

HE LED CAPTIVITY CAPTIVE
Ephesians 4:7-10

INTRO: On this ascension day I want to take us to a rather difficult passage of Scripture. We find it in Ephesians 4:8-10 (read). I want you to notice that the ascension of Christ is mentioned in verse 8, verse 9, and verse 10. The ascension of Christ is an important part of the Gospel. We find it recorded in Mark 16:15-16. We find it again in Luke 24:46-53. We find it once more in Acts 1:6-11 and we will stop to read that account. There we have an account of Christ's ascension. The ascension of Christ to heaven is very clearly given in the Word of God. And as we consider Ephesians 4:7-10, we will be taking on a rather difficult and controversial passage.

Our main emphasis will be to answer two questions. First, what is meant in verse 8 by the words, "He led captivity captive" and second, what is meant by the words in verse 9, "He descended into the lower parts of the earth." As we consider the whole context, we will see that the overriding theme is unity in the Church. I confess it is a rather mixed up message, but I trust to achieve my goal of answering the two questions, and give as a bonus some points on true Christian unity.

We will consider first this morning, the preceding context of Ephesians 4:1-6. Then we will consider the content of the passage, and its difficulties in verses 7-10. Then we will consider the following context, or the conclusions Paul draws from our passage. So, in our outline this morning, let me give us first the context of these verses.

I. THE CONTEXT OF THE PASSAGE

In considering the context, let us look first at the letter as a whole. The letter to the Ephesians, like other of Paul's writings, divides into two main sections. The first is theological or doctrinal in nature and the second is practical, or it gives the duties of the Christian. Chapters 1-3 give us the doctrinal section and the theme is that wonderful subject of salvation. Chapters 4-6 give us the practical section. So you will note that our verses come near the beginning of this practical section, which begins in 4:1.

So, to get what is just before our verses, let us read verses 1-6 (read). You cannot get much more practical than that. Paul desires for the believer a walk worthy of the calling with which he was called. I trust that one of your overriding desires is to be like Christ. To walk worthy of this great salvation we have experienced.

Paul tells us how that walk is to be in general. It is to be with all lowliness. There is humility. It is to be with gentleness and longsuffering. We are, as Christians, to bear with one another in love. We are to endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Today, great stress is placed on this unity of the Spirit. It means, in today's church, that you do everything you can to keep the peace. It means, as I learned from the letter we put out here a while ago, that you do not name names or talk negatively about other churches. It means that you are a peacekeeper, not a peace maker. It means that you do not sound a trumpet when danger enters through other, so called Christians.

In my view, today, what passes for unity is not true unity. Someone here called it 'get-along-ism'. In this kind of unity, as someone has aptly pointed out, relationships trump truth. The apostle Paul warned the early church that after his departure, wolves would enter from among themselves, and they would shred the flock. That is what today's unity effort is doing. When unity is maintained at the expense of doctrine, the Church is being destroyed from within. Now let me quickly say that I am not promoting rebellion. I am all for true unity but I have no interest in unity at the price of doctrine or truth.

So in Ephesians 4:1-6, Paul tells us why this unity is important. First, there is only one body. What that means is there is only one true Church. But let us be careful to not think that all who call themselves Christians are part of that true Church. Jesus Himself said that in the day of judgment MANY would come and say, "Lord, have we not been really good people?" And He will say, "Depart from Me you cursed into everlasting fire." Not all that glitters is gold.

So the unity we are to strive for is within the parameters of true doctrine among true believers. The fact that there is only one body argues for this unity. The fact that there is only one Spirit argues for this true unity. The fact that there is only one hope of our calling; only one Lord; only one faith; only one baptism; only one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all, argues for this unity.

Let me only mention that the one baptism, in my opinion, is Spirit baptism. It is that which takes place the moment we repent of our sins and truly believe in Christ. And let me also just mention, because it is an issue in the Church today, when it says God is in us all, that does not mean all mankind. The Message Bible says He is in all. That is the error of pantheism. When it says He is in YOU all, it is talking about born again believers only.

II. THE CONTENT OF THE PASSAGE

So with that brief look at the previous context, let us consider the content of our passage in verses 7-10. Stressed in the earlier context is unity and oneness. But verse 7 begins with a disjunctive; the word 'but'. We have a contrast coming. You see, in the previous passage is oneness and unity, BUT now we have individuality. Look at verse 7, "BUT, to each one of us..." We, all believers together, make up one body; the Church. But we are still individual believers. So if we are many individuals, how is the unity maintained? Well, to each one of us is given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.

Then Paul says, "Therefore He says: 'When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.'" As Paul is speaking about the gifts Christ distributes to every believer his mind goes to Psalm 68:18. Let's turn there (read).

One of the books I have on the Psalms is written by John F. Brug. And he says of this Psalm, "Like the three preceding psalms, Psalm 68 is very appropriate for use at a festival of the temple. It describes the procession of God from Mount Sinai, where the ark of

the covenant was constructed, to the temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, where the ark found its home. This psalm may have been written for the procession when David brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6) or for some occasion when the ark accompanied Israel into battle, such as 2 Samuel 11:11. However, it is appropriate for any festive procession to the temple. In the Christian church this psalm is often read on the festival of Jesus' ascension and on Pentecost" (260) end quote.

The content of this passage raises two major questions I want to address this morning. Our first question comes from verse 8. It is this, what does this verse in Psalm 68:18 mean in the context of what Paul is speaking about when it says, 'he led captivity captive?

Our second question comes from verses 9-10 (read). Our question is this: What do the words, "He descended into the lower parts of the earth" mean? And you may say, "Well, I don't see this as much of a subject for a message." But it is. Not long ago we covered some of this in Catechism class. There are two major views scholars have come to, and we will consider those.

A. View # 1

So let us consider the first view. When our text says that He led captivity captive, there is a view that has sprung from this and several other passages which we must consider. The teaching of this view goes something like this. The sins of OT saints were never paid for until Christ died. So they could not go to heaven, and so God made a place in the heart of the earth called hades where these departed righteous souls would be kept until Christ would come and actually pay for their sins. But in this place which He made for them, called hades, there were two compartments. One part was a place of torment, and that is where the unrighteous went. We find that from the account of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. The rich man went to the torments part of hades. The other part was known as Abraham's bosom and that is where the righteous went. So Lazarus went

there. This good place was separated from the bad place by a wide chasm.

And so, when Jesus died, he went down to this place called hades during those three days when His body was in the grave. And there, in hades, he preached to the spirits in prison; that is in hades. This teaching they get from such passage as Acts 2:27 where it says of Jesus that His soul would not be left in hell, KJV, or hades, NKJV. Another passage is 1 Peter 3:18-20 (read). Note also 1 Peter 4:6 (read). Some think the unrighteous get a second chance. Others say He announced His victory over sin to those in hades, and then He took the righteous to heaven.

I cannot take time in this message to explain my own view in detail. Let me just say that I hold that Jesus, through the Spirit, preached to those in Noah's day through Noah and that those who did not believe are now spirits in prison. There is no second chance. That the Gospel was preached to those who are dead, I believe means that it was preached to them when they were alive but they are now dead.

However, this view that Jesus went down to hades to preach deliverance, they say, was because now that Christ had died for mankind's sins, their sins were paid for, and they could now justly be taken to heaven. So when He had preached deliverance to them, He delivered the saints who were held captive there, that is all the OT saints, and He took them all up to heaven when He ascended. Now this ascension was during the three days He was dead, not 40 days after His resurrection, the day we commemorate today. This is their answer as to what it means that He led captivity captive. The captivity was that of the righteous saints who were held captive in hades.

Let me quote from D. Martyn Lloyd Jones here. He says, "That is the teaching of the Roman Catholics at this point. They talk about what they call 'limbus patrum', where the fathers remained until Christ brought them out of their captivity. I reject that as an entirely false interpretation here, because the picture is one of triumph over enemies, one of the leading of enemies in triumph" end quote(153). Now, this is not the same as the Roman Catholic teaching

on purgatory. That is a separate teaching. Let me add here as well that many, many evangelicals hold to this view.

Let me show you what Jones means that this is the teaching of the Roman Catholics at this point. In the Catholic Catechism it deals with this in Article 5, Paragraph 1, numbers 632-637. This paragraph is called, "Christ Descended into Hell." That title is taken from Acts 2:27, which says that Christ's soul would not be left in hell. The article says, "The frequent New Testament affirmations that Jesus was 'raised from the dead' presupposes that the crucified one sojourned in the realm of the dead prior to his resurrection. This was the first meaning given in the apostolic preaching to Christ's descent into hell; that Jesus, like all men, experienced death and in his soul joined the others in the realm of the dead. But he descended there as Savior, proclaiming the Good News to the spirits imprisoned there." Let me end the quote there for now. To prove that Jesus went to hell to preach the good news there they cite 1 Peter 3:18-19 which we read earlier.

The Catholic Catechism then says, "Scripture calls the abode of the dead, to which the dead Christ went down, 'hell' -- *Sheol* in Hebrew and *Hades* in Greek -- because those who are there are deprived of the vision of God. Such is the case for all the dead, whether evil or righteous, while they await the redeemer: which does not mean that their lot is identical as Jesus shows through the parable of the poor man Lazarus who was received into 'Abraham's bosom': 'It is precisely these holy souls, who awaited their Savior in Abraham's bosom, whom Christ the Lord delivered when he descended into hell.' Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him. 'The gospel was preached even to the dead.'"

Let me briefly stop there to say that they cite 1 Peter 4:6 which we read earlier as well, for evidence that the Gospel was preached to the dead. The article then goes on like this: "The descent into hell brings the Gospel message of salvation to complete fulfillment. This is the last phase of Jesus'

messianic mission, a phase which is condensed in time but vast in its real significance: the spread of Christ's redemptive work to all men of all times and all places, for all who are saved have been made sharers in the redemption. Christ went down into the depths of death so that 'the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.' Jesus, 'the Author of life,' by dying destroyed 'him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and [delivered] all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage", end quote.

So, what is the teaching of the descension of Christ in our passage according to the view we have looked at? Christ's descension was a descension after His death into hell where He preached the Gospel to all the saved, or as some hold, to the unsaved who had died before Christ died. Then He took those from the good part of hades and ascended to heaven with them. Let me just briefly say there are some variations on how all of this took place, but those are the basics. And so, after Christ's death, from there on, those who die go to heaven rather than this holding place, that is, this captivity which had been used up until that time.

So what does this view say the words, "He ascended into the lower parts of the earth" mean? They mean that Jesus went down to hell during the three days He was dead and He preached to the spirits in prison there. Then he delivered the righteous and ascended up to heaven with them.

B. Conclusion # 2

So we come then to the second view. With regard to the question, what is meant by the words, "He led captivity captive" in verse 8 let me give D. Martyn Lloyd Jones answer. He writes: "In ancient times, if a king or a prince or a great military captain waged successful warfare, when he came back to his own country there was always a kind of victory parade. The conquered kings and princes and military chieftains and captains were all made to walk in the procession in their chains. The conqueror was 'leading captivity captive''. He had taken his foes captive and was now making a public display of them.

At the same time he threw gifts to his own people. He was riding in his chariot distributing his largesse among the acclaiming people, and he was leading these conquered men as captives at the same time. That is undoubtedly the picture here" (153).

I agree wholeheartedly with Jones. You see, in the previous view, the good people, the saved, were the captives. And they were being led captive. That is simply a wrong picture altogether. It is not the victorious but the defeated that are led captive. And those who are being led captive do not receive of the booty, or gifts, taken by their overcomer. The gifts have been taken from the captives. They are not given to the captives. It is the king's people who receive the booty, the gifts. And in our passage, it is the Church that receives the benefit of the victorious king, namely Jesus Christ, at His ascension. After He ascended the Church began, and the gifts He gave and their purposes are given to us in verses 11-16 (read v. 11).

Furthermore, when Jesus died, and He went to Paradise for those days in which He was dead, it is never called an ascension. When we die, it is not said we ascend. The ascension of Christ took place, not during the three days and three nights He was dead. It took place 40 days after His resurrection. Turn to Acts 1 (read 1-3, and 9-11). That is His ascension. That is what Psalm 68:18 talks about.

Now let us go to our second question in Ephesians 4. Let us read verses 9-10 once more (read). What is meant by the words, "He ascended into the lower parts of the earth"? Well, four times in Scripture this phrase, lower parts of the earth or lowest parts of the earth is used. One is our passage, Ephesians 4:9.

Isaiah 44:23 says, "Sing, O heavens, for the LORD has done *it*! Shout, you lower parts of the earth; Break forth into singing, you mountains, O forest, and every tree in it! For the LORD has redeemed Jacob, And glorified Himself in Israel." It is not hard to see that the phrase, 'lower parts of the earth' refers to the mountains, and the forests, in other words that which is on earth. It does not refer to some deepest parts of the earth, but that which is on

the earth. The lower parts of the earth is simply the earth itself, the lower parts as compared to heaven.

Turn to Psalm 63:9. It says, "But those *that* seek my soul, to destroy *it*, shall go into the lower parts of the earth." Some, like the commentator Gill claim this speaks of hell, but most prefer it to mean the grave. But it may simply refer to their falling to the ground in death and the context would seem to indicate that this is its meaning here. It says in verse 10, "They shall fall by the sword.." So there we have a reference to death and falling to the earth. Then verse 10 says, "They shall be a portion for the jackals." Again, they have fallen to the lower parts, which is the earth itself.

We have one more reference, but this time it is the superlative. In adjectives there are the positive, the comparative and the superlative. For example, the word 'low' would be the positive. The word 'lower' would be the comparative. The word 'lowest' is the superlative. You cannot go lower. This is the lowest. We find this used in Psalm 139:14-15 like this, "I will praise You, for I am fearfully *and* wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, And *that* my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth." There is no question here that we are not talking about hades, or even the grave. We are talking about that which takes place in the lower or lowest parts, on earth. It is on earth, the lower parts or lowest parts as compared to heaven, the highest parts.

So we go back to Ephesians 4, verses 9-10 (read). Christ's ascension is mentioned in verse 8, verse 9, and verse 10. It refers to the time of His ascension 40 days after His resurrection, not to the time of His death. And when He ascended He led captivity captive. He had conquered His enemies, and it is they whom He led captive. He now ever sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven, and having conquered Satan and his hordes, He now gives gifts to men. And these gifts and their purposes are further explained in the rest of the passage which brings us to the conclusions regarding this passage.

III. THE CONCLUSIONS REGARDING THE PASSAGE

So look now at the following context of verses 11-16 (read). After Jesus ascended He gave gifts to His own people, the Church.

These gifts produced such men as apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers. And He gave these gifts that believers might be equipped for the work of the ministry. He further gave these gifts for the edifying of the body of Christ. And it is this equipping of the saints and this edification of believers, this building up of believers that brings true unity.

Notice the first word of verse 13 (read). You see, we are to be built up in our Christian faith UNTIL we come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God. To come to the unity of the faith takes a lot of edification. Most of modern Christianity is very seriously flawed in its teaching of doctrine. And then we cry for unity apart from doctrine. We have said, "Don't teach doctrine. Doctrine divides." And I say, "Doctrine should divide." The teaching of pure doctrine should divide all false teaching from it. True unity can never be achieved until the untruth is divided off. In modern church history we went from dropping the teaching of doctrine, to the seeker friendly church, to the now emergent church. At every step doctrine became less important. And as I have observed just a little of the emergent church movement, true doctrine is not minimal. It is out altogether.

Today we want unity without equipping and without edifying. You can only have true unity when edification is there. And one of the reasons Christ ascended to heaven was that He might give gifts to men that they might teach and bring true unity.

I have come to see that possibly the unity in the true Church is far higher than we have thought. When we look at the Church we see a divided Church. Let me tell you why it may be that unity in the Church seems to be so low. It may not be because the unity in the Church is really that low. It may be that the unity in the Church is much greater than we think it is. The apparent lowness of unity in the Church is

because what we view as the Church is by and large not the Church.

Let me explain. Do you agree with this statement: Only truly born again believers make up the true Church. We must answer yes to that, if we are to be biblical. Second, would you agree with this: Many people who are members in churches are not truly born again. We would have to have our heads in the sand, not to agree with that statement. You see, when we are talking about unity in the Church, we are talking about the true Church. And much of what passes for the Church is not the true Church.

Some time ago in the 'Friday Church News' put out by David Cloud was an article titled, "Pastor Warns That False Conversions Are Suicide For Churches." Cloud quotes Dever, the senior pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church, who said, and I quote, "thousands, if not millions, of church members sitting in America's pews aren't really born-again Christians. The problem I am pointing to is not just that of the occasional hypocrite lost in their own unrepentant sin," Dever said. "I'm talking about systems which seem to produce false converts so much that it's not just one man ... but whole congregations that like Israel of old are typified and characterized not by holiness but by worldliness" ("False Conversions," Associated Baptist Press, April 11, 2012).

Billy Graham, who was no conservative by any stretch of the imagination, thought that the majority of those who claimed to be Christians were not real Christians. Why do you think that it seems there is so much disunity in the Church? It is because a large part of the so called church is not really the Church at all. So, much of the disunity in the so called church is between those who are truly born again and those who are not truly born again. And in our desire for unity, we want unity between the saved and those who profess salvation but are not truly unsaved. And because we do not know who those are who are not truly saved, we many times, do not even know where the real problem is.

That is not to say that there is not some disunity in the true Church. There is, as the true Church drops more and more biblical stands.

CONCL: So, let us conclude. The overriding theme of our passage this morning is unity in the Church. But in the midst of it is this text from which we drew two questions. One, what is meant by taking captivity captive in 4:8. We gave two views. One was that before Christ's death, the righteous dead were held captive in hades somewhere in the center of the earth because their sins had not yet been paid for. When Christ died he went and preached to those spirits in prison, and then, during the three days He was dead He ascended with them to heaven.

The second view said that when Christ died, and 40 days later when He ascended, it was a victory march. He had defeated the devil and taken them captive and after He ascended He gave gifts to the Church, such as apostles and prophets and preachers etc..

On the second question, what is meant by the words that Jesus descended into the lower parts of the earth? Well, the one teaching was that He descended down to hell, or hades and preached to those spirits in prison and then delivered them to heaven. The other view says that He descended down to earth from heaven, when He came to earth at His birth.

And in the midst of all this, there flows the overriding teaching of unity in the Church, which we explained as being unity in the true Church.