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THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING

Psalm 48

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March 22, 2009

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March 22, 2009
Psalms 2008-09, Lesson 13

The City of the Great King Psalm 48

I commonly hear people, both in the church and out of it, say something like, "We're planning to move out of town. We're tired of the crowds and the congestion. We bought acreage out in the country where we'll be a long ways from all these people." That seems to be a part of the American dream: get away from the city!

Has it ever occurred to you that God describes heaven as a *city*? Heaven is the New Jerusalem. So if you want to spend eternity in heaven, you'd better get used to city living! I know, at least your neighbors in heaven will be perfect, but you *will* have neighbors!

In the Bible, cities are the desirable place to live. To live away from the city is to be unprotected from bandits, invading enemies, and predatory wild animals. It is to battle the elements. It is to cut yourself off from commerce, social relationships, and community support. The biblical mindset is, "Why in the world would anyone want to move out of the city into the wilderness?"

In America, there is also a cultural tendency towards individualism. We prize the rugged individualist. When we relate to one another, we tend to compete rather than to cooperate. As American Christians, we rightly emphasize having a personal relationship with Christ, but sometimes we neglect to emphasize that the Christian life is more than just you and Christ. It necessarily makes you a part of His body, the church. You become a fellow citizen with the saints, a member of God's household (Eph. 2:19). Or, to put it another way, you become a citizen of God's city.

Psalm 48 sings the praises of Zion, the city of our God, the city of the great King (48:1, 2). It is a companion to Psalms 46 and 47, which also proclaim God's victory over His enemies. Psalm 46:4 also refers to "the city of God, the dwelling places of the Most High." Commenting on the Old Testament theology of Zion, Willem VanGemeren writes (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [Zondervan], 5:355),

The psalmist affirms that God's beneficent rule belongs only to the godly, the residents of Zion.

Mount Zion stands for the vision of God's kingship. God's kingdom is greater than Jerusalem but receives its visible expression in the temple and palace of Jerusalem....

Yahweh has chosen to establish his kingdom and delights in those who submit themselves to his rule: "For the Lord has chosen Zion, he has desired it for his dwelling" (132:13). The Zion theology-eschatology inspires God's people with adoration, joy, hope, and commitment to the Great King.... The godly are those who live and act in anticipation of the vision of Zion. This hope was the basis for ethics, praise, and evangelism (48:8-14).

But this vision of Zion as God's city and dwelling place is not just for the Jews. The New Testament applies this Old Testament vision to the church. In Galatians 4:26, Paul says, "But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother." In Ephesians 2, Paul goes to great lengths (2:11-22) to show that the Gentiles now have become partakers with the Jews of the covenants of promise. He concludes (2:19-22), "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit."

The author of Hebrews contrasts the terrifying fear of those who received the Law at Mount Sinai with the reverent awe of those who have received the New Covenant. He says (Heb. 12:22-24), "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant...."

The apostle John writes (Rev. 21:1-3), "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy

city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I hear a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them'...." In verses 9 & 10, he specifically identifies this new Jerusalem as the wife of the Lamb.

So while Psalm 48 is about the Jewish vision of Zion as God's city and dwelling place, in light of the New Testament, we may legitimately apply it to the church, which has been grafted in to believing Israel (Rom. 11:17-24). Just as God promises to establish Zion forever (Ps. 48:8), so Jesus promised to establish His church forever (Matt. 16:18). We are God's temple, His dwelling place (1 Cor. 3:16). So Psalm 48 has direct application to us.

Psalms 46 and 48 both seem to have been written in response to some stupendous deliverance of Jerusalem from powerful enemies that threatened to annihilate it. While scholars differ and we cannot be dogmatic, I am inclined to view it as the deliverance under King Hezekiah from Sennacherib's powerful army (described in 2 Kings 18:17-19:37; 2 Chronicles 32; & Isa. 36-37). This army had been unstoppable, and now it surrounded Jerusalem. It looked doomed. But in response to Hezekiah's and Isaiah's prayers, the angel of the Lord went out and killed 185,000 of Sennacherib's troops in one night. He returned defeated to Ninevah and was murdered by his sons as he worshiped in his idol temple.

But whatever the historical situation, the psalm joyously proclaims God's greatness as seen in the splendor of His city, which He miraculously delivered. While parts of the psalm would almost lead you to think that it is praising the beauty of Zion, the first and last verses serve to show that it is actually a psalm about the greatness of God as seen through His city. The idea is:

God's city is to proclaim the praise of His salvation to all the earth and to succeeding generations.

The psalm falls into three segments: verses 1-3 show that God's city is to proclaim His greatness, holiness, joy, and power. Verses 4-8 show God miraculously saving His city from powerful enemies. Verses 9-14 show that God's city should praise Him for

His great salvation and spread His praise to the ends of the earth and to the next generation.

1. God's city is to proclaim His greatness, holiness, joy, and power (48:1-3).

A. God's city is to proclaim His greatness (48:1).

"Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, in the city of our God...." How can we ever praise God in proportion to His infinite greatness? It's impossible! Maybe the heavenly chorus will come the closest, when the millions and millions of saints and angels join together to sing God's praise. But even that will fall short, because His greatness is far beyond the highest heaven! But here below, we should not give up just because it is impossible. We should worship Him with all our being. When visitors come into our midst, they should conclude, "These people must be worshipping a great God, because they are so caught up in wonder, love, and praise!" Join me in praying that as a church we will give our great God the great praise that He deserves!

B. God's city is to proclaim the beauty of His holiness (48:1b-2).

The psalmist describes God's city as "His holy mountain" and adds that it is beautiful in elevation. Jerusalem, of course, is at an elevation of 2,500 feet above sea level, so that writers talk about "going up" to Jerusalem (Ps. 122:4). But the theological sense of "beautiful in elevation" is well expressed by A. A. Anderson (cited by VanGemeren, *ibid.*, 5:363), "It is here that, in a sense, heaven and earth meet." The city's holiness and beauty, not to mention its strength, are due to the fact that God dwells there with His people.

The world probably thinks of holiness as being rather drab or boring, but in the Bible God, who is holy, is beautiful (Ps. 27:4; Isa. 33:17). Psalm 96:6 declares, "Splendor and majesty are before Him, strength and beauty are in His sanctuary." Thus God's people, who are to be holy as He is holy (Lev. 11:44), are to display the Lord's beauty. Psalm 50:2 states, "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God has shone forth." Sin is always ugly in its final form; holiness is beautiful or attractive. As God's people, we are to display His holiness to a sinful and ugly world. It is vital that we judge our sin and labor to make the church a holy people (Titus 2:11-14).

C. God's city is to proclaim the joy of being His people (48:2).

The psalmist calls God's city "the joy of the whole earth." Again, the world does not think of holiness and joy in the same breath, unless to contrast them as opposites! But they always go together in the Bible. Some try to limit this to the joy of the whole land, meaning, the land of Israel, because there never has been a time when Jerusalem has been the joy of the whole earth. But I agree with those who take this to be a prophetic vision of the future, when Jesus shall reign over all the earth (see Isa. 2:2-4).

The most difficult phrase to interpret in the psalm is that Mount Zion is "in the far north." The NIV transliterates the Hebrew word for "north" as Zaphon, which was a pagan mountain north of Ugarit where Baal was worshipped. This line of interpretation argues that Israel borrowed from Canaanite and other pagan religions the idea that the supreme place where the gods reigned was a mountain in the north. But the Jews contended that the living and true God reigned in the north, on Mount Zion. This view claims for support Isaiah 14:13, where the king of Babylon arrogantly claims, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north." Derek Kidner understands "the far north" (48:2) to use this imagery to connect the earthly Mount Zion with the heavenly one (*Psalms 1-72* [IVP], p. 179).

But other commentators (Franz Delitzsch, J. A. Alexander, J. J. S. Perowne) argue that the Jews would never have used this pagan mythological idea to describe God's dwelling in Zion. These writers take the phrase to refer to some geographic aspect of Mount Zion, although it is not clear exactly how this fits. So I do not know how to explain it.

But don't let the difficulty cause you to miss the point, that as the city of the great King, we are to extend God's joy to the whole earth. To proclaim His joy, we must be experiencing it as we rejoice daily in His great salvation. Thus, God's city should proclaim His greatness, His holiness, and His joy.

D. God's city is to proclaim His power (48:3).

“God, in her palaces, has made Himself known as a stronghold.” The next few verses go on to portray a coalition of powerful kings coming up to conquer the city, but they aren’t able to raise a hand against it. When they see it, they tremble, panic, and flee. The cause of their terror is not just the impressive walls and towers of the city, but the God who dwells in the city. As J. J. S. Perowne puts it (*The Book of Psalms* [Zondervan], p. 389), “It is the Glory of His Presence which makes her glorious: the strength of His Presence which makes her safe.” The people of God’s city should know Him in a very practical way as their stronghold when they face trouble (Nahum 1:7).

This point is related to the earlier point about holiness. As we rely on God’s Spirit to live holy lives in this corrupt world, we display His power. It is an utter tragedy when those that claim to know God are exposed for living a secret life of sin. May it never be said of us!

Thus the first section of the psalm makes the point that God’s city is to proclaim His greatness, holiness, joy and power. His power is especially displayed in the second section:

2. God saves His city and will establish her forever (48:4-8).

There are two points here:

A. God saves His city from powerful foes that unite to destroy it (48:4-7).

Verse 4 pictures these kings joining together and passing by the city to size it up. Before they actually see it, they are proud and confident. But then (v. 5) they saw it, they were amazed, terrified, and they fled in alarm. In Hebrew, there are four terse verbs in close succession here. It reminded Calvin of Caesar’s famous boast, “I came, I saw, I conquered” (*Calvin’s Commentaries* [Baker], on Ps. 48:4, p. 223). But here, they came, they saw, and they fled in panic. The psalm uses two metaphors to describe their fear. First, they were in anguish as of a woman in childbirth (48:6). Second, they were like ships on the Mediterranean Sea, broken up by an east wind (48:7). The ships of Tarshish represent the strongest and largest ships (see 1 Kings 10:22). But when God raises a powerful wind, these ships are like matchsticks, tossed and broken up by the sea (see, also, Ezek. 27:25-27; Rev. 18:17-20).

Calvin (*ibid.*) applies these verses by pointing out that the church can expect to be assailed by powerful enemies. God uses such assaults to humble us and to demonstrate His own great power. Then he adds, "At the same time, let us remember that a nod alone on the part of God is sufficient to deliver us...." Thus we should look to God alone and not to human help.

- B. God's salvation of His city changes hearsay into experience (48:8).

"As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our God; God will establish her forever." Israel had heard stories of how God in the past had delivered His people from annihilation, but now they had seen it firsthand. This should be the testimony of every true child of God. You have heard of how God has saved others, but now He has saved you. You can add your story to that of others, that the Lord of hosts has rescued you from Satan's destructive grasp. He has placed you in His city, which He will establish forever. This brings us to the final section:

- 3. God's city should praise Him for His great salvation and spread His praise to the ends of the earth and to the next generation (48:9-14).

There are five thoughts here that I can only touch upon:

- A. Our experience of God's salvation should deepen our thoughts of His love (48:9).

"We have thought upon Your lovingkindness, O God, in the midst of Your temple." Specifically, they were thinking of how God had demonstrated His love in saving them from destruction. Paul writes (Rom. 5:8), "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." We should think on that often, especially as we gather in His temple.

- B. Our experience of God's salvation should go from us to the ends of the earth (48:10).

"As is Your name, O God, so is Your praise to the ends of the earth; Your right hand is full of righteousness." As the story of how God delivered Jerusalem spread, so did His praise. His righteousness refers to His righteous judgment on the wicked kings who sought to destroy God's people. As many Scriptures make clear, if

we have experienced God's salvation, then we are to spread God's praise and glory to the ends of the earth. And when we proclaim the gospel, we must not neglect to tell of God's righteousness (see Acts 24:25). People need a Savior precisely because they will face a God whose right hand is full of righteousness.

C. Our experience of God's salvation should cause us to rejoice in His righteous judgments (48:11).

"Let Mount Zion be glad, let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of Your judgments." The "daughters of Judah" refers to the smaller towns surrounding Jerusalem. The cause of their joy, if this refers to Sennacherib's invasion, was 185,000 dead bodies of the Assyrian army. Many today that purport to believe in Christ at the same time are repulsed by the biblical view of God's righteous judgment. Many others tolerate His judgment, but they don't like it. But the Bible portrays God's saints as rejoicing when He pronounces judgment on wicked Babylon (Rev. 18:20). Maybe we have been tainted too much by our tolerant culture and need to re-think this one! If we're saved, we should rejoice in His judgments.

D. Our further meditation on God's salvation should impel us to tell it to the next generation (48:12-13).

The residents of Jerusalem had been cooped up within the walls of the city because of Sennacherib's troops outside. But now the troops are dead and so the psalmist invites the people of God to take a stroll around the city. Count her towers—they're all standing intact, with no damage from battering rams. Consider her ramparts—they're unscathed. Go through her palaces—they're still magnificent. Then tell the next generation, who weren't yet alive to see this firsthand, what the Lord did to save His people. These verses are not encouraging God's people to put their trust in Jerusalem's towers and ramparts. Rather, to see them still standing is a testimony of God's faithfulness towards His people. That is worth handing off to the next generation!

E. God's salvation means that we will praise Him forever (48:14).

Verse 14 ties the end of the psalm back into verse 1: God is great and greatly to be praised. This God is "our God forever and ever; He will guide us even unto death." Some versions read, "He

will guide us forever," but the sense is essentially the same. We can trust and follow and praise this God because He is faithful to deliver His people. Not even the most powerfully evil rulers in this world can thwart His loving purposes for those who dwell in His city. They have His protection, even if they die (Luke 21:16-19)!

Conclusion

In 1956, five young missionaries were speared to death by the Auca Indians as they sought to take the gospel to that primitive tribe. One of those men was Roger Youderian. His wife, Barbara, wrote in her journal, "Tonight the Captain told us of his finding four bodies in the river. One had tee-shirt and blue-jeans. Roj was the only one who wore them.... God gave me this verse two days ago, Psalm 48:14, 'For this God is our God for ever and ever; He will be our Guide even unto death.' As I came face to face with the news of Roj's death, my heart was filled with praise. He was worthy of his homegoing. Help me, Lord, to be both mummy and daddy. 'To know wisdom and instruction...'" (Elisabeth Elliot, *Through Gates of Splendor* [Spire Books], p. 191).

This psalm teaches us that the history and destiny of God's people is inextricably linked with God Himself. Knowing that this God is our God gives us a sense of peace when we're under attack. It gives us a sense of purpose to serve His great cause of spreading His glory to every people. It gives us a sense of belonging to be a part of the city of this great King.

Don't despise the church! Don't be a Lone Ranger Christian! Don't move to the country, away from God's people! God's purpose is bound up with a city. Move into His city and join together with the citizens of Zion in proclaiming the praise of His salvation to all the earth and to succeeding generations. Make sure you're a citizen of the great city of the great King!

Application Questions

1. Many withdraw from the church because they've been burned. Is this a good reason to pull out? Why not?
2. What can we as a church do to proclaim God's greatness more effectively in this city?
3. Is the urge to flee from the city ever justified? If so, when?
4. What are some implications of heaven being called "the new Jerusalem"? Why would God use this imagery?

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