

18. THE ASCENSION AND GRACE OF CHRIST

(SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2020)

Scripture Reading: 10 Commandments; Eph. 4:7-10

INTRODUCTION

What aspects of the life of Jesus are most “celebrated” by our culture and by Christians?

1. His birth
2. Attention is given to His death and resurrection, though certainly less by our culture at large.
3. How much attention is given to the ascension of our Lord? Almost none.

It is wonderful we remember the birth of Jesus. But we should seek to remember and celebrate the entire ministry of our Lord.

Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer, #49

49. What benefit do we receive from Christ’s ascension into heaven?

First, that He is our Advocate in the presence of His Father in heaven. Second, that we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge, that He as the Head, will also take us, His members, up to Himself. Third, that He sends us His Spirit as an earnest, by whose power we seek those things which are above, where Christ sits at the right hand of God, and not things on the earth.

The Heidelberg is a wonderful catechism, but it is interesting that it does not include a reference to our text from Eph. 4.

The Ascension of our Lord is connected with the grace that God has given to each believer in terms of gifts for service.

Christ has given to each believer **grace** for service.

The ascension is also our assurance that our Lord rules over all.

Look again at our text, verses 7-11.

Verse 7 begins with a contrast, but, and makes a point about grace being given.

This point is supported in verse 8 by a quotation from the OT.

Then in verse 9, Paul explains that the ascension first meant that Christ descended.

Finally, in verse 10, we see the glory of the ascension of our Lord.

We will look at these four verses in four points.

Know the grace and the power of our Lord in His ascension.

1. TO EACH ONE GRACE HAS BEEN GIVEN, V. 7

4:1 - Central command of Ephesians, walk worthy of the calling with which you were called.

Verses 2-6 - Emphasis on unity in action, attitude, and doctrine

Reference to the Holy Spirit, Son, and Father.

Doctrine of the Trinity - connection with the question of the one and the many.

We recognize both unity and diversity.

So why does verse 7 begin with the word "But"?

Paul has spoken of unity and now he discusses the fact that we are not all identical in terms of how God uses us in His kingdom.

Verse 7 - great example of one of the most important principles of interpreting the Bible - the analogy of faith, **Scripture interprets Scripture.**

If you read verse 7 just by itself, you might miss the full point that Paul is making.

Consider two other passages which connect with verse 7.

1Cor. 12:4 There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. **5** There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. **6** And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all.

Rom. 12:3 For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think *of himself* more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. **4** For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, **5** so we, *being many*, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. **6** Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, *let us use them*: if prophecy, *let us prophesy* in proportion to our faith; **7** or ministry, *let us use it* in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; **8** he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

Focusing back on verse 7:

There is grace connected with God's sovereign purposes to save sinners.

Eph. 1:6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.

Eph. 1:7 ¶ In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.

There is also grace that is now given for serving the Lord.

This grace is given according to the measure of Christ's gift.

God is sovereign in saving sinners.

God is sovereign also in the specific giftings and callings that He gives to His people.

John Calvin had some profound comments on this.

No member of the body of Christ is endowed with such perfection as to be able, without the assistance of others, to supply his own necessities. A certain proportion is

allotted to each; and it is only by communicating with each other, that all enjoy what is sufficient for maintaining their respective places in the body.

“On no one has God bestowed all things. Each has received a certain measure. Being thus dependent on each other, they find it necessary to throw their individual gifts into the common stock, and thus to render mutual aid.”

Only the Lord Jesus Christ has everything.

Each believer has been given now a part of the whole grace that is found in Jesus Christ.

So again, there is unity and there is diversity.

2. THE PROOF FOUND IN PSALM 68:18, V. 8

Older writers tend to have a greater knowledge of the OT Scriptures than we do.

And of course, Paul, likely had the OT memorized or was at least very familiar.

I found an interesting website where the author showed in Ephesians all the quotes or allusions (references) to the OT.

There are at least 8 places in Ephesians where Paul is at least making an allusion or reference to the OT and three places where Paul directly quotes from the OT.¹

This quotation from Psalm 68:18 is challenging. Why?

Well, look at verse 8 as I read Psalm 68:18.

Psalm 68:18 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*.

I am not going to get into the weeds of what Paul might be doing here.

¹ <http://christiankoinonia.blogspot.com/2010/02/ephesians-and-old-testament.html>

It is not that it is uninteresting or unimportant, but it does not need to be our focus here.

What we do need to try to understand is what is the focus of Psalm 68 and why Paul uses this Psalm here in Ephesians 4.

Psalm 68 has 35 verses. It is a Psalm celebrating God's victory and His provision for His people.

I think we can say this is what Paul has in mind – **the victory of our Lord and how He is so gracious to His people.**

Let's take a moment to consider this.

Look at verses 1-3 and then verses 5-6.

Then look at verses 17-18 and then verses 19-20.

Victory and provision.

This theme is not just found in this Psalm but is found throughout the OT, and I am sure you can find it outside of Scripture.

MacArthur writes:

After such a triumph, the king would bring home the spoils and the prisoners. Here Paul depicts Christ returning from His battle on earth back into the glory of the heavenly city with the trophies of His great victory at Calvary.²

Now what stands out in this quote is that Psalm 68:18 speaks of receiving gifts whereas here in Eph. 4, the language is about giving gifts.

² John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, Accordance electronic ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), paragraph 23209.

This seems to be a change in the text, but certainly Paul is not twisting Scripture but you might say is emphasizing that this is the theme of Psalm 68, the graciousness of God and the gifts that He gives.

Paul in Ephesians 4:8 is emphasizing and connecting the victory of Jesus Christ with the fact that we His people are called now in serving Him.

He has triumphed over the forces of Satan.

And He now graciously gives gifts to men.

Here is another important point.

The ascension of our Lord is the final aspect of His saving work on earth and is also connected now with your calling and the gifts that He gives to you for service.

What Paul is saying here in brief in Ephesians 4 is what Jesus so powerfully taught and prayed in John 14-17.

John 14:12 “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater *works* than these he will do, because I go to My Father. **13** And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

3. THE ASCENSION FIRST MEANS A DESCENT, VERSE 9

There are a few other challenges as we consider verse 9.

The basic question in verse 9 is who is the one who descended?

It would seem that the simplest answer is God the Son, that verse 9 is a description of the incarnation.

Some argue that verse 9 is speaking of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

Part of the question is connected with the common Jewish interpretation of Psalm 68, which saw it fulfilled in Moses and the receiving of the law on Mt. Sinai.³

I think it is easier to understand that Paul is focused on first the incredible nature of the incarnation and then in verse 10 the ascension of Christ.

The phrase lower parts of the earth doesn't have to mean some pit or Hades, but simply can refer to the earth itself.⁴

We obviously take delight in celebrating the incarnation of our Lord and His birth, but we also know that it was part of His humiliation, His descent to lower parts.

Listen to 2 other passages by Paul that we could connect here.

2Cor. 8:9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.

Phil. 2:7 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.

Paul does not emphasize here the humbling of our Lord, but this is the theme that we see at the start of the chapter.

This is important to keep in mind.

1) God might humble you in terms of testing, but what could ever compare to the humiliation that our Lord endured?

³ See the comments of W. Hall Harris, eds. *The NET Bible Notes*. 1st, Accordance electronic ed. (Richardson: Biblical Studies Press, 2005), paragraph 84382.

⁴ John Calvin wrote: "These words mean nothing more than the condition of the present life. To torture them so as to make them mean purgatory or hell, is exceedingly foolish. The argument taken from the comparative degree, 'the lower parts,' is quite untenable. A comparison is drawn, not between one part of the earth and another, but between the whole earth and heaven; as if he had said, that from that lofty habitation Christ descended into our deep gulf."

2) You are called to humble yourself in terms of how you deal with others, but what could be compared to the obedience of Christ on the cross?

4) THE GLORY OF OUR LORD IN HIS ASCENSION, v. 10

I think verse 10 is a strong argument that the one who descended speaks of God the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul has already spoken about the ascension of our Lord.

Turn back to Eph. 1.

19 and what *is* the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power **20** which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated *Him* at His right hand in the heavenly *places*, **21** far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come.

There are two things emphasized in verse 10.

The place of total victory and triumph that our Lord enjoys.

We still deal with incredible forces of evil and conflict.

So here there is assurance that our Lord has won the victory.

Rom. 8:37 Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

The second thing emphasized is the end of verse 10, that He might fill all things.

This language is connected back to Eph. 1:23.

Eph. 1:23 which is His body, the fullness of Him **who fills all in all**.

This is a challenging concept.

What is this filling?

If we think of the OT, the language speaks of God's presence.

In Exodus 40,

Ex. 40:34 Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.

In 2 Chron. 7,

2Chr. 7:1 When Solomon had finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. **2** And the priests could not enter the house of the LORD, because the glory of the LORD had filled the LORD'S house.

Here Paul speaks of the presence of Jesus Christ filling all things.

John Calvin commented:

When we hear of the ascension of Christ, it instantly strikes our minds that he is removed to a great distance from us; and so he actually is, with respect to his body and human presence. But Paul reminds us, that, while he is removed from us in bodily presence, he *fills all things* by the power of his Spirit. Wherever the right hand of God, which embraces heaven and earth, is displayed, Christ is spiritually present by his boundless power;

CONCLUSION

Assurance in the power and presence of our Lord.

Heb. 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. **15** For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all *points* tempted as *we are*, yet without sin. **16** Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Know the grace and the power of our Lord in His ascension.

Connection with the Lord's Supper

Prayer

Closing Hymn: 226

Benediction: Heb. 12:1-3

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares *us*, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.