, God maneuvers His people to reach lost people.

It's interesting, that God uses people to reach people. We might take that fact for granted, but when you step back from

the situation it's really quite amazing that He would rely on such inefficient means.

He could've assigned the task to angels. I'm sure angelic messengers would be much more consistent, and clear, and confident witnesses than you and I.

I can't picture an angel having to muster up his courage, or grope for the right words. Angels never get sweaty palms, or a lump in their throat - *that's us!*

Yet God wants to use the useless. He's planned it so that **"He won't do it without us, and we can't do it without Him."** We are His messengers, and God has no alternates. *The world's destiny is in our hands.*

It's when you realize how much people matter to God, then people will begin to matter to you.

There'll be an ache in your heart when you see the people Jesus died to heal confused and in pain.

And when people begin to matter to you like they matter to God, His Spirit will begin to maneuver you into positions where you can be a strategic witness.

Notice, **Philip had an ear to the heavens.** Yes, God was doing a wonderful work in Samaria, but Philip was open to whatever and wherever God might send him.

If I'd been in the midst of a glorious revival and God asked me to journey to a lonely highway to witness to a solitary man - I might object. **"God, this is my chance to be famous. If I stay here I can pastor a mega-church."**

But when God whispered in Philip's ear he was quick to obey. Philip was flexible, and open, and compliant.

Philip was easily molded to the will of God. *All that mattered to Phil was what mattered to God* - and that was the people or person God wanted him to reach.

Perhaps you remember the Mercedes-Benz commercial that showed one of their cars colliding into a concrete wall during a safety test. There's minimal damage to the crash dummy. The announcer asks an engineer why the company has never enforced the patent on their shock-absorbing car body. The design has been emulated by car companies worldwide.

The engineer looks into the camera and replies, "**Because in life, some things are just too important not to share.**" This is how we should feel about the Gospel.

Nothing should get in the way of our mission.

Our whole world - *our goals, schedules, plans for the weekend, leisure activities, work ambitions* - every aspect of life should revolve around the wonderful task of getting the Good News to the people around us.

When God knows my central aim is to reach the people He loves, then He'll begin to maneuver my life to reach the people who are ready to receive His love.

I can assume God is actively making arrangements.

The server that waits on my table - or the Uber driver who gives me a lift - or the neighbor who moves in next-door - or the co-worker assigned to my team - has been sent to me from God because God knows I care.

It's said, "**When men have the will to speak of their Lord they find no shortage of opportunities to do so.**"

Notice God speaks to Philip in verse 26 to go to Gaza... Then He speaks to him again in verse 29 to go near and overtake the chariot... Like a director on the set God is nudging, and whispering, and pointing, and moving Philip into place. He can do the same with us!

I think we turn a corner in our Christian lives when we realize the Holy Spirit can oversee our thinking. The Holy Spirit can and does implant thoughts in our head.

On occasion He'll give you specific, spontaneous, supernatural directions. At other times He guides our thoughts more naturally. Later, we find out that the thought we had wasn't just a good idea, but His input.

Author Loyd Ogilvie writes, "The adventure begins when we love the Lord with our minds and dare to believe that He can invade the tissues of our forebrain to guide our thinking, imagination, and will. He becomes the Lord of our intelligence, the generator of possibilities we never dreamed could be. Couple that with the will to act on what He guides, and you have the secret of exciting living." Phillip was always open to a divine appointment. That's how we need to live.

A couple of years ago, I was scheduled to speak at a marriage conference in South Florida. A hurricane canceled the conference, and thus, changed my plans.

I remember waking up the next morning at home bummed about the "missed opportunity" - when the phone rang. It was a desperate call from a neighbor.

She told me about her adult child who was having problems, and wanted to talk to someone about God. She asked me if I was available. *And now I was.*

What I'd interpreted as a "*missed opportunity*" was really a "*midcourse correction.*" The divine dispatch knows what He's doing! God is our air-traffic controller.

All too often what kills our motivation to witness is that we assume we'll be rejected before we ever open our mouth. What a tragic miscalculation.

Yes, there've been times when I've shared about Jesus, and gotten a harsh reaction - *but more so, my efforts have been respected.* I've spoken to folks I thought would be hostile to the Gospel; but afterwards they thanked me for caring enough to speak up.

I believe people are more open to the Gospel today than at any other time in history. *People don't want to be beat over the head with a Bible* - but if you love them and lead them gently to Christ they're receptive.

People today are hungry for the truth!

I like telling the story of a young man I picked up hitchhiking. He needed to go to the intersection of Rockbridge Rd. and Memorial Dr. On the way I shared the Lord with him, and as he opened the door to leave, I asked him if he would like to pray and commit his life to Jesus Christ. He said rather matter-of-factly, "**Sure.**"

The whole conversation had lasted no more than five minutes, and I was thinking, "**Lord, this is too easy. Did I leave something out? I need to be sure he's serious.**"

So I asked him again if he understood this was a commitment he was making to live for Jesus. He started to get agitated with my hesitance to pray...

Finally, I asked him, "Now are you really sincere? Do you believe in Jesus with all your heart?" I'll never forget his answer. He looks me square in the eye and says, "Well, hell yea!" He made his point! I stopped grilling him and we prayed... I'm just saying folks are a lot more receptive to the Gospel than we assume!

Realize, when the Lord nudges us in a direction it's because He's at work on the other end of the connection. He's maneuvering you and working in your heart, *but likewise He's at work in the heart of the other person and preparing them for the rendezvous.*

Look at this Ethiopian, when Philip boards the chariot the man is reading the Bible. He'd gone to Jerusalem in search of God - and left with more questions than answers. The only thing he'd gotten, of any value, was the Gideon Bible he'd taken from his hotel room.

Now he's got it open, and he's reading Isaiah 53 - an incredible prophecy of the saving work of Jesus. God is at work on his end, just as he was working on Philip.

This is what makes being a witness so exhilarating.

Yes, at times it's scary. It's a little risky. You can get butterflies. But when you obey the Lord and reach out to the person who God has put in your path, you are participating in a truly spiritual, supernatural event!

Be a witness and you get to live a miracle - ***and that's more living than most people do in a lifetime!***

Missionary, William Carey, use to say, "Expect great things *from* God, attempt great things *for* God."

Why sit on the sidelines? Why not get into the game? Why let fear rob you of the enjoyment of being part of a venture in faith and see what God might do!

Listen to these words by author, Sam Shoemaker...

"I stay near the door. I neither go too far in, nor stay too far out, the door is the most important door in the world - it's the door through which people walk when they find God. There's no use to my going way inside, and staying there, when so many are still outside and they, as much as I, crave to know where the door is.

And so many people only find a wall where a door ought to be. They creep along the wall like blind people, with outstretched, groping hands, feeling for a door, knowing there must be a door, yet they never find it... so I stay near the door. The most tremendous thing in the world is for people to find that door - **the door to God**. The most important thing anyone can do is to take hold of one of those blind, groping hands, and to put it on the latch - the latch that only clicks and opens to the person's own touch.

People die outside that door, as starving beggars die on cold nights in cruel cities in the dead of winter - die for want of what is within their grasp. Those on the inside of the door live - live because they have found it. Nothing else matters compared to helping those outside find it, and open it, and walk in, and find **Him**... so I stay near the door." *Do you stay near that door?*

We need to understand that **lost people matter to God - that God wants to maneuver us into position to reach those people - and finally, that we need to maximize the opportunities God gives us.**

And notice *the three ways* Philip takes advantage and makes the most of this supernatural encounter...

First, in verse 29, **he overtakes the chariot.**

What I picture here is Philip having to run alongside the chariot for a few hundred feet. The Ethiopian was an important dignitary, an official ambassador of an African government. He was not about to speak to just any ole passer-by. Philip had to prove his sincerity and work to earn a hearing. He had to be persistent.

A friend once told me about a salesman in his company who was constantly earning the top awards. The fellow was a soft-spoken, mild-mannered man and the other salesman wondered how he did it.

One month at the sales meeting he was asked the secret of his success. The super-salesman said simply, **"Make the calls, make the calls, make the calls."** Then he sat back down. His secret was persistence.

And the same is true in reaching our friends with the Gospel. You don't try once and give up. God may bring us in contact with the *right person*, but when we first meet them it may not be the *right time*. We've got to be patient, and work to stay involved in the person's life.

Look what happens next...

In verse 31, after some brief dialogue, the Ethiopian invites Philip into his chariot. Philip's persistence pays off - he's now onboard. The second way to maximize an opportunity is **to witness onboard a person's life.**

It's true, folks are open to the Gospel - but they're more receptive to it, when it's presented by people they know and trust. People today can be skeptical. We're a cynical society - that's why **they'll be more receptive to the message if they know the messenger.**

And this is why in my opinion, door-to-door may no longer be the best approach to personal evangelism.

I read of a woman in Long Island, New York who snapped when a Jehovah Witness came to her door.

When she opened the door she stuck the nose of a shotgun in the guy's face, and started screaming, **"I'm sick of you people coming here!"** Door-to-door witnessing may work with some people, but not everyone receives an uninvited visitor with open arms.

Last week, I was driving down the expressway, when I saw a man on the overpass. He was jumping up and down, and waving his arms, like something was on fire.

I thought perhaps somebody was injured. Then I noticed his sign and his shirt. It was a Bible verse.

He was trying to attract attention to a Scripture, and hoping people would look it up - present the Gospel.

I'm not against these kinds of approaches. From T-shirts, to bumper stickers, to John 3:16 signs at sporting events - these gimmicks are harmless as long as they're not a substitute for

the most effective method - that is, **coming onboard a person's life**. Statistics show 85% of committed Christians came to Christ through a friend's witness - *someone they knew!*

Philip **overtakes a chariot**, but then he **undertakes a relationship**. If you can first prove to a person you really care for them, and cultivate a friendship with them - *that they're not just another potential notch on your Bible cover...* then when the time is right they'll be much more open to the message you present.

It's been said, **"Before folks will care about what you know they need to know that you care."** When you take the time and make the effort to build a genuine friendship - then by your actions you're proving you live what you believe. When a lost person sees firsthand how Christ has made a difference in your life, they're quicker to desire the same change in their own lives.

Joe Aldrich says it best, **"Christians are to be the good news before they share the good news."**

It reminds me of a former alcoholic named *"Joe."*

Before his conversion he was a derelict, a wino, but when Jesus came into his life he was made brand new.

The love of Christ just oozed from Joe.

He started working at the downtown mission and did whatever he was asked. No task was too low for Joe. He would wipe up vomit, and clean out toilets. He loved the street people, and tried to meet their needs.

One night the chaplain finished his usual salvation message, when a convicted drunk ran to the altar, crying, "Oh God, make me like Joe, make me like Joe."

The chaplain thought the fellow should be corrected.

He said, "Sir, it would be better if you prayed, '*make me like Jesus*'." The man looked up with a puzzled expression, and asked, "Is Jesus anything like Joe?" How's that for a man with a powerful witness!

It's a truth, **When your life is like Jesus; then the people around you will want Jesus in their life!**

Finally, notice that Philip not only *overtakes* the Ethiopian, and *boards* his chariot, but there comes a point when Phillip **opens his mouth and speaks.**

He *cultivates* a friendship to *articulate* the truth.

Read verse 35, "Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him."

Building a relationship and living out your witness are both important, but there comes a point when you need to present a verbal witness. You need to study and prepare now, so that at just the right time you'll be able, as Philip did, to preach Jesus to an inquisitive soul.

Overtake the chariot, be persistent - cultivate a relationship, be personal - but then there comes a point when you need to articulate the truth, **be vocal.**

There's really no point to building relationships, and reaching out in love, if we don't love someone enough to tell them the truth. It's sad, but true, "Many Christians are like the Arctic River - frozen over at the mouth." We need to thaw out

our frozen tongues and be ready to give a reason for the hope that's within us.

It's when you open your mouth that the excitement builds. You can run alongside the chariot, even climb on board, and your pulse never rises. But the rush comes - the buzz begins - when you open your mouth!

Read this conversation and put yourself in Philip's sandals. *The back and forth - give and take - questions and answers...* together the two men dive into the Scripture and Philip leads the Ethiopian to Jesus...

Philip never gets pushy. He simply tells him about Jesus, and lets the traveler draw his own conclusions.

As the conversation winds down, what a thrill it must've been when the Ethiopian looks Philip in the eye and asks, *"What hinders me from being baptized?"*

I imagine Philip had to hold back his joy so that he could answer the question. He told him in verse 37, *"If you believe with all your heart, you may"* - and the guy replied, *"I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."*

Verse 39 tells us that after Ethiopian's baptism Philip was *"caught away"* by the Holy Spirit to Azotus. He was miraculously transported some 35 miles away.

Apparently, God used Phillip for rapture practice... *But maybe there's some symbolism in this picture...*

Whenever I've had the privilege of leading a person to Christ I've always walked away on cloud nine! It's definitely an *enrapturing* experience. It's a jubilation.

Impacting a person's life for eternity is the most *spectacular* experience I know. "The only thing better than going to heaven is taking somebody with you."

It's no surprise to me that in 1 Thessalonians 2:19 Paul says the person who leads others to Christ will one day receive "*a crown of rejoicing.*" How fitting!

Leading other people to Jesus brings joy - now and forever. Today, if you want to recapture the joy in your Christian life; then get off the sidelines and be a player in the game. I've heard it said, "If a man has a soul, and he has - and if that soul can be won or lost for eternity, and it can - then the most important thing in the world is to bring that man to Jesus Christ!"

There is a Palestinian Christian who owns a gift shop on the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem. Over the years she's given away thousands of dollars to help the poor in her neighborhood, and she consistently shares the Gospel.

Recently, the lady shared her motive with an interviewer, "God did not place me in this world just to take up space. It's not enough just to go along. God wants me to make a difference where I can."

And the same is true for us.

Here's the million dollar question... **Are you just taking up space, or are you making a difference?**

In conclusion, let me ask you the question we started with - the question Steve Jobs used to jar John Sculley... "Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water, or do

you want a chance to change the world?" We change the world, *one person at a time*, when we share the good news of Jesus.

Here's my challenge to you, the next time a *divine appointment* occurs - whether it's at the soccer game, or in the supermarket, or in the break room at work - don't let it pass. Seize the day. Open your mouth!

People **matter** to God. He **maneuvers** us to reach lost people. And He wants us to **maximize** our opportunities. The only question left is, *are we willing?*