

Ephesians 4:8—Therefore it says, “When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, And He gave gifts to men.”

During Old Testament times, all the souls and spirits of the dead (believers as well as unbelievers) went to Sheol (Deuteronomy 32:22; 1 Kings 2:6; Job 24:19; 26:6; Psalm 9:17; 16:10; etc.), or Hades (Matthew 11:23; Luke 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; Revelation 20:13; etc.), while their bodies returned to the earth (to dust). Sheol (Hebrew), or Hades (Greek), was divided—one side for the lost, the other side for the saved (Luke 16:19-31). The saved side was called “*Abraham’s bosom*” (Luke 16:22), or “*Paradise*” (Luke 23:43), while the lost side (the side we normally call hell) is a place of torment for the unrighteous dead (Luke 16:22-24). It also houses a specific class of demons (2Peter 2:4-5; Jude 6). This input should assist our understanding as we continue.

According to Matthew 27:45-46, darkness fell upon the earth during the three hours that the Father judged sin through His Son. Jesus was separated spiritually from the Father (He died spiritually) when He took on the sin of mankind (the sin of the “elect” as well as the “non-elect”). After Jesus’ spiritual death, however, and while His body remained alive on the cross, He was “*made alive in the spirit*” (1Peter 3:18). Therefore, Christ died spiritually and was raised spiritually before He died physically. Later, when Jesus died physically (John 19:28-30), His body was placed in the tomb (for three days); but His soul and spirit traveled to the saved side of Hades (or Sheol)—to “*Paradise*” (Luke 23:43; Ephesians 4:9), or “*Abraham’s bosom*” (Luke 16:22). During His three-day-stay in Hades, He “*made a proclamation to the spirits now in prison*” (1Peter 3:19). In other words, He “*made a proclamation*” (an announcement) to a particular group of beings in hell—“*to the spirits now in prison,*” a topic addressed in more detail shortly. (Notice that He “*made a proclamation*” rather than preached the gospel.) But how was it possible for Christ, dwelling in Paradise (Abraham’s bosom), to make an announcement to beings restrained to hell? According to Luke 16:19-31, the lost rich man (in hell) could speak with Abraham (in Abraham’s bosom). Thus Jesus, by no stretch of the imagination, entered hell—as some theologians have incorrectly assumed.

When Peter speaks of Jesus’ “*proclamation to the spirits...in prison*” in Hades (1Peter 3:19), he mentions a particular class of beings who were disobedient during “*the days of Noah*” (1Peter 3:20). Genesis 6:1-4 confirms that after God pronounced judgment on the serpent through the “*seed*” of the woman (Genesis 3:15), “*the sons of God*” (Genesis 6:2—fallen angels in this case) joined themselves to “*the daughters of men*” (to natural women). These fallen angels were attempting to negate, or corrupt, God’s promise of Genesis 3:15—that a “*seed*” would be born through a particular “*woman,*” and that this “*seed*” would “*bruise*” Satan’s “*head*” (usurp Satan’s authority over earth). Had these fallen angels polluted the lineage to the seed, the seed could not have been born. Peter mentions these particular beings for this reason. Jesus’ “*proclamation*” (1Peter 3:19) proved to the lost side of Hades that He had overcome. Peter addresses these same disobedient angels in 2Peter 2:4.

Jesus departed from Sheol (Hades), for according to Psalm 16:10 (and Acts 2:27) the Father didn’t allow Him to linger there. He was brought up from Sheol to be joined with His resurrected body. Jesus’ subsequent ascension to heaven (Acts 1:1-11) allowed the souls and spirits of the inhabitants of Abraham’s bosom (Paradise) to be taken to heaven, while the souls and spirits of the lost remained in the same place of torment—as they do today. Thus, Abraham’s bosom no longer exists.

Therefore it says, “When He ascended on high, (4:8a)

Paul refers to Psalm 68:18 by saying, “*When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, And He gave gifts to men*” (Ephesians 4:8a). Paul’s words are not a direct quote of the Psalm, which has led some theologians to conclude that Paul makes a general reference for the sake of analogy. *The New Bible Commentary Revised* also states:

The quotation from Psalm 68:18 is adapted to produce a reading which closely follows the Syriac version known as the Peshitta: “Thou didst ascend on high, and take captivity captive; and Thou gavest gifts to men”; and a similar version in the Aramaic Targum (i.e. paraphrase of the Old Testament text) shows that the sense of “He gave unto men” was an old Jewish interpretation on which Paul is evidently drawing in this citation. (*The New Bible Commentary Revised*, 1984)ⁱ

Whatever the case, Christ’s ascension allowed Him to give gifts to men. When He exited the grave (Matthew 28:1-10) and forty days later was taken to heaven (Acts 1:1-11), everything was set for the Holy Spirit to descend on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-13), establish the church, and give “*gifts to men*” (Ephesians 4:8c).

We can’t begin to imagine the warfare accompanying Jesus’ trek through the atmospheric heavens (Acts 1:9-11; Hebrews 4:14) on His way to the Father. Satan had done everything possible to thwart Christ’s birth and had (of late) unsuccessfully prevented His resurrection, so his onslaught against Jesus’ ascension must have been incredible. Evidently, every demon in the enemy’s camp was assigned to the task (Colossians 2:15). But Jesus was taken up in “*a cloud*” (Acts 1:9), “*a cloud*” of glory—glory that stems from God’s holiness, purity, righteousness, omniscience, love, and power. Because righteousness consistently overpowers evil, Jesus’ ascension was completed as planned.

He led captive a host of captives (4:8b)

Jesus “*led captive a host of captives*” (Ephesians 4:8b). The King James renders the phrase, “*He led captivity captive.*” For proper interpretation we need only consider Paul’s words to the church at Colosse:

When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him. (Colossians 2:15)

“*Disarmed*” can also be rendered “renounced,” or “stripped off,” or “put off.” Thus, during Jesus’ ascension, He “put off” every demon that came His way. In fact, “*He made a public display of them*” (Colossians 2:15), or “made a public show or spectacle of them.” In other words, He showed “*the rulers and authorities*” (Colossians 2:15)—all forces of evil listed in Ephesians 6:12—Who is Boss. He “*triumphed over them*” (Colossians 2:15), meaning that He, like the Roman generals who led their captives triumphantly through the streets of Rome, led the demons in triumphal procession through the atmospheric heavens. What a sight this must have been! The demons’ goal was to prevent Jesus from serving as our Great High Priest. How disappointed they must have been!

Jesus’ ascension allowed Old Testament believers’ souls and spirits to move from Abraham’s bosom to heaven. It also paved the way for the soul and spirit of a New Testament believer to be ushered into heaven at the point of physical death (2Corinthians 5:8; Philipians 1:23).

and He gave gifts to men.” (4:8c)

After Jesus “*led captive a host of captives*” (Ephesians 4:8b), “*He gave gifts to men*” (Ephesians 4:8c). Paul uses the Greek *dōma* for “*gifts*” in this instance but *charisma* for “*gifts*” in Romans 12:6-8 and 1Corinthians 12:4-30. This fact may indicate that Paul is referencing the spiritually gifted men of Ephesians 4:11 who serve in designated positions within Christ’s body to help mature the Son’s bride (read Ephesians 4:11 with 4:12-13). After all, the “*gifts*” alluded to in verse 8 are listed specifically in verse 11, with verses 9-10 serving as a parenthetical expression. Don’t misunderstand. The spiritual gifts listed in Romans 12:6-8 and 1Corinthians 12:4-30 are given to individuals (1Corinthians 12:11) for the benefit of the entire body of Christ. But in Ephesians 4:8 and Ephesians 4:11, Paul seems to reference gifted men rather than the individual gifts themselves. We will discuss this matter in more depth when we arrive at verse 11.

Ephesians 4:9—(Now this expression, “He ascended,” what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth?)

We know from previous observations that Jesus “*descended into*” Hades (Sheol) before He ascended into heaven. He did not enter hell, but Abraham’s bosom, the saved side of Hades (Sheol).

Ephesians 4:10—He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)

This passage provides the chronological order of events associated with Christ’s ascension. Before He “*ascended,*” He first “*descended*” (Ephesians 4:10). However, after descending, He “*ascended far above all the heavens*” (Ephesians 4:10) “*to appear in the presence of God for us*” (Hebrews 9:24).

Jesus “*ascended*” for a very special purpose—“*that He might fill all things*” (Ephesians 4:10). The words, “*might fill,*” are in the subjunctive mood in the Greek, confirming the impossibility of determining the time of the action from this verse alone. The full counsel of God’s Word provides the needed input:

The last enemy that will be abolished is death. For HE HAS PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET. But when He says, “All things are put in subjection,” it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him. And when all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all. (1Corinthians 15:26-28)

Jesus (Who is “*God*”—Hebrews 1:8) will “*fill all things*” (Ephesians 4:10) when “*the last enemy,*” “*death,*” is “*abolished*” (1Corinthians 15:26). His resurrection and ascension paved the way for this order of events to transpire.

We also learned from Ephesians 1:23b and Ephesians 3:19b (you may need to review those notes) that Jesus fills every New Testament believer. Because He lives in church saints (Galatians 2:20), however, doesn’t mean that they are perfected in their behavior prior to physical death. Many of our behavioral imperfections won’t be eliminated until our bodies cease functioning, after which we will receive our glorified bodies at the Rapture of the church (1Thessalonians 4:13-18)—an event that occurs at some undisclosed time in the future. Thus, when we return with Christ at His Second Coming (Revelation 19:11-16), inhabiting immortal bodies, we will live in sinless perfection while reigning with Him (Revelation 20:4). But in the meantime, He has endowed certain believers with specific spiritual gifts to help bring us to maturity. Some of these gifted men are listed in Ephesians 4:11.

Ephesians 4:11—And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,

Before examining verse 11, consider that Luke, in Acts 1:1, relates that he recorded in the Gospel of Luke (which deals with Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection) what “*Jesus began to do and teach*”:

The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, (Acts 1:1)

“*Began*” is underlined for emphasis, because Jesus continues His work on earth through His body, the church, who is being equipped for her work through the gifted men of Ephesians 4:11. The gifted men given to the church are “*apostles,*” “*prophets,*” “*evangelists,*” and “*pastors and teachers.*” Let’s discuss

the apostles first.

And He gave some as apostles, 4:11a

Of all the positions of leadership within the body of Christ in Paul's day, no position held more authority than that of "apostle." Notice the emphasis on chronology in 1Corinthians 12:28:

And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets,... (1Corinthians 12:28)

The Gospel of Mark has this to say regarding the twelve:

And He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him, and that He might send them out to preach, (Mark 3:14)

An apostle was a messenger of God—one sent by "Jesus Christ, and God the Father" (Galatians 1:1). The twelve apostles (Paul replacing Judas) laid the doctrinal foundation of the church (Acts 2:42; Ephesians 2:20; 3:5; 2Peter 3:2), having been given the responsibility of imparting the truth taught by Christ. They were the final authority in the early church (1Corinthians 14:37), their ministry confirmed "by signs and wonders and miracles" (2Corinthians 12:12). After all, they had "seen Jesus" (1Corinthians 9:1).

Do apostles exist today? Those who believe they do cite verses such as Acts 14:14, 1Thessalonians 2:6, and Romans 16:7 to confirm that certain men outside of "the twelve" were referred to as apostles. Even Paul, in 1Thessalonians 2:6 (when linked with 1Thessalonians 1:1), refers to Silas and Timothy as fellow apostles—Paul being one of the original twelve, having replaced Judas.

Individuals who perceive the apostolic office as extinct cite 2Corinthians 8:23 ("messengers" can be interpreted "apostles") to support their argument:

As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brethren, they are messengers of the churches, a glory to Christ. (2Corinthians 8:23)

They conclude that the apostles outside of the twelve were "messengers" (apostles) "of the churches" (2Corinthians 8:23), while the original twelve were "apostles of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:1; 1Peter 1:1; etc.). Also, no record exists of any apostle being replaced at death outside of Judas (Acts 1:15-26). Neither is the term "apostle" found in the book of Acts after Acts 16:4. Ephesians 2:20 is also cited, where Paul confirms that the "apostles and prophets" form the "foundation" of the church—a "foundation" on which the whole building is "being built" (Ephesians 2:21; 1Peter 2:5), believers today "being" added to the building, not the foundation. They perceive the foundation as consisting of the twelve apostles, along with the "prophets" (Ephesians 2:20), who were instrumental in forming and proclaiming the doctrine of the church—which had begun a short time earlier in Acts 2. Of course, "the corner stone" of this foundation is Jesus (Ephesians 2:20).

I personally view the office of "apostle" as primarily pointing to the original twelve. No doubt, other persons throughout the church age have taken the body of truth contained in God's Word to geographical locations that have never heard the gospel. In a secondary sense, these individuals are apostles. Their teaching, of course, must agree with the doctrine of the original twelve.

ⁱ Guthrie, D., Motyer, J. A., Stibbs, A. M., and Wiseman, D. J. (Eds.) (1984). *The New Bible Commentary: Revised*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI. www.eerdmans.com. Used by permission.