



Ephesians

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Therefore He says:

**“When He ascended on high,
He led captivity captive,
And gave gifts to men.”** Ephesians 4:8

The verse begins with “Therefore.” This is stated to explain the previous words, “But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” In order to show this, Paul cites the substance of Psalm 68:18. He changes several words and he goes from the 2nd person to the 3rd person. Thus, it is not a direct quote, but rather it conveys the substance of what was said and then he equates it to the triumph of the work of Christ –

“You have ascended on high,
You have led captivity captive;
You have received gifts among men,
Even from the rebellious,
That the Lord God might dwell there.” Psalm 68:18

In the Old Testament, the Ark of the Covenant was the place where God met with man. Its placement in Zion was the sign of victory of God over His enemies. They were defeated, the land had been subdued, and God rested in His place. The thought of ascending on high is that of being exalted above all the others who have been placed in subjection to Him. Though Zion was not the highest peak in elevation, it was considered the highest place of honor. Thus, any time that someone traveled to Jerusalem, regardless of direction or elevation from which they came, they were said to “go up” to Jerusalem.

As the Lord who dwelt between the cherubim of the ark had been brought to this place of exaltation, and as it was a sign that His enemies had been vanquished, it says, “You have led captivity captive.” This signifies that those who were once the captors (called the abstract “captivity”) had themselves been made captive. They were now the subdued prisoners who were conducted in bonds during the triumphal procession to that spot of exultation.

Quite often this verse is cited as a display of the prisoners being released from captivity by the work of Christ. Though this is something He did, it is not what is being referred to here. Rather, it is the foes of God being brought into captivity. After this defeating of His enemies, it then says, “You have received gifts among men.”

Ascribing this thought to the work of Christ, Paul modifies it and says, “And gave gifts to men.” This is the specific explanation of the previous verse which said, “...but to each one of us was grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” The spoils of war were handed out to the subjects of the kingdom according to the pleasure of the vanquishing ruler. Likewise, God passes out His gifts of victory according to His choosing as well.

Paul’s words, though modifying the psalm, do not change the intent. The two thoughts side by side say:

- And gave gifts to men (Paul)
- You have received gifts among men (Psalm)

The same idea is expressed. Christ received gifts which He then immediately turned around and handed out to His subjects. This follows from other times in Scripture where the same thought is denoted by a sudden and succinct expression. Scripture may say something like, “Bring me a heifer,” which is simply a shortened form of “Bring a heifer to me for sacrifice.”

The analogy Paul is making is that Christ was victorious in His work. He was exalted to the highest position, there at the right hand of God, and from that position He gives the Holy Spirit to His subjects in the measure He so chooses.

Life application: If you have called on Christ, you have been sealed with the Spirit. Now it is your responsibility to take the gift you possess and use it for God’s glory. Each thing that you do should be geared towards returning glory to God for the grace which He has bestowed upon you.

(Now this, “He ascended”—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? Ephesians 4:9

Paul now introduces a parenthetical thought concerning what he just said in verse 8. There he cited the psalm which said, “When He ascended on high...” He demonstrates that the psalm

was intended to be a messianic psalm and which pointed to Christ's descent from heaven to earth. It is thus also a presentation of the divine/human nature of Christ. Christ ascended, but in order to ascend, it meant that something else had to occur first. In order for us to think this through, he places it in the form of a question, "[W]hat does it mean but that He also first descended...?"

It is His human nature which is being referred to here. The reason for this is to show that what was asked of us in verses 1 through 3 was already imposed on Christ the Lord. We are not being asked to do anything that He did not take upon Himself. Those words read –

“...to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, 2 with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, 3 endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

This is what Christ did as is noted in Philippians 2:5-8 –

“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, 7 but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.”

Understanding this, we are shown that God stepped out of the eternal, infinite realm and united with humanity; He “descended.” This is something that Jesus spoke of in John 3:13 –

“No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.”

However, Paul's words go further. He says that “He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth.” Questions often arise as to what this term means. Sensationalists will generally say that this means that He went down into Hades itself. They even tie this into the words of the psalm concerning His leading captivity captive, indicating the releasing of souls from a type of prison. But as we saw in that analysis, it is not speaking of that at all. This is not speaking of His descent into hell. It is speaking of His incarnation.

A contrast is being made between His ascension to “far above all the heavens” of the next verse, and the lowly state of being confined to “the lower parts of the earth” of this verse. Again, the reason for Paul's words of verses 1-3 explain what he is talking about. We are in “the lower parts of the earth” and we are being asked to conduct ourselves in a particular way. In order to be compliant and grateful for our current station, we are being told that Christ Himself, very God of very God, came and did the same. Because He was willing to do so, we should likewise be willing to emulate Him. The coming verses, after the parenthetical thought,

will continue to show us this. We are to live in this world and to pursue life in this world, but we are to do it with the heavenly attitude which Christ retained while He walked among us.

Albert Barnes rightly states this concerning Paul's words –

“Into the lower parts of the earth - To the lowest state of humiliation. This seems to be the fair meaning of the words. Heaven stands opposed to earth. One is above; the other is beneath. From the one Christ descended to the other; and he came not only to the earth, but he stooped to the most humble condition of humanity here...”

Life application: Beware of those commentaries which tend to over-sensationalize Scripture. There is enough sensation in the work of Christ to fill our hearts and minds with an eternity of wonder. When people speak of dreams and visions, of angels and demons, and of heaven and hell, they often get off into unnecessary explanations of these things. The sensationalism sells well, but it is more often than not an inappropriate analysis of what is being relayed.

He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) Ephesians 4:10

Here, Paul is still referring to the psalm he quoted concerning the ascension of Christ. He just noted that His ascension implies that He had to first descend. Christ did not originate on earth, and therefore He had to have come from elsewhere; He descended to our lowly station. Now Paul speaks of “He who descended...” It is He and not another. The same One who came from heaven, descending to dwell among us, “is also the One who ascended.”

The descent was the incarnation; God uniting with human flesh. After that, he ascended – fully God and fully Man. He did not put off His humanity, but retains it forever. And yet, in this marvelous state, it is He who “ascended far above all the heavens.” The ascension of Christ was a demonstration that He is fully God. In Matthew 28, we see what it means to be in this state –

“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.” Matthew 28:18

With this power, He ascended. And this was not just “above the heavens,” but “through the heavens.” This is noted in Hebrews 4:14 –

“Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.”

The expression gives us the sense of Christ's movement from sphere to sphere, claiming authority over each as He went. Eventually, He came to His final and most exalted spot, there to rule from the throne of God with His Father. From this highest position, far above the

heavens, He rules completely and fully. This position is His in order “that He might fill all things.”

If we think of being in a room which is completely dark and then a light is turned on, we can partially understand Christ’s position. The light shines and it dispels all darkness. Everything becomes clear and the entire room is filled with what was once lacking. We receive the light, the heat of the light, the knowledge of what the light shows us, and so forth. This is what God has done in Christ.

The universe itself was frustrated by sin. There was darkness and chaotic occurrences because the devil had stepped in and fouled things up. The light of Christ, however, shone through the darkness and the darkness could no longer overcome the light. And this remains true. Christ’s light is being radiated out, filling all things according to a set plan. Thus He fills all things. As Ellicott says it –

“Christ, as God, is present everywhere; as glorified man, He can be present anywhere.”

Life application: We may think there is darkness in the world which is gaining traction and somehow frustrating God’s plans, but this is not the case. They are being worked out despite the darkness. He has simply allowed it to continue until the time of His choosing. Christ’s victory assures us that this is so.

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, Ephesians 4:11

This verse begins with an emphasis on the word “He.” Thus the NKJV says, “And He Himself gave some to be...” It refers back to “Christ” of verse 7. It is He and He alone who has made these designations. Though man may ordain, only Christ truly appoints. Each person is placed in their position within the church according to Christ’s choice and His designation.

In these selected positions, he begins with “apostles.” This category is to be taken in its stricter sense. The word “apostle” means “messenger,” and at times, the early church was said to send out “messengers” using the term “apostle.” However, the stricter sense is speaking of those designated specifically by the Lord and meeting certain qualifications. For example, one is that they had personally seen the Lord. Paul fits this requirement because of his unusual meeting with the Lord on the road to Damascus. This stricter sense of the designation of “apostle” no longer applies within the church. It ended with the last of the called apostles, and its need ceased with the final word “Amen” at the end of the book of Revelation.

Next he notes, “some prophets.” From the earliest times of the church, the office of prophet was separate and distinct from the other offices of the church. They were those who received special revelation from the Lord for the establishment and building of the early church. Such

people stood and proclaimed what they had received under inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As in the case of the office of apostle, this office of “prophet” has ceased. The history of the church shows us this. Only those who boastfully make unfounded assertions still claim this title. It is both unnecessary (we have the written word of God), and it is presumptuous because it makes a claim of special revelation received from the Lord that cannot be validated. The only prophesying that is truly relevant today is forth-telling, not foretelling. If one proclaims what has been written, it could be considered the work of a forth-telling prophet, but there are other titles which better describe this function. The term “prophet” is no longer needed within the church, despite boastful claims otherwise.

Paul next states, “some evangelists.” This word, euaggelistés, is used only three times in the New Testament; here, in Acts 21:8; and in 2 Timothy 4:5. HELPS Words Studies notes that it means “someone with a vocational calling from God to announce the good news of the Gospel.” ... “Every Christian is called to share the Gospel, but ‘an evangelist’ does so as a vocation, which includes preaching the full message of Christ's salvation (the whole Gospel).”

The verse concludes with, “some pastors and teachers.” These two offices are lumped together here just as they were noted under the single category of “teachers” in 1 Corinthians 12:28. These people preach the word, both to the unconverted and to the converted. They are to care for those under their charge in organization, instruction, proper explanation of the word now written, building up the body, counseling, etc. The office of pastor is possibly broader in scope than the teacher, but as both are noted under the one title of “teacher” in 1 Corinthians 12, they both are given for a united purpose.

Concerning the offices listed in this verse, and whether the first two are still relevant or not, Albert Barnes provides a wise and considered thought –

“On the question whether this celebrated passage describes the regular orders or the functions, ordinary and extraordinary, of the ministry, we may fairly say that while no doubt the very genius of the passage points to the latter alternative, yet the ultimate appeal must be made to history. It is clear, from the nature of the case, that none could inherit the direct and universal commission from Christ held by the Apostles; it is certain historically that the supernatural gifts of prophecy and miracle passed away; it is hardly less indisputable that the two functions of evangelism and pastorate were always shared among the three orders of bishops, priests, and deacons after the close of the Apostolic age.”

Life application: Although it sounds impressive for someone to claim the title of “apostle” or “prophet,” they are inappropriate titles to claim. Best to steer clear of such folks.

...for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, Ephesians 4:12

The word “for” is used three times in the English of this verse, but actually two different words are used, *pros* and *eis*. The word *pros* gives the idea of “with a view to.” It is the ultimate end which is in view. The word *eis* gives the idea of “unto.”

The first thought is, “...for the equipping of the saints.” The appointment of the five offices of the previous verse (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers), is with a view to, or the ultimate end of, “equipping the saints.” The word translated as “equipping” here is *katartismos*. It is found only here in the New Testament, but it is found in classical Greek where it refers to the refitting of ships, and also to the setting of bones.

It is as if the church is being used in order to bring about a refitting of that which was lost. Those in this special body are being brought into a restored relationship with God where intimate fellowship will exist, just as it originally was for Adam. The “ministry” and the “edifying” which are next mentioned are the means to obtain this end. Thus, “equipping” is in the emphatic position.

This is why we can discern that two of the offices are no longer needed, that of the apostles and prophets. They were given with a view to the equipping of the saints. With the end of the apostolic era, and with the end of the giving of biblical inspiration, they were no longer required. However, the other three categories are still needed for the end purpose of equipping the saints. They are being perfected for the ultimate goal for which the church is intended.

Next Paul notes that this is “for the work of ministry” in order to reach the desired end goal. As noted, the word “for” here gives the idea of “unto.” The equipping of the saints is “unto the work of the ministry.” The work of the ministry, then, is intended for the equipping, or perfecting, of the saints. The evangelists, pastors, and teachers conduct their duties in order for this to come about.

Further, their work is for, or unto, “the edifying of the body of Christ.” When the body (meaning the sum of the individual parts) is edified, then the end goal of equipping the saints will be met. Paul’s words are logically showing us how the church is being prepared to be the beautiful temple where God will reside. He will continue with this line of thought in the verses ahead, and he will tell why this work is so vital. Failing to adhere to the inspired words of the apostles and prophets, and a failure to have sound evangelists, pastors, and teachers, can only lead to a sad end.

Life application: It is right and appropriate that we should pursue sound doctrine.

Understanding the nuances of the Greek is often not possible by reading any given translation of the Bible. Therefore, an analysis of the original languages, and sound commentary from those who have been properly trained in those languages, is a reasonable way of discerning what is right and proper concerning sure doctrine.