

The City of the Great King

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Date: 09 December 2015

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[0 : 0 0] Well, let's turn for a short time to Psalm 48. The Book of Psalms on Psalm 48. We'll look at some of the main points from this relatively short psalm. When we're reading this psalm and when you're singing this psalm, what are you aware of? Are you singing it just with a reflection back to the days of David? Is it simply a psalm that gives us some historical references back to those days? Or is there more than that in it?

There is obviously, literally, Zion and Mount Zion where the temple was situated during those times. There's Jerusalem. There's the king of Israel or Judah. That defenses that are mentioned for the city as well, for Zion. All of these things are there together with enemies that have obviously attacked at some time or other and been repelled and overcome.

So all of that is certainly there in terms of geography and history. And we're conscious of that as we sing the words of this psalm. But we're conscious, surely, of much more than that as well. Something well beyond the setting of the psalm in its history itself, in the days of David, whenever it was composed, and beyond even our own times. Because as you come to speak about, sing about the king and the city, you're immediately conscious at the very beginning that the Lord is the king of this place. Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God. Not only is he the king of this place, but he lives in this place. This is his habitation.

This is where he actually has his residence. And in addition to that, you then go on to think about how Zion is used elsewhere in scripture as well, similarly to what it is here. And that brings us to see that the psalm is full of references to what we can call spiritual Zion, the church of God, the people of God, or the covenant people of God, and particularly as they are set in this world, in the course of this world, and looking forward to that world to come to the inheritance that is promised them by God. So the conflict that's mentioned in the psalm, the trembling that took hold of these enemies as they came to try to overcome Zion, and the rout that took place, the way they were scattered, you have to see in that much more than something that happened literally in those days historically. It's something that takes in really the whole span of time. And the conflict that exists in the whole span of time between the covenant people of God and those who are at enmity with that, with the belief that they follow, with the God they worship, with all that they stand for. And as you look at it in that way, it takes on a whole new meaning rather than just confining it to something historical and geographical. And that, of course, then is something you carry with you into the prophecies of the Old Testament, which are full of references to Zion and the daughters of Zion, which again, of course, brings in that spiritual dimension where you see the people of God in whatever generation, whatever time in history they're set. There are things here in the likes of this psalm that you have to apply and take to ourselves. Two things we're going to look at briefly tonight. That's first of all, praise to the king, which is most of the psalm down as far as verse 11. And then inspecting the defenses, because that's how it finishes verses 12 to 14.

Praise to the king and inspecting the defenses. Now you notice how it begins. Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God. Mount Zion in the far north, the city of the great king. And Zion is celebrated there as a hugely significant place, which is strange and really impossible if you're just confining it to the literal Mount Zion, to that small mountain that existed then on which the temple was situated.

- [4 : 45] It would be something similar to saying that the Klisham is the greatest mountain in the world. And of course, Mount Zion, that particular place geographically, was hardly the most significant mountain in the world.
- It was tiny compared to many of the other mountains in the world. But what makes it significant is that it is the dwelling place of the Lord. It is where the Lord has his habitation.
- It is, in fact, where he himself has chosen to live. This is my rest, he says in another psalm. I like it well. I'm choosing this for my name to be situated there, for my presence to be there, for my people to worship my great name.
- It's the city of the great king. It's made great because of the one who lives there, the one who's worshipped there. And you, of course, apply that as well further than you have in Zion or in the Old Testament itself.
- It's significant in terms of what we are ourselves. By the fact that through the incarnation of the Son of God and the Holy Spirit coming to live in his people, we who are so small and insignificant by ourselves, the church which is so small and insignificant in itself compared to the mass of humanity in its unbelief and the mass of humanity in all the other systems of belief that exist.
- [6 : 16] It's a very small hill. But it's a great one because the king is there. And because he has chosen it as his dwelling place, as his residence.
- And that's why it says there that this praise of God is a praise in which he is to be greatly praised. Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised.
- And that means when we come to praise the Lord that we are conscious of his greatness and as we're conscious of his greatness in worship, therefore we conclude that we don't worship him by half.
- That we don't worship him with anything other than a worship in which he's greatly to be praised. That the very maximum of praise that we can muster and bring to him is what he requires and what he deserves.
- And that of course gives the praise of God such a high luster in our own thinking and in our practice.
- [7 : 24] The praising of God is something that is set before us as of such significance because it's the praise of this great God who dwells in the midst of his people.
- And then it goes on to speak about this being the joy of all the earth. This holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth. And there are various ways in which we could take that.
- Some commentators suggest that this is anticipating the blessings of the gospel where the whole earth comes to share in, or ultimately to share in, the blessings that these people now enjoy in this city of the Lord in Zion.
- But you could also take it that it means that the joy of human beings, the true joy that human beings need to have and need to experience and need were designed for, is found only in worshipping and being in a living relationship with this God.
- Because this is really the joy of all the earth. Where is it found? It's found in Zion. Why is it found in Zion? Because these people are praising this God. And who is this God?
- [8 : 41] This is the Savior, the King, who is the Redeemer. And we have to try and communicate that to people who think that Christianity is just so due.
- And certainly our way of believing the Bible and all the names that are given to that, sometimes as just caricatures.
- I'm not saying that we always present the kind of joyfulness that we ought to. But the fact is that we have to communicate to people that being in Christ is a source of joyfulness.

Having God reside in us is a source of joyfulness. And the true satisfaction and joy that human beings need to have can only be found here, but is found here to its maximum until it is overtaken in the joy of heaven itself.

So it's the joy of the whole earth, this place. And what happens in this place. And the King of this place is the real cause of all of that.

[9 : 52] The second thing in praising the King that's mentioned is this mention of the fortress. In verse 3, within her citadels, which are some of the security buildings of this Zion, within her citadels, God has made himself known as a fortress.

And that's literally what it says in the verse. The city, God has made himself known. It's not just that God is known as a defense or a rampart or a fortress for them.

It's really literally God has made himself known as a fortress. And that suggests that it was through seeing God at work that they came to understand and to acknowledge that this indeed was their fortress.

Now it's interesting, isn't it, that here is a fortress in itself, literally, this city, this walled Zion that has these defenses against enemies, and yet the ultimate defenses in God himself.

He is ultimately their fortress. They need the defenses, literally, and yet God is ultimately their fortress. Now we'll see near the end of the psalm there being counseled or encouraged to walk around Zion.

[11 : 21] And that's really an inspection of the defenses. Something you would do after a siege has gone and the enemy has been routed and have gone and left the place.

You'd go out and you'd inspect. And what it's saying here is in verse 3, The Lord has made himself known as a fortress. It doesn't in any way do away with the need for inspecting the walls and the ramparts and the citadels, but ultimately these are of little use without God.

Without God himself being the defense. And so it is for the church as well. So it is for ourselves tonight. There are many things, as we'll see when we come to the end of the psalm, there are many things that together will form a defense for us in our Christian life, in our life as a church, in the life of the church.

There are many things that need to be maintained for the defenses to be secure. All the teachings that are basic and fundamental and foundational to the gospel, for example.

But then without God himself, without consciously having and depending upon God as a refuge, they will not defend us for very long.

[12 : 37] They will be broken through if God himself is not to us our ultimate fortress. He has made himself known, and it's probably because of that that the following verses speak about a victory.

He has made himself known as a fortress, and then immediately talks about this great victory that they were aware of. Behold, the kings assembled, and that suggests really it sounds a bit like Psalm 2.

Remember Psalm 2, which is this royal psalm, the psalm of the king, which is attributed to Jesus in the New Testament. It's similar in the beginning. Kings assembled together against the Lord and against his anointed.

But here it says, They came on together. As soon as they saw it, they were astounded. They were in panic. They took to flight. The trembling took hold of them, as of the anguish of a woman in labor.

By the east wind you shattered the ships of Tarshish. As we heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts. It's talking of something that happened, that revealed God as their great fortress.

[13 : 47] That actually, where God manifested himself as the defense of his people, and came to their defense and enabled them to have this great victory.

And in that respect, the Lord of hosts, as a reference there, is very important. Where the Lord of hosts is the one who came to the aid of his people in the city of the Lord of hosts, in verse 8.

Because the Lord of hosts in the Bible is usually associated with God at the head of his army. God at the head of his spiritual army. Which some people think include believers, but certainly includes the great retinue of angels that accompany God, and at times were revealed as his retinue, his royal accompaniment.

He is, and indeed as his own particular army in victory. Here is what it says, the Lord of hosts. And that Lord of hosts is still with us.

He's still, as we sang in Psalm 46, the Lord of hosts is still our God and still with us. And still with us as the God of Jacob, who is our fortress.

[15 : 07] The same idea as you find here in Psalm 48. So the rout that took place is what led them to further assurance that God himself was their defense.

And how often you find in the prophecies of, especially the great prophecies of Jeremiah and Isaiah, how often you find them mocking the idea of trying to be defended by any other power but God himself.

When you find references in both of these great prophets to Egypt, for example. And they talk about Egypt as being just like a reed that's growing in the ground, which if you lean upon it, it's just going to break under your weight.

And of course that's a reference to some of the political alliances that sometimes happen through these kings of Judah and Israel, making alliances with some of the kings around about them to try and protect themselves from some of the powers that then arose, like Assyria and Babylon and so on.

They tried to align themselves with some of the neighboring kings and powers around them. And Isaiah and Jeremiah and others would say, well that's just like leaning upon a reed.

[16 : 26] What use is that when God should be your refuge? And there's a lesson of course in that for ourselves as well, where we don't find our ultimate defense in any government, in any political alliances, in anything that you find on that level in our own day as well.

I'm not saying these things shouldn't take place. I'm not saying these things are unimportant or out of place. But for us as a people, as it was for them as a people, without the Lord as our defense, where are we?

Without him being our fortress, we're vulnerable, we're open to all kinds of influences and all kinds of enemies. And they will soon make havoc without God being our defense.

And it's interesting here where he says, as we have seen, verse 8, so as we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts.

And the sequence there is of some significance as well. First of all, as we have heard, and then so have we seen.

[17 : 40] Now why is that significant? Because it is, in fact, how faith operates. Contrary to what you find as a ridiculing of faith, people will say to you, you're just believing things that you can't see and have never been proved to be true.

Here's the psalm is saying, we heard things. God revealed things to us. He gave us his word. And we had to wait some time until that word came to be proved to be true by his actions.

We heard of God as our defense. And here we were in this little place called Zion. And these enemies came around. And we knew that God was our defense from what we had been told.

But now we're seeing it. Our faith has come to be assured. And that's what we, too, must actually insist upon. It's just ridiculous for us as Christians to think the only thing you can believe in is what you actually see with your eyes.

You believe in God. You place your trust in him. You come to circumstances where that trust is going to be tested. But then you will see, as God takes you through it, and as God takes you above it, and as you learn things about God from it and about yourself.

[19 : 04] Then you can say, I had heard, but now I see. Now I'm able to have more assurance that this indeed is our God and that this is my defense.

This is where my refuge must lie. And then, thirdly, you've got, after the great king and the fortress, you have a reference to an account of the rejoicing people.

Verse 9 through to verse 11. We have thought on your steadfast love, O Lord, 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.

Now when they're rejoicing, the first thing you notice there is that they say, we have thought on your steadfast love. They didn't enter into rejoicing by just coming up with a kind of frothy experience and an emotional thing.

[20 : 14] Yes, there's a lot of emotion in it, but it's an emotion that comes from the truth, from having studied the truth. They gave consideration. We thought on your steadfast love, O Lord.

We gave it consideration. We gave our minds to it. We studied it. That's the beauty of having the approach that we have ourselves to what it is to be a church, to be a congregation, to be Christians together.

That we give our minds to the truth of God. That we consider the truth of God. And especially, the focus here is on the steadfast love of God, which means God's commitment and love to his people.

He says, we gave this our consideration. We studied this. And from that study, from that mind, from consideration of that, we actually then came to praise your name even further.

In other words, your praise of God, your rejoicing in God, it's something that is based upon the truth of God and comes through your study of that truth, through an increased understanding of that truth.

[21 : 30] Let's get away from this idea that the worship and the praise of God is just an emotional thing and you don't really need to consider doctrine and you don't need to give any study to the truth of God.

You can just rejoice and you can just let your heart be free. And we don't want to at all stem the flow of proper emotion in the worship of God or in our relationship with God.

But what the psalmist is telling us is the more you know your truth, the more you know your doctrines, the more you study the steadfast love of God, the rich veins of truth that come to be revealed in the Bible, the more your heart is going to rejoice, the more you're going to have a firm basis of rejoicing.

And that's what he says here. We have thought on your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple. And that, of course, was such an important feature of Israel and Judah's life.

Why did they go to the temple? Not just to pass the time. Why did God require them to go to the temple? Yes, it was to worship him, but they worshipped him by giving their mind to the truth that he had revealed to them.

- [22 : 54] They studied that truth. They had that truth declared to them. The priests and the ritual of the temple actually, in a sense, acted out the truth of God in the way they went about their duties and the sacrifices and every other part of that wonderful ritual that God had given to them to actually handle in the presence of the people.

It was conveying to them the truth of God himself. And from that, they, in the midst of the temple, were receiving this. Those of them that had the mind to do this.

which is why we don't want to have long servants, but we don't want to have ten-minute shortened, curtailed studies of God's truth.

It's from that that you receive your grounding for joy and for rejoicing and for praising of God to flow from it.

So don't minimize that aspect of your life in studying the word of God. Give it the maximum time and consideration, not the minimum. And then it says, as your name, as your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth.

- [24 : 18] Another important feature there is that the name of God stands for the character of God, if you like, what he is, but often in the Bible it refers to God revealing the content of his name, God revealing to us his nature, something about himself in terms of what he is doing at the time.

And there are various titles, of course, given to God, but when it's this the name of God that's mentioned, it really is the self-revelation of God that's behind that word, the name of God.

And what it's saying is, as your name, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth. In other words, as God reveals himself, the more he reveals himself, as he opens out the beauty of his character, so praise to him follows that.

People come to worship God and praise God and reaching the ends of the earth is the wonderful vision that this verse has. And how do people to the ends of the earth come to praise and worship this God?

Well, by God revealing his name to them by coming, by them coming to understand by God's own self-revelation who he is, what he has done, what he is doing, what his plan is, what his future for his people is.

- [25 : 40] As your name, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth. And then, another important reference there, just piling up, aren't they, throughout the psalm as you go through it.

it mentions this righteousness. Your right hand is filled with righteousness. Let Mount Zion be glad. Let the daughter of Judah rejoice because of your judgments.

Now, the judgments of God, the judgment or judgments of God are always going to be marked by righteousness. righteousness. Whether it's God dealing with his enemies or whether it's God dealing with his own people, it will always be in righteousness.

He will always be true to himself and to all aspects of the truth in himself. He will always be the righteous judge. And that's why in the psalm speaking about the victory that they had seen and how that had reassured them that God was their defense, righteousness.

They are now also saying that the fact that the right hand of God is filled with righteousness means he will always do what is right with our enemies.

- [26 : 56] And he will always do what's right with us in his covenant love. The righteousness of God should be one of the things that we constantly praise him for.

It's a constant. It's something that does not change. It's something that's utterly reliable as God's people relate to him.

His righteousness as God. And then we move to the second point we were going to look at in the closing there.

There's the praise to the great king. He's the great king. He's the fortress and around him he has these rejoicing people. But then there's inspecting the defenses. There we find in verse 12 walk about Zion go round her number her towers consider well her ramparts go through her citadels that you may tell the next generation.

It's always somewhat reassuring though there are a lot of opinions in the news now about flights in and out of Stornoway and the kind of aircraft that are used and so on.

[28 : 09] It's always a bit reassuring when you actually see the pilot when you're sitting there and the pilot goes out and he starts going round the aircraft and he looks at the propellers and he looks at the tires and he looks at the wings.

That pilot if you're waiting in Stornoway that plane's just arrived in Stornoway it's had a very successful flight from wherever it's come from. It's landed safely everything's been functioning and yet the pilot can't assume that that's just going to happen when he takes off again.

He has to inspect it. He has to see if everything appears to be correct and appears to be right and working properly and here is the same thing with Zion.

They had been through a difficult time. They had been surrounded. They had been these kings that are assembled there in verse 4. They obviously didn't just arrive and go very quickly.

They were probably besieging the place for some time. don't have the details but it's that sort of picture you get from reading what's there. And now here is the situation.

[29 : 16] They've gone. Victory's been achieved. What do you then do? Well the first thing you do is you walk about Zion. You number her towers.

You consider her ramparts. You go through her citadels. You make sure that the defenses as they were under attack they're going to actually survive the next attack when it comes.

You go around and you see are there any parts of the wall that have been weakened? Is there a hole here and there? If so then you've got to make sure it's shored up that it's strengthened and it's repaired.

And so it is with regard to the church as well. We have to always be inspecting the citadels, the ramparts, the defenses.

God is our defense. God is our fortress. But he has given us a responsibility to look after things as his church. To make sure that we go through the maintenance ritual of keeping the defenses sound.

[30 : 17] What do we mean by the defenses? Well pretty much everything that he's given us in terms of the fundamental things of his truth. Those things that we know are basic to the gospel and basic to our understanding of God and how he deals with us.

The things that are emphasized in the Bible itself as central to the gospel and to a saving relationship with God. Our view of God himself, the person of Jesus Christ.

How we come to be made acceptable with God through faith in Christ. His resurrection from the dead. His second coming. These are all basic truths.

things that are part of the defenses. They're part of the things God has given us to look after so that the citadel is maintained soundly.

And of course we have to be conscious that a lot of the damage sometimes is from inside. That's what makes it so important that we examine these defenses constantly and repeatedly.

[31 : 29] It's often weakened from inside. When you get certain doctrines denied. When you get certain practices accepted and then you just put the word Christian onto them.

Things that would not have been accepted previously in other generations and that are clearly denounced in the word of God. What is happening? What is happening is that the defenses are being weakened. The church is in danger then of just collapsing in its defense and the world floods in.

And you let other powers eventually come to dictate what is and isn't right for the church to do. Just heard today of proposals. It seems that they're being prepared.

Proposals that groups out with. At the moment we're aware of Ofsted specterate to inspect certain things about schools and so on.

Well the proposals that are being formulated at the moment apparently is that Ofsted would actually come to inspect and would need to inspect church groups. Like our camps for example.

[32 : 35] If they're meeting for a certain length of time. If it's more than a set number of hours then Ofsted need to examine that. Ofsted will need to actually give approval to that. What's it all about?

So that we will make sure the government is saying that your people, your children have been radicalized. It's ridiculous. We know it's ridiculous.

But it's creeping in on us. And we have to be aware of it. And we have to say no to it. because the day that the church of God in its exercise of the gospel needs the approval of government.

It's going to be a very sad and difficult day for us. And in fact we could go so far as to say that rather than have an inspectorate, a human inspectorate, a secular inspectorate, inspectorate, come to inspect what is being taught by the church.

You would be prepared to go to jail and let that actually happen, I hope. And I hope I would too. Christ determines what we teach.

[33 : 47] And in any case, it's supposed to be a free country, isn't it? First people are being radicalized. I've still to come across a Christian that's been radicalized in the church to commit acts of atrocity.

But friends, that's what's happening right on our doorstep, right in our midst. more and more secular powers, civil powers, government powers are coming to try and exercise what they see as their right and their authority, even to actually regulate what the church is allowed to teach their children.

Walk around Zion. Consider well her ramparts. Study the defenses. Look at where they're being attacked. Shore them up.

Don't let them be breached. Whether it's from inside or outside. Because it says that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God, forever and ever.

You see, he's not here saying we're doing this just for our own sake. We have to make sure the defenses are sound for our generation and that's it. No, he's saying we have to make sure that this is so for the next generation to benefit.

[35 : 13] So that we can pass this on to the next generation. So that they will have a sound view of God. That they will know that this God is our God. The two things from that is that this God is God.

The God is worshipped here. This God, this covenant God, this God is God. No other God. No other version of this, of God, but this God.

This God. And the second thing, the second element to that is that this is God. This God is our God.

Our covenant God. Our God in covenant with us. And it's that forever and ever, he says.

This God is God and he's our God. Forever and ever. And it finishes, he will guide us forever. Not quite literally as it is in Hebrew. It's he will guide us even unto death.

[36 : 18] Even unto death. Which means pretty much the same as forever and ever. But even unto death really is the strongest possible term that you could think of.

For expressing the reliability and the constancy of God. He will be God and he will be our God forever and ever.

It's not going to change. And our response to that has to be that we maintain these defenses defenses in good shape.

That we continue to praise this God as we do. That we commend this God to the next generation and the generation following.

That he will be the God of our children and our children's children too. Let's pray. Our gracious God, we give thanks for your own reliability, your commitment to your covenant with your people.

[37 : 24] And the way in which we can depend upon you. That you are unchangeably committed to your people. And help us, we pray, to be committed also to you as our God.

Bless to us your word once again, Lord, we pray. Help us to keep our part of that covenant relationship in praising you and in commending you.

and in living in obedience to you. Hear us now and receive our thanks and hear the prayers of your people here and elsewhere. For Jesus' sake. Amen.