

What We Teach

God the Son

How Christ Won the Right to Give Gifts

Ephesians 4:8-10 (NASB)

⁸“Therefore it says, **“WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH, HE LED CAPTIVE A HOST OF CAPTIVES, AND HE GAVE GIFTS TO MEN.”**

⁹(Now this *expression*, “He ascended,” what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth?

¹⁰He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.)”

Paul is set to delineate some of the gifts Christ has given, but before mentioning specific gifts bestowed on the whole church, he uses [Psalm 68:18](#) as a comparison passage to show how Christ received the right to bestow those gifts. The obvious differences between both the Hebrew and Greek (Septuagint) Old Testament texts of [Psalm 68:18](#) and Paul’s citation of it suggest that he is probably making only a general allusion to the passage for the sake of analogy, rather than specifically identifying it as a direct prediction of Christ.

[Psalm 68](#) is a victory hymn composed by David to celebrate God’s conquest of the Jebusite city and the triumphant ascent of God (represented by the Ark of the Covenant) up Mount Zion (cf. [2 Sam. 6-7](#); [1 Chron. 13](#)). After a king won such a victory he would bring home the spoils and enemy prisoners to parade before his people. An Israelite king would take his retinue through the holy city of Jerusalem and up Mount Zion. Another feature of the victory parade, however, would be the display of the king’s own soldiers who had been freed after being held prisoner by the enemy. These were often referred to as recaptured captives—prisoners who had been taken prisoner again, so to speak, by their own king and given freedom.

The phrase **“when He ascended on high”** depicts a triumphant Christ returning from battle on earth back into the glory of the heavenly city with the trophies of His great victory.

In His crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus Christ conquered Satan, sin, and death (cf. [Col. 2:15](#)), and by that great victory He **“led captive a host of captives,”** who once were prisoners of the enemy but now are returned to the God and the people with whom they belong. The picture is vivid in its demonstration that God has yet-unsaved people who belong to Him—though they are naturally in Satan’s grasp and would remain there had not Christ by His death and resurrection made provision to lead them into the captivity of His kingdom into which they had been called by sovereign election **“before the foundation of the world”** ([Eph. 1:4](#)). Compare [Acts 18:10](#), where the Lord tells Paul to stay in Corinth and preach because there were people in that city

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who belonged to Him but were not yet saved from bondage to the king of darkness (see also [John 10:16](#); [John 11:51-52](#); [Acts 15:14-18](#)).

Upon arriving in heaven, **“He gave gifts to men.”** Paul here uses yet another term for **“gifts”** (*domata*) to express the comprehensiveness of this gracious provision. Like a triumphant conqueror distributing the spoils to his subjects, so Christ takes the trophies He has won and distributes them in His kingdom. After His ascension came all the gifts empowered by the Holy Spirit ([John 7:39](#); [John 14:12](#); [Acts 2:33](#)). When the Savior was exalted on high, He sent the Spirit ([Acts 1:8](#)), and with the coming of the Spirit also came His gifts to the church. Before Paul identifies the gifts he has in mind, he first gives a brief parenthetical explanation of the analogy he has just used.

In explaining the application of the Old Testament passage, Paul says, **Now this expression, “He ascended, what does it mean except that He also descended into the lower parts of the earth?”** The **“He”** of whom Paul is speaking is the One who will **“fill all things”**—Jesus Christ, **“who fills all in all”** ([Ephesians 1:23](#)). **“Ascended”** refers to Jesus’ ascension from earth to heaven ([Acts 1:9-11](#)). He **“ascended”** from earth to heaven to forever reign with His Father.

Paul is quick to explain that the expression **“He ascended”** cannot **mean** anything **“except that He... also descended.”** If, as seems clear, **“ascended”** refers to our Lord’s being taken up to heaven, then **“descended”** must refer to His coming down from heaven to earth. The captain of our salvation was first abased and then exalted. Divestiture came before investiture, incarnation before glorification (see [Phil. 2:4-11](#)). This truth is repeated in proper chronological sequence in [verse 10](#): **“He who descended is Himself also He who ascended.”**

The depth of Christ’s descent in incarnation is said to be **“into the lower parts of the earth.”** This reference is presented to provide a striking contrast in terms of His ascent **“far above all the heavens,”** emphasizing the extreme range of our Lord’s condescension and exaltation. To understand the phrase **“the lower parts of the earth”** we need only examine its use elsewhere in Scripture. In [Psalm 63:9](#) it has to do with death, being related to falling by the sword ([v. 10](#)). In [Matthew 12:40](#) a similar phrase, **“the heart of the earth,”** refers to the belly of a great fish where the prophet Jonah was kept. In [Isaiah 44:23](#) the phrase refers to the created earth containing mountains, forests, and trees. [Psalm 139:15](#) uses it in reference to the womb of a woman where God is forming a child. The sum of these uses indicates that the phrase relates to the created earth as a place of life and death. In the majority of the uses it appears in contrast to the highest heavens, as here and in [Psalm 139:8, 15](#) and [Isaiah 44:23](#).

The intent of the phrase in this letter is not to point to a specific place, but to refer to the depth of the incarnation. It is interesting that each of the uses of the phrase outside Ephesians can also relate to the depth of Christ’s incarnation. He was formed in the womb ([Psa. 139:15](#)), lived on the earth ([Isa. 44:23](#)), referred to His own burial as a parallel to Jonah's being in the fish ([Matt. 12:40](#)), and His death is consistent with the use of the phrase in [Psalm 63:9](#).

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It should be noted further that our Lord's descent went even beyond the womb, the earth, the grave, and death—to a descent into the very pit of the demons. Peter sheds light on the meaning of **“He also descended into the lower parts of the earth.”** In his first letter he says, **“For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison”** ([1 Pet. 3:18-19](#)). Between Jesus' death on Calvary and His resurrection in the garden tomb, He was **“put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.”** He was physically dead but spiritually alive. During the three days He was in that state **“He also descended”** and made proclamation (from *kērussō*) **to the spirits now in prison.”** This does not refer to preaching the gospel (from *euangelizō*) but to making a triumphant announcement—in this case Christ's announcement of His victory over the demons even while they tried to hold Him in death.

The Old Testament refers to the place of the departed dead as Sheol ([Deut. 32:22](#); [Job 26:6](#); [Ps. 16:10](#); etc.). Part of Sheol was a place of torment and evil, occupied by the unrighteous dead and by the demons who had been confined and bound there because of their wicked cohabitation with women during the period before the Flood (see [Gen. 6:2-5](#); [2 Pet. 2:4](#); [Jude 6](#)). When Christ **“descended”** to Sheol, He proclaimed His victory, because **“He had disarmed the rulers and authorities [and] made a public display of them, having triumphed over them”** ([Col. 2:15](#); cf. [1 Pet. 3:19](#)). At that time came the announcement to the demons, both bound and loose (the “angels and authorities and powers”), that they all were subject to Christ ([1 Pet. 3:22](#); [Eph. 1:20-21](#)). To ascend to heaven, He also passed through the territory of Satan and his demons in the air ([Heb. 4:14](#) uses *dia*, through) and no doubt celebrated His triumph over them. Whether or not Paul had this event in mind in his reference here is difficult to establish; nonetheless, it does demonstrate the depth of Christ's descent.

Another part of Sheol, though not clearly distinguished from the other by Old Testament writers, was believed to be a place of happiness and bliss, inhabited by the righteous dead who had believed in God. **“Abraham's bosom”** ([Luke 16:22-23](#)) and **“Paradise”** ([Luke 23:43](#)) apparently were common designations for Sheol at the time of Christ. Early church dogma taught that the righteous dead of the Old Testament could not be taken into the fullness of God's presence until Christ had purchased their redemption on the cross, and that they had waited in this place for His victory on that day. Figuratively speaking, the early church Fathers said that, after announcing His triumph over demons in one part of Sheol, He then opened the doors of another part of Sheol to release those godly captives. Like the victorious kings of old, He recaptured the captives and liberated them, and henceforth they would live in heaven as eternally free sons of God.

It must be suggested that such a view seems strained in the Ephesian context, because **“the lower parts of the earth”** is a general phrase and cannot be proven to refer to Sheol.

Paul's point in [Ephesians 4:8-10](#) is to explain that Jesus' paying the infinite price of coming to earth and suffering death on our behalf qualified Him to be exalted **“above all the heavens”** (that is, to the throne of God), in order that He might rightfully have the authority to give gifts to

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His saints. By that victory He gained the right to rule His church and to give gifts to His church, **“that He might fill all things.”**

Does **“all things”** mean all prophecies, all assigned tasks, all universal sovereignty? Surely the answer is yes in regard to each of those aspects. But the context would dictate that His filling **“all things”** primarily has to do with His glorious divine presence and power expressed in universal sovereignty. He fills the entire universe with blessing, particularly His church, as the next verse illustrates.