

THE DIVINE WIND

by Ray C. Stedman

You remember that the book of Acts opened with a dramatic presentation of three symbols that would characterize the ministry of the Holy Spirit throughout the age of the church. These three symbols are very prominent all through the book of Acts. They were:

- The mighty rushing wind,
- The tongues as of fire, and
- The proclamation of various languages, the gift of tongues.

These indicate three elements which we will find again and again throughout the book of Acts, and throughout the age of the church, wherever the Spirit is at work.

The tongues are a symbol of the proclamation of the truth in various languages. It began on the Day of Pentecost with the Apostle Peter standing up and proclaiming Jesus Christ to a great crowd of people. This truth was first proclaimed by Peter and John and the other apostles, then by Stephen and Philip and several of the laymen of the church. Gradually, in our account, that proclamation is increasing and spreading out to other parts of the world.

Fire is a symbol of the judging and purifying by the Holy Spirit at work within his church, to keep it a usable instrument, to keep it honest and available. We see the Spirit working as fire in the story of Ananias and Sapphira, when God judged the hypocrisy, the sham of an empty Christian life. We see it in the story of Simon Magus, at which we looked last week. We will see it again and again in this book.

Then there is the wind of the Spirit, the mighty rushing wind. That represents the Spirit in his Sovereignty, in his right to direct the activity of the church. We will see this repeatedly, and pre-eminently in the passage we have before us now.

Remember that Jesus had said, in those words from John's gospel, that the wind blows wherever it wills, wherever it likes. "You hear the sound of it, but you cannot tell where it is going, and you do not know from whence it comes. So is he that is born of the Spirit," {cf, John 3:8}. The wind is an apt symbol of the sovereign direction of the Holy Spirit. He goes wherever he wills; you cannot predict him.

This account is a very beautiful picture of that. It opens with Verse 25, Chapter 8, where we have Peter and John on their way back from Samaria to Jerusalem:

Now when they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans. {Acts 8:25 RSV}

There are three words there that indicate the normal, usual activity of Christians. These two men had come down to Samaria and had testified, first of all.

That means they shared what they had experienced. That is what a testimony is. There are some who think a testimony is an opportunity to tell everyone else what they ought to do, but it is not that. It is telling everyone else what happened to you. Peter and John shared what God had done with them through Jesus Christ.

Then, they spoke the word of the Lord. That is what the Bible calls prophesying, i.e., they gave out truth. The truth that we now have incorporated in the Scriptures, they spoke to these new believers in Samaria.

Finally, returning to Jerusalem they evangelized, they preached the gospel.

Those three things -- prophesying, testifying, and evangelizing -- make up the normal activities of Christian witness. They are perfectly normal, and yet they are empowered by the Holy Spirit. There is nothing particularly unusual about them, but nevertheless they are, in this case, empowered by the Spirit of God and directed by him.

What Dr. Luke is after in this passage is to set the next story in sharp contrast to Verse 25. In this verse they are proceeding in an orderly way back to Jerusalem, doing the ordinary, expected things. But in the next account we have an unusual, extraordinary, unpredictable activity of the Spirit of God.

But an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert road. And he rose and went. {Acts 8:26-27a RSV}

An angel suddenly appeared to Philip. I've never had an angel appear to me. I have never seen an angel -- except for the one I married. I do not know anyone else to whom an angel has appeared. You may ask, "Does God still work through angels today?" and the answer is a resounding "Yes! He does." But they are not always visible. That is the difference. The ministry of angels, according to the Bible, goes on all the time. They are "ministering spirits sent forth to serve those who shall be heirs of salvation," says the book of Hebrews {cf, Heb 1:14}. All of us, all the time, are being touched and affected by the ministry of angels, but we do not see them. That is the difference between these early days of the church and the present.

There have been well-documented experiences and incidences of the appearance of angels recorded in church history beyond the New Testament period. Many missionaries and others can still tell us stories of this, so it has not ceased entirely. And I believe that, as we draw nearer to the days of the return of Jesus Christ, we may well expect to see a return of angelic manifestation.

But, at any rate, here is an unexpected agency through which the Holy Spirit works. An angel appears to Philip and gives him an unexplained command to go south and take the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza. He could not have picked an emptier stretch of road. It is desert road, as the account tells us. There are no cities or villages enroute, nothing.

The wonderful thing to me is the beautiful way in which Philip obeyed this command of the angel. He did not say, "Well, I'll have to pray about this." He did not say to himself, "Well, I wonder if this is a call to a larger field of service," (which is another way of saying a church with a larger salary). He just went, that is all. He left the awakening that was going on at Samaria, with its demands for training and teaching. He arose and went down to a desert road.

This is a beautiful picture for us of what we might call "the wind of God," the sovereign blowing of the Holy Spirit, and of the adventure that is always characteristic of someone who is being led by the Holy Spirit.

The point I wish to make is that Verse 25 and Verse 26 are both records of Spirit-filled activity. Peter and John were obeying the Holy Spirit when they testified, prophesied, and evangelized. But Philip is also obeying the Holy Spirit when he is being sent by an angel out to a desert place. Both are part of the Spirit-filled life.

That needs to be made clear these days, because we tend to run to extremes. There are those who take the position that only something dramatic happening to you is of the Spirit, that only when you are being led in unusual ways into unusual circumstances are you being led of the Holy Spirit. Thank God the Holy Spirit does lead in that dramatic way, and does present us with unusual circumstances. But that is not the only way. He also leads through the ordinary, the usual, and he can be very effective that way.

But, on the other hand, I think the church is suffering because it has been so terribly predictable. You can always know what is going to happen. We have even gotten into the habit of printing it all up in advance -- in the bulletin issued you each Sunday morning! "Holy Spirit, here you are: run according to this program." Well, there is a place for the ordinary, as Verse 25 teaches us. But there must also be made a place for that unpredictable character of God, the sovereign, vital, fresh ministry of the Holy Spirit which moves in ways

that nobody can anticipate. That is one of the reasons why we have our Sunday evening service unprogrammed. We do not know what God is going to do, but he is free to move in and change it, and do with it as he will.

I have often said that we Christians tend to dig channels for the flowing of the river of God. We dig a channel, then we line it with concrete, and we say, "Come, O River of God and flow now through this channel that we have dug for you." And to our dismay there is just a little trickle of water that comes down through, while the great flood of the Spirit's power is moving out through the mud flats somewhere, where we do not think he belongs at all.

This is the lesson that God is forever teaching us, and certainly it is what is being brought out by this account. This is the creative strategy of the Holy Spirit, the freedom to interfere, the freedom to override a program, and to change it, and to make something new.

The church has suffered terribly by ruling that out, by so organizing everything that there is no room for the Spirit to move. I often think of the scheduled revivals that are advertised. We do not see this so much around here, but in the South I would often drive down a road and see a church that had a big banner up:

REVIVAL HERE!

Beginning June 15th and ending June 24th!

Well, how do you schedule the Holy Spirit that way? That always appeared ludicrous to me. It would be like having all the weather men of the United States meet together to plan where the hurricanes are going to be next year, or the tornadoes. You cannot schedule a tornado, and you cannot schedule the Holy Spirit. He must be free to move in ways beyond our planning. He oftentimes moves in line with what has become the norm, but the wonderful thing about the Christian life is the freedom that God has to break through and to change our schedule.

Every week the PBC staff meets and we outline certain things that we expect God to do: a, b, c, d, and e. Then we always leave a box in which we put, "None of the above," and this is what God usually checks for us. He does none of the above.

This is one of the areas where Christian Education has suffered greatly. I have a great problem with much that goes on in the field of so-called "Christian" education, because, by and large, it is based upon a survey of what is happening now and what has happened in the past. It is a study of methods and approaches and techniques and gimmicks that are used in various places. They are compiled and printed up in a booklet and sent out to people to study. Well, if that is all you have, then you are locked into the past. There is no place for a creative, new approach, fresh and vital. This is the reason why so much of Christian education becomes dull, routine, boring, banal, trite -- because it lacks this freshness of the Holy Spirit.

The glorious thing about the book of Acts is that again and again you find these early Christians so responsive to this, with God breaking through frequently in ways they could never anticipate. The great need of the church of this hour is for us to break free, once again, from too much structure, and to be free again to respond to the leading of God in fresh and wonderful ways.

Yesterday our Board of Directors and the Advisors met together at Mount Hermon, and had a wonderful, refreshing time of fellowship together. In the morning we gathered about the Scriptures, opened them up and studied together about an incident in the life of Elijah. Remember the time after his tremendous battle and breakthrough on Mount Carmel against the priests of Baal. He was threatened by Queen Jezebel after he had her priests slain: "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow," {cf, 1 Ki 19:2}. Elijah reacted very much as you and I would have; he ran. He really ran! We looked it up on the map, and it was more than a hundred miles that he ran before he stopped. He crawled under a juniper tree and there, in his despondency, he gave way to all the self-pity of his heart. But God dealt with him. It was interesting to us that he dealt with him on a three-fold basis: physically, soulishly,

and spiritually; the whole man; body, soul, and spirit:

- First he gave him a good night's sleep and two good meals. It is wonderfully encouraging to me to know that there are times when the most spiritual thing you can do is to have a bath, a good meal, and a good night's sleep.
- Second, he took him to a place of deep emotional attachment, Mount Sinai, with all its memories of the power and the presence of God.
- Then third, he took him to a mountain where three things occurred:
 - 1) A great wind swept through and broke the rocks in pieces, and the account says, "but God was not in the wind," {cf, 1 Ki 19:11 RSV}.
 - 2) Then an earthquake shook the ground, "but the Lord was not in the earthquake," {1 Ki 19:11b RSV}.
 - 3) "And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire;" {1 Ki 19:12a RSV}.

"... and after the fire a still small voice," {1 Ki 19:12b RSV}. It was God's way of teaching the prophet that he did not intend to work through the might of the wind, nor an earthquake, nor a fire. That is what Elijah wanted him to do; that was his schedule for God's activity. But God said, "No, I'm going to work through the still, small voice of an awakened conscience. A still small voice of an awakening of conscience in this land will change the whole land." And that is what he did. We must be prepared in our Christian life for this unpredictable activity of the Spirit of God.

Notice what happens with Philip. The rest of the chapter is a wonderful account of how adequate is the Spirit of God to handle the adventure, and to prepare it all in advance.

It begins with a prepared man:

And he rose and went. And behold, an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a minister of Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of all her treasure, had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. {Acts 8:27-28 RSV}

There is a man prepared.

He was a man of great responsibility, the Secretary of the Treasury of Ethiopia. He had great authority and therefore was of great influence throughout all of Ethiopia and Egypt. He worked with the queen. (Her name was not Candace; that was her title, like pharaoh, or emperor, given to all the queens of Ethiopia.) He was obviously a searching man. He had come to Jerusalem to worship at the temple. He was looking for something. He obviously was not a Jew. Many scholars feel that he was a black man, because the Ethiopians were black. Therefore this would be the first clear account that we have in Scripture of a black man's coming to Jesus Christ.

He was a man of great authority, responsibility, and intelligence, and he was searching for truth. He had come to the temple to investigate the Jewish faith, and you cannot read this account without detecting a note of disillusionment. He is going home, but evidently is not satisfied. He has bought a copy of the book of the prophet Isaiah and, awakened to his own need, is reading this scroll as he rides along in his chariot. And, as they did in those days, he is reading it aloud. Now the moment is prepared of the Spirit, as well. We read,

And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless some one guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of the scripture which he was reading was

this:

**"As a sheep led to the slaughter
or a lamb before it shearer is dumb,
so he opens not his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken up from the earth."**

And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, pray, does the prophet say this, about himself or about some one else?" {Acts 8:29-34 RSV}

This whole situation is a tremendous manifestation of the preparation and timing of the Holy Spirit. Notice the precise timing. Philip was walking along the road, the road he had been commanded to take, and there was nothing in sight. A chariot comes over the hill and passes him by. At the precise moment the man in the chariot passes the evangelist, he happens to be reading aloud, and it just happens to be the right passage of Scripture, the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, the great passage that predicts the coming of the Messiah, the suffering Savior. What exquisite timing!

And notice how the Spirit is guiding the conversation. Philip says to him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" In the Greek there is a little play on words here. The word "to read," in Greek, is the word "to know again." You see, when the writer writes something, he knows it. Then when somebody reads that, he "knows again" what the writer wrote. So what Philip literally says to this man is, "Do you know what you know again?" And the man replies, "How can I, unless some one guides me?"

That is important, too. It indicates the awareness this man has, especially in reading Scripture, that it takes God's full provision to make it clear. The book is given, but there are also teachers provided. It is always a mistake -- as I sometimes see young people doing, and older ones as well -- to take the Bible and say, "Well, I'm just going to read the Bible for myself; I don't need anybody else to teach me. What God says to me, that's what I'll act upon." Charles Spurgeon, the great English preacher, used to say, "I never could understand why some men set such great value on what the Holy Spirit said to them, and so little value on what he said to anyone else." This is what these people are implying: that only what God says to them counts -- as though he were not speaking to anyone else. But, you see, God has made the Scriptures, and he has also provided teachers who are gifted and helpful in understanding and explaining them. It takes both to enter into the full knowledge of truth.

This eunuch recognizes that and he invites Philip to come up and sit with him. He was at the right passage but he was puzzled by it, as many have been puzzled since. For this is the passage that deals with the sufferings of Jesus. All through the Old Testament you find many pictures of the coming Messiah, but most of them depict him as coming in triumph and power and glory, in victory, riding over the enemies of Israel as the great King, the One who would restore peace to the earth, the One who would break in pieces all the weapons of war and cause the people to beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

But there are also these pictures of a suffering Savior. This has always been a puzzle to the Jews, particularly. They love the prophecies picturing him as coming in triumph and victory, but they puzzle over the ones that picture him as a sufferer, as one who has to die, to lay down his life. And so was the eunuch puzzled. "Why does the prophet say that the Messiah has to die? Or is he speaking of the Messiah? Is he perhaps speaking of himself? Right at that point Philip was ready with a prepared message. He knew the Scriptures.

We read,

Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus. And as they went along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?" And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. {Acts 8:35-38 RSV}

He began with the Scripture that the man was reading, but he did not stay there. Isaiah 53 was a wonderful place to begin, and doubtless he pointed out some of the predictions there:

**But he was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. {Isa 53:5-6 RSV}**

What a marvelous place from which to preach the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ -- that his coming has solved the problem of man's guilt, man's sin -- it was laid on him. How this man must have rejoiced to have heard the story of Jesus, and of how this passage was fulfilled in him. But then, evidently, Philip went on from here. He obeyed the Great Commission: "Go and preach the gospel to every creature, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all the things which I have commanded you," {cf, Mark 16:15, Matt 28:19-20}. Philip must have told him what baptism means, how it is a symbol of the life that has been received from Jesus Christ, and that by being baptized an individual is saying, "I have asked Jesus to enter my life and to be my Lord. I have received a new life in him."

So, when they came to a prepared place -- right at the precise timing of the Spirit -- a place where there was some water at the side of the road, it was the eunuch who said, "See, here is water! What hinders me from being baptized?" So they went down and Philip baptized him. Now, for the benefit of some of you Baptists who are saying, "Aha! I told you so. You see, it was immersion!" -- these phrases translated, "they both went down into the water" and "they came up out of the water," can equally well be translated, "they went down to the water" and "came up from the water." So I cannot say that this teaches that the eunuch was immersed. But that is not the point. The point is that he was baptized in order to indicate that he had come to a new life in Jesus Christ.

The closing passage is full of wonderful things:

**And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught up Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip was found at Azotus, and passing on he preached the gospel to all the towns till he came to Caesarea.
{Acts 8:39-40 RSV}**

That sounds as if a miracle occurred, does it not? As if when they came up out of the water Philip suddenly disappeared, and the eunuch looked around with amazement but could not find him, so he finally went on his way. You can read it that way, I grant you; but I personally do not think that is what it means. It is not that I think that could not happen. I believe in miracles and if this is what did happen, I am quite prepared to believe it. But I think that the account means, rather, that when they came up from the water, the two were so caught away with the excitement and the tremendous joy of the moment that they did not realize that they had gone their separate ways.

The eunuch, coming up, was so overwhelmed with the joy that flooded his heart as the Spirit of God had made him a new man in Jesus Christ, and all the answers for which his tortured soul had sought for so long had suddenly been provided in finding Jesus, that his heart was filled with joy. So he did not even notice that Philip did not get back into the chariot with him, but he went on his way rejoicing, and it was some time before he thought of Philip again.

Philip, on the other hand, was so caught up with what God had done, with this glorious gem of an experience that God had given him, with how the Spirit of God had put everything together, had prepared the way so fully, that he did not realize for awhile that the eunuch had driven off and left him there. He was so lost in his thoughts as he went along that it was some time before he came to himself. When he did, he found that he was at Azotus, on the coast road. There he began systematically to preach in the towns all the way up the coast to Caesarea.

I am sure that is what happened, because that has happened to me. I have been caught away like this, sometimes, with the excitement of seeing God at work in some dramatic way. I've gotten to thinking about it

as I have been driving along in my car, and I have lost all memory of where I was going and what I was doing. I just drove automatically and didn't snap to until I found myself driving into the outskirts of Fresno, when all the time I had been heading for Modesto.

That is what can happen in the adventure of the Spirit-filled life, and this is what this account is given to us for. Both in the usual, and in the unusual, you have the Spirit of God at work. Philip, who had been the recipient of God's grace, finding this unusual experience occurring, saw how God had put it all together.

I frequently have had that experience. In fact, just this morning, between this hour and the previous service, I had the joy of seeing a man come to Christ. Neither he nor I knew that this would happen this morning -- but it did!

Yet when Philip got to Azotus he did not expect to have another dramatic leading like this. He began where he was and started preaching right up the coast till he came to Caesarea.

That is the adventure of the Spirit-filled life. It will have plenty of routine, plenty of the usual, plenty of the ordinary, in a sense. But that "ordinary" is all touched with the flame of heaven.

It will also have these wonderful moments when the extraordinary suddenly inserts itself. Out of the ordinary circumstance, amazing things suddenly begin to develop, and you are aware that you are caught up on the treadmill of the Holy Spirit, carried along into events which fit and dovetail together in such a way that only a divine hand could have done it -- and you realize that God is at work in an amazing way. That is the normal Christian life. It ought to be the experience of any of us, all of us, as we are free to be used of God, expecting him to intervene in this unusual way as well as to work through the ordinary.

I hope that you will be making yourself available to the Holy Spirit to work this way, if he chooses to do so, in your own life.

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for this delightful incident from the book of Acts, which so truly reflects the sovereign ability of the Holy Spirit to direct us in ways that we cannot predict, cannot anticipate. What a note of excitement this adds for us, Lord! What a glorious sense of expectation becomes ours as we constantly wonder when you are going to break through and do the unusual once again in our lives. You move like this so frequently, Father. We thank you for it. We pray that this may be the experience of all of us here, so that others looking at us may be very well aware, as were men with Philip, that God is at work in our life. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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