

IF I HAD BUT ONE SERMON TO HEAR

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on July 10, 1966 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Many years ago I read the account of an interview with the son of one of America's best known preachers, a man who had for many years preached regularly over the coast-to-coast facilities of one of our major radio networks. In talking of his father, the son spoke of the great sense of responsibility which this widely known preacher felt for those to whom he preached. Then, he commented that his father often made reference to the fact that almost certainly there were those in his audience each time he spoke who would be hearing their last sermon. Without doubt, among the hundreds of thousands of listeners there would be some who would never hear another sermon. This places a fearful responsibility upon the preacher,

Although this was the first time I had ever seriously contemplated this aspect of the preacher's responsibility, I have thought of it many times since, especially as my own opportunities for preaching the gospel have been more far reaching. But even when we are not speaking of a radio or television audience, even when we are thinking only of an assembled audience within a church building, it is still not only possible but even likely that someone may be hearing his last sermon. As Richard Baxter, the noted English preacher of another generation put it, "I preach as a dying man to dying men." What fearful responsibilities rest upon those of us who preach!

From time to time I have tried to contemplate the type of sermon that I would want to hear if I were hearing my last sermon. Especially, have I been concerned to think of the type of sermon that I would want to hear if I were not a Christian and were hearing my last sermon. I would want it to be simple and plain, without any dramatic or theatrical effects. I would want it to be very sincere and I would want it to tell me what I needed to know, without subterfuge or any effort to avoid hurting my feelings. However, above all else, I would want it to be pre-eminently a sermon about Christ.

A Biblical Example

While thinking in this vein, I was surprised to realize that the Bible contains an example of this very thing. We read of a man who was to hear only one sermon (so far as the record goes) and we even have a description of the sermon that God provided for him. The story is a familiar one, but I would like to read it to you again. It begins in the twenty-sixth verse of the eighth chapter of the book of Acts: "An angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza: the same is desert. And he arose and went: and behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was over all her treasure, who had come to Jerusalem to worship; and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot. And Philip ran to him, and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest? And he said, How can I, except someone shall guide me? And he besought Philip to come and sit with him. Now the passage of the scripture which he was reading was this, 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. And the eunuch answered Philip, and said, I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other? And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this scripture, preached unto him Jesus ..."

Here was an Ethiopian nobleman who had been to Jerusalem to worship. This means that either he was a devout Jew, or else a proselyte, and that he had come more than a thousand miles in order to worship the true God in the Old Testament way at Jerusalem. God was so concerned for him that he sent the evangelist Philip to intercept him on the Gaza road and to preach to him the gospel that is the power of God unto salvation. One cannot help but wonder why this open-minded man had not been told of Christ during the period that he was in Jerusalem worshipping? One wonders if among the thousands of new Christians in Jerusalem there was not someone who failed, as we do today, to speak out for Christ.

He Preached Jesus

The part of the story to which I should like to give special emphasis, however, is the fact that when this God-sent man arrived "he preached unto him Jesus." Beginning with the prophet Isaiah he told first of the Old Testament prophecies of the coming of the Messiah. At this point we are left to our own imagination to know what else was included in this sermon delivered so simply on a deserted country road in the long ago. After speaking of the prophecies of the Messiah, we somehow feel that Philip must have said, "In our own time these marvelous predictions have come to fulfillment." Possibly he even used the familiar words, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:16). It may be that he also referred to Christ's purpose in coming to the earth in such words as "It is he that shall save his people from their sins." (Matt. 1:21).

No doubt he mentioned the birth of Jesus and possibly even pointed to the Judaeen hills only a few miles away where Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Philip might well also have indicated that when Joseph and Mary fled to protect the life of the infant Savior that it was

into Egypt that they went, and possibly even along this same road. There would be the mention of their return to Nazareth where Jesus grew from infancy to manhood. Possibly there was the mention of the visit to Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve years of age, at which time he amazed the doctors of the law with his ability to answer and ask religious questions. It was during this period in his life that "Jesus advanced in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." (Luke 2:52).

There might well have been the mention of the important occasion when Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized of John the Baptist. "But John would have hindered him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? But Jesus answering said unto him. Suffer it now; for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness. Then he suffereth him. And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway from the water; and lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon him; and lo, a voice out of the heavens, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matt. 3:14-17). As the chariot wheels continued to turn, with these two earnest men talking of God and his way for man, it is quite likely that Philip told of the temptations which Jesus underwent at the end of the forty days of fasting in the wilderness and how that the salvation of the souls of all mankind hung precariously in the balance. These were moments in which Jesus' great spiritual strength and loyalty to God enabled him to conquer Satan, and to make possible the salvation of the souls of all mankind.

Sometime in the conversation there would be the mentioning of the disciples who eagerly followed the Lord, and especially of the chosen twelve apostles. These names were not only familiar to the evangelist Philip, but the men themselves were also his friends. It is quite possible that he talked of the various ones as he named them, and of their great spiritual strength as demonstrated in this or that act or word.

### Christ's Miracles

Undoubtedly Philip told the Ethiopian Eunuch of the miracles of the Lord, Philip himself knew people who had once been blind, but who now could see because of the Lord's concern for them. He knew those who had been lame but now could walk, those who had been dumb but now could speak, those who had been lepers but now were whole again, and even those who had been dead but now lived. Possibly he spoke of Christ's stilling the tempest and walking on the waters of Galilee. It may be that he told of Christ's feeding the thousands from a few loaves and fishes. And undoubtedly because of the brevity of time he eventually would say something like this, "Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which I have not time to tell you now, but I have mentioned these, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name." (Paraphrase of John 20:30-31).

Then there would be the telling of important incidents in the life of Jesus. There would be the conversation with the women by the well in Samaria where Jesus taught the marvelous lesson on true worship. There would be the story of the good Samaritan and the story of the prodigal son. There would be the transfiguration where Jesus was exalted above Moses and Elijah and again identified by a voice from heaven, as the divine Son of God. The teachings of Jesus set forth in the Sermon on the Mount would be made clear. The parables of Jesus concerning the kingdom would point out the supreme importance of Christ's church--like the pearl of great price, like a treasure hidden in a field, and like a grain of mustard seed destined to grow up and become a tree.

Eventually as the chariot wheels continued to turn the evangelist would tell of the hatred and animosity of the High Priest and of the leading religious men of the day. He would tell of their plot and of the betrayal and the crucifixion.

Just there we can well imagine a long silence during which time the Ethiopian feared that perhaps this glorious story has come to an end. But then there was the account of the resurrection and the appearances of the Lord and of the great hopeful future of his kingdom.

### The Church and How to Enter It

Somewhere in this preaching of Jesus the evangelist would tell of the church and the plans that Christ had for it to spread throughout the world for the saving of the souls of men. In this discussion there would inevitably be instructions about how to become a Christian. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:16). "Except ye repent, ye shall all in like manner perish." (Luke 13:3). "Everyone therefore who shall confess me before men, him will I also confess before my Father who is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 10:32-33). And then possibly he included the words which we have from the Lord as reported in John 3:5. "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." Of course, there must have been other words of instruction given as questions were asked and as the two men discussed in depth the whole story of Christ and his kingdom.

Undoubtedly, too, there was some mention of the life beyond and possibly the words so familiar to us all, "Let not your heart be troubled: believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." (John 14:1-3). Somewhere toward the end of the sermon there might well have been these words of the Lord, "Everyone therefore that heareth these words of mine, and doeth them shall be likened unto a wise man, who built his house upon the rock: the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon

the rock. And everyone that heareth these words of mind, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and smote upon that house, and it fell: and great was the fall thereof.” (Matt. 7:24-27).

I like to think that possibly Philip brought his presentation of the story of Jesus to a close with the words of the Lord as we read them in Rev. 3:20, Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.” No, we do not know the specific content of the sermon, but we do know that it was a sermon in which this humble evangelist of the long ago “preached unto him Jesus.”

The text of scripture which we were reading continues with the words, “And as they went on the way, they came unto a certain water; and the eunuch said, Behold, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thy heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and then both went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more, for he went on his way rejoicing.” (Acts 8:26-39).

### Conclusion

This great story began with a man who knew little or nothing concerning his Savior, but at the end of the story only a few hours later, he was a Christian. He need to remember that in spite of all of the thousands of books that have been written concerning Christ, in spite of all of the learned treatises and the various journals, in spite of all of the doctrinal discussions, in spite of the meetings of the councils, and in spite of everything else, Christianity centers in Christ and the simple preaching of the gospel of Christ for the salvation of men’s souls.

In our modern 20th century we still have the same God, the same Lord, the same church, the same way of salvation, and the same need to be saved, as did this man on the ancient road from Jerusalem to Gaza. The centuries have not changed any of these essential things. Our salvation, like his, depends upon our willingness to accept Christ and to obey the simple conditions of pardon. We close this message by extending again the ancient invitation. Come to Christ and do just what was done in the long ago, and then you will be able to “read your title clear” as you compare your conversion with that of this ancient nobleman from Ethiopia.