

Psalm 68:1-18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Psalm 68 verses 1 to 18. To the choir master, a psalm of David, a song. God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered, and those who hate him shall flee before him.

As smoke is driven away, so you shall drive them away. As wax melts before fire, so the wicked shall perish before God. But the righteous shall be glad, they shall exult before God, they shall be jubilant with joy. 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, father of the fatherless and protector of widows, is God in his holy habitation. God settles the solitary in a home, he leads out the prisoners to prosperity, but the rebellious dwell in a parched land. O God, when you went out before your people, when you marched through the wilderness, the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain, before God, the one of Sinai, before God, the God of Israel. Rain in abundance, O God, you shed abroad, you restored your inheritance as it languished, your flock found a dwelling in it, in your goodness, O God, you provided for the needy. The Lord gives the word, the women who announce the news are a great host. The kings of the armies, they flee, they flee. The women at home divide the spoil. Though you men lie among the sheepfolds, the wings of a dove covered with silver, its pinions with shimmering gold. When the Almighty scatters kings there, let snow fall on

Zalmon. O mountain of God, mountain of Bashan, O many-peaked mountain, mountain of Bashan, 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. The chariots of God are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands. The Lord is among them. Sinai is now in the sanctuary. 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. Psalm 68 is a difficult yet a glorious psalm, celebrating the power and the triumph of the Lord over his enemies. At its heart lies a procession, as the people move up from the historic realms associated with the Lord's presence up to Jerusalem. The exodus and the period following it are described as a sort of procession of the Lord, the God over the nations, moving in triumph to Zion, the place of his great enthronement. Some commentators, such as Derek Kidner, suggest that we should associate the psalm with the bringing of the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem in 2 Samuel chapter 6. The psalm is a psalm of exuberant praise. It's quite fitting for such a joyous occasion.

In Numbers chapter 10 verses 35 to 36 we read, The psalm begins with words that seem to allude to this announcement, the announcement given as the Ark leads the people on their journey. The verses that follow expound upon this. With the opening words, the psalm evokes a joyful procession of the people with the Ark of the Covenant at their head, praising the Lord as they move towards Jerusalem. The enemies of the Lord are compared to smoke that is driven away, or wax that melts before fire. They cannot stand up to the power of God. The perishing of the wicked is contrasted with the joy of the righteous, who are established by God's coming.

God rides through the deserts towards Jerusalem, his resting place. A shout is taken up by the people as they prepare the way for him. The hearer might think of a later passage of scripture here, in Isaiah chapter 40 verses 3 to 10, which declares the Lord's coming up from the wilderness to Mount Zion to reign. A voice cries, In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

[4 : 16] Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low. The uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. A voice says, Cry, and I said, What shall I cry?

All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news. Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news. Lift it up, fear not. Say to the cities of Judah, Behold your God. Behold the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him. Behold his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

As God comes, he brings deliverance in his wake. He is praised as the defender of the widow, and the fatherless. He settles the solitary in a home. He delivers prisoners into prosperity.

He is the God who is concerned for the outcast, the oppressed, those in need, those who are abandoned and marginalised. The movement of the ark recalls the procession of the exodus. God brought liberation to his beleaguered people. David, to whom the psalm is attributed, looks back to the exodus, and the Lord going before his people in the wilderness, in the pillar of cloud and fire, and in the ark of the covenant. They are continuing this procession, which has finally led them to this point. As they go up towards Jerusalem with the ark, they are moving towards the conclusion, and the great climax of this whole journey. Verses 8 and 9 recall Judges chapter 5 verses 4 and 5, which describe the Lord's victorious march up into the promised land at the head of his people.

Lord, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled and the heavens dropped, yes the clouds dropped water, the mountains quaked before the Lord, even Sinai before the Lord, the God of Israel. God triumphantly led his flock into the land, and he settled them in the land, providing them with rain and a place of safety. He addressed the needs of the nation in its dependency. The verses that follow are particularly difficult, and many different translations of them have been offered. It seems to involve an announcement of the Lord's triumph, and then women who are proclaiming it and dividing the spoil. As the news gets round that the kings of the armies are fleeing, the women start to divide the spoil, even those who have been far from the battlefield. Verse 13 is particularly difficult. Kidna raises the interesting possibility that the wings of a dove covered with silver, its pinions with shimmering gold, might be a description of the Israelite women trying on some of the spoil. As they array themselves in the finery that's taken from the fleeing armies, they look like glorious birds, with precious metals as their plumage.

[7 : 20] The identity of Mount Zalmon is not entirely clear. Many suggestions have been put forward for its precise location. Some have, for instance, suggested Jebel Ruz, which is a taller mountain in the region of the Transjordan. This might help us to understand the reference to Bashan. This many-peaked mountain, this higher mountain, looks with jealousy towards Mount Zion, which the Lord has chosen over it. Despite its greater height, the Lord has not chosen it. Rather, the Lord has chosen this less glorious mountain, and he is going to place his presence there. The description of the chariot of the Lord might recall Deuteronomy chapter 33 verses 2 to 5. He said, The Lord came from Sinai, and dawned from Seir upon us. He shone forth from Mount Paran. He came from the ten thousands of holy ones, with flaming fire at his right hand. Yes, he loved his people. All his holy ones were in his hand, so they followed in your steps, receiving direction from you. When Moses commanded us a law as a possession for the assembly of Jacob, thus the Lord became king in Jeshurun, when the heads of the people were gathered, all the tribes of Israel together. The twice ten thousand, or thousands upon thousands mentioned in verse 17, may be the people of the Lord that are leading up this great procession. The Lord is among them, and now Sinai is in the sanctuary. Kidna observes,

The thought will be carried still further in Hebrews chapter 12 verses 18 to 24. As he ascends, he leads a great host of captives behind him, and he receives gifts and tribute, not merely from his people, but also from his enemies. The law's rule is going to be established upon this mountain.

Therefore it says, How should we understand Paul's use of Psalm 68 at this juncture in his argument in Ephesians?

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