

Psalm 68

“God Shall Arise, His Enemies Shall Be Scattered”

July 2, 2023

Pr. Josh Anderson

Pentecost Season

Our sermon text this morning is Psalm 68, which is printed on the back of your order of worship.

The pages of the Scriptures are full of the songs that the righteous sing in response to the victory of God.

And indeed, that is exactly what we are doing each Lord’s Day when we sing hymns of praise to God. We are joyfully responding to God’s victory in Jesus Christ and entering into that victory with him.

And by singing in this way, as we do each Lord’s Day, we are entering into one of the most basic and fundamental practices of the people of God all throughout the ages.

Think of the people of Israel singing at the shores of the Red Sea in Exodus 15 after the defeat of Pharaoh’s armies.

Think of the song of Deborah and Barak in Judges 5 after the miraculous defeat of the Canaanites and Jael’s execution of Sisera.

Think of the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2 after she gave her son Samuel to the service of the Lord.

Think of David’s song in 1 Chronicles 16 that he taught the Levites to sing after he established the ark of God in its resting place in Zion.

Think of the songs of Zechariah and Mary in Luke 1 after they received angelic visitations and were told that they would be participants in the great story of the birth of the incarnate Son of God.

Think of the songs of the redeemed in Revelation 4 and 5 and 7 and 11 and 15 and 19 as the saints again and again and again sing of the glorious victory of God. It is one of the most striking things about that book. All throughout John's Revelation, the saints cannot stop singing of the glory and victory of God.

This Psalm, Psalm 68, is like unto those songs.

And so as you listen to this psalm this morning, know that you listen to words that the Spirit has given to proclaim the triumph of God.

Beloved, this is God's holy and inerrant word. It is more precious than gold, even much fine gold. It is sweeter than honey, sweeter even than the drippings of the honeycomb.

Psalm 68

*To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David. A Song.*

- 1 God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered;  
and those who hate him shall flee before him!*
- 2 As smoke is driven away, so you shall drive them away;  
as wax melts before fire,  
so the wicked shall perish before God!*
- 3 But the righteous shall be glad;  
they shall exult before God;  
they shall be jubilant with joy!*

4 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!

5 Father of the fatherless and protector of widows  
is God in his holy habitation.

6 God settles the solitary in a home;  
he leads out the prisoners to prosperity,  
but the rebellious dwell in a parched land.

7 O God, when you went out before your people,  
when you marched through the wilderness,

*Selah*

8 the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain,  
before God, the One of Sinai,  
before God, the God of Israel.

9 Rain in abundance, O God, you shed abroad;  
you restored your inheritance as it languished;

10 your flock found a dwelling in it;  
in your goodness, O God, you provided for the needy.

11 The Lord gives the word;  
the women who announce the news are a great host:

12 "The kings of the armies — they flee, they flee!"  
The women at home divide the spoil —

13 though you men lie among the sheepfolds —  
the wings of a dove covered with silver,  
its pinions with shimmering gold.

14 When the Almighty scatters kings there,  
let snow fall on Zalmon.

15 O mountain of God, mountain of Bashan;  
O many-peaked mountain, mountain of Bashan!

16 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?

17 *The chariots of God are twice ten thousand,  
thousands upon thousands;  
the Lord is among them; Sinai is now in the sanctuary.*

18 *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.*

19 *Blessed be the Lord,  
who daily bears us up;  
God is our salvation.* *Selah*

20 *Our God is a God of salvation,  
and to God, the Lord, belong deliverances from death.*

21 *But God will strike the heads of his enemies,  
the hairy crown of him who walks in his guilty ways.*

22 *The Lord said,  
"I will bring them back from Bashan,  
I will bring them back from the depths of the sea,  
23 that you may strike your feet in their blood,  
that the tongues of your dogs may have their portion from the foe."*

24 *Your procession is seen, O God,  
the procession of my God, my King, into the sanctuary—*

25 *the singers in front, the musicians last,  
between them virgins playing tambourines:*

26 *"Bless God in the great congregation,  
the LORD, O you who are of Israel's fountain!"*

27 *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.*

28 *Summon your power, O God,  
the power, O God, by which you have worked for us.*

29 *Because of your temple at Jerusalem  
kings shall bear gifts to you.*  
30 *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.*  
31 *Nobles shall come from Egypt;  
Cush shall hasten to stretch out her hands to God.*

32 *O kingdoms of the earth, sing to God;  
sing praises to the Lord, Selah*  
33 *to him who rides in the heavens, the ancient heavens;  
behold, he sends out his voice, his mighty voice.*  
34 *Ascribe power to God,  
whose majesty is over Israel,  
and whose power is in the skies.*  
35 *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!*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you. Let's pray...

*Blessed Lord, who caused all the holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us, by your Spirit, to hear this portion of your word, and to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it, that we may even more embrace and hold fast to the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

There is much in our world that we might be discouraged about. No doubt.

On a large scale, there is the oppression of the poor and the helpless around the world, and certainly in our own nation.

There are tyrants and men of violence who use their power to steal and abuse and kill.

There is the decline of the church in Europe and the United States (though, we should note, the church is growing in Africa, in South America, in the Middle East, in Asia).

There are the billions of people in our world who enslaved by false religion, especially, in terms of numbers, Islam and Hinduism.

And we experience reasons for discouragement in our own lives as well — difficulties and tension and brokenness in our relationships with friends and family members; financial hardship; the pain and suffering we carry in our bodies; unfulfilled desires for a spouse or children; and of course, the death of those whom we love.

And truly, I have only begun to scratch the surface in terms of all things that are wrong.

Our world is broken, beyond our capacity to repair. Our world is full of the forces of evil, too strong for us to defeat.

But in the midst of all these terrible things that we feel and experience and see, the word of God comes to us from the outside and it declares:

*“God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered!”*

This beloved, is the gospel. This is the glad announcement of the presence of God. We are not alone in this world. It is not our responsibility to repair what is broken or defeat the power of evil.

*For God shall arise, and his enemies shall be scattered.*

In Numbers 10, we find the original inspiration for these words in our our Psalm this morning.

The story of Numbers takes place after the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. Israel has received the law at Mount Sinai, and God has made his covenant with them there. In obedience to his word, they have built the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant, which was to be placed in its midst.

And having done so, they began their journey to the promised land, the land milk and honey and olives and rain and good harvests that God had prepared for them. And as they traveled to the promised land, of course, the Levites carried the tents of the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant went before them.

And Numbers 10 tells us: *“And whenever the ark set out, Moses said, “Arise, O LORD, and let your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate you flee before you.” And when it rested, he said, “Return, O LORD, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel.”*

It is clearly with Moses’ words in mind, and this story in the background that the Psalmist declares in Psalm 68: *“God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered; and those who hate him shall flee before him!”*

In a world that was surely no less broken and filled with evil than our own, Moses prays and petitions God to arise and scatter his enemies, but the psalmist declares that it **will** be so—and indeed, his words speak of some great future event of God’s intervention in history — God *shall* arise, says David, and his enemies *shall* be scattered.

And surely the promise and prophecy of the psalmist in Psalm 68 finds its fulfillment most particularly in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For it was in his death on the cross that Jesus was confronted with all the forces of evil and all the brokenness of this world — and it was in his resurrection three days later from the tomb that God rose and scattered his enemies.

In the fourth century, Augustine preached on this psalm in North Africa and he declared about the words *God shall arise and his enemies shall be scattered*: “This has already happened! Christ has arisen, he who is God, blessed above all forever, and his enemies have been scattered abroad among all nations.”

And of course, the Apostle Paul taught in Ephesians 4 that Psalm 68 was a prophecy of Christ’s resurrection and ascension — quoting directly from this psalm and then writing: “(In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)”

Make no mistake, beloved, this Psalm is about the glad announcement that in the face of all that is wrong in our world, God is victorious in the resurrection and ascension of his Son — and invites his people to delight in that victory.

Yes, there is so much in our world that is broken. Yes, there are so many ways in which evil seems to have the upper hand.

But in this Psalm, the word of God comes to us from outside ourselves and gives us the joyful news that God is, above all things, victorious.

Listen again to the first three verses of Psalm 68.

The Psalmist writes:

- 1 *God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered;  
and those who hate him shall flee before him!*
- 2 *As smoke is driven away, so you shall drive them away;  
as wax melts before fire,  
so the wicked shall perish before God!*
- 3 *But the righteous shall be glad;  
they shall exult before God;  
they shall be jubilant with joy!*

One way to describe Psalm 68 might be to call it the battle hymn of resurrection.

God is the great warrior who rises up and defeats his enemies, saves his people and leads them into his kingdom in festal celebration as he ascends to his throne.

*“Sing to God,”* the psalmist declares, *“Sing praises to his name!”*

But why do the people of God respond with such joy at the revelation of his power? It is not only because God is powerful — it is because of what he does with his power.

As Psalm 68 proclaims, God in his power is Father to the fatherless and a protector of widows; God gives the lonely a safe place to dwell; he leads those who have been made prisoners of sin and evil into a place of prosperity and blessing.

The God revealed in Psalm 68 is generous — his victory is not his alone, it is one that he shares abundantly with his people.

And at the heart of God’s victory is his triumph over death.

As we read in verses 19-20:

*19 Blessed be the Lord,  
who daily bears us up;  
God is our salvation.*

*20 Our God is a God of salvation,  
and to God, the Lord, belong deliverances from death.*

In 1 Corinthians 15, we are told that our last and greatest enemy is death, and I think that we know intuitively that that is true.

All of us, from the youngest to the oldest, are in the process of dying, and there's nothing we can do about it.

To die is to be forgotten, to die is to lose the joys of embodied life, to die is to be conquered by something that we cannot defeat.

So what do we do with that reality? How do we reckon with the apparently unbreakable power of death?

One option, of course, is to simply accept the reality of death and make the best of our mortality — to “seize the day” and make the most of the limited number of days available to us.

This week, I read an article in a national publication that was entitled, “What to Read to Come to Terms with Death.”

The article highlighted a number of recent secular books that have been written on death, stating: “Inevitably, each of us will die, and so will the people we love. These seven titles may help us accept our limitations and live full lives...accepting your fate is the closest a person can ever come to triumph in the unwinnable war against death.”

Now, of course, there is wisdom to acknowledging that death is real and accepting the reality that our days are limited in this present life.

But beloved, I want to be very clear on this.

We are not people who come to terms with death.

We are not people who accept our fate.

We are not people who simply accept our limitations and try to live as full lives as we can in what years we have.

I mean that kind of thinking might make some kind of limited sense for highly educated and wealthy people who have some measure of leisure in their lives.

But can you imagine telling a slave, can you imagine telling a poverty stricken refugee fleeing their homeland — well, yes you will die in a few short years, but you should accept your limitation and try to live as full a life as you can?

No, beloved. It is only because of the resurrection of Jesus that this psalm make sense at all.

If death were an unwinnable war, then why would the women in verse 11 announce the news of victory? Why would they divide the spoil between them?

Why would God's people join him in verses 24-27 in a great procession with singers and musicians and virgins playing tambourines?

The gospel of Jesus Christ, beloved, is the glad announcement that our God is a God of salvation, and to God, the Lord belong deliverances from death.

Not bargains with death. Not acceptance of death. No — to God, the Lord belong deliverances from death.

For as this Psalm teaches us our God will strike the heads of his enemies, and he will bring back the dead who die in him from wherever they have fallen, even from the depths of the sea, and the dead will rise to share in his victory, they will join his triumphal procession.

At the very end of Psalm 68, the Psalmist reflects again on the victory of God, a victory that is not his alone, but is shared with his people.

He writes:

*32 O kingdoms of the earth, sing to God;*

*sing praises to the Lord,*

*33 to him who rides in the heavens, the ancient heavens;*

*behold, he sends out his voice, his mighty voice.*

*34 Ascribe power to God,*

*whose majesty is over Israel,*

*and whose power is in the skies.*

*35 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!*

Isn't it interesting that the psalm that begins with the joy of the resurrection ends with a reflection on the voice of God, his mighty voice that speaks and by speaking gives power and strength to his people.

For, on the last day, that is just what our Lord Jesus taught — that he will share his resurrection power with his saints and raise them from the dead by the power of his voice calling them from the grave.

Augustine, preaching the good news of Jesus Christ 1600 years ago, reflected on this verse and ended his sermon with these words:

“The people of God are fragile and weak now, but in the resurrection God will give strength and power to his people. Blessed be God. By a supremely glorious transfiguration of our bodies he will give strength and power to his people, for although this body of ours is sown in weakness, it will rise in strength.

For on that day, our Lord Jesus will give us that strength which he first displayed in his own flesh, the strength the apostle Paul longed to know, the power of the resurrection, that same power by which death, the last enemy will be destroyed.”

Beloved, whatever is overwhelming and fearsome and terrible in your life, hold on to this:

*God shall arise, and his enemies shall be scattered.*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.