

The Christian Experience of Joy Over the Safety of the Church

Psalm 48:1-14

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Psalm 48. We're working our way through the second book of the Psalms on Sunday evenings. Over and over we've said that we want to ask what these Psalms teach us about Christ and what these Psalms teach us Christian experience. Derek walked with you through that glorious Psalm 47 with its opening words, "O clap your hands all ye peoples"—a Psalm which celebrates the world coming to a saving knowledge of Christ and the nations joining in, in the praise of the one true God, the God of Israel, the God of Jacob.

When last I was with you, we were in Psalm 46 and we were in trouble, but we were in trouble in which we were confident of divine support. Even in the midst of the most trying times, Psalm 46 assures us that we can know a sense of safety and security because of the divine support of God. Maybe we should refresh our memories about Psalm 46, because Psalm 46 and Psalm 48 have certain parallels. If you allow your eyes to look back at the three parts of Psalm 46, we'll remember that in verse 1-3 of Psalm 46 we have this picture of the challenges facing the people of God, and it's drawn for us in the graphic image of the world literally in upheaval: a cataclysmic earthquake in which the world is unmade and the mountains slip down into the sea. And the point of that picture in verses 1-3 of Psalm 46 is that God can be trusted even when the whole world goes crazy.

The second part of Psalm 46 you'll see in verses 4-7. And there is another picture there of the challenges facing the people of God in the fallen world, and it's a picture of a city engulfed by an almost innumerable hoard of its enemies. And again there's a lesson in that picture, and the picture is—or the lesson of that picture is—that when we're surrounded by our enemies, we are as secure as if we were around the celestial throne in glory; so secure are we in the hands of God.

And in the third scene in Psalm 46 you'll see in verses 8-11: it's a final picture. It's a picture of the future when the challenges facing the people of God in this fallen world are ended. It's a picture of the desolation of all of God's enemies. It's what the divine battlefield is going to be, is going to look like when God is done. And that final picture is used by the Psalmist to remind us of God's power to protect

us against anything, and he reminds us of that power by showing us what God is going to do to all the forces arrayed against Him and us.

Now that leads us very naturally into Psalm 48, because some of those same images are picked up again in Psalm 48. If you look again at Psalm 48, now I'd like to show you four parts in this particular Psalm, four parts that we're going to work through together tonight. The first part of Psalm 48 is verses 1, 2, and 3. Verses 1 to 3 give us the first phrase or stanza of Psalm 48, and it's a picture of the great king in the midst of his capital city. Then, the second part of Psalm 48 is in verses 4 to 8, and there we see a picture of the foes of God and the foes of God's people terrified at the sight of the city of God. Then the third part of Psalm 48 is in verses 9 to 11, where the worshippers are meditating on what they learned about God and rehearsed about God in their corporate worship. These are the things that they learned about God that were not only piled up in their minds but in their hearts as they gathered with the people of God and sang His praises; and we saw those in verses 9 to 11. And then the fourth part of Psalm 48 is in verses 12 to 14, and it's a focus on the safety of Zion; but more than that, it's a focus on the God who is greater than Zion. So you can already see some commonalities with the themes of Psalm 46.

It's interesting that commentators note that Psalm 48 was often sung by churches that followed the church calendar on the day of Pentecost, which was, of course, a day in which the church remembered the sending out of the gospel to the ends of the Earth. And you'll see why when we work through this Psalm together. But you'll also notice in this Psalm that Zion here is far more than a national capital of Israel and Judah. It's far more than a local capital; she is called here the "joy of the whole earth." And so the vision here is much broader than simply a vision for Old Testament Israel. It's something much deeper, and that's why Derek Kidner can say, "The outlines of the Jerusalem above, with its great walls and foundations which are forever, are already coming into view here in Psalm 48." Now before we read God's word and hear it proclaimed, let's look to Him in prayer and ask Him to open our eyes. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for this, Your day. It is a day of rest and gladness. It is a day in which Your people fellowship with one another and delight to fellowship with one another. And above all it is a day where we come together to meet with You, to engage with God, to do soul-business with the living God; and in which we come with great expectancy for You to meet with us, to speak to us by Your word, by Your spirit to stir up our hearts, and to hear a word from You that will change us and grow us and deepen us and ground us and make us to be more and more like the Savior whom we love and trust and serve. We ask then, Heavenly Father, that as we study this, Your word tonight, we would be built up in this, Your means of grace. Grant that we would hear Your word and listen to it for what it is: Your inspired authoritative truth. And by Your Spirit help us to understand it, to believe it, to embrace it, and to live it. In Jesus' name we ask it, Amen.

Hear God's holy word.

A Song; a Psalm of the sons of Korah. Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, in the city of our God, His holy mountain. Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion in the far north, the city of the great King. God, in her palaces, has made Himself known as a stronghold. For, lo, the kings assembled themselves, they passed by together. They saw it, then they were amazed; they were terrified, they fled in alarm. Panic seized them there, anguish, as of a woman in childbirth. With the east wind thou dost break the ships of Tarshish. As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our God; God will establish her forever. We have thought on Thy lovingkindness, O God, in the midst of Thy temple. As is Thy name, O God, so is Thy praise to the ends of the earth; Thy right hand is full of righteousness. Let Mount Zion be glad, let the daughters of Judah rejoice, because of Thy judgments. Walk about Zion, and go around her; count her towers; consider her ramparts; go through her palaces; that you may tell it to the next generation. For such is God, our God forever and ever; He will guide us until death.

Amen. Thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts.

What makes the church secure in this world? –God, Who He is, His presence, His providence, His character, His greatness. And this Psalm explores all these things. And we need that kind of security in the world that we live in. Because all of us at one time or another have the rug pulled out from under us or, even worse, feel like the Earth is moved out from under us. We need the security that only God Himself can give His people in this world, and that's what this Psalm is about. I want to look at the four parts of this Psalm with you tonight and the specific things that the Psalmist points to which ground us in safety and security in the midst of a changing, dangerous world.

I. God the King dwelling in the midst of His people and protecting His people.

And the first thing you see there in verse 1 through 3: this is a picture of God the King dwelling in the midst of His people and protecting His people. And the point of this picture is that the presence and protection of God makes Zion secure. Zion, again, is a name, a title for the children of God in the Old Testament, and by extension it's a name for the children of God in all ages. You've sung Christian hymns since you were young which spoke about Zion, and in particular you had in view, not simply Old Testament Israel—or more specifically, Old Testament Israel in the city called Zion, Jerusalem—but you had in mind the whole of the

people of God. Well, here the presence and protection of God pictured in Zion as the great King of that city is a reminder that the people of God in all ages are secure. So, verses 1 and 3 give us a picture of the King in residence: He is enthroned in the midst of His people.

If you've visited Great Britain before you know that one of the signs that the king or the queen, the monarch, is in residence is that a special flag is flying over whatever palace that the monarch happens to be in at a given time. If you're in Buckingham, or around Buckingham Palace, and you see the queen's personal flag flying, it means that she's there at that given time. If you're at Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh, and you see that special, yellow banner with the lion rampant, then you know that the queen is in residence, or perhaps one of the other royal princes is in residence in Holyrood. Well, here in this psalm, the Psalmist is telling us that God Himself, the great King is resident in the midst of His people. "Great is the Lord, greatly to be praised in the city of our God, His holy mountain. In the city of the great King and in her palaces God has made Himself known as a stronghold."

You know that Jesus quoted this psalm in Matthew chapter 5, verse 35. He's making a point about telling the truth, and He's responding to people who think that if you swear by God's name you have to tell the truth, but if you swear by the city of Jerusalem you don't. And they had levels of oaths: and you could lie on some levels of oaths, but you couldn't lie on other levels. And Jesus makes the point: "Look, if you swear on the city of Jerusalem, it's no different than swearing on God because He's the God who protects Jerusalem." And then Jesus of course goes on to tell them, "Let your 'yea' be 'yea,' and your 'nay,' 'nay.'" At any rate Jesus references Psalm 48:2 in His making a point about truth telling in the light of the presence of God.

You may be surprised a little bit at how the city is described: "Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth is Mt. Zion in the far north." Now I don't think any of us is so bad in geography that we would be tempted to characterize Jerusalem as being far north in Israel within the boundaries of the days of David and his successor. We wouldn't have thought of Jerusalem being in the far north any more than we would describe Birmingham as being in the far north or Atlanta being in the far north. Well, maybe some of us in Mississippi might describe them as being in the far north.

But the point is: that name "the far north" is often associated with heaven. For instance, in Isaiah chapter 14 verse 13, that phrase "the far north" points to heaven, and so the city of Jerusalem and God in the midst of His people in Jerusalem is a picture of God dwelling in the midst of His people in heaven. You see the line of thought goes something like this: in verse 1, the Lord is great and so He ought to be praised greatly in the city, Jerusalem, the city of our God, His holy mountain. In verse 2, Jerusalem is described as "beautiful in her height, in her elevation, and the joy of all the earth in the far north like unto heaven." She is

the city of the great King. And then in verse 3, God has revealed Himself to be a stronghold and a dwelling and a protection in her palaces. The whole point of this picture is to comfort the people of God with the greatness of God and the nearness of God. The Psalmist begins speaking great thoughts about God: He is the great King; His city is the joy of all the earth; He is greatly to be praised.

Great thoughts about God are important for right thoughts about ourselves and for worship. You can't worship God without great thoughts about God, and you won't have a right view of yourself if you don't have a view of the greatness of God; and the Psalmist begins by putting before our eyes great thoughts about God.

You know, we live in a world full of spin and hype and overstatement. You can't watch a television commercial—you cannot read a cereal box!—without hearing or seeing a lie, because audacious claims are made that absolutely nothing and no one could live up to. Have you seen the television commercials that show a person with, say, a cell phone, and a smile on their face as if they had just been made king of the universe? Now the implication is that cell phone will give you happiness in life. That cell phone service will do it all. And we live in a world of hype and overstatement.

My family used to joke with my father that he loved a good meal. You can tell that I do too. And we heard on more than one occasion this statement, “You know I believe that was the best steak I ever had.” Now maybe it was, maybe it was, and we heard that comment a lot. But you know what? You can't over-hype, and you can't overstate about God. There's nothing that you can say that is too great to be said about God. And so when the Psalmist begins with “Great is the Lord,” it's an understatement. You can't have too high thoughts about God. And those thoughts of God must be cultivated and separated from the hype of this world that makes great things from small things. And we don't need to stumble in making great things of small things and making small things of the Great One. We need to cultivate in our hearts great thoughts about God.

And note again, even as the city of Jerusalem, the city of Zion is called “great” because of the presence of God, we are reminded that God's presence makes any place notable and desirable. Jacob's in the wilderness and he encounters God at Bethel, and he says, “Surely this is the house of God.” Jesus is born in Bethlehem, least of the places of the princes of Judah, but Bethlehem is great because of His presence. I remember in Scotland going to visit Anwath, where Samuel Rutherford ministered. Now Anwoth is in ruins now; the church itself could fit in the north transept of our sanctuary. There's no roof on it; there are stones left; there's a graveyard around it; there's no village nearby—but God was in that place once. And I wanted to go there just because God did a mighty work during a man's ministry there 350 years ago. I wanted to go to Ettrick where Thomas Boston ministered. Again, there's hardly anything in Ettrick. People know more about James Hogg the great Scottish poet from Ettrick than they do about

Thomas Boston. But there was a work done there, and that place was known because God was there. And that's always the way it is where God is: He makes any place notable and desirable.

But even as we see this picture of the great King, we're also reminded that Christ Himself is *our* King. If you were to quote from the twenty-sixth answer to the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* answering the question, "How does Christ execute the office of a King?" You would say this: "Christ executes the office of a King in subduing us to Himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all His and our enemies." And so as we see the picture of the great King in Jerusalem, we must remember that our King is King Jesus. And He not only subdues us to Himself, but He rules and He defends us and He conquers all His and our enemies. Well, there's the first picture—the first picture of the Psalm in verses 1 through 3, a picture of God the King dwelling in the midst of His people and protecting them.

II. The enemies of God's people

And here's the second picture. Look at verses 4 to 8. Here we see a picture of the foes of God's people. And they're looking at Zion; they're looking at Jerusalem; they're looking at the city of the great King, and they're terrified. They are terrified at the sight of the dwelling place of the great King. And this picture is given to us as a reflection on the security of the people of God. If you remember back to Psalm 46, there's this picture of the city under siege, and all the enemies are gathered around the city, and yet the city is secure. And something of this is coming back, except the scene is slightly different. There's no siege being laid because when the enemies see the city of God, they're terrified. It's a picture of the security of the people of God and the Old Covenant Israel and the New Covenant, the Church. Now, friends, we may not often view ourselves as great, nor as something to tremble before. We may not always feel ourselves secure, but the church is impregnable and indestructible. She cannot be destroyed.

I loved the story that Bill Wymond shared during Erskine Wells' funeral of what Erskine said when he was pinned down with his platoon at Guadalcanal with machine gun fire all around, and the commanding officer literally going mad under the pressure of battle. Here is Erskine taking over and saying to his men, "Cheer up, boys, we've got the Japanese just where they want us."

And that's just like the church: surrounded on all sides. We may feel like we're overwhelmed, but you know the songwriter is correct when he says, in "Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken," that "with salvation's walls surrounded, Thou mayest smile on all Thy foes." David Dixon says, "Such as come to bring trouble to God's church come to catch trouble to themselves." And so the Church can sing this song with a view to God's final judgment. We often sing renditions of the Psalms and other pieces of Scripture written by the hymn writer James

Montgomery, and he has a wonderful rendering of this stanza in this Psalm. He puts it this way: "At the sight of her splendor the kings of the earth grew pale with amazement and dread. Fear seized them like pangs of premature birth. They came; they beheld her, and fled."

Now we may not feel like something to flee from; we may not feel like we're terrible as an army with banners. We may feel more like Barney Fife or Deputy Dog than Arnold Schwarzenegger or Sylvester Stallone up against their foes, but God promises in this picture to befuddle our enemies. And that's very important to us.

You know, almost every month I get an email or a book by an expert in the growth of the church who tells me that unless I buy his book, his program, his video, or try his new idea for only \$19.95, then the Church is going to fail. And I can tell you this: I don't even have to look at his idea; I don't even have to consider his idea to know that he's wrong, because the Church will never perish. She may not seem like much to us sometimes. We may see her in all her weaknesses and all her warts—and we may be right to see her weaknesses and her warts—but we should never, ever underestimate what God has ordained for His people. The church is never going to cease because God is in the midst of her. Well, there's the second picture, and then from that picture we move to another picture.

III. The people of God in worship

And this is a picture of the people of God remembering corporate worship. You see it in verses 9 through 11: worshipers declaring in their worship to God, celebrating His person, His nature, His character. And what we have here in verses 9 through 11 is a comforting remembrance on the nature and presence of God in worship. Look at verse 9: "We have thought on Your lovingkindness, O God, in the midst of Your temple." You see, these are the worshipers remembering worshiping God in His temple and praising God for His lovingkindness in corporate worship as they're gathered at the temple. And what we have here is a remembrance of what was learned and rehearsed to God in the context of corporate worship.

May I just pause and say right here that the memory of seasons spent in the house of God is precious to all of God's children. And we ought to store up in our hearts some of those special seasons in which we were gathered with the people of God, and God did special dealings with our hearts and encouraged us and strengthened us and grew us up and rooted and grounded us in special ways.

And here the saints are meditating on some of these things. Look at verses 9 through 11, and you'll see six things in particular that are being celebrated about God. First, we've already read it there in verse 9: His lovingkindness, His

covenant love. He's faithful in His commitments in His love. Secondly, His nearness or presence—He's in the midst of His temple. He's drawn near to His people. Thirdly, His name or His reputation: “As is your name, O God.” God's name is His reputation, and they've dwelt on the glory of who He is. Fourthly, His praise or His renown: “As is Your name, O God, so is Your praise to the ends of the earth.” Again, God's glory is unsurpassed in all the world, and the Psalmist is rejoicing in that and remembering rejoicing in that in corporate worship. Fifthly, His righteousness: “Your right hand is full of righteousness.” He does what is right. And sixth, His judgments. You know so often we think of final judgment as something that strikes fear and trembling into our hearts. And of course it's appropriate to view that day of reckoning with awe and reverence, but the Bible more often for the people of God points out that the day of reckoning, the day of judgment, will be a day of vindication and glory for God's people as God's enemies are brought to judgment. And here the Psalmist celebrates the judgments of God. You see, God never acts out of character and so we can always rely on that character to comfort us in time of trial. And here the Psalmist is remembering the character of God—the character of God that he learned in large measure in the context of the worship of God.

IV. God's people commanded to teach their children about the goodness of God

And then there are verses 12 through 14, the fourth part of this Psalm. And this is a challenge to the congregation: the worshipers have now declared their remembrance of what they learned about God in the midst of corporate worship in the temple. Now comes a challenge: it's a challenge from those who were leading in worship, perhaps the sons of Korah. And they turn to the congregation, and they give an imperative; they give a direction; they give a charge: “Walk about Zion; go around her. Look around and then tell you children.” It's a call for the whole congregation to look at Zion and then to tell their children about Zion.

But ultimately there's a bigger agenda here, because the challenge to the congregation, though it initially is a challenge for the congregation to look at Zion, ultimately this is a call for the congregation to look at God. You see, the emphasis here is not so much on Zion as it is on *the God of Zion*. Zion is the backdrop here to a great reality, and we'll see that in verse 14. But the exhortation begins like this, “Walk about Zion; go around her; count her towers; consider her ramparts; go through her palaces, that you may tell it to the next generation.” Maybe this Psalm was written in days in which Jerusalem was strong, when she had never been sacked by her enemies, and the Psalmist has in his mind the relative safety of Zion, of Jerusalem in the midst of all her foes.

But whatever the case is here, the Psalmist is calling on the people of God to reckon with the glory of the people of God; because when we live in the midst of the people of God, the glory of the people of God is probably not one of the top

five things that we think about, not when we're living in the midst of the people of God. Because the people of God let you down, and they hurt your feelings, and they don't minister to you in the time of need, and they do all sorts of things that are disconcerting and disappointing—and frankly you don't think of the glory of the people of God a lot. But the Psalmist is asking you to think about the glory of this people with whom God dwells.

I want to remind you of this as we think about the church, because we don't see the church as God sees her and as God will one day reveal her. And we need to rehearse to ourselves what the church really is and what she really will look like one day. Because King Jesus by His Spirit is preparing the Church for a day when He will present to Himself the Church in all her glory, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing but holy and blameless. That's what Paul says in Ephesians 5:27. That's the work and goal of glorification. Now it's true that God glorifies us individually, and it's true that we're going to be raised with glorified bodies, but ultimately glorification is a corporate work: God is doing it for all of His people. Hebrews 11 makes that clear when it says in reciting the record of the faithfulness of the people of God in all ages he says, "And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect." And the author of Hebrews there is simply making this point that it is God's will that we would all experience the final glory together; at the same time, not apart from the totality of the Church's experience and the enjoyment of that final glorification. And so we need to remember that God is in the business of making us.

Eric Alexander has spoken about this renovation work of God in this way: "Glorification," Alexander says, "gives a new, true, biblical sense of perspective to our view of the world and of history and of the church."

We need to ask ourselves, what is the really important thing that is happening in the world in our generation? Where are the really significant events taking place? Are they taking place in the seats of government and power here in London or Washington or Beijing or wherever? What is the most important thing? Where do you need to look in the modern world to see the most significant event from a divine perspective? Where is the focus of God's activity in history? In answer to all these questions, the most significant thing happening in history is the calling, redeeming, and perfecting of the people of God, the Church of God. God is building the Church of Jesus Christ; the rest of history is simply a stage God erects for that purpose. He is calling out a people; He's perfecting them; He's changing them. And history's great climax comes when God brings down the curtain on this bankrupt world and the Lord Jesus Christ arrives in His infinite glory, and the rest of history is simply the scaffolding for the real work.

Alexander goes on to say, "The last time I was in London, the front of the great Abbey of Westminster was covered in scaffolding as they were cleaning it; they

were beautifying it; they were preparing it for a future day. One could not see it's true beauty, but one was aware that something of great significance was happening behind that web of scaffolding. Something of majestic beauty was about to be revealed. The same thing is happening in my own city of Glasgow. Some of its magnificent Victorian buildings are covered for months and even years with scaffolding, and then when the scaffolding is taken down the architecture is revealed in all its pristine glory." There will come a day when God will pull down the scaffolding of world history, and do you know what He will be pointing to when He says to His whole creation— "This is my masterpiece"? He will be pointing to the Church of Jesus Christ. In the forefront of it all will be the Lord Jesus who will come and say, "Here I am and the children You have given Me, perfected in the beauty of holiness." That is the day that we are living for, and we must never ever forget when we have the fullwarts biography of the church that that is the day that God is preparing for now. And there is a glory to be in the Church in all her imperfections; there is a glory to be united and connected in part of this living body, this imperfect body now, but one day a body that will be ultimately, finally perfect.

But the Psalm doesn't end there does it? It doesn't end in Zion. Verse 14 takes us to Zion's God. It's almost a surprise ending, isn't it? "Consider her ramparts; go through her palaces, that you may tell it to the next generation. For"— Now what are you expecting?—"For Zion is glorious"— But what do you get?—"for such is God, our God, forever and ever. He will guide us until or to death."

You see, the surprise ending is that it's not about Zion; it's about God. Because it's God who makes Zion great; it's God who makes His people great, and God will guide His people because He knows the way because He decreed the way. Why do we look to God for guidance? Because God ordained the end from the beginning, and He knows how to get from the beginning to the end. So we look to Him to guide us on our way to the end...and He *will* guide us there. John Owen's meditation on this psalm, said, "This Psalm gives the church five bulwarks in the midst of trial: her King, Jesus; the promises of God, the providence of God, the presence of God, and God's covenant commitments sealed to us in Christ." Amen. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, with this picture of what You are doing and this picture of the security of Your people in the midst of all the troubles of this world, strengthen us today, this week, that we might remain faithful and hopeful and serviceable for Your glory and our eternal good. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

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