

June 28/29, 2008

# The Victory of God

## Psalm 68

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I enjoy listening to all kinds of music, but I really enjoy listening to college fight songs. Yeah, you heard me right, college fight songs. I don't know if it's because of my enamoration with the college atmosphere. Perhaps it's because in high school I played in a marching band, and I love marching bands. But I love to listen to college fight songs. And, you know, a good college fight song in both the style of music and its lyrics does several things. It speaks of victory, both past and in the future. It extols the might of the university. It calls for allegiance to the alma mater. And it arouses hope and confidence in the team.

Well, the psalm that we will look at this morning I liken to a college fight song, the fight song we might say of the Hebrew people.

A couple of weeks ago Mark Kremer mentioned that there are several styles of psalms that we find. There are laments and there are ones that are meditative. This is neither of those. This psalm is a raise-the-roof, boisterous, exciting psalm of victory. If you have a copy of the scriptures (and I hope you do), please turn with me to Psalm 68.

This psalm is considered one of the most difficult psalms to interpret. It may be one of the most difficult portions of the Hebrew scriptures to interpret. And again, the Old Testament scholars almost in unison say that the interpretative problems here are almost legendary. There's imagery here that scholars are just not quite sure what to make of it, just what exactly it refers to. There are words and phrases in this psalm that occur nowhere else in scripture or other writings that kind of give us a hint how they should be interpreted.

Furthermore, we're not quite sure of the occasion that this psalm was written for. Again, the heading here has *A Psalm of David*, and some have suggested that perhaps David is looking toward the future when the temple would be built and is anticipating the Arc being taken into the temple. Or perhaps David has written this for the occasion when the Arc was moved from Obed-Edom into the city of David. That occurs in 2 Samuel:6. Someone suggested it comes later when the temple was actually constructed, and it was used on the occasion when the Arc was brought into the temple.

But whatever the uncertainties of how the details should be interpreted, I think a general theme is clear that emerges from this psalm. What we encounter in Psalm 68 is a psalm of the victorious reigning mighty God who protects His people, defeats His enemies, and again takes up residence among His people in victory.

Now, before we get to this psalm, I want to point out the structure. I have a graphic here to show you on the screen that might help us picture this a bit.

# Psalm 68

ASCENT OF AND DWELLING IN ZION

15 - 18

11 - 14

VICTORY IN BATTLE

19 - 23

7 - 10

VICTORIOUS PROCESSION

24 - 27

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GOD'S POWER AND RULE

28 - 31

4 - 6

PRAISE THE 'RIDER OF THE SKIES'

32 - 35

1 - 3

PRELUDE

This psalm is written so that verses 15-18 become the apex, or the climax, of the psalm. Now, in ancient times, if someone wanted to emphasize something in the writing, they didn't underline, they didn't italicize, they didn't have bold font. They'd use literary techniques to do so. They might repeat a word or place words at the front of a sentence to give them emphasis. Other times they might structure the text so that it points to the theme. And I think that we have that here when the psalmist crafts this psalm such that in the first part of the psalm and the latter part of the psalm there is a mere picture that all builds and points to verses 15 through 18.

Now, it doesn't perfectly do so. In verse 28-31 we have something that I don't find clearly mirrored in the first part of the psalm. But we have after a prelude, a praise to the rider of the skies. And then we have in verses 7-10, which is mirrored later, a victorious procession. Then there's a description of victory and battle in both the beginning and ending part of the psalm. And that all points toward God's ascent of and His dwelling and reigning in Zion.

Well, let's look at this psalm. There's a lot here, and we're going to have to go through it fairly quickly, so hold on. We're not going to read through this all again. It was well read earlier, but I want to point out some highlights here and help you see the theme that emerges of a victorious God.

Look at the prelude, verses 1-3. And in most translations these verses are interpreted as a request. You know, *may God, let God*, and so forth. I think that this is better seen as being declarations. Verses 1-3 could be read this way and I think should be read this way.

God arises. His enemies are scattered. His foes flee before Him. You've blown them away like smoke, as wax melts before the fire. The wicked perish before God. The righteous are glad and rejoice before God. They're happy and joyful. And it's these declarations that set the stage for this song of victory, this fight song. And it's from this that praise, we'll see in the beginning of verse 4, will erupt.

But I want you to notice something in this prelude in that it sets the stage for this psalm of a victorious God. Notice God arises, God appears, and that's enough for the victory. That's how mighty this God is. He just shows up and He wins the day. Notice God arises and the cause of the enemy scattering is His mere appearance.

But then also note in verse 3 God's presence is not merely the cause of the enemies fleeing, but it's the very location and place of the praise of the faithful. And it's interesting God's appearance has something about it that it divides people into two groups. And there are no casual neutral observers here. His presence either scatters the enemies, or it's the place of praise and joy and rejoicing of the faithful. We'll return to that idea a bit later.

But this prelude right off the bat again extols this wonderful God and again launches into praise beginning in verse 4. Verse 4-6 is the next section here where there's praise for this God who is over all. In verse 4,

**Sing to God, Sing in praise of His name. Extol Him who rides on the clouds.** (\*NASB, Psalm 68)

Maybe many of your translations have “*rides through the deserts*”. Again, here’s one of those places where the interpretation is a bit fuzzy. We’re not quite sure how this should be understood. I think that *He who rides on the clouds or in the skies* is maybe the better translation here, and it is for this reason: Again, this is a psalm of victory, of God defeating His enemies, whether other nations and kings, and yes, other false gods. This term *Rider of the Skies* was a term that the Canaanites used for their god Baal. And Baal was said to be the rider of the skies. And what the psalmist is saying, it is not Baal who is the one who is above all. It is not Baal who is the rider of the skies. That title belongs exclusively to Yahweh. And in verse 4 we see at the end that, again, this God, this rider of the skies is identified. His name is the Lord. His name is Yahweh. This is the God of the Jewish people.

But I want you to notice again something else here that’s interesting. In verses 5 and 6, this God who is above the universe, the rider of the skies who is above all is not an aloof, remote, distant God. This isn’t a monarch who is disconnected from His people. But this is a God who is involved intimately in the affairs of people. In verse 5, he’s a father to the fatherless, a defender of the widow. He makes homes for the lonely. He brings out prisoners with singing.

But this God is not just involved in the lives of the people whom He’s protecting, but He brings justice, end of verse 6

#### **The rebellious live a sun-scorched land.**

They live in a place of exile, of abandonment, of homelessness. So we have this grand rider of the skies, the God above the universe who is Yahweh, who is intimately involved in the lives of people, protecting the faithful, taking care and doing justice to the enemies.

And now we move in verses 7-10 to a scene of a victory procession. Again, this psalm was written to commemorate the moving of the Arc from the wilderness in Sinai to the land of Canaan. And here we had this grand procession (beginning in verse 7), and there’s some language here that really gives the imagery of a victorious king leading his army as a warrior. Those terms *God went out, He marched through the wilderness*, were terms that would have identified a king leading his army as a warrior. And notice when He does so in verse 8,

#### **the whole cosmos reverberates at the presence of this God.**

But again, the psalmist tempers this view of this God who is above all, this God who is powerful, at whose presence the whole cosmos reverberates by again showing he’s not a distant, aloof God, unconcerned. But here in verses 9-10 we see this God as also a provider.

#### **You gave abundant showers, O God. You refresh your weary inheritance.**

In that word *inheritance* there is a reference to this promised land of Canaan for the people. And there they settle in it.

Verse 10

#### **And from all its bounty He provides for the poor.**

And again, the *poor* there is a reference to the nation of Israel itself. So again, we have this picture of this God who is above all, this powerful God, but yet is intimately in contact with the people.

In verses 11-14, the next section, we have a discussion of the victory of battle. Again, we have this God who is a rider of the skies, who is above all now who in a victory procession leads his people through the wilderness from Sinai to the promised land of Canaan. And along the way there is victory to be won, and it is accomplished.

And in verse 11, again we have the same sort of an idea that we get in verse 1 that God's just showing up wins the day. The Lord announced the word. Great was the company of those who proclaimed it. And notice, kings and armies flee. So God just shows up, He announces victory, and that's enough. It scatters the enemies. Again, you get the picture that it just doesn't take much for this God to win the battle. Again, if you go back to verse 2, it's like blowing smoke. It's like wax melting before a fire. It's nothing to God. He shows up, He announces victory, and it's done.

Then in verse 13 and 14, which may be two of the most difficult passages to figure out what's going on here (translators translate this very differently, it's understood very differently), but I think the idea here is that the victory is so great that two things happen. One is in verse 13: even those who are not direct participants in the battle enjoy the spoils of war. And again, the dove with silver wings and feathers of shining gold might be a reference to the spoils that would be gained from war. And you see the utter defeat of the enemy in verse 14 when the Almighty scattered the kings of the land, it was like snow fallen on Mount Zalmon.

Here we probably have a metaphoric picture of the battlefield perhaps strewn with gear from the fleeing enemy, perhaps the bleached bones or bodies of the dead enemy that litter the battlefield that perhaps from a distance looks like it snowed. But yet a picture of utter defeat. When this God is victorious, there is no question—it's not a close call—the victory is sure.

And now that leads us from this procession of this *rider of the sky*, this God who's overall, this victory procession through the wilderness, the victory and battles, we now get to the pinnacle, the apex, the climax of this psalm in verses 15-18. This is where now God ascends and dwells now in Zion, in the promised land. The journey is complete. And again, even the tall mountains of the Bashan region in northern Canaan seem to look on with some envy at this small little mountain, this small little hill in southern Canaan where God will take up residence and intimately dwell with His people.

And in this ascent, verse 17

**The chariots of God** (in other words, the heavenly horses) **accompany him, and He enters his sanctuary victorious and ready to reign.**

The journey from Sinai to Mount Zion is complete. And God takes up residence to rule and to reign in His sanctuary. (again, perhaps a reference to the temple there)

Notice this God doesn't lead them to the promised land and then say, "See ya, I got ya here, talk to ya later." No, he takes up residency. He dwells intimately with His people. Again, if that's not something to celebrate, I'm not quite sure what is.

In verse 18,

**When You ascended on high, You took many captives** (again, the enemies). **You received gifts from people, even from the rebellious.** (probably a reference to either the spoils of war or tribute that would be paid to a victorious king) **that you, Lord God, might dwell there.**

So God has won the victory. He's eliminated the enemy. He's taken up dwelling among His people to rule and to reign. In fact, the apostle Paul finds verse 18 so compelling that he applies this verse in Ephesians 4:8 to the ascension of Jesus, and Jesus' giving of spiritual gifts to His people.

Well, now we get to the back half of this psalm, and we'll see now in the various sections how it mirrors the ideas from the front half of the psalm.

In verses 19-23 again we have discussion of victory of battle, and again a complete victory.

**But praise be to God, to the Lord, to God our Savior who daily bears our burdens, the God who saves. From the sovereign Lord comes escape from death.**

Again, the ultimate enemy's death, even God is victor over that. And in fact, it probably would be a good idea if that word *death* was capitalized, because again I think something connected with the Canaanites is behind this.

The Canaanite god of the underworld was named Maat and was considered the chief nemesis of Baal. And I think the point here is this: It's not Baal who can defeat death. The only one who can do that is Yahweh, again this mighty victor who defeats kings and nations and armies and, yes, even death itself. This is the victorious God.

And again in verse 21-23 we see the utter victory, the complete victory. The enemies are crushed. They are judged (verse 23). This kind of graphic description of wading in blood and the tongues of dogs having their share of the bodies again maybe calls to mind in 2 Kings:9, what was promised that would happen to Jezebel in judgment. So we have judgment here. We have complete victory. There's no question that God is the victorious God.

And we encounter then in the next section (verse 24-47) another victory procession. This is a victory parade, a pep rally. There is no solemn, somber occasion here. This again is a raise-the-roof, boisterous, loud celebration. You have singers. You have musicians, young women playing the tambourine or the tumbrels, probably to recall, Miriam and the other women who danced and sang and praised God after His deliverance of the Jewish people at the Red Sea.

And we note that the whole of the nation is there to celebrate (verse 27). You have the southern tribes of Benjamin of Judah, representatives of the northern tribe, Zebulun and Naphtali. But this is

a celebration. And, in fact, in verse 27 when it talks about a throng of Judah's princes, a good translation of that could be a shouting crowd. Again, this was no somber occasion.

And then we move to a section (verses 28-31) that again doesn't have a clear parallel in the first part of the psalm, but it's really a summons, a request that God will continue to act as He has acted in the past.

**Summon your power, God. Show us Your strength, our God, as You have done before.**

Well, what has He done before? Well, we see He's brought victory. He's defeated the enemies. He's provided. And again, the call is for God to continue in that manner. And He can because He's the victorious God. He's the one now who reigns over all. And, in fact, it says (verse 29-31) that because of this temple in Jerusalem, all the nations, whether strong nations, powerful ones, whether weak nations, whether well known nations, whether little-known nations, all will come bearing tribute, bearing gifts to Him.

In verse 30, the *beasts among the reeds* is probably a reference to Egypt. The *bulls and the calves* probably refer to strong nations and weaker nations. The *envoys from Egypt*, a well known place, and Ethiopia, which would be the area of northern Sudan, that's a little-well known place in that day, so again, whether powerful or weak or well known or not-so-well known, all nations will come and give tribute.

And this leads to a last section that again parallels verse 4-6 because we have this praise for the rider of the skies. But notice something different. Now *all* of the nations, not just the Hebrew people, *all* the nations are enjoined to praise this God who is over all.

**Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth, Sing praises to the Lord, to Him who rides the ancient skies above.**

Again, remember that was a title given to the Canaanite god, Baal. And again, the writer of the psalm is saying, "No, it's not Baal who is God. It's Yahweh. It's Yahweh we give our praise to. It's Yahweh who is above all."

But you notice something else here. Many of the pagan religions in the ancient near east, their gods were territorial gods. They were gods of one particular people and identified with one particular location. Not Yahweh. Not the God of the Hebrew people. Yes, the Hebrew people were His chosen people, but He wasn't just the God of the Hebrew people. He's the God of *all* people and the God of *all* places. And yes, while He took up His dwelling on Mount Zion, He wasn't confined to just that place. This is the God of all people and all places.

In verse 34, this is the God to whom we submit.

**Proclaim (ascribe) power to might or God.**

Really the notion there is *give strength or yield up your strength*. It's the idea of submitting, submitting to this God whose majesty is over Israel, whose power is in the skies. Notice in verse 35

that this God gives back the power and the strength to the faithful. So this submitting, this giving up or yielding of one's power to God results in Him giving it back.

We have quite a fitting ending to this psalm.

### **Praise be to God.**

Or better yet, ***PRAISE BE TO GOD!*** This is something to exalt in! This is a victory song. This is the Hebrew people's fight song.

Well, I say, you know, all of this is interesting. It gives us an insight into the Hebrew people, what they thought of God and their worship and celebration. But what good does that do me today?

Well, I think several lessons emerge from this psalm, and I think first and foremost we should come to grips with what this psalm says about the victorious God. Again, just as in the days when this psalm was written, so too today God is not an aloof, distant, disconnected God, some monarch reigning somewhere who is out of touch with people. Not at all. This God is, again, the same today as He was yesterday. This powerful, victorious God that we find here in Psalm 68 is still a caring deliverer who defeats His enemies, who cares for the oppressed, the faithful. He's still one who is victorious.

In fact, this psalm recounts a time when God was victorious, but this wasn't the only time. As I read this psalm, I can't help but think that this foreshadows another time that God was victorious on a mountain, a small little hill again in southern Canaan, Golgotha, where in a victory procession of mocking scorn Jesus was led up this hill where he was enthroned on a cruel cross, but where once again God was victorious, defeating sin and death and evil and evil powers.

God is still victorious. In fact, we're promised that the day when Jesus shows up again there's going to be another victory, once and for all. When Jesus reappears, sin and death and evil will be done away with completely.

But this God also, as He was then and now, dwelt among His people. We saw there that God didn't just lead them to the promised land and then depart, but took up residence on Mount Zion. Well, in days gone by, God dwelt intimately among His people in a tabernacle, and He did so in a temple. Then later in the person of Jesus God dwelt intimately among His people.

Today, with Jesus as the cornerstone and those who follow Jesus making up this body called the Church, God intimately dwells among the faithful in the church. This God is still the victorious God who still intimately dwells with His people and who still is the caretaker, a protector, a provider. That's something to celebrate.

I think beyond the things we learn about this victorious God that are true today every bit as much as they were back then, we learn something else: that with victory comes a decision. Again, you're either on the side of the victor, or you're not. And again, God's presence has a way of exposing two groups of people: His enemies, and those who are faithful. And the enemies will flee. They will be consigned; the rebels will stay in the desert, in the wilderness, the place again of abandonment, of

judgment, of destruction. But the faithful who submit will enjoy, in His presence, great rejoicing and celebration. They'll enjoy the spoils of His victory.

Which one are you? Are you a rebel? Or are you one of the faithful? Again, there are no neutral observers here when God shows up. When God's presence is evident, the enemies flee; the faithful rejoice in His presence. And again, there are no neutral observers. So which group are you in? Are you on the side of the Victorious One, or are you on the side of the defeated foes?

One other lesson I think that we learn here are what are the appropriate responses to this victorious God. I think one is, we just mentioned, the most appropriate response is to side ourselves with the victorious God. But beyond that, what other appropriate responses are there? Well, I think one obviously is worship, both corporate worship and individual worship. You know, when was the last time that you, with groups of people, worshiped God for being the victorious God? That is certainly an appropriate cause for worship, and we see the Hebrew people doing that in this psalm.

But, you know, that also should extend to our individual worship. Again, worship isn't something we just do this morning, and then, you know, when 10:15 comes worship stops and out we go. No, we've been reminded on several occasions that worship is something that occurs every moment of every day. Everything you do is an act of worship—or should be.

But now think about that in terms of serving the victorious God. God has called you to various responsibilities, and we need to look at those in terms of serving and worshiping the victorious God. So whether you are fixing someone's plumbing, you are investing someone's money, you're litigating a case in court, you're washing clothes or dishes, you're waiting on tables, you're building a house, when is the last time you've thought of that as being an act of worship to the victorious King? You should because it makes that work important. It makes that work significant because you're working for a King who is victorious, meaning that what you do is of immense importance. And if you are doing what God has called you to do, whatever that might be, what you're doing is every bit as important as what I am doing this morning. But you're doing it for the victorious God, and we need to keep that in mind because what you do is not wasted effort. You're serving the victorious King. So worship is an appropriate response obviously.

But secondly, celebration. Celebration we can consider an aspect of worship, but I want to talk about celebration in and of itself. When is the last time you have celebrated the victorious God? Maybe never. But again, we see the people doing that here. You know, sometimes Christians give the impression that being a Christian is, you know, being down and depressed and sour and, you know, not very exciting. You know, of all people, Christians should be the most celebratory of anyone. We have the most reason to celebrate because we serve the victorious God!

Let me go out on a limb here. If you haven't ever taken the opportunity to celebrate before God in His presence for Him being victorious, let me give you a couple of examples that you could maybe do this week. Again, maybe this will spawn more creative examples of ways that you could celebrate the victorious God.

We're approaching the fourth of July and there are fireworks to be bought. Let me suggest this: Buy some extra fireworks, maybe the best. And on the third of July gather your family and friends and have a fireworks display in celebration of the victorious God.

Now I know what you're thinking. *Oh, that doesn't sound very spiritual, Mark.* I beg to differ. I think that's supremely spiritual to celebrate the victorious God. I think that's something that the Jewish people would have done. The raucous praise that they gave, this temple ceremony in celebration of this victorious God? Why don't we do that?

So maybe somebody asks, "Well, why don't you save those good ones for the fourth?" Then you can say, "Well, you know, we'll celebrate our country's independence then. We'll celebrate the victorious God."

Or, again, you know, maybe that's a little bit too much for you. At least you could maybe dip into the savings a little bit or whatever and go out with your family and treat yourself to a nice dinner in celebration of this victorious God. And you say, "*Yeah, but that money could be used for so many other good things, helping the needy, etc.*" So take the needy with you then, invite them along to your celebration.

Again, sometimes we don't really appreciate this God. I mean, you know, we'll spend money and take the time to celebrate everything else. But somehow we think it's kind of unspiritual to do this with God. No way. This God deserves celebration, and it's a healthy thing for us to do.

Well, long before the University of Michigan had the victors or Notre Dame had its victory march or Penn State University had *Fight On, State*, and yes, long before the University of Nebraska had *Hale, Varsity*, the Hebrew people had Psalm 68. It's a fight song. It's a victory song. It's one that speaks of the victorious God both in the past and in the future. It's one that extols the might of God. It's one who calls for allegiance to this victorious God. This psalm is one that arouses hope and confidence that God will continue to be victorious in the future as He was in the past.

**Sing to God you kingdoms of the earth. Sing praise to the Lord, to Him who rides the ancient skies above, who thunders with mighty voice. Proclaim the power of God whose majesty is over Israel, whose power is in the skies. You God are awesome in your sanctuary. The God of Israel gives power and strength to His people. Praise be to God!**