



THE SPOILS OF VICTORY

Ephesians 4:1-16

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By the time Caesar Augustus became the first Emperor, Rome's most rapid era of conquest was already on the wane. It was during the preceding one hundred years that massive expansion occurred both to the east and the west, throughout the Mediterranean region. To some extent, Rome's explosive growth occurred because the Senate granted wide latitude to its frontier commanders. It was an exciting, chaotic time, as daring young leaders could request and be granted dangerous assignments, and then set out to conquer and plunder far away lands. The stakes were high, but those who succeeded returned home with fame and fortune.

There were official restraints on what Roman generals could do with the spoils of war: they had to pay their soldiers, and they had to give the rest to the government, because, after all, the plunder had been obtained in the name of Rome. But since it was in Rome's best interests to incentivize the daring exploits of her frontier commanders, taxation of returning conquerors was sometimes rather lax. There was even a saying in those days: "Those who steal from private persons pass their days in bonds and fetters; but those who steal from the state pass their days in gold and purple." In other words, today's frontier generals are tomorrow's senators. The fastest path to Roman nobility was through the conquering and plundering Rome's frontiers.

Jesus and Paul were born into that world, and this "Tale of the Victorious Conqueror" shaped their imaginations and storytelling. Think for a moment about the stories that we have grown up with, stories that shape our imaginations. For example, consider the Tale of "Happily Ever After," a story that is central to every wedding: boy and girl meet and fall in love, get married, and live happily ever after. It's a foundational myth embedded within us all. In the same way, the Tale of the Victorious Conqueror was another essential story woven into the lives of people in the ancient world. Both Jesus and Paul grew up in towns that had been conquered in recent memory. Both Jesus and Paul suffered at the hands of tyrannical victors who did whatever they pleased with the people they conquered.

We don't really have anything quite like this tale today. The closest thing to it might be the Tale of the Conquering Football Team, or the Tale of the Conquering Politician. ("To the victor belong the spoils" was coined by an American politician.) For people in the first century, however, everyone knew and was shaped by the Tale of the Victorious Conqueror. It was a good story, and just as compelling as our Tale of Happily Ever After. I'll bet every boy in the ancient world dreamt of becoming a Victorious Conqueror (and every girl dreamt of marrying one).

But what about Jesus? Did the Good Shepherd ever imagine himself as the Victorious Conqueror? You bet he did. So did Paul. As we'll see, the Tale of the Victorious Conqueror ultimately describes what Jesus came to do in setting the world to rights.

But before we dive any deeper into the Tale of the Victorious Conqueror, let's survey Ephesians 4:1-16. We're working our way through this letter, to a church Paul established a decade earlier when he lived in Ephesus, in what is now western Turkey, opposite Athens on the Aegean Sea. It's yet another city conquered by Rome during that period of massive expansion. When Augustus came to power, he declared Ephesus to be the capital of Asia. By the time Paul arrived in Ephesus several decades later, it was perhaps the most important and cosmopolitan city in the eastern Empire. Imagine how challenging it must have been for this young church to survive and grow in such an environment! Paul believed the key to their survival was maturity. As we'll see in Ephesians 4:1-16, Paul urged them toward maturity, on the basis of their unique unity and diversity. Let's take a look.

THE ESSENTIAL UNITY OF THE CHURCH (EPH 4:1-6)

In vv 1-6, Paul's emphasis is on the essential unity of the church in Ephesus, and among all Christians for that matter. Look at all that we have in common:

[4] There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—[5] one Lord, one faith, one baptism, [6] one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:4-6 ESV)

Not surprisingly, Paul lists a perfect (seven) number of things that unite us:

- one **body**, which Paul will make much more of in a moment, and elsewhere in his writings. We're all components of the same organism, depending upon one another for survival and health.
- one Holy Trinity: one **Spirit**, one **Lord**, Jesus Christ, and one **Father**—three persons, one God, who redeemed us and now leads us.
- one **baptism**, through which all of us who are Christians entered into God's family.
- one **faith**—those shared beliefs and practices which bind all of us together in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church
- and one **hope**—when Christ returns, death and sin are no more, and God makes all things new.

Our city is a lot like Ephesus: a diverse, cosmopolitan capital. Living in such a place, it's hard to imagine finding a group of people that have all the essentials in common. That, however, is the great strength of the church. As Christians, no matter where we're from, no matter our skin color or marital status, we have all the essentials in common with one another. In fact, we have so much in common, it would be the height of absurdity for us NOT to be together.

THE SUBSIDIARY DIVERSITY OF THE CHURCH (EPH 4:7-11)

Secondly, in vv 7-11, on the basis of our essential unity, Paul makes the case for a subsidiary diversity within our unity. I call this a *subsidiary* diversity, because the differences between Christians are minuscule when contrasted with the essential similarities described in vv 1-6. But even though we have everything essential in common, Paul argues that we do have unique

differences, and this subsidiary diversity within the church isn't random but lovingly and intentionally fostered by the Lord Jesus himself. In v. 7 it is Jesus who calls us and apportions his grace to each of us in unique ways for the good of the entire church.

In this particular passage, Paul's focus is on the uniqueness of different leaders who served the church in Ephesus. In v. 11, he gives a diverse list of people whom Jesus sent to them: apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds (pastors) and teachers. For example, Jesus sent them Paul as an apostle, who established their church ten years earlier as a missionary outpost as an embassy of God's kingdom in Asia. Likewise, Jesus sent them a pastor/teacher, namely Timothy, in order to guide and teach them. Each person Jesus sent them was unique and different, even though they all shared the same essential unity. Thus, 7-11 describe the subsidiary diversity of the church.

THE GOAL OF MATURITY OF THE CHURCH (EPH 4:12-16)

Finally, what's the reason for all these unique and peculiar people in the Church of Ephesus, and in every congregation? Maturity. That's what 4:12-16 is about. Jesus appoints and sends various and diverse people to every church not to stir things up, but so that each of us, playing our peculiar part in the life of the body, might help one another reach maturity:

[14] so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. [15] Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, [16] from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:14-16 ESV)

Isn't this maturity what we all long for? To be so grown up, so mature, that we're no longer carried away by fads and foolishness, false teaching and heresy? We want no longer to be deceived by crooks and impostors, no longer caught up in sin and death, but instead to be strong together, strong in the Lord Jesus. We long to be built together in an ever-flowing stream of God's love, pouring out from us for the life of the world. Our vision for Rez, and for all the churches in our city is to be grown up and held together in God's love.

In summary, Paul argues in Ephesians 4:1-16 that we have a subsidiary diversity within our essential unity, and the purpose for this diversity is ultimately Christian maturity.

THE TALE OF THE VICTORIOUS CONQUEROR

Now let's dive a little deeper into the back story to discover the Tale of the Victorious Conqueror, by focusing on vv 7-11. Most readers find no difficulty making sense of verses 7 and 11, but in between them—in vv 8-10—lies a foggy valley:

[8] Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." [9] (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? [10] He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) (Ephesians 4:8-10 ESV)

What in the world is Paul talking about? Eph. 4:8 is Paul's way of summarizing Psalm 68, which is a song about God being the Victorious Conqueror. For the purposes of this message, here's a quick synopsis of what Psalm 68 is about:

The Lord came down from heaven, down into the underworld, where he did battle with the forces of evil and emerged victorious, saving his people from enslavement and oppression. Then he marched forth in triumphal procession, carrying the spoils of victory and leading a host of captives in his train. He ascended to his temple, where he took his rightful throne as king of the nations. There as high king, he rules the nations with justice and mercy. Everyone the Lord has rescued prospers in his glorious kingdom.

In Ephesians 4:8, Paul summarizes the story of Ps 68 by lifting a phrase from the middle of the psalm (Ps 68:18), and a phrase from the end (Ps 68:35), and fusing them together as a synopsis. Thus:

[8] Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men."

Paul's aim here is to remind everyone of the big idea (the foundational story) of Ps 68, namely the Tale of the Victorious Conqueror. Paul wants his readers to understand that the unity, diversity, and maturity of the church make sense in light of the Tale of the Victorious Conqueror.

Next, Paul adds Eph 4:9-10 in order to apply Psalm 68, the Song of the Victorious Conqueror, to Jesus.¹ Paul wants us to understand what the universal church later adopted in the Nicene Creed: "For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, and by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man." Jesus did battle with the forces of evil and emerged victorious, saving his people from enslavement and oppression. Then, "He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." Or, as Paul put it:

[9] In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions of the earth? [10] He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) (Ephesians 4:9-10 ESV)²

After conquering death, Jesus marched forth in triumphal procession, carrying the spoils of victory and leading a host of captives in his train. He ascended to his temple, where he took his rightful throne as king of the nations. We pray for his kingdom come, and his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, so that all nations will be ruled with justice and mercy, and all God's people will flourish and prosper in Jesus' glorious kingdom.

¹ For some reason, modern translators have placed Eph 4:9-10 in parentheses, even though biblical Greek had no punctuation marks, including parentheses. I wish they hadn't added the parentheses, because vv. 9-10 certainly aren't a footnote to Paul's argument.

² The ESV translates the latter part of 4:9 to say that Jesus "descended into the lower regions, the earth." The smoothest, simplest, and most likely translation should read that Jesus "descended into the lower regions of the earth." However, the translators probably wanted to avoid criticism from churches who are uncomfortable with the idea of Jesus' descent into Hades (as taught in the Apostles Creed). Consequently, the translators chose a more awkward and ambiguous expression.

SO WHAT? FOUR QUESTIONS RAISED BY THE TALE OF THE VICTORIOUS CONQUEROR

Now let's consider the implications of the backstory of Ephesians 4. Here are four questions I believe Paul would have us consider:

1. DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOD'S GIFT TO THE CHURCH?

We've all heard the jab about the guy with the super-sized ego: "He thinks he's God's gift to women." Then who among us would be so foolish as to claim to be God's gift to the church? Yet that's Paul's point in this passage. "When [Jesus] ascended on high, he led a host of captives and gave gifts to men." Then "he gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." In other words, **the gifts Jesus gives to his people are his people.** Jesus sends Christian congregations people as gifts. Jesus sent Paul and Timothy to lead the Ephesians. Jesus sent me and Shawn to lead the Church of the Resurrection. But that's not all. Our congregation is filled with people Jesus has given us as gifts. Six years ago he sent us Josh and Becca Good. When he did, it was almost as if they had gift tags around their necks, saying "For Rez, because I know you needed these. Love, Jesus." This summer we get to send them on to the church in Milwaukee, because, in God's providence, the church in Milwaukee needs them now like we needed them six years ago. And of course I could say the same about the dozen others we bid farewell this and every summer. They were gifts Jesus sent us, and now he sends them to other congregations who need them.

It's always harder to stay than to go. All of us who remain have to believe that the Lord Jesus knows what he's doing, and that he won't leave our congregation devoid of the gifts we need. We have to open our hearts for the many new presents Jesus has already sent and will continue to send us this year. He wouldn't have sent them if we didn't need them. **The key to a healthy church in a transient city is that we come to see our members as gifts.** Do you really believe the implications of what Paul is saying here, that you're God's gift to Rez, and so are the others who call this church home? Do you really believe that we have been given to this congregation by Jesus, so that we might together reach maturity in Christ, abounding in love, for the life of the world? If we really believed that we were God's gifts to Rez, how would it change the way we invested our lives in this church? How would it change how we cared for one another? What do you think? Do you believe you're God's gift to our church?

2. WHAT'S HOLDING YOU BACK?

One of the chief reasons why we don't give ourselves to the church body for the life of the world is because the timing just isn't right. "I wish I could participate, but I just feel like I'm held hostage. My boss is a tyrant. I'm still in school. I have a toddler at home. I have a big project at work. I'm trapped in a bad relationship. I thought I would be married by now. I might be moving next year. etc." Do you feel this way? Is something like this holding you back?

If so, let me draw your attention the way Paul begins this chapter: "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in such a way that befits your great calling" (Eph 4:1). By identifying himself as a prisoner *of the Lord*, Paul is reminding the Ephesians of an absolutely critical part of his own story as it relates to the Tale of the Victorious Conqueror. The Ephesians had been worrying about Paul after they heard that he had been imprisoned by the Romans. But in chapter 3 Paul flipped that idea on its head by saying:

“Don’t think for a moment that I’m constrained by the Romans. I’m not *their* prisoner. I’m a prisoner of Jesus, the Victorious Conqueror. Remember how he descended and did battle with the forces of evil? And remember how all of us were dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1), enslaved to the prince of darkness? Well, Jesus rescued me from enslavement and saved me from sin and death. I’m one of those captives that he led forth in triumphal procession. And it’s because I belong to King Jesus, because I’m *his* prisoner, that he sent me as a gift to you. I’m part of the plunder, part of the spoils of victory. So don’t think for one second that my so-called imprisonment by the Romans is thwarting King Jesus in the least. I’m right where he wants me to be, and still able to live in such a way that befits the great calling Jesus gave me.”

So what about you? What’s holding you back? If you’re not yet a Christian, then you’re still being held captive by forces that at best want to distract you, but ultimately want to destroy you. If you’ll put your faith in Jesus, you will become a prisoner of the Lord, which is to say that Jesus will rescue you from enslavement and give you a meaningful, fulfilling role to play within his kingdom as he makes all things new. There’s no higher calling.

If you are already a Christian, is something holding you back? Is your current imprisonment genuinely an obstacle to your ministry within our body? Are your current circumstances stronger than the mighty Victorious Conqueror? Or does he have you right where he wants you, and is he calling you to be a gift to his church right now in spite of current circumstances? What’s holding you back?

3. ARE YOU EAGER TO MAINTAIN THE UNITY OF THE SPIRIT IN THE BOND OF PEACE?

We have an essential unity as Christians. One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one Father. Therefore, because we have so very much in common, we ought to be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:3). Are we?

There are natural fault lines in a church like ours. Some are obvious, e.g. gender, race, age. Some are more subtle, e.g. marital status, age of children, oldtimers vs. newcomers. I believe that in a church like ours, having an eagerness for unity involves intentionally reaching out across these fault lines and building relationships with people who have subsidiary differences but are nevertheless just like you in all the essentials. The thrust of what Paul is saying in this passage is that as we reach out and build such relationships, that we will grow together into maturity. This makes sense, because we each receive grace as Jesus apportions it (Eph 4:7), which is to say that each of us has a unique experience with the Lord. It’s inevitable that we will understand Jesus more and follow him better as we learn how others experience him in different ways. Since every member of our church is God’s gift to our church, it follows that there is no one in the church who can’t teach me something about the Lord. We need one another to grow.

Are you eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?

4. HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN WHY WE'RE HERE?

Several years ago we talked a lot about Proverbs 11:10, a verse which both Tim Keller and Amy Sherman commend as a foundational principle for our posture toward the city. It says, "When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices." It's just another way of talking about what the Victorious Conqueror is supposed to do with the spoils. Remember how Rome's victorious conquerors kept the spoils of war, making themselves rich and famous, so that they might pass their days in gold and purple royalty? Jesus turned this practice on its head. Instead of keeping the spoils, he gives them away for the life of the world. How does he do it? What's his distribution network? Jesus shares the spoils of victory with the world through the church. Proverbs 11:10 says that whenever it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices because the spoils of victory overflow through the righteous for the life of the world, rejoicing our neighbors, and rejoicing our city. That's why we're here. Have you forgotten?

Do you live as though the unfolding of God's kingdom in Washington is of the utmost importance? Or do you live as if you've already attained maturity, and there is no further urgency to grow in grace? Is there nothing more to be done, no more grace that we have to share with our neighbors? Is the city rejoicing because of us?

Jesus is the Victorious Conqueror. We are the spoils of his victory. He generously gives us to one another in the church, for the life of the world.