

"He that ascended, descended first."

Psalms 68 and 69.

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Psalm 68 strikes a very triumphant note, for in it God is seen as scattering His foes and blessing His people. It seems to be the climax of a short series. Psalm 64 anticipates that God will intervene for the deliverance of His people. Psalm 65 speaks of the blessing that will visit the earth when God has stilled the tumult of the nations. Psalm 66 expresses the joy of the godly when brought through fire and water they can praise His Name in His house. Psalm 67 shows that when God blesses and causes His face to shine upon Israel His saving health will be known among all the nations. Psalm 68 crowns the story by recapitulating the whole theme with greater fulness, and showing that all hinges upon the One who has ascended on high.

Psalm 69 commences another short series of three, in which not triumph but a cry for deliverance is predominant. It begins with the cry of One who entered into troubles far more deeply than any other. The truly marvellous thing is that the One who cries out of the deepest troubles is to be identified with the One who has gone up on high. Therefore it is that Psalm 72 closes the second book with a description of His millennial glory.

If human order and arrangement had prevailed in the grouping of the Psalms, it would pretty certainly have reversed the order of the two series. We should have arranged things in historic order, first His trouble and suffering, second His triumph and ascension, third His millennial glory. But doubtless we should have been wrong. The order here agrees with that observed in Ephesians 4: 9, 10, where, having quoted the eighteenth verse of Psalm 68, the comment is made "Now that He ascended, what is it but that He also descended first into the lower parts of the earth." The descent was first historically, but it is only mentioned parenthetically because His triumphant ascension is the main point before the mind of the Spirit. So it is in these Psalms, and 69-71 may be viewed as a parenthesis between 68 and 72.

He "descended first." So let us first consider Psalm 69, in which He is seen as sinking in "deep mire," and "deep waters" (ver. 2), and as going down into "the waterflood," "the deep," and "the pit" (ver. 15). Ephesians 4: 9 speaks of Him as descending "into the lower parts of the earth," an expression that occasions some little difficulty. If, however, we connect it in our minds with the Psalm before us the difficulty largely disappears. Indeed it may be that the Apostle Paul, when he wrote the words, had this Psalm in his mind, just as he had Psalm 68 in his mind and quoted from it in the previous verse.

The sufferings contemplated in our Psalm are not those that are connected with His soul being made an offering for sin. His atoning sufferings were *from* God, as we see in Psalm 22. Here the sufferings are endured *for* God. It is plainly stated in verse 7, "For Thy sake I have borne reproach." All through this is the dominant note. We see by the spirit of prophecy the holy, dependent Man altogether identified with God's interests, and by reason thereof going down into death.

The language of this Psalm cannot be applied to the Lord Jesus without any reserve, as is possible when we consider Psalm 22. Verse 5 is a case in point. The utterance of that verse would come most appropriately from the lips of the most devoted saint that has ever lived, but in no sense did it come from His lips. In Psalm 22 the sufferings He endured at the hands of men when on the cross are predicted, yet all are subsidiary to the supreme sufferings which were His as forsaken of God. Then it

was that atonement was made, and hence He stands absolutely alone. No other enters into the question, even in the remotest way. In Psalm 69 He is not absolutely alone, for many a saint has known what it is to suffer from evil men, because identified with God's Name and cause. He is immeasurably pre-eminent in this, but there are others. This accounts for expressions in the Psalm which apply to the others, but which do not apply to Him.

A large part of the Psalm however, does apply to Him. The Lord Jesus quoted the opening words of verse 4 as applying to Himself in John 15: 25. We are told in John 2: 17 that His disciples remembered the opening words of verse 9, and saw that they referred to Him. Paul remembered the latter part of that verse, and saw that it referred to Him, as shown by Romans 15: 3. So also Peter saw a reference to Judas Iscariot in the 25th verse, as we are told in Acts 1: 20.

In addition to these we are furnished with many remarkable allusions to what He suffered. Hatred, reproach, shame, dishonour are all mentioned, and they reached Him, from all quarters. "They that sit in the gate speak against Me;" and it was the elders and judges who sat there — the most reputable of the people. But equally, "I was the song of the drunkards;" and they were the most disreputable of the people.

Then again, when reproach had broken His heart He had to say, "I am full of heaviness: and I looked for some to take pity, but there was none, and for comforters, but found none." This was fulfilled in His disciples, for it was in Gethsemane that He was "sorrowful and very heavy," and even Peter, James and John utterly failed Him.

Verse 21 was fulfilled on the cross in the most literal way by the Roman soldiers who crucified Him.

So in this wonderful Psalm we get the whole range of suffering that came upon Him at the hands of men: whether from the leaders of the people, or from the very scum' of society, or from the Gentiles; whether from true disciples who really loved Him, or from false disciples who betrayed Him. He felt it all with an intensity that is altogether beyond our conception, and He was cast upon God in it all.

"Then I restored that which I took not away" (verse 4). These words found their fulfilment in Him. The first man Adam robbed God of His glory. He forsook obedience to, God and dependence upon Him, and became eaten up with self-interest and self-seeking. The second Man the Lord Jesus Christ was marked by absolute obedience and dependence; He was eaten up with zeal for God's house, and was so wholly identified with the interests and glory of God that, if any desired to fling reproaches upon God, the reproach naturally fell upon *His* head. Thus having taken man's true place, He restored to God as Man the place that was truly His as God. He glorified God where the first man had dishonoured Him.

But it was just this whole-hearted identification with God, and zeal for His house, that brought upon the Lord Jesus the full weight of man's hatred and persecution — a persecution which did not stop short of death. Adversaries surrounded Him on all sides; reproach, shame and dishonour were rolled in upon Him from all quarters. He did indeed *descend*. He had to say, "I sink." But this descending was *first*; that infers that there is something to be accounted *second*. There is a glorious *sequel*.

Psalm 68 very specially contemplates the great intervention on God's part which will overthrow every adversary and deliver His people, and thus inaugurate the age of millennial glory. Again and again men perpetually ask, Can there be a God? If so, why does He not rise up and do something? They do not realize what the fulfilment of their desire will entail. The day will come however when a Divine intervention will take place. God will arise and His enemies will be scattered. HIS enemies, be it noted;

not yours or mine or Britain's or Ethiopia's or even Israel's. His enemies will be like smoke driven before the fire.

That intervention will mean the deliverance of all those that fear His Name. Many of them will be in a captivity that has been brought upon them by reason of their nation's sins. Isaiah asks the question, "Shall the prey be taken from the mighty, or the lawful captive delivered?" (Isa. 49: 24), and in the next verse he answers it, saying, "Thus saith the Lord, Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away, and the prey of the terrible shall be delivered." Our Psalm shows that not only will the Almighty "scatter kings" (ver. 14), but He will lead captive every power that had enslaved His people. He will possess Himself of them by taking captive those who held them in captivity.

But, as we have seen, the Apostle Paul discovered that these words, while referring to the millennial triumph, had an application to the triumph won by the Lord Jesus at His first advent by way of death, resurrection and ascension into the glory. Many details in the Psalm can only refer to what will be accomplished at His second advent, but verse 18 has special reference to the first, and we may make a similar application of verse 1.

"Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered!" These are great words. Had there been fulness of intelligence and faith in the hearts of the disciples, they might have been on their lips as they awaited that glorious first day of the week when Jesus rose from the dead. They had neither the faith nor the intelligence at that moment, but doubtless as the myriads of holy angels looked down upon the grave of Joseph of Arimathea that is what they desired to say, and that is what they saw accomplished. Of a truth He was crucified in weakness, but He came forth from the tomb by the power of God — a power that was inherent in Himself.

It must have been a great sight when, in the little ship on the lake of Galilee in the midst of the storm, the apparently weary Man "arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm." It was a far greater sight when the apparently defeated Man arose from the dead, not only rebuking but scattering His spiritual foes, when, "having spoiled principalities and powers, He made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it" (Col. 2: 15). The thing was done openly or publicly. The triumph was over opposing evil spiritual powers, and it was public in the sight of all the holy spiritual powers.

When the triumph was effected men were wholly unconscious of it. The best of the disciples were still in fear and trembling. No human shouts of exultation greeted the arising of God and the scattering of His foes, but who shall say what transpired in the angelic realm? If the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy when the foundations were laid in creation, what songs and what shouting must have greeted the arising of the Son of God from death and the grave? There must have been a shout that reverberated to the farthest of the shining stars of God, though dull human ears perceived it not.

We believe that we do not trespass in thus applying verse 1 to the resurrection of Christ. We are sure that we do not in applying verse 18 to His ascension, for the inspired Apostle makes just that application, as we have seen. His application sheds a flood of light on the Old Testament scripture.

Verse 17 speaks of "the chariots of God." These are connected with angelic ministrations and power, as we see in the translation of Elijah. When he ascended on high he was fetched by the chariots of God. "The chariots of God are twenty thousand," yet none of them appeared when Jesus went up. The One who then ascended was God no less than Man. He was not fetched: He went up and in, as the Master of that holy place.

Moreover His ascension was in the nature of a triumph. A cloud received Him out of the sight of the disciples: the scene that transpired on the other side of that cloud was too bright for mortal eyes to gaze upon. The verse that we have already quoted from Colossians 2 has as much application to His ascension as to His resurrection. The powers of darkness, which had been holding man in captivity, were themselves dragged as helpless captives in His procession; and already there were found upon earth men, who though once the helpless captives of Satan, were now gladly captivated by Him. The handful of captivated men that He left behind Him have now increased through the centuries to a multitude that no man can number. We — readers and writer — are amongst them, conscious of the cords of His love.

"Drawn by such cords we'll onward move,
Till round the throne we meet,
And, captives in the chains of love,
Embrace our Saviour's feet."

When this verse is quoted in Ephesians 4 the point particularly before the mind of the Spirit is the gifts that were given to Him as Man on behalf of men. "Thou hast received gifts in Man" (New Trans.). The gifts were indeed received *for* men, but the language indicates more than this. They were received *in* Man; that is, by Him in His ascended and glorified Manhood, so that He, as the supreme and representative MAN, might bestow them upon men. He will indeed shed great gifts upon the men who, born again and redeemed, enter the coming age of glory. The point made in Ephesians 4 is the way in which He has given the gifts amongst His redeemed to-day.

The saints of today, who compose the church, are "a kind of firstfruits of His creatures." We have in anticipation blessings which will be bestowed in a more public way in the coming age. On the day of Pentecost Peter stated of Christ that "being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, He hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear" (Acts 2: 33); so here we have a statement which runs parallel to that of Paul.

Peter speaks of the gift of the Spirit Himself. Paul speaks of the gifts that accompany and flow from the gift of the Spirit. But in both cases the gifts reach men in the same way. As the ascended and victorious Man the Lord Jesus received of the Father the promised Holy Ghost, and then shed Him forth upon His saints below. As the ascended and victorious Man He received the gifts, which He proceeded to give unto men. By the gift of the Spirit Himself the saints were constituted His members, and His body was formed. By the gifts bestowed — apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers — the saints are to be perfected and the body edified.

These gifts are all in evidence today. The apostles are available for us, inasmuch we still have the inspired writings which came from their pens. We also have inspired writings which have reached us through men, who although not apostles, were prophets. Prophets, in the full sense of the term, were inspired men: yet, though inspiration has ceased, we still find that there are given to the church men of prophetic gift, who can unfold the mind of God. Evangelists, pastors and teachers are also to be found today.

The point in the Psalm is that the bestowal of these gifts is the fruit and manifestation of the triumph of the Lord Jesus. He descended first into death and all that was involved in it. He arose from the dead to the confusion and scattering of every adverse power. He ascended into the heavens having made captive the evil principalities and powers that formerly held us captive. Then, to crown everything, He received as Man the gifts which He bestowed upon men.

These gifts are even for "the rebellious," as the Psalm says: that is, for those who once were rebellious, but now have been happily subjugated through grace, are captives in the chains of His love. By-and-by, when judgment has run its course in the earth, there will be a great out-pouring of the Spirit and of the gifts of the Spirit upon once rebellious men. At last the earth — Israel and the nations — will be in sincere subjection to the will of God, and it will be seen that Christ is "the Head over all things" (Eph. 1: 22). In that glad day the gifts will flow to men from the glorified Man who is Head over all.

But the same verse in Ephesians declares Him to be "Head . . . to the church, which is His body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all." The church exists today, and her Head is the One who — though "over all, God blessed for ever" — is over all things, the ascended and glorified Man. Hence the church has not to wait to receive gifts. They are hers today, and have been hers since she came into being. They have reached her from her exalted Head, and every one of them exists for the maintenance of His interests and the doing of His work in the world, which is the scene of the adversary's power. Every one of them is a witness to the triumph of our Head.

And every one of them has this in view — "that the Lord God might dwell." In the coming age He will dwell in Zion, as His rest forever. In this age He dwells in the church, as we are told in the last verse of Ephesians 2. What mighty results flow from the triumph of our Head!

Sing His blest triumphant rising;
Sing Him on the Father's throne
Sing — till heaven and earth surprising,
Reigns the Nazarene alone.