

Horsley Evangelical Church (www.horsleyec.org.uk)

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Psalm 48 The City of God

Psalm 48 is one of a group of Psalms called *the songs of Zion*. These Psalms praise the Lord and rejoice in the city of Jerusalem where the temple of the Lord was situated, and which served as the ‘capital’ of God’s kingdom on earth.

We know that when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in the 6th century BC and when the Israelites were taken into exile, their captives taunted them to sing such songs as Psalm 48. **Read Psalm 137:1-3**. (Like me you may remember the pop song in the 1970’s by ‘Bony M’ based on these verses!)

But the fact that Jerusalem and its temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC and then again by the Romans in 70 AD reminds us that this Psalm is not referring just to the physical city of Jerusalem. For the term ‘Zion’ in the Bible has a range of meanings. It *can* refer to the city which David took from the Jebusites in 2 Samuel 5. It can refer to the city of David, Jerusalem, which in those days was the centre of God’s earthly kingdom.

But in the New Testament, Zion can also refer to the church of Jesus Christ and especially the people of God gathered from all nations in heaven, as well as the heavenly city. The book of Revelation especially, talks about the beauty and security of *Zion*, meaning not only the beauty and security of heaven as a place but also the beauty and security of God’s people in heaven.

So this is another Psalm which very much looks forward and is prophetic about what is yet to come. And as we study it, we will need to remember that forward gaze. The things spoken about here find their fulfilment in Jesus Christ and will come true when the new heavens and earth are created.

Let’s look at the Psalm under 4 headings this morning. First, in verses 1-3 we have **the beautiful city**. **Read verses 1-3**. Was the city of Jerusalem beautiful? Well yes. Ezekiel the prophet, for one, describes the beauty of Jerusalem in his prophecy. **Read Ezekiel 16:13, 14**.

Jerusalem *was* a beautiful city, set on a hill. And certainly, in the days of David and Solomon, Jerusalem had its admiring visitors from far and wide, such as the queen of Sheba who was overwhelmed by what she saw. But what made Jerusalem beautiful was the Lord’s blessing and the Lord’s presence within her.

Psalm 48 of course is not praising Jerusalem as a city, but the God who had chosen Jerusalem and its people as his own. And it was because of this adoption and because God was within Jerusalem in a special way that the city had a beauty and glory all its own.

We read in Psalm 46 - **read Psalm 46:4, 5**. And this same ownership of God is spoken about here. Verse 1 describes Jerusalem as the *city of our God* – the same God who is *great* and *most worthy of praise*. It is his *holy mountain*. Then in verse 2 Jerusalem is described as *the city of the Great King*.

This is linked in verse 2 with describing Mount Zion as being *like the upmost heights of Zaphon*. Now ‘Zaphon’ means ‘north’ in Hebrew. And Mount Zaphon was thought to be the sacred residence of the chief Canaanite god, El. So the Psalmist is probably saying that Mount Zion is the real ‘Zaphon’ because there is no other god except the Lord. Zion is the city of *the Great King*. And because *he* is within her, the city had a special beauty and significance over all other cities. **Read verse 3**.

And then this lovely phrase again in verse 2 – *the joy of the whole earth*. It means that the nations will find joy not just in visiting Jerusalem, but in coming to know the one true God who resides in Jerusalem and whose joy is shared with those who trust in him.

The beautiful city - but only because God lives within. For it is God who makes things beautiful – only him. The Lord in himself is beautiful, and it is only his presence and favour which gives things their beauty. It's the presence of sin which *takes away* the original beauty of God's creation.

But the good news is that through the Lord Jesus Christ, God will restore that which was made unattractive through sin. And this Psalm is pointing forward to something very special that God will do. This beauty and joy were not fulfilled in the earthly city of Jerusalem but point us instead to the future beauty and glory of heaven, and to the people of heaven who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

These future things are taken up by the apostle John as he writes the book of Revelation. Concerning the future beauty of Zion, John writes this in chapter 21. **Read Revelation 21:2, 3, 10, 11, 18-21**. What is John telling us? He is telling us about the beauty of the heavenly city. God is within her. But John is also telling us about the beauty of the people. The people are beautifully dressed. As beautiful as a bride on her wedding day. The place of heaven and the people of heaven will shine with the glory of God, as beautiful as the most beautiful things this world affords – precious stones and jewels. And this is what our Psalm is looking forward to. We all appreciate things of beauty. We yearn for such things. But these things will be found in heaven, and even in us!

Then in verses 4-8 we read about **the secure city**. **Read verses 4-8**. Just as the city's beauty was from God, so was her security. Some think Psalm 48 was written after some deliverance of the Lord in time of war. (In the same way some think Psalm 46 was written after the Lord's miraculous deliverance of the city from the armies of Sennacherib.)

And this may well be what prompts our Psalmist, and yet we are not told which deliverance is in his mind. But we *are* told the kings (plural) joined forces. There was an attack on Jerusalem when a coalition of forces joined together to attack the Lord's dwelling. And this joining together of enemies reminds us of Psalm 2. **Read Psalm 2:2**.

In other words Jerusalem is outnumbered. But the Lord delivered his people.. There is mystery about what verses 5 and 6 mean. **Read verses 5 and 6 again**. What did the kings see to make them astonished and flee away? What made these aggressors quake in their boots?

We don't know. All we know is that this was the Lord's direct intervention, not the armies of Israel. The panic reminds us of other stories when the fear of the Lord descends upon people. For example in the story of the fall of Jericho, we read this from Rahab. **Read Joshua 2:8-11**.

Now it would seem that the Lord caused a similar terror to fall on those who came to destroy Jerusalem. **Read verse 7**. What's the relevance of Tarshish? One possibility is that the ships of Tarshish were quite sturdy vessels, capable of longer sea journeys. But these sturdy armies that threatened Jerusalem were shattered by the Lord with a strong east wind. Elsewhere in Scripture, the east wind symbolizes destruction. It may remind some readers of the wind that destroyed the armies of Egypt at the Red Sea. The Lord caused a strong *east wind* to part the waters so that the Israelites could pass through (Exodus 14:21).

And verse 8 is saying that just as we have heard the *stories* of the Lord's deliverance of the past, we have now seen this deliverance with our own eyes. **Read verse 8 again**.

Now again, when we remember the ransacking of Jerusalem by both the Babylonians in 586 BC and then the Romans in AD 70, we realise that these verses find their fulfilment in the future. And

again this fulfilment is found in Jesus Christ. The people of God have eternal security in him. On the cross, all our enemies were forever defeated – Satan, sin and death. So in the new Jerusalem we read about the eternal security of God’s people. **Read Revelation 21:10, 12, 17.** Now again, these things – the high walls and the thick walls of the city speak symbolically of the absolute security of God’s people in heaven. No enemy will disturb them. They will know for ever the protection and the peace of God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

The beautiful city. The secure city. Then thirdly in verses 9-11, **the beloved city.** **Read verses 9-11.** Now if this Psalm is written after the Lord’s defeat of an enemy, this rejoicing and praising is because of that deliverance. But this section also speaks of the people meditating on the Lord’s love at the heart of the city - the temple, where the special presence of the Lord was. It was because of the Lord’s love that he would save them. And this love, this unfailing covenant love is something the people of God are to meditate on.

It’s so easy to panic and allow our minds to be filled with fear and anxiety. This is how the devil loves to attack us. Peter describes Satan as a roaring lion. And lions roar in order to frighten their prey so that the poor animal is paralysed with fear. And how the devil loves to fill our minds with things that cause us to fear. But God’s people mediate on his unfailing love.

When troubles come in the form of various attacks, this doesn’t mean that the love of the Lord has failed or that God has left us. No, his love is unfailing. It is a covenant love. And so at the heart of the city, and in our own hearts, the Lord’s people focus on the Lord’s love and his promises. His right hand is filled with righteousness which saves his people (10). And his right hand is also filled with judgements against those who attack his people. Not just in the capitol city notice, but also in the villages of Judah to the south (11).

Do you remember the story told in 2 Chronicles 20 when the armies of the Ammonites and Moabites came to make war on God’s people in the days of King Jehoshaphat. Some men told the king a vast army is coming against you. But what did God’s prophet, Jahaziel, tell Jehoshaphat. “The battle is not yours but the Lord’s. Go out to meet them, but you will not have to fight them.” And so Jehoshaphat appointed singers to praise the Lord. And as they sang his praise, the Lord set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab. And they destroyed one another.

The battle we face is not ultimately ours, but the Lord’s. And we are to keep remembering his love. Now that doesn’t mean we are to be inactive or put our heads in the sand. But it is a call to keep the focus on God during the troubled times. To meditate of his love, which is demonstrated in the Lord Jesus. Keep the focus on Christ and on what he has done and what he has promised to do. For the people of God, the inhabitants of Zion, are dearly loved.

Think how John speaks about the fulfilment of this for those who trust in Jesus. **Read Revelation 21:2-4.** The people of God and the members of Zion are dearly loved. We are the bride of Christ and the apple of his eye. The Lord will deliver his people from every danger and in heaven we will know the full extent of his love.

The beautiful city, the secure city, the beloved city and then finally, **the eternal city.** **Read verses 12-14.** In this last section, the readers are invited to take a tour of the city. Perhaps the Psalmist wants the reader to do this literally, although there is no evidence that a procession round the city was ever done by the people as part of any worship ceremony. Yes, the people did process round the walls of Jerusalem when Nehemiah finished the rebuilding of the walls, but there is no evidence this was done regularly.

So it may be that the Psalmist is inviting the reader to do this in their minds. They are to walk around and in their imagination count the towers and consider the ramparts and view the citadels – these parts of the city which would contribute to the city’s defence, security and beauty. They are to *appreciate* the city God has given them and chosen to put his name.

But why take such a tour? It is so that the next generation may be told. So does that mean giving a sort of geography lesson to the younger people? What are they to talk about with the next generation?

Surely they are simply being encouraged to tell the next generation about the Lord. They are to rehearse with the younger generation his goodness, his protection and his love for his people. Our minds go back to what the law tells the parents to do in Deuteronomy 4. [Read Deuteronomy 4:9, 10.](#)

The tour of the city is really an *aid memoir* so that the next generation and the ones following may grow up to know the Lord and the great privilege they have in belonging to him. But look at how the Psalm finishes. [Read verse 14.](#)

We might have expected the verse to say, “For this city is our city for ever” – after all, verse 14 comes after the virtual tour. But of course what is eternal is the Lord. The city is eternal only in the sense that God’s love and provision for his people are eternal. Each generation needs to know about the Lord because *he* is eternal, and so is his salvation.

Every person needs to know him because our eternal destiny depends upon knowing him. But the Psalm finishes with the grace of the Lord. He will be our guide even to the end.

The earthly city of Jerusalem is not eternal. One day it will be destroyed, as will everything else in this passing world. We do not put our hope in buildings or in cities. We put our hope in God. And through Jesus Christ he has given us hope and the gift of eternal life. The city of Zion is eternal in the sense that the people within it have eternal life. Our home in heaven is eternal. Hear these words about the hope of Abraham. [Read Hebrews 11:8-10, 13-16.](#) And that city, in heaven is eternal.

This present world is passing. The Christian is not to feel too comfortable in this world because we do not belong here. Our citizenship is in heaven. And so we are to have an eternal perspective on this life.

We have **a beautiful city**. We are not to set our hearts on *earthly beauty*. It will fade. We are to look to God - for only he makes people beautiful as they are united to his Son. We have **a secure city**. We are not to search in *this world for security*. There is none. We are to look to God and the safety there is in Christ, whose death upon the cross has defeated the enemies of death and Satan. That is the only safe place - in Christ. We have **a beloved city**. We will not find such love *in this world*. For we will not find love that lasts. The love we must seek is the love of God. Only that will last and is found in Christ. And we have **an eternal city**. We will not find *permanence in this world*. The buildings we all live in, the towns and cities where we dwell will one day be destroyed, forever. But in Christ we are promised a city that will last forever. And in that heavenly city, the river of God will refresh and satisfy every desire. Ours is an eternal city. But the focus is always to be on Christ. For ultimately this Psalm is about the eternal security and delight we have in Christ.