

“Enduring Fire: Praising a Faithful God – Power and Strength”

Scripture: Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35

Graphic: fire, hands raised, life, offering, worship, lightning, Holy Spirit

Key Verses: 4 Sing to God, sing praise to his name; lift up a song to him who rides upon the clouds – his name is the Lord – be exultant before Him.

Theme: We have been given power and strength from God through salvation in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit active in our lives. This is nothing less than the power of resurrection. This power and strength aren't for overwhelming anyone or anything but for the sake of those who are powerless and lost – that they too may have resurrection power and strength. For that, we have reason to praise our faithful God.

1) Introduction

- a) All right! Over the last two weeks we have been praising our faithful God. I can't think of anything BETTER to do in the context of worship, than praise God! Amen?
- b) Praising God for safety and security. Praising God for life and purpose. And today, praising God for power and strength.
- c) And again this morning, we will see that our cultural, our worldly, concept of power and strength is at odds with God's perspective. And sometimes it really feels like everything the Bible has to say about the way the world views stuff is exactly opposite from the way God does.
- d) And I'm not apologizing about that to you, I'm simply identifying one of the main reasons why people have a hard time giving their lives to Christ.
- e) The church, in our American culture at least, is viewed as weak. It's viewed as a bunch of hypocritical people who need the crutch of faith in God to get through life.
- f) And my response to the people who say that is: THEY'RE RIGHT! The church IS weak. Because if we define the church as the people who make up the body of Christian believers in this world, who bow to the authority of a Triune God and the Word of God, then we are weak in comparison.
- g) But here's the rub – God never intended us to be powerful and strong according to the world's perspective. And if we're chasing after any forms of power or strength in this world – money, fame, physical strength, accolades, or awards – whatever it is, then the true power and strength that God has in store for us can never fully be a part of our lives.

- h) Because in God's economy, power and strength are realized most profoundly in salvation and the resurrection of Jesus Christ – for your life, and the lives of everyone else you know.
- i) It's only when we stand close to the enduring fire of God in our lives that we participate in this counter-cultural power and strength...
- j) Let's open our Bibles to Psalm 68. Let me just encourage you to bring your Bible with you to worship each Sunday, because we WILL open it, we WILL read from it, and it's what defines us as body of believers...
- k) Let's pray...

2) Scripture

a) Read verses 1-3

- i) I read verses 1 and 2 of Psalm 68, and I'm, like, ready to fight! And I want God to smite my enemies and tear down those people who don't like me very much...and all the people who annoy me!
- ii) And then, REALITY CHECK! – do I really have any enemies, personally? How many people here, seriously, have enemies in your life that you know want to hurt you or kill you?
- iii) Now, I know there are probably some radical Muslims that would love for all the Christians to be wiped off the face of the earth in the name of Allah...and if one happened to walk through this door, there might be trouble for us, but I don't KNOW anyone like that, personally.
- iv) I DO know that some people in my life, at one point or another, don't care to be around me...
- v) Are these people my enemies? Are they enemies of God that the psalmist here wants to have flee from God, be driven away, melt like wax, and perish before God? I don't know.
- vi) What I DO know, and what the psalmist confirms, and what the Biblical narrative is very clear about, is that God has enemies! There is a spiritual battle that is RAGING in this world that is seeking to tear down the very fabric of God's Kingdom.

- vii) And even though we want to enter into that fight against what we perceive to be injustice in OUR lives or against some unnamed force that we THINK is seeking to tear apart Christianity, IT'S NOT OUR FIGHT!
- viii) IT'S God's fight!
- ix) The psalmist says, "Let GOD rise up" not the United Methodist Church...not the evangelicals...or those who are good enough! Let GOD rise up and take care of HIS business. We want GOD to make an appearance here and do what He will.
- x) We have to be extremely careful in our lives not to just throw people into categories like "enemy of God". "Oh, I don't believe the same thing as you about sexuality – BOOM, you must be an enemy of God." Or, "Hey, your way of baptizing people is way different than mine – BAM, enemy of God."
- xi) God is the one with enemies, not us. And even though some people might want to kill you because you are a follower of Jesus, let GOD do the judging. Let GOD rise up and scatter those that He KNOWS are evil. Let GOD figure out who hates Him. Let GOD drive people out like smoke and melt people like wax. We can't do any of that anyway, even though we so often like to think we can.
- xii) When the last time any of us melted anyone anyway?
- xiii) Compared to God we are ignorant and weak!
- xiv) We aren't called to fight the battle for God, we are called to respond TO God by living lives that are obedient and faithful. So that when God looks at us, He will see people who have received His salvation.
- xv) And our response is, verse 3, to be joyful...to exult (to leap for joy) before God...to be jubilant with joy. NOT (hear me)...NOT primarily because God has destroyed His enemies (although we can rejoice in the fact that God CAN and DOES DO that), but ULTIMATELY because He has provided a way for us (and the people we consider to be OUR enemies) to be saved and counted as heirs to His kingdom.
- xvi) And he does that because he can – God is powerful and strong...
- xvii) Look at verse 4...who is this God?

b) Read verses 4-6

- i) Who IS this God? Is He who so many people inside and outside the church are terrified of because He hates sin and we think He wants to destroy everyone who sins or is lost or broken?
- ii) Is He an angry and vengeful God who could care less about you and me and only wants us to be perfect?
- iii) Hardly! He is the One who, in verse 4, rides upon the clouds! No one does that but God. We can ride THROUGH them maybe in an airplane, but only GOD rides ON them, or controls them.
- iv) Think back with me to the Exodus, when the people of Israel are being led through the desert by a pillar of cloud. This is most likely a reference to the time when God led the people through the wilderness and into the Promised Land. God has the power to give salvation to His people – to rescue them.
- v) They were weak and lost out there...He was leading them with power and strength.
- vi) And His Name is the Lord – YHWH. The Hebrew here is the proper name for God. Not some vague reference to SOME god, somewhere. Not the pagan gods, not Allah, or Buddha. This name, YHWH, is the specific and ONLY true name for the Triune God we worship. The people of Israel had such respect and fear of THIS one true God that they would not dare to even SPEAK his name. They would only write it...
- vii) This is YHWH and YHWH is powerful and mighty...and we should be exultant – be joyful and filled with praise - before Him.
- viii) But, listen, up until now, we've talked a lot about God's power and might...about God taking care of business in the spiritual realm and handling this raging spiritual battle. And we know God has the power to save us.
- ix) But our ideas of power and strength in this world go against the perspective of God in the Bible...
- x) So here's the deal...Not only is God ALL THAT, but he is identified in verses 5 and 6, as the father of orphans...the protector of widows, the one

- who finds homes for those who are lonely and desolate, and leads prisoners to prosperity...
- xi) And as we, again, think about the people of Israel, coming out of slavery in Egypt, with nothing but the clothes on their backs, God steps in and cares for even the least among them.
 - xii) YHWH cares for the LEAST among them...the least among us. If you are fatherless...God cares for you. If you have lost a spouse...God cares. If you have no home or no friends...God is right there waiting to love you and connect you with people who will be brothers and sisters in Christ!
 - xiii) If you have been in bondage – a prisoner to sin or some circumstance in your life – God leads you out to prosperity.
 - xiv) But God's prosperity is not made of money and real estate – it's found in a right relationship with Him through salvation in Jesus Christ.
 - xv) The power and strength that God gives to the world is the opportunity to take hopeless situations and transform them into that which gives glory and honor to God and His purposes.
 - xvi) When Jesus was hanging on the cross...when Jesus died and was placed into that tomb, the circumstance seemed hopeless. The disciples were left orphans and widows...they were lost and without a leader...they were prisoners in their grief...
 - xvii) BUT, God showed THE WORLD his power! And God's power in their lives was not exemplified as a divine warrior marching into Jerusalem and wiping out all those who opposed Jesus and the salvation message of God's kingdom. God's power and strength came to them, and to us, as an empty tomb and resurrection from the dead.
 - xviii) So that orphans could have a father, widows could be protected, people could find shelter, and prisoners could be lifted up...
 - xix) And yet the sad reality is that there are people who refuse to see that power for what it is. Verse 6 reminds us that people choose to live in the parched land without the resurrection power in their lives.

xx) The amazing thing about God is that He is both capable of destroying the great legions of those who would oppose Him, simply by SPEAKING, and caring for every individual in this room – at the same time.

c) Read verses 7-10

i) This is not just a picture of a God who is totally capable to destroy anyone who opposes Him...not just a depiction of a God who marches with the people of Israel...Our God is a God of thunder and power, majesty and might, AND, AND! a God of gentle rain to provide for your needs...

ii) How awesome is our God...and we praise Him because of his power and strength to defeat the evil in this world...but also because God loves and cares for us! ... skip over to verse 32...

d) Read verses 32-35

3) Conclusion

a) This morning, we'll have the opportunity to come forward to receive communion.

b) In one aspect, communion is simply a celebration of the last meal that Jesus had with his disciples just before he was crucified. It was a Passover meal, celebrated by the people of Israel, commemorating an event that led to the Exodus, when God brought the people out of Egypt.

c) One could easily say that this last supper was filled with weakness...Jesus was about to be crucified by Romans soldiers (enemies). And Judas would do the betraying so those soldier could find Jesus.

d) The disciples fled in fear when Jesus was arrested.

e) Jesus was hung on the cross, seemingly alone and abandoned by God.

f) Weakness was winning!

g) Yet, as we step back from the singular events of that day, we begin to see, through the weakness, strength and power that can only come from God. Power and strength that are completely opposite of what the world would define as power.

- h) The disciples wanted Jesus to FIGHT! But Jesus knew his only enemy was evil and your sin.
- i) The other aspects of communion include the remembering the events that took place after the resurrection.
- j) It includes remembering and giving thanks for the ways that God has been saving and strengthening His people for thousands of years.
- k) It's thanksgiving for the sacrifice that God made in Jesus, and the fact that Jesus was fully human when he agreed to make that sacrifice for you and me.
- l) It's a gift of grace from God, who knows our weakness and doesn't ignore it because of His own unlimited power and strength.
- m) Communion is our best reminder that the power of Jesus' resurrection can be ours when we accept Christ as Lord and Savior. That the power of Jesus' resurrection is available to all who will come and receive Christ.
- n) As you come forward this morning, be assured that God has the power to defeat evil – the cross was not the end of God's plan. There is no doubt! God also has the power to bring back to life that which was dead...which is dead.
- o) Maybe this morning, you are attempting to build your life through sheer human strength that you have. God's plan is for you to rely fully on Him, so that in your weakness, He is strong through you.
- p) And then with His strength, you are equipped to go out and share the love that He has for the orphans...the widows...the homeless and desolate...even those you might think are your enemies.
- q) In Christ, all that is possible...
- r) Stand in the presence of God's enduring fire, receive the power and strength that He offers, and then praise our faithful God.
- s) Let's pray...