

**THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND**  
**THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL:**  
**A STUDY OF EPHESIANS**  
**(LESSON FORTY-NINE)**  
**“LEADING CAPTIVITY CAPTIVE”**

**EPHESIANS 4:7-16**

*7 But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.*

*8 Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.*

*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.)*

*11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;*

*12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:*

*13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ:*

*14 That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive;*

*15 But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ:*

*16 From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.*

In **Ephesians** chapter 4, Paul urged the believers in Ephesus to be faithful to their calling. In verse 1 he wrote, *“I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called.”* I believe that there is a great need for believers today to do the same. There is a serious crisis of identity in the Body of Christ. Many of us appear to be suffering from amnesia. We do not really know who we are and whose we are. Consequently, we do not know what our purpose is. In this chapter, the apostle is reminding us of the primary reason for our salvation and he is calling us back to the great purposes of God for which the church was established and for which it still exists.

**Raymond Charles Stedman**, the late evangelical Christian pastor and author, observed that “The church has never any right to determine its own goals; it is here because its Lord has put it here. The church is not here primarily to correct the evils of society, but it is here to declare and demonstrate the power of God in Jesus Christ. That will be the most effective thing it can do to correct the evils of society.” He goes on to say that, “In order to act intelligently on this great purpose, every Christian must understand the nature of the church and the way it was intended to function.”

**Ephesians 4** is fundamental; it is of central importance to our understanding of what it means for individual believers to be members of the Body of Christ, the Church. In this chapter, Paul deals with the **nature of our unity**, the **marvel of our diversity**, the **importance of our partnership in ministry**, and the **prospect of our growing in maturity together**.

As it relates to the **marvel of our diversity**, let me make the point that the Apostle is not so much emphasizing the diversity of our families of origin, personalities, nationalities, races, socio-economic status, or our experiences. Rather, he is emphasizing the diversity of the spiritual gifts that Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, has distributed to each one of us.

In explaining the nature of the church, Paul first calls attention to the unity of the Spirit, or the oneness that already exists in the body of Christ. In verses **3-6** he writes,

**3 Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.**

**4 There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;**

**5 One Lord, one faith, one baptism,**

**6 One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.**

The unity of the Spirit is a oneness that has been created by the Holy Spirit. It is not something that we are asked to create, but rather it is something that we are urged to preserve or maintain. If we are honest brothers and sisters, we will have to admit that we have failed miserably in the past to preserve or maintain the unity that the Holy Spirit has created. Thankfully, however, the Holy Spirit has already created this basic unity as a result of Christ's work of atonement and reconciliation, and it is a unity that nothing can destroy. Therefore, even though the Church has been **externally** divided many times, the Body of Christ has never been disjointed **internally**.

In verses **7-10**, Paul begins to focus on how the Body of Christ functions. In this passage, he unfolds the great essential truth that enables a church to function effectively. This truth is that spiritual gifts have been imparted to each member of the Body of Christ. He writes,

**7 But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.**

**8 Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.**

**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.)**

The **New English Translation** renders the passage as follows:

**7 But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.**

**8 Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he captured captives; he gave gifts to men."**

**9 Now what is the meaning of "he ascended," except that he also descended to the lower regions, namely, the earth?**

**10 He, the very one who descended, is also the one who ascended above all the heavens, in order to fill all things.**

Commenting on these verses **Ray Stedman** states, "In this section we face a most important question. How is the church expected to demonstrate the power of God and thus, influence society? Is it by some miraculous, wonder-working, dramatic display of divine power? Is it something that captures the attention of the multitudes by miracles? Or is it by the power of numbers - getting people together to vote the same way and thus, exert pressure upon the legislatures to obtain the right kind of legislation? Is that the power of the church? Is it by agitating for change by joining picket lines and sit-ins and walk-outs and rise-ups? Is it by attending conventions devoted to discussions of various things and the passing of resolutions? Well, you notice the apostle does not waste one moment on these kinds of activity. He suggests very clearly that the power of the church lies in each Christian discovering and intelligently exercising the spiritual gift that was given to him when he became a member of the Body of Christ. That is largely a forsaken principle today, and that is why the church is so weak.

If we ever recover the strength God intended the church to exert in human society, it will be by a return to that simple thing, the exercise of each person's spiritual gift.

After all, is that not the way a physical body functions? In the body of flesh and bones, there are a variety of cells. There are nerve cells, blood cells, tissue cells, muscle cells, sex cells, hair cells, and many others, each having a distinct and different function. The body operates, not by the cells getting together and voting as to what is the best thing to do, but by simply functioning, by doing what they individually and particularly were designed to do. It is the function of the head to correlate this, and bring it all together, and make it operate effectively, but each cell gives itself to the task of functioning according to its design.

Certainly, the body does not operate by the cells revolting. Did you ever experience a rebellion of the muscle cells of your stomach? We call it indigestion! Or a revolt of your brain cells? That is called insanity. It means that the body is sick, something is wrong with it, it is not operating the way it was intended to do. This is the whole problem with the Church today. In so many places it has forgotten it is a body and has tried to operate as another human organization, therefore, it has no more power than any other human organization at work in the world. But the apostle reminds us that the fundamental secret of the operation of the church is that each true Christian has a gift."

Paul says in verse 7, *"But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift."* Brothers and sisters, grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. If we are authentic believers, we have received at least one spiritual gift. There are no exceptions to this rule. If we do not have a spiritual gift, then we are not saved. It is our individual responsibility to first identify our own particular gift or gifts, and then to use them to edify the Body of Christ, preserve the unity of the Spirit, influence society and ultimately glorify God. The church begins to live, and exercise its impact and influence, when we begin to exercise our spiritual gifts.

Paul says, **grace** was given to each believer. It is important for us to understand that what is given to us as believers is not primarily **gifts** but **grace**. It is the grace of God that works within us and manifests itself in the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to us. These gifts are a special ability or capacity for service. They are to be exercised according to the measure of Christ's presence within.

When we really understand and appreciate that it was the grace of God that not only saved us, but also made it possible for us to receive spiritual gifts, we will be delivered from a sense of inadequacy on the one hand and a sense of superiority on the other hand. Brothers and sisters, the spiritual gifts that we have received were not given to us to establish our status in the church, but to empower us to serve. They were given to enable us to serve each other effectively. The attitude, the mentality of every believer should be that of a servant! In the context of the Body of Christ, we should not regard ourselves as consumers but as contributors. Paul will deal with this in detail in verse 16. There he writes, *"From him the whole body grows, fitted and held together through every supporting ligament. As each one does its part, the body builds itself up in love"* (New English Translation).

Paul is not the only one who deals with this in the New Testament. The Apostle Peter in **1 Peter 4:9-11** wrote the following:

**9** Show hospitality to one another without complaining.

**10** Just as each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of the varied grace of God.

**11** Whoever speaks, let it be with God's words. Whoever serves, do so with the strength that God supplies, so that in everything God will be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen. (New English Translation).

As we noted earlier, Paul is teaching us how the Body of Christ functions and develops. Our Lord has provided everything that His Body needs. He has provided grace so that the members of the Body can function in harmony with each other, and He has provided gifts so that the Body can operate and grow through the lives of ordinary men and women who are super-naturally empowered.

It is important for us to understand that persons who possess gifts without grace tend to be harsh, presumptuous, demanding, egotistical and downright offensive. When there is an abundance of manifestations of spiritual gifts without an abundance of a manifestation of grace, pride, carnality and division are produced. In our brief examination of the church in Corinth, we saw the evidence of this. The truth is that the more gifts we have, the more grace we need. That is exactly why Paul wrote in verse 7 of grace being given *“according to the measure of Christ’s gift.”* Gifts without grace are undesirable, but so is grace without gifts. The Church needs both grace and gifts. Once we understand that it is the grace of God that has given us the gifts that we have, we will be more diligent in developing them and using them and we will be more humble in doing so.

In verse 8 Paul writes, *“Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.”* The words *“Wherefore he saith”* is Paul’s way of alerting his readers that he is going to quote an Old Testament passage. He quotes from **Psalm 68:18** to illustrate to his readers how Jesus Christ was enabled in the divine plan of God to give the grace gift described in verse 7. It is possible that Paul was not quoting one particular verse of the Psalm but rather that he was summarizing all of **Psalm 68**. Paul wants the believers to know that although the gift is free, there was a great price that had to be paid to make this bestowal of grace possible, and so, he proceeds to connect the giving of gifts to the triumphant ascension of Christ. He explains that it is Christ’s exaltation to the right hand of the Father that makes it possible for Him to give gifts to men.

In commenting on **Psalm 68:18**, **Christmas Evans** writes that the phrase *“thou hast led captivity captive,”* signifies that Jesus Christ conquered the allied forces of the devil, principalities and powers, sin, death, and hell, and deprived them of the weapons that they had used to keep human beings in captivity. He says that our Lord began to distribute His gifts to men as soon as He had been resurrected and that He did so as He ascended to heaven, and especially after He had entered heaven. These gifts were gifts of mercy which He gave to the rebellious. He gave gifts to those who threw down their arms at His feet in penitent submission that He might dwell among them.

Paul states that Jesus Christ ascended up on high, led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. The word *“ascended”* is the translation of a Greek word which means to go up. Here, it describes our Lord’s ascension on high, into heaven after His victory on the Cross of Calvary over the allied forces of the devil, principalities and powers, sin, death, and hell. Paul had already referred to this momentous event in **Ephesians 1:19-23**:

**19** *and what is the incomparable greatness of his power toward us who believe, as displayed in the exercise of his immense strength.*

**20** *This power he exercised in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms*

**21** *far above every rule and authority and power and dominion and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.*

**22** *And God put all things under Christ’s feet, and gave him to the church as head over all things.*

**23** *Now the church is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (New English Translation)*

The word “*captivity*” is the translation of a Greek word which means “to be taken a prisoner of war by the sword.” The idea is of one who gains complete control over another. The word “*captive*” is the translation of a Greek word which describes the state of being captive or of taking someone captive by force.

There are biblical expositors who are of the opinion that Paul is referring here to persons who were once prisoners of the devil but who are now delivered from their captivity to him and have become the captives of Jesus Christ. It is argued that these persons have chosen to become captives of Jesus Christ because they have come to understand that His captivity is not for their harm but for their good.

There are others, however, who are of the view that the phrase does not refer to believers but to the devil and the demons who were conquered on the Cross and stripped of their power. **Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones** for example, commenting on this verse, wrote the following: “The picture is one of triumph over enemies, one of the leading of enemies in triumph. In ancient times, if a king or a prince or a great military captain waged successful warfare, when he came back to his own country there was always a kind of victory parade. The conquered kings and princes and military chieftains and captains were all made to walk in the procession in their chains. The conqueror was ‘leading captivity captive.’ He had taken his foes captive and was now making a public display of them. At the same time, he threw gifts to his own people.”

While I am personally inclined to lean toward the latter position, I do not believe that we need to be dogmatic. In fact, I believe that both positions can be accommodated. It is possible that in the victory parade of Jesus Christ were both the devil and his demons, as well as those who had been delivered from their power and were now willing captives, or “love slaves” of Jesus Christ.

What I do not believe is in any doubt is **when** and **where** our Lord won the decisive victory over the allied forces of the devil, principalities and powers, sin, death, and hell. The victory was won almost two thousand years ago at a place of apparent weakness and shame, on an old rugged Cross, on a hill called Golgotha. Paul makes this explicitly clear in **Colossians 2:13-15**:

*13 And even though you were dead in your transgressions and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, he nevertheless made you alive with him, having forgiven all your transgressions.*

*14 He has destroyed what was against us, a certificate of indebtedness expressed in decrees opposed to us. He has taken it away by nailing it to the cross.*

*15 Disarming the rulers and authorities, he has made a public disgrace of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (New English Translation)*

In **Hebrews 2:14-15**, we read the following:

*14 Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, he likewise shared in their humanity, so that through death he could destroy the one who holds the power of death (that is, the devil),*

*15 and set free those who were held in slavery all their lives by their fear of death. (New English Translation)*

*Low in the grave he lay, Jesus my Savior,  
Waiting the coming day, Jesus my Lord!*

*Up from the grave he arose;  
With a mighty triumph o’er his foes;  
He arose a victor from the dark domain,  
And he lives forever, with his saints to reign.  
He arose! He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose!*

*Vainly they watch his bed, Jesus my Savior,  
Vainly they seal the dead, Jesus my Lord!*

*Up from the grave he arose;  
With a mighty triumph o'er his foes;  
He arose a victor from the dark domain,  
And he lives forever, with his saints to reign.  
He arose! He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose!*

*Death cannot keep its prey, Jesus my Savior;  
He tore the bars away, Jesus my Lord!*

*Up from the grave he arose;  
With a mighty triumph o'er his foes;  
He arose a victor from the dark domain,  
And he lives forever, with his saints to reign.  
He arose! He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose!*

Brothers and sisters, Jesus Christ triumphed in battle over the allied forces of the devil, principalities and powers, sin, death, and hell. He entered the domain of the enemy and led forth a multitude of captives. Then, He took His place on high and “gave gifts unto men.”