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Christ's Cosmic Tour: Descent to Hades. Ascent on High

Bible Reading: Ephesians 4:3-4, 7-13

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SUMMARY: Christ gives gifts to each believer & gifted people to his church. Paul portrays Christ's cosmic tour of a 3-tier universe (standard in 1st century science) to obtain the church. In the OT, God led Israel from Egypt via Sinai to Mt. Zion. Now, in the NT, Christ conquers his foes at the cross. Then he descends to Hades the realm of the dead, asserting his authority, changing our destiny & trajectory. From the depths Christ ascends to the heights as Lord of the universe & gifts his people. No sphere in the cosmos is outside his control. No event—life or death, depression or disease—can separate us. No being—good or evil; human, angelic, demonic, or satanic—can defeat God's mission to build

his church. The church is not just another human institution; it's the end-product of Christ's cosmic tour; the church has cosmic significance!

The Divine Warrior (Eph. 4:8 quotes Ps. 68:18)

- A. Psalm 68—the LORD, the Warrior God of Israel (Psalm 68:1, 7-10, 17-18)
- B. Commentary on Psalm 68—God's military campaign (tour) from Sinai to Zion
 1. Psalm 68's "theme is...unflinching praise for the powerful Warrior God of Israel..." —Beth Tanner **Eph. 4: The Divine Warrior's triumph transposed to the Cosmic Scale**
 2. "In Psalm 68 the warrior is God...That *picture is now tipped on end, transposed onto a vertical plane of earth & heaven*, with Christ triumphantly ascending..." —Tremper Longman

Ancient Cosmology—the Three-Tier Universe (Phil. 2:10)

- A. Three Cosmic Tiers—Heaven, Earth, & Under-the-Earth (Phil. 2:10-11; Rev. 5:13)
 1. "At the name of Jesus every knee will bow—[1.] *in heaven* and [2.] *on earth* and [3.] *under the earth*." (Phil. 2:10)
 2. "Paul understood the cosmos to be at least a three-tier affair...realms each populated by creatures..." —Michael Lakey Reading Paul in a Three-tier Universe
 3. "We should read 'the lower parts of the earth' [Eph. 4:9] in concert with Phil. 2:10 & assume...a three-tier cosmology...Paul ...believed in Sheol [Hades] beneath the earth." —Todd Scacewater

God's Disruptive Invasion Defeats the Dark Cosmic Powers

- A. "The ascension of Jesus throws open wide heaven's doors providing liberty for humans [whom] Evil...held hostage. Jesus' ascension...turns the tables on humanity's demonic oppressors, who find themselves...plundered...The death of Jesus... opens the door to the underworld, through which he...passes in his [descent into Hades]. The effects... ripple outwards...in a larger chain of cosmic events. In his [defeat] of Evil &...empowering of humanity, Jesus fills the universe."—Carey Newman

Christ's Triumphal Tour of the Cosmos — *Descent to Hades; Ascent on High* (Eph. 4:8-11)

- o Christ's descent begins "his proclamation of victory over God's enemies...*In the descent...Christ begins his victory tour.*" - Matthew Emerson
- o Christ's Cosmic Tour—Descending from the Cross to Hades; Ascending to God's Throne
 - A. **Where was Jesus on the Saturday, between 'Good Friday' (1st day) & 'Easter Sunday' (3rd day)?**
 - B. **Death** on the Cross (1st day: 'Good Friday') (Col. 2:15; Jn. 19:30)
 - C. **Burial** (1st day: 'Good Friday' PM) "*Christ died for our sins...he was buried*" (1 Cor.15:3b-4a)
 - D. **Descent** "to the earth's lower parts"—Hades, the underworld (incl. 2nd day: 'Holy Saturday') (Eph. 4:9)
 - E. **Resurrected** (3rd day: 'Easter Sunday' AM) "*he was raised on the 3rd day*" (1 Cor. 15:4b)
 - F. **Ascent**—"He ascended on high; he led captivity captive [He led a train of vanquished foes]" (Eph. 4:8 Amp.)
 - G. **Gift-giving**: "Giving gifts to his people" (Eph. 4:8b NIV)—"he gave some apostles, some prophets..." (Eph. 4:11)
 - H. **Christ Descended to Sheol/Hades**
 1. Sheol (Hades) Place where both good & bad people go at death (Gen. 37:35). It's like an Abyss, a Pit (Ezek. 28:8; Ps. 30:3)
 2. 'Hell' (Heb. *Gehenna*) in the Bible (Mk. 9:43, 45, 47; James 3:6) **Note**: On Hades & 'the lake of fire' see Rev. 20:13-14.
 - "Hell, as a place of eternal suffering & punishment, does not exist in the Hebrew Bible [the OT]..." —Mark Finney

Christ's Descent to Hades: Corroborating Scriptures (Mt. 12:39-40; Rom. 10:6-7; Acts 2:27-28, 31; Luke 23:43)

- A. The Sign of Jonah (Mt. 12:39-40)
- B. Paul: Don't say "who will ascend...?" or "Who will descend...?" (Rom. 10:6-7)
- C. Peter: Christ not abandoned in Hades (Acts 2:27-28, 31)

D. Jesus told the thief “*Today* you’ll be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43)

The Significance of Christ’s Descent to Hades

A. A. Christ experienced the full reality of Death

B. Christ is Victor over Dark Cosmic Powers, Hades & Death; He’s Lord over the entire Universe (Phil 2:10-11; Eph. 4:9-10)

- *There’s no place—whether in death, depression, or disease—where God in Christ cannot reach us.* –Michael Bird

C. Christ’s Cosmic Tour is for the Benefit of the Church; the Church has Cosmic Significance

QUESTIONS:

A. In the middle of this section Paul inserts a quote from Psalm 68:18 [as Eph. 4:8], with Paul’s elaboration (Eph. 4:9-10).

1. What ideas does that quote (& elaboration) introduce which would be absent if Eph. 4:8-10 were omitted?
2. What do those ideas add to the following verses (Eph. 4:11-13)?
3. How should these statements affect our view of the Church?
4. Discuss the statement: ‘Christ’s cosmic tour is for the benefit of the Church; the Church has cosmic significance’
5. If ‘the Church has cosmic significance,’ how should this affect our priorities, key decisions, & church participation?

B. Paul expounds the Ps. 68:18 quote in terms of Christ “descending to the lower parts of the earth” (Eph. 4:9) and “ascending far above all the heavens” (Eph. 4:10). What comes to your mind when you read these two statements? How do you think they might be understood by first-time readers/hearers—(i.) in Paul’s day & (ii.) today?

C. Paul’s writing (here & Phil. 2:10) seems to assume a ‘three-tier universe,’ consisting of a (flat?) earth, with ‘heaven(s)’ up above the earth, & *Sheol*//Hades down below the earth. Modern science contradicts this ‘primitive’ view. No one has found Hades (realm of the dead) down below, within the earth’s mantle; that’s the ‘stuff of horror movies.’ Does this mean we ought to reject the whole scenario of Eph. 4:8-10 & its implications as outdated superstitions? Discuss.

D. The “Descent of Christ to Hades” is defined as meaning “*Christ spent...the interval between his death...and his resurrection...in the underworld [Hades]*”—Scott Leafe. Is this the first time you’ve heard this proposition? If you heard it previously, while you were growing up, or in another church, how did you understand this statement? In your prior experience/church was this taught, affirmed or rejected? What was accomplished by Christ’s descent?

E. In 1 Cor. 15 Paul gives a statement of basic Christian beliefs—“Christ [1.] *died* for our sins...[2.] he was *buried*, that [3.] he was *raised* on the 3rd day...” (1 Cor. 15:3b-4). Now Eph. 4 seems to imply a more complex statement—That Christ [1.] *Died*, [2.] *was buried*, [3.] *descended to Hades*, [4.] *resurrected on 3rd day* [5.] *ascended on high*, [6.] *gave gifts*... What does this more elaborate statement add (besides complexity)? Discuss

F. Apostles’ Creed dating back to ~400 AD (if not before) says: “I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son Our Lord, Who ... suffered under Pontius Pilate, was *crucified, died, & was buried. He descended into Hell; the 3rd day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into Heaven, & sits at the right hand of God, the Father almighty...*” How do you feel about the statement, ‘*He descended into Hell*’? Should it be rejected, adjusted or retained? Why or why not?