

Chapter 4 the Ascended Christ -- Psalms 16, 24, 68

by A.B. Simpson

The sermon explores the significance of Jesus' descent into Hades, resurrection, and ascension, emphasizing His conquest over death and His exaltation to the throne of God.

Scripture: Psalm 16:10, Psalm 24:7

Topics: "Victory over Death", "The Ascension of Christ"

Description

A.B. Simpson explores the profound significance of Psalms 16, 24, and 68, illustrating the journey of Christ from His descent into Hades, through His resurrection, to His glorious ascension. He emphasizes that Christ's descent was not a defeat but a proclamation of victory over death, where He preached to the spirits in prison, affirming His role as the Conqueror. The resurrection is highlighted as the pivotal moment that distinguishes Christianity, showcasing Christ as the firstborn from the dead, leading believers to eternal life. Finally, Simpson vividly describes the ascension of Christ, where He takes His rightful place at the right hand of God, celebrated by heavenly hosts, affirming His eternal reign and glory.

Transcript

These three beautiful Psalms give us the combined picture of the risen and ascended Christ. The twenty-fourth comes in central order after the twenty-second and twenty-third. The twenty-second is the Psalm of crucifixion; the twenty-third, the picture of blessings that follow to us; and the twenty-fourth, the ascension of the Lord and His glorious reign at God's right hand. The logical order begins with Psalm 16: "My flesh also shall rest in hope. For You will not leave my soul in hell; neither will You suffer Your Holy One to see corruption. You will show me the path of life: in Your presence is fulness of joy; at Your right hand there are pleasures forevermore."

I. DESCENT INTO HADES

This is the inspired picture of what is known in the ancient creeds as the Lord's descent into Hades. That the Psalm refers to our Lord directly is evident from Peter's application of it in his sermon on the day of Pentecost. Peter says it cannot refer to David, whose sepulcher is with them, and whose flesh has seen corruption. Therefore, it must refer to Jesus, who had been raised from the dead by the power of the Father.

But what is meant by His descent into Hades? For the Apostle says in Ephesians: "Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?" The Apostle Peter has given us the strongest light on this subject of any New Testament writer: "Being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit [or rather, in the Spirit]: By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; which sometime were disobedient . . . in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls, were saved by water."

This forms the battleground of Bible exposition. It is not necessary that we should even state all the views that have been held and advocated. It is enough to give the two which are most approved by evangelical teachers. The old conservative view is that it refers to Noah preaching through the Holy Ghost to the antediluvians, who are now "the spirits in prison," because they were disobedient when he preached to them. In other words, and freely paraphrased, it might be rendered thus: "Jesus is put to death in the flesh, but is quickened, or raised from the dead by the Holy Spirit, which in the days of Noah, and through Noah, preached unto the unbelieving men of that age, who are spirits in prison." In fact, it is a bungling attempt to make the Bible meet a preconceived opinion; and even though it is a good opinion, it is a profanation to wrest Scripture, even with the best intent.

The central meaning of the passage is, that Christ died in His body, but not in His spirit; but, on the contrary, that spirit was quickened into intenser life the moment of His death, and in the disembodied state His spirit went and preached to spirits in prison; that is, to the inhabitants of the world of the dead. The Old Testament represents departed spirits as dwelling in a region called Sheol or Hades.

This seems to have had two sections, one for the lost and one for the saved. The latter is the Paradise of the dying thief, the bosom of Abraham where Lazarus went, the place where Abraham was gathered to his fathers, a sweet and restful place where the redeemed ones waited for the great redemption. It was not heaven, for heaven was not yet opened.

There was another section to this region where the spirits of the wicked passed, represented by the rich man in the parable, far away from the unsaved, and yet in view of them, even across the great gulf. Now, it was to this region of the dead that the spirit of Jesus passed.

In order truly to die it was necessary not only that His body should hang lifeless on the cross, but that His spirit should go down into the regions of the dead. But how did He go? Not as others had gone before, as victims of death, but as Conqueror and Witness, to preach the consummation of redemption. Even to the unbelieving dead, it was proper that He should announce the accomplishment of those promises which they had rejected. Even to the devil himself and all his angels, it was right that the Son of God should proclaim that he was defeated at length, and that his last desperate blow had been turned against himself in the very death of the Lord.

But to the saints of the past how peculiarly fitting it was that He should preach the great truth that He had come and died for their complete salvation, and that the gates of their prison were about to be opened, and they were to follow Him in a few days as He ascended heavenwards to take His place with them at His Father's side. This is the sense in which He went to preach to the spirits in prison. That He went to proclaim a second probation, another chance of salvation, we do not believe; and there is no semblance of evidence anywhere in the Scriptures to prove, or even imply it. This is the time of men's probation; this is the day of grace; and when it shall be passed, he that is unjust shall be unjust still, and he that is righteous shall be righteous still.

II. HIS RESURRECTION

"You will not leave my soul in hell [Hades]; neither will You suffer Your Holy One to see corruption. You will show me the path of life."

Not long did He remain among the dead. On the morning of the third day the fetters of the tomb were burst asunder, the stone rolled away, the spirit returned to the uncorrupted clay, and the body sprang to life in all the fullness and glory of immortality, and Jesus became the firstborn from the dead. Others had been raised from the dead, but He was the first raised to die no more. Even the saints that were raised in connection with His crucifixion did not come out of their graves until after the resurrection of their Lord. This glorious fact of the risen Christ is the general theme of the apostolic testimony; it gives eternal greatness to the whole Gospel; and in proportion as we realize it, it uplifts and glorifies our whole Christian life.

The difference between the religion of the New Testament and Judaism on the one hand, or Romanism on the other, lies right here in the conception of a living Christ. It is the great evidence of Christianity. It is the mighty inspiration of spiritual life. It is the pattern, both of our spiritual resurrection now and our future glorification in His fullness when He shall come again.

That path of life which He has shown has become the shining way to a mighty multitude, who pass from mortality to immortality, from the race of Adam to the race of our second great Head of humanity. "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." "The first Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit." "As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy; and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly."

But we pass on from this theme, which has been so often unfolded, to the third question.

III. HIS ASCENSION

This is described in Psalm 16, and more fully in the others. "In Your presence is fulness of joy; at Your right hand there are pleasures forevermore." This, undoubtedly, is an allusion of Christ to the ascension at His Father's right hand. Psalm 24, however, expressly refers to this glorious event. It is the responsive chorus of the saints and angels who attend the Son of God as He ascends. "Lift up your heads, O you gates; and be you lifted up, you everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in," is the shout of the approaching procession as it mounts the sky and nears the heavenly portals.

"Who is this King of glory?" is the answer of the heavenly chorus that wait at yonder gates. And then the answer is returned from the approaching throng: "The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle." "Lift up your heads, O you gates," again they shout, "even lift them up, you everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in." Once again the heavenly hosts answer, "Who is this King of glory?" And once again the chorus around the King sends back the cry as they reach the gates, and both companies unite in the swelling refrain, as it echoes to the confines of the universe, "The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory."

It is something like the mighty scene which John presents, the whole creation in earth, and in the heaven, and in the sea, away out to the uttermost parts of the universe, waiting with the saints and angels to echo, "Every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and

all that are in them, I heard saying, Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto him that sits upon the throne, and unto the Lamb forever and ever."

To apply this sublime Psalm to the ascension of the ark to Mount Zion would be unworthy of its lofty character. For there were no everlasting doors; but the gates through which Jesus passed shall never be shaken or removed. The throne to which He ascended can never pass away. The glory which He has inherited can never decline.

The New Testament has given us the earth view of this glorious event. Out to Bethany He has led them. Perhaps for a moment they have entered that loving home and taken a last farewell of its dear inmates; perhaps they have accompanied the disciples and the Lord from the door to the little eminence on which He stands; and now, with hands out-stretched in blessing, He is speaking to them -- perhaps praying with them -- when, suddenly, they behold Him rising and disappearing.

Often in these forty days had He vanished from them, but now His attitude is different; He does not disappear, but fully in their view He begins to ascend. His hands are still stretched out toward them with tenderness and love as higher and higher He rises into the clear, blue heavens, while they gaze intently as if they would follow if they could. Higher and higher He rises, still blessing, still spreading those hands above their heads, until a cloud intervenes, and they see Him no more. Perhaps it was a cloud of angels; angels, we know were there -- multitudes of angels, and multitudes of saints.

Upward and upward still He arose, beyond the nearest of the stars, beyond the distant constellations, beyond the nebulous clouds which form the great invisible worlds, beyond the vision of the eye, to the one central spot, somewhere in this immensity where stands the metropolis of the universe, the throne of God, and the home of the redeemed. "Far above all principality, and power," the Apostle has said, "and might, and dominion, and every name that is named." Far above all heavens, that He might fill all things. Then it was that the glorious chorus of the twenty-fourth Psalm begins, and the King of Glory enters in and takes His seat at the right hand of God.

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