

Psalm 68 is a difficult Psalm to *translate*,
partly because there are fifteen words in this Psalm
that appear nowhere else in Hebrew literature!
There are a host of textual problems –
partly due to the fact that copyists couldn’t figure out what they were reading,
and so tried to “fix” it!

And yet, while Psalm 68 may be difficult to translate,
it is an easy Psalm to understand!
With many of those fifteen words, you may have to shrug your shoulders
and *guess* at what the *word* means,
but meaning does not inhere solely in *words*.
Meaning is found in sentences and paragraphs.

How many of you have ever seen a play by Shakespeare?
I once watched a Shakespeare play with the script in my hands.
I was amazed at how many words I didn’t understand.
I had seen the same play without the script –
and I had never noticed how many words simply “made sense” in context.
Shakespeare uses Elizabethan English –
and even in his own day, some of the words he uses were obscure!
And yet, modern audiences have no difficulty understanding his plays today.

Likewise, in Psalm 68, there will be a few words where we will need to shrug our shoulders –
and yet there is no obscurity in the point of this song!

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David. A Song.

I’ve given you an outline of the Psalm in your bulletin.
I want you to see the big picture first.

The overarching movement of the Psalm is seen in the three main points:

1. The basic point of the song is laid out in the opening six verses.
When God ascends – when God arises in triumph –
he scatters his enemies and rescues widows and orphans –
and therefore the righteous sing for joy.

2. And then an illustration is given.

Indeed, *the* illustration.

The Exodus is the paradigm of the ascension of God.

The Glory of God was revealed at Sinai –

where God restored his inheritance (Israel)
and provided for the needy (manna in the desert).
Verses 11-14 then *appear* to describe the Conquest
(these are some of the most difficult lines in the Psalm.
And then verses 15-18 speak of how God has ascended on high
in the sanctuary of God's holy mountain.
"Sinai is in the sanctuary" – in other words,
the glory of God that appeared at Sinai
now resides in the sanctuary at Jerusalem.

3. And then the third section, verses 19-35,
speaks of what the reign of the ascended Lord looks like day-to-day.
"Blessed be the Lord *who daily bears us up.*"
And the way that we remember this
is through the regular worship of God.
The procession of the people of God as they come before the LORD
reminds us of how God led us through the desert –
and how God leads us every day.
And so because of who God is and what he *has done* and *is doing*,
we ask God to continue to do what he has promised –
so that all the nations would humble themselves before him,
and sing praise the Lord who rides in the heavens.

I want you to think about this in light of what we have seen in the last couple weeks.
Psalm 65 spoke of God's rule over all the earth –
showing the connection between redemption and the harvest;
Psalm 66 expanded the theme of God's universal rule
by connecting the Exodus with God's provision for Israel,
claiming that all nations should praise God for his care for Israel,
and especially that God's faithfulness to the Davidic king
is reason for all peoples to sing to the Lord.
Psalm 67 then connects the priestly blessing of Numbers 6
to the promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through his seed.

Since I preached on Psalm 67 a few years ago, I'm not including it now.
But let me read it to you now, so that you can hear what comes immediately before our song:
*May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us,
that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations.
Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you!
Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth.
Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you!
The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, shall bless us.*

God shall bless us; let all the ends of the earth fear him!

I have suggested that Psalms 66-67 were inserted in between Psalms 65 and 68 in order to flesh out the themes of creation, Exodus, and the blessing to the nations, so that Psalm 68 makes more sense when you get there. Especially because of Psalm 68's obscure vocabulary, the backdrop of Psalms 66-67 helps us see that the Exodus was not merely for Israel.

When God arises, his enemies shall be scattered, and all the nations will praise the LORD. And, as Psalm 68 reminds us, the story of redemption is not merely something that happened way back when – because what we do in the liturgy every week is designed to draw us back into this story.

We remember God's mighty deeds – not merely out of historical curiosity, but because this is the story in which we participate.

1. When God Ascends, His People Sing (v1-6)

a. God Shall Arise and Scatter His Enemies so that the Righteous Rejoice (v1-3)

*68 God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered;
and those who hate him shall flee before him!*

² *As smoke is driven away, so you shall drive them away;
as wax melts before fire, so the wicked shall perish before God!*

³ *But the righteous shall be glad;
they shall exult before God;
they shall be jubilant with joy!*

The opening line of Psalm 68 is drawn from Numbers 10:35.

Whenever the ark would set out from camp, Moses would say,
“Arise, O LORD, and let your enemies be scattered,
and let those who hate you flee before you.”

And when the ark rested, he said,

“Return, O LORD, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel.”

So from its opening words, Psalm 68 is calling our attention to the Exodus, and reminding us very particularly of the *presence of God with his people*. After all, the ark would only set out when the glory-cloud “arose” and led Israel through the wilderness.

It is for this reason that many scholars agree that Psalm 68 was used regularly at the feasts. God had commanded Israel to gather three times a year, at Passover, Pentecost, and Booths/or Tabernacles in order to remember his provision for them. Psalm 68 rehearses the history of God's faithfulness to Israel –

blending certain particular episodes with more general language
that results in a song that draws the worshiper into the story of redemption.

I want you to see particularly how he describes the wicked:

“as smoke is driven away...
as wax melts before fire...”

In our day, religion is viewed as ephemeral and insubstantial.

I suspect that David is dealing with the same phenomenon.

The wicked *seem* quite substantial.

Remember Goliath?

As Goliath hurled his threats and insults,
all Israel quaked and trembled with fear.

And rightly so!

What would have happened if one of the other Israelites had challenged Goliath?

Goliath would have ripped his head off!

Israel’s enemies were *not* ephemeral or insubstantial!

Israel’s enemies were *real* and *powerful* and utterly beyond Israel’s strength to defeat.

And so it is today.

The powers that are arrayed against you are overwhelming!

The world offers a seductive and compelling postmodern narrative
that provides a comfortable and happy life –

so long as you abandon any ultimate truth and righteousness.

The flesh is powerfully oriented towards your own peace and happiness.

And the devil prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.

Against these foes, you are weak and helpless.

Compared to *you*, they are dominant and powerful.

But notice that David is not talking about you!

David is talking to God:

“As smoke is driven away, so you shall drive them away;
as wax melts before fire, so the wicked shall perish before God.”

When we say that God is a spirit, we do not mean that God is insubstantial.

Rather, we mean that God is *super*-substantial.

Compared to him, *we* are insubstantial.

As many authors have said,

God’s substance is so tiny that the whole of him can fit into the smallest atom,
and yet so huge that all the universe cannot contain him.

The same theme of God's hugeness and smallness is found in verses 4-6:

b. Therefore, Sing to the God Who Aids the Weak and Helpless (v4-6)

⁴ *Sing to God, sing praises to his name;
lift up a song to him who rides through the deserts;
his name is the LORD;
exult before him!*

⁵ *Father of the fatherless and protector of widows
is God in his holy habitation.*

⁶ *God settles the solitary in a home;
he leads out the prisoners to prosperity,
but the rebellious dwell in a parched land.*

The same God who "rides through the deserts" –
whose enemies are as smoke and wax before him –
is also the Father of the fatherless and protector of widows.

You may sometimes have wondered, "who am I, that God would take note of me?"
But God's greatness is manifested *precisely* in his care for widows and orphans!

If you want to know how good a community is,
look at how they treat the weakest and most helpless members of the community:

fatherless children – widows (single mothers) – migrant workers –
"the solitary" – those who have no one else to look after them –
(incidentally, the "prisoners" are those who have been captured in battle –
these are not criminals, but prisoners of war).

God's rule – God's community – is a community characterized by righteousness.
It is a well-ordered community where those who are helpless can find help.
It's worth saying that while we may often be frustrated by the failures in our society,
the US has done a reasonable job of making help *available* to the helpless.

And the church should be especially good at this.
Notice how our God does this.
He is a father to orphans –
he takes them in and provides for them.
He is a champion of widows (literally "a judge" for widows).
The widow has no advocate – no protector –
and is at the mercy of creditors.

Now, these sorts of situations cannot be addressed by throwing money at the problem.
You cannot help widows and orphans simply by giving them money.

They need advocates – they need people who will get involved in their lives.

Sometimes you can do this by adopting – or fostering – an orphan.
Or you can do this by tutoring – or working at Camp Ray Bird –
or helping at Hannah’s House, or the Pregnancy Care Center.

But behind all of these actions is the action of our Lord Jesus Christ
who came in the flesh – who shared in the plight of the weak and helpless –
and arose in power and might to become their advocate at the right hand of the Father.

And that is why we sing praise to his name!

But the stubborn – the rebellious – dwell in a parched land.

This is an interesting phrase,
because the *sarar* – the stubborn –
are usually Israelites.

The “stubborn and rebellious son” of Deuteronomy 21 (echoed in Isaiah 30),
the rebellious princes of Isaiah 1,
the rebellious people of Isaiah 65 (and Jeremiah, and Hosea, etc.),
all refer to Israel in his rebellion.

Indeed, Psalm 66:7 referred to the rebellious –
who should not exalt themselves against the LORD.

Psalm 68 here contrasts two groups:
on the one hand, the helpless poor –
the fatherless, the widows, the solitary, the captives;
on the other hand, the rebellious –
the stubborn – those who will not accept the gracious work of God.

Those who refuse God’s gracious and powerful protection
dwell in a parched land.

Even widows and orphans – even the solitary and prisoners.

Psalm 68 does not contrast widows and orphans with the rich and powerful.

Psalm 68 contrasts the humble poor with the rebellious poor.

We’ll see throughout the Psalm:

in verses 1-3 we saw “the enemies” – those who hate God –
contrasted with the righteous – who rejoice at God’s triumph.

In verses 4-6 we see the fatherless and widows prosper,
contrasted with the “rebellious” who dwell in a parched land.

In verses 7-18 we see “your people”, “the women who announce the news”
contrasted with the kings whose defeat is announced.

Verses 19-27 contrast the “great congregation” with “God’s enemies”,

and verses 28-35 contrast “the kingdoms of the earth” who praise God with “the peoples who delight in war” who will be scattered.

In other words, Psalm 68 is no respecter of persons.

Whether Jew or Gentile – whether great or small – whether rich or poor – there are those who belong to God, and there are those who oppose him.

In verses 7-18, we then see that God first ascended in the Exodus – prefiguring the ascension of Christ, in the greater Exodus of his resurrection.

2. The Ascension of the Lord in the Exodus (v7-18)

a. The Glory of the God of Sinai (v7-10)

⁷ *O God, when you went out before your people,
when you marched through the wilderness, Selah*

⁸ *the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain,
before God, the One of Sinai,
before God, the God of Israel.*

⁹ *Rain in abundance, O God, you shed abroad;
you restored your inheritance as it languished;*

¹⁰ *your flock^a found a dwelling in it;
in your goodness, O God, you provided for the needy.*

In the Exodus God revealed his glory:

the earth quaked – the heavens poured down rain;

this is the language of theophany, that when God appears, creation trembles.

The Song of Deborah, in Judges 5, uses a lot of this meteorological language – as does Psalm 65!

Rain and hail and storms are not just earthly phenomena – they are signs of judgment and blessing.

We get so used to rain as an ordinary part of everyday life,

that we forget that rain is also an essential part of God’s blessing.

Farmers are not so quick to forget that *timely rain* is crucial to good harvests!

And here in verses 9-10 the rain comes in abundance *at the right time* – and thus God provided for the needy.

But verse 8 is at the center of what Psalm 68 is doing here:

the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain

when God – *the One of Sinai* – went out before his people.

Sinai plays a crucial role in this Psalm.

Here, God is described as “the one of Sinai” –

and while the Hebrew is a little obscure here,

the point is clearly to call attention to the importance of Sinai.
(Because Sinai will appear later in the Psalm in a very different place!)

b. The Word of the Lord of the Conquest (v11-14)

- ¹¹ *The Lord gives the word;
the women who announce the news are a great host:*
¹² *“The kings of the armies—they flee, they flee!”*
The women at home divide the spoil—
¹³ *though you men lie among the sheepfolds—
the wings of a dove covered with silver,
its pinions with shimmering gold.*
¹⁴ *When the Almighty scatters kings there,
let snow fall on Zalmon.*

Verses 11-14 are nearly impossible to figure out.
The ESV does a pretty good job of translating literally.
And it doesn't make much sense.

That's why I've summarized it as “the Word of the Lord of the Conquest.”
There are a few references to Judges 5 here (the Song of Deborah),
which suggests that we should connect this section to the Conquest
rather than the Exodus.

But, like in Exodus 15, or 1 Samuel 18, the women are celebrating a great victory.
What the men are doing is a little more difficult.
Lying in the sheepfolds doesn't sound very valiant –
but having the wings of a dove covered with silver,
and pinions with shimmering gold,
certainly sounds like a good thing.

The one thing that is clear from verses 11-14 is that *the Almighty* is scattering kings –
with the result that *he* is enthroned and exalted over the kings of the earth.

And this comes to the fore in the Psalmist's rebuke of Mt. Bashan:

c. The Dwelling of the LORD in the Mountain of God (v15-18)

- ¹⁵ *O mountain of God, mountain of Bashan;
O many-peaked^[b] mountain, mountain of Bashan!*
¹⁶ *Why do you look with hatred, O many-peaked mountain,
at the mount that God desired for his abode,
yes, where the LORD will dwell forever?*
¹⁷ *The chariots of God are twice ten thousand,
thousands upon thousands;
the Lord is among them; Sinai is now in the sanctuary.*
¹⁸ *You ascended on high,*

*leading a host of captives in your train
and receiving gifts among men,
even among the rebellious, that the LORD God may dwell there.*

Bashan is across the Jordan to the east.

Og, king of Bashan, was one of the first rulers defeated in the Conquest.
The idea here is that Bashan is jealous that God has selected *Zion* as his dwelling place.
The Golan Heights (north and east of the Sea of Galilee)
is the modern name for the mountains of Bashan.
They are far more impressive physically than Mt Zion.

But then again, Psalm 68 has already shown that physically imposing foes
are as smoke – as wax – before the LORD!

God does not choose his dwelling place based on outward appearances.

The rabbis spoke of a competition that the mountains had –
as each argued its case before God,
pleading for the honor of having the Law – or the Temple –
but that God chose Sinai, and Zion, because he wanted to demonstrate
that he is a God who dwells with the meek and lowly!

Psalm 68 helped spark the discussion,
because of the word that the Psalmist chose to describe Mt. Bashan.
It could mean “many-peaked” if you translate it neutrally.
But when used of a person, it means “hunch-backed”
(it is the word used in Leviticus 21:20 when God says
that no hunch-back may serve as a priest).

If you are looking for a mountain to serve as God’s holy place,
you do not want a “hunch-backed” mountain!

Rather, God has selected another mountain to be his abode –
“where the LORD will dwell forever.”

But that mountain is not named here.
Instead, we are told that the chariots of God are twice ten thousand,
thousands upon thousands,
the Lord is among them;
Sinai is now in the sanctuary.

In verse 8 we were told of how God went out before his people –
the God of Sinai led Israel through the wilderness

and brought them into their inheritance.

Now Sinai is in the sanctuary.

What does this mean?

Well, what happened when Israel *left* Mt Sinai?

The Glory of the LORD left the top of the mountain and filled the tabernacle.

At Sinai, there were three levels.

The plain at the bottom, where the people beheld God –

but the people were not supposed to come up the mountain.

But then in Exodus 24, the 70 elders came halfway up the mountain
and beheld God, and ate and drank with him.

And the top of the mountain was where only Moses and Joshua could go.

The Tabernacle was designed as Mt Sinai on its side:

the outer court was for the people to worship God;

the priests could enter the holy place, on behalf of the people;

and the high priest alone could enter the Holy of Holies once a year.

So, when the Glory of the LORD left Mt Sinai and filled the Holy of Holies,
it was true to say “Sinai is in the sanctuary”!

And when Solomon built the temple,
the Glory of the LORD filled the Holy of Holies –
and so it was true once more:

“Sinai is in the sanctuary”!

And so part 2 concludes by declaring the ascent of the LORD:

“You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men,
even among the rebellious, that the LORD God may dwell there.”

So part 2 sees the Exodus, the Conquest, and the Temple
as the demonstration that God *has* ascended – God has arisen and cast down his foes.

But then part 3 applies this to today –

because *we* live under the rule of the ascended God

(and if this was true for David, how much more is it true for us –
since Jesus is the ascended king, both as God and as man!)

So what does it look like to live under the Reign of the Ascended Lord?

3. The Reign of the Ascended Lord (v19-35)

a. God Is Our Salvation *Every Day* (v19-23)

¹⁹ *Blessed be the Lord,
who daily bears us up;*

God is our salvation. Selah
²⁰ *Our God is a God of salvation,*
and to GOD, the Lord, belong deliverances from death.
²¹ *But God will strike the heads of his enemies,*
the hairy crown of him who walks in his guilty ways.
²² *The Lord said,*
“I will bring them back from Bashan,
I will bring them back from the depths of the sea,
²³ *that you may strike your feet in their blood,*
that the tongues of your dogs may have their portion from the foe.”

First, we need to remember that God is our salvation every day.

“Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears us up; God is our salvation.”

As Ed Clowney used to say, the message of the whole Bible is Jonah 2:9 –
Salvation belongs to the Lord.

Our God is a God of salvation.

The particular salvation in view in verses 19-23 is salvation in battle.
When our foes assail us, God will strike the heads of his enemies:
the seed of the serpent will be destroyed.

And Bashan comes back into view as well:
the Lord says that he will bring the guilty back from Bashan
and from the depth of the sea,
“that you may strike your feet in their blood,
that the tongues of your dogs may have their portion from the foe.”

I don't know whether Elijah said it first of Jezebel (1 Kings 21:19),
or whether Psalm 68 said it first more generically,
but whoever said it first, the other one clearly saw the connection!

As Paul says in Romans 16:20,

“The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.”

It's not just that God will “save you” –

it's that when God saves you, you will *experience* the victory over your enemies.

You see this in Acts 12:23, when God strikes Herod down.

Herod had just executed James, the brother of John –
and he has just ordered the execution of Peter.

But God saves Peter from prison,
and strikes Herod down instead.

The way Luke tells the story leaves little doubt that he viewed this divine vindication of Peter.
In the same way, I recently heard the story of a pastor in Indonesia
who tried to lead the church into idolatry –
encouraging syncretistic burial practices.
Another pastor rebuked him –
and a week later the idolatrous pastor was nearly killed by a falling tree branch.

Interpreting providence is always a little hairy!
If the tree branch falls on the pastor who rebuked the idolater, what does that mean??!!
These sorts of providences are a terrible guide for action!
But the death of Herod is reason for the people of God to rejoice!
Likewise, when God strikes those who promote idolatry,
we should tremble – and flee from idolatry!
What about when God strikes the faithful?
We should tremble – and remember that judgment begins with the household of God.

But God *daily* bears us up.
God is our salvation *every day*.

And our liturgy should remind us of this every time we gather –
and that's the point of verses 24-27:

b. The Procession at the Feasts Remind Us of This (v24-27)

²⁴ *Your procession is^[c] seen, O God,
the procession of my God, my King, into the sanctuary—*
²⁵ *the singers in front, the musicians last,
between them virgins playing tambourines:*
²⁶ *“Bless God in the great congregation,
the LORD, O you^[d] who are of Israel's fountain!”*
²⁷ *There is Benjamin, the least of them, in the lead,
the princes of Judah in their throng,
the princes of Zebulun, the princes of Naphtali.*

David describes the procession of the great congregation at the time of the feast.
The singers, the musicians, the virgins playing tambourines –
the tribes of Israel – with *Benjamin* in the lead!
(This almost suggests that it was written while Saul was still king –
or, at the very least, that the Davidic author is paying tribute to Saul).

The processions and feast of Israel were designed to remind them of their history.
After all, the wilderness wandering was a great procession –
as Israel marched from Egypt to the Promised Land.

Psalm 42 – the first psalm in book 2 of the Psalter –
speaks of how the psalmist used to lead the throng
“in procession to the house of God.”

When we gather together for worship,
we are to remember how we got here.

But also, when we gather for worship, we should expect God to speak – and to act!

c. So Summon Your Power, O God, and Rebuke the Nations (v28-31)

²⁸ *Summon your power, O God,^[e]
the power, O God, by which you have worked for us.*

²⁹ *Because of your temple at Jerusalem
kings shall bear gifts to you.*

³⁰ *Rebuke the beasts that dwell among the reeds,
the herd of bulls with the calves of the peoples.*

*Trample underfoot those who lust after tribute;
scatter the peoples who delight in war.^[f]*

³¹ *Nobles shall come from Egypt;
Cush shall hasten to stretch out her hands to God.*

When we worship the triune God, we should expect him to act as the ascended King.
Because in Jesus Christ, the King sits on the heavenly throne.
And so we come in worship to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and we ask Jesus to trample underfoot those who lust after tribute,
and to scatter the peoples who delight in war.

Now, it's true, that we should bless those who persecute us.
But at the same time we should comfort those who are persecuted
with Paul's words in 2 Thess 1:5ff

This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—⁶ since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷ and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels ⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from^[b] the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, ¹⁰ when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

We should pray that God will repay with affliction those who afflict God's people –
because we *do* long for vindication.
We don't want things to stay this way forever!

We want Jesus to be glorified –
and so therefore, we conclude:

d. Therefore, All Kingdoms Should Sing to the God of Israel (v32-35)

³² *O kingdoms of the earth, sing to God;*

sing praises to the Lord, Selah

³³ *to him who rides in the heavens, the ancient heavens;*
behold, he sends out his voice, his mighty voice.

³⁴ *Ascribe power to God,*
whose majesty is over Israel,
and whose power is in the skies.

³⁵ *Awesome is God from his^[g] sanctuary;*
the God of Israel—he is the one who gives power and strength to his people.
Blessed be God!

Notice that David is not asking that God would vindicate Israel and destroy the nations.

Rather, he asks that God vindicate himself.

And when God vindicates himself, then the salvation that God has wrought for Israel
will come to the nations as well.

The same God who rode the heavens down to Mt. Sinai in Exodus 24
now rides the heavens today.

In verse 4, God rode through the deserts.

Now, God rides the heavens – the ancient heavens – and sends out his mighty voice.

Even in the OT, the nations *should have* blessed God for what God was doing in Israel.
Because what God began in Israel, was intended to go forth to the nations.

And now it has!

Psalm 68 is quoted in Ephesians 4.

Psalm 68 fits *beautifully* with what Paul is saying in Ephesians.

Paul has just finished talking about the “mystery of the gospel” –
which is that God has brought Jew and Gentile together
in one new man in Jesus Christ.

In other words, what David longed for in Psalm 68 is what Paul proclaims in Eph 1-3.

The ascension of Christ has brought about

Psalm 68 says that God has ascended on high – and *received* gifts –
but Paul says that when he ascended on high he *gave* gifts.

Paul is not following the LXX here (the LXX agrees with the Hebrew).

Rather, Paul is applying Psalm 68.

After all, what does the king do when he has received the spoil – the plunder –
the tribute from the nations?

When the king has received gifts,
he then gives gifts.

When Jesus ascended, he received gifts indeed –
all nations have brought tribute to King Jesus! –
but Paul highlights the fact that King Jesus now *gives gifts* –
taking from the spoil of the nations and giving gifts to his church.