

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND
THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL:
A STUDY OF EPHESIANS

(LESSON FIFTY)

“HADES”

EPHESIANS 4:7-16

(NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

7 But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.

8 Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he captured captives; he gave gifts to men."

9 Now what is the meaning of "he ascended," except that he also descended to the lower regions, namely, the earth?

10 He, the very one who descended, is also the one who ascended above all the heavens, in order to fill all things.

11 And he himself gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,

12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, that is, to build up the body of Christ,

13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God — a mature person, attaining to the measure of Christ's full stature.

14 So we are no longer to be children, tossed back and forth by waves and carried about by every wind of teaching by the trickery of people who craftily carry out their deceitful schemes.

15 But practicing the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Christ, who is the head.

16 From him the whole body grows, fitted and held together through every supporting ligament. As each one does its part, the body builds itself up in love.

In **Ephesians** chapter 4, Paul urged the believers in Ephesus to be faithful to their calling. In verse 1 he wrote, "As a prisoner of the Lord, I plead with you to walk holy, in a way that is suitable to your high rank, given to you in your divine calling" (**The Passion Translation**). If we as believers do not know who we are and whose we are, we will not know what our purpose is. In chapter 4, the apostle is reminding us of the primary reason why God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. He is calling us back to the great purposes of God for which the church was established and for which it still exists. This chapter is of central importance to our understanding of what it means for individual believers to be members of the Church, the Body of Christ.

In explaining the nature of the church, Paul first calls attention to the unity of the Spirit, or the oneness that already exists in the body of Christ. In verses 3-6 he writes,

3 making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you too were called to the one hope of your calling,

5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism,

6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (New English Translation)

The unity of the Spirit is a oneness that has been created by the Holy Spirit. It is not something that we are asked to create, but rather it is something that we are urged to preserve or maintain. The Holy Spirit has already created this basic unity as a result of Christ's work of atonement and reconciliation, and it is a unity that nothing can destroy.

Therefore, even though the Church has been **externally** divided many times, the Body of Christ has never been disjointed **internally**.

In verses **7-10**, Paul begins to focus on how the Body of Christ functions. In this passage, he unfolds the great essential truth that enables a church to function effectively. This truth is that spiritual gifts have been imparted to each member of the Body of Christ. He writes:

7 *But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.*

8 *Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he captured captives; he gave gifts to men."*

9 *Now what is the meaning of "he ascended," except that he also descended to the lower regions, namely, the earth?*

10 *He, the very one who descended, is also the one who ascended above all the heavens, in order to fill all things. (New English Translation)*

In verse **7**, Paul says *"But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift."* Grace was given to every genuine Christian believer, enabling every one of them to receive at least one spiritual gift. It is the responsibility of every believer to identify his or her gift or gifts, and to use them to edify the Body of Christ, preserve the unity of the Spirit, and ultimately, glorify God. When we understand that it was the grace of God that not only saved us, but also made it possible for us to receive spiritual gifts, we will be more diligent in developing them and using them, and we will be more humble in doing so.

In verse **8** Paul writes, *"Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he captured captives; he gave gifts to men."* He quotes **Psalm 68:18** to illustrate to his readers how Jesus Christ was enabled in the divine plan of God to give the grace gift described in verse **7**. Paul wants the believers to know that although the gift is free, there was a great price that had to be paid to make this bestowal of grace possible, and so, he proceeds to connect the giving of gifts to the triumphant ascension of Christ. He explains that it is Christ's exaltation to the right hand of the Father that makes it possible for Him to give gifts to men.

Paul states that Jesus Christ ascended up on high, led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. The word *"ascended"* is the translation of a Greek word which means to go up. Here, it describes our Lord's ascension on high, into heaven, after His victory on the Cross of Calvary over the allied forces of the devil, principalities and powers, sin, death, and hell. He entered the domain of the enemy and led forth a multitude of captives. Then, He took His place on high and *"gave gifts unto men."*

Brothers and sisters, God's gifts are always good gifts. In **James 1:17**, we read the following: *"All generous giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or the slightest hint of change" (New English Translation).*

The word *"all"* is the translation of the Greek word **pas**, which means "all" in the sense of "each part that applies." The word *"good"* is the translation of a Greek word which means "intrinsically good, inherently good in quality but with the idea of good which is also profitable, useful, and benefiting to others." The Greek word translated *"perfect"* identifies the gift as lacking nothing for completeness and thus, lacking nothing to meet the needs of the recipients. In other words, God's gifts are as perfect as He Himself is.

The greatest gift that our Lord gave was the gift of the Holy Spirit. It was the Holy Spirit who regenerated us and made us alive when we were in a state of death as a result of our trespasses and sins; it was the Holy Spirit who baptized, or placed us into the Body of Christ; it was the Holy Spirit who sealed us unto the day of redemption; it is the Holy Spirit who distributed individual spiritual gifts to each believer as He desired.

Verse 8 says, “When he ascended on high he captured captives; he gave gifts to men.” The word “gave” is a translation of the Greek word **didómi**: (**did’-o-mee**), which means “to bestow, cause, command, grant or offer.” This clearly indicates that these gifts were given based on a decision of His will and not on the merit of the recipients. Like a triumphant conqueror distributing the spoils to his subjects, so Christ takes the trophies He has won and distributes them in His kingdom. When the Saviour was exalted on high, He sent the Holy Spirit, and with the coming of the Holy Spirit, also, came His gifts to the church.

In a sermon entitled “**The Gifts of Christ to His Church**,” the noted American pastor and author **John MacArthur**, made the following remarks:

I believe that every Christian is what I like to call a spiritual snowflake. Listen, if God could do it with snowflakes, I think he did it with us. No two of us is ever alike. The combination of giftedness areas that the Lord blends together to make you what you are and the way He administrates that and the way He orders that and the way He places that in the body, makes you absolutely necessary vital and strategic. The body of Christ could never function without you in the way that it was meant to function.

And, therein, beloved lies the real issue in Christianity as we look at it today. We got a lot of Christians who see Christianity as a spectator sport. They want to watch it happen. They just never get involved. Listen, we desperately need you because you are a spiritual snowflake and there’s nobody in the world like you. And if you don’t do what God has enabled and gifted you to do, then, nobody’s going to do it. And, by the way, let me remind you of this, that giftedness, that enablement that God’s given you is a gift from Jesus Christ. I mean, that ought to lay a little bit of pressure on you to do something with it...

But listen, when our dear Lord Jesus Christ gave you a gift, when He, by His wonderful grace and sovereignty, gave you a gift and blended together certain areas of enablement under the power of the Holy Spirit, it was not only an act of love to you that He would give you such a gift, it was not only a way of Him saying, ‘I love you so much I see you as unique. I see you as different. I see you like I see nobody else in this whole wide world. And this is just yours and this is just for you.’ But He was also saying, ‘And everybody in the church is going to need it so much, would you pass it on to them? Would you use it for their benefit?’ And I guess maybe it would be a serious affront to the kindness and grace and generosity of Jesus Christ not to use the gift he gave me. And it would also be the loss of all those around me who so need what I have to offer.

Listen, I’m not interested in just coming on Sunday morning and talking to a bunch of people and have them all walk away. I’m only interested in coming here to nourish a bunch of people who are already committed to minister to each other. I’m not interested in spectators. I don’t want people to just see the back of everybody’s head. I want people who are willing to turn around and say, ‘Hey, this is what I’d like to do for you. This is what I believe I can do’....

And you know something – you say, well I can’t do that. Well, you’re given a gift. Every one of us is given one. I don’t want to belabor the point, I just want you to know that you didn’t deserve it and you didn’t earn it. But a gracious Christ has given it to you. That’s the gift. And it’s yours and yours alone and we can’t do without it. There’s nobody to replace you. If you don’t function, we lose it. You’re that unique.”

We noted earlier that in **Ephesians 4:8**, Paul quotes **Psalms 68:18** to illustrate how Jesus Christ was enabled in the divine plan of God to give the grace gift described in verse 7. Now, in verses 9 and 10, he gives a brief exposition of **Psalms 68:18**.

He writes, *“Now what is the meaning of ‘he ascended,’ except that he also descended to the lower regions, namely, the earth? He, the very one who descended, is also the one who ascended above all the heavens, in order to fill all things.”*

But, what does Paul mean when he says that Christ descended, *“to the lower regions?”* There are at least 3 ways of interpreting this phrase. Some commentators believe that Paul is simply saying that our Lord descended from heaven to earth. It is with this understanding that the **New English Translation** and the **New Living Translation** render the phrase:

New ENGLISH Translation

“Now what is the meaning of ‘he ascended,’ except that he also descended to the lower regions, namely, the earth?”

New LIVING Translation

“Notice that it says ‘he ascended.’ This clearly means that Christ also descended to our lowly world.”

Other commentators are of the view that by *“the lower regions,”* Paul is referring to the grave. And there are others who believe that the phrase is a reference to Jesus’ descent into **Hades** during the time between His death and His resurrection. Of the three explanations, this is the one that I prefer.

In **1 Peter 3:18-20**, we read the following:

18 *Because Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, to bring you to God, by being put to death in the flesh but by being made alive in the spirit.*

19 *In it he went and preached to the spirits in prison,*

20 *after they were disobedient long ago when God patiently waited in the days of Noah as an ark was being constructed. In the ark a few, that is eight souls, were delivered through water. (New English Translation)*

In verse **18**, Peter writes, *“Because Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, to bring you to God, by being put to death in the flesh but by being made alive in the spirit.”*

Peter refers to Jesus Christ as *“being put to death in the flesh”* and *“being made alive in the spirit.”* Our Lord was put to death on the one hand, with respect to the flesh, but He was made alive on the other hand, with respect to the spirit. It will be noticed that the word “spirit” begins, not with a capital **S** but with a common **s**. This clearly indicates that the word spirit here is not referring to the Holy Spirit but to the human spirit of Jesus Christ. In other words, His outer man had died, but His inner man was alive.

Now we know that the body of our Lord was on the Cross for a while and then it was placed in a tomb. But His spirit was not dead! In verse **19**, Peter says that *“In it (in His human spirit) he went and preached to the spirits in prison.”* In His human spirit, our Lord descended down to the prison of spirits.

Between His death on the Cross and His resurrection from the tomb, our Lord went to the unseen world. It is my opinion that the unseen world consisted of 2 sections, each separated from the other by an impassable gulf. One section - the upper one, I believe, was where the spirits of the righteous dead were. The other section - the lower one, was where the spirits of the unrighteous dead are, as well as the fallen angels or demons who are bound in chains. Peter refers to these angels in **2 Peter 2:4**: *“For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but threw them into hell and locked them up in chains in utter darkness to be kept until the judgment” (New English Translation).*

We find another reference to them in **Jude 6** “*You also know that the angels who did not keep within their proper domain but abandoned their own place of residence, he has kept in eternal chains in utter darkness, locked up for the judgment of the great Day*” (**New English Translation**).

We have expressed the view that the unseen world consisted of 2 sections. But what is the basis for such an opinion? Let us consider the account of Lazarus and the rich man found in **Luke 16**. In verses **19-26**, we read the following:

19 “*There was a rich man who dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.*

20 *But at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus whose body was covered with sores,*

21 *who longed to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. In addition, the dogs came and licked his sores.*

22 “*Now the poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried.*

23 *And in Hades, as he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far off with Lazarus at his side.*

24 *So he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in anguish in this fire.’*

25 *But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things and Lazarus likewise bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in anguish.*

26 *Besides all this, a great chasm has been fixed between us, so that those who want to cross over from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’* (**New English Translation**)

Warren Wiersbe, the American theologian and former general director of **Back to the Bible** radio broadcast, made the following remarks in respect of this passage: “From our Lord’s description, we learn that **hades** had two sections: a paradise portion called “Abraham’s bosom,” and a punishment portion. It is believed by many theologians that our Lord emptied the paradise part of **hades** when He arose from the dead and returned to the Father.”

The word translated “*hell*” in this passage is the Greek word **hades**. **Hades** is the equivalent of the Hebrew concept of **Sheol**. This is the place where the dead were gathered. In the New Testament, **hades** sometimes has an additional negative force of awaiting judgment. It is important for us to understand that the “*rich man*” in this story was not yet in *hell* as in the “*lake of fire*,” but in **hades**, the place of the dead. Because the **King James Version** often translated both **sheol** and **hades** as *hell*, this has needlessly confused two different regions. The Bible seems clear that no one is yet in (eternal) *hell* or the “*lake of fire*” at the present time. Someday, according to **Revelations 20:14**, **hades** will be thrown into *hell* or the “*lake of fire*,” but this has not yet occurred.

Peter says that in His human spirit, our Lord “*went and preached to the spirits in prison.*” He preached to those who were in the lower section of **hades**, or the unseen world. The word preached is a translation of the Greek word **kérussó**: (**kay-roos’-so**), which means, to herald or proclaim. It is noteworthy that Peter does not use the word **Euaggelizó**: (**yoo-ang-ghel-id’-zo**), which means “to announce good news.” Our Lord did not preach the good news of the gospel to the spirits in prison. Instead, he went and made a proclamation.

I believe He proclaimed that what they believed would have secured His defeat and their triumph, had turned out to be the exact opposite. I believe that He proclaimed to them that through His death on the Cross He had triumphed over the allied forces of the devil, principalities and powers, sin, death, and *hell*.

I believe that in His proclamation He said to them, I am “*the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth.*”

I believe that in His proclamation He said to them, *“I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty.”*

I believe that in His proclamation He said to them, *“I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.”*

I believe that in His proclamation He said to them, *“I am KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.”*

I believe that in His proclamation He said to them, *“God has highly exalted me, and has given me a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*

His proclamation to the human spirits in prison was one of absolute hopelessness. **John Phillips**, in his commentary in respect of this passage, makes the following remarks: “Jesus went to these captives in Hades with a proclamation. He proclaimed His everlasting triumph over sin, Satan, death, and the grave. To those in the dark realm, it was a message of eternal despair. During their lifetimes they had rejected Him by rejecting the light God had graciously given them. Now they were without God, without Christ, and without hope. One man in their ranks represented them all - the thief who while dying had cursed Christ and blasphemed His claims. With what horror-filled eyes he must now have looked on the One he had so rashly scorned but a few hours before.

To those in paradise, the Lord’s message was full of unspeakable joy and glory. How the prophets must have rejoiced at the fulfillment of their often misunderstood and barely comprehended prophecies! How Abraham, David, and all the others must have shouted for joy! One man in their ranks, represented them all - the thief who died calling on Christ to remember him in His kingdom. Now he was alive forevermore. With what wonder-filled eyes he must have looked on the One in whom he had so boldly believed a few hours earlier.”

After proclaiming His triumph in Hades, the Lord Jesus arose, bringing with Him the souls of the righteous dead who had formerly occupied the upper section of **hades** known as “paradise” or “Abraham’s bosom.” He opened the doors of the upper section of **hades** and released them from their captivity. It was at that point that the spirits of the Old Testament saints left the upper section of **hades** and ascended with Christ to be with God in His place. Our Lord led captivity captive!

Brothers and sisters, what we must always bear in mind is that it was the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross that qualified Him to bestow on us the grace gifts that we possess. In the light of this reality, we dare not treat the spiritual gifts that He has given to us lightly. When we consider the great price that He paid in order for us to receive the gifts that we have received, we should be motivated to use these gifts to edify each other, preserve the unity of the Spirit, and ultimately glorify God.