

**Sermon preached by Mr. L. R. Broome, Pastor,
at Bethesda chapel, Southampton,
on Lord's Day afternoon, 9th December, 1984**

Text: *"And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest? And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him" (Acts 8. 30, 31)*

The remarkable circumstances surrounding this meeting are known to us all. It is a matter for individual examination of our own hearts as to the question, "Understandest thou what thou readest? How can I, except some man should guide me?" What a spirit this manifests in the heart of this man, the Ethiopian. His actions are under the coverage of the prayer of Solomon years before when the temple was sanctified, and Solomon's long prayer was made that if any strangers not of Thy people should come and worship towards this temple, then "hear Thou in heaven Thy dwelling place: and when Thou hearest, forgive." That prayer is now being answered for our information and profit. Not that this is the only case, but this is the one that stands out pre-eminently from all those miles away: that the Ethiopian eunuch, evidently a man of ability, should be reading a vital chapter. Not that all chapters are not vital, but this one in particular, the fifty-third of Isaiah, was the one that he was reading *at the time*. We talk of coincidences. Well, let us; there are things which happened simultaneously and they do bear the mark of being coincidental. This is so in nature and everyday life. It can also be in grace and in the Spirit of God's teaching and purpose. These are very important things for us to notice, not just label them as a coincidence as we would a natural thing, but see in them a blessed, divine overruling which is a much safer, sounder and

blessed word to use – overruling. The purposes of God co-ordinated on our behalf. Things just worked together in such a strange, unasked for manner (for the eunuch had never asked for this as far as the scripture tells us). But there is a remarkable difference in that these two came together, not in the temple, from which the eunuch had come, or the house of God to which he had gone, but in the desert. This is plain in the same scripture, “Arise and go toward the south,” says the angel to Philip, “Which is desert.”

The first point is the command to the Lord’s servants to go into a desert. There is no prospect of hope naturally of anything of a spiritual nature, whereas had it been, “Go into Jerusalem,” or even, “Go back to your own city in Ethiopia,” but no, it was in a waste, howling wilderness. Not in a waste, howling condition, but in a place where it was most unlikely that God would co-ordinate and bring together a blessed purpose. And when we have such things in our lives (which we do), how beautiful they appear. And what cause we have to thank the Lord that they do, and that steps and hearts are guided to these particular, mighty, important events by a single incident or the passing of a single word. Thus, whilst we believe not in chance or such things as that, we do believe in the overruling hand of the Lord in providence and in grace. And where the two come together, what a cause there is to thank the Lord for such a blessing. And if we are blessed, it is not something that will pass with the hour. It is something that we shall look back to; it will bear upon it a particular stamp, have in it a particular purpose which will have ripened and matured and come to a head. As Cowper says in his hymn,

“His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;

The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.”

(Gadsby’s 320)

The unspeakable grace and ability in those words of the hymnwriter which have long been and still are appreciated, and it is our mercy that we are fixed upon such a rock as this, and can hold fast to such a truth as this in a day where there is so much unrest and instability and uncertainty, as the apostle warns us, “Being driven about by every wind of doctrine”; there are so many like the leaves in autumn blown hither and thither according to the current. It is this that stabilises and settles a soul and gives spiritual settlement. Says another hymnwriter,

“Now I have found the ground wherein
My anchor, hope, shall firm remain.”

(Gadsby’s 96)

And upon this grace there is rest and security.

Now surrounding this incident is a score of other incidents. We might, if this were the place to do it, trace the eunuch leaving his home. Why? We might ask where he obtained the book or the scroll from which he was reading. We might ask why he went to Jerusalem to worship. We might ask why he opened on such a chapter, which was not historical or interesting to the carnal mind, and one which a person would very readily, not to say willingly, turn over from and say, “I cannot understand this.” And it starts with such a question that I cannot possibly go any further with it: “Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?” And over the page goes the natural mind, making excuse to turn away from it. For it is not an unknown thing for those who fear God to feel so sad and cast down in their

hearts that they have to find something simple. They say, "If the body and mind and heart are weary and tired, I cannot pursue this now." It is a sad time with thee if it is, "I will look for something more simple." This is not an unusual thing: one finds in their life that there are those questions which surround the Lord's gracious work that we have to say of them, the more we look into them, the more beauty they reflect, and they could not possibly be other than inspired by the Holy Spirit to record. The disadvantages are recorded exactly the same way as the advantages: the trial is recorded in exactly the same way as the blessing. We are not just told that Philip met the eunuch; we are not just told that the eunuch was riding in a chariot; we are told where they met and how Philip took the unusual step of advancing or walking through the desert toward this moving chariot. "Go near, and join thyself to this chariot," was the command that was given to him. And this he obeyed.

And the next thing is this obedience: working God's work, going His way on the bare command. By faith. We may well say that it was by faith that Philip joined himself to this chariot. He had had a solemn disappointment not long before in the case of Simon and this man had proved to be a strange character, not nearly so clear as was the Ethiopian, and Simon had asked for the laying on of hands and had offered money for it. "Thy money perish with thee," said Peter, who had come down later with John.

Now as for the question, Philip used the right word. He heard him reading, so evidently he was reading out loud, strange thing to do with his soldiers with him no doubt, and he was reading aloud for Philip heard him reading. Philip knew the deep significance of the chapter. Philip now had had his eyes opened to see what this chapter meant, for he had been a witness of the sacred scene of the Lamb being delivered to the slaughter, and

standing before His shearers, dumb. He knew this Jesus of the fifty-third of Isaiah. He had been instructed in his subject and he was a fitted teacher as well as a fit one, and this was God's provision for him that he should come to this spot at this particular time when this particular chapter was being read. Remember that he had no thoughts whatever of this baptism which followed. He was quite unaware until Philip "Preached unto him Jesus," of this new command which the Lord had given His church. But the question or the thought upon our minds is more particularly this: that he said "How can I?" Now this indicates willingness to learn. What a remarkable thing it is when there is a willingness to learn. "How can I?" "I would if I could understand what I am reading, but how can I?" We can see what is meant by it, that unless he had some man to guide him, he could not understand. To come back to what we were saying this morning therefore, there was a knowledge. He was reading but he did not understand – which is very significant and very much to the point of the necessity of God's gift to the church to give the Holy Spirit to them that ask. And it is this which is necessary to us each, and without which we shall dwell in darkness. We shall not understand, and we may read and re-read and still not understand.

So that God's purpose ripened and that in the most unusual surroundings – and it only ripened to one man. As far as the Scripture tells us there was no other person blessed in this desert scene than the Ethiopian eunuch. It was him and him alone. And the word which he was reading was the word that was sent to him and it was the word that was opened to him at the time when he needed the teaching. How blessed, I repeat, therefore, when we say "O, I wish I could understand," or, "How can I understand?" This not only implies but also proves our lack of knowledge and ignorance of divine things. We may run through any chapter in

the Bible and not understand it. You may go into almost secular matters in the Bible and historical matters in the Bible and not understand them. We have lately been speaking of the captivity and the wonderful way those men there were blessed and used of God, and we may read that and not understand it, not see the hand and purpose of God. And therefore it puts upon this place: "How can I?" or to go back to the book of Job, "What I see not, show Thou me," a prayer for a gracious unfolding of the word of God in Scripture. Not to approach it as we would something that we could confidently command knowledge of, which we can in natural things according to what natural ability we have got. But when we come to the Word of God we dare not approach it and say we are going to understand it from beginning to end, we will master it. No, it is revealed truth that we need, and this revelation is comforting. O yes, we must not make a distinction where there is not one. There is a difference here, but comforting is it to solve a problem and to solve a natural pressure and to seek to understand that which comes in everyday life that may long have puzzled us and yet the answer is found; there is a comfort in knowledge; it does not lead to pride but it leads to a comfortable understanding and this applies to many things that are not, of course, of a spiritual nature.

When you come to understand a spiritual point, as we were speaking this morning of this strange scene at the sepulchre where they understood not, though they had been told that it would happen, yet they understood not really what the resurrection meant until it was displayed before their very eyes in the latter part of Luke, or where Jesus revealed Himself to Thomas and showed him His hands and feet, and gave him a clear demonstration of the very thing that had been foretold in the Scripture: "They pierced My hands and My feet." In this Scripture takes the pre-eminence, and Scripture is vital; not any other source will God use to

confirm belief in His deity. "How can I?" Now you may not be a stranger to this feeling when you come to the house of God, and you hear different things and say, "I have never heard that before," and you feel at a complete loss. You know other things that you have learnt and how you have learnt them, but when it comes to truth, just to contain it to this one great word, "Truth," and you feel at a complete loss, is this not a fitting word, "How can I?" Now if this springs (as it did in this case, it must have done), from a Spirit-taught heart, for this man was not here at this time and God's angel had not sent Philip on this errand for nothing. Here was a bringing together of those things which ended in this: "How can I?" And if in life's pathway it has been or is our mercy to come to this place and it would be acknowledged by that very word, "We cannot understand but we want to understand," then how real it is. It sets before us the fact that we cannot teach ourselves, that we want a man to guide us, that we want the explanation from the Lord via whomsoever He may send. And is not this His appointed way? There is no clearer evidence than this in the Scripture: all Scripture is given for this purpose. It was Paul's word to Timothy, it is the Lord's word to His church: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable," advantageous. It is profitable for four things the apostle names: doctrine (who wants doctrine?), reproof, correction and instruction. And the ultimate purpose of these four (or any one of them) is that the man of God – no other would desire it or need it, nor would it be the purpose of God to bestow it upon any other – the man of God might be truly or completely or perfectly furnished unto all good works. Therefore Timothy had his gracious authority to stick fast by the Word of God: "Hold fast to that which is committed unto thee." And it has ever been the same. Depart from it, introduce a sideline or a heresy, and you are completely lost. But hold fast to it, and you are safe. This is not merely an exhortation you would expect but one that God ensures.

Once He begins His work it is most mysterious how He carries it on. There may be blank spaces seemingly, and dark times and deep trials; there may be a realisation of mistakes and taking a wrong course or whatever other thought one might have about it, there is this one return, the one point, and that is the Scripture. What saith the Scripture? O, "How can I?"

I have said that this is a happy place to be brought into, and it is. I can wish no better blessing for the generation following, that they should come to this place where they feel they want to know but they cannot, do not know without they are taught. Now if the Word of God did not hold out encouragement to such and point out the way to this understanding, they would be at a complete loss, and it is when they depart from this narrow path of seeking the truth that they get into "Bypath Meadows" or some other such place of difficulty. Now, the fifty-third of Isaiah is not a long chapter is it? It was in Stephen's apology in an earlier chapter that dealt solely with the history of Israel. Stephen ran through the whole of Israel's experience, but the eunuch was not reading that. He was not reading the second of Acts – it was not written then. He was not reading whatsoever to do with the promised blessing in the second of Acts which comes from the Old Testament. He was reading from the Old Testament. Therefore do not despise it or think that it is something effete and finished with: it is not. It is a part of the new as much as the new is derived from the old. And therefore if it should be picking and choosing then there is something wrong. But it comes to this: "How can I?" He was on the right ground, and he was in the Old Testament and he was in one of the sacred chapters of the Old Testament and he was reading it aloud and he was faced with the question by a total stranger, "Understandest thou what thou readest?" Now that was the work of the Holy Spirit, the guiding hand of God to an individual: in an unusual place and an unusual circumstance but

mark this: *that he was in the way of obedience* or under the coverage of the prayer of Solomon, "A stranger from afar." He did not know it, or he may never have known it. It is not told us but was quite within his compass to have read about the dedication of Solomon's temple, but whether he had placed himself under that blessed portion of Solomon's prayer we do not know; but we do know this, that we can put him there and we can say that he was there; he had come "For the worship," and the prayer was (and prayer does not age – Solomon's prayer was still current in heaven) and the answer came. And prayer is still current in heaven. Prayer on your behalf by many or one. Parents' prayers for their children; pastors' prayers for their people, be it what it may, a sister's prayer for a sister, a brother's prayer for a brother, yes, within the confines of your own family there may be current prayer in existence in heaven for your spiritual welfare. On the other hand there may be none, but that does not alter God's purpose. And thus it comes about that these two meet in these particular circumstance.

So what is understanding? And how did Philip discharge his responsibility? What an amazing word it is that "He preached unto him Jesus." He was right on the mark; he could not speak to him of any other person. He could not bring Abraham forth, David, Jacob, or any of the patriarchs; none of them fitted this particular chapter. He had no alternative, but he was instructed of the Spirit and this was his subject: Jesus. How many can see it today, and have seen it and know it? But do they understand? Now, one of the points of this chapter is this, that the Lord had laid upon Him the iniquity of us all. This is one of the great teachings of the fifty-third of Isaiah, the laying of iniquity upon this Lamb. What was this if it was not the great purpose of God in the forgiveness of sin? He was the Sin-bearer: sin was imputed to Him. There was nothing that man could do, nothing that man

would want to do. A total impossibility to the creature, but the imputation of guilt to this Lamb of God was one of the things of this chapter that he was reading. And this constitutes *the* great thing that first of all the sinner has to ask himself when he is convicted of his sin. "How can I come to that point where I approach Him?"

"My soul looks back to see
The burdens Thou didst bear,
When hanging on the accursed tree,
And hopes her guilt was there."

(Gadsby's 125)

That is one of the verses you can sing. You cannot sing every verse, and you often have to alter the tense and the pronoun when you are singing – and do so by all means to be honest with yourself. That is one of the great things, but be careful in this and remember this, that if your soul *does* look back to see the burdens Christ hath borne, there is the eye of faith there to see that He did bear burdens, that when He came out from the garden of Gethsemane He bore in His holy soul what He never bore when He went into the garden of Gethsemane. He came out burdened. God had imputed and laid upon Him; it was a transaction between God and God. It was the removal of sin from the Lord's people in their entirety (and they were only known to the Father) and laid upon the Lord Jesus. So his question was a tremendous one, it was not superficial – neither will yours be when the Lord brings you to look back to the burden that Christ did bear, and this is what makes the Scripture so vital, because it is revealed in the Scriptures in type and shadow and actual – to us, but it was not to the Jews. All they had was a scapegoat. And that scapegoat typically bore the sins of Israel, but only typically, and that goat was led away into the wilderness and set free by a faithful man

who could be trusted, so that it did not find its way back again into the herd from which it was taken. The other goat was slaughtered, and its blood was shed.

Now see where the eunuch was guided to read. How many times do we have to ask the Lord to guide us to what to read? Or do we just pick it up at random? Both. And there is blessing in both, and it is this that constitutes the secret of this here. Why was he reading? Was he reading through the Old Testament? Some tell us that they have read the Bible through twenty or thirty times. Some tell us they make a practice of reading it through each year. Well, if it is laid upon their minds to do so, all well and good. But if it is not, all well and good. It is the Scripture, and that opening of something under God's direction for your profit in reading is as comforting to you as if you had decided at the beginning of the year to read a chapter or two chapters at a time day after day and dwell upon the same theme in an historical way. That is a matter for individual exercise. But when it comes to this, and the Lord sends the message at the appropriate time and for the appropriate person, then the subject is Jesus. And that is all we are told: "Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus." I suppose there have as many sermons been preached from that text as any, upon this subject, Jesus. "Understandest thou what thou readest?" "How can I?" What, just with regard to this one word, Jesus? Yes. "Where shall I find Him?" you may say. All through the Scriptures. "All through the Scriptures?" Yes. "Surely not!" Yes. "Jesus in the ark, Noah?" Why, what a blessed type, shadow. What a sweet account of that dove and how she found no place to rest her feet and flew back with her homing instinct to that window of the ark and Noah put forth his hand and pulled her in. Says the hymnwriter,

“Thus my spirit longs to prove
Rest in Christ, the Ark of grace.”

(Gadsby’s 356)

Now with such thoughts as these (and I had not thought to go on this line at all), what teaching there is in these Old Testament accounts as revealed by the Holy Spirit and brought into use by Him – in the gospel! So let us go on with our reading, for who can tell a prophet may not yet be sent to us in our desert journey? We shall know him by his preaching.

Amen.