

Psalm 68

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[0 : 00] If you'd like to turn back to Psalm 68, I think you'll find it helpful having it in front of you. It's great to be back with you. It's always good to see you. It's good to have an assurance of your friendship.

I had earlier in the service, I'll take that on the trust, to open God's word. You're going to look at this Psalm today. Just as you're doing that, can you also open your worship sheets?

We read earlier from the Nicene Creed, and like all the great creeds, summaries of what Christians have believed and do believe down the ages, like most of them, in the middle of the creed, we've got that list, haven't we, of important things that we confess that has happened to Jesus.

So we've got for us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven. He was incarnate from the Holy Spirit. And the Virgin Mary was made man. For our sake, he was crucified. He suffered death. He was buried. On the third day, he rose again.

And then you get, he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. All the creeds mention that, they focus on that. I wonder whether that would be something that we would particularly focus on, to put it into a creed.

[1 : 22] The ascension. We're familiar with the account, aren't we? Forty days after his resurrection, Jesus is taken up with his disciples, watching. Luke, interestingly, thinks it's so important he records it twice, doesn't he?

Once in his Gospel, once at the start of the book of Acts. If you're anything like me, it's the part of Jesus' experience that we forget.

Very easily remember the next bit, don't we? He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. But the ascension. Why is that so important?

Why is that so important to confess, to hold on to? We might forget it. But then on a personal level, if you're anything like me, we can begin to think it's the most inconvenient part of the whole account of Jesus' life.

After all, we proclaim, don't we, Jesus is alive. Came back from the dead. But it's tempting to feel, isn't it, sometimes, that it might just be a little bit easier if he stayed on earth.

[2 : 30] Why did he have to go? So perhaps we talk to our friends about the resurrection. Great opportunities, don't you, at this time of year, around Easter. And we would love to finish the conversation by saying, and here he is now.

And introduce him physically. We'd love to turn on our TV and for him obviously to be here. The same man who walked this earth 2,000 years ago. As a church, as we gather together on the Lord's Day.

Wouldn't it be great if, instead of coming to hear me preach on Sunday morning, we could all gather and hear the risen Lord Jesus physically address us?

It would be wonderful if, on these great Christian conferences, well, Jesus would be the speaker.

And then personally, and perhaps a bit more seriously, in the ups and downs of life.

Perhaps we're tempted to think, if only Jesus was here physically, by my side, to comfort me, to assure me, to encourage me.

[3 : 32] Perhaps I'm not the only one who's tempted to think, well, yes, I pray and I read my Bible, but sometimes there's that longing for something more. The fact Jesus ascended to heaven can easily be forgotten.

How many times have you mentioned that fact in conversation to someone else? Sometimes it can be a bit of an embarrassment or even a discouragement. But I'm challenged, and I was particularly challenged when I looked at this psalm, that that is not at all how the Bible speaks of the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The writers of the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the other creeds, they were right. It is a vital part of the Gospel message. Without the ascension, Jesus' work is not completely done.

And more than that, the ascension is good news for us now. Jesus returning to heaven to be at the right hand of his Father, isn't him disappearing through a bit of a sit-down before he comes again.

No, it is wonderful news for us today. And Psalm 68, I think, helps us to understand why that is. It's quite a long psalm, we don't have time to go through it in massive amounts of detail.

[4 : 39] But we can see, I think, the three stages that this psalm goes through. Verses 1 to 6, we get a call from David to us to praise the ascended king.

Then in verses 7 to 18, we get a description of how the king has ascended. And then from verse 18 onwards, the second half of the psalm, we get a description of what the ascended king is doing now.

That's how I'm going to approach the psalm in a few moments we've got. So firstly, verses 1 to 6, praise the ascended king. Now the big question you might have from my introduction is, why am I talking about the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ when we're looking at a psalm?

A psalm written hundreds of years before Jesus Christ came to earth. A psalm which doesn't seem to mention Jesus, doesn't seem to mention the Messiah, doesn't seem to mention Christ at all.

Well, there's a couple of verses in this psalm which I think are a clue to what this psalm is pointing us forward to. The first is verse 1. God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered, all those who hate him shall flee before him.

[5 : 58] This psalm actually isn't so much of a wish, it's more of a certainty, it's more as if David is saying, look, God has arisen, these things have happened, let's praise him, let's rejoice in him, rejoice in him for these things.

But what is David talking about in this verse and in the rest of this psalm? Well, the clue is to realise this psalm, Psalm 68 verse 1, isn't original to this psalm.

David is actually quoting here. It's quoting from the book of Numbers. If you're taking notes, we won't turn to it, but it's Numbers 10 verse 35. And it's what Moses said, whenever the people of God were on the move, remember the people of God, they were taken out, slavery in Egypt, they were taken through the wilderness into the promised land.

And whenever they went on the move in the wilderness into Sinai, this verse was said. And it was particularly said when they first set off, when the Ark of the Covenant, that box that contained the Ten Commandments, but really was that great symbol of God's presence with his people, that Ark that travelled in front of them as they moved, showing that God was with them, and that God was guiding them into the promised land.

When that started to move, when the people of God started making their way on their journey once again, Moses would cry out this verse, God shall arise, God shall arise, his enemies will be scattered, those who hate him shall flee before him.

[7 : 35] Obviously that journey was heading to a destination. And that destination was the promised land, wasn't it? And it was Jerusalem. And finally the Ark of the Covenant came to rest.

And it came to rest on Mount Zion. And it came to rest, and it was placed in the heart of what became the temple. It came to rest in the Holy of Holies.

The temple which showed loud and clear that God dwelt with his people, that God ruled his people, that God spoke to his people, that God had provided a way to dwell with his people through sacrifice.

The temple was on a hill, it was on Zion in the heart of Jerusalem. And as we read that, and as we read this psalm, it becomes clear that this psalm is a psalm written by David, when the Ark of the Covenant had finished its journey.

When it was placed on that hill in Zion. When God's promises were seen to be fulfilled, when the people had reached the land, and the temple was built.

[8 : 36] What's this psalm? It's a psalm where David is looking back, and he is praising God for all he has done, and praising him for his victory, and praising him for his rule, and praising him for the salvation he has brought to his people.

But what about us today? Well, actually, this isn't just a nice bit of history, it's not just a historical psalm for us. Because the ascension of the Ark of the Covenant into the heart of the temple on Mount Zion, actually just pointed forward to a greater victory.

It wasn't the conclusion of everything that God was going to do, though it was pointing forward to a greater ascension that is to come. We know that, because verse 18, the other key verse in this psalm, is quoted by the Apostle Paul.

And it's quoted in Ephesians 4. And he applies it, now, not to something that's happened in the past, for God's people in the Old Testament, but he applies it to the Lord Jesus.

He applies it to Jesus, which is the fulfilment of all of those promises in the Old Testament, the fulfilment of where God and man really meet. He is the one who brings God's people out of slavery. [9 : 47] He is the one who speaks to God's people. He is the one who is the sacrifice that enables God and man to meet. And as Paul applies this psalm to Jesus in Ephesians 4, he's saying, actually, that great ascension that God's people looked back to when the Ark of the Covenant ascended and rested on Mount Zion, well, actually, that's just a picture of the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, who ascended not just up to the top of a mountain on earth, but he ascended to the true temple in the heavenly realms and is seated at the right hand of his Father on high.

Now, as we see that, and that was done very quickly, hopefully you've kind of at least got the gist of that, hopefully we can see why we can begin and must begin to sing this psalm.

And these first six verses that you've got in front of you are like an overview, really, of the entire thing. What is David doing in these first six verses? Well, he's praising God for ascending, for rising up and completing his work, for showing that he is king, for finishing his task.

Ascension. The ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ. The ascension of the Ark of the Covenant on top of Mount Zion, into the heart of the Holy of Holies of the temple.

That doesn't mean that God suddenly disappears out of view. No, it means that God takes his throne. So when today we think of the fact that Jesus has ascended, don't think of it as a kind of magic trick, where Jesus has somehow disappeared into the sky.

[11 : 29] We need to think of it more like a new king climbing up some stairs to sit down on a throne. To rule. And I think the big part of this psalm is, it is a good thing that God has sat down to rule, because he is a good king.

Because he is ruling, God's enemies now pose no threat. They're like a breath, an imagery in verse 2. They will melt.

This might sound terrifying, but we need to remember what he defines as wicked. God defines as wicked all that is wrong. All that is against him.

This is not a king on the side of the rich and powerful. No, he's a king who is habitually on the side of the weak and the vulnerable. He wouldn't want a king who's said to be the father of the fatherless and the protector of widows.

A king who cares for the weakest and least valued. But what if we hear that, and we look at ourselves and think, well, I'm not sure whose side I'm on.

[12 : 39] I want to be on King Jesus' side, but when I compare myself with his character, I know I fail. We heard the Ten Commandments read out earlier in the service, and as we're really honest about ourselves, and we look into our hearts, we know that we break them, don't we?

Well, how can we be on the side of a king who keeps and upholds those laws? Well, verse 6 is a great comfort, isn't it? He is a king who releases prisoners.

Just as he brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, he brings people out of slavery to sin and rebellion to him, to know and trust him. That's who the righteous are in verse 4.

They're the ones who are right with this king through what he's done. We trust him, we recognise he is king. The wicked in this psalm, well, they are those who hold out against him.

They are the ones who refuse to come to this king. They are the ones who refuse to bow down before him. We don't believe he's king, we don't believe he is good. We can join with David, can't we, in these verses.

[13 : 42] We can praise Jesus that he has ascended, because it means that he, right now, is the king who is ruling. Putting it directly means that while you slept last night, Jesus was at work subduing his enemies.

Right now he is continuing to rule over his world. Remembering the fact that Jesus has ascended and is ruling, well, it cuts, doesn't it, to the heart of some of the very real and very personal struggles we all have.

Struggles with worry and fear and stress. Struggles that things seem out of control. Struggles with grace and grace and grace and grace and grace and grace. We know we're not in control, don't

we? But the ascension, well, it means that Jesus is in control.

It means that Jesus is king. It means that God is on the throne. So he plays it. That's what David's calling us to do in these verses. but David doesn't just do that in this psalm in verses 7 to 18 he then takes a step back and he kind of recounts the journey of the ascended king a bit like, this probably trivialises it but if you're a fan of a football team and they've made their way to the FA Cup and they've got the FA Cup and they've triumphed they've triumphed over the season, it's great then isn't it to just kind of go back as fans and just to discuss how they got there, the teams they beat on the way to Wembley and in a way that's a little bit like what David is doing here although obviously in a far more serious and in a far more important way as David takes a step back and thinks about how did God get to his throne the journey of the ascended king because in some ways as we think about the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ and we're saying, well okay, it's God taking his throne it's kind of slightly odd isn't it to think about because we kind of think, well surely God has already been in control surely God has always been in some sense king well, yes that's true but there was a process to Jesus becoming king and becoming crowned with honour and glory there was a particular journey that he took to the throne certain things had to happen as we confessed the 19th creed earlier it was important that he suffered and died and was buried and rose again as David looks back on the journey of the Ark of the Covenant to rest on Mount Zion what does he talk about?

well he talks about that journey through the wilderness, doesn't he? it was a journey where God picked up a people and rescued them from slavery and brought them through difficulties we're not going to look at all the details but the basic message is clear as you look down through verse 7 down to verse 14 the basic message is simply well look how great God is because people are weak and pathetic God's enemies are weak and pathetic but as God set out he won the victory God's presence with his people well that meant he was always going to come and take the throne so in verses 7 to 10 you see the Lord leading his people out of Egypt through the wilderness providing for them with rain showing his greatness to those who oppose him and then when they're opposed in verses 11 to 14 well what's the Lord doing?

[17:18] the Lord fights for his people against their enemies the kings flee the Lord scatters them kings don't flee because God's people are great fighters they're not you can read about it early in the Old Testament but simply because God gives the word verse 11 simply has to speak they're blotted out what were the Israelites like?

well they were few in number weren't they? were they a powerful group? no they were weak were they a faith? full of faith? well now often they were grumbling weren't they? but why did they make it to the promised land?

they made it to the promised land because the Lord was with them and at their best they recognise that it's interesting that this part of the psalm really picks up on Deborah's song from Judges 5 as she looks back and recognises the greatness of God and then once the Lord brought and led his people out what does he do?

well he leads them in he leads them to the promised land and he chooses to dwell on Mount Zion verse 15 to verse 18 they're the climax of this journey aren't they?

as the ark ascends but just notice to those people looking on these events at the time this climax would have seemed a little bit disappointing Mount Zion isn't a particularly massive mountain if you've ever been to Jerusalem you'll know it's on a hill you do go up to Jerusalem but it's not spectacular in any way the mountains of Bashan and in the Golan Heights well they're majestic mountains if you're going to show some kind of victory that is where you would go but why are those mountains in Bashan verse 15 why are they being pictured as envious at what is going on here?

[19:16] well the important thing about Mount Zion is that God is there that's what makes Mount Zion so great God is in Jerusalem that's why David praises God is ruling for the sake of his people that's why we can be filled with awe and wonder this great climax this great journey it's all about God it's not about his people as we think about Jesus ascended we rejoice in the fact that that God is reigning and God is ruling what makes God's people great well it's not not us is it?

like Israel we can look back and we rejoice in God and we look back we look at Jesus ascended and we rejoice in Jesus we look back we look at the fact that he's ruling and reigning for us and he is caring for us but it's not because we are so great it's because he is great so what's the church like today?

what are we like? what's the church in the world like? well a bit like Israel really we're pretty weak aren't we in worldly terms as Paul says we're not very rich we're not very powerful he was put us in football team terms we're more like American Samoa than Brazil so apparently in 2001 American Samoa were the worst team in the world they lost 31-0 to Australia no one would bet on American Samoa but actually they qualified for the World Cup 10-14 years later why? well not actually because they were great for themselves in 2011 they hired a coach a Dutch coach Thomas Longan and amazingly he began to turn them round what made them great? well it wasn't them it was the one who was working for them what makes us great as a church? what do we rejoice in? well we rejoice in God God has chosen to rescue and to dwell with us the ascension here as David looks at the ascension and the journey that God took to the throne well it's wonderful because it highlights the weakness and the pathetic nature of God's people but it just shows the greatness of God to remember the journey Jesus has taken to the throne well to remember that he could have remained in heaven but he chose for the sake of his people to come down in weakness to rescue us in our sin to go to the cross to die to be resurrected and then return to the throne it is a wonderful journey and it's a wonderful journey because it just highlights the greatness of God it highlights the power of God it highlights the love of God he is a God who through his journey cleared the way of obstacles picked up a people to take with him so David calls us to praise the ascended king and he looks back and rejoices at the king's journey and then thirdly he spends the rest of the time talking about the rule of the ascended king the rule of the ascended king what is what is our king doing now as we look at the second half of this time it shows he's not just waiting is he don't ever think that's what Jesus is doing now he's not just biding his time until he comes again no he's active what is what was

[22 : 48] God doing for his people as he ruled over them from Mount Zion well David saw three things and they're the same three things that the Lord Jesus Christ is doing now for us firstly he's equipping his people he's equipping his people that's what verses 18 to 23 say verse 18 is really the heart of the whole psalm the king takes the throne and like a king and any other king in the ancient world his rule is shown by the fact he's overcome enemies and those enemies bring gifts to him in submission and in defeat brings captives in your train receiving gifts from men have you been paying attention this verse poses a question this is the verse that Paul quotes in Ephesians 4 and this is the verse that he emphasizes that it's about Jesus Christ in his ascension but actually if you were to turn to

Ephesians 4 Paul seems to misquote this on he talks about the Lord Jesus Christ giving gifts to men rather than receiving gifts from men what's going on here it's quite a big problem if the apostle Paul misquotes the bible it seemed to strike at the heart of our trust in the bible you see what the apostle Paul seems to be doing is he's both quoting verse 18 and he's explaining it in the context of the whole psalm so when the Lord Jesus Christ ascends and is victorious like all kings he has the spoils of victory he has captives he has prisoners he has taken prisoners who are now his people that he's released from slavery and are now bound to him and as we come to Lord Jesus we in a sense bring gifts to him our lives now belong to him but what does Jesus do with our lives but he's not like an ancient ruler who's got a palace full of gifts and presents that people have given him in fact that still happens today the royal family at the end of last year published a list of official gifts they've received throughout 2014 you can go online and read what they were it's a fascinating list really

Prince George it would be no surprise to see received the most you can imagine I guess they've got rooms and rooms of gifts that they were given which I'm sure they don't use on a daily basis but when King Jesus receives gifts and tributes when he receives lives which now belong to him what does he do well he turns it round doesn't he he takes those gifts and he shares them with his people he gives lives he gives gifts to his church in particular to bring our lives to him he takes us and uses us in service of him to his church that's why Ephesians 4 then goes on to talk about pastors and evangelists and other roles in the church the risen Lord Jesus giving gifts of people to his church people with particular gifts in all sorts of ways to build up his church the risen Lord Jesus equips his people as he is now reigning and ruling equips us as a people as a church but he also equips us personally so verses 19 to 23 well they talk about don't they our great king daily bearing us up Jesus might be absent physically and we have that longing don't we have that longing to see Jesus face to face but Jesus is intimately involved in your life he's using all his strength and his power to keep you going he's protecting his people he's bringing us deliverance

from death because Jesus is king the thing we most fear need not to be feared he's giving us isn't he daily bearing us up verse 19 as the God of our salvation he's equipping us with what we most need to get through life to face death to deal with wickedness of sin and he is doing that because he is doing that from the position of strength from the ruling from his throne he's equipping his people secondly what's he doing now well he's receiving praise verse 24 to 27 a great image isn't there of the whole of

God's people in the temple rejoicing in the fact that God is victorious all of God's people are there so there are two tribes from the north are named and two tribes from the south a way of kind of saying all of God's people are together rejoicing in the fact that God is king gathering together as one to praise God God's people gather together to praise the fact that Jesus rules and reigns that's a wonderful thing we do every Lord's Day isn't it and we need to remember that what we are doing right now and what we do every Sunday is that we are coming together to recognise reality we are coming together to recognise what is true in a sense it's the most real thing we do all week as we come together and we praise the Lord Jesus Christ who is really on the throne who is really in control of our world I notice that yes they are accompanied by musicians but it's the singers that are at the front the word is central isn't it it's not a performance it's a gathering of all of God's people to hear and then to respond to the fact that God is in charge and then finally wonderfully what is [28 : 50] Jesus doing now well he's drawing the nations even in the Old Testament there is mission there is the sense that God is a God of the whole world and because God is on the throne David says nations will come to him you see that in verses 28 to 31 and onwards nobles verse 31 shall come from Egypt Cush shall hasten to strengthen will hasten to stretch out her hands to God David is expecting an influx not just of Jews but of Gentiles into God's kingdom yes they come verse 30 with their wickedness beaten down but they come willingly to trust and to rejoice in the king this is the wonderful thing that Jesus has ascended because Jesus on the throne he has all authority over heaven and earth to draw all people all people from all backgrounds and all nations and tribes and languages to come to him this is a picture of the great commission isn't it it's what Jesus says and calls us out to do and it's wonderful that's fulfilled in a small way in this room this morning as we look around and see people from all different backgrounds we've all come haven't we hopefully to the

Lord Jesus Christ because why well not because of we've just suddenly decided to follow Jesus as a great kind of religious teacher but because Jesus is the king on the throne who draws people to him we only went through that fairly briefly but hopefully as we've seen this time we've got a little bit of an insight as to why it is so great so important that Jesus has ascended and that he is ruling you see Jesus is not off the scene of this world actually it's exactly the opposite Jesus is not off the scene he's not showing his lack of care and involvement in your life no actually the fact that Jesus ascended it says exactly the opposite says his work is complete it means he's ruling and caring and saving so this week we need to remind ourselves of that fact we need to have these words ringing in our ears whatever happens this week perhaps go home perhaps this afternoon just read through this psalm again we've gone through it so quickly there's so many great details that show just strengthen our faith as we think on the fact that the

Lord Jesus Christ is the risen ascended king equipping his people calling the nations being praised by us together recognizing the reality of our world let's pray and then we will