

Paul's Use of Psalm 68  
Ephesians 4:7-10; Psalm 68:7-20  
by Grover Gunn  
170305@McDonald

There is a lot of helpful information in our passage for today, and this is our third sermon on this passage in recent weeks. Let me quickly review what we have already learned from this passage and also let me make a couple of new observations. The Apostle Paul exhorts us to walk worthy of our calling as Christians. There are many ways in which we are to walk worthy of our calling, but in this passage Paul stresses Christian unity. The people of God have a sevenfold unity in that there is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God and Father of all. Yet Christians also have diversity in that Christ has distributed a diversity of gifts among the members of the church. The gifts mentioned in this passage are the leaders of the church to whom Christ has given equipping gifts. We looked at all of these gifted individuals last week. The leaders from Paul's list who today continue to exercise leadership in the local church are the pastor-teachers, who are the local church's elders. Their job is to equip the saints for the work of ministry. That is what we have learned so far.

That is our review. Now for a couple of new observations. Let me point out to you something about verse 12. The New Testament in the original Greek doesn't have any punctuation, but the translators supply punctuation in their English translations. The King James Version puts a comma in verse 12 which modern translations leave out. The King James Version

translates the first part of verse 12 this way: "For the perfecting of the saints, [comma] for the work of the ministry." This translation implies that the elders have two jobs: 1) perfecting the saints and 2) the work of ministry. According to this reading, the work of ministry is something only the elders do as opposed to something that all the saints do. Without the comma, the verse says that the elders equip the saints so that the saints can do the work of the ministry in the church. The work of ministry in the church can refer to the authoritative teaching and ruling which only elders should perform. The work of ministry can also refer to the general work of service which all the saints, including the elders, should perform. I believe the proper interpretation of this verse uses the phrase "work of ministry" in the general sense and teaches that the elders should prepare all the members of the church for and lead them by example in that work of service which is the fulfillment of the law of love in the church.

That is my first new observation on the text. In addition, I want to point out something significant about verse 15. The work of service performed by all the saints builds up and unifies the local church, and so does the teaching of God's truth in the church. As we mature as a church, we learn to speak the truth in love to one another. That also is very important.

In the name of love, some people deny truth. They think it is unloving to tell anyone that something they believe might not be true. They teach in the name of love that each person should be allowed to have his own personal truth. In other words, what a person believes to be true is true for him whether it is true for

anybody else or not. Yet to allow someone to have his own private truth is to deny that God defines truth. If God defines something as true, then it is absolutely true whether anyone believes it or not. If we accept that God's truth is absolute truth and that the Bible teaches God's truth, then to believe something that contradicts the Bible is to believe something false. When someone believes something false, especially regarding something significant, is it loving to allow them to continue unchallenged in their fantasy world? No, the saints should speak the truth to one another.

Yet speaking the truth is not enough; we must also speak the truth in love. Some people speak the truth harshly, judgmentally and arrogantly. We should also avoid that. Jesus did not break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax. In other words, Jesus treated people gently. He did not break and discard believers with a weak faith but rather supported them and built them up to be strong in their faith. He did not quench believers who had little understanding and gave off more smoke than light; instead He trimmed their wick and tended their flame until they burned brightly with God's truth. We should follow Christ's example and speak the truth while at the same time treating our brothers and sisters in the faith gently and lovingly as those for whom Christ died.

With that review and with those two additional observations, I want next to look in more detail at Paul's use of an Old Testament passage in our text. In verse 8 of our text for today, the Apostle Paul quotes a verse from the 68th Psalm and applies it to the ascension of the resurrected Jesus to heaven and to

Jesus' giving spiritual gifts to His church through the work of His Holy Spirit. Yet this Old Testament psalm is about God's dwelling in earthly Jerusalem. What has that got to do with Jesus? I think this is an important question. The Old Testament ends like an unfinished book. The four hundred years between Malachi and John the Baptist are like the intermission in a movie. I think that examining Paul's use of a verse from the 68th Psalm will help us to understand better how the New Testament picks up and completes the unfinished story which began with the Old Testament. The New Testament is the second half of the movie after the intermission. Psalm 68 has 35 verses, but I am going to comment today on only the fourteen verses that we read in our Scripture reading today. Let's think through these verses in their Old Testament context in terms of three mountains, Mount Sinai, Mount Hermon and Mount Zion.

First, Mount Sinai. As soon as Israel escaped the slavery of Egypt under Moses' leadership, God began leading them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21). God led them to Mount Sinai, the place where God had appeared to Moses in the burning bush, and settled the weary people there for over a year of rest. When Israel came to Mount Sinai, God descended on the mountain with thundering, lightening, fire, smoke, earthquakes and the sound of a trumpet. There God gave His law to Israel, made them into a nation and entered into covenant with them. After Israel's year of rest, God led Israel in a march of conquest that would cover several centuries. God would fight for and with Israel. Through these victories, the people would receive great spoil, even beautiful objects of silver and gold. The battlefields where God had

defeated His enemies were sometimes so covered with the bleached bones of the fallen that they could be compared poetically to a mountaintop covered with snow. So God came down upon Mt. Sinai to make Israel into a nation, and then went with them on a journey of conquest. Second, Mount Hermon. God marched in a march of victory from Mt. Sinai to another mountain which would become God's dwelling place. That mountain which God chose for His dwelling place wasn't Mt. Hermon, and our passage poetically describes Mt. Hermon as jealous because God didn't bestow this honor on it. Our passage doesn't call Mount Hermon by name, but our passage clearly describes Mount Hermon. The jealous mountain is a mountain of Bashan, and Mount Hermon is the most majestic mountain in the territory of Bashan. Mount Hermon is much taller than any of the mountains south of it in the land of Canaan. It is a large mountain running about twenty miles long from north to south. The snow on its cap is the main source of water for the Jordan River and for the rivers which water the Damascus plains in Syria. The jealous mountain is a mountain of many peaks, and Mount Hermon has three summits. The jealous mountain was known in the culture of the area as a mountain of God, and the native Canaanites regarded Mount Hermon as a holy place, much as the ancient Greeks regarded Mount Olympus. In spite of its pre-eminent majesty and its pagan reputation as a holy mountain, God did not choose Mount Hermon as His dwelling place.

Third, Mount Zion. If God did not choose to dwell in majestic Mount Hermon, what mountain did God choose for His dwelling place? God chose Mount Zion, which is geologically

puny by comparison. Mount Zion is only a few hundred feet higher than the valleys around it, and it is dominated on all sides by higher mountain ranges. There is a rough triangle of three mountain ridges which almost enclose Mount Zion. As Psalm 125 says, the mountains surround Jerusalem. Mount Zion and the mountains which surround it are all less than 3000 feet above sea level, and Mount Hermon rises more than 9000 feet above sea level. That is a difference of over 6000 feet. Yet God chose Mount Zion as His dwelling place and not Mount Hermon.

This journey of victory began with Moses and continued to David, the king who brought rest to the land which God had promised Abraham by conquering all the peoples within that area. There are about five centuries between Moses and David, and this psalm summarizes these centuries very concisely by saying that God has come in victory from Mount Sinai to the sanctuary on Mount Zion. In verse 18, the psalm pictures God as a victorious warrior ascending Mount Zion so that He might dwell there, ascending Mount Zion with captives trailing behind Him, ascending Mount Zion rich with the plunder received from men, even from the rebellious whom He had conquered. To fill in some of the historical details, King David conquered Mount Zion and moved his throne to Jerusalem. King David also brought to Jerusalem God's earthly throne, the ark of the covenant. David's son Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem to house the ark in its inner sanctuary called the Holy of holies. Thus Jerusalem, the city of Zion, became the center of God's rule and worship and God's special dwelling place on earth.

Let's now go to our passage in Ephesians and see how Paul uses this Old Testament psalm in verse eight. The Old Testament psalm is about God's march of victory in history, and Paul applies it to Christ. This is appropriate because Christ continues God's march of victory in this age.

God's Old Testament victories used physical weapons, and Christ is conquering the nations with spiritual weapons.

God's Old Testament conquests were limited to the land of Canaan which God had promised to Abraham. The Old Testament prophesied that the Messiah, the greater Son of David, would continue this conquest to the ends of the earth. Both the 72nd Psalm and the prophecy of Zechariah prophesied that the dominion of the Messiah would extend from the Euphrates River, which is the northern boundary of the land promised to Abraham, to the very ends of the earth. Jesus is today conquering the world through the discipling of the nations.

Under the old covenant, God as represented by the ark of the covenant ascended the earthly Mount Zion in victory. Under the new covenant, the resurrected Christ ascended to the heavenly Mount Zion in victory over sin, death and the grave.

Under the old covenant, the earthly city of Jerusalem was the center of God's worship and rule. Under the new covenant, the heavenly Jerusalem is the center of Christ's worship and rule. The Hebrew of Psalm 68 says that God received gifts from men, even the rebellious, and Paul says that Christ gives gifts to men,

even His church. There is a consistency here because after victory, a king both receives plunder from his enemies and distributes plunder to his own people.

In 2 Samuel chapter 8, we read that David dedicated to the Lord plunder and tribute which he had received. In 1 Chronicles 22, we read that David set aside gold, silver, bronze and iron for Solomon to use in building the temple in Jerusalem. Under the old covenant, God received material gifts and used them to build His temple of stone as His dwelling place upon Mount Zion. The temple was also a gift which God gave to His people. In listing in Romans chapter nine the many advantages which God had given the old covenant Jew, Paul included among them the worship service at the temple.

Under the new covenant, Christ gives gifts to His people as He builds up the new covenant temple made of living stones. We are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, and God is building us on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone. In this age, the people of God are growing into a holy temple in the Lord for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

Paul tells us that the resurrected Jesus has ascended to heaven and the heavenly Mount Zion that from there He might fill all things. From heaven, the resurrected and ascended Christ is distributing the gracious gifts of His reign throughout the universe and especially to His church. These gifts are the spoils from the battle which the Son of God descended to earth to fight. Through His incarnation, God the Son became flesh and

dwelt among us. In His humiliation, Jesus came not only to earth but also to the lower parts of the earth. I believe that is a reference to the depths of Jesus' humiliation upon earth. He underwent the wrath of God against our sin, He died the painful and shameful death of the cross, and He was buried and continued under the power of death for a time.

Jesus rose in victory on the third day. Forty days after that, Jesus gave His church the Great Commission and then ascended to His heavenly throne at the right hand of God. About ten days after that, on the first Pentecost after His Passover death, Jesus poured out His Holy Spirit in new covenant fullness and power upon His new covenant church. Through these actions, Jesus continued God's march of conquest in this age. The weapons have changed from physical weapons such as spears and swords to spiritual weapons such as the gospel message. The center of worship and rule has shifted from the earthly Jerusalem to the heavenly Jerusalem. God's earthly temple dwelling has changed from a temple of stones to a temple of living stones, the church. The battlefield has expanded from the land of Canaan to the ends of the earth. God's march of victory continues in this age in the new context of the new covenant.

God's march of victory continues today, and God is transforming the world. What is so exciting about this is that we are at the center of this victorious march in the work of the church. As we do the work of service and speak the truth in love, we are building up the body of Christ on earth. As we proclaim the gospel message of Jesus and demonstrate its power through the unity and love of the church, we are expanding

God's kingdom on earth. There is no greater privilege, no nobler task, no better investment of our time and talents. Let us today devote ourselves anew to this divine campaign of the ages.

Prayer: O God, arise. Let Your enemies be scattered; let those who hate You flee before You. As smoke is driven away, so drive them away; as wax melts before the fire, so let the wicked perish at Your presence. But let the righteous be glad; let them rejoice before You; yes, let them rejoice exceedingly. In Jesus' name. Amen.