

The City of the Great King

Psalm 48

By [Sean Morris](#)

Well good evening. It's good to be with you all tonight. If you have your Bibles handy turn with me to Psalm 48. It's also printed on the back of your bulletin, I believe there, for you. I love to get to sing the psalms together, especially when it works well with our text, so it's always enjoyable to get to sing the text of Scripture that we'll be studying together in the same evening.

Confidence in the Truth of God vs. Confidence in the Vain Boasts of Man

Think for a moment what it is that inspires confidence in you. Is it your own personal success? Is it material resources? Is it inspirational musings or things that are encouraging to you? Is it truth? Or perhaps your confidence can be swayed by the loudest and boldest competing voice in the room. For me, and I suspect for many others, my perspective and my sense of value on situations and on matters can too easily be swayed by baseless bragging or propaganda. We hear it all the time, don't we? When stating the facts and surveying the numbers soon becomes the all-too-familiar battle of the egos, doesn't it? You know, "Come, let's compare job titles; let's compare salaries even. Let's compare the square footage in our homes or family success or family prestige or influence." And before you know it, you find yourself thinking, "Good grief! Next to this person am I worth anything at all? Do I even have anything to contribute to society compared to this guy next to me because next to him I'm just some unremarkable nobody from nowhere!"

Well propaganda, my friends, is nothing new as you well know; it is as old as man's ego. In the ancient world, you students of history will know, how did kings flaunt their ego and flaunt their success and impress their rivals? Well they would say, "Come, look at my capital, look at my city," they would say. "Look at my armies, my great city, my treasures, the number of servants and wives and daughters and sons that I have!" That was certainly true of places like ancient Rome, ancient Babylon, ancient Greece, and the ancient Near East. For instance, I can't recall the exact figure but one of the kings of Assyria was known to brag at one point that he had 3 million soldiers in his army, and when history tells us in fact that the entire population of his actual empire was only half a million! So propaganda and baseless bragging is nothing new. It's often an attempt to manipulate the emotions and to portray this image of strength and confidence when the reality of the situation is simply vain, empty boasting.

Well here, tonight we have, if I can say this reverently, a counter-example of Biblical propaganda, one that is sinless and factual and rooted in truth. And as we will quickly see, this song is not like the world's songs. The things that the Lord says should inspire confidence in God's people are things that are not of this world at all. This is the Lord God's rejoinder here in Psalm 48 to the world's empty bragging and pompous boasts. It tells of God our King. It tells of His power and glory and His steadfast love, of His eternal kingdom and His eternal purposes that span far beyond the mere borders of this passing world. So this is a beautiful text and I'm excited to get to study it with you. So let's read it together and let's ask for God's help before we do so.

Heavenly Father, we are so thankful to come again in the middle of busy weeks between Lord's Days for yet another time to be with Your people and to be with each other in fellowship and in prayer and in the study of Your Word. And so we come asking, Lord, for You to meet with us, to speak to us by Your Word, by Your Spirit, to stir up our hearts, to deepen us and grow us and make us to be more like the Savior. By Your Spirit, help us to understand what it is we read, Your Word, to believe it, to embrace it, and to live it. For we ask it in Jesus' name, amen.

This is God's Word to us. Psalm 48. Hear it:

"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, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King. Within her citadels God has made himself known as a fortress.

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. Trembling took hold of them there, anguish as of a woman in labor. By the east wind you shattered 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, which God will establish forever.

Selah.

We have thought on your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple. As your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth. Your right hand is filled with righteousness. Let Mount Zion be glad! Let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of your judgments!

Walk about Zion, go around her, number her towers, consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever."

Amen. Thus far God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word to us this evening.

A Song of Jerusalem, A Song of the Church

Now you may well be wondering, “What in the world was the occasion that inspired the sons of Korah to pen this beautiful psalm here before us?” Well I think Matthew Henry says it well when he writes, “Some think that it was penned on occasion of Jehoshaphat’s victory from 2 Chronicles. Others think, perhaps, on occasion of Sennacherib’s defeat,” one of the kings of Assyria, “when his army laid siege to Jerusalem at Hezekiah’s time. But for all I know, it might be penned by David upon occasion of some eminent victory obtained in his time. Yet it was not so calculated for that, but that it might serve any other similar occasion in aftertimes and be applicable also to the glories of the Gospel church of which Jerusalem was a type, especially when it shall come to be a church triumphant, the heavenly Jerusalem, the Jerusalem which is above.”

You see, as useful and lovely as this psalm would have been in speaking of Jerusalem, it was not speaking of an earthly Jerusalem merely or of an Old Testament nation-state merely. But the psalmist, as he writes these words, as he’s borne along by the Holy Spirit, he writes with an eye towards fulfillment, with an eye towards the eternal, of future fulfillment and of heavenly realities that are merely shadowed here on earth. This is a song, Psalm 48, ultimately about the people of God, the church, and what it is that makes that people glorious. She is great because she has a great king who dwells in her midst. And the psalmist says, “Believer, you should take confidence and have great hope because that King dwells among you, because of what that King has done among you, and what He will do among you in times to come.” So here in the psalm we see some fundamental principles of the church.

And so if you’ll look at the text with me, you’ll see, especially if you’re using the ESV translation, it’s arranged in four sections there for us and it’s bracketed at the beginning and at the end by God Himself, by the great King of this city. So we’ll look at it in those four sections.

So in verses 1 to 3, the first section, we see number one, the city of God and the presence of God praised. Then number two, in verses 4 through 8, we see the power of God described. Then, number three, in verses 9, 10, and 11, we see the person of God being worshiped. And then finally, number four, in verses 12 to 14, we see the city of God and the presence of God again, but this time, proclaimed.

I. The City of God and the Presence of God Praised

So let’s begin. Let’s dive right in and look at that first section, verses 1 through 3—the city of God and the presence of God praised. So right from the get-go we realize that the psalmist sees this city not merely from where she sits geographically but from where she sits in relation to God’s redemptive purposes. Zion’s significance to us is far more than its geographical location or size. You come to the psalm and you’re thinking, “Why should this city be praised? Why is she beautiful? Why does this inspire confidence in

God's people?" And the psalmist answers you right away, "Because the king is enthroned there." 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 of God makes Zion secure. Zion, again, as you may know, is a title for the children of God throughout the Old Testament and by extension it's a name for the children of God in all ages. 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; they are secure.

Spiritual Reality in Earthly Shape

Now again, you may be a little bit surprised at how this city is described. Look at verse 2, for instance. "Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion, in the far north." Now you students of cartography and geography you'll understand that when he says that, it's like describing Birmingham, Alabama as being in the far north or describing Atlanta, Georgia as being in the far north. So what happened here? Did the psalmist make some sort of geographical faux pas? Well no; not at all. The point, when he says that in that name, "the far north," is that that phrase, "the far north," is often associated with heaven itself. Throughout the Old Testament this phrase gets used to speak of heaven. For instance, in Isaiah chapter 14 verse 13 that phrase, "far north," is explicitly indicating heaven there. It's a metaphorical symbolic phrase that's used many times throughout the Old Testament Scriptures. And so here, 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—a heavenly reality that is described for us here in earthly forms and with earthly, tangible pictures.

Christ the King

And then in verse 3, God has revealed Himself among His people to be a stronghold and a dwelling and a protection. The whole point of this picture is to comfort the people of God with the greatness of God and the nearness of their God. You see, the psalmist is speaking great thoughts about God. He's the great King and His city is the joy of all the earth. He is greatly to be praised. Zion is secure. The people of God are secure. The church is secure because the King is among her. You see, the Old Testament is showing us, in type and in shadow, what we see now clearly revealed in the Lord Jesus, isn't it, in God the King dwelling in Zion, ruling over His people. I love, in particular, how our *Westminster Shorter Catechism* puts it in question number 26. It says this, "How does Christ execute the office of a King? 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 this picture of a great king in Jerusalem, we remember that our King is King Jesus. It's the same God of this Old Testament—the Lord Jesus fully revealed. And He not only subdues us to Himself but He rules and He defends us and He conquers all of His and our enemies. Well there's the first section—the city of God and the presence of God praised.

II. The Power of God Described

The second section then, verses 4 through 8—the power of God described. Now if you look at verse 4 in this case, it's another piece of evidence that the psalmist here is surely talking about a heavenly reality and an eternal truth. You see, Jerusalem, at this point in history, was a tiny, tiny place in those days. Kings and enemies and invading armies would not have been overwhelmed by the size of that city or by the magnitude or the sheer number of the people. No, no. The point is, kings and emperors or would-be opponents, they're overwhelmed due to the fact of who dwells within that city—God Himself, the great sovereign, eternal, King of the ages. That's why they're overwhelmed; not because Jerusalem's impressive or overwhelming.

Notice again verses 3 and 8. Here we see language of battlement. We see language of fortification, of military, of warfare. Now we're starting to get at the heart of what it means to be God's people. Do you see how the psalmist is steering us along and probing us ever further, layer by layer? We're starting to see within the actual DNA of what it means to be God's people, to be the church. This psalm is reminding us that the church, intrinsically, simply by virtue of who she is, will always draw forth oppression. And isn't that a timely reminder based on some of the things we're seeing throughout the globe even this week in northern Iraq and throughout the Middle East. And that's not a glib observation; that's part of what it means to be the people of God.

An Echo of Psalm 2

This really is an echo of Psalm 2 to a large extent, isn't it? Psalm 2, "Why do the nations rage and why do the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together against the LORD and against his anointed." One of the most helpful things, I think, about Psalm 48 is that it reminds us that God's people should not be surprised by this, that the city of God was attacked because there are forces in the world set up against God. As we move forward into the New Testament, we see the prophecy of Psalm 2 come to fruition and fulfillment. And in the life of Christ Jesus Himself the Son of God was attacked because there are forces in the world set up against God. Psalm 48 reminds us that the church is attacked because there are forces in the world set up against God and against His people.

Opposition and the Identity of the People of God

We may be surprised, no doubt about it, sometimes where those attacks come from—sometimes from corners or people or friends whom we would least expect, sometimes from even within the church herself. The enemy is crafty and he is very eager to wield those diabolical schemes of his however he can. We may be surprised where the attacks may come from, where their origin is, but we should never be surprised, friends, that opposition does happen, that opposition is mounted against the people of God. You see again he's probing us yet to another layer. This psalm here is helping us to see and understand a bit more even of the Gospel itself, how it draws forth both admiration on the one hand and opposition on the other hand. Billy alluded to it earlier in his prayer, "For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved

and among those who are perishing; to one, a fragrance from death to death, and to the other a fragrance from life to life.” That’s what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 2. “And yet,” said the psalmist, “God is our fortress,” verse 3. You can just start singing that tune right in your heads, can’t you? “A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing! Our helper He amid the flood of mortal ills, He, our King, is prevailing.” And yet, amidst all this opposition says the Lord Jesus, “I will build My church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it!” Now hold onto that thought because we’re going to come back to it in just a few moments. So the power of God here described.

III. The Person of God being Worshipped

But then we move to the third section of Psalm 48, verses 9, 10, and 11. Here we see the person of God being worshiped. And I think perhaps in this section we have some of the most explicit Old Testament-New Testament connections and connections to Christ and the church. We see the love of God and the presence of God here are most wonderfully experienced among His people. The steadfast love of God is in the midst of His temple. See it there in verse 9. And back in verse 3 in our first section we see God is wonderfully made known. Well here now in verse 9 God’s steadfast love is wonderfully experienced. And again, this temple is just type and shadow of what God would ultimately be doing in and among His people in the Lord Jesus Christ. You can hear the Apostle Paul’s pronouncements ringing in your ears already, can’t you? “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” [1 Corinthians 3:16](#). Or Ephesians chapter 2, “So then you were no longer strangers and aliens but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In Him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”

God’s Steadfast Love Exemplified in Christ

What better, when you think upon the steadfast love as it’s even early on hinted at in this Old Testament text, what better exemplifies the steadfast love of God than Christ Himself in His life and death and resurrection and ascension, all for you, believer? Think on that. Long suffering, patient, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. “We’re thinking upon your steadfast love,” the psalmist says. His long suffering with the Israelites in the desert, with the people of Israel and Judah during their years of apostasy, with David and Solomon, with the people in exile and then returning from exile, all of these things the psalmist surely had in mind to some extent. But when we read this text through the lens of the New Testament and from the lens of where we sit in the new covenant, all of it pales in comparison to the steadfast love that God has shown His people in the giving of His dear Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

To the Ends of the Earth

“We have thought on your steadfast love,” he says there in verse 9, “so that”—so what? Verse 10, “so that your praise reaches to the ends of the earth.” Now again, as we’re thinking of these Old Testament-New Testament connections, does that phrase not sound like something ripped straight out of the book of Acts when we read it? You see this psalm is showing us that the destiny of Jerusalem, this holy city, this beautiful Mount Zion far elevated, the destiny of Jerusalem is fulfilled in the church of Jesus Christ. This holy city lifted high for all to see—how does our Lord Jesus describe it in Matthew chapter 5? He says, “You are the light of the world. You are the church, that city set upon a hill. So let your light shine before all men so that they might give praise to your Father in heaven.” You see one of the most remarkable things that we come to realize when we read this psalm through that New Testament lens and from our position in the new covenant is that in the Old Testament the message was, “Come, come to Jerusalem and see the glory of God. Come all nations, come to Zion and behold the great glory of our God and Redeemer and King!” And then we come to the New Testament and the message is, “Go out from Jerusalem! Take that glory of Jerusalem, of Zion, of God, of salvation in Christ, take it to the ends of the earth, “from Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria to the ends of the earth”— Acts 1 verse 8. “Go ye into all the world,” [Matthew 28:19](#).

A Caution to Consider the Health of the City

One of the other things we see in this section that’s worth pausing and considering is all the praise he gives to these ramparts and these battlements and these towers and these descriptions of the city. Now when the psalmist praises the city’s citadels and ramparts do not confuse that as if he were merely praising buildings or prestige or material resources. Again, where Jerusalem was at this point in history was not an impressive city that would cause kings and emperors to tremble. Now here we are at First Presbyterian Church of Jackson, Mississippi, blessed by God with a long, long history—with material resources, with prestige and influence to a degree with a rich history, here in this beautiful facility, a building with beautiful architectural features, and we thank God for that. We thank God for His goodness to us, how He’s blessed us, how He’s continued to bless us, how He will use us for times to come—we thank Him for that. But this is not what the psalmist is getting at ultimately, getting caught up here on material goodness, material riches, material resources. It’s not physical campus that he’s getting excited about here in Psalm 48. Rather he is saying, “Where there is a living fellowship of God’s people, there, there is the kind of admiration that leads to a kind of illumination that leads to a love of the Gospel and the God of that Gospel and the Christ of that Gospel. That’s the glory of Zion that he’s getting at. No mere battlement or building or structure or architectural grandeur or historical status could accomplish any of that.

It’s rather fitting; at the time I didn’t realize that I would be preaching on this psalm when I was thinking of it for the first time; and I thought it would be so applicable. When our little short-term mission team was over in Scotland a number of weeks ago in July we passed dozens, dozens of churches in Edinburgh, in Dundee, in Saint Andrews, gorgeous buildings—real Protestant cathedrals if I can call them that—from which a

glorious Gospel was preached once upon a time. And that's just the point—once upon a time but no more. These beautiful structures sit empty. In fact, there was one church in Dundee called the M'Cheyne Memorial Church, and if any of you know some of the history there, it's built and named in honor of the great Scottish preacher, Robert Murray M'Cheyne. And that church, named in his honor, built because of the legacy that he left, sits abandoned and empty and crumbling. In fact, part of that building has been refurbished into an apartment complex in the back.

You see the point, don't you? A contemporary application of what the psalmist is getting at here—never confuse outward trappings of impressiveness for the real source of what gives a church its power and its beauty. It's the life within, made by the Spirit of God, united around the steadfast love of God that they're praising there in verse 9, because therein dwells God Himself. That's what makes the church beautiful; that's what makes the church praiseworthy. Sinclair Ferguson makes a wonderful point along these lines in his comments on this passage. And that brings us back to that thought that I said, "hold onto" earlier about the gates of hell prevailing. Here's some interesting things that Sinclair says:

He says, "In examining Psalm 48 this raising a number of serious questions." He says, "For instance," a little closer to home, "why then have the gates of Hades prevailed or so it would seem against the church in Europe? Why, when I was a little boy, I was surrounded by ten well-attended churches. And now in that same area, with the same population mind you, there are two poorly attended churches. Why is this the case? Why is it that when you go to Europe you always seem to come back lamenting the spiritual state of Europe? Because," he goes on, "God defends His church through the faith of His people. The promises of God for His people are promises to be received by faith and what happened in Europe, among other things, was that the church began to live by sight. What are the causes? Well the Old Testament is full of causes that bring church decline like that. The book of Revelation is full of things that bring that kind of church decline. When we have orthodoxy without vibrancy, when we have the truth without commitment and love to Christ, when we engage in much activity but are careless about personal sanctity, when we have a reputation without having the reality, when we have material prosperity with lukewarm spiritual lives. That's what happened to the church in Europe." He goes on, "Many of my American friends ask me, 'Could it happen here?' Friends, it is already happening here. That is why at the end of this psalm the psalmist gives the exhortation that he does in verses 12 through 13. He is saying, 'Make sure that things are in working order.'"

IV. The City of God and the Presence of God Proclaimed

And that brings us very naturally, I think, to the final point in verses 12 to 14. Here we have the city of God and the presence of God, this time, proclaimed; not merely praised but proclaimed. In many ways we're right back where we started at the beginning. We look at verse 3—we see her citadels and her fortress and we've come full circle now to verses 12 and 13 and we're invited to consider the city's towers and ramparts and

citadels. Again, not her literal outward trappings but he's saying, "Take stock," the psalmist is saying, "Take stock of God's people, the church, her spiritual inventory, her health, her vibrancy; consider it well. Make sure that this city is in a place to defend herself," he is saying. Psalm 48 tells us that part of what it means to be the people of God is to be a church that is constantly vigilant and constantly aware of her need and her liability. "Take nothing for granted," he is saying, "but be ever-dependent upon your king. Don't let your guard down. Take stock."

Led toward a Sure, Glorious Destiny

Why? Well notice the point of it all there in verses 13 and 14. Why do all these things? Why take stock? Why take inventory? Why go to such great lengths to make sure things are in working order? Verses 13 and 14—"Tell the next generation that this God, our God, forever and ever, He will guide us forever." The greatness of this God and this city that he tells of here is not only to be celebrated but it is to be proclaimed; it's to be told forth. It's to be shared, spread, announced to the ends of the earth just as it was getting at in that third section. The psalmist here, I think one of the most beautiful things about this, is that he has a sense of anticipated expansion as part of the identity and the purpose of God's people, of God's church. Do you get that sense here—a sense of anticipated expansion, of coming things that have not yet arrived? Psalm 48 says that we need to remember that God is in the business of making us. You may even have noticed some early hints, some Old Testament teaching here of the doctrine of glorification—not just individual glorification of what God is doing in you personally but the glorification of God's people as He is moving them toward a definite end, the destiny of Jerusalem of where He's taking the church. Eric Alexander, I think puts it wonderfully, he hits this on the nose when he says, "The glorification that we see here in Psalm 48 arrests our attention because glorification gives a new, true, Biblical sense of perspective to our view of the world and of history and of the church." He goes on, "Friends, what really are the important things that are happening in our generation? More to the point, where is the focus of God's activity in history? 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 that God erects for that purpose 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 that He's performing."

A Fixed Gaze on Zion's God

And then, even then, look at verse 13 where he gives a resounding conclusion, not of Zion you'll notice, but that resounding conclusion rests its gaze finally on Zion's God. You see the ending and the point of it all is not about Zion; it's about her King. It's about Zion's God because it is God who makes His people great and God will guide His people because He knows the way that He has decreed because He has decreed that way—the end from the beginning, and He will guide us there. He will guide us forever. Some translations even render that "He will guide us beyond death." And that is worth

telling to the next generation.

And so as we come to a close of this study we simply have to step back and take a look for a moment and ask ourselves, “Is this our goal?” We have a rich history, First Presbyterian Church. We have been blessed by God in innumerable ways, countless ways, and it really is wonderful. Yet we must take stock and go around so that we are ready to tell the next generation. The great King, the Lord Jesus, is at work here, moving among us and moving us forward as His people that final glorious destiny. The question is, “Is Psalm 48 describing for us the kind of church that we want God to make us into?” The city of God and the presence of God praised, the power of God described, the person of God being worshiped, and a city of God and the presence of God proclaimed. Perhaps these are some things that we can even pray about tonight. Let’s close in prayer.

O Lord and God, with this picture of what You are doing and with this picture of the security of Your people in the midst of all the troubles of this world, we ask that You would strengthen us today and this week with these words, with this image, with this truth of what You are doing and what You are about so that we might remain faithful, Lord, and hopeful and serviceable for Your glory and for the eternal good of Your people. Build Your church, O Lord. We ask it in Jesus’ name, amen.

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