

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND
THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL:
A STUDY OF EPHESIANS
(LESSON FORTY-EIGHT)
“COSTLY GIFTS”

EPHESIANS 4:1-16

- 1 *I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called,*
- 2 *With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love;*
- 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.*
- 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 verse 7 of our text, Paul writes, “*But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.*” In this verse, Paul transitions from focusing on the Church as a whole, to focusing on the individual members of the Church. He is still concerned with the matter of preserving the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, but he moves from discussing what all believers have in common, to looking at how believers differ from each other. He discusses variety and individuality within the unity of the Spirit, and argues that unity is not inconsistent with a variety of gifts and offices.

The question naturally arises as to how unity, which has been so strongly emphasized in the first six verses of the chapter, may be preserved in the light of this diversity and variation? Paul gives us the answer in verses 7 through 16. In these verses, he explains how the body of Christ, even though it is characterized by diversity, is held together in unity.

Paul says, “*But unto every one of us is given **grace.***” 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.

In other words, we would not have been given any spiritual gift if God had not first been gracious to us. Spiritually mature believers appreciate this truth and will never place more emphasis on the gifts of the Spirit than on the grace of God, for they know that if God had not lavished His amazing grace upon them, they would not have received any gift at all!

When we come to a full appreciation of how sinful we **are** and how gracious God has been to us, we will be ashamed of our pride, our selfishness, our boasting, and our exaltation of men and women, all of which promote division. One of the marks of a mature believer is a strong desire and commitment to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. In fact, where that desire and commitment is lacking, it is a mockery to speak about spiritual maturity, no matter what else may be present. Since every believer is made a partaker of Christ's gift of grace, each believer should strive to do his or her part in the maintenance of unity and peace.

Brothers and sisters, grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift, or out of His generosity. The reason why unity and diversity can co-exist in the Body of Christ is because the Lord Jesus Christ Himself is the Head of the Body, and being the Head, He is the Giver of the variety of gifts which are enjoyed by the Church as a whole, and by every single member in particular. This principle guarantees the unity in the diversity!

God has given each believer at least one spiritual gift, and this gift is to be used for the unifying and edifying, or building up of the body of Christ. A spiritual gift is a God-given ability to serve God and other Christians in such a way that Christ is glorified and believers are edified.

It is very important for us to appreciate that the gifts of the Spirit are not necessarily a means of judging the depth of a person's spiritual life. We often make the mistake of thinking that because a person speaks in tongues a lot, and/or manifests other gifts of the Spirit that they are necessarily mature spiritually. But this is often not the reality.

In our last **Lesson**, we turned our attention from the church at Ephesus to the church at Corinth, in order to emphasize the fact that "giftedness" does not necessarily equate to spiritual maturity. In this **Lesson**, we will turn our attention back to the Ephesians.

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 invitation to the Ephesian believers to carefully consider what he is going to say to them, in the context of the spiritual gifts distributed to them, according to the grace of God. It is his way of alerting them that he is going to quote an Old Testament passage. He quotes from **Psalms 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**. Paul wants the believers to know that although the gift is free, there was a great cost 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.

Paul wants to make it clear that the truth that he had just stated in verse **7**, was a truth which had always been a part of the manifold wisdom of God. The words, "*Wherefore he saith,*" indicate that God is speaking through His word. Brothers and sisters, whenever we read the Bible, or hear the Word of God rightly divided by one of His ministering servants, we must always be aware that it is the infinite, transcendent, omnipotent, omniscient God Himself who is communicating personally with us!

Psalms 68 is regarded as one of the Messianic Psalms. Messianic Psalms are Psalms which speak directly of Christ and His work **for** those for whom He died, His work **in** those for whom He died, and His work **through** those for whom He died.

For example, in **Psalms 22:1**, David said, "*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*" Our Lord made this desperate cry on the cross, for they were His words in the Old Testament as He spoke them prophetically through David. David said those words in a moment of chastisement when God had seemingly abandoned him.

Nevertheless, it was Christ speaking through David and in David's own experiences in life.

The **King James Version** translates **Psalm 68:18** as follows: *"Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive: thou hast received gifts for men; yea, for the rebellious also, that the LORD God might dwell among them."*

In his *"Commentary on the Book of Psalms,"* the Anglican bishop **John James Stewart Perowne**, wrote the following in his introductory remarks concerning **Psalm 68**: "The subject of this grand hymn is the entry of God into His Sanctuary on Zion. This is described under figures borrowed from the triumph of an earthly conqueror, who, after having vanquished his enemies, and taken possession of their country, marches in solemn procession at the head of his troops, to occupy the city which he has selected as his capital and the seat of his empire. God is represented, first as advancing at the head of the Israelites through the desert; then as leading them victoriously into Canaan; and finally as fixing His royal abode on Zion, whence He reigns in the majesty of universal dominion, acknowledged and feared by all the nations of the earth."

In verse **18**, the Psalmist is painting a word picture of a conquering general returning to his own country or city. In the triumphal procession, the general and his chariot would be up front. Behind him, would be all the people that he has conquered, the generals and the leaders of the opposing armies. Then behind them would be all the spoils of war. After entering the city, the conquering general would go to an elevated area of the city, and there the spoils of war would be officially presented to him. The general, in turn, would distribute the spoil to whoever he desired. He had to receive gifts in order to give gifts. It is necessary for us to make this point because **Psalm 68:18** says, *"thou hast received gifts for men."* However, when Paul quotes the verse in **Ephesians 4:8**, he says that Christ *"gave gifts unto men."*

There is a wonderful picture here of what Christ has done for us. We must understand that if He had not ascended, The Holy Spirit, who really is **The Gift**, would not have come and facilitated our receiving of all the other gifts.

In **John 16:7** our Lord said to His disciples, *"Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you."* It was absolutely necessary for Jesus to ascend to the Father in order for the Holy Spirit to come. The Holy Spirit is the One who distributes the gifts, ensuring that the desires of the Father are carried out.

Paul is making us aware of what it cost for us to be able to have our spiritual gifts. In **Philippians 2:5-11**, he describes the humiliation and subsequent exaltation of Christ eloquently and graphically. We will read the translation provided by the **Amplified Bible**.

5 *Have this same attitude in yourselves which was in Christ Jesus [look to Him as your example in selfless humility],*

6 *who, although He existed in the form and unchanging essence of God [as One with Him, possessing the fullness of all the divine attributes – the entire nature of deity], did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped or asserted [as if He did not already possess it, or was afraid of losing it];*

7 *but emptied Himself [without renouncing or diminishing His deity, but only temporarily giving up the outward expression of divine equality and His rightful dignity] by assuming the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men [He became completely human but was without sin, being fully God and fully man].*

8 *After He was found in [terms of His] outward appearance as a man [for a divinely-appointed time], He humbled Himself [still further] by becoming obedient [to the Father] to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

9 *For this reason also [because He obeyed and so completely humbled Himself], God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name,*

10 *so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW [in submission], of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

11 and that every tongue will confess and openly acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord (sovereign God), to the glory of God the Father.

In this passage, Paul outlines the process of humbling that our Lord submitted Himself to. He went from existing in the form of deity, to relinquishing this form in order to take upon Himself the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men. Not only did God become a man, but He even identified with us to the point of death, and this at the hands of His own creation. Not only did He die, but He died the most despicable death known in that day. What grace! From heaven to earth, from glory to shame, from Master to servant, from life to death, *“even the death of the cross!”*

Brothers and sisters, in order for us to receive spiritual blessings, our Lord had to divest Himself of the expression of His deity; He had to abandon His right to express Himself as God; He had to empty Himself, laying aside the independent use of His own attributes as God; He had to become a human being, in a sinless physical body; He had to use that body to be a servant; He had to take that body to the cross and willingly die for us.

It is reported that during the First World War, there was a tradition in the French towns and cities. In many instances the towns and cities had to organize to defend themselves. They had walled cities with huge gates and walkways over the gates. When the group of men who had left the towns or cities to oppose the enemy returned, the citizens would get on top of the gate. They would have a choir who would chant songs of victory. The men would come back, wounded, broken and bleeding from battle, but they would come back waving their flag, signifying that they had won the victory!

The people on top of the wall would shout to them, “What right do you have to enter through these gates?” The men would hold up their hands displaying their scars. Then, they would raise their flag and shout their reply: “We have been to battle, and we have won the victory!” The gates would swing open, and they would walk through in triumph celebrated by a grateful citizenry.

In similar manner our Lord left the splendours of heaven and descended to the earth to engage in the greatest conflict of all. Having won the victory, He returned to heaven. Let us try to imagine His return back into heaven. As He approached heaven, the angelic choir stood on the gates. They shouted, “What right do you have to enter these gates?” The Lord Jesus Christ lifted up His hands displaying the nail prints. He displayed the nail prints in His feet and the mark of the spear in His side. Then He shouted, “I have been to Calvary, and I have won the victory!” Then, the heavenly gates swung open and the Lord Jesus entered triumphantly to the Father and sat down His right hand. He was exalted and was given the name above every name.

In **Psalm 24:7-10**, we have a prophetic description of this event.

7 Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in.

8 Who is this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle.

9 Lift up your heads, O ye gates; even lift them up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in.

10 Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory. Selah.

It cost our Lord everything for us to be diverse. It cost Him everything for us to have our gifts. And if we are not using our gifts to edify the Body of Christ, preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, and glorify God, then, we are not operating as God designed the church to operate. If we operate in a similar manner to the Corinthian church that we examined in our previous **Lesson**, we are hindering the forward march of the Church and we are dishonouring our great God. We do well to remember Paul’s warning to the Galatian believers in **Galatians 5:15**: *“However, if you continually bite and devour one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another.”*

Brothers and sisters, we need to operate in the gift or gifts that cost our Lord so much to procure, and we need to do so in a manner that edifies the Body of Christ, preserves the unity of the Spirit, and glorifies God.