

THE LORD'S ASCENSION (Ps. 68:18)

Ps. 68:18 Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive: thou hast received gifts for men ... Eph. 4:8 Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.

We shall begin with a *very* brief synopsis of the psalm, as we consider the verse quoted in Ephesians chapter four.

Written by King David, the psalm relates to a great time of praise, ¹ Let God arise ... ³ let the righteous be glad; let them rejoice before God: yea, let them exceedingly rejoice. ⁴ Sing unto God, sing praises to his name: extol him that rideth upon the heavens by his name JAH, and rejoice before him. ... Notice also the many titles of God, *Elohim* (v.1, twenty-six times), *Jah* (v.4), *Adonai* (v.11), *Shaddai* (v.14), *Jehovah* (v.16), *LORD God* (v.18), *El* (v.20). Commentators would place the historical setting in I Chron. 15 where David moved the Ark of the Covenant from the house of Obed-Edom to Mount Zion, ²⁵ So David, and the elders of Israel, and the captains over thousands, went to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of the house of Obededom with joy. ²⁶ And it came to pass, when God helped the Levites that bare the ark of the covenant of the LORD, that they offered seven bullocks and seven rams. ²⁷ And David was clothed with a robe of fine linen, and all the Levites that bare the ark, and the singers, and Chenaniah the master of the song with the singers: David also had upon him an ephod of linen. ²⁸ Thus all Israel brought up the ark of the covenant of the LORD with shouting, and with sound of the cornet, and with trumpets, and with cymbals, making a noise with psalteries and harps. ... A great historical occasion!

The psalm can be divided into six sections:

- 1) v.1-6, God is the triumphant Leader of His jubilant people who He has established in the land and scattered their enemies, ⁶ God setteth the solitary in families: he bringeth out those which are bound with chains: but the rebellious dwell in a dry land.
- 2) v.7-18, His people remember how He miraculously brought them out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land ... giving them victory over the hostile armies they faced along the way. Reference is made to the choice God made concerning Jerusalem as their capital, ¹⁵ The hill of God is as the hill of Bashan [*'fruitful', 'sacred'*]; an high hill as the hill of Bashan. ... Bashan refers to the majestic Mount Hermon which is over 9,000 feet high. Mount Zion, on the other hand, is only 2,300 feet, and not majestic at all ... yet, - the humble Zion, - was chosen by God in which He and His people would dwell, ¹⁶ Why leap ye, ye high hills? this is the hill which God desireth to dwell in; yea, the LORD will dwell in it for ever.
- 3) v.19-23, Jehovah's affection and commitment to Israel.
- 4) v. 24-27, the triumphal procession (cf. I Chron. 15:27-28). ... v. 27, 'Little Benjamin' produced their first king ... Zebulun and Naphtali, their final King (cf. Is. 9:1 Nevertheless the dimness shall not be such as was in her vexation, when at the first he lightly afflicted the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, and afterward did more grievously afflict her by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, in Galilee of the nations.)
- 5) v.28-31, the promise that the nations will come to worship God in Jerusalem.
- 6) v.32-35, ultimately and globally, God to be praised.

Throughout this psalm there is an increasing eschatological emphasis, but we shall concentrate on verse eighteen and on how it is quoted by the apostle Paul, **Eph. 4:8** Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. ... The “He” is the ⁵ One Lord ... ⁶ One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. Then in Eph. 4:8, Paul quotes from Ps. 68:18, Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive: thou hast received [*the original Hebrew ... whereas Paul quotes using the Septuagint, ‘gave’*] gifts for men ... Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive: thou hast received gifts for men ... This psalm is about how all-victorious God is, and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul states it as a prophecy concerning Jesus Christ and His victory over Satan, sin, death, and hell.

Eph. 4:8 When he ascended up on high ... When a king, for example King David, went out to fight a battle and win, he returned and ascended the hill of Mount Zion, - the great crowning hill of Jerusalem, - he would ‘ascend up on high’. He would be the conquering hero upon whom the people would heap their praise and adulation ... the triumphant King. The ‘He’ here though in Eph. 4:8, is King Jesus and Paul relates Ps. 68:18 to His ascension, as Peter and the disciples had witnessed, **Acts 1:9** And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. **10** And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up ... Paul further extrapolates this point from a doctrinal perspective, **Eph. 1:19** And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, **20** Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own 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 world, but also in that which is to come ... **Col. 2:15** And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it. ... Jesus Christ is at the centre of Heaven, the Focus of the Redeemed.

By His resurrection, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (In Ps. 68:18, David says thou hast *received* gifts for men, He *gives* salvation, and through Him salvation is received) ... He led captivity captive. In this case, these captives are His own ... who *previously* were in bondage to Satan ... but when Christ saved *and freed* them, they became ‘captive’ to Him ... and what a privilege! This is what lay behind Paul’s regular introduction to the churches as the ‘servant’ or the ‘slave’ of the Lord Jesus. When you became a Christian you become a possession of Christ, ... **I Cor 6:20** For ye are bought with a price. ... You belong to Him. You are His. ... He embarked upon a battle with Satan for the ownership of your soul ... and Jesus won ... He ascended up on high, into Glory bringing with Him the spoils of war, the captives who now are His.

... Paul then goes on to explain further, ⁹ (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? **10** He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.) ... **Eph. 4:9** Now that he

ascended, ultimately, where did He ascend to? He ascended into, - He returned to, - Heaven, to the throne at the right-hand of His Father ... but *before* He returned to Heaven He descended into the lower parts of the earth.

What does that mean? Where did Jesus go following His death? Did He sleep after the busyness of those days preceding Calvary? As some say, did He rattle the gates of Hell to endorse the punishment its occupants were suffering? Or, as some others say, did He actually *enter* Hell and suffer, Ps. 16:10 *For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.* Is the Apostolic Creed correct when it says Jesus “was crucified, dead and buried; *He descended into Hell*”? ... No, Jesus did *not* descend into Hell after He died, otherwise His words to the dying thief were misleading, Lk. 23:43 *To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.*

Where did He go then, when He died? ... Well, He *did* go to Paradise. In the Old Testament the realm of the dead was known as ‘sheol’ (‘Hades’ in the New Testament Gospels). It was a temporary place where souls await the final resurrection and the judgment. Rev. 20:11-15 explains how Hades became more pronounced as a place of torment Hell, and how it will ultimately be cast into the eternal lake of fire.

Originally, Sheol/Hades was a realm consisting of two divisions/compartments, - a place of blessing and a place of curse ... ‘Abraham’s bosom’ (Lk. 16:22), - also referred to as ‘Paradise’ Lk. 23:43), - and the place of punishment, - ‘Hell’ or ‘Hades’, - and between them was ‘a great chasm’ (Lk. 16:26). ... When Jesus died He went to ‘Paradise’, and *also*, at the exact moment He died, Mt. 27:51 *the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; 52 And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose ...* The righteous saints from the Old Testament era were translated from Paradise into Heaven ... for in His death, - as Paul wrote in Eph. 4:8, - Christ led captivity captive ...

So, what does the lower parts of the earth mean? There are quite a few opinions among evangelicals as to what it means. Personally, I consider the simplest to be the least problematic and the most valid ... Jesus ascended into Heaven, out of which He had previously come to enter this world. Heaven is gloriously perfect, and more beautiful than any earthly mind could imagine ... But when the Lord Jesus came into this world, knowing exactly what His purpose was, He made Himself of no reputation, - His intention was not to attract great leaders or emperors. He wasn’t born into a palace but He wilfully, - as was His Father’s plan, - born in the humblest surroundings. Even as a little Boy His life was in danger, and His parents had to take Him away to a foreign country, - exiled as a child.

After His time in that foreign country He returned, and His parents would have liked to settle in Judea, which was their tribal territory, but instead, they considered it wiser to travel north to Galilee where Jesus grew up. Then when He began to travel, teaching and preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom, He attracted such cruel and vitriolic opposition ... and to consider how He left the glories of Heaven and the praises of the angels and the company of His Father to *descend* into a world where often He did not know where He would lay His head that night.

And as if that was not low enough for our Lord to descend, He went even lower ... He was arrested, man-handled, mistreated and abused by evil men. They slapped Him, thumped Him, beat Him, mocked Him ... He was despised, rejected, a man of sorrows, - there was nothing about Him which was attractive, - they saw no beauty that they should desire Him ... They falsely accused Him in front of their courts, and they condemned Him to the cross. And even on the cross He had yet *further* to *descend* for upon Him was laid all our sins and He suffered the eternal wrath of His Father which was due to the people He died to save. ... Surely, *that* is how Jesus descended *into the lower parts of the earth*. ... How much lower could He have gone than Calvary?! Surely, *that* was the lowest! ... And yes, during the time following His death He entered that part of Sheol/Hades and He led the Old Testament saints into Glory ... as the hymn says, "Up from the grave He arose ... And He lives forever with His saints to reign".

... That is what David and Paul were referring to when they prophesied He would lead captivity captive and give/receive gifts unto men, **Eph. 4:10** He that *descended* is the same also that *ascended* up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things. ... He would fulfil the plan of His Father, - the salvation of the Old and New Testament saints, and every saint for whom He died. ... And that is how David concludes his psalm on such a note of victory, **Ps. 68:19** Blessed be the Lord, who daily loadeth us with benefits, even the God of our salvation. Selah. **20** He that is our God is the God of salvation ... **32** Sing unto God, ye kingdoms of the earth; O sing praises unto the Lord; Selah: **33** To him that rideth upon the heavens of heavens, which were of old; lo, he doth send out his voice, and that a mighty voice. **34** Ascribe ye strength unto God: his excellency is over Israel, and his strength is in the clouds. **35** O God, thou art terrible out of thy holy places: the God of Israel is he that giveth strength and power unto his people. Blessed be God.