

The City of the Great King

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[0 : 0 0] is a psalm about the city of the great king. You don't have to go very far into the psalm to realize that it's about something much more than geographical.

There is a lot here to do with the theology of God as the God of his people, as the one who resides within his church. Yes, it is about Zion. It's about the city of God, literally Mount Zion, near Jerusalem. It's about Zion's king, literally, kings such as David, Solomon, and so on.

And yes, it's about the defenses of that city in the days of the psalmist himself. But as we say, as you go on in the psalm, you realize that there's a lot more here than just literal Zion, a literal geographical location on earth, that it is, in fact, carrying us upward to the residence of God in his holiness, in his kingship, in the midst of his people. And the psalm actually incorporates both conflict and victory in the experience of those that are written about in the psalm. The conflict that is mentioned, as you see the likes of verse 4, all the way through to verse 8, where you find certain opponents coming to attack Zion and trembling in response to the way that they came to know of the impregnable nature of Zion and of God's people under the Lord's own direction.

So Zion really here, as so often you find in the Psalms and in the prophecies, is really to do with God's people, especially as they are presided over by God. Zion itself was, of course, not very significant to look at, very small hill in comparison to many other hills or mountains. But as we'll see in the psalm, in the spiritual, theological sense of it, Zion is massive. Zion is impregnable. Zion is, all the way through what's spoken of here, it is something that's set before us as God's own residence among his people. And there are two things that we can divide the psalm into two, really. We're looking at the whole psalm briefly. First of all, it speaks about great praise to the great king of Zion. Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised. And then as you go through the psalm, you come down to the final verses from verse 12 especially, and you find the psalmist speaking there about inspecting the defenses of Zion. You go around and look at the walls, considering her ramparts, going through her citadels. And the specific reason for that is that we take stock of the nature of the church, the nature of God's own place in the church, so that that's passed on to the succeeding generations. Consider it well, he says, so that you may tell the next generation that this is

God. This is our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever. So it's great praise to the great king, first of all. As we said, Zion itself literally was not very significant. But here is great praise to the great king. Zion is significant as the dwelling place of God, as the location of the temple on earth associated with the presence of God amongst his people, with the gathered people of God to worship this God. And it's important that we see how the psalm presents the king as actually living in Zion, being a resident of Zion, being somebody who actually presides over it, but living within Zion as well. Great he is to be praised in the city of our God, his holy mountain, Mount Zion in the far north, the city of the great king. It is the greatness of God, the greatness of Zion's God, that makes Zion great. We can't speak about Zion being great of itself, but by virtue of the great king being in residence, by virtue of his greatness, Zion is spoken of as being great in that spiritual theological sense. But it's also, you notice, great is the Lord and greatly to be praised.

[4 : 33] The reason the praise of God's people is to be great praise, not just a little thing, not a little trickle of praise, but great praise, great in the sense of its nature as ascription of glory and praise and honor to God. Great in its volume, great in its extent, great in its continuance. And it's the greatness of God that calls forth that greatness of praise.

He is great and greatly to be praised in the city of our God. And we come here tonight, with that conviction in our own minds, a small group of people compared to the world in which we live.

And yet with God in our midst, we come here tonight, conscious of the fact that because God has promised to be where his people are gathered, and where in your heart of hearts and in our hearts together, we seek that we'll know the Lord's presence, that he will speak to us, that he will come and make himself known to us. But by virtue of the fact, we know it's the great God we're talking about. We want our praise to be great. We want to have a praise that's great in its quality, as much as possible, to be a praise that is as perfect as it can be. Whether it's in our singing, in our dealing with God's word, in our interaction with his truth, the praise of God is to be a great praise. He is to be greatly praised. And as we come together this evening, that is surely one of the chief convictions in your heart, that the God you come to worship is a God who is greatly to be praised. You don't want to go out of this building tonight thinking of God as worthy only of just a minimum amount of praise on your part, or an out part as a people. Whether you think of him praised in our lives privately or here together in formal worship, or praised as we live out our lives in the world, our lives have to reflect that it is this great God we serve and worship. And therefore, as far as possible, we pray that God will show through our lives how great he is and how greatly he is to be praised.

You see, he's saying the joy of the whole earth, his holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth. So often in the Psalms, you find a prophetic note here and there that really stretches well beyond what you find in the days of the Psalmist himself. Zion, when this was written, was not the joy of all the earth. It was only known pretty much in its own locality or the immediate surroundings of Zion or of Jerusalem. But Zion was to be the joy of all the earth. The gospel through the Lord's people and the Lord's blessing, as it came to touch the lives of millions of people, that becomes obvious that this is the joy of all the earth. This is the location of true satisfaction and lasting joy. The worship of God, the praise, the great praise that we owe to God. So here's the great king and greatly to be praised. And he's also speaking here of Zion being a fortress. Mount Zion in the far north, the city of the great king, within her citadels, God has made himself known as a fortress.

In those days, every city needed defenses, needed to be a fortress against the many enemies that threatened to come around and overtake them. And it's no less the case with the church. You're aware here tonight, you're aware as we're praying to God tonight, that one of the things we pray for is the Lord's protective care, the Lord taking care of our lives in this world, the Lord taking care of our witness, the Lord actually himself being our defense, our shield, our citadel, as he comes to make himself known as a fortress to us. Now, that doesn't, we'll look at the end of the psalm later, it doesn't displace our responsibility in checking the defenses of Zion, in making sure that the ramparts, the citadels and all of that represents spiritually are actually in good order.

[8 : 56] But it is God himself who is especially known as a fortress. And when it says here that God has made himself known as a fortress, I think that really, the psalmist is really casting his mind back to times when God made himself known as the God who gave his people victory over their enemies.

In other words, the psalmist really is reflecting here on times when God had made himself known as the one who protected his people, who gave them victory, who actually enabled them to overcome their enemies. And here we are tonight, and that's what we're conscious of. The God who is our citadel, who is our protector this evening, has made himself known as such down through the ages of the church.

You think of the many times in the Bible's own record, when it seemed that the cause of God, that the church of God was about to peter out, was about to be annihilated, was about to be destroyed by their enemies. All the way through from the earliest Old Testament times, through the days of the psalmist, through the days of the prophets, even right into the New Testament, the days of the apostles, the opposition they faced, the tiny fragment of people that were there in the upper room with Jesus, that he was teaching in respect to their responsibility to go out into the world.

Then came Pentecost. Then came the thousands added to the church. It seemed that it was about just to be destroyed, about to disappear. And what happens? God made himself known as a fortress. How many times in your own life, to some extent, small or great, you felt things ebbing away from you. You felt your vulnerability.

You felt that in the presence of all the pressure of the world, and the pressure of within God's providence of things that you knew were against you, things that you knew were actually setting out to deflect you from the path of obedience, setting out to trouble you, setting out to displace the thoughts in your mind that gave the praise to God. How many times God then came and made himself known to you, and the power of his word brought you back to the conviction of the psalmist here. God has made himself known as a fortress. God again and again has come to convince his people that this is who he is.

[11 : 38] And that's so important for us in today's world, isn't it? Because let's face it, as a believing people of God in this nation itself, we are vulnerable. We feel vulnerable. We're facing the might of an unbelieving world. We're facing the might of heresy within the church. We're facing the might of defections from the church, and all sorts of things that really are a damage to the gospel itself.

We have to come back like a psalmist here, just to remind ourselves of who is our God? What is he like? And how has he made himself known in the past? He has made himself known within our citadels.

He has made himself known as a fortress. And so he's not just the great king. He's the great king whose fortress this is, whose citadel this is, who is in fact himself, strictly speaking, her fortress.

And that's why it leads to rejoicing people. We thought upon, he says, we thought upon, your word. We thought upon these things. And as we thought upon these things, so we came to realize more and more that this, in fact, is who God is. In verse 9, we thought, especially on your steadfast love in the midst of your temple, as your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth.

Now, when it's saying here, we thought upon your steadfast love, O God, it doesn't just mean to think now and again and briefly and in a shallow way about the steadfast love of God. It means to really ponder this, to really reflect upon this, to keep coming back again and feed our souls with the great fact of God's own steadfast love. And what is a steadfast love? Well, a steadfast love cuts two ways.

[13 : 33] His steadfast love is the love by which he has gathered his people, by which has brought them to be his own people. The steadfast love that has given so much for them, as especially seen in that ultimate giving of the Lord Jesus Christ, God's own son. But you know, the steadfast love of the Lord is not just God's commitment steadfastly in their favor and on their behalf.

It has another side to it. It's a two-sided coin. Because God is as steadfast against his enemies as he is for his friends. The steadfast love of the Lord is an assurance to God's people that their enemies will not prevail. It's the steadfast love of the Lord that persuades us tonight that the church will not be destroyed, however low it may become in its influence in any generation.

And tonight, you're so thankful, and we're so thankful together, that this is, in fact, the conviction of God's own truth. We have thought upon your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple.

And then he says, as your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth. In other words, the name of God, God's self-revelation of himself, what he has made clear and known about himself.

Well, as that is the case, so also your praise reaches to the ends of the earth. In other words, the revelation of God of himself is what precedes his praise, reaching out, just like you would find perhaps on dry, parched land, another great image from the Bible, the Old Testament especially, and then in times of refreshment, times of new rains, when you find the parched land suddenly being covered over with the water that flows in, and then the growth begins, and you get some wonderful transformations of desert-like conditions. Well, the name of God, the power of God, the way in which God himself reveals himself as God, it goes before his praise reaching out to the ends of the earth.

[15 : 55] The effect of that, the growth that emanates from God, revealing himself through his people. And of course, it is righteous as well. Your right hand is filled with righteousness.

Let Mount Zion be glad. So it's not really just the mere power of God, the greatness of God and his power and majesty that's brought before us. He here is speaking about righteousness, the righteousness of God.

God himself as the one who is in his character so perfect, so true to himself, so true to his promises, so true to his people. Your righteousness, your right hand is filled with righteousness.

This is not a despot. This is not a God who is something of a tyrant, who just sweeps in everybody and anything out of his way. No, his right hand, the right hand of power, the way in which God's works is a work filled with righteousness.

Great praise to the great God, to the great king. And as he speaks there of those that came to assemble themselves in verse 4, came on together.

[17 : 19] As soon as they saw the nature of God's protective care, they were in panic. They took to flight, trembling, took hold of them, their anguish as of a woman in labor by the east wind.

You shattered the ships of Tarshish. A great God, great in power, great in righteousness, and greatly to be praised.

But he goes on to speak about our responsibility in terms of walk about Zion, verse 12. Walk about Zion, go round her, number her towers, consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels, and so on.

Here is the psalmist. He's taken all this time to present the greatness of God, the fact that God is the fortress of his people, that he provides that wonderful security for us.

And yet he comes now to turn the thing towards our responsibilities in reflection and in relation to that. The fact that God is this great God doesn't devolve us of responsibility in looking after each other and looking after ourselves, looking after his cause from our point of view.

[18 : 27] So what is he saying? He's saying, walk about Zion, go round her, number her towers, consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels. In other words, he's saying, like you would especially after a siege or after an attack.

I was speaking, as we said earlier, of those who came to attack and were turned back. And the people within the citadel that was attacked would have the responsibility then of going back outside and it was safe to do so, and checking up the walls of the city, checking up where the ramparts were in danger of being breached, checking up any breaches that had been made so as to provide security against the next attack whenever it came.

You find the same thing in many respects. It's the first time I ever saw it. It was quite touching in a sense when after the plane had landed and while we were getting off the plane, it was one of those turboprop planes.

And the two pilots came outside, went round the plane, started inspecting the propellers, turning it just by hand, turning it round, looking at it, making sure there are no cracks there, making sure it's safe for the next flight.

And that's what we're told here about the inhabitants of Zion. Walk about her, go round her, number her towers, consider well her ramparts, check out the defences, make sure they're okay against the next attack, make sure they're kept up in terms of their efficiency, make sure the defences are in good shape.

[20 : 09] And that's what we need to do in regard to ourselves as the church of God in the world. It's our personal responsibility to ensure as far as possible that my own defences, your own defences are in place.

And that means that as every individual looks at the defences of their own life, making sure there are no leaks there as far as possible, no breaches through which the enemy can gain access to your mind, to your thoughts, to your actions, to your words.

As everyone does that, so the whole of the people of the citadel of God are checking the ramparts, checking the defences, because it's important that any breaches are actually made up.

And of course, we have to remember, one of the really important things to remember is that the defences of the church are often breached from the inside, not just from the outside.

In fact, it's much easier to see the enemy that attacks you from outside, whether it's another kind of belief or ideology that comes from outside the Christian faith altogether.

[21 : 17] You can see that much more easily than the heresy that works from within, that comes creeping up slowly, as Jude put it, when he was writing his epistle and appealing to those Christians he was writing to, to maintain the faith, keep it, that was once delivered once for all to the saints.

For he says, certain men have crept in unawares. They have crept in unawares, they've not been noticed. They're already inside.

And as they're inside and not faithful to God and determined to pursue their own agenda, so the walls begin to show signs of cracking. So breaches begin to open up in the walls.

Breaches from bad teaching, from doctrine, from practice. And how well you're aware of that in our own particular day, as you look at the state of the church throughout our nation, and I'm talking here of all churches, but not leaving aside our own, because we're all part of the process of examining the walls of the citadel.

But where you find, in certain cases, that other ideologies are given a place even in the worship of God. It's a very sad thing to see other so-called faiths involved in the celebration of King Charles as he came to Scotland, where you find somebody there who's a professed Buddhist, for example, appealing to the Buddha and appealing to the idolatry that is part of all of these systems that are against the gospel itself, but of course are so persuasive, because they're not outwardly antagonistic.

[23 : 16] And the thinking of our day has, over many, many years now, come to present this view of all the faiths together, having a valid place in relation to God, in relation to the truth.

And it's only as you put them all together and actually just take parts of each of them and see where there's common ground that you come to realize more and more what the truth of God is.

Well, Jesus says, I am the truth, and the way, and the life. Not a Buddha, not Islam, not secularism, not any of those ideologies that are quite contrary to the gospel.

And it's your responsibility and it's my responsibility to make sure that the walls of Zion are in good order, to call out heresy what it is, to actually show that we care for the truth of God, that we care for it so much that we realize and are convinced that without maintaining that truth of God as it was passed on to us, we're going to be facing further breaches in the ramparts and the walls of God's citadel.

And it's not a cursory examination we're called upon to do. Consider well our ramparts. Make a good study of it, he's saying.

[24 : 41] In other words, he really is saying to us, know what you believe. Know why you believe it. Familiarize yourself with the teachings of the past that have been true to the gospel that are now put aside as no longer relevant for the age that we belong to.

Know why there were so many faithful people of God that stood out against the idea that a person was not justified by faith in Christ, but through works.

Or whatever other defection from the gospel people had to stand up against. That's where we stand. That's what we've actually come all the way through from the Old Testament, you know, through the days of the apostles and the early church after the apostles.

How did the great doctrines of the great creeds like the Chalcedonian Creed, the Nicene Creed, all the way through down to the Westminster Confession and other confessions faithful to the Bible?

How did they come about? They came about because there were responses to heresies. There were responses to false teaching about the person of Christ, about the Trinity, about God's work of salvation.

[25 : 59] And these great people of God, as they got together in councils or in meetings, they came up with these wonderful confessions of faith that we benefit from today.

How did they come about? They came about because they considered well the ramparts of the church. They could see where they were being attacked, where they were being weakened. They could see where they needed strengthening.

They familiarized themselves with the truth of God and what the truth of God was and what truth he had passed on to his people. Why? So that as we'll see in a minute, that we may pass it on to the next generation.

Consider well, our ramparts and go through our citadels. Why do we do this? Well, so that we will pass it on to the next generation.

Not just for our own security, not just for our own assurance, assurance spiritually and so on. That's part of it, of course. But it's so that you may tell the next generation that this is God and that this God is our God.

[27 : 08] This is our God forever and ever. Why do we make such an effort to teach our young people? Why are there so many things in this congregation?

So many wonderful things. So many people committed to doing things with our young people, not just in Sunday school, but many of the other related activities that we have throughout the week, as well as on the Lord's Day.

Why is that? What's all that about? It's so that the next generation will know that this is our God. That the God of the Bible, the God of our fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, Paul, Peter, John, John Knox, Thomas Chalmers, Martin Lloyd-Jones, R.C. Sproul.

Their God, this is our God. And as we consider these, well, it's so that we will tell the next generation. And what are we going to tell them? Well, the legacy that has been passed on to us is this, that this God is God.

This God, the Bible speaks about, not the God that's presented as just taking bits of the Bible and leaving out some other important bits and saying, well, this is the God we need today.

- [28 : 34] We need a God today who is really friendly towards certain ways of thinking of human behavior, through human morality, not the God of the Old Testament, not the God of the apostles, not the God of the reformers, but the God of the thinking that sees adjustments to the Bible as necessary.

The thinking that says, if Paul were alive today, he wouldn't have written as he wrote. You know what that is? That's a complete misunderstanding of what the Word of God is.

Of the fact that this whole book is the Word of God. It doesn't just contain the Word of God. It is the Word of God. The Word of God that is given to God's people for every generation.

And it doesn't matter what changes take place from one generation to the next. What changes take place in the succeeding generation to our own? What sort of circumstances our children and grandchildren will face when we're no longer here?

In a sense, that's not the important thing. The important thing is that they consider this Bible to be the Word of God and seek to live accordingly. this God is God.

- [29 : 51] Not the God of those who are the revisionists of the Scriptures, of the modernists, of whatever otherists you might think of.

This is God. But equally important, this is our God forever and ever. He is not just God in the sense of being the true God and the only God.

He's concerned here to pass on to the next generation that this is our God. This is the God not just as our God in the sense that we believe in, but our God who looks after us.

Our God who has given us so much and who promises to give us more. He's our God. And that's why the likes of writer to the Hebrews could say that he is not ashamed to be called our God for he has prepared a city for us.

He is true to his promise. He is our God. It wouldn't be right just to say that he is possessed by us, but he is confessed by us and he is himself committed to us as his people.

- [31 : 17] This is our God. In other words, the psalmist really picking up such an important thread and theme all the way through scripture. This God is our covenant God, a God in covenant with his people, a God faithful to his people in covenant promises.

This is our God. This great God who is greatly to be praised, but he's a God of relationship. A God who loves his people in a spiritual marriage that will never end.

This is our God. And he says forever and ever. The constancy of God. And the words that are used there at the end of the psalm, where he says this is our God forever and ever.

He will guide us forever. The repetition of these words forever, forever and ever, forever. It's really in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and of the psalm here.

It's putting in the strongest possible terms how reliable God is. how true God is to himself and to his promises to his people.

- [32 : 34] He's our God forever and ever and ever. He will not change and we don't need to change anything about. And that's why we inspect the defenses so that we will pass on that great conviction and truth to the succeeding generations that we may tell the next generation this is God our God forever and ever.

May he bless these thoughts to us. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for all the assurances we receive from your word, from you in your word, of the relation that you have to your people.

We bless you, Lord, that tonight you have drawn our minds to this great portion of your word, that you have presented yourself to us as the great God who is greatly to be praised.

Lord, we pray that our presentation of you through our lives may not be a God who is seen to be small, a God who is seen to be weak, a God who is seen to be irrelevant for the needs of the present day.

Help us truly, Lord, to present you as the great God you are and to present the great privilege we have of being your people. help us to be confident in your covenant relationship with your people and help us to be true to you, O Lord, as we would seek to walk faithfully and embrace the promises you have given us.

[34 : 07] And help us to reach out into the world, O Lord, as we already heard in prayer, a world that's so needy, a world that has so much turned its back upon God, a world that is so given to opposition to the gospel, a world, O Lord, that is so proud of itself, proud of its own imagined authority.

O Lord, our God, grant us grace, we pray, that we may indeed be your believing and witnessing people, and that you would use us, Lord, we pray, for the generation that has come upon us to hold forth the word of life and seek by the gospel and by your grace to see many turning into the ways of the Lord.

Hear us, we pray tonight, in our prayers, silent and spoken. Accept our thanks, hear our praise, and all we ask is for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Amen. Let's sing now to God bless you, God.

Let's sing now to the word of life, Lord, our grace to thank you. Amen. Holy amen.