

## The Perfect Gift From Above.

Text: Acts 8:27-39

1) The Word

Suggested Hymns:

2) The Sacrament

433, 127, 609, 842, 264

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Acts 8:27–39, *<sup>27</sup> So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, <sup>28</sup> was returning.*

*And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. <sup>29</sup> Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go near and overtake this chariot.” <sup>30</sup> So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?”*

*<sup>31</sup> And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him. <sup>32</sup> The place in the Scripture which he read was this: “He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth. <sup>33</sup> In His humiliation His justice was taken away, And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth.”*

*<sup>34</sup> So the eunuch answered Philip and said, “I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?” <sup>35</sup> Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him.*

*<sup>36</sup> Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, “See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?” <sup>37</sup> Then Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”*

*<sup>38</sup> So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. <sup>39</sup> Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing. (NKJV)*

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

***“Every good gift,”*** writes St. James in his epistle, ***“every perfect gift is from above.”***<sup>1</sup> It does not matter what that gift may be. He is the Cause, the Spring and the Source, the Origin and the Giver, of it.

The air that we breathe, the water that we drink, the food that nourishes our body, the clothing that covers our limbs, all that is comprehended in the wide range of the Fourth Petition, when we pray, ***“Give us this day our daily bread,”*** we have from Him. God’s generous hand has supplied it. If not He, who has? And as with these general gifts, so also with our personal gifts.

Who gave physical strength and prowess to such men as David<sup>2</sup> and Samson,<sup>3</sup> who, when roaring beasts, a young lion and a bear, came against them and they had nothing in their hand, tore them apart as one would have torn a young goat and performed feats that are still the admiration and envy of the physically strong?

Who gave to Sarah,<sup>4</sup> Rebekah,<sup>5</sup> Rachel<sup>6</sup> and Esther<sup>7</sup> such beauty of form and appearance so that they found favour before others? The Bible tells us who it was.

Or again, if you are a skilled mechanic, a talented musician, a successful business man, an adept keeper of books, or whatever other qualifications of mind and ingenuity you may possess, who gave you such skill and such talents?

The prophet Isaiah answers when he says, ***This also comes from the LORD of hosts; he is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in wisdom.***<sup>8</sup> And one of the distinguishing marks between a believer and a man of the world is this, that the one speaks of his possessions as his own, while the other acknowledges them as having come from God.

***“Soul,”*** said the rich man in the parable, ***“you have many goods laid up for many years.”***<sup>9</sup> St. Paul says, ***What do you have that you did not receive?***<sup>10</sup> Pontius Pilate asked Christ, ***Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?***<sup>11</sup> ***Jesus answered, “You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above.”***<sup>11</sup>

A simple distinction, yet an important and significant one, perhaps never more deserving of emphasis than at the present time, when people are in danger of forgetting it; for they carry their heads aloft and fail to give due honour to God to whom it belongs.

But there are higher and more excellent gifts than those which have been mentioned. Man was not created for this world only and therefore has received from above gifts not only for this world.

One such higher and more excellent gift are the Scriptures, without whose revelations and communications life here below would be a riddle and life hereafter inexplicable darkness.

From whom is it? From men? It was written by men, but there is a higher Power that inspired their thoughts and guided their pen. Therefore we sing, "*How precious is the Book Divine, by inspiration given!*"<sup>12</sup>

Again, there is that gift on which all other gifts depend and to which all other gifts are related as their centre and chief, the gift spoken of when it says, "***God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son,***"<sup>13</sup> Jesus Christ, our adorable Lord and Saviour. He is pre-eminently God's Gift to man.

But there is yet another gift that stands inseparably linked with Christ and His blessed work, and to that the Church in the course of her holy instruction directs our consideration at this time.

As our eyes during these forty days of Eastertide turn from that empty grave in Joseph's garden to Christ's ascension, we hear our Lord's utterance as given in today's gospel, ***It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Comforter will not come to you.***<sup>14</sup>

Let us consider *the Perfect gift from above*, namely the Holy Spirit, His work and office. May the Lord bless our meditation.

## 1. The Word

Now, who is this Comforter, this good and perfect Gift from above, but the third person of the adorable Trinity, the Holy Spirit?

Six hundred years before the occurrence mentioned in the Gospel for today the prophet Zephaniah had declared, <sup>10</sup> ***From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suppliants, my scattered ones, shall bring my offering.***<sup>15</sup>

David before that had sung, <sup>31</sup> *Envoys will come out of Egypt; Ethiopia will quickly stretch out her hands to God.*<sup>16</sup>

With the rise of Christianity these prophecies were being fulfilled. Here was an envoy, consisting of nobles come out of Egypt; an Ethiopian stretching forth his hands earnestly beseeching God.

The account is, *And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship,*<sup>28</sup> *was returning.*

It is supposed that knowledge of the true God Jehovah had been carried into Ethiopia nine hundred years previously by the Queen of Sheba after her visit to King Solomon.

But, however obtained, his religious knowledge did not permit the eunuch to rest until he had journeyed to Jerusalem and seen in God's own city and Temple, how He was worshiped. The worship being over, he was now on his way back. Wishing to use his time profitably, he was reading, as he travelled, the prophet Isaiah.

But the book was too deep for him; ignorance still clouded his mind. He did not understand it. Then it was that the Holy Spirit came to his help. He directs His minister, the deacon Philip, *"Go near and overtake this chariot."* He obeyed, "ran," is the term, and while proceeding along the desert highway, he heard a voice as of someone reading aloud.

He recognised the Scriptures read aloud by the eunuch, the 53d chapter of Isaiah, and courteously asked, *"Do you understand what you are reading?"* *"How can I,"* answered the occupant of the chariot, *"How can I, unless someone guides me?"* *And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him.*

The passage of Scripture which he read was this, *"He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth.*<sup>33</sup> *In His humiliation His justice was taken away, And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth."* The eunuch then said to Philip, *"I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?"*

Here was a most suitable text, a fine opportunity for Philip, and he availed himself of it. Most fascinatingly it says, <sup>35</sup> *Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him.*

Line after line, winged by the Spirit of God, Philip explained that Old Testament passage, showing who it was that was led as a sheep to the slaughter and as a lamb before His shearer was silent, who in His humiliation was deprived of His right of judgement, and whose life was taken from the earth.

And what was the effect produced? <sup>36</sup> *Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?"* <sup>37</sup> *Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."* <sup>38</sup> *So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.*

And when the ceremony was over, when Philip's work was done, what a strange occurrence! *"The Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing* back into his native land.

From this descriptive narrative, so rich in lessons, we could learn a few particulars in respect to the work of the Holy Spirit. No one can carefully read this account without being impressed with the Spirit's interest and efforts in behalf of this man.

Who was it that prompted him to leave his own country and travel that great and dangerous distance of seven hundred miles to witness the worship of the true God?

Who was it that led him to purchase that expensive parchment of Isaiah and to read its sacred contents? Who gave direction to Philip, *"Go near and overtake this chariot"*? Who opened the page to that fruitful 53d chapter of Isaiah? Who spirited Philip away when his work was completed?

And while these and other features might appear extraordinary because of the extraordinary conditions prevailing, let us remember that the Holy Spirit exerts Himself in this way with respect to every immortal soul.

We have no reasons from which to infer that the Holy Spirit has any particular favourites upon whom, to the exclusion of others, He specially desires conferring His gifts and blessings.

What He did toward and for this eunuch He is ready and willing to do toward and for any person. Externally and internally in this way He still operates, arranges and shapes events, influences and convert men's souls. And very forcibly and plainly the narrative brings out how He does this.

The eunuch, sitting in his chariot, was reading, and what was he reading? Was it a book on philosophy, a dissertation on statesmanship or politics, or maybe a novel, or a traveller's description of the beautiful country through which he was passing?

We have heard what engaged his attention. He was reading the prophet Isaiah, a portion of the Bible. There is a wonderful connection between that Book and the Spirit of God. He inspired it. We read in 2 Peter 1:21, *holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.*

It is His Book, and because it is different from all other books it deserves a consideration different from all other books. God is speaking to you in this Book. See, then, my dear hearer, that you copy the conduct of the eunuch. How much more easily you may do so!

In those days Bibles were most expensive, as they had all to be written out by hand, and most bulky, being scrolls of parchment wound about a staff; now we can secure them at a trifling cost, in size small enough to fit into a pocket.

But of what value is the Bible, no matter how easily procured and how cheap and handy, if it is not read? It is by reading it that the Spirit of God works in men's hearts, enlightens their eyes, and opens their understanding, so that they see the wondrous things revealed there.

Do not neglect to read that Book which is the only source of the true religion, the only guide to heaven. Like the eunuch, sit and ponder the Word of God!

Again the Spirit of God works through the instrumentality of men. The Spirit of God could have taught the eunuch and opened the eyes of his understanding without the help of Philip, if had He so pleased. He could have

used an angel to do it, the same angel whom He commanded to tell Philip to arise and go toward the south.

But that was not His method. He used the ministry of man. Philip must do the explaining. It is still so. God works through persons. He has established the ministry. Not by chance or by our own choosing do we stand in these pulpits. There is a divinity in our calling.

The same Spirit who said to Philip, “*Go near and [join] this chariot*” says to us, “*Go near and join yourself to this congregation.*” We have fallen on times where some have little or no use for the Christian ministry, neglect its service, and speak belittlingly of its office. Not so does God look upon it. Paul says 1 Corinthians 1:21, *it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.* Let men avoid being wiser than the all-wise God.

On the other hand, let the pulpit never forget what should be the core, the substance, and central matter of its message. Admirably it says of Philip, “*He preached Jesus to him.*” In simple exposition he proved to the eunuch that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Messiah, the Saviour of the world.

That is the supreme theme of our sermons still, if the ministry is to fulfil its purpose. We must preach Jesus, our sermons must be Biblical. For us to offer, and for you to expect, what might be just as appropriate on the platform, in the lecture-hall, and in the classroom, from a professor of philosophy, is improper and will not bring about what the Christian ministry has been designed for.

The magnet, the secret power, under the Spirit’s influence, that draws men’s hearts to salvation and heaven, is here: “*He preached Jesus.*” If that does not draw, nothing will; if anything else draws, it is only transitory, fading, unavailing.

## 2. The Sacrament

And there is one other way, as the text points out, that the Spirit of God works. This is a consideration of big importance. “*See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?*” said the eunuch to Philip. Philip had preached to him Jesus, had informed him regarding the integral, essential parts of the religion of Jesus Christ.

What did such preaching include? Why, when the eunuch saw the water, did he immediately ask to be baptised? Evidently Philip must have taught him that Baptism belonged to the first things of Christ's religion.

And on the first Pentecost, when Peter had preached, and when, as St. Luke relates, his hearers were pricked in their hearts and said to Peter and to the rest of the apostles, "**Men and brethren, what shall we do?**" What did he answer? Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "**Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.**"<sup>17</sup>

What further witness do we need that the Holy Spirit works in and through Baptism? Can we conceive a more sacred and solemn scene than was enacted in that quiet spot by the roadside on the way that leads down from Jerusalem to Gaza — the eunuch standing in the water, the evangelist reverently administering the Sacrament, the witnesses of the act, the servants of the Ethiopian and the angels of God?

A pity that even some Christian denominations regard Baptism so lightly, speaking of it as being merely a rite of initiation into the Church. Truthfully and Scripturally we call it a Christianising; we hold that by it we become Christians, that the Holy Spirit operates in and through Holy Baptism.

As St. Paul says in Titus 3:5, **according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration [of the new birth] and renewing of the Holy Spirit.**

Surely no one can read this narrative without learning that Baptism belongs to the first of Christian duties, a means by which we are received into fellowship with Jesus, enter into that covenant which unites man with the Triune God, makes him a member of His Church and an heir of salvation.

These, then, are the means through which the Spirit of God carries on His work in our hearts: through His Word, read in the Bible and preached by His ministry, and through the holy Sacraments.

The story ends, **the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing**, uplifted, happy. He had obtained what he desired: peace with God, satisfaction of heart and mind

— the most valuable possessions that a person can obtain in this world and for the next.

And what he obtained we also may obtain if we are as mindful of religion, as earnest and conscientious as he, yielding ourselves to the influence of God's Spirit in the means mentioned.

As to what finally became of the Ethiopian eunuch, we know nothing but positive things. Eusebius, the first Christian historian, informs us that he was instrumental in bringing many to Christ in his native country.

How else could it have been? When God's Spirit has called us by the Gospel, enlightened us with His gifts, and sanctifies us, we cannot but be witnesses for Him, helpers together with Him, to lead others to the same salvation and blessedness bestowed to us.

May the earnestness, the happy and the blessed zeal of the Ethiopian eunuch, through the working of God's Spirit in our hearts and lives, be ours! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> James 1:17

<sup>2</sup> 1 Samuel 17:34-37

<sup>3</sup> Judges 14:5-6

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 12:11

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 26:7

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 29:17

<sup>7</sup> Esther 1:11

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 28:29

<sup>9</sup> Luke 12:19

<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:7

<sup>11</sup> John 19:10-11

<sup>12</sup> Hymn 264

<sup>13</sup> John 3:16

<sup>14</sup> John 16:4-15

<sup>15</sup> Zephaniah 3:10

<sup>16</sup> Psalm 68:31

<sup>17</sup> Acts 2:37-39