

Gifts poured out on the people of God by the ascension of Christ into heaven

by Rev. Tom Aicken

Psalm 68:18 comes from a psalm of David, and there are some commentators who see this text as an incident from David's own life, as one of his conquests that can also be applied to the great conquest of the coming Christ over Satan. Some have even supposed that there is an apparent contradiction here between David's "gifts from men" and Paul's "gifts to men" as he seeks to quote this text in Ephesians 4:8, and these same commentators have sought to give some explanation for that. If we study the text carefully, however, we find that there is no basis for any of this, that these speculations fall short of the mark and fail to show us the great blessings of Christ poured out on His people as a result of His ascension into heaven.

Psalm 68:18 is often translated, "You have received gifts *from* men." The NKJV translates it as, "You have received gifts *among* men," though it goes on to say, "Even *from* the rebellious," implying, still, that these gifts are from men. A better translation of the Hebrew text, however, is this, "You have received gifts **FOR** men," which is clearly Paul's own understanding of this verse as he refers to it in Ephesians 4. The apostle is there writing of how Christ in His ascension "gave gifts to men" – the fact that He received such gifts for the purpose of giving them to men – Paul also highlights what some of those gifts are and the Lord's purpose in giving them. If we accept the principle that Scripture is the best interpreter of Scripture, this is a good example of how that works.

Let's now take a closer look at Psalm 68:18, and examine it phrase by phrase:

"You have ascended on high." If David wrote of our Lord's resurrection (Acts 2:31), he could surely write of His ascension also, and how else shall we understand Psalm 110? David acquired by the grace of God many conquests in his life, but he never achieved a victory like this, nor could any of them be described in such lofty fashion as we see here.

"You have led captivity captive." This is an interesting expression, but what does it mean to lead captivity captive? This is an overwhelming and incomparable victory, one that is so final and conclusive that it does not need to be repeated.

John Owen wrote of the death of death in the death of Christ, meaning that the Lord Jesus in the atoning sacrifice of Himself at Calvary did not conquer death for His people temporarily, but permanently, with effects which could never be undone. Death itself was put to death, in other words, and never would it be enabled to rise again. In the same way, Christ leading captivity captive is a victory which can never be overturned, making God's people more than conquerors (see Romans 8:35-39), a victory far superior to any ever found among the kings and princes of the earth.

"You have received gifts for men." In the military conquests of ancient times, treasured items were taken from the defeated peoples and, if the king didn't keep them for himself, he redistributed them among his favourite subjects, those whom he wished to honour in some peculiar way. Ah, but these gifts here in Psalm 68 are altogether different. They are not taken from men, nor could they be. They are received from God the Father, the Giver of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17,18), from whom all blessings flow. Moreover, these gifts are given to God the Son to honour Him in His victory over sin and death and all the powers of darkness, to mark His exaltation to glory, to set Him apart as King of kings and the Head of His Church.

But notice, Christ has not received these gifts for Himself; He has received them for men, for the benefit of His Church in particular. Paul tells us what some of these gifts are. Ephesians 4:11, "And He gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers." We need not think that this is an exhaustive list of the gifts, of course, though it does reveal to us something of the care with which the Lord Jesus provides for His Bride, the Church, in order to see her through this present vale of tears.

"Even for the rebellious." I'm so glad this is added, for it's a helpful and much needed reminder that God has chosen His people and given them to His Christ, not from among the elite (as if there are any), but from the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15), and that, even though we are made a new creation in Christ, believer, you and I have nothing in or of ourselves for which to boast (1 Corinthians 1:26-31). As the gifts, in other words, are treasures of His grace, so are we the objects of His mercy, and how thankful we should be for all the love and favour our Lord bestows upon us!

“That the Lord God might dwell among them.” The Lord our God is pleased to dwell among His people, but He must provide for us in order for that to happen, and we, in turn, must submit to His presence and power in order to experience His blessing. We see how He has provided for us. Do we accept the office-bearers He has sent us? Do we respond to their task of equipping us for the work of ministry? Do we work with them in seeking the edification of the body of Christ?

We may dismiss the Lord’s gifts, of course, thinking that we can find a better way of doing things – and the Lord’s servants are not perfect, to be sure – but to reject the Lord’s ways is, effectively, to reject the Lord Himself, and we must never do that. Remember, beloved, our form of government, and our working together doing our share, is a direct result and manifestation of the ascension of Christ, of how He would have us to live and work and serve Him until He comes again. This at the same time is an important part of how He, by His Spirit, lives among us, cares for us here, and prepares us for the life hereafter.

In the light of all that we have seen above, I would like to suggest an alternate metrical version of Psalm 68:

(new)	(old)
“O Lord, Thou hast ascended	“O Lord, Thou hast ascended
On high in might to reign;	On high in might to reign;
Captivity Thou leadest	Captivity Thou leadest
A captive in Thy train.	A captive in Thy train.
Rich gifts by Thee are given	Rich gifts to Thee are offered
To men who did rebel,	By men who did rebel,
Who pray that now Jehovah	Who pray that now Jehovah
Their God with them may dwell.”	Their God with them may dwell.”