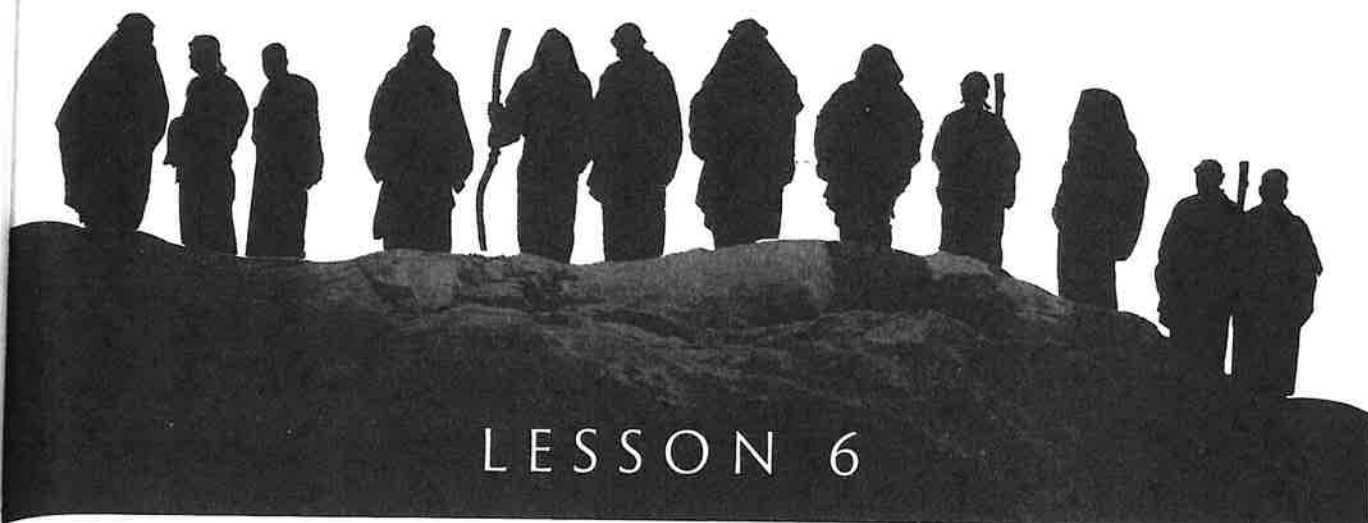




LESSON 6

PHILIP

THE BEAN COUNTER

Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have a little."

JOHN 6:7

In the four biblical lists of the disciples, each arranged into three groups of four (Matthew 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:13-16; Acts 1:13), the fifth name is always Philip. This indicates Philip was the leader of the second group that included Bartholomew, Matthew, and Thomas. In the Gospels, he plays a bit of a minor role when compared to the men in the first group. Yet he is mentioned several times, so he emerges as a distinct individual in his own right.

Philip is a Greek name meaning "lover of horses." His Jewish name is never given. This could mean he came from a family of Hellenistic (Greek-influenced) Jews. The *disciple* Philip is not to be confused with the *deacon* Philip who preached in Samaria and led an Ethiopian eunuch to Christ (see Acts 6:5; 8:4-13, 26-40).

PHILIP THE DEACON

This Philip was one of seven men chosen to oversee the daily distribution of food in the church in response to a complaint by the Hellenists (Jews from the Diaspora) that their widows were being overlooked (see Acts 6:1–7). He is the first missionary named in Scripture and the first given the title “evangelist” (21:8).¹

Philip the disciple was from Bethsaida, the hometown of Peter and Andrew (see John 1:44). Being God-fearing Jews, Philip likely knew the brothers from synagogue and, through them, knew their fishing partners, James and John. There is evidence that Philip was also a Galilean fisherman, for he accepted Peter’s invitation (with Nathanael and Thomas) to go fishing after the resurrection (see John 21:2–3).

When we put these details together, we see the group of disciples were a close-knit bunch. Prior to answering Jesus’ call, these seven men were likely already acquaintances, if not friends. Given this, it is rather surprising that Jesus would select more than *half* of His team from the same small region and business community. One would think that He would at least conduct a search throughout Judea for the gifted candidates. Instead, what we find is Jesus selecting a core group of rugged, working-class men with unremarkable resumé’s. All that Jesus required was availability—and Philip evidently fit that requirement.

All of the vignettes of Philip come from the Gospel of John—Matthew, Mark, and Luke give us no details about him. What we find in John’s Gospel is that Philip is often paired with Nathanael, which likely means that the two were close comrades. Beyond this, we learn that Philip was unique among the disciples as a classic “operations person.” He was the facts-and-figures guy, by the book and practically minded, rigidly adhering to protocols and procedures, and practical to the point of sometimes being a killjoy.

Philip was predisposed to be a pragmatist and a cynic—and sometimes a defeatist—rather than a visionary. Given this, he does not seem like the ideal candidate for a disciple. But Jesus had a different perspective. Philip was exactly the kind of person Jesus was seeking, for his weaknesses would serve as the perfect platform for displaying Christ’s strength.

STARTING OUT

Describe the most classic “bean counter” you have known. Did you ever get to see the heart behind that person? If so, what were you surprised to discover?

EXPLORING THE STORY

Jesus drew the men He selected for His disciples to Himself, trained them, gifted them, and empowered them to serve Him. Maybe this is why He chose so many rugged fishermen—they were better suited to the task of operating in *His* power than a group of prodigies would have been trying to operate in their own talent. Still . . . what did He see in Philip? Based on clues we find in John, Philip was *awaiting the Messiah*, yet *hesitant and pessimistic*, and also *uncertain and indecisive* at times. You will explore each of these aspects of his character in this section.

Awaiting the Messiah

Philip appears in the opening chapter of John’s Gospel. The day after the calling of Andrew, John, and Peter, “Jesus wanted to go to Galilee, and He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow Me’” (1:43). Notice the wording: “*He* found Philip” (emphasis added). This is the first time we read of Jesus seeking out one of His disciples. Of course, He sovereignly sought out and called the others, but this language regarding Philip’s calling is unique. When the Lord found Philip, He found a disciple with an open heart who had been eagerly awaiting *Him*.

After meeting Jesus, Philip sought out his close companion, Nathanael, and said, “We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (verse 45). Notice again the wording: “*We* have found Him” (emphasis added). In Philip’s mind, *he* had found the Messiah rather than being found by Him. Clearly, both he and Nathanael had been

studying the Old Testament. They were excitedly on the lookout for the Messiah. So when Jesus said, "Follow Me," it was all Philip needed. The search was over. His ears, his eyes, and his heart were already open and he was ready to follow.

Granted, Philip never expected a lowly carpenter's son from a small town (Nazareth in Galilee) to be the anointed One. Nevertheless, he received Jesus as the Messiah without hesitation, reluctance, or disbelief. "Come and see," he simply said when Nathanael expressed his doubts. Philip was like "a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon . . . waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him" (Luke 2:25).

Philip's receptivity must be highlighted in this case precisely because it was so out of character for him. His natural tendency was to hang back, hold off, ask tough questions—to not rush too quickly. In Philip's calling, though, we see his spiritual side shining through. The Lord had prepared his heart. By the time Jesus called Philip, he had already been drawn to Christ by the Father. As Jesus said, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me" (John 6:37).

- Read John 1:10–13. Philip was one of those in Israel who chose to receive Jesus as the Messiah. What does this passage say that those who likewise receive Jesus become?

- Read John 6:41–44. What does Jesus say about God's role in bringing people to Him? What does this reveal about God's character and nature?

- Read 1 Corinthians 2:14–16. God had prepared Philip’s heart to receive Jesus. According to the apostle Paul, how do we likewise prepare our hearts to receive the things of God?

- What are some ways that you are actively seeking a relationship with Christ in your life? How have you witnessed God draw you to Himself?

Hesitant and Pessimistic

Our next glimpse of Philip occurs at the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. In this story, we witness Philip’s inherent tendency to narrow in and calculate the reasons why a plan will not work. The spiritual side of Philip was quick to respond to Jesus’ call. But his human side was hesitant and pessimistic. Though a man of faith, he often exhibited a weak faith.

We examined this story when we studied the character of Andrew, but now we will look at it through Philip’s eyes. The scene begins with Jesus traveling across the Sea of Galilee. A great multitude followed Him, “because they saw His signs which He performed on those who were diseased” (John 6:2). Jesus went with His disciples up a mountain, where He saw the throng of people coming toward them (see verses 3–5a). In this moment, late in the day, Jesus asked Philip, “Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?” (verse 5b).

The other disciples likely assumed that Jesus aimed His question at Philip because he was the apostolic administrator—the bean counter responsible for

coordinating meals, handling logistics, and organizing resources. We know that Judas was in charge of keeping the money (see 13:29), so it makes sense that someone else was charged with coordinating the acquisition and distribution of meals and supplies. It was a task that suited Philip's personality. However, as John reveals, this was not the reason why Jesus posed the question to him. Rather, Jesus said this "to test him, for He Himself knew what He would do" (John 6:6).

When posed with this dilemma, Philip no doubt started counting heads and crunching numbers. But it was no use. Including the women and children, the crowd was easily ten thousand people or more, and the disciples collectively had only about eight months' worth of funds saved up. This was barely enough to cover their basic operating expenses and nowhere near enough to give so much as a bite of food to everyone in the crowd.

Philip put the impossibility to Jesus straight: "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have a little" (verse 7). From a material perspective, he was right—the disciples could never feed the crowd. But this wasn't a test of logistical thinking. It was a spiritual test needing spiritual eyes. Philip had been present when Jesus turned water to wine (see John 2:2). He had witnessed many miracles of Jesus, including several creative and regenerative miracles. Yet when he saw the crowd, he began to feel overwhelmed by the impossible and lapsed into his old materialistic thinking.

THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND

The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels (see Matthew 14:13-23; Mark 6:30-46; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14). John's account of the miracle emphasized its importance in two ways: (1) it demonstrated the creative power of Jesus more clearly than any other miracle, and (2) it supported John's purposes of demonstrating the deity of Jesus while also serving to set the stage for Jesus' discourse on the "bread of life" (see 6:22-40). Interestingly, both creative miracles of Jesus—the turning of water into wine (see 2:1-10) and the multiplying of bread—speak of the elements in the Lord's Supper (see 6:53).²

One of the must-haves of a godly leader is *vision*—and this is especially true for followers of Christ. Philip was blinded by unbelief. He allowed arithmetic, human reasoning, and raw data to get in the way and obscure his view of the Lord's limitless capabilities. In all his calculations, he had failed to factor in the difference that Jesus can make.

Jesus taught His disciples, "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20). Philip needed to learn this lesson. As long as he limited himself to his own understanding and his own solutions, *everything* would seem impossible to him.

- Read John 2:1-11. How did the situation at the wedding in Cana resemble the situation on the mountainside? Philip had witnessed this miracle, so why do you think he was still having trouble looking past the "numbers" and believing in God's provision?

- Reread John 6:5-7. Given what Philip had seen Jesus do in previously impossible situations, what should Philip have said? What would have been a better response for him to make?

- Read Matthew 21:21-22. What does Jesus remind His disciples here about faith? What are some rewards of faith that Philip shut down by failing to consider Jesus' power?

- In what ways are you like Philip when it comes to being hesitant and pessimistic? How would you like God to increase your faith in Him today?

Uncertain and Indecisive

The story of the Greeks in Jerusalem who wished to see Jesus provides us with further insights into Philip's temperament. Once again, we examined this story when we discussed the character of Andrew, but now we will look at it from Philip's perspective. In this instance, we find a man so analytical that he lacked certainty. When he was given another opportunity to walk by faith, he got caught up in protocol and handed over the decision to someone else.

As you might recall, this story takes place after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem during the week leading up to his arrest and crucifixion. The Greeks were either God-fearing Gentiles or proselytes to Judaism who had come to Jerusalem to worship God at the Passover. Naturally, they were interested in meeting Jesus. Perhaps they sought out Philip to make the connection because of his Greek name. Or maybe they had learned that he was more or less the one who made all the arrangements on behalf of the disciples.

Whatever the reason, these individuals presumed that Philip was Jesus' meeting organizer. It was a simple and straightforward request, yet, for some reason, Philip appears uncertain and indecisive (see John 12:20-21). Being a by-the-book kind of guy, it is possible he was recalling Jesus' previous instructions to "not go into the way of the Gentiles [nor] enter a city of the Samaritans" (Matthew 10:5). Or maybe he was recalling the time when Jesus said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24).

Only an overanalytical rule-follower like Philip would question whether this meant that Gentiles should not be introduced to Jesus. Had Philip considered the big picture, he might have remembered the time when Jesus offered to come to the home of a centurion to heal his servant (see Matthew 8:5-7). Or when He went out of His way to meet a Samaritan woman (see John 4:1-26). Or when He taught and healed those in a Gentile region for *three days* (see Matthew 15:29-32). Jesus' ministry *priority* was to the Jew first (see Romans 2:10), which meant His words about the Gentiles were a general principle rather than an edict set in stone.

Thankfully, Philip had the heart, and the good sense, to introduce the Greeks to Andrew, whom he knew would bring anyone to Jesus (see John 12:22). In this, we can give Philip credit. Even if he was unsure about introducing them to Jesus himself, he seemed to understand at the least that turning them away completely was not the answer. Philip seemed to know that in his heart, even if his head was obsessed with protocol and procedure.

JESUS' RECEPTION OF THE GREEKS

We can safely assume that Jesus received the Greeks gladly. After all, He Himself had said, "The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out" (John 6:37). John doesn't record anything about Jesus' meeting with the Greeks except the discourse that Jesus gave on that occasion, in which He said, "If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor" (12:26). In short, Jesus preached the gospel to the Greeks and invited them to become His disciples.³

So, what became of Philip? Tradition tells us that he was greatly used in the spread of the early church. By most accounts, he was put to death as a result of his faith by stoning at Heliopolis, in Phrygia (Asia Minor), eight years after the martyrdom of James. Before his death, multitudes came to Christ under his preaching. Philip overcame the human tendencies that often hampered his faith, reminding us in the process that God can use *anyone* for His glory.

- Read John 6:37–40. What was Jesus' promise to all who come to Him? Based on this, what we can assume was Jesus' response in meeting with the Greeks?

- Read Matthew 23:13. Jesus issued these strong words against the Jewish scribes and Pharisees. What was the nature of Jesus' complaint against them?

- Read James 2:1–4. What does James say in this passage about showing partiality? What does this passage say about who is welcome in God's family?

- In what ways are you like Philip when it comes to being uncertain and indecisive? What are some of the ways that God has given you discernment?

CONSIDERING YOUR STORY

Read John 14:7-11. Philip wasn't the only disciple who struggled to grasp the truths that Jesus taught. Yet his earthbound thinking seemed to consistently narrow his spiritual vision.

- Jesus had just made a claim about His divinity—that He and the Father are of the same essence. The disciples had seen Jesus and knew Him, so in effect, they knew the Father as well. What does Philip's question reveal about his lack of understanding this truth?

- When is a time you sought more proof of Christ's divine power, divinity, or grace? When did you realize that what He has provided is already sufficient?

- Philip was slow to understand, slow to trust, and slow to see beyond the moment. Yet church history says he was instrumental in establishing the early church and, prior to his martyrdom, countless people came to Jesus through his preaching. With his story in view, how do you want the Lord to likewise help you in each of these situations?

Quicker to understand:

Quicker to trust:

Quicker to see beyond the moment:

We can all be thankful that the Lord doesn't disqualify the bean counters. As you reflect on the tendencies that hamper your spiritual vision the most, where could you use a greater, broader, or higher vision? How is the Holy Spirit drawing you to seek Christ above all?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

Heavenly Father, I have gotten in Your way more times than I can count. But I am willing to learn a new response. So, every time I am staring at difficulties that are far beyond me, please turn my thoughts toward You instead. Bring Your greatness, Your promises, and Your miracles to mind so I don't get lost in the limitations of the moment. Help me recognize that You are always there and always willing to provide. Thank You for spiritual eyes to see. Amen.



Notes

1. John MacArthur, author and general editor, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), notes on Acts 6:1, 5; 8:5.
2. MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, note on John 6:1-14.
3. John MacArthur, *Twelve Ordinary Men* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 129-130.