

Leading Captivity Captive

Ivan Burgener

This phrase is found but one time in the New Testament, in Ephesians 4:9 where the Apostle Paul quoted Psalm 68:18. In the Old Testament it appears twice, Psalm 68:18 and Judges 5:12. Let us consider first Ephesians 4.

*“But unto every one of us is **given grace** according to the measure of the gift of Christ. Wherefore He says, When He ascended up on high, He led **captivity captive**, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that He ascended, what is it but that He also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that He might fill all things.) And **He gave** some apostles; and some prophets; and some evangelists; and some pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine ...”* (Ephesians 4:7-14).

According to Judges 4:2 *“the LORD sold them [Israel] into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan”* and God was at that time bringing Israel out of this captivity through the judges Deborah and Barak.

“Then sang Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam on that day, saying ...” (Judges 5:1).

*“Awake, awake, Deborah: awake, awake, utter a song: arise, Barak, and lead thy **captivity captive**, thou son of Abinoam”* (Judges 5:12).

The people of Israel were prisoners and God would lead their “*captivity captive*,” that is, He would set them free.

*“**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”*** (Psalms 68:18).

In expounding and interpreting our passage in Ephesians 4, many expositors seem to ignore the passage quoted from Psalm 68 and its setting. As a result they miss the point Paul was making in Ephesians. Let us begin with Psalm 68.

David began his psalm asking God to arise, that is, to come to the defense of His people, “*Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered: let them also that hate Him flee before Him.*” He continued, “*let the wicked perish at the presence of God*” (68:2), and on the good side, “*... let the righteous be glad; let them rejoice before God: yea, let them exceedingly rejoice*” (68:3). David rejoiced that God would be a father to the orphan and a defender of the widow. In God’s deliverance “*He brings out those which are bound with chains ...*” (68:6). What is this but setting the captives free?

Then David recalled Israel under Moses’ leadership when “*The earth shook, the heavens also dropped at the presence of God: **even Sinai itself** was moved at the presence of God, the God of Israel ...*” (Psalms 68:8). He thought back to God’s glorious deliverance of Israel from the bondage of Egypt. He remembered many of the mighty acts of God in His championing the cause of the nation as He brought them to Sinai,

*“The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels: the Lord is among them, as in **Sinai**, in the holy place. **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. Blessed be the Lord, who daily loads us with benefits, even the God of our salvation ...”* (68:17-19).

In this Psalm who was it that ascended on high? Was it not Moses in his trips up and down Mt. Sinai? Moses ascended up the mount and met God there only to receive from Him the gift/revelation of His sacred law. What did Moses do but descend back down the Mount and give these gifts to Israel! It is this very passage that Paul quoted, not as a fulfillment of prophecy, but as a parallel situation of God delivering captives from their captivity, setting them free, and then giving them gifts through His very presence on Sinai.

Paul made application in Ephesians only after first giving the seven-fold unity of the Spirit,

*“Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is **one body**, and **one Spirit**, even as ye are called in **one hope** of your calling; **One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father** of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all”* (Ephesians 4:3-6).

Our question to Paul is: Where are we to turn for help to keep this unity of the Spirit? We need help, to say the least! To meet that need, our risen Lord has “**given grace** ...” Paul continued,

*“But **unto every one of us is given grace** according to the measure of the gift of Christ. Wherefore He says, when He ascended up on high, He led **captivity captive**, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that He ascended, what is it but that He also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that He might fill all things.) And **He gave** ...”* (Ephesians 4:7-11).

This whole passage explains the gifts of grace given to gifted men in the church for the growth and maturity of the body of Christ.

First the Lord had to “*lead **captivity captive** ...*” It should be clear from the passage in Psalm 68 where David referred to Moses at Mt. Sinai that this phrase means, in modern English, that He set the prisoners free. Who were the freed prisoners in Moses’ day? Israel, of course, for they were newly freed from the bondage and slavery of Egypt. Who are the freed prisoners in Paul’s day? These are saints newly freed from the bondage of sin, Satan, and the law. These are redeemed members of the body of Christ.

Therefore upon Christ’s ascension to heaven (analogous to Moses ascending Mt. Sinai) Christ also “*received gifts for men.*” Like Moses our risen glorified Lord, having received these gifts from the Father, proceeded to give “*some apostles; and some prophets; and some evangelists; and some pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry ...*”

Just as Moses’ trips began at the foot of Mt. Sinai, even so the Lord Jesus came to this earth, “the lower parts of the earth,” right where He lived and died. These lower parts, the earth, are contrasted with the upper parts, heaven. Based on His death, He freed us, the prisoners. Then ascended in heaven He gave gifts for the edifying of the body of Christ, building it up to maturity.

As to the expression the “**lower parts of the earth,**” it should be clear that as Moses came down from Mt. Sinai to its base – that is, where Israel was encamped: it was where they lived and died – so for the Lord,

“What is it but that He [Christ] also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? [for His life in ministry and His death and burial in sacrifice to free us, the prisoners] He that descended [to the earth and then the grave] is the same also that ascended up [out of death into resurrected life] to fill all things ...”

Hence of His fullness have we received. “*He ascended up on high ... far above all heavens, that he might fill all things ...*”

Two other passages speak of the “*lower parts of the earth.*”

Psalm 63:6 reads,

*“When I remember Thee upon my bed, and meditate on Thee in the night watches. Because Thou hast been my help, therefore in the shadow of Thy wings will I rejoice. My soul follows hard [I follow close] after Thee: Thy right hand upholds me. But those that seek my soul, to destroy it, shall go into **the lower parts of the earth.** They shall fall by the sword: they shall be a portion for foxes. But the king shall rejoice in God; every one that sweareth by Him shall glory: but the mouth of them that speak lies shall be stopped” (Psalm 63:6-11).*

In this passage the lower parts of the earth clearly refer to **the grave.**

Isaiah 44:21-23 reads,

*“Remember these, O Jacob and Israel; for thou art My servant: I have formed thee; thou art My servant: O Israel, thou shalt not be forgotten of Me. I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins: return unto Me; for I have redeemed thee. Sing, O ye heavens; for the LORD hath done it: shout, ye **lower parts of the earth**: break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein: for the LORD hath redeemed Jacob, and glorified Himself in Israel.”*

These lower parts are simply the earth with mountains and trees.

You will notice that there is no mention of the Lord visiting the underworld of imprisoned demons, fallen angels, or doing any such weird things during His supposed disembodied condition between His death and resurrection. What did the Lord do between His death and resurrection? Absolutely nothing!

According to Romans 6:9-10 death had “*dominion over Him ...*” What can that mean? It means that He was dead. Dead people do nothing. Christ did absolutely nothing between His death and resurrection.

The four Gospels conclude with scenes of the risen Lord. Their great testimony was, not one thing that He did while dead, but only what He did in resurrected life! This was the cause for rejoicing. This is something we are supposed to know and understand,

“Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dies no more; death has no more [no longer has] dominion over Him” (Romans 6:9).

That is the simple issue: Was Christ really dead? Did death have dominion over Him while He was dead? What is the only thing the Bible teaches that broke death’s dominion over Him? Resurrection!

“For in that He died, He died unto sin once: but in that He lives, He lives unto God” (Romans 6:10), and we live in Him, we are quickened with Him, risen with Him, ascended with Him, seated with Him. Everything we have is in our risen glorified head of the church, which is His body.

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