

IN RESPONSE – PSALM 68:1-18: A STUDY, PART ONE

by Dennis Prutow

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Jesus Christ is the great Victor over all His and our enemies. He subdued the devil and defeated death. He sits on the throne of the majesty on high as King of kings and Lord of lords. The great Christian confession is, "Jesus is Lord" (Romans 10:9). Psalm 68 sets forth the enthronement of Christ. The apostle Paul indicates this is the case in his reference to Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8.

This quotation from the Psalm is another use of a general reference to God, taken from the Old Testament, and specifically applied to Jesus Christ in the New Testament. My objective is to show this is the case and therefore to display the Christological thrust of the Psalm.

Seeing this is important from a biblical-theological perspective. It is doubly important from the perspective of singing, preaching, and teaching. Paul's use of the Psalm teaches us when we are truly God centered in preaching we *are* Christ centered. The Psalm itself, and Paul's use of it, therefore helps teach us how to preach Christ from the Old Testament.

To achieve our objective, we will look at Psalm 68:1-18. In the next issue, we will examine Ephesians 4:7-9 to see what light Paul sheds on the Psalm and what light the Psalm sheds on the gifts of Jesus Christ to His church.

The setting for Psalm 68 is much debated. Derek Kidner follows Spurgeon. "This rushing cataract of a psalm—one of the most boisterous and exhilarating in the Psalter—may have been composed for David's procession with the ark 'from the house of Obed-Edom to the city of David with rejoicing' (2 Sa. 6:12)."¹ A. J. Alexander differs. This psalm "is a triumphal song, occasioned by some signal victory or success in war, perhaps that recorded in 2 Samuel xii. 26-31, which closed the last important war of David's reign."²

Hengstenberg is more general. "[T]he occasion must have been the termination of some war when the ark was brought back to the Holy Mountain.³ *Expositor's Greek Testament*, in reviewing the Psalm, lists ten possible occasions.⁴

The common thread is the movement of the ark of God. The Ark of the Covenant was the symbol of God's presence among His people. The psalm "opens with an echo of the words with which the ark set out on all its journeys (Nu. 10:35), and finds its climax in God's ascent of 'the high mount' which He has chosen for His dwelling."⁵

The people moved from the foot of Sinai led by the ark over which the pillar of fire or the cloud would rest. "Then it came about when the ark set out that Moses said, 'Rise up, O Lord! And let Your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate You flee before You.' When it came to rest, he said, 'Return, O Lord, To the myriad thousands of Israel'" (Numbers 10:35-36). Psalm 68 is a psalm of the victory of God. Verse 1 sets the theme. "Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered, and let those who hate Him flee before Him."

We briefly look at verses 1-18.

The Psalmist, in ver. 1—6, praises the Lord, as the savior of the righteous, and the destroyer of the wicked. Then He casts a look upon the grand manifestations of his mighty grace on behalf of his people, as seen in history. First, in ver. 7-10, what he did for them when he led them through the wilderness, until he brought them to the promised land. Next, in ver. 11-14, the victory and happy peace which he granted to the people in the *time of the judges*, until the erection of the sanctuary on Mount Zion. Then, ver. 15-19, the Lord has chosen Zion, which, in spite of all the assaults of

the world, he shall never leave, and where he sits enthroned in the sanctuary, with all the fullness of his might: *he has made himself known as the God of Zion, in the victories gained over the enemies of his people.*⁶

The psalm portrays God's inexorable triumphant march from Sinai to Zion.

Verses 1-6 form the introduction to the psalm. Verse 1, 'Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered,⁷ and let those who hate Him flee before Him.' Again, this verse is "an adaptation of Israel's ancient watchword" (Num. x. 35).⁸ God arises. His enemies *are scattered*. "Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4). There is no neutral ground. Failure to love God is to hate Him. "Hatred of God is impotent. His proudest foes can do him no injury."⁹

Verse 2 pictures the ease with which God dispenses with His enemies. "As smoke is driven away, so drive them away; as wax melts before the fire, so let the wicked perish before God." God's enemies flee as smoke retreats before the wind. As wax yields to the fire, so God's foes inevitably yield to Him. Psalm 1 uses similar imagery. The wicked "are like chaff which the wind drives away" (Psalm 1:4). God's enemies perish. They perish eternally. "Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous" (Psalm 1:5).

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⁶ Hengstenberg, 334.

⁷ "Or, 'God will arise, and his enemies be scattered...'. All three verbs of verse 1 are affirmations, present or future. Those of the next to verses therefore continue in this strain, although in isolation they would be translated as either affirmations or prayers." Kidner, 238, note 1. Compare the New American Standard Bible margin.

⁸ A. Cohen, *The Psalms, Socinos of the Bible*, 14 vols. (New York: The Socinos Press, Ltd., 1992), 9:209.

⁹ Spurgeon.

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 238. See also C. H. Spurgeon, *Treasury of David* (Newark: Cornerstone, n.d.), 3:214.

² A. J. Alexander, *The Psalms Translated and Explained* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 283.

³ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 3 vols. (Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack Publishing Company, n.d.), 2:335.

⁴ *Expositor's Greek Testament*, W. Robertson Nicoll, ed., 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 3:325.

⁵ Kinder.

IN RESPONSE – PSALM 68:1-18: A STUDY, PART TWO

by Dennis Prutow

Verses 3, “But let the righteous be glad; let them exult before God; yes, let them rejoice with gladness.” “Whereas the manifestation of God will bring destruction upon the wicked, to the righteous it will offer cause for rejoicing in the establishment of equity.”¹ The call goes out to give praise to God (verse 4). “Sing to God, sing praises to His name; lift up a song for Him who rides through the deserts, whose name is the Lord, and exult before Him.” “The second clause alludes to the opening of roads for kings and armies.”² It foreshadows the march of God leading His people through the wilderness from Sinai to Zion. “An alternate translation is, ‘cast up a highway for Him,’ for which there is a parallel in Isa. xl. 3 ‘straighten out in the wilderness a highway for our God,’ in which God is pictured as a saving warrior riding his chariot through the desert to meet the enemy in battle.”³ “The marches of God were in the waste howling wilderness. His eternal power and Godhead were there displayed in his feeding, ruling, and protecting the vast hosts which he had brought out of Egypt.”⁴

The exalted Name LORD is Yah or Jah and is “a contraction of Jehovah.”⁵ We see it most frequently as part of the Hebrew word coming into English as *Hallelujah*, praise the LORD.

Verse 5 describes Jehovah, “A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows, is God in His holy habitation.” He is *the* Father of the fatherless and *the* Judge for widows. “As the generation which came out of Egypt gradually died away, there were many widows and fatherless ones in the camp.... The tabernacle was the Place of Justice; the ark was the seat of the great King.... He is the President of Orphanages, the Protector of Widows.”⁶ Little wonder James 1:27 declares, “Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans

and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

In addition, God’s holy habitation, “His *abode of holiness*[,] cannot in this connection denote heaven, but must be referred to his peculiar residence among his chosen people.”⁷ God is with His people in the march through the wilderness into Canaan.

Verse 6 offers further description. “God makes a home for the lonely; He leads out the prisoners into prosperity, only the rebellious dwell in a parched land.” Here is threefold blessing. God gives His people the blessing of homes and families. God gives His people the blessing of freedom. God gives His people the blessing of sufficient provision. The rebellious among Israel experienced a parched land in the wilderness. The rebellious suffer a dearth of spiritual and emotional wellbeing in the midst of plenty. God is the victor over the howling wastelands through which He leads His people.

The next portion of the Psalm, verses 7-10, makes this clear. Verse 7, “O God, when You went forth before Your people, when You marched through the wilderness, Selah.”

If this processional psalm was indeed written to escort the ark to the newly won Jerusalem, it celebrated the last stage of the journey begun centuries before at Mount Sinai. There the ark had been made, and from there it had led Israel in God’s name into the promised land and now at last to the summit on mount Zion.⁸

The march begins. “Rise up, O Lord! And let Your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate You flee before You” (Numbers 10:35). “God himself was the guide of Israel through the wilderness.”⁹ But why does the psalmist begin at Sinai. “The answer is: it was at Sinai that the *covenant* for the first time was formally and solemnly concluded.”¹⁰ Before the sentence concludes, “Selah.” There is a pause to reflect on the idea and implica-

tions of the God’s march through the wilderness, “a pause of solemn and admiring recollection.”¹¹

Verse 8, “The earth quaked; the heavens also dropped rain at the presence of God; Sinai itself quaked at the presence of God, the God of Israel.” At Sinai, the earth quaked. Exodus 19:18 relates the scene. “Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently.” The rain is not that of a thunderstorm. The Biblical data does not include such rain at Sinai or in the wilderness.

Verse 9 repeats the thought of God’s blessing with rain. Here the rain is no ordinary one. “You shed abroad a plentiful rain, O God; You confirmed Your inheritance when it was parched.” “The first clause probably refers to the abundant and refreshing gifts (of which rain is a natural and common emblem) bestowed upon the people in the wilderness, including manna, quails, and water.”¹² “Such rain as never fell before dropped on the desert sand, bread from heaven and winged fowl fell all around the host; good gifts were poured upon them, rivers leaped forth from rocks.”¹³

The biblical witness is clear. Exodus 16:4, “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you.’” Psalm 78:24 and 27, “He rained down manna upon them to eat and gave them food from heaven.... He rained meat upon them like the dust, even winged fowl like the sand of the seas.”

“The next clause heightens the description by suggesting that the gift came precisely when it was most needed.”¹⁴ God confirmed the people were His by sustaining them from heaven. “The *inheritance of God* indicates, as usual, not the *land*, but the *people* of the Lord.”¹⁵

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¹ Cohen.

² Alexander, 284.

³ Ibid. Kidner, 239 See also Hengstenberg, 341.

⁴ Spurgeon, 216

⁵ Hengstenberg, 343.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Alexander.

⁸ Kidner, 239.

⁹ Matthew Henrys Commentary on the Whole Bible, 6 vols. (Nutley, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 3:386

¹⁰ Hengstenberg, 345.

¹¹ Alexander.

¹² Ibid, 285.

¹³ Spurgeon, 217.

¹⁴ Alexander.

¹⁵ Hengstenberg, 346.

IN RESPONSE – PSALM 68:1-18: A STUDY, PART THREE

by Dennis Prutow

Verse 10, “Your creatures settled in it; You provided in Your goodness for the poor, O God.” The Authorized Version says, “Thy congregation hath dwelt therein: thou, O God.” “The uncommon word *chayyah* occurs in 2 Sam xxiii. 13 where it means ‘congregation’ (Rashi) and is translated troop. In Arabic it means a clan consisting of persons sharing the same blood.”¹ In it, *therein*, refers either to the wilderness or to the Promised Land. The latter seems preferable. “*Therein*, i.e. in the land of promise, which was present to the writer’s mind, though not expressly mentioned in the context.”²

Within the land, blessings were to abound. It was a land flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:8, Numbers 13:27). Why? “The land into which you are about to cross to possess it, a land of hills and valleys, drinks water from the rain of heaven” (Deuteronomy 11:11). God insured the care of the poor from the fruit of the land. So God led the people on a march from Sinai into the land He promised them.

The next section of the psalm, “ver. 11-14, displays what God did for his people from the time of their entrance into the land, till the setting up of the sanctuary in Zion:—he gave them glorious victory and happy peace, which are celebrated each in two verses.”³

Verse 11, “The Lord gives the command; the women who proclaim the good tidings are a great host.” In this verse, “we do not sing of marching, but of battle and victory.”⁴ God leads His people forward in conquest of Canaan. “God was their commander-in-chief: *The Lord gave the word*, as general of their armies. He raised up judges for them, gave them their commissions and instructions, and assured them of success.”⁵ God gave the order “for the subjection of the inhabitants of Canaan, and the victory ensued.”⁶ God raised up Deborah. The

victory of her commander, Barak, over Jaban, king of Canaan, and over Sisera, his general, is an example (Judges 4). “When God has messages to send, he will not want messengers.”⁷ Under Deborah, “The hand of the sons of Israel pressed heavier and heavier upon Jabin the king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Jabin the king of Canaan” (Judges 4:24).

Reference to a host of women may be an “allusion to the ancient oriental custom of women celebrating victories with song and dance.”⁸ See Exodus 15:20, Judges 5:12, and 1 Samuel 18:6-7. More than a single incidence may be in view. “The great band of female-messengers of joy is made up of the union of all the separate choirs during the centuries of the time of the judges, till the erection of the sanctuary on Mount Zion.”⁹

Verse 12, “Kings of armies flee, they flee, and she who remains at home will divide the spoil!” “David now adverts to the victories by which God had signally displayed his power in behalf of his people.”¹⁰ As Jaban and Sisera fled before Israel, so other kings took flight. Gideon’s pursuit of Zeba and Zalmunna, kings of Midian, is another outstanding example (Judges 8). “The lords of hosts fled before the Lord of Hosts.”¹¹

The words “divide the spoil” are “illumined by Judges 5:30, where Sisera’s mother pictures to herself the rich garments her son will bring home.”¹² In this war with Canaan, another woman who remained at home took the spoils of war. Jael slew Sisera. “Jael, Heber’s wife, took a tent peg and seized a hammer in her hand, and went secretly to him and drove the peg into his temple, and it went through into the ground; for he was sound asleep and exhausted. So he died” (Judges 4:21).

God raised up judges to deliver His people from the tyranny of their foes. This He brought decades of rest upon the

land. “And the land was undisturbed for forty years” (Judges 5:31). “And the land was undisturbed for forty years in the days of Gideon” (Judges 8:28). God’s march against Israel’s enemies brings peace. Psalm 68:13-14 speaks of this rest.

Verse 13, “When you lie down among the sheepfolds, you are like the wings of a dove covered with silver, and its pinions with glistening gold.” Israel is now in green pastures. “The lovely changeable, colors of the dove might well image the mild lustrous beauty of the nation, when arrayed in white holiday-attire....”¹³ “The beautiful allusion in the last clause to the changeable colors of a dove’s plumage seems intended to suggest the idea of peaceful but splendid prosperity.”¹⁴

Verse 14, “When the Almighty scattered the kings there, it was snowing in Zalmon.” “Zalmon is a ‘hill mentioned in Judges ix. 48, which was covered over with great thick wood, (even according to that passage), so that it might be called a dark forest, the black or dark mountain.”¹⁵ The Psalm compares the peace of God bringing the resplendent whiteness of snow to the black mountain, a transformation from darkness to light. “The change from war to peace is likened to the dazzling whiteness of snow in the midst of blackness or darkness.”¹⁶

The following section of the psalm, verses 15-19, “describes the glory of God in Zion, after He had taken up his abode.”¹⁷ The march from Sinai to Zion is completed. “As the ark, the throne of the invisible God, leads the procession up to its resting place, its progress is a victory march completing the exodus.”¹⁸

“The mention of snow-clad Zalmon leads the mind to the white-capped giants in an beyond Bashan.”¹⁹ Verse 15....

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¹ Cohen, 211.

² Alexander, 285.

³ Hengstenberg, 347.

⁴ Spurgeon, 218.

⁵ Henry, 486.

⁶ Cohen.

⁷ Henry.

⁸ Alexander.

⁹ Hengstenberg.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 3:15.

¹¹ Spurgeon.

¹² Kidner, 240.

¹³ Spurgeon, 219.

¹⁴ Alexander, 286.

¹⁵ Hengstenberg, 350, quoting Luther.

¹⁶ Alexander.

¹⁷ Hengstenberg.

¹⁸ Kidner, 242.

¹⁹ Kidner, 241.

IN RESPONSE – PSALM 68:1-18: A STUDY, PART FOUR

by Dennis Prutow

Verse 15, “A mountain of God is the mountain of Bashan; a mountain of many peaks is the mountain of Bashan.” This is “a mount of peaks and ridges, ... a chain with many loft summits....”¹ Bashan is a mountain of God because it shows “the creative power of God by its vastness.”² In addition, “Bashan is known for its lushness and imposing appearance.”³ “There was, moreover, a peculiar propriety, arising from its position on the very boundary between Judea and the heathen world, in employing it as a symbol of the world’s might....”⁴

Verse 16, “Why do you look with envy, O mountains with many peaks, at the mountain which God has desired for His abode? Surely the Lord will dwell there forever.” God did not select Bashan but Zion as His dwelling place. The implication is that Bashan looks at Zion with “envy.”⁵ The “meaning is to eye with envious hostility.”⁶

“Zion is here described as an object of hostility or envy to the mountains of the heathen world, on account of the honor put upon it by its being chosen as the earthly residence of God.”⁷ Verse 17 confirms the latter. “The chariots⁸ of God are myriads, thousands upon thousands; the Lord is among them as at Sinai, in holiness.” The AV reads, “The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels: the Lord is among them, as in Sinai, in the holy place.” “There is no mention of angels in the text, although interpreters in every age have supposed their presence to be necessarily implied, as the conductors of God’s chariots, if not as the chariots themselves....”⁹ “It is possible that the whole angelic host is visualized as the Lord’s chariot-throne, as in Ezk. 1.”¹⁰ “Angels are the chariots of

God.”¹¹ “He is imagined as entering His chosen abode with an innumerable retinue.”¹² Verse 17 also compares the scene with Sinai. Deuteronomy 33:2, “The Lord came from Sinai, and dawned on them from Seir; He shone forth from Mount Paran, and He came from the midst of ten thousand holy ones.” Daniel 7:10 is similar. “Thousands upon thousands were attending Him, and myriads upon myriads were standing before Him; the court sat, and the books were opened.”

Literally, “Sinai is in the sanctuary.”¹³ This is the case since the Law given at Sinai now resides in the Ark of the Covenant installed on Zion. “Mount Sinai is no longer to be sought in the wilderness but may be found within the sanctuary which God has caused human hands to erect for Him.”¹⁴ The picture is simple yet powerful. God was present at Sinai. God is now present on Zion’s holy hill. Sinai reflects the law and justice. Zion portrays grace. “The throne of grace in Zion is holy as the throne of justice in Sinai.”¹⁵

“Ver. 18 gives the matter-of-fact proof for the assertion made in ver. 17.”¹⁶ “You have ascended on high, You have led captive Your captives; You have received gifts among men, even among the rebellious also, that the Lord God may dwell there.” “The ark was conducted to the summit of Zion; God himself took possession of the high places of the earth, being extolled and very high.”¹⁷ Paul quotes this verse in Ephesians 4:8 with reference to Christ. However, as Hodge observes of Psalm 68:18, “It does not refer to the Messiah, but to the triumphs of God over his enemies.”¹⁸ Calvin agrees. “But careful examination of the Psalm will show it to be applied strictly to God alone.”¹⁹

God takes His enemies captive and reigns supreme. “That the Lord sits enthroned in Zion in the whole fullness of his might has been made known, even now, by a great victory over the enemies of his people.”²⁰ “The gifts meant are the forced gifts of the conquered.”²¹ Even the most recalcitrant rebels yield. God controls all from Zion. There He dwells. There He rules.

Here is “a symbolical picture of the climax of the campaign, revealing God in the triumph of His might.”²² This is not just the culmination of a campaign. “With the ascent of ‘the high mount’ the psalm has reached its climax.”²³ “God has won His war, entered His capital and put the rebellious under tribute.”²⁴ The march from Sinai to Zion is complete.

In like manner, “the antitype of the ark, the Lord Jesus, has ascended into the heavens with signal marks of triumph.”²⁵ This Jesus is God. As Paul tells us, “He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives” (Ephesians 4:8). A beautiful picture emerges. Jesus Christ takes a people out of bondage for Himself. He forms them into a visible body by covenant. He leads His people on a march through the wilderness of this life giving them every comfort and benefit. He is the victor over every enemy and over all evil. He ascends to heavenly Zion. From His heavenly throne, and from among the captives He takes, He gives gifts to His church to minister and serve. As His people, we are part of the great assemblage. We too “come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels... and to Jesus” (Hebrews 12:22 and 24).

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¹ Alexander, 286.

² Ibid.

³ Cohen, 212.

⁴ Hengstenberg, 351.

⁵ Alexander.

⁶ Cohen.

⁷ Alexander.

⁸ “This singular is often used collectively: e.g. 2 Ki. 6:17” (Kidner, 241, note 5).

⁹ Alexander.

¹⁰ Kidner, 241, note 5.

¹¹ Henry, 487.

¹² Cohen.

¹³ Hengstenberg, 253. See Cohen, Henry.

¹⁴ Cohen.

¹⁵ Spurgeon, 220.

¹⁶ Hengstenberg.

¹⁷ Spurgeon, 221. See also Part Three, note 17.

¹⁸ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 216.

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians*, Trans.

T.H.L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 174.

²⁰ Hengstenberg.

²¹ Alexander, 288.

²² Cohen.

²³ Kidner, 242.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Spurgeon.