

Psalm 48
The Glory of the Church

I'd like to ask you a question as we begin: how many institutions would you say that you are in love with? We don't generally tend to identify institutions as objects of our love. We love our family, we love our friends. Maybe you "love" some company that makes products you love – think Apple, Ford, or Old Navy. You may "love" your favorite coffee shop or grocery store. But that's a different kind of love, isn't it? We don't love institutions the way we love people. Is there any institution you love so much you would be willing to die for it?

There should be. Jesus did. The church should have that place in our hearts. Our psalm this evening is a love song to the church of Jesus Christ. The psalm is written to inspire in God's people a deep love for God's city, Mount Zion.

As you may know, "Zion" is another name for Jerusalem, the capital city of Judah. But this isn't merely about the ancient city of Jerusalem. It is about the eternal Jerusalem, the eternal city of God, the people who belong to God, and the place where God dwells. The church.

***Kidner:** "Whatever the occasion that immediately inspired the psalm, we are conscious of a bigger setting than the hills of Judah. Zion is more than a local capital; the struggle concerns the whole earth and the whole span of time. The outlines of 'the Jerusalem above,' with its eternal foundations and walls, are already coming into view."*

Newton picks up this New Testament usage of "Zion" in his hymn:

*Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion city of our God.
He whose word cannot be broken formed thee for his own abode.*

And that's precisely the way the psalm begins. The glory of the church is directly connected to the glory of the great God and King who dwells there.

I. The God of Zion

The psalm's basic theme is revealed in verse 1:

Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God

In other words, this is primarily a psalm about the greatness and glory of God. But this greatness and glory is linked to a people and a place. Zion is great only because God has placed his name there – God has claimed it as His city. Zion is majestic and glorious because it is the city of God, who is majestic and glorious. The God of Zion is the Great God, the King above all gods.

That's the point of verse 2 where the writer speaks of,

His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation...Mount Zion in the far north, the city of the great King.

The word for "north" is "Zaphon," and there was a mountain in the north by that name. It was the mountain of the pagan deity, Baal. The Canaanites believed that Baal dwelt there. It was common in those days to identify a local mountain as the dwelling place of the local deities. Mountains, after all,

were the closest thing on earth to heaven. And people, made in God's image, long for a place where they can meet with God, or at least a place where they can say, "Our god is there, he is near." That is the universal, God-created desire of all mankind – no matter what deity they claim. So the Greeks and Romans had Mount Olympus for their deities. The Canaanites had Mount Zaphon. And Israel had Mount Zion.

But why is this Jewish poet talking about Mount Zaphon and calling it Mount Zion? Any Canaanite reading this would be offended or confused. Why would this Hebrew psalmist be claiming Mount Zaphon, the mountain of Baal, as if it were Mount Zion – the mountain of Jehovah, the God of Israel? The answer is very clear. The psalmist is showing that the God of Israel is not a local deity. He is the one and only true God and declares his glory over all the false gods of men. There is one God. One Maker of heaven and Earth, One Rock of Refuge, one Redeemer and Deliverer.

II. The Glory of Zion

There are things which define the city of God, things which are true in direct relation to his presence there.

It is a City of Joy: *His holy mountain is the joy of all the earth.*

This would also be confusing to the pagan nations around. They didn't see Mount Zion as a joy – they despised Mount Zion and the God of Israel who claimed it. But the writer knows the deep secret of the world, that although the world does not now acknowledge God as God, or find God to be the source of all joy, the fact is that

- a) there is no lasting joy in all the world apart from God who created it, and
- b) one day God **will be** the joy of all the nations of the earth.

The psalmist is looking forward to the time when the Christ would be born and angels would sing "Joy to the world." The gospel of God would be proclaimed for the joy of Jew and Gentile. And the city of God would be found not in the geographical city of Jerusalem, but in the faces and praises of those, all over the world, who have come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. These are the citizens of the new Jerusalem, the city built without hands, whose builder and maker is God. Then the prophecy will be fulfilled, as God's holy city, and all those who live by faith in her, will truly be the joy of all the nations.

It is a City of Refuge: One of the primary sources of joy and reasons for praise is the sovereign power of God, which serves as a shield and fortress for his people. We see that in verse 3:

Within her citadels God has made himself known as a fortress.

We have here echoes of Psalm 46:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

⁴ *There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.*

⁵ ***God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;
God will help her when morning dawns.***

The morning would be when the opposing army would attack. That is precisely the scene in

48:4: *For behold, the kings assembled, they came on together.*

The enemies of God have gathered themselves to make war against his people.

This is a common theme in the Psalms because it's a common experience of God's people. The powers of this age, the world, the flesh, and the Devil continually assemble against the people of God.

But within the citadels of Zion, God has made himself known as a fortress. In verses 5-7 we see the kings, the powers of this evil world, shrink back in terror before the God of Israel. Trembling takes hold of them like a woman in labor. There is no avoiding or delaying the crisis and pain of childbirth. They are like men who find their ships being battered by the winds, and are beginning to sink beneath the waves with none to rescue.

There are so many instances in the Old Testament where we see this very thing. When Joshua was invading the land of Canaan, the awesome greatness of God made the armies of Canaan tremble with dread and fear. Who can blame them? What chance of survival was there when you are facing a God who rescued the Israelites from Egypt through ten devastating plagues, capped it off by opening the Red Sea so the people could walk through, and then collapsed its waters over the heads of Pharaoh's army? That might sound like a Sunday School story to us, but it was a recent and terrifying reality to the armies of Canaan.

Our God is a mighty God, not in theory but in real and active warfare against all the spiritual powers of darkness that oppose him and seek to harm his people. We have no idea how many times and ways God has protected us from the spiritual attacks intended to destroy our soul. And the times God does allow us to suffer are not because the fortress has failed, but to strengthen our confidence in his preserving, protecting power. He may allow us to stumble, but he will not let us fall.

The Bible continually reminds us that we are involved in a great contest between the Lord God and all that seeks to resist his rule and destroy his kingdom. But it also reminds us that those who dwell in the city of God have no reason to fear! The beauty of being a child of God is that the mighty power and righteous wrath of the Lord that was once opposed to us, is now engaged to protect and save us. God is a rock and refuge for all those who hope in him. This is the glory of belonging to the church. As Newton writes:

*"On the Rock of ages founded, what can shake thy sure repose?
With salvations wall's surrounded, thou mayest smile at all thy foes."*

And that is precisely the experience of the psalmist.

III. The Experience of the Saints

*⁸As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the LORD of hosts,
in the city of our God, which God will establish forever. Selah*

They had **heard** of God as a fortress and strength, but now they have **experienced** God in that way. This is an essential experience in the life of faith.

- It is one thing to believe that God is a friend of sinners in Jesus, but it is another thing to experience his friendship for you, the sinner.
- It is one thing to believe that God promises to take care of you and be with you when you go through the waters and trials of this life, but it is another thing to go through the waters and find him there.

I had the opportunity to talk with several different people this past week who are going through trials, and I asked them why they felt so much peace. And they said, “Because we’ve experienced God’s present help at every stage of our life. God has been faithful to us in the trials we’ve already been through, and we are confident that he will be faithful to us now.” What they had been told about God, they had seen and experienced in their own life. Isn’t that wonderful?

Calvin writes,

“As long as we have only the bare promises of God, his grace and salvation are as yet hidden in hope; but when these promises are actually performed, his grace and salvation are clearly manifested.”¹

One of the joys of becoming an older believer is the ability to look back over your life and see how God has led, blessed, and guided every step of the way. I can see with clarity that God has not dealt with me as my sins deserved, but according to infinite mercy, grace, and love. And it is the experience of God’s grace and sovereign kindness that leads to praise.

IV. The Testimony of the Saints

⁹ *We have thought on your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple.*

¹⁰ *As your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth.
Your right hand is filled with righteousness.*

It is the privilege and glory of the citizens of God’s city to praise his great and holy name.

Psalm 9:10 *Those who know your name put their trust in you,
for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you.*

M. Henry: *“Where he is known he will be praised; for none deride God but those that are ignorant of him.”²*

But let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.

¹¹ *Let Mount Zion be glad! Let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of your judgments!*

V. The Task of the Saints

The psalm ends with some pointed applications.

1. Take the time to see, study, and cherish the glory of Zion.

Walk about Zion, go around her, number her towers,

¹ Calvin, J., & Anderson, J. (2010). [Commentary on the Book of Psalms](#) (Vol. 2, p. 225). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

² Henry, M. (1994). [Matthew Henry’s commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume](#) (p. 811). Peabody: Hendrickson.

¹³ *consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels...*

The psalmist clearly wants us to really see the glory of Zion. Take the tour. Count the towers. Note the ramparts and citadels. Notice it! Delight in the beauty, strength, and glory of God's holy city.

Of course, the psalmist isn't calling us to simply inspect the old city of Jerusalem. Zion stands for the city of God, in all age, now manifested in the church of Jesus Christ.

M. Futato: *"In 587 BC Jerusalem was destroyed, demonstrating that the city and God were not one and the same. The city was a symbol, a shadow of another reality. That reality is God himself, dwelling with his people. Jesus Christ came as the great king, as the embodiment of the presence of God, to bring us into the presence of God."*³

This is a call to really "see" and cherish the glory of **Jesus** as manifested in his church.

What is the **beauty** of Zion? Jesus is the beauty of Zion. The church is precious and beautiful in the sight of God because this is the church elected from before the earth and given to Jesus. This is the church bought with the blood of Christ.

What is the **joy** of Zion? Jesus is the joy of Zion. What is the joy of the people of God? It is that Jesus loved us and gave his life for us, and now reigns on our behalf and will soon take us to be with him.

The joy of the church is Jesus.

What is the **strength** of Zion? Jesus is the strength of Zion. The world and the Devil have been attacking the church of Jesus Christ from its inception. How does it continue to stand and grow? The power of King Jesus, and the presence of His Spirit.

Matt. 16:18 *...I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*

What is the **security** of Zion? Jesus is the security of Zion. He has never lost a single soul. He will hold us fast. He is the rock of ages. We can hide in him.

2. Tell this to your children.

Why does the Psalmist want us to study the glory of Zion?

*that you may tell the next generation ¹⁴ that this is God,
our God forever and ever.*

God has not given us 300 children here by accident. We have a holy obligation to testify to them concerning God. Which God? "This God" – the God who builds up his church, who seeks her wandering sons, who binds their wounds, and gently heals the broken-hearted ones.

This is God – our God, forever and ever. The God whom we believe is the God of Zion, the God of his Church. The God who bought the church with his own blood. Who indwells the church with his Holy

³ Futato, M. D. (2009). [The Book of Psalms](#). In *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol 7: The Book of Psalms, The Book of Proverbs* (p. 175). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

Spirit. The God who preserves his church and fulfills all his promises. We need our children to know that the God of the Bible is the God of Zion. And he is not only their God, but “our God” – the God of the community of faith. And he will be our God forever and ever.

Studies show that many, many children of the church leave the church when they reach adulthood. They might still believe in God, they just don’t believe in the church. For whatever reasons, they didn’t learn that the God who is, is the God of his Church. We do our children a great disservice if we tell them about the glory of Jesus but fail to show by our words and actions the inestimable value and beauty of his bride, his church.

3. Trust His Guiding Hand

He will guide us forever.

This is the Christian's confidence. God will guide us forever. That doesn’t mean that God will give us the life here we desire. It means he will give us the life here that best prepares us for eternity. He will guide us forever, beyond the horizons of this world and into the world to come. This is what he has promised in Jesus Christ. “I will never leave you or forsake you. I am going to prepare a place for you so that where I am you may be also.”

He said that to his church, his bride. Do you belong to her?

*"Savior, if of Zion's City, I through grace a member am,
Let the world deride or pity. I will glory in Thy Name.
Fading is the worlding's pleasure, all his boasted pomp and show.
Solid joys and lasting treasures none but Zion's children know."*