

Ephesians 4.7-10
6 June 2010

Sermon notes by Pastor Paul Goh

Beloved, today we mark the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. This event took place forty days after our Lord rose again from the dead. And during those forty days, our Lord appeared to his fearful disciples, assuring them that he was yet alive and he arose from the dead. He was teaching them the things concerning the kingdom of God and to confirm those things that our Lord had taught them when he was on earth in the flesh. At the end of those memorable forty days, Jesus said to the disciples, "ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: that ye shall be witnesses unto me, both in Jerusalem, and in Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" and while he had spoken these words, he was taken up in a cloud. And Christ continues to be in heaven for our sake until he comes again at the end of the world. And he sits at the right hand of God as head of the church and by whom the Father governs all things.

In Ephesians 4, the apostle Paul is speaking about the unity: that the Ephesian church should endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace for there is one body, one Spirit, and one hope of your calling. One Lord, one faith, one baptism. One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. And he says, "but". Here "but" is not a contrast for it does not seem that the words of our text is a contrast to the teaching of unity but it is a continuation and a further development of his thoughts on unity. Thus the Word of God to us is the gifts of office are given for the unity of the people of god. Christ gives these gifts because he is the ascended Lord, who triumphed, over his enemies. And let now receive instruction from the words of our text in Ephesians 4.7-10.

We consider the theme grace according to the gift of Christ. First, we consider the meaning. Secondly, the position and thirdly, the means. The meaning. Christ gives gifts to the church. These gifts refer to the offices in the church. We read about this offices in verse 11, the office of apostle, prophets, and pastor-teachers. The office of apostle was given when the church was at its infancy and thus was temporary. The Old Testament prophets were filled with God's revelation and they could not but speak God's Word. They spoke God's Word that addressed the current sins of the day, e.g. idolatry, wickedness and calling God's people to repent of their sins. They also foretold of crucial events that will take place in the future, e.g. the seventy years of the Babylonian captivity and the promise that Judah will return to Jerusalem. Both offices are temporary in nature and have ceased though the function of prophesying and teaching still continues in the one office of pastor-teacher unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He gives these gifts as the one Head of the church for the perfecting of the saints, for the edifying or the building up of the body of Christ until we all come to the unity of the faith, of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. Christ gives this grace. This grace is the gift that Christ gives to the church. Firstly, these gifts are not given to the heathen who does not know God but only those who are the elect. Secondly, these gifts as given to the church are not given according to our abilities nor any merit but purely according to the unmerited favour of God upon his children. This grace is rooted in God's love for his elect people, whom he has chosen before the foundation of the world. For these alone Christ came and gave himself to the death of the cross so that the wrath of God is appeased through the atoning and vicarious sacrifice of Christ. Christ, though he was innocent from sin came to be the sin-bearer, who knew no sin. And he bore our sins on the cross so that we might be declared righteous. But by ourselves we are never righteous. We are born sinners

and we continue to do the works of the flesh but we are only righteous only in Christ who obeyed God perfectly so that he might earn the righteousness which he imputes into our account. The result is that God declares us just in his sight legally, as if I have not committed any sin and as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me, as much as I embrace such blessings with a believing heart.

Grace is given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ. Firstly, we notice that it is given according to the measure of Christ. Measure implies these are not given equally: some are given a greater portion of these gifts and some less. And according to the will of God, Christ measures out the gifts to his saints according to the free grace of Christ. These gifts are given from the abundant and unsearchable riches of Christ, which is given to him at his exaltation into heaven. We must remember that Christ gives these gifts for the unity of the Spirit of the bond of peace. For there one body, and one Spirit, and one hope of your calling: one Lord, one faith and one baptism. And so Christ gives these gifts for the sake of the unity of the people of God. There are diversities of gifts but they come from the same Holy Spirit. So, there is unity, not in uniformity or sameness but unity in diversity. But, how did Christ come to this position in order to give gifts unto the church.

Verse 8, "wherefore, he says, he led captivity captive". It is very clear that this phrase is taken from Psalm 68.18, which reads, "thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive: thou have received gifts for men" Psalm 68 is an interesting psalm. This psalm was written on the occasion of David bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. Israel was afraid to bring the ark into Jerusalem because when Uzzah steadied the Ark of the Covenant with his hand, he was struck dead by the Lord and Israel was filled with terror. Furthermore, David was displeased that the Lord in his wrath struck Uzzah dead and he was afraid of the Lord and said, "how shall the ark of the Lord come unto me?"

And so David caused the ark to be carried to the house of Obed-edom, the Gittite. And when he saw that the Lord prospered the house of Obed-edom and his entire household, David decided to bring the ark into Jerusalem. And as a result, there was great rejoicing when they brought the ark of God (II Sam 6.1; I Chronicles 16). David offered the burnt and peace offerings and blessed the name of Jehovah. He gave to everyone in Israel a loaf of bread, a piece of flesh and some wine. And he appointed the Levites to minister unto the Lord. And he praised God with the words of Psalm 105. And thus Psalm 68 is a psalm of joy and thanksgiving to God. This is also a psalm of triumph over the enemies of Israel, the Philistines. In Psalm 68.18, it says, "thou hast ascended and thou led captivity captive." Here God has ascended into heaven. Question is: in what way has God rose on high? Is there a need for God to ascend since God is always in the heaven. So, this is a prophecy about the ascension of Christ into heaven and sits at the right hand of God. And God led captivity captive. This is a picture where a conqueror is triumphant over his enemies. How does the conqueror return to his city? He returns in triumph and in style. He marches in victory with all his pomp and show together with his soldiers. He marches with his cavalry. What is at the end of his train? His defeated enemies. Who else? His enemies in chains, looking defeated, weary and subjugated. And he receives gifts for men. The conqueror is triumphant over his enemies and they give unto him the spoils and the conqueror in-turns throws those booties to his citizens while he marches triumphantly into his royal city. He gives away the gold, silver, rubies, coins and garments. And you hear the trumpet blowing and the banners unfurled in the wind. What does all these mean? Clearly it refers to Christ. Thus, the apostle as he speaks of the giving of gifts to the church, he has his eye on Psalm 68.18. He interprets that verse to be Christ who has ascended into heaven and sits at the right

hand of God. And in heaven, he gives gifts to men. And Christ is the conqueror for on the cross he gained the victory for us: over sin, death and the devil.

Why is there the need to gain the victory? Man in sin is a slavery to sin. An enemy has entered the world. He is the devil, the enemy of God and of his people. He conquered man held man in bondage and captivity. Heb. 2.14, 15, "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage". Man is a slave to the devil; he is under the dominion of Satan. The apostle Paul on the road to Damascus was given the command by the Lord Jesus Christ to preach the gospel, he was told to go to the people and to the Gentiles, "to open their eyes, and to bring them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan unto God". We are under law by nature – the last enemy is death (I Cor. 15.26). The apostle said, "Having spoiled principalities and powers" (Col. 2.15). At Calvary, they brought out their last reserves. The devil assumes that if he killed Christ he would get rid of him and thus defeat him. And as the devil carried out in evil plot, Christ was not defeated but Christ was defeating the devil for the apostle says, "having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it" and by dying and rising again from the dead Christ defeated the devil and all his hosts.

How did Christ gain the victory? He descended into the lower parts of the earth. The parenthesis or bracket serves to explain that the one who ascended is also the one who descended first into the lower parts of the earth. And this clearly refers to Christ for he is the one who descended into the lower parts of the earth. This does not mean that he went to hell to preach to those who were living in the days of Noah (c.f. I Peter 3.19). Neither does it mean that Christ went to the place of limbo of unconscious existence after his death. But, what it means simply that Christ took his place on earth. He was in the flesh. He was born of a virgin and came as man. What better way to describe this by turning to Philippians 2.7-8, But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:

8 And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross".

The same who ascended far above the heaven, in order that he might fill all things. We continue to read Philippians 2.9-11, "Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of *things* in heaven, and *things* in earth, and *things* under the earth; And *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God the Father." This means the ascension of Christ took place forty days after his resurrection from the dead. He has ascended into heaven and sits in all honour, power and majesty. He is triumphant over his enemies. First, over sin because he was the perfect sacrifice for the sins of his people. Over sin because he was the sin bearer for he knew no sin so that he could justify his people and declare them righteous. And therefore, Christ was triumphant over sin. Secondly, he was triumphant over the devil. The devil was dealt with a fatal blow on the cross. And he is bound a thousand years and he is cast into the bottomless pit and its shut up and seal is upon him so that he should not deceive the nations till the 1000 years are up (Rev. 20.1-3). Finally, Christ is triumphant over death. Through Christ, death is swallowed up in victory. The sting of death is sin and the strength of the law is sin. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (I Cor. 15.54-57). The purpose is that Christ can fill all things. Now, as the exalted Mediator, he replenishes the church with his bounteous gifts of grace. And thus, the

ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ is a great triumph over his enemies and we through Christ is victorious over the enemies so that we can declare, “we are more than conquerors through him that loved us”. Amen.