

Descending for Gifts

The War-Psalms Fulfillment and The Impact Upon the Church and Heavenlies

Ephesians 4:7 But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

⁸ Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men."

⁹ (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth?

¹⁰ He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)

¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,"

(Eph 4:7-11)

Life in Ephesus

TO ME, IT IS OFTEN THE CASE that understanding **the original biblical context** of a story is **far more interesting** and, at the end of the day, satisfying and relevant than someone making up a context for something difficult to interpret. Truth is often much more interesting than fiction. To that end, I want to **take you back in time**, first to a relatively unknown Roman Emperor, and then to the city of Ephesus in Paul's day where I will ask you to imagine yourself.

Julian (331-363) was the precocious orphaned son of Julius Constantius, half-brother of **Constantine the Great**. His mother, Basilina, probably died giving birth to Julian. She willed her extensive lands as an inheritance to the church of **Ephesus**. Raised as a Christian, Julian had the “**natural self-will of a vigorous mind.**” At a fairly early age he “**rebelled in secret against his Christian instructors,**”¹ turning first to Greek philosophy and then to the dark arts as learned from one **Maximus of Ephesus**.

Maximus was a master magician who presided over the **temple of Artemis** in Ephesus, particularly in the precinct of the goddess **Hekate**, who had a significant presence at the temple. **Pliny the Elder** tells us that Hekate had a remarkable statue made of such pure marble that, “**The keepers of the temple recommend persons, when viewing it, to be careful of their eyes, so remarkably radiant is [it].**”² In her sacred grove there was also **a cave of Pan**, the satyr goat-demon god

¹ **John Rickards Mozley**, “Maximus (25) of Ephesus,” ed. William Smith and Henry Wace, *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects and Doctrines* (London: John Murray, 1877–1887), 885.

² **Pliny the Elder**, *The Natural History*, ed. John Bostock (Medford, MA: Taylor and Francis, Red Lion Court, Fleet Street, 1855), 6318.

who was also worshiped at the base of Mt. Hermon, in Israel.³ Hekate is the goddess of witchcraft, magic, crossroads (think [gates](#)), ghosts, and necromancy, in other words—the [underworld](#). Importantly, she was said to have [authority over “the keys of Hades.”](#)⁴ She decides who goes in and who goes out. Her status as a primary goddess of the underworld is very similar to Artemis, who is sometimes said *to be* Hekate, though in Ephesus they were viewed as distinct goddesses.

This sets the stage for Julian’s [de-conversion](#) from Christianity. The *Wikipedia* (which I trust in this case) summarizes what happened:

[Maximus] invited him into the temple of Hecate and, chanting a hymn, caused a statue of the goddess to smile and laugh, and her torches to ignite. Eusebius [the famed church

³ The Pan reference is in [Hyde Clarke](#), *Ephesus: Bing a Lecture Delivered at the Smyrna Literary and Scientific Institution* (Smyrna: G. Green, 1863), 18. Pan and Artemis (at least the Greek Artemis) had a relationship where Pan gave her his magical flute and this apparently became the reason no virgin was allowed in the temple. See [Rick Strelan](#), *Paul, Artemis, and the Jews in Ephesus* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 60 n. 91.

⁴ “Bronze sandal of her | who rules Tartaros, | Her fillet, Key, wand, iron wheel, black dog ... the governess of Tartaros” (PMG IV.2335-38). “I have hidden this magic symbol Of yours, your sandal, and possess your key. I opened the bars of Kerberos, the guard of Tartaros” (PMG IV.2291-94). “I entrust this binding spell to you, chthonic gods ... Ereschigal [often associated with Artemis] ... Anubis Psirinth [Anubis is the Egyptian jackel who watched over the dead, see Hekate’s “black dog” above] who holds the keys to Hades” (PMG VII.340-42). In [Hans Deiter Betz](#) (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation: Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). Found in Arnold, *Magic*, 190 n. 52.

historian who first told Julian about Maximus] reportedly told Julian that he “must not marvel at any of these things, even as I marvel not” ... In spite of Eusebius’ warnings regarding the “[deceptions] of witchcraft and magic that cheat the senses” and “the works of conjurers who are insane men led astray into the exercise of earthly and material powers,” Julian was intrigued, and sought out Maximus as his new mentor.⁵

Such is the beguiling witchcraft of the goddess of the underworld and the dark powers of the air. Such is the supernatural background I want you to now envision as I take you back three hundred years earlier.

Imagine that you are an Ephesian living in the city or perhaps just outside in the country prior to the coming of Paul the Apostle. Perhaps you are an idol maker or a farmer whose food goes to the temple sacrifices. You are a just a typical peasant trying to make a living in a hard world. You go the temple weekly to offer sacrifices to Artemis-Hekate. You chant magical spells on a regular basis, trying to keep the demons at bay. (Magical papyri were a major part of the

⁵ “Julian (emperor),” *Wikipedia*, last accessed May 23, 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian_\(emperor\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian_(emperor)).

life of the Ephesians along with the worship of their goddess.)⁶

Suddenly, a **foreigner comes** into your city and begins causing an uproar. Far away at the stadium you begin to hear chants, “**Great is Artemis of the Ephesians, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!**” (**Acts 19:28**). Clearly, this stranger is presenting a challenge to the great goddess. After being thrown in prison, he is let out and you, curious of his strange teachings, seek him out. He tells you this incredible story of a divine warrior from a far-off land who has battled with the gods **and won**. You listen to his story of this God defeating the powers of the air and suddenly, in the telling, your heart comes alive. You believe him! Your life, along with those of countless others who are also listening, are changed forever. There is something about the power of this God that the later Julian would never understand.

But now you must **learn what it means** to be part of a “new creation” as he called it, a temple of living stones made up of former idol making Gentiles and Jews, free and slave, young and old, soldiers and peasants who have all come together in the name of this new God—Jesus to whom you have bowed your knee.

⁶ See **Arnold**, *Magic*.

Time passes and you come to realize that it isn't as easy as you thought it might be. You have been told there is a new unity in this Christ, but it seems hard to come by. Then, you receive a letter as a church from this same Apostle who is now imprisoned for his faith. His letter reminds you of this Great Warrior and his victories. As it is read, you reach the point where he now begins telling you how to live together in unity. "It is rooted in the oneness of our Faith and God," you hear Timothy, you pastor, tell your congregation as he reads from what we call Ch. 4.

He then begins to tell you how Christ has provided the way for this unity, made sure in heaven, to work itself out here in Ephesus. Gifts! Gifts have been given. Curiously, this is what you were taught by magicians like Maximus. It was a universal view that the gods gave gifts to mankind. For instance, the Babylonians taught that the gods came down and gave us grain as a gift so that we could learn the art and science of agriculture.⁷ It wasn't only them. The Jews and early Christians taught the same thing.⁸ They tell us of the Watchers who, on Mt. Hermon, descended to give mankind

⁷ I heard this from Gordon White (himself a modern magician) on "Richard Dolan and Gordon White (Pre-history and Extraterrestrials)," *The Richard Dolan Show* (Aug 16, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WC3s7YOe1Rs>. I know it is true, but have not tracked down the texts.

⁸ See 1 Enoch 8:1; 69:1-16; Justin Martyr, *Second Apology* 2.5; Ps. Clem. Homily 8:11-15.

arts rooted in mining and metallurgy,⁹ the use of drugs for healing or crossing-over,¹⁰ and so on. But when he tells you both **how those gifts came to be** and **what those gifts are**, your jaw drops to the floor. You sit stunned together by the magnificence and power of this God Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 4:7-11

Gifts

“**Gifts**” are how the passage today begins. “... according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Eph 4:7) and “he gave gifts to men” (Eph 4:8). It is also how it ends, “And he gave...” (11), then going on to describe the nature of the gifts. In the larger unit of thought which we are in the middle of, Paul is moving back and forth from **diversity** (4:1-2) to **unity** (4:3-6) to **diversity** (4:7-11) to **unity** (4:12-15) to **diversity** (16)

⁹ Nickelsburg for instance notes that one of these (the making of “shields”) is used as a wordplay on one of the names of Mt. Hermon (Sirion) in TLevi 6:1. See **George W. E. Nickelsburg**, *1 Enoch: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch*, ed. Klaus Baltzer, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 194-96; 246.

¹⁰ **George W. E. Nickelsburg** and James C. VanderKam, *1 Enoch 2: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch, Chapters 37–82*, ed. Klaus Baltzer, Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 302.

forming an A-B-A-B-A pattern with vv. 7-11 as the center.¹¹

- A. “Gave” (8)
- B. “Ascended” (9a)
- C. “Descended” (9b)
- C¹. “Descended” (10a)
- B¹. “Ascended” (10b)
- A¹. “Gave” (11-12)

The gifts section is a section of **diversity**. There are **many gifts**! The point of these gifts is to help you, the church, act as you are, to truly learn to be as one in your treatment of one another (4:1-3) as God has made us one in heaven (4-6). But since we are sinful creatures prone to wander, and since God has set his love upon us, Christ has ensured that we would be able to carry out his instructions, not of our own power, but through the use of these good gifts which he so powerfully and victoriously won. He has gifted his church with gifts. When we use them, *the church will rejoice, Satan will tremble, and the name of God will be glorified.*¹²

¹¹ Dan Claire, “The Gifts of the Divine Warrior in Ephesians 4:7-11,” Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, n.d.), 3 [1-26], *acedemia.edu*, https://www.academia.edu/34296738/The_Gifts_Of_The_Divine_Warrior_in_Ephesians_4_7-11.

¹² William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of Ephesians*, vol. 7, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 188.

The Nature and Identity of the Gifts

Our text now is going to explain the nature and origin of these gifts. Let's look first at their nature. These gifts are both corporate and individual. They are also diverse. The first thing we learn is that they are of "grace" (*charis*). "But grace was given to each one of us..." (Eph 4:7). Grace is not the product of your own skill or ingenuity.¹³ It is not something you go out and buy. It is not earned. It is something that is given to you from above apart from your even asking for it.

We've seen that grace comes as a package gift along with faith and that these bring salvation and good works (Eph 2:8-10). So it says "the measure of Christ's gift" here. In one sense this reminds me of Romans 12:3 and the "measure of faith" God gives each Christian. But what's so interesting about that passage is that this is also one of those "gifts" texts in Paul. Hendriksen says, "The apostle is not thinking in quantitative terms (a large or a small amount of faith). He is thinking rather of the various ways in which each distinct individual is able to be a blessing to others and to the church

¹³ Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, 188.

in general by using the particular gift with which, *in association with faith*.”¹⁴ Faith becomes the standard or measure which allows each person to understand Scripture in association with using their gift to help the body. You must believe what is said, for it is the truth. And what a truth it is!

Something similar is happening with the measure of Christ’s gift here in Ephesians. It has in mind the use of many gifts in one body and using it not for your own glory, but for the benefit of Christ’s church to God’s glory.¹⁵ This is very similar to Paul’s discussion of gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1Co 12:4-7). Basically, the whole idea of gifts makes little to no sense apart from the church. It is why being part of a local church is absolutely essential, biblically speaking.

This leads us to the specific *identity of the gifts* which he begins to discuss in vs. 11. “And he gave...” is how it begins. He is still thinking of the giving of gifts when he says, “And

¹⁴ William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 12–13, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 408.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 189.

he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers...” This is where it begins to get rather mind-blowing.

He does not mention gifts like “service” or “tongues” or “contribution” or “mercy” as he does in the other gifts lists. The gifts God gives in this list are the very living stones of the new covenant temple itself. He is speaking first and foremost about **people rather than things**. Apostles are people. Prophets and evangelists are people. Shepherds and teachers are people. Yes, they are also offices that have specific duties attached (which we will look at much more next time), but first and foremost they are people. **People** are the gifts God gives to his church!

Contrast this to the gods giving gifts that I mentioned earlier. Most of these gifts are used by people for personal reasons, selfish reasons, or even wicked reasons. When you read the Enoch stories, especially, these gifts are all viewed as **negatives**. **Not so with Christ’s gifts!** His are exactly the opposite in nearly every respect. They are *people* rather than things. They are for the *benefit* of the body rather than the selfish pleasure or torture of other human beings. They are for the *glory of God* rather than the glory of man. They are

given purely *by grace* with no strings attached. This is all quite fascinating to me from an historical perspective.

But it is so much more than just fascinating. It is actually deeply relevant to something that is even more mind-blowing in the verses between the giving of these gifts. Why would he not list some of those other gifts here? And if the gifts are people, where did they come from? These two questions are tied directly to the overall thrust of the letter thus far and **to one more aspect of divine warrior theme** we've looked at.

The Origin of the Gifts

If the outer rim of our passage tells us about the **nature and identity** of these gifts, it is the center that tells us of **their origin**. In one respect, the origin of the gifts is the easiest thing to see in the whole passage. They come from God. It is **the Triune God** of the oneness of our Faith (**Eph 4:4-6**) who gives gifts to mankind. But in **vs. 7** it is specifically said to be "**Christ's gift**" to us. Christ is thus the origin of these gifts. If **vv. 8-10** were not here, we could just move on and continue looking at the gifts themselves. This entire sermon would have looked quite different. But those verses are here

and because of what they teach, because of their unfamiliarity and difficulty of interpretation, we will spend the rest of our time trying to understand what it means that these people are Christ's gift to the church. **The key is Christ.**

Importantly, **vs. 8** is a **quotation** from the OT. Paul says, “Therefore it [Scripture] says, ‘*When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.*’” You can see how this reinforces and explains the giving of Gifts. But somehow, his point is that in an ascension where Christ is leading a host of captives, this is directly related to the gifts of Apostles, prophets, and so on. What could this possibly mean?

I must impress upon you before anything else that it is **Christ's giving of gifts** that this quote is supposed to be proving. In other words, by quoting this Paul is saying that the OT is teaching that Christ Jesus gave gifts to men. In other words, the subject of his quotation is Christ Jesus. I belabor this point because of this persistent inability that God's people seem to have to see Christ in OT passages. Our default is either to the One God or to the person of the Father or even just to ourselves, as if the whole point is “me!” But Paul is saying the object of his quotation is specifically the Son of God. Truly, there is a veil on our eyes and only Christ can take it away.

What is he quoting? The citation comes from **Psalm 68:18**. That verse says in the ESV, “You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and¹⁶ receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious, that the LORD God may dwell there” (Ps 68:18). The one ascending must be Christ. As we will see, indeed the entire Psalm is about him.

You may have heard a rather significant difference. Where Paul says he “gave” gifts “to men,” the Psalm says he was “receiving” gifts among men.”

(Ps 68:18)	(Eph 4:8)
You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men.	When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.
Anabēs eis hypsos ēchmalōteusas aichmalōsian, elabes domata en anthrōpō	Anabas eis hypsos ēchmalōteusen aichmalōsian, edōken domata tois anthrōpois

Scholars are not exactly sure how to account for the change. Some think he just changed the word, “just because.” I always run from that kind of interpretation, because it wreaks havoc on the whole point of quoting a passage. If you can

¹⁶ Technically, there is no “and” in the earliest copies of the Greek texts of these verses. So one scholar concludes, “There is no intervening conjunction because the two lines describe the same event.” Claire, 24. This is important because it signals that the captives are the gifts.

just make it say whatever you want, then how is that proof of anything? Perhaps Paul is doing something similar to the **Targum**, which also uses the word “gave.”¹⁷ But whereas Paul sees the giver of gifts as Christ and the gifts as people, the Targum sees the giver as Moses and the gift as the Law.¹⁸ What this idea shows is that Paul isn’t the only one who interpreted the Psalm as “giving.” Maybe this is what made **Chrysostom** conclude, “the one is the same as the other.”¹⁹ Another suggestion is that he is **combining** vs. 18 with vs. 35 where Christ the King does “give” strength and power to his people.²⁰ Paul often combines verses like that.

The more important point is what Paul is trying to say here, and for that we need to understand the context of the

¹⁷ Cf. **Kevin Cathcart**, Michael Maher, and Martin McNamara, eds., *The Aramaic Bible: The Targum of Psalms*, trans. David M. Stec, vol. 16 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), Ps 68:19.

¹⁸ “You ascended to the *firmament*, O prophet Moses, you took captives, you taught the words of the Law, you gave them as gifts to the sons of man. McNamara explains a possible reason, “the targumist has changed the letters of *lqht*, “you accepted” to *hlqt*, “you distributed.”

¹⁹ **Chrysostom**, *Homily 11*; PG 11.81 in **Seth M. Ehorn**, “The Use of Psalm 68(67).19 in Ephesians 4:8: A History of Research,” *Currents in Biblical Research* (2013): 96 [96-120]. See also the historical survey, “**Jonathan M. Lunde** with John Anthony Dunne, “Paul’s Creative and Contextual Use of Psalm 68 in Ephesians 4:8,” *WTJ* 74 (2012): 99-117.

²⁰ **Dan Claire**. “The Gifts of the Divine Warrior in Ephesians 4:7-11,” *The Catholic University of America* https://www.academia.edu/34296738/The_Gifts_Of_The_Divine_Warrior_in_Ephesians_4_7-11, p. 14. William Wilder sees the same general kind of idea of “summarizing” the passage, but argues that Paul also has in mind the whole trajectory of Isaiah’s Messiah. See **William N. Wilder**, “The Use (or Abuse) of Power in High Places: Gifts Given and Received in Isaiah, Psalm 68, and Ephesians 4:8,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20.2 (2010): 185-200.

Psalm.²¹ Psalm 68 has both an “ecclesiastical context”²² (that is, it is about the assembled people of God) and, importantly, is one of the great **Divine Warrior Psalms** of the entire Bible. Both are intimately related to the citation by Paul.

Psalm 68

The Psalm is a giant chiasm with the “*selah*” or “pause” as its center.²³ On either side we read, “**God is our salvation**” (**Ps 68:19**) and “**Our God is a God of salvation**” (**20**). This makes salvation the effective center of the song. The way salvation is wrought is through deliverance of the Divine Warrior—Christ! This song has much in common with Moses’ Song of the Sea (Ex 15) and Deborah’s victory song (**Jdg 5**).²⁴

²¹ Someone has pointed out (**Claire**, 24) there the original texts of both passages do not have the word “and” in the original. He believes this strongly points that the leading captivity captive and the gift giving/receiving is therefore the same event. This would in turn strengthen the case that the captives *are* the gifts in Paul’s thinking.

²² **Garrett S. Craig**, “The Hermeneutical Key to the Mystery of Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8,” *Academia*, https://www.academia.edu/37078497/The_Hermeneutical_Key_to_the_Mystery_of_Psalm_68.18_in_Ephesians_4.8.pdf 9 [1-32].

²³ **Robert Alden**, “Chiastic Psalms (II): A Study in the Mechanics of Semitic Poetry in Psalms 51-100, *JETS* 19.3 (1976): 195-96 [191-200].

²⁴ For **my** full treatment of Psalm 68 see my sermon “God is our Salvation: The Rider of the Clouds and the Freeing of the Captives at the Gates of Hell,” (7-9-2017), <https://www.rbnc.com/Psalm%2068%20God%20of%20Our%20Salvation%20Big%20Font.pdf>.

This deliverance is **profoundly supernatural** in the song. For example, the Psalm says, “God will strike the heads of his enemies, the hairy crown of him who walks in his guilty ways” (Ps 68:21). Deborah says something similar when she sings of Jael “crushing the head” of Sisera (Jdg 5:26) as the “stars fought, from their courses against Sisera” (20). This reminds us of the promise to Eve of her Seed **crushing the head of the Serpent** (Gen 3:15). In the Psalm, the “**hairy (sear) crown,**” the parallel to his head, is imagery that deliberately reminds us of demonic Satyrs (*sairim*) like **Pan** (recall, he had a shrine at Hecate’s temple).²⁵

Further, there is some kind of a **great spiritual battle** that is presented throughout the song as Yahweh (that is the Son of God) rides his chariot on the clouds (Ps 68:33). The fulfillment of this, Jesus says, takes place at his death/resurrection/ascension (Dan 7:13; Mt 26:64). In the Psalm, the battle takes place on **Mt. Hermon** (remember Pan again) or what the psalm calls “**O mountain of God, mountain of Bashan**” (68:15). Something happens where he brings people

²⁵ “The term ‘hairy’ (Heb. *šē ‘ār*), if different vowel points are understood, could refer to a ‘goat demon’ or simply a ‘demon’ (*šā ‘îr*; see Lev 17:7; 2 Chr 11:15; Isa 13:21; 34:14).” **Clinton E. Arnold**, *Ephesians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 247.

back “[from Bashan](#)” (22). This is all important for understanding the ascent and descent that Paul speaks about.

The ascent is spoken about in the quotation. “[You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men ... God is our salvation](#)” (18-19). The surrounding context says, “[God will strike the heads of his enemies, the hairy crown](#)” (21) as he “[brings them \[captives\] back from Bashan](#)” (22).

To understand what is going on here, you have to understand the [cosmic geography](#) of the place.²⁶ By cosmic geography I mean learning to think about the geography not merely as a place on a map, but as a place of spiritual warfare. [Mt. Hermon](#) was the place where the [Watchers](#) descended in the days of Jared, gave those “[gifts](#)” to men, and fell into great sin with our women. It becomes the place where the [giants](#) Og and Sihon would have to be defeated by Moses. When a giant died, it was universally taught that they became the bible’s evil spirits or [demons](#). As I said earlier, Hermon is also the place where there was extremely ancient

²⁶ All of this and appropriate references is found in my sermon on Psalm 68 and my book on the giants. [George W. E. Nickelsburg](#), *1 Enoch: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch*, ed. Klaus Baltzer, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 191-201 has an excellent Excursus called “The Origin of the Asael Myth,” and [Michael Heiser](#) has much more information on Hermon in his book *Reversing Hermon: Enoch, the Watchers & The Forgotten Mission of Jesus Christ* (Crane, MO: Defender, 2017).

worship of the Satyr-demigod **Pan**. He was worshiped at a cave which is still there to this day, a cave that was thought to be **the entrance to the underworld**, the place the Jews called Sheol and the Greeks called Hades (which we translate as hell). That's quite a picture!

In this regard, it is vitally important to understand that when Jesus said, “**The gates of hell shall not prevail against [the church]**” (**Matt 16:18**), he said it while standing on the literal rock of the Mt. Hermon, probably looking into the very cave of Pan.²⁷ We will come back to the “**gates of hell**” in a moment. It is also from Mt. Hermon that scholars argue **Jesus was transfigured**.²⁸ It was here that he revealed his angelic glory to the very powers and principalities in heavenly places, basically baiting them into killing him, for as soon as he came off the mountain, he told his disciples not to tell anyone until he was raised from the dead (**Matt 17:9**). Just a couple of weeks later, Jesus was dead.

What happened at that death? Paul is very clear to the Colossians, “**[God] disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him**

²⁷ Matthew tells us this took place at Caesarea Philippi (Matt 16:13). Previously, the place was called Baniyas which comes from Pan. For more on all of this see **Judd H. Burton**, *Interview with The Giant: Ethnohistorical Notes on the Nephilim* (Burton Beyond Publications, 2009), ch. 3.

²⁸ **Michael S. Heiser**, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*, First Edition (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 285-286.

[Christ]” (Col 2:15). It was here that Hebrews 2:14 says he destroyed the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil. This is what Psalm 68:18 is referring to. This is Jesus’ great victory as the Divine Warrior as we have seen it throughout Ephesians. “None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1Co 2:8).

Importantly, in divine warrior epics, there is one feature that Paul has not yet touched upon. This is the goodness that comes after the battle is won. In other epics, sometimes it is the restoration of fertility or the blessing of the people.²⁹ Here, the giving of gifts serves as the parallel! This is what the Psalm is also talking about when saying both that the Son is receiving gifts among men (18) and then giving power and strength to his people (36).³⁰ Given that the whole psalm is a corporate salvation of Israel, the context of the Psalm shows that what Paul is doing makes perfect sense both of the Psalm and of his point that Christ is giving gifts to his church.

²⁹ For example, Gombis writes, “In Psalm 29, after Yahweh asserts his superiority over the forces of chaos and demonstrates his cosmic kingship, he gives strength to his people, blessing them with peace (v. 11). The same feature is found in Isa 43:16-21, where the imagery of the triumph of Yahweh over the machinery of war, along with the sea and mighty waters (vv. 16, 17), is followed by Yahweh blessing the people with fruitfulness in a dry place (v. 20).” Gombis, *Dissertation*, 123.

³⁰ See Gombis, *Dissertation*, 123-24.

Descending and Ascending

But it is the question of **where these gifts originate** that is the truly astonishing thing. For Christ rescues these gifts from somewhere. **Eph 4:9-10** are the explanation of the quotation. We have not yet seen what it means that **he ascended on high and led a host of captives** in either the Psalm or Ephesians. This is the purpose of vv. 9-10.

The ESV has them as **a parenthesis**. It begins, “(In saying, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? ...” The ESV is making an interpretive decision here (reading the genitive “**appositively**” so that “the lower regions” = “the earth”).³¹ the ESV reads Christ as descending to the earth, probably in his incarnation or perhaps his death in the grave or even at Pentecost through the Holy Spirit, all of which scholars have argued for. But not every translation goes this route. In fact, most do not. For example, the NAS says, “... He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth?” (seeing “of the earth” as a **partitive** genitive). In other words, the NAS

³¹ O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 295 argues for this.

reads Christ as descending *below* the earth. Both happened, but what is in Paul's mind?³²

Because the context is warfare, it probably isn't the incarnation generally speaking as in the coming to earth in the Virgin's womb. The incarnation is, of course, presupposed. Because of the cosmic geography of the Psalm, it can't be the cross or Pentecost as others suggest, because those all take place in Jerusalem, not Mt. Hermon.³³

Because of the cosmic geography of the Psalm (Hermon is considered the vilest place of the ancient world, and there is even an entrance there to the underworld), the best option is that it is talking about [Christ's descent into hell](#) where something literally happens between Christ's death and resurrection. Hermon represents the otherworld, its top in the heavens, its bottom in hell. This is what the Creed is refer-

³² Arnold gives good evidence that the ESV is a nearly impossible reading. [Arnold](#), *Ephesians*, ECNT, 253.

³³ Someone might say, "But the ascension of Jesus was in Jerusalem," and this is true. But the Psalm and Paul's reference is most likely not to his resurrected bodily ascension in Luke-Acts, but to his coming out of hades with the captives riding his train. In other words, it was a spiritual ascension while his body still lay in the grave. There is no reason to think Jesus' soul went nowhere when he died. There is every reason to believe that it went to Sheol, like every other soul. Yet, there is every reason to believe he did not stay there, but was lifted up to heaven prior to his resurrection.

ring to when it speaks of “descended into hell.” This is something in addition to “died and was buried.”³⁴ But there is another Psalm that can help us here, for it also talks about this same event.

Psalm 24 and the Gates of Hell

Psalm 24 is another Divine Warrior song, a parallel to Psalm 68. There is an entire flow of thought between Psalms 15-24 where Psalm 15 asks, “Who will dwell on your holy hill?” (Ps 15:1). It then tells you that a perfect person is the only one who can do it. After predicting the coming Perfect Man, the series ends in Psalm 24 which asks, “Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?” (24:3). The language of “ascend” is important. It answers that it is those who have been saved by God.³⁵

³⁴ For this and what follows see my sermon “Lift Up Your Heads, O Gates! Who is This King of Glory?” at <https://www.rbcnc.com/Psalm%2024%20Who%20is%20this%20King%20of%20Glory%20big%20font.pdf>.

³⁵ In Psalm 68 the “hill” is clearly Mt. Hermon, which is not “hating” or “envying” other mountains where God had his abode, but is preparing for holy war at its own base and on its summit. Here is what I said in the sermon on Psalm 68, “Yahweh is taking back his territory from evil fallen heavenly beings. What the Psalm is saying is powerful in this regard. Vs. 16’s, “Looking with hatred” ... can be understood by going back to the Deborah song again and thinking about the meaning of the word “looking with hatred.” A parallel word means “to watch or wait” with the idea of stealth and ambush. Watchers! This is certainly a kind of hatred—it is hatred that comes out in war, not envy. For example, “In Judg 9:25 we read that the men of Shechem ambushed men on the mountain tops. Similarly, here the high mountain is described as taking part in the ambush.” In Deborah’s song, this is the role that the heavens and stars play. “From heaven the stars

The song and series end with a kind of catechetical Q & A (Ps 24:7-10):

Lift up your heads, O gates. And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.

Who is this king of glory?

The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle!

Lift up your heads, O gates! And lift them up O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.

Who is this King of glory?

The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory! *Selah*.

This is the companion to Christ ascending on high and leading a host of captives in his train. But this is not well understood. Most people think that these gates are [the pearly gates](#) of heaven. Instead, by comparing this to well-known descent hymns in other cultures,³⁶ it becomes clear that the psalm is referring to the the impregnable adamantine [gates of hell](#). Again, it is to these gates that Jesus was referring at Mt. Hermon, appropriately, since that was considered the entrance to hell. He is coming to burst them open!

fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera” (Jdg 5:20). They ambushed Sisera. But in Psalm 68, they are waiting in ambush for the LORD so that he might not make Hermon his dwelling! It is theirs and they want to keep it.”

³⁶ For example, Alan Cooper, “Ps 24:7-10: Mythology and Exegesis,” *JBL* 102 (1983): 37-60.

Importantly, **it is to hell that everyone in the OT went**. That sounds wrong to you because you think of hell only as a place of punishment. There was a punishment side to hell, to be sure. But Sheol (the OT equivalent) was more just the place of the dead or as Thomas Boston calls it here, “**the lower parts of the earth ... the region of death.**”³⁷ Where Jacob says upon hearing of the death of Joseph, “**I shall go down to Sheol to my son,**” the LXX says, “**I will go down to my son mourning to Hades (Hell)**” (**Gen 37:35**). When Job says, “**Oh that you would hide me in Sheol, that you would conceal me until your wrath be past,**” The LXX says, “**Oh that you had kept me in Hades (Hell), and had hidden me until your wrath should cease**” (**Job 14:13**). Clearly, they didn’t think of it quite way we do.

Were they all wrong and in reality and they went to heaven? Only if you think the Bible is seriously flawed on this point is that even an option. No. The point is, **everyone is there**, and that includes all the saints from Adam to Zechariah. They had to be released from Abraham’s bosom by someone who could bring them out of hell by his own con-

³⁷ Thomas **Boston**, *The Whole Works of Thomas Boston: Sermons and Discourses on Several Important Subjects in Divinity*, ed. Samuel M’Millan, vol. 6 (Aberdeen: George and Robert King, 1849), 284.

quering power. Those in Abraham's bosom, Hades' "paradise" were not suffering torment for sins, as Jesus' story of Lazarus and the rich man teach. Nevertheless, they had not yet been brought into *heavenly* paradise in the presence of the Lord. This is what both of our Psalms are teaching must happen. This is what Paul is saying has happened!

To get at how powerful an idea this would be for the Ephesians, return to the discussion with [Hecate](#). She is the goddess of witchcraft, magic, and crossroads (think gates). And, she has authority over "[the keys of Hades](#)." She is the goddess gatekeeper of hell. I told you that she is sometimes associated with Artemis herself,³⁸ though Ephesus' Artemis is not quite the same as the Greek Artemis. Nevertheless, they are worshipped more than anyone else in this city. To go after them is powerful indeed.

³⁸ "Apollodorus's opinion is, that *Hecate*, *Diana* [*Artemis*] the *Moon* and *Proserpina* are all one and the same, wherefore they call her triple *Hecate*, or the Goddess with three heads, being the *Moon* in Heaven, *Diana* on Earth, and *Proserpina* or *Hecate* in Hell." [Pierre Danet](#), *A Complete Dictionary of the Greek and Roman Antiquities Explaining the Obscure Places in Classic Authors and Ancient Historians Relating to the Religion, Mythology, History, Geography and Chronology of the Ancient Greeks and Romans, Their ... Rites and Customs, Laws, Polity, Arts and Engines of War: Also an Account of Their Navigations, Arts and Sciences and the Inventors of Them: With the Lives and Opinions of Their Philosophers / Compiled Originally in French ... by Monsieur Danet; Made English, with the Addition of Very Useful Mapps*, Early English Books Online (London: Printed for John Nicholson ... Tho. Newborough ... and John Bulford .., 1700).

She is sometimes depicted as having three heads and “with a dreadful countenance, her Head attired with Serpents; and was called upon in Magick.”³⁹



Now listen to this description in 2 Enoch of the guards of the gates of hell. “I saw the key-holders and the guards of the gates of hell standing, as large as serpents, with their faces like lamps that have been extinguished, and their eyes aflame, and their teeth naked down to their breasts” (2En 42:1). Sounds very much like a watcher-type goddess like Hecate if you ask me (there were also said to be lesser guardians that were more demonic in nature, much like the Rephaim-giants of Ps 88:10-11; Prov 2:18-19; 9:18; 21:6; Isa 14:9).

³⁹ Ibid.

You can almost start to see why Paul might be using this to teach the Ephesians so steeped in the worship of Artemis and Hecate about this particular storyline of Christ's victory over the powers. He is telling them that the goddess(es) who are so powerful in this city, worshiped by one and all, have been defeated. Indeed, they have been plundered! Those who couldn't get out are now out. The gates have been opened. That's his point! Jesus has lead captivity captive!

Who are these captives? One option is that it is the demonic hordes of hell, including the likes of Hecate. Boston and others since him cite **Col 2:15** and Christ's seemingly parading them around.⁴⁰ This is an attractive option. But the one I think makes the most sense of both the Psalm and especially Ephesians is that it refers to the captives of Sheol, that is **the saints of old**. This is the only thing that makes sense of Paul's quotation here.

Though nearly abandoned by the Calvinist side of the Reformation, this was the Lutheran view, which dates to the Medieval view of Aquinas and to nearly all of the church Fathers in one way or another. Following the ancient inter-

⁴⁰ **Thomas Boston**, *The Whole Works of Thomas Boston: An Illustration of the Doctrines of the Christian Religion, Part 1*, ed. Samuel M'Millan, vol. 1 (Aberdeen: George and Robert King, 1848); also **Arnold**, *Ephesians*, 251 also takes this view.

pretation found in Eusebius, Ambrose, Athanasius, Hippolytus, Gregory of Nyssa, Irenaeus, Jerome, Justin and more,⁴¹ **Epiphanius** writes about how Jesus breaches the gates of the netherworld as his angelic entourage cries out **Psalm 24:7-10** repeatedly. The demons are in disarray; the angels pursue and capture them. In the meantime, Adam is awakened by the noise, and he understands that his deliverance is at hand.⁴² He prostrates himself at the feet of Jesus, who leads him, together with Abel, Abraham, and all the rest into heaven.⁴³ This is what Peter is talking about when he says Christ preached to the spirits (i.e. evil demonic creatures) in prison (**1Pe 3:19**). That sound woke the slumbering saints and Jesus took them to glory in his train.

⁴¹ **Gregory of Nyssa** (On the Ascension of Christ); **Ambrose of Milan** (*The Faith* 4.1.3ff. and *The Mysteries* 36

Apocalypse of Peter 17; **Athanasius**, *The Incarnation* 25.5–6 (SC 199, 358–59); *Against Arius* §41B; **Gregory Nazianzenus**, *Oratio XLV* 24–25; **Hippolytus** (PG 83, col. 176 = GCS Hippolytus 1/2, 147); **Irenaeus**, “Erweis der apostolischen Verkündigung” §§78, 83–85 (TU 30/1 [1907]); **Jerome**, *Epistola XVIII* (see above, n. 85); **Justin**, *First Apology* §51; **Origen**, *Commentary on John* 6.287–88; **Tertullian**, *De Fuga in Persecutione* 12.4 (CSEL 76, 36). This note summarizes, “All of these authors cite Ps 24:7–10 in connection with the ascension, and most either describe or allude to the preceding descent-battle. On the fascinating notion that ascension to heaven after death represents a transformation of the imagery of descent.” **Cooper**, 57 n. 89.

⁴² **Pseudo-Epiphanius**, PG 43, cols. 452–64. Also the **Greek Apoc Ezra 7:2** says, “And I raised up my elect ones and I summoned up Adam from Hades so that the race of men...” **Odes of Solomon 42:11-14** says,

Sheol saw me and was shattered | and Death ejected me and many with me.
I have been vinegar and bitterness to it | and I went down with it as far as its depth.
Then the feet and the head it released | because it was not able to endure my face.
And I made a congregation of living among his dead; and I spoke with them by living lips; in order that my word may not fail.

⁴³ **Cooper**, 57, n. 88.

One of the church councils said, “He was crucified and he died, and he descended to Hell, and there he ruled all things. The gatekeepers of Hell, seeing him, were terrified. After three days he was resurrected from Hades” (*Council of Sirmium*, 359 AD).⁴⁴ The *Gospel of Nicodemus* (also called the *Acts of Pilate*), elaborates that after the Psalm is recited over and over again, when the gatekeepers resist, Jesus smashes the gates and enters and defeats the powers of hell. This is beautifully and almost poetically concluded this way:

For three days the band of the righteous was mustered and assembled, so that the wickedness of Death could no longer exercise its might against them ... Jesus smashed the eternal bolts, and the iron gates collapsed on Christ’s command ... The saving divine spirit rejoices, and his triumphal chariot accompanies the band of the righteous and holy ... The saving divine spirit hastens forth and commands the gates of heaven to open: “Open, open, and rend the immortal bolt. God Christ has stamped out death and called the men he has adopted back to heaven.” ... It is the Holy Spirit which, in order to show us the might of the Commander Christ, says: “Raise up the gates for your prince, and raise yourselves, O

⁴⁴ This council was not accepted by the churches because of its semi-Arian overtones. This excerpt, however, is no more unorthodox than saying than anything in the Apostle’s Creed. In other words, at this and many other points in their creed, the semi-Arians were trying to show their agreement with the church.

eternal gates, and the King of Glory will enter.” This the angels [demonic doorkeepers?]⁴⁵—who had no information since they could not have known that the Word of God had descended to earth—are commanded. They respond, therefore, with an urgent question: “Who is this King of Glory?” To their question Christ responds with the radiant majesty of his divinity: “The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.” Then the watchers of the heavens recognize the son of God, and they realize everything that has occurred before. They see the captured weaponry of the defeated enemy and, recalling the first command, they too cry aloud together with those who are ascending: “Raise up the gates, you who preside over the gates, and raise yourselves, O eternal gates, and the King of Glory will enter.”⁴⁵

In this light, Revelation tells us that Jesus now says, “I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (Rev 1:18). You might say, he took them from Hekate. Now, he is the King of Glory! This is what is happening in Ephesians 4:10, “He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.” Of the Revelation verse scholars say,

⁴⁵ This is from Julius Firmicus Maternus’s, *The Error of Pagan Religions* (fourth century).

The phrase [*“the keys of death and hell”*] functioned for John as a means to counter influence from competitors to Christ, in this instance Hecate. The imagery associated with this prominent and influential goddess in antiquity was noted at crossroads, gateways, doorways and on public buildings. She was, in particular, associated with having power over the dead, which was claimed by the Christian community, to be the prerogative of Jesus Christ.⁴⁶

In my mind, it is truly astonishing that so many supernatural confluences like a goddess of death and the underworld who stands at the crossroads of earth and hades with the keys in her power, who was said to have the power over the dead, who had a shine to the Satyr Pan at Ephesus, who was himself worshiped at Mt. Hermon, the entrance to the underworld, the place where Jesus spoke about the gates of hell and announced to the heavenly beings who he was and said, “Come and do your best,” is all circulating around Psalm 24 and Psalm 68 which are right in the middle of

⁴⁶ Rodney Thomas, “Magical Motifs in the Book of Revelation,” Durham Thesis, Durham University, 2007, 248. <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/1892/1/1892.pdf>

He cites the works of Aune and Beale who agrees with the Hecate association). David E. Aune, *Apocalypticism, Prophecy and Magic in Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006); G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary Series (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999)

Paul's explanation of gifts that Jesus has now given to the church.

The point of his digression then, that is our few verses today, is to explain the origin of the gifts and the power through which he won them. But NT Apostles were not in hades with Abraham. Or weren't they? Not temporally, but spiritually they were. That is, we were all children of wrath (Eph 2:1-3) who had to be plucked out of hell by Christ too. Curiously, Paul's own situation and that of the Ephesians prior to salvation fits right into this. One scholar writes,

[Paul] never mentions the location of his imprisonment, or the identity of his captors. Rather, he is a prisoner [of Christ] (3:1) [in the Lord] (4:1). He was made an apostle (1:1) and a minister (3:7) for their sakes (3:1, 8). He is therefore living proof and a chief example of Christ's captives, who are now being given to the church to the end that the body may be complete. Christ's taking captivity captive in 4:8 is exactly what he did in Paul's life, not in his current imprisonment, but on the road to Damascus (Acts 9; Eph 3:3).

Each one (4:7) in the audience is to understand his own situation to be the same as Paul's. They too were dead (2:1, 5) through their allegiance to the Christ's enemies (2:2). But

Christ plundered the abode of the dead, and when he ascended, he led them out with him (2:5-6). They are to do good works that God foreordained (2:10), according to their unique vocations (4:1) and the measure of grace given each of them (4:7). They will accomplish their ministry (4:12) as they grow into a united, complete body (4:13) under the tutelage of leaders like Paul whom Christ has given specifically to them (4:11) ...

In this light, the descent and ascent of Christ is a message of great encouragement not only for the original audience, but also for readers today. Those once held in bondage by forces of evil (2:2) have been rescued by one who is stronger, Jesus Christ (1:22). He entered into enemy territory on their behalf in order to bring them into his own family (2:18) and build his temple with them (2:21-22). He places each person with care, as a treasure given to the church, because he knows precisely what his body needs (4:7-11). Together they can have peace (2:14) as they stand firm against the principalities and powers (6:12), dressed in the full armor of God (6:13), in the service of Christ their Warrior King.⁴⁷

Understand then the power that Julian did not see, for it is grasped only by faith. Do not seek power in the magic and superstitions and fairy-tales that are re-intruding like a dark

⁴⁷ Claire, 24-26.

fog and poisonous vine throughout the West and Christianity in our day. But seek that power is which is Omnipotent, the power of Christ the victorious resurrected King who has rescued captives from hell after he died, defeated the powers of hell, yes and of the very city of Ephesus, and in victory gifted to the church all that she needs to carry out the business of being the church.

Beloved, Christ has plucked you out of the fiery pits and through his victory, he has given gifts to his church that will ensure the ability to carry out his mission of unity. Strength and power belong to the Conqueror who has now given the same strength and power to the church in the form of people-gifts who help the church. That help is so that you might engage in a struggle against the cosmic powers through earthly and mundane obedience and the fostering of self-giving relationships.⁴⁸

When the church does these things, the world is changed. You want to change the world? Start here. Perhaps the changes in our culture have occurred so rapidly in part because the church is failing at this most basic of all duties. Therefore, let us proclaim this victory through our unity, through our churches, through our obedient using of

⁴⁸ Gombis, 121.

the gifts he has given to tell the powers that they have been conquered, Jesus has won, and there is nothing on earth or in heaven that is going to stop him from ushering in his glorious kingdom of peace which will culminate on the Day when he comes to judge everyone in heaven and on earth.

Who is this King of Glory? The Lord strong and mighty. The Lord mighty in battle. He is the King of Glory.

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