

Hearts Aflame: A Passion for Souls, for people need the Lord ... Acts 8:2-8, 26-40

The book of Acts is a spiritual travelogue – we move from A to B to C and a few places in-between! Sometimes, it all seems so fast, it's a little bit hairy at times, a bit scary at other times; the foot is down hard on the pedal; it leaves us breathless, we have some catching up to do. This is faith in overdrive!

Ever wondered why it all seems so hectic? I reckon these guys have a real sense of urgency about them, they're chomping at the bit, they're living their lives on the raw edge of faith, they want to push back the boundaries, they are fanatically keen to win their world for Jesus Christ. And they succeeded! In thirty years they turned their world upside down!

These men were just plain vanilla folks – we know from Acts 4:13 that they were 'unschooled, ordinary men' – one look at their CV and you'd think twice about taking them on board; Luke goes on to inform us that the reason why God used them so spectacularly was that 'these men had been with Jesus.' To me, that is the secret ... they had been with Jesus.

Who am I? I'm a nobody. What am I? I'm a nothing – but the Lord Jesus is everything! When our lives are motivated by his love, when our hearts have felt the sheer thrill of

marvellous grace, when our eyes have caught a vision of a world without Jesus, God can use us. Maybe I should say, God *will* use us!

You see, to quote the song often sung by Steve Green: **People need the Lord!**

That song was birthed in 1983 in Nashville, TN - the two guys who penned the lyrics were out for a bite of lunch one day. Their waitress in the restaurant was pleasant enough, but she seemed sad and lonely. There was something etched on her face. That's when both men had a look around the restaurant and there were so many people with that empty, hollow look in their eyes. They finished their meal - and, as they went out to their car, they turned and said to one another: 'You know, people need the Lord.'

Another old gospel song says: The need of the world is Jesus! My dear friend, Stephen, from Ghana, often said, with tears running down his ebony cheeks: 'Brother Sam, Africa needs Jesus.'

For us, that's what we need to realise: people desperately need the Lord; if we want to see the Lord turn the tide of evil in our land, if we're looking to poke holes in the inky black darkness, then we need to be living and walking in the light, we need to be like the

early church and be men and women with a passion for souls.

That's what Philip had! We see him in Acts 6 where he has a passion to serve; well, right here in Acts 8, he has an all-consuming passion for souls. He has a burden on his heart and mind. He has what the Irish missionary to India's young women had ... Amy Carmichael, she pleaded with the Lord: 'O for a passionate passion for souls.'

He's the kind of guy who goes to bed at night and wakes up in the morning with a tear stained pillow – that puts him in the same mould as the saintly pastor from St Peter's Church in Dundee, Robert Murray McCheyne. Why? Because he was pleading with the Lord to save men and women. His was a ministry, as Fanny Crosby put it, to 'rescue the perishing'. It was the Methodist revivalist preacher, John Wesley, who said to his students: 'You have only one business, and that is the salvation of souls.'

It wasn't all plain sailing back then; in Acts 7 Stephen had been stoned to death, he paid the supreme sacrifice, he was the first martyr of the church; you will know from the likes of Open Doors that many more have followed in his footsteps in recent decades. He lived well, and he died well. It seems to me, with the homecall of Stephen, a seed was sown – and

one day in the providence of God it would bring forth an immense harvest.

Not unlike that day in January 1956 when five young men were speared to death in the jungles of Ecuador. That day, God planted five seeds. It was one of those guys, Jim Elliot, who said, 'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.' Look, folks, the Lord is sovereign, he has his own way of doing things. I agree with the early church father, Tertullian, when he noted that the blood of the martyr is the seed of the church. That's what happened right there in the early church – a spark was ignited, with the wind of God fanning it, the flame rapidly spread.

Things began to happen ... big time! You can silence a man but you can never silence the word of God. The church had lost a champion in Stephen. This was a pivotal moment, it was the hour that signalled an outbreak of hostile opposition to the first church.

They tasted blood, and so, with Saul as the ring leader, they played havoc among the people of God. He was the grand inquisitor! It was wave after wave of intense persecution – many died, many were thrown into prison for their love and loyalty to Jesus, many lost all their earthly goods, many were tortured for their faith in God. In fact, when Nero arrived on the scene, they would be thrown to the

lions in the Roman arena; they would be accused of cannibalism; they would be impaled on tall poles, covered with burning tar, then used as torches to light his garden parties at night.

The people scattered as they moved out from Jerusalem; the amazing thing is, wherever they went, they fearlessly preached the story of Jesus! Even in the midst of horrendous trials, they never lost their passion to tell people about Jesus. If anything, it stirred them even more. When you trace the young church through the book of Acts, it's a bit like following a wounded deer through a forest for drops of blood mark the trail.

Hey, didn't they choose their leaders well in the early church! Stephen became the first martyr, and Philip became the first missionary. These guys were top-notch! Both were willing to lay their lives on the line – ultimately, both had a huge passion for the Lord. That's why they stood out in the crowd. Men of calibre, men with backbone, men of integrity, men of faith, men with grit and gumption, men of God.

So far as Philip is concerned, there are two rich qualities in his life: one, his sense of accountability as a preacher in verse 4. When the going was tough, what did he do? Yes, he got going! He didn't go searching for a

bolthole, he didn't go looking for a shelter from the storm, he didn't go on the hunt for a refuge from the rabble. No!

The enemies of the cross wanted to eliminate the church, but Philip didn't batten down the hatches, he didn't quietly fade into the background, he didn't ride into the sunset – no matter where he went, he told people about Jesus. Why, because he knew the value of a soul. That's what Mr Spurgeon did in his pulpit, he said: 'We have a great need, ah, but we have a great Christ.'

He knew that one day he would be called to give an account of his ministry at the Bema, at the judgment seat of Christ; he did not want to be red-faced. It was the godly Professor Smeaton of Edinburgh who said: 'Gentlemen, reckon your ministry a failure unless souls are won to Christ.' What a challenge!

The second virtue in his life was his availability as a preacher, we see that in verses 5 and 27.

It didn't matter where he was, he was totally available for God to lead him – one day he was preaching to huge crowds in suburban Samaria, the next day he is on a dusty trail to confront one man about Jesus. One day he's in the midst of a heaven-sent revival, the next he's down south in the middle of nowhere. The lesson is, we must bloom wherever God plants our feet.

It didn't matter how many he was talking to – his preaching was faithful. It was the same old story of Jesus and his love (5, 12). He didn't change his message to suit his congregation, he had one string to his bow, and that was Jesus. He emphasised the centrality of Jesus. It didn't matter what he said, he always made a beeline to Jesus.

Basically, he was pioneering enemy territory, he was opening up a trail to be blazed with the old-fashioned gospel. God in his grace was building a bridge between two estranged peoples – the Jews and the Samaritans had little or no dealings with one another, they detested each other! There was no love lost. Yet God used Philip to draw them together in Christ. That's the stunning power of the gospel of grace. Just like the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda and Burundi..! It reconciles!

Under God, his preaching was fantastically fruitful (6-8). Read the account for yourself – it is unbelievable, yet true. God did it. People were set free from all kinds of shackles, people were miraculously healed, people were gloriously converted; it's no wonder the people were delirious with joy, they were elated, it was party time in Samaria!

The lesson is: see what God can do with a life at his disposal – we bend whenever God stretches our faith. So far as I can see, Philip is

not purpose-driven, he is passion-driven ... he has a passion for souls and a passion for God. Let's not put him on a pedestal. Great man, sure; but a far greater God. Philip had never been to Bible school, but he had been to Jesus; he knew his Bible, he knew his God, he had the anointing of the Spirit upon him – this is what God can do – little man, big God.

Philip isn't only there for the city-wide events, he's just as keen to deal with individuals, one-on-one. He wasn't only there for the big time or the big crowd, he's perfectly happy to sit down and talk to one lost soul about Jesus.

When the Lord told him to pack his bags and leave the place of stupendous blessing, he didn't hesitate, not for a moment.

The man in the chariot is a black man from Ethiopia, he's the Finance Minister in his government. He had travelled a couple of hundred miles up to Jerusalem on a spiritual pilgrimage, he knew it was the city of the great king, the place where the true God was worshipped; he was looking for peace, and life, and joy – but he went away with an empty heart, disillusioned and disappointed.

See what he's doing in his chariot – he's reading the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Then, suddenly, God broke into his life. I love this – Philip was the right man in the right place at the right time. Talk about divine timing!

Perfect! God is always on schedule. Especially when we see where he's reading from – it's chapter 53! And, guess what, it's all about Jesus!

God in his providence used Philip to be a channel of blessing to this man; he trusted the Lord, he was baptised, he went on with a spring in his step and a song in his heart – again, we see the forward thrust of the gospel, it's reaching into Africa.

The spreading flame, all because one man was sensitive to the voice of God, a man who didn't dilly-dally when God said 'go'. Talk about passion, this man has a passion for souls. He'll go anywhere and do anything just to introduce people to Jesus.

When was the last time you testified and spoke to a friend or a colleague or a neighbour about Jesus? When was the last time you put your arm around someone and told them that God loved them? It seems to me that is what we need to recover in our lives – a passion for people who are perishing; we discover it in the book of Acts, but we need to see it happening today. Maybe we should pray:

Lead me to some soul today, O teach me Lord just what to say; Friends of mine are lost in sin, And cannot find their way. Few there are who seem to care, And few there are who pray;

Melt my heart and fill my life, Give me one soul today.

In closing, let me draw four threads together about one man and his God, about one man and his heart burning passion for souls. One, he was receptive, we see that in verse 26. In all the hustle and bustle of a busy family life and ministry, he wasn't so busy that he couldn't stop to hear the whisper of God's voice. This man was in touch and in tune with his Lord. He had an open ear to hear the Lord talk to him. He knew something of the divine nudge.

Two, he was responsive, that's highlighted for us in verses 26 and 27. When God spoke, he packed his few odds and ends and started out. It wasn't an easy journey, it was arduous and tedious, it was fraught with enormous dangers – even though he knew what lay ahead of him in terms of terrain, he didn't flinch or even think about second-guessing the Lord.

Three, he was resourceful – we discover ample evidence of that in verses 30 and 31. When Philip posed the leading question, 'Do you understand what you're reading?' he got the answer, maybe not the one he expected! 'How can I unless someone explains it to me?' When the man invited Philip into his chariot, he didn't have to be asked a second time. He jumped in with both feet, as it were – too good an opportunity this, he thought.

Isaiah 53, what a chapter: it's the Everest of Christology, he's reading about Calvary, about Jesus as the Saviour of sinners. What a platform for any preacher! What a gospel text. Philip needed no more – he just told him about Jesus. Tremendous. It seems to me here is a soul-winner in action! If that had been me, could I have done that? I believe we ought to be able to preach the gospel from anywhere in the Bible – let's be ready!

Four, he was redemptive in verse 37. The testimony from this dear man is summed up right here – before he was immersed in the waters of baptism, he firmly states his conviction that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Nothing less will do, nothing more is needed, nothing else will suffice – Jesus is the answer! In no time at all, Philip was whisked away – you see, God had something else for him to do further north on the coastline, he had somewhere else for him to go. And, once again, Philip was more than happy to comply. That's what a passion for souls does for a man – it focuses his thinking on what matters most in life, it harnesses his energy and channels his enthusiasm in the right direction.

Philip was always reaching out to others – he knew how to give away his faith. The blunt reality is, the church that does not reach out will pass out; get this, you and I are only one

generation away from closing these doors. Let us pray that God would give us a heart for people who need the Lord – a heart on fire – a heart to pray – a heart that will go, at any cost.

*In years gone by I've lived without a passion,
For dying souls around me every day.
Now fill my heart with burning zeal and
fervour,
And teach my feeble, faltering lips to pray.*

*As day by day I talk to many people,
Help me to see as Jesus Christ would see;
And fill my life with such divine compassion,
That thine own love may freely flow through
me.*

*Transform my life after thine own desire,
Help me to feel anew the sacred fire;
May streams of living water flow through me,
That I may win some precious souls for thee.*