Psalms for a Summer Season (4): Psalm 48

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Date: 15 June 2025

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[0:00] The Christian church is the most miraculous body in the world. We have no natural way to account for its beginning.

! We have no logical way to account for its growth.! And we have no rational way to account for its existence today. By all measures, it should have gone the same way as all the other religions of the Roman world and faded into nothingness.
In every way, the Christian church is a miracle whose beginning, growth, and existence owes everything to God. Now, Psalm 48 was written in praise of God and the city of Jerusalem.
At the time of writing, the centerpiece of Jerusalem was the temple in which was contained the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was the symbol of the living presence of God with his people.
Jerusalem was special because God was said to live there, there in the midst of the heart of his people. In the storyline of the Bible, with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and the coming of the Holy Spirit, one of the ways in which Jerusalem has been replaced is by the Christian church.
[1:29] God's presence is no longer symbolized by a golden box and a temple, but is realized by the Holy Spirit who protects and empowers his church from within.

Now, this psalm may have been written nearly 3,000 years ago and the Jerusalem of which it speaks replaced by the church, but the God of whom it speaks is the same.
We are therefore to think of this psalm in terms of the praise of God and of his church, the church which owes its beginning, its growth, and its existence to the living Christ, who through his Holy Spirit lives in and reigns over his church.
So, if we want a title for this psalm, we could do no better than In Praise of God and His Church. In Praise of God and His Church.
You know, as a parent, I find it difficult to understand how I can love each of my children with all of my heart. I love each one of them with all of my heart, and yet I love the others with all of my heart also.
[2:52] In the same way, the message of Psalm 48 is that if we love God with all of our heart, we are to love the church that way also. Not because the church is divine, but because the living Christ loves His church and has given Himself for her.

If we are committed to Christ, we must also be committed to His church. Well, I want us to see two things this morning from this psalm.
First, the God of our church, and second, the church of our God. In Praise of God and His Church, if we love God, we are to love His church.
If we love His church, we are to love God. So, the God of our church, first of all. The God of our church. The psalm does not begin with the words, Great is the city of our Lord, and greatly to be praised.
But, great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised. The chief focus of this psalm isn't the church of God, but the God of the church.
[4:08] For the Christian, it must always be this way. God must come first in our devotion. We do not pray to the church.

We do not trust in the church for our salvation. The church did not die upon a cross to take away our sins. It's a temptation for those of us deeply involved in the service of the church to be more devoted to the church of God than to the God of the church.
But love for God must come first. It always must come first. Our testimony must be that of the writer, Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised.
We love the church because we love God. We serve God by serving His church. Love for God must always come first.

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God does not belong to the church. The church belongs to God. As we read in verse 1, it is His city. In verse 2, it is His holy mountain.
[5:21] You'll notice in verse 2 that God is described as the great king, literally the mega king. No earthly ruler can compare with the God of the church.

The kingdoms of the world are represented by kings and presidents and prime ministers, but of none of them can it be said they are the great king, only God.
In verses 4 through 7, God the great king establishes His authority over all human kingdoms and all human authorities. No matter how many kings fight against the church, God will protect her.
You know, the church seems so fragile, so vulnerable, but the God of the church causes our enemies to tremble in defeat.
Our God protects and delivers us from all our enemies. The great king triumphing over all our opponents. The church is, after all, as we read in verse 8, the city of the Lord of hosts, which God promises to establish forever.
[6:31] That title, in verse 8, the Lord of hosts, is a powerful name of God. It combines God's personal name, Yahweh, the God of committed love to His people, with the Hebrew word for armies, armies.

The armies to which the host refers are heavenly armies. the millions of angels, the millions of angels God has at His beck and call.
As we learn from the story of the Assyrian invasion of Judah in the days of Hezekiah, just one of these angels is powerful enough to destroy an entire army.
God has millions of them and millions of them in His heavenly army. So, the Lord of hosts is a title which combines God's unchangeable love for His church with His power to protect His church.
There may seem times where we fear for the future of our church because we do, after all, seem so weak and fragile.
[7:46] But when we understand that our great King is none other than the Lord of hosts, our fear is replaced by confidence. When we understand that our great King, the Lord of hosts, is committed to establishing His church on earth, our nervousness is replaced by hope.

Verses 9 through 11 are filled with the godly thoughts of the psalmist. He speaks in verse 9 of the steadfast love of God. The steadfast love of God, what some of you may know as the word chesed, is His eternal determination to love His people to the very end.
It's as the hymn writer so well puts it, O love that will not let me go. Though my sinful thoughts may cause me to doubt, though I may try to wrestle free from the grip of His love, though my enemies may oppress me, though I may want to leave God behind and return to the world from which I came, God will never let me go.
Because His love, unlike mine, is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. And His love overwhelms my lovelessness.
We're getting the picture here. The steadfast love of God combined with the supreme power of God are the ultimate foundations of our confidence for the future of the church.
[9:30] We remember the words of the Apostle Paul, if God be for us, who can be against us? We remember the words of our Lord Himself who said, I will be with you to the end of the age.

Such confidence fills the psalm writer with praise, with praise. And so, in verse 10, he exclaims, As your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth.
Again, when the writer of the psalm thinks of Jerusalem, he's not thinking about the city. He's thinking about God. That's why the psalm begins with the praise of God.
It ends with the same praise in verse 14. This is God, our God, forever and ever. The psalm begins and ends with God.
Every Christian song should begin and end with God. God, our great King. God, our Lord of hosts. God, our guide. God, our lover. The God whose praise reaches to the ends of the earth.
[10:36] We love the church because we love its God. We serve God by serving the church. church. However, at the end of the day for the Christian, we stand not in awe before the church.

We stand in awe before God. None before Him, none above Him. For His throne it shall remain and ever stand.
all the power, all the glory. I will trust in His name for my God is the ancient of days.
We praise Him for whose church this is. The church He guides, the church He rules, the church He loves. Our church.

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because first it's His church. Over the years I've met many people who were devoted to the church. Albeit not so many in our denomination, but enough to make it a matter of concern.
[11:45] I say concern because although they were devoted to the church of God, they were, by their own admission, they were not devoted to the God of the church.

They viewed the church as an institution, something that belonged to their culture. But they had no living relationship with the God whose church it is.
They spoke much about the church and in general when referring to the church they were thinking about the building, the fabric, the finances. But their enthusiasm for the church wasn't first based on an enthusiasm for God.
And their dedication to the church wasn't first founded on their dedication to God. You see, this is to put the cart before the horse. Psalm 48 is written in praise of God and his church, but God must come first.
Does God come first for you? When you think of church, are you thinking institution, culture, social club? Or are you thinking God?
[12:52] God? When Sunday morning comes around and you're getting ready to leave the house, are you thinking of meeting with God? Or is it all about church?

Like a sharp two-edged sword, Psalm 48 strikes deep into our hearts and covering our inner motives and affections and drives us to ask ourselves vital questions.
who or what comes first in my life? Is it God or the church? The God of our church.
Well, secondly, the church of our God. The church of our God. St. Cyprian was a bishop in the third century Roman city of Carthage.
modern-day Tunisia. Repeated by John Calvin, St. Cyprian famously said, you cannot have God as your father if you do not have the church as your mother.
[14:04] You cannot have God as your father if you do not have the church as your mother. God is the Christian church in every age may be weak and fragile, disjointed and unlikely, but it's the church of God.

And if we are to have God as our father, we are to think of the church as our mother. Because God is the great king of the church and our love for him comes first, we are devoted to his church.
There may be times when the church hurts us, makes us ashamed, rather than run from the church and become a lone wolf Christian, we remember that the church is our mother and we recommit ourselves to her purity and prosperity.
So this psalm, Psalm 48, is written in praise of God and his church. We've already seen various aspects of the God whose church this is. We've established the foundation of the church as the steadfast love and power of God.
But in this psalm, the writer takes us for a tour around Jerusalem. He speaks of it as beautiful in its elevation, proudly standing above all the other mountains.
[15:21] It's the joy of all the earth. It's in the far north, not geographically. In the world of the day, the further north something was, the more important it was.

By saying it's in the far north, the psalmist is referring to how important the city is. The writer wants to take us on a tour of the citadels and fortresses of the city, its massive walls, its gleaming turrets, its impregnable gates.
In verse 12, the psalm writer invites us to walk around the city, to count her towers, her citadels, to walk on the ramparts, to see how strong the city is against all invaders.
He invites us to marvel in the city of God, the dwelling place of God and his temple. A few years ago, Catherine and I visited Rome.
We did the same thing. We went on tours of the city, walked around its famous streets, gazing in wonder at its great buildings, the beauty of their construction.
[16:29] Perhaps you can think of similar tours you have taken in great cities. However, the city of Jerusalem was just a shadow of the reality of the Christian church.

And just as the people of that day were commanded to walk around Jerusalem and be filled with awe, as Christians were called to think about the church and be similarly filled with awe.
Of course, we must remember when we're talking about the church, we're not talking about buildings, chapels, cathedrals. We're thinking about things far less earthly, far more spiritual.
The glories of this church are things the world can't see and don't value, but in the eyes of God, in the eyes of God's people, they are the most important, precious things in the world. There are many

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of them, but I'm going to mention just two very briefly.
the church is spirit and the church is gospel. The church is spirit and the church is gospel. For all that we may grumble and moan, for all that we may complain about the church, not just this church, but the whole church worldwide, because that's what we're thinking of, let's remember the beauty of the church of God, for this is, after all, our mother.
[18:01] The church is spirit. Think of the church is spirit. We must never divide God's church from God the Holy Spirit.

We must never divide God's church from God the Holy Spirit. Unseen, unobserved, the Holy Spirit is powerfully at work in His church today. At the beginning of the book of Acts, the risen Christ sends His Holy Spirit upon the earthly church and describes His coming in this way, you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.
The Holy Spirit is the power of the church, hidden but powerfully strengthening the church for worship, service, mission. It is not the enthusiasm, the charisma, the wealth, or the giftedness of its members which give the church its power.
It is the Holy Spirit. We can no more physically see the Holy Spirit than we can see God the Father, and yet there can be no other explanation for the beginning, for the growth, and for the endurance of the Christian church than that the Holy Spirit of God Himself is at work in us.
the Holy Spirit works with the church's preaching prayers and sacraments to bring new people to faith in Jesus Christ and to grow Christians in their love and holiness.
[19:29] He is the dynamism of the church. And although we cannot see Him, the psalmist invites us to stand in awe before Him, for this is His church, not just Crow Road.

we're an infinitely tiny portion of the church, but the church worldwide, made up of peoples from every tribe and nation, this is the church of the Holy Spirit.
No other group of people in the world can claim that, but we can. God is in the midst of His people.
Verse 9. You know, sometimes, especially at times like this with the building project, we need to stand back a little and see what the Holy Spirit has done and is doing among us.
We so easily miss the wood for the trees, but sometimes it's good to pause and see how He has given strength to the weary among us, life to the spiritually dead among us, comfort to the despairing, growth to the immature.
It's the church's spirit, the Holy Spirit of God, which makes us the joy of all the earth. Second, think of the church's gospel.
[20:54] Think of the church's gospel. Early on in verse 9, we spoke about thinking through the steadfast love of God. This is the most passionate word to describe God's infinite, eternal, and unchangeable commitment in love for His church.

God has loved His church before there was a church. Now, in the New Testament, the Hebrew word we translate as steadfast love, chesed, is directly replaced by the Greek word for love, agape. Agape. In Romans 5, verse 8, we read simply the most amazing thing. God demonstrates His agape for us in this.
While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.
This is the church's gospel. Not that we have won salvation for ourselves by our good works and our religious merits. Not that we have worked our way upward to God, but that in agape chesed, love, He has worked His way down to us in Christ.
[22:06] And that in Christ, His sacrifice for us on the cross, He has won salvation for us. In human religion, man works his way to God.

In Christianity, God works His way to us. This is the church's glorious gospel. Not the glorious achievements of a human being, but the glorious achievements of Jesus Christ.
When we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. God accepts us not because of our works of righteousness, but because of Christ's sacrifice of Himself for us.
There are no preconditions set on who can become a member of the church of God other than they recognize their need for forgiveness and change, and that Jesus alone can give them these things.
our status in standing before God does not consist in how many hours we pray, on how much we give, on how morally good we are, but on the simple, small existence of faith in Christ.
[23:22] The church glories at the gospel it proclaims, for there is no other way that a human being may be forgiven and changed, no other way for us to be accepted by a righteous and holy God.

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The church is a miracle because it's filled by people who don't deserve to be there and haven't earned their membership. In Ephesians 5 we read these words, Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself as a glorious church, not having any spot or wrinkle in any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.
How great the gospel we preach, how great the gospel which burns within our hearts as we go forth in mission to a needy, empty and lost world, as we go forth to our fellow Glaswegians with the good news, as we go forth to Scotland with the great news, as we go to the rest of the world with the glorious news, Christ has loved us and given Himself for us.
No wonder the writer of the psalm calls the church the joy of all the earth. For without the message of the gospel, there is no possibility of joy in our world.
It is the church's gospel which changes lives and transforms nations. The gospel is the glory of the church. You know, sometimes it's good to stand back a wee bit and for all the faults of the church, here and everywhere, reflect on the gospel it proclaims.
[25:14] It's good to admire the towers and the citadels and the fortresses of the church, as without any political or military power at all. Merely through the love it displays and the gospel it preaches, it transforms people, communities, nations.

Just as there are those who are devoted to the church and not to God, there are others who are devoted to God but not to His church. There is no commitment to the expression of one's faith in God in a church setting like ours.
But how can we love our father and not our mother? How can we say that we are devoted to Christ if we are not devoted to the church for which Christ died?
Perhaps now is the time to nail our colors to the mass and commit ourselves to this church. But then there may be some here this morning who are neither committed to God nor to His church. church. This summer season is still a winter season in their hearts because they've never let the thaw of Christ's warmth in.
[26:31] You know today through faith in Jesus Christ you can participate in this wonderful psalm. You can devote yourself to faith in Jesus, the God of our church and the church of our God.

because then and then only could you join with the psalmist as he begins and ends with praise. Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God.
Amen.

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