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PHILIP STARTED AFRICA MISSIONS

Bit of Personal Work on Desert Marks Beginning of Christian Service

The International Sunday School Lesson For March 19 is "Philip and the Ethiopian."—Acts 8:26-40.

By William E. Ellis

Boys who like war stories will find themselves introduced to the most wonderful battle front of the present conflict by this Sunday school lesson. The episode of Deacon Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, one of the familiar incidents of the Bible, had its setting on a desert near Gaza, a spot now alive with all the activity and confusion and tumult of military encampment.

At the time of our lesson story it was an uncultivated solitude, where quiet and leisurely religious discussion between wayfarers seemed most appropriate; but that same territory is overrun with Ottoman troops and their German leaders.

The scream and looting and puffing of locomotives, and the rattle of troop trains over the new railroad that has been built down through this lower end of Palestine to Beer-sheba, may be heard today when the Ethiopian eunuch's camel stepped softly and quietly two thousand years ago. All the indescribable confusion of a military camp fills the scene at the present time. The Turkish troops are careful not to get too near to the site of the old Gaza itself; for it is on the Mediterranean coast, and too near to the warships of the allies to be comfortable. In outward appearance the present hordes of troops, and the preparation for the widely heralded attack on Suez, seem to blot out all such memories as this and the other great Bible stories that were staged on this very spot.

Is it too much to say that whatever the outcome of the present plans for the Egyptian invasion, and whatever the battles to be fought hereabout, when contrasted with the single interview between one Christian layman and a negro inquirer, the latter has had a much greater effect upon the thinking and actions of mankind?

This bit of personal work by Philip on the desert marked the beginning of Christian missions to the Dark Continent. This was a spark from the fire at Jerusalem that was being scattered by persecution over the whole earth.

An Old City's New Life

Occasionally nowadays we read in the newspapers the name Nabulus; this is the modern title of ancient Shechem, a Samaritan city a few miles below old Samaria itself. Nabulus is to-day a great military depot and railroad center, a point of concentration for the Ottoman troops. A few miles above it, on a hill, are the ruins of the old city of Samaria, where the archaeologists from Harvard a few years ago dug up the ruins of Abah's palace. The excitement of war that few of the Christians of the Central Powers who pass Samaria on the new railroad recall that it was hither that Philip carried the Gospel from Jerusalem.

This was foreign missions quite at the beginning; for ordinarily the Jews had no dealings with the Sa-

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maritans. Philip's work in Samaria had wrought such results that even the most outstanding popular leader of the city, was among those who followed the crowds to hear Philip, and who, too, yielded to the new religion. Apparently Simon was converted all but his pocket-book; for he coveted spiritual gifts for a pecuniary gain to himself. There in old Samaria, by the help of the apostles and John, the big issue of money-making in religion was fought to a conclusion. The avaricious spirit of Simon was broken to contrition, and he and the people were turned toward the pure and simple life of the disciples of the Crucified.

The First Layman's Movement

As the embers of a fire are scattered by the blast amount to extinguish them, so Philip, like a Gospel brand, had become a beacon to the Samaritans. He might be called the first example of the deputation work by laymen that is increasingly popular throughout the land. Or, we may say that Philip inaugurated the first laymen's movement.

He did a great work in Samaria, and was the center of a real revival. Things were succeeding for him. Apparently he had found the very place where he could do the best work. Then suddenly the summons came for him to follow the Gaza highway out across the desert to Gaza.

"I said, 'Let me walk in the fields.' He said, 'No, walk in the town.' I said, 'There are no flowers there.' He said, 'No flowers, but a crown.'"

"I said, 'I shall miss the light, and my friends will miss me, they say.' He answered, 'Choose to-night. If I am to miss you or they.'"

"I pleaded for time to be given. He said, 'Is it hard to decide? It will not seem hard in heaven.' To have followed the steps of your guide."

Leaving the Big For the Little

This summons seemed incredible. What! Leave the big congregation to go off to the desert to preach to black emuch? Yes; that was Philip's call. God weighs the importance of service in different scales from those used by man. Here is Mrs. Blank, who has apparently given up a social career and all her club and committee work, merely to take care of one baby. "She is wasting her life," say her friends impatiently. But wait; we cannot decide that until we know the story of the future of the babe who is receiving the full thought and time of a wise and noble woman. We must not forget that it is only the decision of a student who makes a school famous, and the one man who lifts a town above commonplaceness.

From our vantage point, centuries removed, we can see that Philip was taking the short cut to Africa, for the message to which his life had been given. Dr. F. N. Peloubet, the author of the famous commentary on the Sunday school lesson, planned to go to India as a missionary, and so prepared himself. He seemed to be thwarted in that desire; yet to-day his lessons are used in mission fields all over the earth. Let us notice the character of literature he took with him on his journey, and compare it with the trash which nowadays seems most popular with travelers. By some strange quirk in their thinking, people feel that travel literature should be the flimsiest obtainable. This man, who was perhaps a "Proselyte of the Gate," was reading those moving words from the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah:

"He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before his shearer is dumb, So he openeth not his mouth; In his humiliation his judgment was taken away; His generation who shall declare? For his life is taken from the earth."

Frankly, the man did not understand what he was reading. There are some persons who declare they would not read what they cannot understand. All the best books, however, are above the level of the obvious. The Bible is beyond mocking. The church has been for centuries discovering new treasures of truth between these old covers. When lovers of the Book study it together they are likeliest to understand it better. One's experience adds to the other's knowledge. So the emuch was led from the better to the best; from the Old Testament to the New; from the suffering Messiah of the prophecy to the Crucified Christ of history.

That was an interesting Bible class held that day in the wilderness; yet no more so than a thousand other men's Bible classes may be as they consider this very lesson. When sincere men study big problems with open minds, there is hope for the times. A few days ago, when visiting in rural North Carolina, the farmer's son who came into my room to make the fire, greeted me with a question, not concerning some triviality of metropolitan life or usage, but about the old perplexity as to the fate of the

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heaven. He had been pondering big things in his quiet life; and I have more respect for him than for the cigar-smoking dude at Forty-second and Broadway, who could retail the latest scandal of New York's social or theatrical life. So this layman, who was a missionary to one man, began with the passage that the emuch who is not willing to make an open sign of his confession. This baptized believer, with the dusky skin, went on his way with a joyful heart, singing songs across the desert and bearing to the court of Ethiopia a richer treasure than anything that the Queen's strong boxes held.

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