

THE TRIUMPHANT CHRIST
Ephesians 4:7-10

Intro: Recently I was reading Psalm 68, and in doing so I was struck with the words of the 18th verse:

Thou hast ascended on high,
thou hast led captivity captive:
thou hast received gifts for men;
yea, for the rebellious also,
that the Lord God might dwell among them.

I immediately recognized these as words that are found also in the NT. While I could not remember immediately where they were, a little checking enabled me to find them in Ephesians 4:8. When Paul wrote those words in Ephesians he was quoting David's words written some 1,000 years before.

If you will turn to Ephesians 4, you will see that the Person that Paul was referring to in these words was none other than our Lord Jesus Christ. And so he was also telling us that David had the Lord in mind when he wrote the words originally in Psalm 68. Thus, Psalm 68, like so many of the Psalms, is a Messianic Psalm; that is, it was prophetic of Christ, the Messiah of Israel.

If you will read Psalm 68, you will see that it begins with a prayer which Moses prayed every time the cloud in the wilderness began to move, and the people continued on their journey through the desert with the ark of the covenant going before them. That prayer is found in Numbers 10:35. Let me read that verse for you. Look at Psalm 68:1 as I read Numbers 10:35.

And it came to pass, when the ark set forward,
that Moses said,
Rise up, Lord, and let thine enemies be scattered;
and let them that hate thee flee before thee.

Now if you will read through Psalm 68, you will see that it is a psalm proclaiming the glorious victories of the Lord. He is the mighty Conqueror. He is **THE TRIUMPHANT SAVIOUR**. The Lord had promised His people that no enemy would be able to stand before them. He would give them victory over all of their enemies as long as they walked in obedience to His will.

David said that the Lord "led captivity captive." That is a very interesting expression, isn't it? But what does it mean?

That expression is first found in the song of Deborah and Barak in Judges 5:12. They were celebrating their victory over Jabin, the king of the Canaanites, who had conquered the Israelites, and severely oppressed them, because the Israelites had been disobedient to God. Under Deborah and Barak's leadership Jabin had been killed, and the Canaanites

were completely conquered by the armies of Israel. So the expression speaks of a complete victory, the enemy had been conquered!

Psalm 68:17 tells us that when such victories occurred it was because, as David said, "the Lord is among them." And then in v. 18 we see that He had "ascended on high," **THE TRIUMPHANT CHRIST**, and from there He had "received gifts for men," which, according to v. 19, He was pouring out daily upon His people.

Now that gives us the background for Paul's quotation of this verse in Eph. 4:8. He was commemorating the glorious victory of our Lord Jesus Christ! And in verses 9 and 10, which do not need to be a parenthesis because they are a vital part of what Paul was teaching here--but in these verses we see just what the victory was that Paul was referring to.

Let me speak, first of all, then, in considering our text, about . . .

I. THE LORD'S DESCENT.

As Paul explained here, the Lord could not have "ascended up on high" if He had not "descended **first** into the lower parts of the earth."

Obviously as the Lord God of the OT came down in real, spiritual presence to deliver His people in OT times, so the NT teaches us that Christ came down, not merely in His spiritual and unseen presence, but He came down "and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:7b). He was the Son of God incarnate, in the flesh. He was born of the virgin Mary. He had a human body. He lived on this earth for over 30 years. He was "touched with all the feelings of our infirmities" (Heb. 4:15m). As a Man He continued to be God, and so we speak of Him as the Son of God incarnate.

But notice what Paul said in addition to this about our Lord's descent to the earth. He said that our Lord "descended **first** into the lowest parts of the earth." By this he did not mean that this was the first thing that the Lord did, because it was about the last thing that He did. He meant that He had to descend "into the lower parts of the earth" first, before He could ascend back where He had been, and go as He intended to go: leading "captivity captive."

What are we to see in that expression, "the lower parts of the earth"?

This has to do with our Lord's death. He had become a man

in order that He might die. He died on the Cross. He was buried as evidence of His death. The statement that He went "into the lower parts of the earth" includes the Cross, and it includes the tomb. Some say that our Lord went to hell after He died. I personally do not believe that the Bible teaches that, and that is not necessary in order for this passage to have the meaning that it does.

But why did Jesus Christ die?

You know, I want to tell you something this morning that I don't remember ever having said this before in the same way. But that is one question that I am not qualified to answer fully. In my younger days I might have felt more confident about it than I do now. But to me this morning the death of Christ was so far-reaching in all of its accomplishment that I am persuaded that we will have to wait until we get to heaven to be able to give that question its full answer.

But I can tell you some very important parts of that answer. Why did Jesus Christ die? The angel told Joseph before the Lord Jesus Christ was born,

. . . and thou shalt call his name JESUS:
for he shall save his people from their sins
(Matt. 1:21b).

The Lord Jesus Himself said,

For the Son of man (referring to Himself) is come
to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10).

Paul said in 1 Cor. 15:3,

For I delivered unto you first of all
that which I also received,
how that Christ died for our sins
according to the scriptures.

Isaiah said about Christ 700 years before Christ was born,

All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the Lord (the Father) hath laid on him (Christ)
the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:6).

The Apostle Peter wrote in 1 Pet. 3:18,

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins,
the just for the unjust,
that he might bring us to God,
being put to death in the flesh,
but quickened by the Spirit.

And when the Lord Jesus died, He said on the Cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30). And in John 17:4 He prayed,

I have glorified thee on the earth:
I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do.

Do you get the message? When Christ died on the Cross He

won a glorious victory on behalf of all who would ever believe in Him, winning for them deliverance from sin's penalty, deliverance from sin's power, and, eventually, when we are all in heaven, deliverance forever from sin itself! On the Cross He sealed the doom of Satan. On the Cross He guaranteed a new heaven and a new earth. As I said a moment ago, it is impossible for us to state in all of its entirety what our Lord Jesus accomplished when He died on the Cross. All other victories are not even worth talking about when we think of His triumph at Calvary. His enemies thought it was His end. They did not know that He was the Victor, and they were the vanquished. There is a world of truth bound up in those words "he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth."

But the story did not end at the Cross, and neither does our text. What else do we read here? We read of . . .

II. THE LORD'S ASCENT.

You have this stated in vv. 8, 9, and 10. (Read.)

We heard in our Scripture reading this morning about our Lord's resurrection. He ascended out of the tomb.

If we had continued on with the Biblical record we would have found that He ascended back to the Father. V. 10 here tells us that He "ascended up far above all things."

Turn back to Ephesian 1 and read about our Lord's resurrection and ascension in vv. 19 (the last request of Paul's prayer) through v. 23. Here we see what a glorious and triumphant victory He won.

What preacher has ever been able to do justice to the truth of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ? There never has been anything like it, and there never will be. The Lord conquered death. He conquered the grave. He conquered sin. He guaranteed our resurrection. He gave proof of the Father's acceptance of His work. And on and on we could go. You have the whole story of the Gospel in the descent and the ascent of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But I want to raise a final question in looking at this passage of Scripture. It is this: WHY WOULD PAUL BRING THIS INTO THE BOOK OF EPHESIANS AT THIS POINT? This brings us to the one subject that remains in our text. It has to do with . . .

III. THE LORD'S GIFTS.

Notice this in vv. 7 and 8 and the latter part of v. 10.

What resulted as a part of the work of our Lord Jesus Christ? I have told you that it is impossible for us to calculate all of the results. But here is another: the Church, the body of Christ, was born.

What is the Church? Is it the Catholic church? Is it the Baptist church? Is it the Methodist church? Is it the Pentecostal church? Is it the Bible church? What is it?

The Church is the body of Christ, made up (as far as our generation is concerned) of all true believers in Christ. If you have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour, you have been baptized by the Holy Spirit into the Church, the body of Christ. This is the true Church. You may be a member of some local church congregation, or you may not. If you are not in a local church, you ought to be. But the body of Christ is the world-wide fellowship of all who truly know Christ as their Saviour from sin. Some of the members of Christ's body are in heaven now. There are others who will yet be added to this body who have not yet been saved. The Lord knows who they are. We do not. But we are looking for them by preaching the Gospel to every creature, believing that God will touch the hearts of those who are His elect, and He will save them.

But what about those of us who are members of the Church, Christ's body, but we are still here on this earth? Are we now what we ought to be? If you are wise and honest, you will answer, "No." We are far from being what we ought to be. Are we becoming more and more like God wants us to be. If you are walking with the Lord in daily fellowship, you will answer, "Yes." We are not what we will be some day, but we are headed in that direction.

What are we going to be like when the Lord is finished with us? We are going to be like Christ.

NOW COMES MY MAIN QUESTION: IN THE DESCENT OF CHRIST, AND IN HIS ASCENSION, DID HE MAKE PROVISION FOR OUR PERFECTION? The answer is, "YES." How? By the gifts which He has given.

What are those gifts? There are two kinds that are mentioned here.

- A. The gifts which He has given to each of us individually. See vv. 7, 8.
- B. The gift of men whom the Lord has given to His Church. See the verses that follow our text, vv. 11 ff.

Now what is the purpose of all of these gifts? Just read vv. 12, 13.

God has given all of us gifts, gifts which are the expression of His grace, and which are a part of His grace. He has given the church "pastors and teachers." For what reason? To administrate large congregations, or even small congregations? Are they to entertain their people? Are they to promote all kinds of elaborate programs to try to get people to come to the church. "No" to all of that! The Lord has, in the words of Psalm 68:19, loaded us with His benefits, and every one of them has to do with Christ, and every one is not only designed for our perfection, but they guarantee our perfection.

To bring it down to the ministry of Trinity Bible Church, what is my task as your pastor? What is the task of our elders and deacons who share this ministry with me (because it is not just my work)? Our task is to minister Christ to you. To tell you about Christ. To teach you of Christ. To live Christ before you. And to pray, as Paul prayed for the Galatian churches, that "Christ" would "be formed" in them. See Gal. 4:19. It is in knowing and loving and obeying and in following Christ that you and I are to be brought to maturity in this marvelous salvation which was why Christ descended to the earth, and now has ascended back to the Father in heaven.

And do I need to tell you that just as the Father ordained our salvation, and Christ came to accomplish it for us, so the Holy Spirit is not busy in the life of every true child of God, bringing that work of salvation to its full realization in our lives.

Concl: You see, salvation is CHRIST--from start to finish! If you want to grow as a Christian, then learn of Christ. If you are without Christ as your Saviour today, then you are without salvation. And if you are without salvation, you cannot go to heaven. You are still in your sins.

But thank God, this is still the day of salvation. And the Word authorizes me to tell you that today, if you will believe in Him, you will be saved. Come to Him just as you are. Let Him make you what you need to be. And He will do it without any doubt or failure if He is your Saviour. Trust Him today. Trust Him now. Let this be the time and place you will always remember as the time and place when the Lord brought you to Himself.