

May 14

Scriptures: Read Psalm 68

Key Verse: “Ascribe strength to God; His excellence is over Israel...” (Psalm 68: 34)

Overview

Psalm 68 is a poetic song celebrating God’s many victories of the past, present, and future. It is a unique and complex psalm wherein there are passages which can be interpreted historically, theologically, symbolically, and prophetically. The occasion for composition was likely when David brought the Ark of the Lord from the house of Obed-Edom up to Mount Zion in Jerusalem (historical interpretation, 2 Samuel 6:12-15). The procession of the Ark to its resting place in Jerusalem is dramatized by the journey of the children of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land (symbolic interpretation). This same event symbolized the ascension of God (His presence represented by the Ark) as the conquering King to His throne in the Holy and Royal City to reign sovereignly (theological interpretation). It also has Messianic significance, for the Apostle Paul quotes verse 18 as referring to Jesus Christ’s ascension into heaven (prophetical interpretation).

This psalm of celebration begins by the lifting up of the Ark by the priests. The psalmist’s words echo those of Moses as the Ark would set out before the children of Israel in the wilderness (v 1; Numbers 10:35). When the presence of God arises in our midst, then no enemies of the Lord can be present; they flee and are scattered like smoke, or they will perish as wax disappears under fire (cf. Hosea 13:3; Micah 1:4). The righteous, however, are made exceedingly glad by the presence of the Lord, and are compelled to sing and praise His Name.

As the joyous procession of the Ark begins (v 4), the people sing and extol God, whom they understand to be not confined within the Ark, for He “rides on the clouds”, and the exaltation and reverence given to Him is evident by the use of His personal Name “Yah”. God’s majesty is such that the psalmist is inhibited and feels unworthy to use the full form of His Name, “Yahweh”.

Although God dwells in His Holy habitation, He is not so high above the clouds that He is too far removed to see and care for His people; on the contrary, He watches circumspectly and helps the helpless, defends the defenceless, brings comfort to the lonely, and sets the prisoners free (Exodus 22:22-23; the ministry of Jesus, Isaiah 61:1-3; Luke 4:18; John 14:18). Those who rebel against God, however, will not prosper, just as the children of Israel who rebelled against God had to remain in the wilderness to see their death in the dry land (vv. 5-6; Hebrews 3:12-19). Yet the Lord was gracious to His people, for they were His inheritance. He inarched before them as they journeyed through the wilderness (pillar of fire/cloud). With manifestations of His power, He gave them the Law at Sinai. He sustained them when they were weary and blessed them like a “plentiful rain” with manna, water from the rock, and quail (vv. 7-10). The Lord’s goodness was further expressed by giving His word for Moses to write (the Law, the covenant), which was loudly proclaimed and affirmed by all the people once they entered the Promised Land (v. 11; Joshua 8:32-35).

As the procession of the Ark continued, the psalmist likens it to the victorious conquest of Canaan, as the Lord went out before them and routed the kings of the opposing armies (v. 12). With poetic imagery, the psalmist describes the riches that God's people obtained from the spoil, even though they lived in humble camps; they were like doves (simple and common birds) adorned with gold and silver (v. 13). In scattering the mighty kings of the land, God did what seemed impossible, just as snow on Zalmon is impossible, but not beyond the power of God to do (v. 14, Zalmon is a heavily forested hill near Shechem, cf. Judges 9:47-48).

Inspired by the ascending of the Ark up Mount Zion, the psalmist expresses that the most beautiful mountain of Bashan (Hermon in the north) is no comparison to the hill of the Lord's dwelling (Deuteronomy 12:5). From Mount Zion, the location of the Lord's temple (tent of meeting), the Lord's presence, glory, and power is displayed as it had once been on Mount Sinai. This makes Zion unique, for the Lord chose to dwell there, but even more unique is the fact that He dwells in us; believers are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:22; Colossians 1:27).

In its resting place, the Ark represented God's ascension on high, like a conquering King upon His throne who reigns over subjected nations that bring him tribute (v. 18), such as Egypt (crocodiles, calves) and Assyria (bulls; vv. 29-31). To the people of His kingdom, He gives good gifts, and those who belong to Him escape death (v. 19-20, receive eternal life), but His enemies are found, even though they are in far or obscure places, and they are destroyed (v. 21-23).

The psalmist recalls the grand procession of the Ark accompanied by joyous music (v. 25; 1 Chronicles 13:8) and the leaders of all the tribes; however, mention is made of only the southernmost tribes of Benjamin and Judah, as well as the northernmost tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. This procession was watched by those of other nations (v. 24), who are also invited to sing praises to God, for He is mighty, awesome, sovereign, transcendent, and faithful to give "strength and power to His people" (v. 35).

Prayer

Dear Lord, as the Ark of the Covenant, representing Your presence, was brought to rest in Your holy Temple, may we daily invite Your presence in us as temples of Your Holy Spirit. As did Israel, we invite Your presence with praise and thanksgiving.