

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Psalm 68 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the psalm. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

PSALM 68:1-35 ESV

1 To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David. A Song. 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!

STRUCTURE

- I. Prologue: He "who rides (Heb. *rakab*) in the desert" saves His weak children (1-6)
- II. Main Body: God ascends to Zion in triumph and glory (7-31)
 - a. Ascension of the ark from Sinai to Zion (7-18)
 - b. A psalmist's remix of the ascension song, viewed from different angles (19-31)
- III. Epilogue: He "who rides (Heb. *rakab*) in the heavens" will save the nations (32-35)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

Given the length of Psalm 68, I will not comment on every verse but rather provide a section-by-section commentary, emboldening parts of the Psalm that I quote. I'll spend a little more space explaining verses 15-18 since the sermon focuses especially on those. Overall, this song is about God's descent (to be with us) and ascent

(that we might be with Him). The Psalmist portrays this journey of descent and ascent by retelling the story of how God met Israel in the desert and shepherded the people to Mount Zion. Many scholars believe the song was written specifically to celebrate the arrival of the ark in Jerusalem (cf. 2 Sam. 6). This descent and ascent foreshadows that of Christ, as the Apostle Paul explains in Ephesians 4.

SECTION-BY-SECTION COMMENTARY:

VERSES 1-6

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

The opening line alludes to the prayer of Moses when Israel would set out with the ark. Observe the relationship:

- Psalm 68:1: "God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered; and those who hate him shall flee before him!"
- Numbers 10:35: "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.'"

Therefore, the Psalm's introduction establishes its theme: the journey of the ark of the covenant. The ark was a wooden chest overlaid with gold that contained the ten commandments and rested in the heart of the tabernacle (later, the temple). The tabernacle was God's "house"; the ark was God's "footstool". Picture God reigning from heaven's throne but resting His feet over the ark. God does not have feet, but figuratively speaking Israel pictured the ark as God's resting place—the earthly center of His heavenly reign. God reigned over all, but He reigned over Israel through the law contained inside the ark.

Because Israel broke the law constantly (as we all do), God provided a means for atonement, also centered upon the ark. On top of the ark was a "mercy seat," which the New Testament translates "propitiation"—a sacrifice that turns away wrath and makes God favorable. When the High Priest sprinkled blood over the mercy seat, God forgave Israel and restored them to Himself. All this foreshadowed Jesus, who became our "mercy seat," our "propitiation," turning away God's wrath and making His face shine favorably upon us.

With the opening verse providing the theme of the ark's journey, verses 2-6 show how God answered the prayer of Moses, arising and scattering Israel's enemies (like "**smoke is driven away**" and like "**wax melts before fire**"). The Psalmist portrays Israel as a weak people in need of a strong and compassionate God. In the exodus story, Yahweh was to Israel a "**Father to the fatherless and protector of widows**" who "**settles the solitary in a home**" and "**leads out the prisoners to prosperity**" (vv. 5-6).

The prologue also provides the setting for Israel's initial steps with the ark—the desert. The psalmist celebrates "**him who rides through the deserts**" with His people (v. 4). Symbolically, the ark represented God's presence, which alone explains how Israel survived a hostile wilderness. Later in the song, the psalmist parallels the description of Yahweh with more exalted language: "**him who rides in the heavens**" (or, technically, "the highest heavens"). The exodus was not merely a departure and arrival for God's people; it was the first stage of Yahweh's journey from the lowest of lows—slavery in Egypt and drudgery in a desert—to the highest of highs: enthroned on Mount Zion. The prologue thus sets the stage for this song of ascension.

VERSES 7-14

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.

What the prologue intimated (vv. 1-6), this section explicates (vv. 7-18). Verse 7 begins with “O God” because memories of the exodus and entry to the Promised Land evoked deep emotion. God “marched” (v. 7) through the desert with Israel like a military hero, answering Israel's prayers to “arise” and “scatter” enemies (v. 1). When the Psalmist sings of how the “earth quaked and the heavens poured down rain” (v. 8) he alludes to Judges 5:4. The allusion draws from Deborah's song, which commemorates Israel's military victory over the Canaanite king, Jabin, and his commander, Sisera. Many verses in Psalm 68 allude to the Song of Deborah, strengthening the connection between Israel's exodus and settlement in the Promised Land. Here is a list of those allusions (encompassing the whole psalm), taken from Matt Swale's academic paper on Psalm 68, titled “Needy Israel and the Warrior God”:

	Psalm 68	Judges	Lexical Connection	Lexemes
1.	68:7–8[8–9]	5:4–5	word pair; two phrases	two “nearly identical” ²⁹ verses
2.	68:12b[13b]	5:30	phrase	חלק (divide) + שָׁלַל (spoil)
3.	68:13a[14a]	5:16	phrase	בֵּין הַמִּשְׁפָּחִים//בֵּין שְׂפָתַיִם (among the sheepfolds)
4.	68:14[15]	9:48	rare place name	צֶלְמוֹן (Zalmon)
5.	68:18[19]	5:12	word pair	שָׁבָה (take captive) + שְׁבִי (captives)
6.	68:21[22]	5:26	word pair	מָחַץ (smash) + רֹאשׁ (head)
7.	68:23[24]*	5:56–27	word pair	מָחַץ (smash) + רֶגֶל (foot)
8.	68:27[28]	5:14, 18	three tribal names	נַפְתָּלִי (Naphtali) + זְבוּלוֹן (Zebulun) + בִּנְיָמִין (Benjamin)
9.	68:30[31]*	5:22	one lexeme	אַבִּיר (strong)

One need not understand all the Hebrew words to draw the intended conclusion. The Psalmist recounts a chaotic period of history where everyone in Israel “did what was right in his own eyes.” Deborah's victory song not only celebrates God's power and compassion in delivering Israel; it also subtly rebukes Israel for the rebellion that precipitated the need for deliverance (Jdg. 5:16; cf. Ps. 68:13). Interpreted against this backdrop, Psalm 68 celebrates—through the imagery of ascension—God's triumph on behalf of His rebellious people. From the giving of the law at “Sinai” (v. 8) to the giving of an “inheritance” in the land (v. 9) to the giving of “spoil” (v. 12)—a process explicated in vv. 11–14—God amply provided for “needy” Israel (v. 10). In contrast to the hard-working women who distributed plunder, some of the lazy men refused to enter combat, choosing rather to “lie among the sheepfolds” (v. 14) like a couch potato. God's care for Israel owes nothing to man's faithfulness but to God's. Without the blood of propitiation on the mercy seat, the people of God languish in their sins.

VERSES 15-18

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.

In this section, the ark continues its journey from the wilderness, but now we gain insight into its destination: Mount Zion. Though unmentioned, the Psalmist speaks of “the mount that God desired for his abode, yes, where the LORD will dwell forever”. This can be none other than Mount Zion. Mount Zion refers to a famous hill in Jerusalem, much like Montmartre in Paris or the Palatine Hill in Rome. Prophets and Psalmists poetically employed the term to depict Israel's temple mount, which also featured a heavenly counterpart (cf. Ps. 2:6: “I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill”—a reference to heavenly Mount Zion).

Thus far, we have observed our warrior God defending Israel against her enemies in the wilderness. With the temple mount in view, however, the psalmist depicts combat with the imagery of mountains. Towering high above Mount Zion, the “many-peaked mountain... of Bashan” symbolizes human strength and power garnered in holy war in this battle between peaks. From this lofty vantage point, the “mountain of Bashan” looks down “with

hatred" upon the glorified hill in Jerusalem, Mount Zion. God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong (1 Cor. 1:27). He chose the tiny mountain for His dwelling, not the towering peaks of Bashan.

Mountains represent human strength and power, but to ancient readers, they symbolized more than just that. Mountains were meeting places for the gods. Scripture even portrays "Eden" as a mountain (Ezk. 28:13-14). Given that "Mount Zion" is the temple mount, it's easy to see how this elevated locale provided a meeting place with God. But what about the mountains of Bashan? An ancient Israelite would have viewed **"Bashan"** as the "cosmic north," the dwelling place for supernatural evil. In The Unseen Realm, the late Dr. Michael Heiser says, *"In effect, Bashan was considered the location of (to borrow a New Testament phrase) 'the gates of hell.'"* This view prevailed not only in Israel but throughout the ancient near east. Heiser again remarks, this time in Reversing Hermon: *"For the Canaanites of Ugarit, the Bashan region, or part of it, clearly represented 'hell', the celestial and infernal abode of their deified dead kings."* Understood this way, it makes sense why the **"mountain of Bashan"** looks down sneeringly on Mount Zion. This battle between mountains represents a battle of the gods. Specifically, it is a battle between the one true God and all the poser-gods, aka demons (Deut. 32:17; 1 Cor. 10:20).

One might counter that the Psalmist describes **"Bashan"** as the **"mountain of God"** (68:15)—not of the devil. However, some translations render this **"majestic mountain"** (NIV) or **"mighty mountain"** (RSV). Ross explains that in Hebrew usage, "The word 'God' could here be a way of expressing the superlative, the mightiest mountain." This makes the best sense of the context, where the mighty mountains of Bashan gloat over tiny Zion and where ancient readers noted supernatural connotations.

Further supporting the supernatural interpretation of Bashan is verse 17, where **"the chariots of God"**—an angelic army—**"are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands."** Zion might appear tiny, but God's mountain is backed by an angelic host that makes Bashan—and the devil's army—whimper. **"Yahweh is among them."** God fights with His angel armies, and He fights for Israel.

The last part of verse 17 creates difficulty. It can be translated as **"Sinai is now in the sanctuary"** (ESV), or **"The Lord has come from Sinai into his sanctuary"** (NIV), or **"The Lord is among them as in Sinai"** (NKJV, NASB). Ross comments that all these translations are reasonable. To me, it makes the most sense to say, **"The Lord has come from Sinai into his sanctuary."** In this way, the psalmist alludes to the pilgrimage described in prior lyrics. Verse 17 would thus represent a high point, as if to say, "God has arrived in His house! After all these years leading Israel through the desert, Yahweh is home!"

Given such a high moment, we should not be surprised by the exclamation of verse 18, which bears repeating: **"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."** The pilgrimage of Israel from Egypt to Zion and especially from Sinai to Zion reaches its apex in these verses. Zion might not pierce the atmosphere like Bashan, but the Psalmist nevertheless portrays it as an ascension **"on high"**. For Israel, the language of ascension speaks less of geography than of victory. Picture Rocky ascending the steps in Philadelphia. There's a reason he doesn't go down to the basement. Rocky's ascent to the top of the stairs foreshadows his ascent to the top of the boxing world. Likewise, Israel's ascent to Mount Zion conveys triumph. Egypt could not stop God; Canaan could not stop God; Bashan could not stop God; not even faithless Israel could stop God. God journeyed with weak Israel through her desert, routed her enemies, ascended the temple mount, and distributed the spoils of war. That's what verse 18 is about—well, sort of.

As is typical in the Psalms (no pun intended), we must interpret Psalm 68 "typologically." This means that the ascension of the ark to Zion provides the "type" or "shadow" of Christ's ascension into heaven and distribution of the spoils of war. When we interpret the Bible typologically, we do not invent random parallels between the Old and New Testaments. Instead, we look for people, events, and institutions that foretell an eschatological escalation of parallel realities in Christ. Ephesians 4 makes clear that Psalm 68 prophesies such an escalation—not just the ascension of the ark to the earthly throne room but the ascension of Jesus to the heavenly throne room. Observe:

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." (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.) And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to

equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

Paul paraphrases Psalm 68 based upon an Aramaic translation called the Targum, which sounds more like the wording of Ephesians. Just as the ark moved from Sinai to Zion (Ps. 68:16–17), where God ascended on high with his host of captives and gifts, Jesus Christ moved us from the Law of Sinai to the Gospel of Zion, and—since His ascent means He also descended—from the grave to the throne. The ascension is where Jesus is crowned as Cosmic Lord over all and Head over His church. Without the ascension, evil is on top. With the ascension, Jesus is.

But who are the **“host of captives”** that Jesus leads in procession? In the Psalm’s original context, it referred to pagan kings and their armies, captured and paraded before cheering Jewish crowds. Typologically, the **“enemies”** (v. 1, 21) of Psalm 68 foreshadow the greater enemies that Jesus conquered on the Cross and rose above in the resurrection and ascension. Ephesians 1:21 says that Jesus ascended above “all rule and authority and power and dominion”—a clear reference to demonic powers (cf. Eph. 6:12). This brings us back full circle to those **“mountains of Bashan”**. In ascending to heavenly Mount Zion, the mount of Yahweh, Jesus sat on His throne above the devil’s mighty mountain range. Jesus took captive the devil, death, sin, hell, and all that stood against us.

Not only that, but He empowered us to extend His reign through spiritual gifts. The spoils of war, enjoyed by Israel, are now spiritual gifts, enjoyed by the church. Spiritual gifts provide evidence that Jesus already won! When we witness the gospel spreading to the nations (apostles/evangelists), secrets of hearts revealed (prophets), the Word of God being expounded (teachers), and the sheep of God being cared for (pastors), we are reminded that Jesus won, He ascended, and He reigns.

VERSES 19–31

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.

These verses provide the Psalmist’s remix of the procession, observed from the vantage point of the Lord (vv. 22–23), the musicians (vv. 24–25), and the tribes of Israel (vv. 26–27). Overall, this section rounds out our perspective of the ascension—first of the ark, and second, of Jesus. Derek Kidner poignantly comments on God’s **“salvation”** and **“many deliverances from death”** with these words:

“The Christian can reflect with David that while death is apparently a domain with many entrances and no exit, God has made it one from which ‘he brought me forth... into a broad place.’”

On Israel’s journey, God rescued Israel from death; on our journey, Jesus shepherds us beyond it. Because of the resurrection and ascension, death has not only many entrances, but also one exit: Jesus.

In **verse 28**, David prays for God to again display the **“power”** that He formerly exercised. Like so many Psalms, David recounts the past to stir faith for the future. Considering that David could fan the dying flame of faith by recalling the ark’s ascension, how much more should Christians be able to kindle the flame by recalling Christ’s

ascension to the heavenly temple! David's memory serves him well, for the last verses of this section envisions foreign kings bringing "gifts" of tribute; he envisions **"the beasts that dwell among the reeds"**—Egypt—as well as other enemies (**"herds of bulls"**) succumbing to God's **"rebuke."** He not only prophetically envisions this judgment but prays for it (**"trample underfoot... scatter the peoples"**).

But then David's vision takes a positive turn: **"Nobles shall come from Egypt; Cush shall hasten to stretch out her hands to God."** He envisions the nations coming to faith! In this spirit of faith and prophecy, the rest of the Psalm calls on the nations to worship the God of Israel.

VERSES 32-35

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!

The song that *began* with a call for God to scatter His enemies *ends* with enemies worshiping the God of Israel. This is a true song of victory! Central to it is the ascension. Throughout church history, this Psalm has been preached and sung on "Ascension Day" to commemorate our Lord's enthronement above the powers of Bashan and of unregenerate man. Jesus conquers not only by destroying His enemies but by winning them to His team. He who **"rides through the deserts"** (v. 4) with Israel also **"rides in the heavens, the ancient heavens"** (v. 33). Despite their height, the mountains of Bashan never stood a chance. God chose little Zion, a hill in Jerusalem, to place His eternal abode. When Christ returns, earthly and heavenly Zion will become one. All the prophecies about Jerusalem's bright future will be fulfilled. Bashan will descend to the depths. Zion will finish on top.