



Truth

On Tough Texts

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What Does the Phrase “Led Captivity Captive” Mean?

Ephesians 4:8-10

WHEREFORE HE SAITH, 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.)

At first glance these verses seem to be an interruption of thought. One would think that after writing the thoughts of verse 7, Paul would just go right to the gifts in verse 11, but He does not do that. Why? Because he thought it necessary to carefully emphasize exactly Who bestows these gifts—the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

This point is crucial. *All spiritual gifts, and especially the leadership gifts in this context, are based upon what God is doing.* Paul emphasizes here how vital leadership is and that it is God alone Who is appointing and gifting these leaders, not men who just decide to appoint themselves, not just people in the church who decide that they would like to teach a little bit. The point is, are you gifted to do this, are you called of God and qualified for such leadership? *That* is the question, and it is the question that few today are willing to ask. Men such as Charles Spurgeon in his classic book *Lectures to My Students*, Martyn Lloyd-Jones in his equally enduring *Preaching and Preachers*, and others in the past were aware of this foundation to ministry, but today it is all but lost. (See Issue 18 of TOTT, January 2007, *Is There a So-Called “Call” to Ministry?*)

So it is for that reason that Paul writes what he does in verses 8-10. As the words **Wherefore he saith** indicate, verse 8 is actually a “semi-quotation” of Psalm

68:18 (“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”). The scene here is that of a victory hymn celebrating God’s conquest of the Jebusites and His ascent (represented by the Ark of the Covenant) up Mount Zion (II Sam. 6-7; I Chron. 13). At that time of conquest, soldiers who had been captured by the enemy became “re-captured captives,” and the spoils of war became the property of the conqueror to give as he wished.

There is obviously a slight discrepancy between Psalm 68:18 and our text. The Psalm reads “*received gifts for men,*” but Paul writes “*gave gifts unto men.*” The liberal critic immediately sees a contradiction here, which he thinks argues against the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture. But there is no problem because our Lord did *both*: He received *and* gave. On the one hand, the Son received them from the Father, and on the other, the Son gave them to the Church. As a victorious king would first receive the spoils of war and then distribute them to those who aided in the conquest, so the King of Kings received of His Father and distributed to His Church.¹

So Paul’s words picture the risen, triumphant Savior going into heaven after His battle on earth. With Him He takes certain captives and then gives **gifts** to those who remain on earth. What a thrilling picture!

This does, however, bring up a question: What is the meaning of that odd phrase, **He led captivity captive**? There has been some debate on this phrase. A common teaching views “captivity” as referring to Old Testament saints who though saved were held in some sort of cap-

tivity. It is further taught that the Lord Jesus went into Hades (Hell), retrieved them from their captivity, and took them to Heaven.

Such a teaching, however, is rooted in Roman Catholic tradition, not Scripture as it claims. The Latin term is *limbus patrum*, that is, “limbo of fathers.” The literal idea of *limbus* is “fringe or border,” and the basic idea in the word “limbo” is “a state or place of confinement.” So the teaching in the term *limbus patrum*, which was chosen in the Middle Ages, refers to a place on the border of Hell that, as the *Catholic Encyclopedia* puts it, was the place where “the just who had lived under the Old Dispensation, and who, either at death or after a course of purgatorial discipline, had attained the perfect holiness required for entrance into glory, were obliged to await the coming of the Incarnate Son of God and the full accomplishment of His visible earthly mission. Meanwhile they were ‘in prison’ . . . awaiting ‘the higher bliss to which they looked forward.’”²

We might also interject that a similar teaching is called *limbus infantium* (“children’s limbo”), which is the place where unbaptized infants go, according to Catholicism; since they weren’t baptized, they can’t go to heaven, but because they have done no wickedness, they go a place of happiness and no “positive pain.” This is why infant baptism is so strongly emphasized to parents, so that they will be able to see their children again in Heaven.

Further, such teaching does not come even remotely close to the imagery of the phrase. The Greek (*ēchmalōteusen aichmalōsian*) more literally says, “he led captive captivity.” *Ēchmalōteusen* is the aorist indicative active of *aichmalōteuō*, to capture, and *aichmalōsian*, the state of being captive, is a noun from *aichmalōtos*, a captive. The picture is rooted in the public triumphs of conquerors, especially as celebrated by the Romans. The language clearly describes the conqueror who took captives, led them away in chains, and then made them part of his triumphal procession.

We find the same expression elsewhere in the Old Testament. In Judges 5:12, for example, Deborah praises the Lord for giving victory over Canaan: “Awake, awake, Deborah: awake, awake, utter a song: arise, Barak, and lead thy captivity captive.” The idea is clear, that you will now lead captive him who held you captive. Also in Amos 1:3-6 we read God’s pronouncement of judgment on the nations around Israel because they had “carried away captive the whole captivity, to deliver them up to Edom,” that is, the Philistines had handed over a large number of Israelites to the cruel Edomites.

So what is Paul saying? As one expositor puts it,

It is a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ leading in His triumphal train the devil and hell and sin and death—the great enemies that were against man and which had held mankind in captivity for so long a

time. The princes which had controlled that captivity are now being led captive themselves.³

What a picture! Our Lord is, indeed, the Conqueror of Conquerors, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords. Those who once held us in bondage are now captives to the Great Conqueror and march in chains before Him.

Paul continues the thought in verses 9-10: (**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.**) Some interpret this to mean that Christ **descended** into Hell (Latin, *descensus ad inferos*) to accomplish certain things, such as preaching to Old Testament saints or even preaching to lost people, such as those before Noah, to give them a “second chance,” or perhaps to proclaim His victory to Satan. But, as John Gill puts it, such ideas are “fictitious and fabulous.” They are, of course, usually propped up with I Peter 3:19, “By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison.” But when viewed in its context, the verse obviously does not say anything of the sort, nor does any other Scripture. The verse is best understood as referring to our preincarnate Lord “preaching through Noah to those who, because they rejected that message, are now spirits in prison.”⁴

So, then, to where is Paul saying our Lord **descended**? The answer obviously is the earth itself. After all, can one “ascend” Who did not first “descend?” This principle is expressed, in fact, in other Scriptures. Our Lord Himself declared, “And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven” (Jn 3:13), and then again, “For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world” (6:33), and still again in 6:38, 41, 42; 50, 51, and 58.

With that in mind, however, does **descended** perhaps mean something even deeper? After all, if all Paul wanted to say was that Christ came to the Earth, he could have said it in much simpler terms than referring to **the lower parts of the earth**. We submit, therefore, that it is not just Christ coming to Earth, but *His coming to Earth in the deepest, most profound humiliation possible*. As Philippians 2:7-8 declares:

But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

This is further substantiated by the Greek for **descended** (*katabainō*), which in its literal meaning simply means “to go down,” as when Jesus came down from the mountain after His Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 8:1) or when the angel of the Lord told Philip to go down from Jerusalem to Gaza (Acts 8:26). But as Greek authority

Joseph Thayer writes, there is a figurative meaning of this word, “to be cast down to the lowest state of wretchedness and shame.”⁵ This meaning is found in Matthew 11:23, where our Lord said of Capernaum that though it had been “exalted unto heaven,” since He had chosen it as His headquarters, it would “be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.” It’s interesting that there is no record that the inhabitants persecuted Him or even mocked Him, but simply because of their indifference, their sin was more wretched than even Sodom’s.

Think, then, of the humiliation of our Lord. He set aside His heavenly glory and was born a man, was born of peasant stock in stable, was born in the less than significant Nazareth (Jn. 1:46), experienced all the weaknesses and temptations of humanity, was mocked by the masses, scorned by His own family, rejected by His own nation, nailed to a Roman cross as the worst of criminals, buried in a borrowed tomb, and then forgotten by everyone except only a few loyal followers.

That is the view of several expositors,⁶ and I am convinced that it is correct because only against that backdrop could we then see the true glory of His ascension, for He **ascended up far above all heavens**. As Calvin put it, “If ever there was a time when, after appearing to lay aside the brightness of his power, God ascended gloriously, it was when Christ was raised from our lowest condition on earth, and received into heavenly glory.” In other words, if there is anything that illustrates the lowest ascending to the highest, it is our Lord. Paul here adds to the ascension story told by Luke (Lk. 24:50-52; Acts 1:9-11) by telling us more specifically where our Lord went. While John 3:13 (and the other texts mentioned earlier) declare that He “ascended *up* to heaven” and “came *down* from heaven,” Paul specifies that He went **far above all heavens**, that is, above the atmosphere, above the stars, beyond the universe, into the third heaven and to the very Throne of God, where He now sits at the Father’s right hand (Heb. 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). As one commentator aptly phrases it, “As His humiliation was so low, His exaltation is proportionately high.”⁷ As noted earlier, Philippians 2:7-8 speaks of His humiliation, but verses 9-11 immediately go on to declare:

Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him 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.

And what was the purpose of this? Paul tells us that Christ did it to **fill all things**. *Fill* is *pleroō*, “to render full, to complete.” He did it all to complete God’s plan

of salvation and to fulfill God’s plan for the Church. And what a completion it is! Our Lord **descended** to the lowliest state and suffered the lowliest death, but then He rose again, led our enemies into captivity, **ascended** gloriously into Heaven, and left behind great **gifts** that His redeemed people can use to carry on ministry.

We emphasize this in dramatic contrast to today’s distorted emphasis on spiritual gifts. There are many today who teach that every believer must “seek their spiritual gift.” We hear such things as, “Here are four principles on how to find your spiritual gift,” or, “You have got to find your gift before you can ever serve God.” But we would humbly submit that this emphasis is incorrect. Nowhere in Scripture are we instructed to “seek our gift.” Spiritual gifts are not to be *sought*; they are to be *received*. Receiving a spiritual gift is like receiving any other gift; we do not solicit it or expect it, rather we receive it when the giver decides to give it. The single key to understanding this is found in the word *yieldedness*. We are to be totally yielded to Christ. When we are yielded, God will then give the gift or gifts (in the amounts He wills) that will glorify Him and edify the Church the most.

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NOTES

¹ This seems further indicated by the reading of the ancient Syriac Peshitta (a 2nd Century Bible version), which translates the Hebrew word as “gave.” As John R. W. Stott writes, “Evidently this was already a traditional interpretation” (*God’s New Society* [Downers Grove: IL: Intervarsity Press, 1979], p. 157).

F.F. Bruce is even more significant: “An early targumic rendering [Targums are oral paraphrases of the OT committed to writing in 2nd and 3rd Century A.D.] is found in the Peshitta:

‘Thou hast ascended on high;
thou hast led captivity captive;
thou hast given gifts to men.’

“A later amplification appears in the traditional Targum on the Psalter, which provides the text with a life-setting far removed from Jerusalem under the monarchy:

‘Thou hast ascended to the firmament, prophet Moses;
thou hast led captivity captive;
thou hast taught the words of the law;
thou hast given gifts to men.’

“Paul and other NT writers occasionally give evidence of using targumic renderings (or renderings known to us nowadays only from the Targums), especially where such renderings are better suited to the argument to which they are applied than the Hebrew or Septuagint wording would be. Even when a written Targum is quite late, the renderings it presents often had a long oral prehistory. However far ‘thou hast given gifts to men’ deviates from ‘thou hast received gifts among (from) men,’ it circulated as an acceptable interpretation in the first century A.D.” (F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 342-3).

In the typical liberal fashion of modern textual critics, Andrew Lincoln prefers to call the Peshitta reading a possible “corruption, which makes its value as evidence precarious” (*Word Biblical Commentary: Ephesians* [Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990], p. 242).

² “Limbo” in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Classic 1914 Edition (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen>).

³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Christian Unity: An Exposition of Ephesians 4:1-16* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), p. 153.

⁴ *Ryrie Study Bible* (NASB). John Gill expands, “The plain and easy sense of the words is, that Christ, by his Spirit, by which he was quickened, went in the ministry of Noah, the preacher of righteousness, and preached both by words and deeds, by the personal ministry of Noah, and by the building of the ark, to that generation who was then in being; and who being disobedient, and continuing so, a flood was brought upon them which destroyed them all; and whose spirits, or separate souls, were then in the prison of hell, so the Syriac version renders it . . . in hell . . . so that Christ neither went into this prison, nor preached in it, nor to spirits that were then in it when he preached, but to persons alive in the days of Noah, and who being disobedient, when they died, their separate

souls were put into prison, and there they were when the apostle wrote: from whence we learn, that Christ was, that he existed in his divine nature before he was incarnate, he was before Abraham, he was in the days of Noah; and that Christ also, under the Old Testament, acted the part of a Mediator, in his divine nature, and by his Spirit discharged that branch of it, his prophetic office, before he appeared in human nature; and that the Gospel was preached in those early times, as unto Abraham, so before him” (*John Gill’s Exposition*).

⁵ *Thayer’s Greek – English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 329

⁶ E.g., Albert Barnes, John Calvin, John Gill, William Hendrickson, William Kelly, Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

⁷ John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998; reprint of 2nd Edition, 1861), p. 296.

“The Papists, therefore, make themselves guilty, who eke out Scripture with their traditions, which they consider equal to it. The Council of Trent says, that the traditions of the church of Rome are to be received *pari pietatis affectu*, with the same devotion that Scripture is to be received; so bringing themselves under the curse. Rev 22:18. ‘If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book.’”

Puritan Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*
(Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992 reprint), p. 30

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