

Jason Upchurch - Ephesians 4:7-16 - The King Gives Gifts

When I was in high school I remember the Discovery Channel put out a program called Mysteries of the Bible. And the premise of the show was to discuss odd things of the Bible that we didn't have a lot of information about. I thought the show was fascinating until I went to Bible college and came back one winter and watched a couple of episodes. And what became clear was that the Discovery Channel was using these unusual stories in the Bible to sow doubt on the Bible and undermine its truthfulness.

No surprise, but it was actually a liberal theology propaganda machine. Every miracle was explained away. Every truth claim was left in question. Every fantastic pagan philosophy was accepted without question. All under the guise trying to figure out mysteries.

And something you need to get comfortable with is that there are mysteries in the Bible and we don't have all the answers. And this side of glory we're not going to get them. And God doesn't owe us any answers. And we need to be careful not to speculate about the answers.

What was Jesus's childhood like? We don't know. Except the few things recorded in Scripture.

What was going on in Corinth with people being baptized for the dead? We don't know. There's over 200 scholarly ideas. But they're just opinions. Not facts.

Who wrote the book of Hebrews? No one knows.

Where was Daniel when his 3 friends were thrown into the fire. Don't know.

There's all kinds of mysteries in the Bible we just simply don't have the answer to and that's okay. A lot of times we get so caught up on the mysteries that we miss the main point.

The main point isn't where was Daniel when the friends were tossed into the fire, the main point is be faithful to God even if it costs you your life because you won't bow to Caesar even when the entire Kingdom bows to Caesar.

So we don't want to get distracted by what we don't know, we need to focus on what we do know.

We get a taste of this morning because Paul touches on an ancient mystery: Where did Jesus go during the 3 days his body was in the grave? What was happening during that time?

This passage and several other passages reference that question in passing. Added to the difficulty is that later versions of the Apostle's Creed say that Jesus descended into hell, or hades. What does that mean?

When I was first a believer, for whatever reason, I thought that after he died, Jesus was in hell for 3 days suffering in agony. I mean, I deserved hell and he took my place, right? Well, he suffered the wrath of God alright, but that was all on the cross. Jesus didn't suffer in hell at all. His final words on the cross were "it is finished." The work of atonement, the suffering for the sins of his people was done completely on the cross.

So whatever else was going on, it wasn't him burning in hell.

So we're going to dive into some of that this morning. But I want to encourage you that that's not even the main point of the passage, although it might be the most interesting part of the passage. It's not the main point.

Big Picture: Jesus gave his unified church a variety of spiritual gifts.

Paul has been talking about how in the wisdom of God he has brought Jew and Gentile together into one new man through the gospel. You're probably sick of me saying that, but that's what a lot of Ephesians is about: The mystery that God kept hidden was that when he sent the divine Messiah he would actually unite Jew and

Gentile into one family through faith in Jesus. There would no longer be a separation like there had been for millennia. God would do a radically new thing.

I'm just as much a child of Abraham as you are as a Jewish believer is. By the way, it drives me nuts when people refer to others as "Messianic Jews" or "Jewish Christians" or even "Chinese Christians" or "African Christians." We're just Christians. If you're a believer in Jesus you're in Christ, part of the true Israel and Jesus himself if our entire identity. That's what God has done.

So we're unified. But what Paul is going to do is also show that we're different and that's good. God designed differences into the Kingdom on purpose and for his glory. We need to be different to get the mission accomplished.

I'm reading a biography of James Cook called the Wide Wide Sea. It's a look at his 3rd and final voyage. And on his ship he has a bunch of different people: captain, lieutenants, navigator, different levels of seamen, guys who do rigging and anchors. There's masters and newbies. There were carpenters, carpenter's mates, caulkers to keep water out of the boat. Joiners, sailmakers, butchers, coopers who made barrels - barrels are essential on a boat. Surgeons, gunners, soldiers, scientists. I never realized ancient vessels had such a wide variety of people but they had to in order to survive.

You had all these guys with a variety of talents and skills and abilities all working to the same end. That's the church. We're unified, but we are different as well. And that's good.

Paul doesn't use the analogy of a ship, he uses an analogy of a conquering king. When an ancient king would conquer another country, they would lead all the surviving enemies back his city. They'd be chained up in shame for all the citizens to see. The enemy kings and rulers would be executed or put into slavery, all the others sold as slaves or killed off.

And so when the King returned home, he led all the captives behind him - like the Arch de Triumph in Paris built by Napoleon. And when got up to his throne he would dish out gifts to all his citizens. He would divide the spoils of war. And it was a big party. And this big party brought all the country together.

The Code of Hammurabi talks about Babylonian and Assyrian kings cancelling debt and freeing slaves when a King would take the throne.

Cyrus the king was described as giving out robes and horses and gold when he ascended the throne.

Solomon gave massive banquets for all the people. The party was so loud that the ground shook.

In Rome, soldiers were given money, citizens were given free admission to the games and free food, and usually taxes were lowered.

Even presidents give gifts. They try to do something to provide financial benefit to citizens within the first 100 days of their presidency. It's natural for leaders to want to bless their people when they come into power.

Paul says that's what Jesus did. He got off his throne, took on flesh and died to triumph over the enemy. Then he rose and ascended back to his throne and gave gifts to us. The enemies are satan and his minions. We are the subjects of the Kingdom. And he gave us gifts. **Read 7-8**

What are the gifts he gave? **Read 11-14**

The gifts that he gave to his people - the Church - are specifically the leaders in the Church who help to bring the whole church to maturity. I think these gifts do also include all the spiritual gifts because all Christians should be using their gifts to bless the church. But here the gifts that Jesus gives as the conquering, ascended king are the leaders who equip the church for ministry.

So that's the context of what Paul is saying. Jesus the King of kings conquered, ascended his throne, and gave gifts - spiritual gifts - like ancient kings did to bless the Kingdom.

So I want to break this whole section down.

1. Your part in the Kingdom is a gift to others. **Read 6-7**

So we're all to be unified. God the Father being over all and in all and through all. He's joining us all together. But our specific role in the Kingdom is pure grace from Jesus.

This isn't talking about saving grace because the saving grace of God is equal. I have my sins forgiven with the same exact grace you do and everyone does.

Paul is saying there's a difference between each of us. We received grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Some people get more, some people get less. That's not talking about salvation. He's talking about how we're used in the Kingdom.

This is super important: the gifts that God has given you to serve the Kingdom is an act of grace. It's God's gift to you and to the Church. And it's specifically given by Jesus.

When kings gave out gifts to their subjects in ancient times it wasn't always the same gift. They gave out a variety of the spoil. And especially to close friends they customized the gifts to fit their friends.

Jesus knows us all perfectly so he gives us all the exact gifts he wants us to have. We all have a gift - a spiritual gift or talent or skill to bless the body of the Christ - but we all have different gifts.

Even in the list of gifts Paul gives in **Vs. 11** there's variety: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers. These are leaders in the church, but they're not all the same.

Paul thinks he's the least of all the apostles. We probably view him as the greatest. And most Christians probably can't name all 12 apostles. Peter, James and John are always listed first - they are the closest ones to Jesus. Others we barely hear about, like Andrew or Matthias.

Same with teachers. There are Charles Spurgeons and Martin Luthers. There's popular authors or commentators. There's small town pastors and big church pastors. There's Sunday school teachers and stay at home moms teaching Bible stories and theology to little ones.

There are different types of evangelists. Some just ooze out the gospel to everyone they know in personal conversations, others do street preaching, others preach the gospel at work.

But everyone who has a gift has it because of pure grace. Jesus, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, gave us the gifts we have. He puts us in the place in life we are.

Have you ever felt like "Man I wish I could do what so and so can do?" "I wish I had so and so's situation?" That's pretty common. And it's okay to ask the Lord to change your situation, especially if you want to serve others. But don't let it slip into envy or covetousness.

What he has given you he has personally given by his grace.

2. Jesus purchased these gifts through conquering. Paul quotes a verse from the psalms to explain how Jesus came to give the gifts he gives to his people. **Read 8**

We think of him as the sacrificial lamb, gentle shepherd, faithful high priest, compassionate Lord, suffering servant.

But one of the pictures I think we often forget is that he is the triumphant and reigning king. The first promise we have of Jesus in the Bible is in Genesis 3 where he is promised to do something to the head of the serpent. What does he do? He crushes it. I don't know if you've thought about that but that is graphic and violent. And completely appropriate because of what Satan did to humanity.

But all throughout the OT the Lord is shown to be a warrior. He points his loaded bow at the face of his enemies. He crushes their teeth. He slams them and their little ones against the rocks to destroy them.

Now who are the enemies? Primarily they are spiritual forces: demons, principalities and powers. **Look at 1:19-23.** This is Paul talking about what Jesus did to the evil spiritual forces. **Read 19-23**

Paul is describing the same situation: Jesus rose, ascended and is seated not just above, but far above all rulers and authorities. Those are evil spiritual forces. And God put everything under Jesus's feet. What does that mean?

In ancient times when a king would conquer another king he would literally put his foot on the neck of the other king to show absolute dominance. **Josh 10:24:** Joshua lines up all the defeated kings and all Joshua's leaders come and put their feet on the necks of the kings. Why? It shows absolute dominance.

This is what Jesus did to the evil spiritual forces. **Turn to Col. 2:13-15** This is the same kind of thing. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, our sins are forgiven, of course. But Jesus was doing more than that on the cross. **Read**

We call this our union with Jesus. When someone is saved, what happens is we are united with Jesus in his death. The wages of sin is what? Death. And so when we trust that Jesus died for our sins we are united to him in his death. It's as though we died with Jesus. And we're made alive with Jesus in his resurrection. And so the record of debt - the sin debt that we owed God - is cancelled because it was all paid through Jesus.

At the very same time, Jesus's death completely disarmed the rulers and authorities. They're not completely destroyed yet. But they are disarmed. They have no real power over us. They can tempt us, accuse us - but for those in Christ they have no real power.

Imagine someone coming up and trying to rob you using a little orange squirt gun. "Give me all your money" or you'll what? Squirt me? Jesus has disarmed every evil spiritual power.

This was always by design. The OT promised Messiah would come. **Turn to Psalm 68** for a few minutes. This is the psalm that Paul quotes about Jesus leading a host of captives and then giving gifts to men. The whole psalm is a Messianic psalm about how messiah will absolutely crush his enemies. **Read 1-6, 15-18, 28-35**

So you get the gist of the whole psalm. God is a conquering warrior who absolutely destroys his enemies. And David uses the same graphic language throughout. Scattered, driven away, trample.

The verse Paul quotes is **Vs. 18. Read**

The Messiah ascends and receives gifts. If you remember Paul quoted it saying he gives gifts. It seems there's some flexibility in the Hebrew. It could mean give or take. Or it could be both: he is given gifts by the enemy and then he gives it away.

Whatever the case, the point is that Jesus conquers over his enemies through the cross, and like the best of kings he gives out spoil to his people.

What's that have to do with Paul's point **back in Eph 4?** Well, not only are the gifts Jesus gives pure grace, but Jesus earned them through defeating his enemies on the cross.

Every gift you have, every gift our church has is not only pure grace, but is a result of Jesus triumphing over his enemies through the cross. We share in the spoils of our warrior King.

3 - The gifts come because he is the ascended King. **Read 9-10**

In the last section here this morning we get into the most interesting section: where did Jesus descend to? We're going to talk about that. But just know that for all the hubbub of discussion on where Christ descended to, the point is actually that he ascended into heaven. That's the whole emphasis.

Just pause there for a minute. The ascension of Jesus is a big deal and often overlooked, or an afterthought. He died - yes and amen. He rose - yes and amen again. But we often pass over his ascension and what that means. The ascension of Jesus means that he is reigning on God's throne as God. It is the vindication that is who he said he was.

How do we know he was the Son of God? How do we know he was fully divine? How do we know his death was a sacrifice for sins? How do we know he's coming again? Because he ascended into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. Who sits on God's throne? God.

In fact, the description of Jesus is basically the same as the description of the Father. **Read 6, 10**

Jesus is over all the heavens and fills all creation, just like the Father. This is really the point of the passage: our Lord conquered his enemies through the cross, and gave us gifts because now he is the ascended reigning, majestic king of Heaven. He is far, far, far above all things.

Alright, what is this whole descended thing? Where did Jesus go? Why do some versions of the Apostle's Creed say he descended into hell? What does that mean?

Here's what I think: At some point during the 3 days his body was in the grave, Jesus descended into hell. Not to suffer, but to proclaim victory over the demons in hell and to lead the saints in Sheol to glory.

Here, the language is difficult: It could mean that he descended into the lower regions, meaning the earth itself. The earth is lower than heaven in biblical framework. This was true, of course.

It could mean that when he died he was lowered into the earth, that is buried in the ground, which also is true.

But I think there's a supernatural element in all of this. In the OT those who died went to Sheol. The grave, the place of the dead. Sort of murky undefined place.

As time goes on we get more information about what happens to people after they die. If you remember Jesus tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus. I think it's a true story, not a parable. The rich man and Lazarus both die and they're in the same area, but experiencing very different things. Lazarus is in paradise and the rich man is in hades - torment. And there's a divide. It seems as though they can see each other although they can't interact. There's a gap. One side is hell where unbelievers and demons are suffering, the other side is the saints in peace.

Turn to 2 Pet. 2. Here Peter is talking about the judgment that awaits false teachers. And the judgment is dark chains in hell just like fallen angels. **Read 4-10**

What's his point? God knows how to preserve the godly and to punish the ungodly. And he gives examples of God's punishment: locking up fallen angels in chains of gloomy darkness. Destroying the world in a flood. Turning Sodom and Gomorrah into ash.

If he can do that, rest assured he will see to it that the unrighteous are punished appropriately until the day of judgment when they are cast into the lake of fire.

Why mention this? Because the picture of hell or hades or Tartarus that we get is darkness, chains, punishment, anguish. It's filled with fallen angels (demons). I think these are the sons of God from Genesis 6 who married women and created a hybrid demonic race of giants.

I think those fallen angels tried to corrupt the human lineage to prevent Messiah from coming as truly man.

But it's filled with every false prophet who tried to lead God's people astray and it's filled with every unbeliever who rebelled against God and refused to honor him as God. **Turn to 1 Pet 3**

Peter gives us another sketch of this. Jesus suffered, then went and proclaimed, then he rose, then he ascended and all things are subjected. But there's this same stuff here. **Read 18-22**

So putting all the pieces together here's what I think Jesus did in hell: He was put to death in the flesh but was alive in the Spirit. And he went and proclaimed to evil, demonic spirits in prison.

What does he proclaim? Victory. They didn't win. They didn't triumph. He triumphed. He won. They didn't obey in the days of Noah. They were trying to corrupt the human race. God destroyed their whole race and threw them in prison where they await the judgment. And Jesus comes down and proclaims his victory over them through the cross.

They didn't win. He won. He conquered. He crushed them. And they've been burning in gloomy darkness for 2,000 years since then. And they are going to burn along with the rest of all the unbelievers of all the ages.

And then Jesus rose and ascended into heaven. Having destroyed all of his enemies he now sits on his throne reigning over the whole universe. And as he reigns, our gracious gives gifts to us that we would be unified. He gives you and me and all of us to serve and love one another for his glory and our good.

Pray