

PSALM 48

PRAISE FOR ZION'S CITY

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, December 26, 2010

Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth (Ps. 48:1-2).

I have had the privilege to travel to a number of places throughout the world, but I have never visited the holy city of Jerusalem. Friends who have been to Palestine have told me of the blessing it was to see with their own eyes the places where Jesus lived and ministered. The reports are inspiring enough that if I could pick one place to visit, that place would undoubtedly be Jerusalem.

I have had, however, the privilege of seeing something better and more holy than the ancient city of Jerusalem. I have seen the church of Jesus Christ, which fulfills all that Jerusalem represented as the city of God. Psalm 48 glorifies God as the psalmist gives praise to Zion's holy city, providing a picture of how the church is intended to display God's glory for the praise of his grateful people.

Psalm 48 is third in a series of psalms dedicated to God's holy city. Psalm 46 sang of God as a fortress for his city, "the holy habitation of the Most High" (Ps. 46:4-). Psalm 47 told of the enthronement of God as the ark of the covenant was processed up to Mount Zion. Psalm 48 concludes the sequence, associating God's glory with the splendor of his city: "Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God!" (Ps. 48:1). The scope of the praise, however, expands beyond earthly Jerusalem. Derek Kidner comments that the "outlines of 'the Jerusalem above', with its great walls and foundations which are 'for ever', are already coming into view."¹

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-78*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, UK: InterVarsity, 1973), 179.

THE SPLENDOR OF GOD'S MOUNTAIN CITY

The psalmist begins and ends with an expression of how God is praised because of his city: "Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God!" (Ps. 48:1). H. C. Leupold comments that the "conclusion that this psalm draws is that the God who dwells at Zion is immeasurably great and will be a sure defense of all who put their trust in him."² J. J. Stewart Perowne adds, "It is the glory of His Presence which makes her glorious; the strength of His Presence which makes her safe."³

In the opening stanza, God is first praised for the beauty of his mountain-top capital: "His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth" (Ps. 48:1-2). Jerusalem rests at 2500 feet above sea level, and its setting grants it an impressive sense of loftiness. This is why so many psalms speak of going "up" to Jerusalem.

The idea of Jerusalem being lifted up is theological even more than topographical. Micah prophesied, "It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it" (Mic. 4:1). The idea is the saving preeminence of God's city, the church, to which peoples from all over the earth will come to know God. In this vital sense, the beauty of Zion's lofty city is tied to the missionary spread of the gospel.

The universal scope of Psalm 48 continues in verse 3, which says that God's city "is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King." If speaking only of the exaltation of Jerusalem in his day, the psalmist was engaging in a good deal of sacred hyperbole: at no time was the ancient world focused in marveling on Jerusalem, with the possible exception of King Solomon's fleeting reign of splendor. Even at the height of Solomon's glory, however, Zion was not "the joy of all the earth."

Here, again, the meaning is theological. Jerusalem is the city from which salvation comes to the whole earth. John Calvin explains: "Christ appeared with his Gospel out of Zion, to fill the world with

² H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 375.

³ J. J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms, 2 vols* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1878, reprint, 1976), 1:389.

true joy and everlasting felicity.”⁴ Many people do not think of the church as “the joy of all the earth,” and would rather be practically anywhere else on the Lord’s Day. Those who do come, however, often at the invitation of a Christian friend, should discover how wrong they have been. They should witness joyful praises to God, they should be wrapped in the warmth of loving fellowship, and, above all, they should hear the preaching of glad tidings of salvation from on high. David Dickson writes: “The church is the joy of the whole earth by holding out to all the light of saving doctrine, and showing the authority, power, wisdom, and grace of Christ.”⁵

John Piper wrote a book titled *God Is the Gospel* that agrees with the theme of Psalm 48. His point was that the knowledge of God is itself good news for salvation. Jesus taught this when he prayed to the Father: “Now this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God” (Jn. 17:3). It was God’s presence alone that made Jerusalem the world’s greatest city, and when God’s presence was removed the city fell into disgrace and defeat. God’s presence made a stone in the desert a Bethel, “the house of God,” to fleeing Jacob, and the presence of Jesus in the manger of Bethlehem caused the star of God’s glory to shine upon that little town. So, too, will the presence of Christ lift up any heart with faith, hope, and love.

Verse 2 makes a note that probably points specifically to Christ. The psalmist speaks of Mount Zion “in the far north.” This is a curious statement, since Jerusalem was not a city in the northern regions of the world. Some have argued that the city looks to the north, perhaps challenging the citadels of the pagan gods of Mesopotamia. Far more likely is that the psalmist is focusing on the northern portion of Mount Zion, where God’s temple rested. The temple was a strikingly beautiful marvel of the ancient world. More significantly, the temple was the one place where atonement for sin was made in the presence of the true God. It is the forgiveness of sin and the reconciliation between God and man that made Jerusalem and makes the gospel today “the joy of all the earth” (Ps. 48:2).

⁴ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, 23 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1848, reprint 2009), 5:221.

⁵ David Dickson, *Psalms* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, DATE), 278.

THE MIGHT OF GOD'S CITY

Having celebrated Zion's city for its splendor, the psalmist extolls Jerusalem for her might. In keeping with the theme of Psalms 46-48, it is the presence of God that makes Zion a fortress: "Within her citadels God has made himself known as a fortress" (Ps.48:3).

The statement that "God has made himself known" as a fortress suggests that the psalm celebrates some remarkable divine deliverance. Perhaps the most famous occurred in 701 B.C., when God answered the prayers of King Hezekiah by sending the angel of the Lord to slay an Assyrian army of 185,000 men in a single night. There are, however, other options, including God's protection of Jerusalem from the great army of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir in the time of Jehoshaphat. On that occasion, the king assembled all Israel to stand as one before the Lord in prayer, including "their little ones, their wives, and their children" (2 Chron. 20:13). Jehoshaphat prayed, "O our God,... we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you" (2 Chron. 20:12). The Lord sent a prophet with this reply: "Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours but God's... Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the LORD on your behalf" (2 Chron. 20:15, 17). Jehoshaphat went out in the morning with his army, led by singing Levites. When they reached the enemy camp they found signs of a rout, with bodies strewn around, as the Lord had responded to their singing by bringing a violent confusion to the foe. God had "made himself known as a fortress" (Ps. 48:3) to that believing king.

The details of verses 4-7 suggest that the psalm may look to Jehoshaphat's victory, since it speaks of a plurality of "kings assembled" against the city and celebrates that God scattered and shattered the enemy, just as happened in 2 Chronicles 20. It is also noteworthy that among the Levites who led Jehoshaphat's army were the sons of Korah, to whom Psalm 48's authorship is attributed.

This and other biblical examples show that God's people are not immune from suffering trials, some of them very severe. Israel would face painful struggles and Jerusalem would be beset with mighty foes like the Assyrians or the eastern horde of Jehoshaphat's time. What

God has promised is that he will reveal himself as a fortress to all who flee to him. The mistake some suffering Christians make, sometimes making a shipwreck of their whole lives, is to blame God for their misfortunes. According to Psalm 48, and the whole Bible, God is not the problem but the answer. We should never flee from God in our suffering, but run into him and find ourselves safe from a deadly world and the enemies of our souls.

The psalmist particularly notes the dismay with which God afflicts his enemies: “For behold, the kings assembled; they came on together. As soon as they saw it, they were astounded; they were in panic; they took to flight” (Ps.48:5). The rapid succession of verbs suggests the sudden dismay experienced by the enemy. Julius Caesar famously described his victories in Gaul with a terse succession of verbs: *Veni, vidi, vici* (“I came, I saw, I conquered”). The Hebrew verbs of verse 5 have a similarly dramatic phonetic effect: “They saw... they were astounded... they panicked... they fled.”⁶

The psalmist employs two analogies. The first is the anguish of a woman in labor, who is unable to avoid or delay affliction. The second analogy speaks of the mightiest ships of the day, the ships of Tarshish, being scattered by the blowing of a sudden, strong east wind (Ps. 48:6-7). This second image is picked up by Revelation 18:17-20 in describing the fall of the godless world system as represented by Mystery Babylon. Both of these images show God reducing the enemies of his people to panic by a sudden onslaught of divine power.

This kind of divine deliverance is not restricted to Bible times. One nearly literal example of the psalm’s scenario was the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. The cause at stake was the gospel: England had joined the cause of the Protestant Reformation, and the fiercely Roman Catholic Spaniards were determined to put to the sword to the gospel-spreading English church. Spain’s King Philip II sent 130 great war galleons, carrying 17,000 soldiers, to effect the conquest. History records the gallant sea defense of Sir Francis Drake in the English Channel and credits the smaller, more nimble English ships with advantage over the massive, more powerfully armed, but less maneuverable Spaniards. The English defeated the enemy, destroying and capturing many ships. The real cause for the English triumph,

⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries*, 5:223.

however, was a sudden change in the weather, with a wind that blew the Spanish galleons up the channel towards Scotland, wrecking scores of mighty ships on the Irish coast. Less than half of the Spanish fleet returned to its ports and the defeat was so thorough that the age of Spanish sea dominance was over forever. While most historians attribute the victory to English skill and valor, the English themselves gave praise to God for their victory. Queen Elizabeth struck a coin to celebrating the Armada's defeat, reading *Afavid Deus*, which means, "God blew."

The same God is the fortress of his church today. While most of us will not see such dramatic events as those of Jehoshaphat or Queen Elizabeth of England, verse 8 reminds us that God is a present power for his people: "As we have heard, so we have seen in the city of the LORD of hosts, in the city of our God." Every Christian should come to add his or her "Amen" to that boast. It is important for believers to know about God's past mighty acts of salvation, especially God's victory over sin and death at the cross of Jesus Christ. But we are also to experience God's power at work in our midst in answer to prayers and in response to our faith in carrying forth the gospel. James Boice comments: "We have also heard what God has done in the lives of other people, how he provided for them in hard times, protected them in moments of danger, and comforted them in loss. Perhaps you were told of such special acts of God by your parents. As you learn to trust him, you should begin to experience such personal blessings yourself, and you should be able to say, 'As I have heard, so have I seen.'"⁷

The psalmist concludes his praise for God's might, saying that "God will establish [his city] forever" (Ps. 48:8). This proves that the psalm has the church in mind, of which the city was a symbol and type. In time, God judged Jerusalem for its idolatry and allowed it to be destroyed by her enemies. But the church is established forever through God's covenant promises. Speaking of the church he is building, Jesus promised that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Mt. 16:18).

⁷ James M. Boice, *Psalms*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 2:405.

TOURING GOD'S CITY

Having praised God's city for its display of the Lord's splendor and might, the psalmist then catalogues a number of other attributes of God that are revealed in Jerusalem for his praise. The chief idea is that of verse 10: "As your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth." The name of God involves all that God is, including his great saving works for his people. As these are proclaimed "to the ends of the earth" (another clear allusion to the mission of the church), the praise of God goes forth from his city. Psalm 48 thus reminds us that having trusted in Christ's salvation for ourselves, the chief calling of the church is to preach the gospel for the salvation of others both near and far.

In particular, God is to be praised for the way that Jerusalem bore testimony to his love: "We have thought on your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple" (Ps. 48:9). The temple revealed God's merciful love through the offerings to atone for sin that were performed there. We likewise declare God's love by preaching the death of Christ for our sins. The New Testament makes this connection over and over. John wrote, "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 Jn. 4:10). Paul taught this repeatedly, saying: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Jesus most famously declared, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16).

Psalm 48 also celebrates God's righteousness and his judgments: "Your right hand is filled with righteousness. Let Mount Zion be glad! Let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of your judgments!" (Ps. 48:10-11). These primarily refer to God's justice in punishing sin and his judgment in showing wrath to his enemies. Christians alike celebrate that God's hand "is filled with righteousness," since God justifies sinners by the gift the righteousness, secured by Christ to be imputed to us through faith alone. While the daughters of Zion rejoiced to see the enemies of Jerusalem scattered and destroyed in God's judgment, the daughters of the church rejoice for God overcoming his enemies today with the power of grace and making them believers and friends.

In these and other ways, the glories of God were displayed in his holy city Jerusalem, so that the psalmist invites this readers to tour the city so as to learn how to praise God and to pass on the faith to following generations: “Walk about Zion, go around her, number her towers, consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels, that you may tell the next generation” (Ps. 48:12-13). Christians should do the same by coming to know the great truths revealed in the Bible.

What are the ramparts of the church, the bulwarks that establish her safe forever? The great Puritan theologian, John Owen, highlighted five bulwarks of our faith to assure us of the security of our salvation.

First, Own pointed out the kingship of Jesus Christ for the true Zion of his church. The world has seen many kings and rulers, some and wise, and others cruel and cunning. The Christian can celebrate the eternal reign of King Jesus over his church. James Boice exults: “He is utterly sovereign, wonderfully compassionate, all-wise, and extraordinarily patient – all that the same time. Moreover,, he is the King of kings and Lord of lords. And his is an eternal kingdom.”⁸ With Jesus as our Lord and King, we will experience the blessings of peace in the city where righteousness dwells.

Second, Owen pointed to “the promises of God, which are innumerable.” God will and must be faithful to all that he has promised, and his church dwells securely under the towers of divine pledge of its salvation. We therefore need to know what God has promised in Scripture – especially forgiveness of sin, eternal life, and a resurrection into glory – and then rely on God’s promises when darkness and doubt descend. One old hymn tells us: “Soldiers who to Christ belong / Trust ye in his Word, be strong / For his promises are sure / His rewards for aye endure.”⁹

Third, Owen noted the “watchful providence of God over the church.” Men carefully watch treasures they cherish. We care about our families and possessions, so we place security systems on our houses. We care about our money so we have financial advisors to watch over our portfolio. Our watchfulness is imperfect, however, and often fails. God treasures his church, but his watchfulness never fails. Psalm 121 says, “Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep...

⁸ Ibid., 2:406.

⁹ Isaac Williams, “Soldiers who To Christ Belong,” 1839.

The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life” (vv. 5, 7). It is therefore impossible for events to surprise the Lord with respect to his church and his people. His watchful care is a strong rampart of our defense.

Fourth, the church is protected by God’s special presence within her. The ancient Jews looked to the temple and the ark of the covenant and they knew that God was specially present in their city. Psalm 46 therefore rejoiced: “God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns” (v. 5). Psalm 48:3 celebrates that God is “within her citadels.” The church, and the individual Christian, can rejoice to have God’s Holy Spirit dwelling within. History showed that the physical walls of Jerusalem could not protect the people if God abandoned them in punishment for their sins. When Jerusalem was rebuilt, The Lord challenged Zechariah to seek a stronger protection than stone and iron, looking to him instead: “I will be to her a wall of fire all around, declares the LORD, and I will be the glory in her midst.” (Zech. 2:5). How important it is today, then, that the church not look to numbers, or money, or fleshly excitement to grant her success and security. Let our glory as a church be the presence of God by means of the Holy Spirit and especially in the preaching of the whole counsel of his Word.

Fifth, and finally, Owen summed up all these bulwarks with the great strength and assurance that God’s people find in “the covenant of God.”¹⁰ All our hope and security is bound up in God’s covenant for our salvation, since God has bound himself by oath, sealed in Christ’s blood, to save all who look to him in faith for salvation.

This is the argument made so eloquently by the writer of Hebrews to his fearful and persecuted readers. Through faith in Jesus, he says, Christians have come not to the Mount Sinai of the old covenant, with its fearful threats of the law, but to the Mount Zion of the new covenant in Christ, with its bulwarks of saving grace. He depicts believers as having gained safety within the city high upon the mountain of God, strong and secure in God’s covenant fidelity: “you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,

¹⁰ Owen’s exposition is cited from Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *A Treasury of David*, 3 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, n.d.), I:2:366.

and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect” (Heb. 12:22-23). Greatest of all our securities and chief among our claims to eternal life is the new covenant sealed by the death of God’s Son for our sins. The writer of Hebrews concludes his portrait, saying that God’s mountain city is secured by “Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and... the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Heb. 12:24).

The writer of Hebrews concludes with two exhortations, first for those who have not yet entered God’s city through faith in the Savior: “See that you do not refuse him who is speaking,” since to reject the gospel is to become one of the enemies by God’s wrath (Heb. 12:25). Then, to believers, he delivers an exhortation similar to that of Psalm 48: “Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:28-29).

OUR GOD FOREVER

It is with a similar exhortation that Psalm 48 concludes. Seeing the splendor, might, and security of our salvation, believers should

“tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever” (Ps. 48:13-14).

There is much for us to tell and celebrate in that final verse. God is our guide, to lead us to salvation. God is forever, so that we can trust him for all our hopes and with our very souls. But perhaps most important is the exclamation, “this is God, our God” (Ps. 48:14). This is the point of the psalm to the believer today. The God of the Bible and of Psalm 48, the glorious God of beauty, power, and saving faithfulness, is your God through faith in Christ, so that you should live with assurance, purpose, hope, and joy. Whatever the world may choose to trust and worship, we will exalt the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God revealed in the Bible. Have you committed yourself to him?

The final statement of Psalm 48 states that if you commit yourself to God through faith in Christ, he will guide you into eternal life and protect you from every enemy that would destroy your soul. The Hebrew text is particularly vivid, saying not merely that God will

“guide us forever” but that God will guide us “through death.” There is no power, no enemy, and no threat that can defeat or destroy the people of God’s city. “For this is the will of my Father,” Jesus said, “that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (Jn. 6:40).