

The City of the King

Psalm 48

Studies in the Psalms #49

THese last three Psalms, 46–48, are really exciting stuff! I mentioned before that we so often think of the Psalm as individual puzzle pieces that happen to be gathered in one box. But each of them are pieces of one beautiful picture. Psalm 46 said, “God is our refuge and strength” (v. 1) against all the rage of the nations. Who is “our?” The city of God: “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the habitation of the Most High” (v. 4). Because he “is in the midst of her present; she shall not be moved” (v. 5). But how can a city be described with personal pronouns like “our?” The Psalm went on to say, “The LORD of hosts is with *us*; the God of Jacob is *our* fortress” (v. 7). The city is the people. We see this most memorably stated in Revelation 21 when John sees a new heaven and new earth (v. 1) he sees “the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.” So-called eschatology experts envision a literal giant cube city coming down in the end times. But the description goes on to say this: the city is “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (v. 2). The city of God is the bride of Christ, the people of God! So there’s a close connection between the city of God and the people of God. As we turn to Psalm 48 there’s another angle: the close connection between the city or people of God and the Lord himself.

THE PRESENCE OF THE KING (vv. 1–3)

The Psalm opens with a celebration of THE PRESENCE OF THE KING in the city of God. Verse 1 is a direct ascription of praise: **Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised.** Note where he's praised: **in the city of our God!** (v. 1) Here among us as we gather for public worship especially! I read a story of pastor who said he looks out every week at men who do not sing or even pick up the hymnal. Their slothfulness leads to their sons doing the same. But this Psalm says God is to be praised greatly among us! The close connection between the LORD and the city is established here and continues throughout. **His holy mountain (1c) beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King** (v. 2). What's interesting is that Zion isn't that high in elevation nor has it ever been the joy of all the earth. In fact, today, it's the consternation of the U.N. in our day! This statement is a confession of faith. In fact, **in the far north** is literally *the heights of Zaphon*. Zaphon was the mythological meeting place of the Canaanite gods in the palace of Baal. The psalmist is borrowing imagery not theology to make this confession that the Lord is great!¹ Notice how verse 3 brings these two images of the LORD and the city together: **within her citadels God has made himself known as a fortress** (v. 3). By praising the city the Psalmist is praising God indirectly. What makes the mountain upon which the

city of God sits so beautiful and joyful that the psalmist can make this confession of faith? The presence of the LORD. He is what makes the city of God when we gather together so beautiful and so joyful. How is he present? How can we say in faith that we as the city are the joy of all the nations who come to worship among us? Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians it's when the Word is proclaimed in known languages not in unintelligible tongues that unbelievers will fall on their faces and say, "Surely God is among you!"

THE PANIC OF THE KINGS (vv. 4–7)

The king's presence leads to THE PANIC OF THE KINGS. This is another confession of faith because the kings of the earth have been assaulting the city of God since the beginning. Look at the persecution so prevalent today. 6,000 women and children were just slaughtered in Nigeria and the world barely batted an eye! In faith the Psalmist says **for behold, the kings assembled; they came on together** (v. 4). **As soon as they saw [the city], they were astounded; they were in panic; they took to flight** (v. 5). There are two ways they panicked: first, as a woman in labor: **trembling took hold of them there, anguish as of a woman in labor** (v. 6); second, as ships being destroyed: **by the east wind you shattered the ships of Tarshish** (v. 7). We're not exactly sure where Tarshish was, but we do know these were long distance trading ships.² We also know that the east wind was how the LORD split the Red Sea in two.

Scholars try to figure out the background story to this Psalm. For example, in Isaiah 37 the LORD defeated 185,000 of Sennacherib's men by the hand of the angel of the LORD in 701BC, keeping him from capturing Jerusalem. Ultimately though, this is a confession of faith wherever God's city is found in the cities of this world that he protect them from all their enemies. The gates of hell cannot prevail against the church! Our trust is not in the protection our city provides; it's not the tangible things we have in our midst like the Word and sacraments as if they were magic rabbit's feet. Jeremiah rebuked Judah for their misplaced trust: "Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD'" (Jer. 7:4). Nations panic when we trust the Lord not trinkets.

THE PRAISE OF THE KING (vv. 8–14)

Our psalm continues its confession of faith with THE PRAISE OF THE KING in verses 8–14. **As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the LORD of hosts, in the city of our God, which God will establish forever** (v. 8). They heard of past deliverances and they saw fresh ones with their own eyes. Because of that **we have thought on your steadfast love** (his covenant faithfulness), **O God, in the midst of your temple** (v. 9). Notice that. While they're in the temple on Mount Zion above Jerusalem they think of *God's* covenant faithfulness, not the physical mountain. That's why we read: **as**

your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth. Your right hand is filled with righteousness (v. 10). The psalmist then issues a call to worship: **Let Mount Zion be glad! Let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of your judgments!** (v. 11) Notice the parallelism: **Mount Zion and the daughters of Judah**. The place is the people! The psalmist then issues a call to contemplate: **walk about Zion, go around her, number her towers** (v. 12), **consider well her ramparts** (literally, *her strength*, meaning, the fortified walls), **go through her citadels** (v. 13). Why? **That you may tell the next generation that this is [what] God [is like]** (vv. 13, 14).³ The city is the people. But contemplating the city leads us to praise God himself, who builds the city, who blesses the city, who protects the city. **Our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever** (v. 14).

Brothers and sisters, you are the city of God! Are you longing to enter his presence in our midst ever time we gather? Brothers and sisters, you are the city of God! Are you trusting in him no matter what hell throws at you? Brothers and sisters, you are the city of God! Are you praising him for his past deliverances you've read about in the Word and in church history? Are you praising him for the fresh deliverances in your life every day as he guides you again and again? Brothers and sisters, you are the city of the King!

Endnotes

¹ Longman, 210.

² Longman, 211; Motyer, 125 n36.

³ Futato, 174.