

“Captivity Held Captive”

Psalm 68:18

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SERMON 1915

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The sermon text is from Psalm 68:18, “You have ascended on high, You have led captivity captive; You have received gifts among men, Even from the rebellious, That the Lord God might dwell there.”

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our Lord Jesus Christ has come down from heaven in order to go to battle for us and give us the gifts of His victory. With His ascension we see that He is the victorious King and we are the recipients of His battle spoils. He came because the ruler of this world was holding us captive. He came because our sinful nature had bound us to its will. He came, because death had a death-grip on each and every one of us.

How were we doing? Our earthly weapons were impotent against this satanic foe. Our own will was fighting against us. Nothing which we had tried was able to release us from the fear of death. If we were to be set free, we needed a King from a kingdom that is not of this world. His weapons would not be earthly weapons. His fight would not be in an earthly way. Unlike this world’s way, His distribution of benefits would be offered in the Word and received by faith.

When St. Paul in Ephesians 4 teaches about the Ascension of Our Lord, he cites Psalm 68:18. St. Paul says,

“When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, And gave gifts to men” (Ephesians 4:8).

The words, “He led captivity captive,” is quite unusual. We usually don’t think of our situation as being held captive. **First, consider our captivity to death.** Each and every one of us will die. Death is holding us captive. We don’t want to die. Yet, we cannot break ourselves free from it. Healthy eating, medicine, and exercise is impotent in the face of our captivity. We have been captured by death and we cannot free ourselves from its grip.

The devil, too, is an enemy who has taken us captive. 2 Timothy 2:25-26 speaks of those “who are in opposition” to God. And it goes on to say, “...if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, ²⁶and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will.” **By nature each and every one of us is out of our mind.** We either think we are good, or we think that we can work our way to heaven. Only through the Word of God can we “come to our senses.” By ourselves, we can’t see the truth. The snares of the devil are leading us to do his will.

Now I realize that those who are most held captive, often speak about their great freedom as they sin. They say that they have been freed from the confines of marriage and chastity, from responsibility and simply live for themselves. Having given themselves over to abominable practices, they think that they are free from the

restrictions of outdated morality. They live like unrestrained animals. They are actually captive to their sinful desires.

This captivity by the devil is not easy to see. If there were prisons set up, then we could point to the captivity. Nevertheless, Revelation 12:9 describes “the Devil and Satan” as the one **“who deceives the whole world.”** And 2 Corinthians 4:4 says that “the god of this age has blinded...{the minds of those} who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.”

The problem is that like the captivity of death, we don't know of it being any other way. The whole world is the devil's prison and the only freedom is found when the Word of the Gospel creates faith. We are those living in the land of the shadow of death, and we needed someone who would come to us from outside. We needed the Light to come into this world. We needed someone, who was not indoctrinated by the devil's will and ways, to reveal to us his lies and our captivity.

Last of all, **we must consider the slavery of sin.** Romans 6 says, that all of us were once, “slaves of sin.” This slavery to sin, reminds me of what medicine calls an addiction. Those who speak about nicotine or alcohol or pornography, all lament their sin. People want to quit, but find that they cannot. They know the harm that it causes and yet they continue to return to it. Some say that they could stop, if they want to. You try weaning yourself off, but you return to it. You try quitting cold turkey, but its too much. You escape a smoking addiction, only to overeat. You make it more difficult to feed your sinful habit, but the desire grows stronger. The deceiving character of our captivity to sin, leads us to believe that we are in control, but we are not. Until God's law shows you your slavery, the Old Adam inside you still has control.

Our pride makes us think that we are strong. Trying to set us free, St. Paul gives it to us straight, “I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. {For just as} you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness...” (Rom 6:19). When you sin, you are neither strong nor free. You are weak, too weak. You are simply a captive doing what your master desires.

The ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ is His victorious return to the Father. Our Jesus has taken captivity captive. Our victory over these captors has been secured by His suffering, death and resurrection. We need to understand that Jesus did not enter this world with His guns blazing in order to completely destroy the devil's domain. If He had, we who were held captive in the devil's stronghold would have been destroyed with the devil. **Instead, our shrewd God had a plan to defeat sin, death and the devil, AND to rescue us from their clutches.** Our Jesus didn't pull up the weeds, lest He harm some of the wheat in the process. Jesus didn't destroy this sinful world, lest we sinners be consumed. Our Jesus took captivity captive, so that we might be set free.

I would liken it to **an army coming to occupy a prison.** The former warden is arrested and chained, but he is left in his office. The guards are bound, but remain at their posts. Though the outward prison walls remain, the word of freedom spreads. You no longer need to obey these masters. You are free. Nevertheless, these former masters continue to threaten and yell, but their power has been broken.

It seems quite confusing. The word is to be spread through the prison by means of the prisoners. How do you know we are free, since you are a prisoner, too? Some of the prisoners declare that they are free and will no longer be a slave to sin. Other prisoners see that the prison and guards are still there, and declare it is crazy talk.

When a prisoner believes the Word and walks away, there is not a consensus about what has just happened. Conspiracy theories abound.

Finally, you must know that even after we come to faith in Christ, **we continue to walk by the prison wall, the prison guard and the prison warden, every day.** Our entire life is one of resistance. Our Lord has ascended to His Kingdom, but we are still here. What that means for us is that we must continue in faith to hold to our ascended Lord and King. We have the victory, but only through faith in Jesus.

1 Peter 5:8-9 says, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. ⁹Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.” **Though Jesus defeated every temptation** of the devil, the devil still roars as if he were a grave threat. With faith in Christ, we can resist the devil’s temptations. Though Jesus has defeated death by submitting to it Himself, death still thinks that we ought to run in fear of it. With faith in Christ, we shall not die but live. Our sinful nature continues to announce to us our sinful desires, and expects us to do it. My neighbor boy said, “You live your life, the way you want to.” That is not freedom. It is the captivity of a sinful nature, but it sounds like self-determined freedom, “You live your life, the way you want to.”

On this Ascension day, our King who came down from heaven for us and for our salvation. He “has gone up with a shout; The Lord with the sound of a trumpet” (Ps 47) Our Jesus has won the victory for us. Having won that victory, He has given out these gifts through the preaching of His Word. Through faith we receive the benefits of His having led captivity captive. We were delivered from sin, death and the devil.

Ephesians 4 goes on to say the result of our justification by grace through faith. It says, “. . .that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, ¹⁵but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ.” The devil’s trickery will not work. The sinful nature’s deceitful plotting can not capture us. Death’s tomb cannot scare us. “For the Lord Most High is awesome; He is a great King over all the earth. ³He will subdue the peoples under us, And the nations under our feet.” **With faith in Christ, we are free to say no to sin. Our Lord has given us gifts** so that we can resist these captors who are still proclaiming our captivity.

Jesus has ascended on high. He has led captivity captive. You Christ’s believers have received gifts of forgiveness life and salvation. You are rescued from sin, death and the devil. Just as the Lord left visibly, so He will return in the same way. When He does return on the Last even the rebellious, will acknowledge that the risen and ascended Lord God dwells with His people.