

**PREFACE**

As a teacher, there are winsome passages that one is eager to explore and teach: they are relatively straightforward in meaning and interpretation, and a pleasure to study and teach. Then there are not-so-winsome passages that one would rather give a wide berth: they are dense and convoluted, no one seems to agree on what they mean, and one knows going in that it will be a challenge to study and teach.

The passage before us today is of the latter category. From the beginning I knew I was in for a hard slog—but I also knew that it would be worth it. Before us today is one of those delightful hidden gems buried in God's word. You have probably read it a number of times, didn't understand it, and didn't lose any sleep over the fact that you didn't. But buried inside is a wonderful prophecy—not just of our risen, victorious, reigning and returning King, but of what He did to equip all of us to serve Him and His church until His return.

Our focus passage is Psalm 68, but from it we are going to go back to the time of Israel's exodus, and forward to the letter of Paul to the Ephesians.

**PSALM 68**

Let's first take an overview of Psalm 68. It was written by David, but no one knows when—but a pretty good guess might be after he has returned from a military victory.

The first four verses are a song of praise to the victorious Lord and future King.

Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered,  
And let those who hate Him flee before Him.  
As smoke is driven away, so drive them away;  
As wax melts before the fire,  
So let the wicked perish before God.  
But let the righteous be glad; let them exult before God;  
Yes, let them rejoice with gladness.  
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.

Walter Kaiser points out that even though almost every known version translates v1 in the same way, the "Let God" is really in the *indicative* mood, and should be translated as the ESV has:

**God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered; and those who hate him shall flee before him! (emphasis added)**

Beginning in v7 and running through v17, David revisits the history of Israel: the power of God at Sinai, through the wilderness journey, and the grace of God in giving Canaan to Israel, and in empowering King David to conquer Mt. Zion, (vv7-8):

O God, when You went forth before Your people,  
When You marched through the wilderness, Selah.  
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.

Verses 16-17:

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.  
The chariots of God are myriads, thousands upon thousands;  
The Lord is among them as at Sinai, in holiness.

Verse 18 is the heart and climax of the psalm, and will be the focus of our attention.

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.

In v22 the Lord brings the exiles back to Jerusalem—remember, v18 on, this is all future to David, all prophecy.

The Lord said, "I will bring them back from Bashan.  
I will bring them back from the depths of the sea";

In vv24-27 there is dancing with joy at the procession of the Messiah into His sanctuary, followed by the tribes of Israel, (v24):

They have seen Your procession, O God,  
The procession of my God, my King, into the sanctuary.

In v29 the Messiah is ensconced in Jerusalem and the kings of the world bring Him tribute.

Because of Your temple at Jerusalem  
Kings will bring gifts to You.

And as the psalm closes, in vv32-35, all bow down before the awesome God who gives strength and power to the people, (vv33-35):

To Him who rides upon the highest heavens, which are from ancient times;  
Behold, He speaks forth with His voice, a mighty voice.  
Ascribe strength to God;  
His majesty is over Israel  
And His strength is in the skies.  
O God, You are awesome from Your sanctuary.  
The God of Israel Himself gives strength and power to the people.  
Blessed be God!

### **v18**

Verse 18 is not just a "now—not yet"; it is also a "before—not yet" and a "before—not yet, not yet"! From David's perspective it hearkens to something that occurred four hundred years in the past, looks forward to something that will happen more than a thousand years in the future, and beyond even that to something that will happen at the end of all things. But gleaning all this from Psalm 68 is not for the fainthearted; scholars agree that this psalm is the most difficult of all psalms to interpret—so let's put on our thinking caps.

Just for a moment, let us first approach this verse without any prophecy in mind; what is this verse saying just within its context. As he does in vv7-10, and again in the last verse of the psalm, David changes the voice at v18 from the third to the second person.

*You have ascended on high,*

Notice how the psalm builds to this climax in vv16-17:

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.  
The chariots of God are myriads, thousands upon thousands;  
The Lord [note: *adonay*—not *Yahweh*] is among them as at Sinai, in holiness.

***adonay*** = an emphatic form of <H113> ('adown'); the Lord (used as a proper name of God only) :- (my) Lord.

**Sidebar:** Have you noticed in Scripture that one rarely gets God alone? He is invariably surrounded by adoring seraphim, myriads of worshipers, or, as here, "thousands upon thousands" of chariots.

So the "You" in v18 is "the Lord" (*adonay*). And taking into account the context of the entire psalm, the immediate application would be that the Lord has entered the city a victor, and is ascending the mount of His sanctuary—note v24:

They have seen Your procession, O God,  
The procession of my God, my King, into the sanctuary.

—and coming behind Him are all those He has taken captive in battle.

*You have led captive Your captives;*

The KJVs are a little misleading in their archaic translation:

**You have led captivity captive;**

That makes it sound as if the Lord has conquered and taken possession of the *institution* of captivity, but that is not necessarily what it means.

*The Cambridge Bible:* 'Captivity' is not, as the English reader might suppose, a personification of the hostile powers which had led Israel captive, but [this is] equivalent to a *body of captives*. To obviate misunderstanding, R.V. gives 'thy captivity.' **The captive enemies of Israel are meant...** (emphasis added)

It is the typical (and historically authentic) picture of a victorious ruler entering the city in a procession toward his throne, with the slaves and booty of his conquered enemies trailing behind him (NIV: "in your train").

*You have received gifts among men,*

Again the KJV is a contrary translation:

**KJV: thou hast received gifts for men**

"An impossible rendering, influenced probably by the quotation in Ephesians 4:8." (Cambridge) [which we will get to in a moment]

The procession has reached its terminus and the king is now on his throne. Again, as would have happened historically, the king now receives the homage of his conquered foes in the form of riches, and exotic goods from the faraway lands.

*Even among the rebellious also, that the Lord God may dwell there.*

Even those still in rebellion are, perhaps grudgingly, proffering their gifts to the king. Why? That *Yahweh Elohim* might take up residence there.

That is the essential *in loco* meaning of v18. Now let's go forward one step. It is obvious that David is drawing from the history and imagery of Mt. Sinai and God's meeting with Moses. The end of v17 makes that clear. But before we go backward to Sinai, we need to go forward to Ephesians.

**Sidebar:** Again, there are all sorts of interpretations—both modern and ancient—of Psalm 68, so I would not presume to be dogmatic about the interpretation offered in this session. It is not just my own, however; it is essentially the position of Walter C. Kaiser (whom I have repeatedly cited in this study) and Frank S. Thielman, in the substantial *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*, edited by G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson.

## EPHESIANS 4

The theme of Chapter Four in Ephesians is the unity of the body—specifically, unity through the various gifts accorded believers through Christ.

### Read Ephesians 4:7-12.

**Sidebar:** Before we proceed, I promised last week in our discussion of Christ descending to hell that in this session I would address the apparent issue in this Ephesians passage. Verse nine reads in the NASB:

(Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth?)

This does sound like a pretty good euphemism for hell. But Wayne Grudem points out that the NIV is a perfectly fair translation of the phrase:

...he also descended to the lower, earthly regions?

That is, "the lower regions which are the earth." Here is Grudem's conclusion:

Paul is saying that the Christ who went up to heaven (in His ascension) is the same one who earlier came down from heaven (v10). That "descent" from heaven occurred, of course, when Christ came to be born as a man. So the verse speaks of the incarnation, not of a descent into hell.

Now, back to the issue at hand. Ephesians 4:8 reads,

Therefore it says, "When He ascended on high,  
He led captive a host of captives,  
And He gave gifts to men."

**Question:** Does anyone see a problem in v8, where Paul quotes Psalm 68:18?

Psalm 68:18 reads, "You have *received* gifts among men," but Paul turns that around in his quotation: "And He *gave* gifts to men."

One perfectly fair conclusion is that Paul reworded the quote to better fit his point in Ephesians 4, which is all about "the equipping of the saints"; after all, he has done it before. But we can add to that the influence on both Paul, and David in Psalm 68, of the Sinai narrative.

**Please turn to Exodus 32.**

## Exodus 32

We have shown in past sessions that many OT visitations were either provably or possibly Christophanies—that is, earthly visitations by the preincarnate Son of God: Moses and the burning bush, Abraham being stopped before he can sacrifice Isaac, etc. Based on the evidence of the many instances of God revealing Himself on earth in the person of the Son, it is not a stretch to imagine the Messiah at work in the face-to-face scenes at Sinai—especially with the prologue of the burning bush, where the preincarnate Christ is clearly identified. [Remember the end of v17 in Psalm 68 speaks not of *Yahweh*, but *adonay*: “The Lord is among them as at Sinai, in holiness.”]

So let’s look at one of the scenes from that: the aftermath of the creation of the golden calf. Moses comes down off the mountain to discover the idol, and the “revelry” going on around it, and he confronts the people.

### Read Exodus 32:25-26.

Note that: It is the tribe of Levi that declared themselves for the Lord. Moses tells them to work their way through the camps slaughtering the idolaters—about three thousand. When they are finished, they return to Moses.

### Read Exodus 32:29.

That is, on that day the Lord “set apart” (dedicated, consecrated) the Levites to Himself.

### Now turn to Numbers 8.

## NUMBERS 8

Kaiser refers to this as a “divine commentary” on what it meant for the Levites to be set apart for the service of God. Yahweh is speaking.

### Read Numbers 8:14-16.

There is the *taking* of gifts. Psalm 68:18, as Messianic prophecy, speaks of Messiah ascending with captives in His train, and of gifts being given to Him. The “captives,” then, are first the Levites at Sinai. The Messiah, in preincarnate form, had descended to earth to meet with Moses face-to-face. He then returned to the Father, taking with Him “captives” in the form of Levites, who He (the Son) then offers as gifts to the Father—gifts consecrated to Him for service. The Levites will carry out the work of ministry until the return of the Messiah and the new covenant.

So by including some of the Sinai narrative in Psalm 68, David ties v18 to Messiah and the Levites. And by the way, Psalm 68:18 states that He “ascended on high”; “high” is the Hebrew *maron*, “a term that never means anything less than heaven” (Kaiser)

And here is also foreshadowed what Paul writes in Ephesians 4: “And He gave gifts to men.” Christ *gave* the Levites as a gift *to* the Father, but the Levites were also a gift *from* the Father to Aaron and Israel.

### Read Numbers 8:18-19.

Paul, in Ephesians, then takes the concept and applies it to the new covenant in Christ.

**And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-13)**

Here is how Walter C. Kaiser summarizes all this, extending it even into the end times:

The captives, then, are first the Levites, but eventually all those called into the equipping ministry of outfitting all God's people to do the work of ministry. Paul did not spiritualize, allegorize, or supply [an interpretive commentary] to the text; he gave the straightforward grammatical-historical sense of Psalm 68:18, which depends in turn on the theology of Numbers 8 and 18.

The ultimate goal of the Messiah's advent, ascension, and endowing his people with gifts is that all may enter into His final victory over the rebellious—increasingly as the ages move on and finally in the last day, when the grandest of all victories is consummated in Christ's second coming. At that time He will come to dwell among mortals in Zion [["Even among the rebellious also, that the Lord God may dwell there."](#) (Psalm 68:18c)]

Finally, here is what Charles Haddon Spurgeon writes about Psalm 68:18, keying off the the KJV:

**Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive.**

*Spurgeon:* A multitude of the sons of men are the willing captives of Messiah's power. As great conquerors of old led whole nations into captivity, so Jesus leads forth from the territory of his foe a vast company as the trophies of his mighty grace. From the gracious character of his reign it comes to pass that to be led into captivity by him is for our captivity to cease, or to be itself led captive; a glorious result indeed. The Lord Jesus destroys his foes with their own weapons; he puts death to death, entombs the grave, and leads captivity captive.

**Psalms 68:15-19**

15 A mountain of God is the mountain of Bashan;  
 A mountain of many peaks is the mountain of Bashan.  
 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.  
 17 The chariots of God are myriads, thousands upon  
 thousands;  
 The Lord is among them as at Sinai, in holiness.  
 18 **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.**  
 19 Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears our burden,  
 The God who is our salvation. Selah.

**Exodus 32:25-26, 29**

25 Now when Moses saw that the people were out of  
 control—for Aaron had let them get out of control to be  
 a derision among their enemies—  
 26 then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said,  
 “Whoever is for the Lord, come to me!” **And all the sons  
 of Levi gathered together to him.**  
 29 Then Moses said, “**Dedicate yourselves today to the  
 Lord**—for every man has been against his son and against  
 his brother—in order that He may bestow a blessing  
 upon you today.”

*Captives and Gifts (1)*

*Sinai Narrative:  
 Event*

*Sinai Narrative:  
 “Divine Commentary”*

**Ephesians 4:7-12**

7 But to each one of us grace was given according to the  
 measure of Christ’s gift.  
 8 **Therefore it says,**  
**“When He ascended on high,  
 He led captive a host of captives,  
 And He gave gifts to men.”**  
 9 (Now this expression, “He ascended,” what does it  
 mean except that He also had descended into the lower  
 parts of the earth?  
 10 He who descended is Himself also He who ascended  
 far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.)  
 11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets,  
 and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,  
 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service,  
 to the building up of the body of Christ;

**Numbers 8:14-16, 18-19**

14 “Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the  
 sons of Israel, and **the Levites shall be Mine.**  
 15 “Then after that the Levites may go in to serve the tent  
 of meeting. But you shall cleanse them and present them  
 as a wave offering;  
 16 for they are wholly given to Me from among the sons  
 of Israel. **I have taken them for Myself instead of every  
 first issue of the womb, the firstborn of all the sons of  
 Israel.”**  
 18 “**But I have taken the Levites** instead of every firstborn  
 among the sons of Israel.  
 19 “**I have given the Levites as a gift** to Aaron and to  
 his sons from among the sons of Israel, to perform the  
 service of the sons of Israel at the tent of meeting and to  
 make atonement on behalf of the sons of Israel, so that  
 there will be no plague among the sons of Israel by their  
 coming near to the sanctuary.”

*Captives and Gifts (2)*

*Relationships*

