Ephesians 4:7-10 Our God and General February 15, 2009

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I was reminded this week that we live in a strange time even in the church. It seems to me that there is a concerted effort even among evangelicals today to make Jesus acceptable to the culture, to make Him acceptable to 21^{st} century Americans. You can see that illustrated in a variety of ways. I was reminded of it this week in a review that was written of a book, on a book by Philip Yancey, a book entitled *The Jesus I Never Knew*. The reviewer makes this insightful observation, listen to what he writes.

"Yancey seems bent on reducing Jesus to the most comfortable non-threatening hello-kitty like figure that he can. Jesus is always nice, always accepting, and always non-judgmental, except of course to those judgmental and intolerant Pharisees who deserve to be judged back. Yancey delights in pointing out the softer side of Jesus. I suppose it will make us feel better about ourselves to realize that Jesus too struggled with loneliness and dependency issues. I guess we are to take some comfort in knowing that Jesus can help us break out of restrictive stereotypes of masculinity. Even when Jesus commands a storm at a word to cease, Yancey sees as most profound in that story that God is vulnerable. After all Jesus had fallen asleep from sheer fatigue."

That sort of weak, pusillanimous Jesus is not the Jesus of the Bible. He is not the real Jesus. It is true that Jesus is tender toward His own people, the Scripture records that. He's pictured as a Shepherd gently taking us in to His arms as His sheep. He Himself said the smoking wick He wouldn't extinguish, and the bruised reed He wouldn't break. For those who are a part of His bride the church later in the book of Ephesians we learn that He cherishes us and nourishes us in the same way that as husbands we do our wives. So those are all biblical images, but folks they aren't the whole story. Jesus is also presented in Scripture as a Man of incredible strength both physically and in His character.

I challenge you to read the two different accounts, one at the beginning of His ministry and one at the end, as Jesus drives the money changers out of the temple. As He separates those Jewish people from their money and drives them out with a scourge He made of rushes. There is a side of Jesus that frankly most people would just as soon ignore. People love to think of Jesus as the little pet lamb that John the Apostle describes, and that's an accurate picture of Jesus. He pictures Jesus as that little diminutive pet lamb that has been slain. But that's not all that John pictures Jesus as, he also pictures Him as a lion.

C S Lewis in his classic, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, has Susan and Lucy ask Mr. Beaver to describe Aslan. You remember Aslan is Lewis' allegorical depiction of Jesus Christ. And when Susan and Lucy discover that Aslan is a lion, the son of the great emperor beyond the sea, they ask this question. It's the question we should be asking. Is he safe? Mr. Beaver's immortal reply is this, "Who said anything about being safe. Of course, he's not safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you."

For many of those who say they believe in Jesus they're happy for Jesus to be a lamb slain for sinners. But their Jesus could never be a lion. Listen if your Jesus is not both lamb and lion you are not worshiping the true Jesus. He is presented in Scripture in a variety of magnificent powerful images. He is described as the captain or general of the armies of heaven. He is described as a mighty champion, as a great invincible warrior, (are you ready for this) as our warrior King.

Today as we come back to Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, we come to a passage that presents our Lord in just such a way. Turn with me again to Ephesians as we return to our study of this great letter. Let me remind you that we have just begun the second half of Paul's letter. The first half was solidly doctrinal explaining our position in Christ. In 4:1 begins the practical application of that doctrinal to life. In fact, verse 1 of chapter 4 is really the topic sentence for the rest of the letter. Paul says, "I want you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling of the position that you have." Walk in keeping with your calling, and the rest of the letter explains how to do that.

And the very first way Paul tells us to walk worthy is to live in unity in the church. That's the theme of the paragraph that runs beginning in 4:2 all the way down to verse 16. The core of that paragraph comes in verse 3, he says, "being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." There is a real, vital unity between those that are Christians. We've studied that in chapter 2. That unity was created by the Spirit of God at the moment of salvation. It's not something we create. It was done by God. There is unity, real unity and now it is our responsibility to be diligent to preserve that unity that God the Spirit has created. In verses 2 - 16, Paul tells us how. He provides us with three means for preserving the unity that we enjoy as believers.

We've looked at the first two, let me just remind you of them. In verses 2 and 3 we saw that we must begin by "put on" the attitudes of unity. That's the first means to preserve unity. Put on the attitudes of unity. There are certain attitudes that promote unity. You find those in verses 2 and 3.

In verses 4 - 6 we saw the second means for preserving unity; and that is we are to focus on the basis of our unity. We are to focus on those realities that we share together. Not the things that we disagree on, but on those things that provide the basis for our unity and he lists them there. There're seven of them.

One body, we share a common life. One spirit, we share a common source or origin. One hope, we share a common future. One Lord, we share a common Master a common Sovereign. One faith, we share a common belief, a common body of doctrine especially when it comes to the gospel. One baptism, we share a common confession of Jesus as Lord. And we share a common God and Father, verse 6 says one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. Those seven realities unite us to every other true Christian. And Paul lists them there to remind us to be motivated to preserve the unity created by those things. Those are realities that will never change. Focus on those things, and they will bring us together.

Today we want to begin to study the third means that Paul lists here of preserving unity. Paul unfolds and explains this third means in the rest of this paragraph. We must first of all put on the

attitudes of unity. We must focus on the basis of our unity and thirdly we must work on Christ's plan for unity. We must work on Christ's plan for unity. Christ has a plan that if we will follow it will promote unity among us. In verses 7 - 16 we see this third means of promoting unity worked out. In one sense verses 7 - 16 are this third means in another sense this passage sort of stands alone. It describes God's plan for how the church is to function.

We saw back in chapter 3 you remember that God in eternity past made an amazing decision. God decided in eternity past to create the church that's us that's you and me it's not the building; those who believe in Jesus Christ and churches like us all over the globe that are true churches believing in the true gospel teaching the true word. God decided in people like us to create a platform, a stage on which He would put His glory on display. And when the church functions the way God intended, it will preserve the unity and God's own character will be put on display. As each person fills the role that God designed him or her to fill, the unity of the church is preserved, and God's glory is put on display.

My grandfather, my dad's dad was a railroad man. My family moved to Mobile, my dad and his family moved to Mobile, Alabama in 1919 across the border from Florida, and he began then to work on the railroad and did the rest of his 80 plus years. A few years ago, my aunt, his daughter gave me my grandfather's railroad pocket watch. You may not know this, but there are very clear specifications for what a railroad watch is to be. It's distinguished from all other pocket watches. Back in the 1800's there was a serious accident where a watch, a pocket watch stopped working (or excuse me yeah a railroad pocket watch stopped working), and because of that, for four minutes, and because of that four minute lapse, there was a terrible accident. People were killed, and so the railroad commission came up with a set of stipulations for what a railroad watch had to be and how it had to function. It had to have a certain number of jewels so there wasn't incredible wear within the inner working of the watch. It had to be a certain size. It couldn't have a cover. The numbers had to be all Arabic and all visible. And it had to be accurate within thirty seconds a week.

That's my grandfather's watch. It's an amazing piece of equipment. I looked at it this week, and I was reminded that in that watch there are some 150 plus individual parts. Tiny little parts all

intricately interrelated, and as long as each part fills its place and role, the watch functions as a united whole. It still works to this day, and it reflects well on the one who created it the one who made it. But if one part in that watch fails to function, the unity of the entire timepiece is destroyed. It no longer fulfills what it was designed to do.

Folks the same thing is true of the church. We are all many members, Paul says. But every one of us has a function, and we are interconnected and interrelated, and only as we feel fill the role God gave us is the unity of the whole preserved. Each person fills his or her role and the church functions together; the unity is preserved, and God receives the glory. So, it's so important that we understand how you and I fit into the plan. God has a plan. Christ has a plan for how this church is to function; you fit that plan, it's so important that you understand how. In the next couple of weeks, we're going to study the plan itself.

But today in preparation for communion, I don't want us to go to the plan itself. Instead, I want us to briefly consider the biblical defense of the plan. It's in three verses, three verses that are often overlooked. Look at them with me together; I'm going to start reading in verse 7 of Ephesians 4, but we're just going to look at verses 8, 9 and 10. Paul writes, Put to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.

Therefore it says, "WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH, HE LED CAPTIVE A HOST OF CAPTIVES AND HE GAVE GIFTS TO MEN." (Now this *expression*, "He ascended," what does mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth?) He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.

Now be honest with me in the past when you've read Ephesians, it's really easy to skip this part, isn't it? I mean it seems awkward, it seems like it doesn't really fit into the flow of Paul's argument, it seems sort of added in. But in reality, those three verses, verses 8, 9 and 10 not only fit, I think you'll see when we're done this morning that they reveal the genius of the mind of the Holy Spirit because these verses are central to Paul's argument.

Notice in verse 7, he says, "Christ gave spiritual gifts to every individual Christian." And then in verse 8 he defends that by quoting an Old Testament verse. There's the biblical basis for his argument. Verse 11 begins, "And He gave ..." not only did He give spiritual gifts to each of us individually but verse 11 says and Christ gave gifted men to the entire church. What does that mean? It means verses 8, 9 and 10 explain why Christ has a right to do this. Why He has a right to have a plan. It explains how Christ earned the right to give gifts to each of us and gifted men to the whole church. How He earned the right to create a plan for His church and the right to command every one of us, you included, to get with the program.

In these three verses Paul tells us why you and I must work on Christ's plan for unity; why it has to matter to you. If you're a follower of Jesus Christ, here's why this matters. Listen carefully. Here's the key. As our mighty Champion, as our General, as our warrior King Jesus has the right to give gifts to every one of us, to give gifted men to His church and to command every one of us to get in line with His plan for His church. So, these three verses are the biblical defense of Christ's lordship over His church.

Usually, when you and I receive gifts, when we give or receive gifts there's an occasion. Friday night my wife and I went out to a nice dinner to celebrate that it was this week 25 years ago we had our first date. And it's a reason to celebrate because it's still hard for me to believe she actually accepted that first date. She did, and it's worth celebrating. And so, we were sitting at the restaurant there, and we had gifts for each other, we were going to exchange gifts. There was an occasion to do that. Well Paul wants us to know here the occasion for Christ giving you a spiritual gift and for His giving gifted men to the church.

So, he begins in verse 8 with these words, notice verse 8, "Therefore it ..." That is the Scripture says, and then you'll notice what follows is in all caps and in the *New American Standard* that means it's a quotation from the Old Testament. It says, "WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH, HE LED CAPTIVE A HOST OF CAPTIVES AND HE GAVE GIFTS TO MEN."

He quotes Psalm 68 or at least paraphrases Psalm 68:18. Now turn back with me to Psalms 68 because to fully appreciate what Paul is saying you've got to see this verse in its context. Psalm

68. Some would say this is the hardest Psalm in the whole Psalter to interpret. But it is in essence, Psalm 68 is a victory hymn that David wrote a thousand years before Christ to celebrate God's triumphs on behalf of His people. It was probably written to celebrate both David's taking of the Jebusite city that eventually became the city of Jerusalem, you remember that? As well as, when David marched the Arc of the Covenant up into to Jerusalem, up to Mount Zion, the hill where the temple would eventually be built.

But notice verse 1. You get a little feel for what's going on here. "Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered, and let those who hate Him flee before Him." You immediately get that military feel, right. God the warrior King, get up from Your throne and scatter Your enemies. And that's the theme that occurs throughout this psalm, that's why Paul chose it. You see it in the exodus beginning in verse 4, you s you hear about the deserts, verse 6 "the parched land", verse 7, "O God when You went forth before Your people", when You marched through the wilderness, we're talking about the exodus when God brought His people out of Egypt and He led them through the wilderness to Mount Sinai. Notice verse 8, "The earth quaked, the heavens also dropped rain at the presence of God: Sinai itself quaked at the presence of God, the God of Israel."

So, you see the picture. God the mighty warrior gets up from His throne, goes down to Egypt as it were and leads His people out as a great warrior defeating kings everywhere He goes. And in fact, you see that in verses 11 - 14, verse 12 says, "kings of armies flee, they flee." God the warrior is on the move.

But the Psalm doesn't leave God at Sinai. In fact, when we get to the heart of this passage that Paul quotes notice in verse 15, he begins to talk about a mountain of God. Verse 16, "Why do you look with envy, O mountains with *many* peaks, at the mountain which God has desired for His abode? Surely the LORD will dwell there forever." What are we talking about? A place where the temple would be built, Mount Zion. So now, God who is parked (if I could put it that way), at Mount Sinai. Now He's pictured as getting up as a warrior and moving to take Mount Zion; to take the place where His temple would be built in Jerusalem. And notice how it's

described, verse 17, "The chariots of God are myriads, thousands upon thousands. The Lord is among them as at Sinai, in holiness."

So, God has left Sinai, and verse 18, He's marching up the hills of Jerusalem to Mount Zion to establish His throne, as it were, where the temple will be built. Verse 18, here's what he quotes, "You have ascended on high, You have led captive Your captives; You have received gifts among men, even among the rebellious also, that the Lord God may dwell there."

Here's the picture folks. God is pictured as descending from Mount Sinai and coming to Jerusalem and ascending with all of His captured enemies behind Him up the hill in Jerusalem to the place where He would establish His throne. As He ascended the height of Mount Zion, He led the captives He had defeated behind Him in a triumphal procession as He makes His way up.

Now okay let's be honest that's a hard scene for us to get our arms around because that's so foreign to our culture and to our world. But folks, it was extremely common in the ancient world. In fact, it was only in1899 when the Hague Conventions were passed about how to treat prisoners of war, and then of course the revised version the Geneva Conventions that things changed.

Before 1900 essentially it was like this. In the ancient world when a king defeated his enemy in battle, he would capture the leaders of that army, the leaders of that country, and he would return to his capital city. And when he entered his capital city, he did so with all the fanfare and pomp and circumstance that his kingdom could muster. He would come in what we would call a parade.

Parades aren't new with us they were part of the ancient world. He would come into his capital city with a parade, and part of that parade would include the prisoners of war he had captured (especially the leaders, the kings and princes and nobles and generals and captains). In addition, as the king made his way through his own capital city celebrating his victory, he would take some of the spoils he had captured from the enemy, and he would distribute them to the people as he marched through the city.

By the way, that's the reason that even in parades today, people who are on the floats throw things, it's an ancient picture. It's like here's some of the spoil, so they throw candy and beads, and if you live in Mobile where I grew up - Moon Pies, you know whatever. So, what you have here, what I want you to see is that in Psalm 68, the verse he quotes, it's a picture of a general's victory march into his city with his captured enemies behind him.

On one of my trips to Rome I had the chance to see the Arch of Titus. If you've been there you've probably seen it as well; magnificent, magnificent arch. And on that stone archway, on that massive stone archway, there are carved relief's describing the Roman general following his victorious army and all the captured prisoners of war in their chains in triumph through the city of Rome. You remember the story; it was in 70 AD that Titus captured Jerusalem, destroyed the temple. In 71 AD he returned to Rome and it was a magnificent celebration.

Flavius Josephus describes it, he was there. He describes it, and it's really remarkable. I read it this week, and let me just describe it a little bit to you because I think it sets this passage in context. "Titus' victory march or triumph entered the city," Flavius Josephus said, "through the gate called the Gate of Pomp," as in pomp and circumstance. "It was an extravagant, luxurious parade that eclipses any show you have ever seen." Think the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics on steroids. Josephus describes what seemed liked rivers of gold and silver flowing down the streets of Rome. Then came all of the noble's and generals that had been captured as prisoners of war, and they weren't dressed as slaves (they were chained), but they were dressed in the finest garments of their home countries. Behind them what came what we would call floats. Floats too are nothing new, we are so Roman.

The floats Josephus describes as being in some cases three and four stories high. And each of those floats told a story. Each of them was a dramatic re-enactment of the various battles and sieges of cities that occurred on that campaign. And Josephus says that they were done in such vivid detail and enacted by people in such in vivid forms that it was just like you had been there to witness the battle or the taking of the city or whatever it was. The most extravagant float in the victory parade (that particular one), was the one representing the defeat of Jerusalem and the

plundering of its temple. And on each of those floats the most demeaning thing of all was on the top of each of those three to four story high floats was the commander of the defeated city or the general of the defeated army; a key person from that particular campaign. And after of all those spectacular floats came the climax, right at the end of the parade came Vespasian and his son Titus and Domitian all riding on magnificent horses.

The parade wove its way through Rome and ended up at the temple of Jupiter, and there they waited because it was tradition that the leading general that had been defeated would be executed. And so the crowd and the generals waited until the word was shared that Simon the general who had been killed who was the head general of the Jews, the people broke into shouts and the generals of Rome began to sacrifice to the gods of Rome. And then the victorious generals entertained the citizens of Rome (we're told by Flavius Josephus), with a magnificent feast for everyone, paid for by the spoils of their victories, (great moment in the city of Rome). They celebrated the victory of their army over their enemies.

Folks that is the picture in Psalm 68. It's the triumph, the victory march. Now turn back to Ephesians and let's see how Paul uses it here. Notice in verse 8, "Therefore ... [Scripture] says," [in Psalm 68,] "WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH, HE LED CAPTIVE A HOST OF CAPTIVES AND HE GAVE GIFTS TO MEN."

Now Paul makes a couple of changes here from Psalm 68 and from the Hebrew and the Septuagint, the Greek of the Septuagint. A couple of them really don't affect the meaning at all, one potentially affects the meaning. If you look at Psalm 68:18, it says that God receives gifts, in Ephesians 4 it says Christ is giving gifts. Now that's not hard to explain because when one king defeats another, he receives tribute, spoil from the kings he's defeated, and then he turns around and gives some of that to his own people. So, Paul isn't changing the meaning of the Psalm, he's simply applying it.

We don't know exactly how Paul's using this verse. We don't know if he's making a general illusion to Psalm 68 and saying what happened there is like what happened to Christ, or if under the inspiration of the Spirit, he's saying that's what David was talking about. We don't know.

But either way, listen carefully, Paul intends us to think Jesus Christ here. This is Jesus Christ. Now that shouldn't surprise us because both Ephesians 4 and Psalm 68 have to be talking about Jesus Christ.

How do I know that? Well you tell me what member of the Trinity does both the Old Testament and the New Testament tell us was most involved in Old Testament history? What Person of the Trinity? The second Person of the Trinity. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10, Jesus Christ was the rock from which they drank as He led them through the wilderness as He led them out of Egypt. As He led them in conquest, remember He shows up to Joshua as the Captain of the Lord's armies there in Joshua's time. The Angel of the Lord through out Old Testament history. So, Jesus Christ was the one who took Jerusalem, if you will, in the Old Testament, Psalm 68, and so here in Ephesians 4 Paul wants us to know that it was Christ who accomplished His greatest victory in the incarnation.

Now who are these captives that Christ led captive? Obviously, we're talking about His ascension when He ascended on high when He left the earth and returned to heaven. He led captive a host of captives. Who are they? Well there've been several suggestions made through church history.

The Roman Catholic view is that these were Old Testament true believers who were held in some holding cell down at some subterranean holding cell near hell until the ascension of Christ, and then they were taken to heaven.

Another view says that these captives are all of us. That is that these are redeemed sinners captured by Christ away from Satan. Those both may have some attraction, but neither of those is clearly taught in Psalm 68 or Ephesians 4, nothing suggests either of those views.

The third view is the most likely and the most consistent with the context of both passages, it's this: these captives are God's enemies. Clearly in Psalm 68 the captives are Israel's enemies that would lead us to conclude that the captives here in Ephesians 4 are also the enemies of God. So, who are the enemies of God that Christ defeated at the cross in His incarnation?

Look over at Colossians 2 because in a parallel passage Paul wrote at the same time in the same prison cell, he explains. Colossians 2:13, he says, "you were dead and God made you alive." And then he uses three participles to tell us what Christ did at the cross. Notice the enemies He defeated, verse 13, "having forgiven us all our transgressions…." Enemy number one, the penalty and power of sin.

Enemy number two, verse 14, the curse of the law, "having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; having taken it out of the way, having nailed it to His cross." Listen you were under the law, and the law said you better keep it. It was a curse on you, cursed is everyone who doesn't abide and everything that is written in the law of God. You were under God's curse. Jesus defeated the enemy of the curse of the law. He defeated the penalty and power of sin; He defeated the curse of the law.

There's another enemy He defeated, look at verse 15. "When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities," [We're talking about Satan and his demonic hoard, the powers of darkness.] "He made a public display of them having" [here it is,] "triumphed over them through Him." What enemies did Jesus lead captive when He ascended? Every enemy of the human soul - sin and death and hell and the law of God that was a curse to us because we'd never kept it, all of those enemies He defeated. So, Paul uses the victory march image from Psalm 68 to show what Christ did at His incarnation.

Now look back at Ephesians 4:9 and 10 because here Paul makes it clear when Christ accomplished this. Verse 9, (Now this *expression*, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also descended into the lower parts of the earth?"

What are the lower parts of the earth? Well I have a lot of notes on that, I don't have time let me just give you the bottom line. Here it is. The lower parts of the earth are used in Isaiah 44:23 to simply speak of the earth. Paul is saying Christ descended from the highest heaven to live on the earth; the lowest parts of the earth are simply the extreme condescension our Lord made when He entered our world as a man. John Calvin put it like this, "At what time did God descend

lower than when Christ emptied Himself? And if there ever was a time when God ascended gloriously it was when Christ was raised from our low condition on earth and received back into heavenly glory."

So, the "depths" was living here. The ascension was entering back into heaven. You understand that after His resurrection, after the forty days after His resurrection, Christ ascended back into heaven, listen carefully, here's the picture. And when He returned, not literally, we're not saying there was a triumph through the streets of heaven, but the best way to compare what Christ accomplished is to say it was just like that triumph I described for you when Jesus entered back into heaven He led his enemies in triumph behind Him. And He gave gifts, He gave spoils of His victory to His friends, to us and those gifts were specifically as we'll learn next week spiritual gifts to every believer and gifted men given to the whole church.

Paul completes the point by adding in verse 10, ("He who descended is the One who ascended far above all the heavens,") [What's far above all the heavens? God's throne and God Himself. That's where Christ has been exalted to.] Verse 10, "(... so that He might fill all things.)" You understand that the ultimate goal was that Jesus Christ would exercise sovereign lordship, sovereign rule over everything.

Now listen carefully, here's Paul's point in Ephesians 4, Jesus has the right to create unity in His church and He has the right to demand that we preserve it. He has the right to distribute gifts to His people and gifted men to His church; He has the right to rule His church. Why? Because He purchased that right at the cross by crushing His enemies, He snatched victory from what looked like the jaws of defeat and then He ascended into heaven as it were leading in His train all of the enemies He had defeated in triumph; our warrior King. Then from all the spoils of His victory gives gifts to His rightful subjects.

Do you know what this means, Christian? Think about it. It means that you do not need to fear any of the great enemies that men normally fear because your warrior King if you're in Christ has already defeated them. And as we read this morning in Hebrews, He's just sitting there waiting until all His enemies are made a footstool on which He places His feet. Think about it,

you don't need to fear sin, its penalty or its power. He defeated it at the cross. You don't need to fear Satan and all of his demons and all the powers of darkness. He defeated them, and He entered heaven as it were with them chained behind Him. You don't need to fear death. It's been defeated. He conquered it, and some day it'll be destroyed. Someday, Jesus, our warrior King, the General of the armies of heaven will return, and He will utterly destroy all of the enemy that He has already defeated. Our Lord is the sovereign of history. He is the sovereign of everything. It's the victory He won at the cross that we celebrate in the Lord's Table. Would you bow with me?

Our Father, we thank You for this powerful reminder that our Lord poured out His life in violent death, the death of a sacrifice to seal the covenant that You made that You would forgive our sins, that You would take out our heart of stone, and that You would write on our hearts Your laws so that we could keep them and obey them. Father, we thank You for the work You have done and this for a wonderful reminder of our Lord and of His work, of His victory over every enemy of our souls.

O Father, help us to live in light of that. Help us to remember that, to meditate on that.

Forgive us for living as if we were defeated when we serve a warrior King who has defeated every enemy we have.

Thank you, O God, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.