

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Messianic Psalms

Psalm 68

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Introduction

Today, we begin our third series on the Messianic Psalms. As we do so, it's worthwhile restating that Messianic Psalms speak of the Messiah. Christ is the Greek word for the Hebrew word, Messiah, which means the Anointed One. Therefore, a Messianic Psalm in some way speaks about the Person and/or the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Usually, you can identify a Messianic Psalm if it contains a reference to the Messiah; and if it's applied to Christ in the New Testament. Sometimes, it's a whole Psalm. Sometimes, it's just a single verse from a Psalm. For example, the entirety of Psalm 22 refers to Messiah as the One who bore the punishment of our sins in His body on the cross and the future consequences for Him based upon that work of salvation. Whereas, in Psalm 41, there's only verse 9 about the Messiah, a prophecy about Judas and his betrayal of Christ. Only v. 18 in Psalm 68 is explicitly applied to Christ in the New Testament.

Overview of Psalm 68: the Song of Israel's great Victories

Psalm 68 is a psalm of David, a triumphant victory song of Israel's great victories. It was written for when he brought the ark of God from the house of Obed Edom into the tent he'd provided for it in Jerusalem. You can read the full accounts of this happening in 2 Samuel ch.6 & 1 Chronicles chs. 15-16. It was the first significant thing he did after he had been anointed as Israel's king. Specifically, Psalm 68:24-27 celebrate this event. Like David's song of thanksgiving in 1 Chronicles 16:8-36, Psalm 68 reviews all of Israel's history with Jehovah through to the nation's future unique place in Messiah's everlasting kingdom upon earth.

David composed this psalm to be sung at various stages of the ark's journey from Obed Edom's house to Mount Zion. J. G. Bellett (Short Meditations on The Psalms, G. Morrish, London, 1910) suggested six stages:

1. Vv.1-6: God's constant presence with Israel was celebrated as the journey commenced.
2. Vv.7-10: His presence throughout their wilderness journey was remembered.
3. Vv.11-14 concern Israel's experiences of God's support in their battles for, then after they'd entered, Canaan.
4. Vv.15-19: when the ascent of the ark to Mount Zion began, there was that prophetic anticipation of God's presence amongst Israel in the coming Kingdom.
5. Vv.20-23: during the ascent, the Lord's final deliverance of Israel from all their enemies was envisaged.
6. Vv.24-35: when the ark reached its resting place, the singers prophesied of the reality of God's presence in Jerusalem's temple throughout Messiah's millennial Kingdom.

However, because Psalm 68 contains overlapping and repetitive themes, various different suggestions have been made as to how to sub-divide it. I'll focus on the various victories which it celebrates. I'll now read vv.1-6 from the ESV.

Vv.1-6: Establishing the Praise

“To the choirmaster. 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.”

Psalm 68 begins with that first ever movement of the ark, when Israel set out from Mount Sinai in the second year of their exodus from Egypt. V.1 is almost an exact quotation of Moses:

“Arise, O LORD, and let your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate you flee before you” (Numbers 10:35).

God is bidden to arise, to scatter His enemies and cause them to flee. In a general way, vv.1-3 establish the victory themes of the entire psalm. Nothing, and no one, shall prevent God from fulfilling His purposes for Israel. All opposition is overcome by Him, or dissolves away from before Him. Vv.3-4 direct His people to exult in His praise, which, Psalm 110:3 states, they'll willingly do in the day of His power. (In v.4, He's called JAH to emphasise His absolute nature and power - for example, see Psalm 89:8 & Isaiah 26:4). Vv.5-6 remind us that His power is always compassionately and tenderly directed towards all needy, desolate, and solitary people, whether free or imprisoned.

Vv.7-8: Specific celebrations of Israel's wilderness experiences

“O God, when you went out before your people, when you marched through the wilderness, *Selah* the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain, before God, the One of Sinai, before God, the God of Israel.”

These two verses summarise Israel's journey as recorded in The Book of Numbers. Following their redemption by blood from Egypt and their deliverance by power at the Red Sea, God brought them to Sinai. After making them His covenant people, He led them through the wilderness and miraculously provided sustenance for their whole journey, with the heavens oozing its bountiful supplies.

Vv.9-14: Victories in Canaan celebrated

“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.”

The figurative use of the words “poured down rain” in v.8, seem to remind David of Deborah’s victory song. Vv.9-14 echo that song and celebrate the triumphant, irresistible march of God when Barak defeated Sisera, the Canaanite king as recorded in Judges chs.4-5. On that occasion, the torrent Kishon swept away the kings of Canaan, at Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo causing Deborah to exult, “March on, my soul, with might!” (see Judges 5:19-21). Perhaps, also, David had in mind his own victory over the Jebusites who defiantly held Jerusalem, the stronghold of Zion, until he cleverly outwitted them (see 1 Chronicles 11:4-9 & 2 Samuel 5:6-10). After he united all the tribes of Israel under his kingship, Jerusalem became Israel’s political capital city. And thereafter, David lived in Zion, which was renamed “the city of David.” But Jesus referred to it as “the city of the great King” (see Matthew 5:35, which quotes Ps.48:1).

Vv.15-18: Celebrating God’s presence in Zion

“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.”

It appeals to me that in these verses David is celebrating God’s choice of Zion by comparing it to Mount Hermon, called “mountain of Bashan.” Mount Hermon is Palestine’s highest peak on Israel’s northernmost border. Poetically, he questions Mount Hermon, ‘Why do you look with envy upon the mount that God desires to be His everlasting dwelling place?’ (my paraphrase of v.16 in Darby, RV & Young’s Literal translation.) David identifies the sanctuary as Jehovah’s actual dwelling place, even before the temple had been built. God’s choice of Zion is primarily stated in Psalm 132:13-18:

“For the LORD has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his dwelling place: “This is my resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it. I will abundantly bless her provisions; I will satisfy her poor with bread. Her priests I will clothe with salvation, and her saints will shout for joy. There I will make a horn to sprout for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed. His enemies I will clothe with shame, but on him his crown will shine.””

- Psalm 2:6 states that Jehovah has already anointed His King upon Zion, the hill of His holiness! Psalm 24 declares that Messiah is the only Person who is both spiritually and morally qualified to ascend to the hill of the LORD and to occupy the Sanctuary.
- Psalm 48:1-3 celebrate Zion’s future elevation, when it becomes the joy of all the earth as the city of Israel’s God, for Mount Zion will be known the city of the great King (cp. Matthew 5:35).

But Ps.68:18 is Messianic and is thus the prophetic climax of David’s song:

“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.”

Therefore, David celebrates the capture of Zion in vv.19-23.

Vv.19-23: Celebrating David's capture of Zion

“Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears us up; God is our salvation. Selah Our God is a God of salvation, and to GOD, the Lord, belong deliverances from death. But God will strike the heads of his enemies, the hairy crown of him who walks in his guilty ways. The Lord said, “I will bring them back from Bashan, I will bring them back from the depths 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.””

Vv.19-23 look back to David's victory over the Jebusites and forward to Messiah's return, when He, the LORD of hosts, will come down to fight for Mount Zion (Isaiah 31:4). Then He will fill it with justice and righteousness (Isaiah 33:5). Because He will set His sanctuary there forevermore, all nations of the world will acknowledge the LORD has sanctified Israel to be His people (Ezekiel 37:24-28).

Vv.24-27: Celebrating the placement of the ark in Zion

“Your procession is seen, O God, the procession of my God, my King, into the sanctuary—the singers in front, the musicians last, between them virgins playing tambourines: “Bless God in the great congregation, the LORD, O you who are of Israel's fountain!” 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.”

In vv.24-27, David describes the joyous event as the priests carry the ark up Mount Zion and into the tent, he'd provided for it. All the tribes of Israel, from Zebulun and Naphtali in the north to Benjamin in the south accompanied the ark. The contributions of the singers, the dancers, the musicians, the representatives of the tribes, and of David himself, together with the many sacrifices made, are recorded in 2 Samuel 6:12—20 and 1 Chronicles chs.15-16.

Vv.28-31: Prophetically celebrating the establishment of God's Kingdom upon Earth

“Summon your power, O God, the power, O God, by which you have worked for us. Because of your temple at Jerusalem kings shall bear gifts to you. 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. Nobles shall come from Egypt; Cush shall hasten to stretch out her hands to God.”

In vv.28-31, David appeals to God to usher in Messiah's kingdom, which includes the establishment of Jerusalem's temple and its system of worship, by His subjection of all hostile Gentile powers through the appearing of Messiah. Then, all opposition will be crushed, and Jesus Christ will reign in power and glory from Jerusalem over every nation of the world (see, for example, Zechariah 14; Luke 21:24-27; Matthew 24:29-31 & 25:31-46).

Vv.32-35: Prophetically celebrating the worldwide worship of God

“O kingdoms of the earth, sing to God; sing praises to the Lord, Selah to him who rides in the heavens, the ancient heavens; behold, he sends out his voice, his mighty voice. Ascribe power to God, whose majesty is over Israel, and whose power is in the skies. Awesome is God from his sanctuary; the God of Israel—he is the one who gives power and strength to his people. Blessed be God!”

Finally, David envisages the coming kingdom of Messiah and calls upon the saved nations to ascribe God worship. These final verses begin, "Sing to God", and end, "Blessed be God!" They reflect the fact that all Psalm 68 vibrates with God's praise. So it's fitting for me to quote a few verses from the "Hallelujah Psalms", Pss.146-150, before moving on to consider Ps.68:18 as quoted in the New Testament:

"The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, to all generations. Praise the LORD!" (Psalm 146:10).

"Praise the LORD! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens! Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his excellent greatness! Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with sounding cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!" (Psalm 150:1-6).

Psalm 68:18 quoted in the New Testament

Ephesians 4:8 applies Psalm 68:18 to the Lord Jesus Christ. V.18 is at the very centre of Psalm 68 and the words, "You ascended on high", are recognised as being its zenith. For context, let's read from Ephesians 4:1-16:

"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower [parts of] the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, 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. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 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."

I'll make four main points about Paul's use of Psalm 68:18.

First, several translations prefix this quotation with the word, "When." I think that's to identify the point in history when Messiah's exaltation actually occurred. It was at His ascension from earth into heaven. This is most important because it distinguishes Judaism from Christianity. A friend of mine recently asked me if my church thought that the doctrine of the Ascension of Christ was important. I replied that it's essential to the Christian faith that the Christ is now a glorified Man in

the presence of God. Christianity takes its character from Him there in heaven. God calls us present-day believers to be His heavenly people, that's our calling. The nation of Israel are God's earthly people, who are called by God to possess their earthly inheritance, the Promised Land and the physical worldwide Kingdom of God ruled by Messiah their King (Revelation 11:15). The Church is blessed with spiritual blessings in the exalted Christ in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:3). That's why, after stating that Christian believers now see Jesus crowned with glory and honour, the writer of The Letter to the Hebrews exhorts us, as holy brothers who share in this heavenly calling, to consider what it means that Jesus is our apostle and high priest, who is seated in His exalted place at the right hand of the Majesty on high (see Hebrews 2:9, 3:1 with 1:3).

Second, Ephesians 4:9-10 explain what the words, "He ascended" obviously mean. They mean that the Christ must first come down from heaven. Jewish messianic hopes were for their Messiah to be sent from God as their great Deliverer. They didn't realise that Christ had first to suffer before entering into His glory (see Luke 24:25-27 & 46). However, it was always the eternal purpose of God that His Christ would suffer those things prophesied about Him in the Old Testament and, after rising out from among the dead, that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem and reaching the ends of the earth (see Luke 24:45-47 & Acts 1:8). So, in the prophetic statement of Psalm 68:18, "You ascended on high", Paul wants Christian believers to appreciate that Christ had, of necessity, to descend not only from heaven, but also into the lower parts of the earth, that is, into death itself. Ephesians 4:9-10 are bracketed in most translations causing us to pause and reflect on the depth of the truth they contain; there was no other way that either the Church or Israel could be blessed!

Third, the next part of Paul's quotation of Psalm 68:18 is, "He led a host of captives", itself a quotation from Deborah's song of triumph, "Arise, Barak, lead away your captives" (Judges 5:12). Bible teachers differ over its use in Ephesians 4:8. To me, the most satisfactory explanation is that the captives are all the dead Old Testament saints, whose spirits and souls were released from the confines of sheol or hades. After Christ's triumph over death at His resurrection, they were transferred from Abraham's bosom to be with Him in Paradise (cp. Luke 16:22-23 with 23:43). But the most important issue is that principally, in both Judges 5 and Psalm 68, it's a victory cry!

Fourth, Paul finishes quoting Psalm 68:18 at the words, "He gave gifts to men." Quotations from the Old Testament in the New Testament are from the Septuagint version. So Brenton translates Psalm 68:18, "Thou hast received gifts for man", which Paul utilises in Ephesians 4:11 onwards to show what that actually means for the Church. As its risen, ascended, and exalted Head, Christ bestows many gifts upon His Church. Whilst in Romans 12:4-8 and 1 Corinthians 12, these are spiritual gifts, in Ephesians 4:11 they're men: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. V.12 gives the reason for these gifts and v.13 states the objective. These men are provided to fully equip Christ's people for serving and building up His body until it attains that fullness to be His complement in the same way as Eve was built by God to be Adam's counterpart (Genesis 2:18). Ephesians 4:10 states that God's eternal purpose is that Christ will fill everything in eternity. We must link that with 1:9-11. It's God's will to head up all things in the Christ, both the things in the heavens, and the things on earth. And 1:20-21 state that He raised Christ from the dead and, through His ascension, exalted and seated Him at His right hand far above every other rule or authority. Christ is given to be head over all things to the Church, His Body, which is the fullness of Him, the One who, in eternity, fills everything in every way (v.22). What a triumphant note to finish on! (cp. Ephesians 3:21.)

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