

# **SERMON BY REV W HUIZINGA**

## **ON ASCENSION DAY**

### **ON EPHESIANS 4:8-12**

#### **LITURGY**

Votum and Salutation

Hymn 33:1,2,3

Confession of Faith

Hymn 33:4,5,6

Prayer for the Opening of God's Word

Thankoffering

Psalm 132:4,8,9,10

Read - Ephesians 4:1-16

Text - Eph. 4:8-12

Sermon

#### **USE CHRIST'S ASCENSION GIFTS TO YOU.**

We will see:

- 1. The fulfilment in these ascension gifts.***
- 2. The function of these ascension gifts.***
- 3. The fruit of these ascension gifts.***

Psalm 68:7,8

Prayer

Psalm 47:2,3

Benediction

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today we celebrate Christ's ascension into heaven. As our Heidelberg Catechism makes clear, this ascension benefits us here and now. How? Well, when you make trips, you may often take gifts back home. So will Jesus! But Jesus also presented gifts at his ascension. He did not forget his bride on earth. No, He gave many and varied gifts.

Paul makes that clear in our text.

I preach to you God's Word through Paul under this \*THEME:

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### ***1. The fulfilment in these ascension gifts.***

In Ephesians 4:8 Paul quotes Psalm 68, which we sing in this service. In this Psalm 68 David rehearses how God had chosen Mt. Zion for his dwelling-place. David had the ark of God brought here with rejoicing. So this psalm in turn recalls the history of the ark of the covenant during and after the days of Eli, the priest. This history is related in 1 Samuel. Let's follow that history.

The First Book of Samuel opens with the dark pages about Eli, whom we find too often relaxing in his easy-chair. Though he himself is faithful to the LORD, Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, virtually tyrannise the tabernacle at Shiloh. Eli was responsible for not controlling and disciplining them. Mild words of soft rebuke were the most they received from father Eli. Apparently Eli had trouble even pulling a sour face at his two ungodly sons. But it was symptomatic of Israel. So priests, so people.

God punishes them for this flagrant violation of his covenant.

Philistines swarm over Israel. Desperation fills the leaders of Israel.

What can they do to ward off total defeat? After a council of war the elders decide to take the ark of the covenant into the army camp!

Please realize well what the ark of the covenant meant. For it was the focal point of Israel's life. It stood for nothing less than the throne of God. Here God met with Israel, accepted the atoning blood, smelled the aroma of the incense of prayer, and saw the bread of thanksgiving and dedication. In the ark were deposited the two tables of the covenant. God remembers the teachings and commandments. The covering of atonement over the tables of the covenant remind God of forgiveness for Israel. The two cherubim on either side of the ark

symbolize God's great power and glory. He commands the forces of heaven and earth. Awesome is his might. Psalm 68 accents this when it says, *terrible is God from his sanctuary, the God of Israel, he gives power and strength to his people.* Israel banked on this power and might of God, enthroned upon the ark amidst the cherubim. But here the journey of the ark takes a sad turn. Rather than be used as magical formula in a superstitious manner, God inflicted infamy and defeat on Israel. The two culprits, Hophni and Phinehas, die in the battle. But this was not the worst. As the wife of Phinehas said, "Ichabod" - the glory of Israel had departed. The ark of the LORD departed into captive.

So the ark descends to the lower regions of the coastlands into humiliation. It is captured by the enemies, who gloat over it, parading it proudly as a trophy in the temple of their god.

But no sooner have the Philistines done so than God lashes out to terrify the enemies. When they think the God of Israel is defeated and humiliated, the LORD inflicts a plague of mice and tumors. In anguish the Philistines cart the ark from one city to the other to avoid these outbreaks of painful tumors. Finally they give up, admitting defeat at the hands of the God of Israel. After a new cart with gifts of gold and the ark is loaded, two milch cows, against their natural instincts, leave their calves and pull the ark back to Israel, to Bethshemesh. This is a city for the priests and levites. So the ark can be properly received and handled here. There is rejoicing for the glory of Israel has returned.

But God struck down men of Bethshemesh for looking into the ark. As a result the ark ends up in the caretaker's house for 20 years.

Finally David brings the ark home to Jerusalem, to Mt. Zion. As David sings and dances before the LORD with the ephod on, he distributes gifts to the people. Out of joy he shares his wealth - a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins - with each person, man and woman. That is how he blessed them and sent them home. Psalm 24 reminds us of this festive event when it says,

*lift up your heads, O you gates;  
be lifted up, you ancient doors,  
that the King of glory may come in.  
Who is this King of glory?  
The LORD strong and mighty,  
the LORD mighty in battle...*

This psalm celebrates the LORD's entrance into Zion. The King of glory passes through the gates. The ark returns!

Brothers and sisters, you recall from this journey of the ark how the King of glory descended into the lower regions of the coastlands into enemy territory to be mocked, yes to be gloated over. But the King of glory, who sits on the throne on the ark between cherubs, does not allow that. He stands up to defeat and even to disgrace the enemies, till they concede victory to the LORD.

Then David takes the ark up to Mt. Zion from the lower regions. As the ark ascends the hill of God presents are handed out by the king of

Israel.

Brothers and sisters, Paul the apostle pulls this line further through to our Lord Jesus Christ. For is it not true that the ark stood for the glory, the presence of the LORD, behind a veil? Well, our Lord Jesus Christ is the reality of the ark, for He brings the glory of God to earth, as the gospel makes clear. Jesus is the temple of God. Did He not say, "break down this temple, and I will rebuild it in three days," in reference to his death in the body? He is the reality of the ark.

Paul shows the fulfilment of this prophetic history of the ark. For that Jesus ascended means that He first descended into the lower regions. As you can understand now, that does not mean He descended into the underworld as many in the early church thought. No, understood in the light of O.T. revelation, it means He descended into the lower regions of enemy territory, of humiliation and shame. The enemies think they have captured Him. For did the enemies of Jesus – Pontius Pilate, Herod Antipas, with the scribes and Sadducees and Pharisees – not conspire together to kill Him? And they succeeded, it seems. He was even crucified! He died and was buried with a guard at the mouth of the grave to ensure He did not come out! How the enemies sighed with relief! How they gloated over their success! Did they not exchange presents with each other to celebrate this victory? Jesus of Nazareth, the troublesome wonder-worker, was out of the way.

But on the third day Jesus stood up to make a public display of his enemies. *And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross* (Col.2:15). Jesus rose from the dead, confounding the enemies. Even as in the OT the LORD publicly disgraced the enemies. He rose from the dead. That was not all.

Then He also ascended up on high into heaven. The forces of evil were terrorised and expelled from heaven upon his entrance. He ascends as the Captor and Victor. Moreover, even as David the king distributed gifts when the shadow, the ark, ascended the hill of God on earth, so Jesus, the great King of glory, passed out gifts at his ascension.

These gifts are for all of you. They are the **apostles and prophets** who are the foundation of the NT church. We all are built on the foundation they laid. Their teachings and prophecies of Jesus unify us. But there are also the other office-bearers. **Evangelists**, such as Philip and Timothy, were like travelling missionaries, enjoying a rank and office beneath the apostles and prophets. And there are the permanent office-bearers, **the pastors and teachers**. These include missionaries, special ministers set apart for preaching the gospel on mission fields.

How privileged we are to have had apostles and prophets! Their work is foundational. God the Spirit made sure their writings remain on the pulpits of his churches.

How privileged we are to have ministers of the Word, at home and also on the mission field. God provides!

So at his ascension, when He went up into heaven till the Day He

comes in glory, Jesus thought about his church. He distributed the gifts of office-bearers to teach, admonish, unify, guard, and govern his people.

These ascension gifts then are the fulfilment of the gifts David handed out as the ark ascended to Mt. Zion.

## **2. The function of the ascension gifts.**

This text makes us realise, brothers and sisters, that Christ's ascension benefited Him for sure, but Christ's real aim remained the upbuilding of the church. As He ascended He handed out gifts for the church. He also kept us in mind. Even as the ascended Lord He is the Head of the church, ruling over all things for the sake of the church. This also comes out in the function his ascension gifts have. They must function for the beautiful unity and growth of the church, as Paul described and defended it in 4:1-7. Jesus has toiled and prayed for such unity. This unity is fact - there **is** one body and one Spirit. Inside the church we must preserve and nurture that unity in the bond of the Spirit, of faith and truth and love.

Yet the body of Christ must also grow up to maturity. Seeds sprout and shoot leaves in a nursery under special care. Inside the nursery they are coaxed into life. But as they grow, they can be transplanted and moved out with other plants to grow to maturity so they can bear fruit. The same applies to the body of Christ. God coaxes us to life through his Word and Spirit. Our spiritual life needs watering and care on a regular, weekly basis. Gardeners - ministers, elders and deacons - tend us, so we can grow.

We must grow as the body of Christ. Do you young fellows not want to grow tall and strong, like your dads? Well, the body of Christ wants to grow up to be like our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul calls it *a perfect man*, or we can also translate it, *a manly maturity*.

What type of growth does Paul mean? Is it a growth of the catholic church unto full maturity? Until the last living stone is fitted into the spiritual temple?!

Or is the growth of a local church?

Or is it the growth of an individual member of the church?

I do not think you can think of the one without the other. You young boys and girls do a lot of growing, especially between the ages of 12 to 15. You have a real growth spurt. But your parents not only look at your physical growth, but also at your spiritual growth. We want you to profess the faith, love the Lord, keep his testimony and serve Jesus. It is an organic growth in faith, love and unity. That is what parents love to see in their family.

The same holds true for the Family of God. We not only want to see the numbers of believers grow, we also want to see growth in faith, in unity and love. The church together must grow organically.

This growth is not purely individualistic. No, we grow in oneness of faith in the one body. The body as a whole has to grow. To have an overgrown ear or an underdeveloped foot will not do. Every part of the

body should grow together. That is the aim in church-life too. Members need the nurturing work which the ascended Lord gave to his church. We need preaching, teaching, pastoral care, discipline, the use of the sacraments, and the help of the communion of saints. We grow together.

So these gifts function within this context of the unity of the body and the need for growth of the body. Office-bearers are given for this purpose. Let us remember that.

As far as the gifts themselves go, Paul lists the outstanding ones. It is not an exhaustive catalogue. For that you need to combine the lists in Rom. 12 and 1 Cor.12. Even those lists are not exhaustive. But Paul is concerned to enumerate the ones which the church needs most for unity and growth. Paul wants the church in Ephesus, and Christ wants the church in Armadale to united and to grow in love and truth. The office-bearers you have are necessary for growth in faith and for unity in the Spirit. Other ascension gifts of Christ promote the same, but they are not required.

Let me also point out that Christ gave these men. They are ascension-gifts. Even though you helped to nominate and elect them, and though the consistory with the deacons appointed them, we maintain that they are given by Christ. This means that Christ gives, appoints and invests men for office. The church is not run by democracy - rule by the people, for the people and unto the people. Neither popularity polls nor pragmatism rules the church. Christ rules, through his ordained leaders.

That they are gifts also means we must be careful not to reject them. To reject them is to reject the Giver!

Thus far we mentioned much about the function and character of these gifts. But more needs to be said. For example, who are the pastors/shepherds and teachers? From the original Greek we learn to see that Paul describes one class of leaders who are both shepherds and teachers. We would call them ministers, elders and deacons. For example, Paul once called all the elders of the church at Ephesus to say farewell to them. In his farewell (Acts 20:28) he says,

*Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.*

So all the overseers or elders are called to be shepherds. Peter the apostle says the same in his first letter (5:1-4),

*To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder...Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care...being examples to the flock.*

That all the elders, not the ministers alone, must also teach is evident from Paul's lists of qualifications for overseers or elders. In 1 Tim.3:2 the apostle points out that elders must be "able to teach" and in Titus 1:9 he elaborates on this by saying,

*He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.*

So teaching involves encouraging the faithful and refuting opponents. While ministers do this in their preaching and teaching of the youth and others, elders do it in home-visiting and in special visits.

Sometimes, as when the minister is away, elders teach catechism classes to the benefit of all. And elders also do some special teaching. And even deacons must teach the congregation to show mercy and care. They also teach some how to budget wisely. And they shepherd the flock with the encouragement and comfort of our only Highpriest. They too, in their own way, are pastors and teachers.

To sum up then, *shepherds/pastors and teachers* refer to the work of the office-bearers. We had to make this clear so that the following remarks of Paul are applied properly.

For Paul defines the specific function of these gifts in three clauses

*to equip the saints  
for the work of ministry  
for building up the body of Christ*

Or one can put it more simply and more precisely in two clauses,

*to prepare God's people for works of service,  
so that the body of Christ may be built up.*

This renders the Greek accurately.

This means that the office-bearers' function is to prepare God's people for works of service. Elders and deacons, the members of the body are to become spiritual adults who can leave the classroom of instruction and apprenticeship, to go to work. As office-bearers we must equip the members. That is why the consistory calls the members for church-services - to learn God's Word. The elders supervise the catechism-instruction and the Bible-study clubs. Home and families are visited. Wayward members are admonished. Weak members are encouraged. The needy are helped, taught if necessary, and comforted. In this way you are to equip the congregation for works of service.

Yes, the body of Christ must perform the work of ministry or works of service. The Greek word is ***diakonia***, service. You, brothers and sisters, must use your equipment, given through the office-bearers, to labour and to serve. In the church of Christ we do not know of a team where the coaches go out on to the field to play the game, while the team-players remain on the bench to cheer or to jeer them. No, No! The players, you church members - both young and old, are drilled in the catechism classes, trained in the church services and exercised in the Bible study clubs so that they play the game.

Therefore do not expect the leaders to do it all. It means that in the church of Christ our Lord wants the members to put into practice what they were taught in church. The church as a body goes to work in daily life, in public life as well, to speak, live and think as taught in the Scriptures. We thus expect that you church members do much of the *work of ministry* or the *works of service* to use a clearer translation. If someone does not show up in church for a long time, do not say, *the elders and minister will take care of that; that's why we pay the minister and why we appoint the elders*. You also are involved, after due preparation, in serving your straying brother or sister. And if

there are financial hardships, many older or lonely people, handicapped or distressed members, then go out and do the work of service. Though the elders and deacons lead you, and should be examples to you in such works of service, they should not do it all.

### ***3. The fruit of these gifts.***

When everyone does what God asks, then the body of Christ will built up to maturity, the full manhood of Christ. A young man grows to be a man, and the church grows up to be a man like Christ. Children are impressionable. Adults have heard the enticing and deceptive advertising long enough to be wary. Spiritually, you become adults. You lose the impressionableness of your spiritual youth. No longer children, the Devil cannot sway you with every wind of doctrine, tossing you to and fro. You see so many people *church-shopping*, being tossed to and fro. Now they go to the Baptist, then to the People's Church and then to one of the sects. They are tossed to and fro. But if Paul's instruction is followed, then we will grow up to maturity, and avoid these pitfalls of the Devil.

Christ ascended for your sakes. In heaven He has not forgotten you. His eye remains on his body, the church. If David gave gifts when the glory of God ascended the hill of God, then Christ gives the fulfilled gifts of his ascension. They function for the unity and growth of the church. They are the office-bearers who equip the membership for the work of service, so the whole body may mature and be like Christ. Christ wants his bride to grow up beautiful and unblemished, so He can present his bride to the Father. To Christ and to the Father be the praise. Amen.