

Psalm 48 “The City of God and the Ends of the Earth”
Isaiah 14
Psalm 48
Matthew 5:17-48

August 19, 2012

Introduction: What Is Zion Doing in the Far North?

We are looking today at Psalm 48.

Why, then, did we read Isaiah 14?

Psalm 48 says “*Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God!
His holy mountain, ² beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth,
Mount Zion, **in the far north**, the city of the great King.*”

Now, if you look at a map of Israel,

then you will see that Jerusalem is *not* in the “far north.”

Indeed, Jerusalem is only a few short miles from the *Negeb* (which is Hebrew for “South”).

So while “Mount Zion” and “the city of our God” would normally refer to Jerusalem,

Psalm 48 raises some interesting questions about the meaning of “Mount Zion.”

The word “north” is *Zaphon*, which is also the name of a mountain in the far north!

But Zaphon is also the abode of the Canaanite storm-god, Baal.

Indeed, you could easily translate this,

“Mount Zion, the recesses of Zaphon, the city of the great King.”

Because whether the Psalmist means Zaphon, the mountain,

or Zaphon, the direction,

the result is the same:

everyone who knew about Baal would immediately think

that the Psalm is saying something about the Canaanite storm god.

So the real question is why do the sons of Korah identify Mount Zion

with the “far north” – with the recesses of Zaphon?

Some have argued that Psalm 48 (and the rest of the Psalms of the Sons of Korah)

were originally written by people from the northern kingdom of Israel,

during the division of the kingdom;

and that only later were these Psalms adopted and adapted

for the use of the temple in Jerusalem.

That’s possible – but it doesn’t solve the problem!

Because it doesn’t explain how the priests in Jerusalem

would have approved the usage of a song that says

that the city of the great King is in Zaphon! – the “far north”!

Regardless of whether the “Sons of Korah” were northern or southern,
the Psalms *as we have them* are the songbook of the temple in Jerusalem.
So the result is that the priests and Levites in Jerusalem (in the south),
are saying that Mount Zion “in the far north (or Zion, the recesses of Zaphon)”
is the city of the great King!

There are several passages in the OT that speak of “the far north” – the recesses of Zaphon.
And these shed light on our text.

The first is Isaiah 14.

Isaiah 14 taunts the king of Babylon, and speaks of the coming destruction of Babylon.

Isaiah speaks of the king of Babylon and says,
“How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn!
How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low!
You said in your heart,
‘I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high;
I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far north [*the recesses of Zaphon*];
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds,
I will make myself like the Most High.’
But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the pit.”

The phrase “depths of the pit” parallels “far north.”

You could say instead that he wanted to sit on the mount of assembly
in “the remote parts of Zaphon,
but instead he is brought down to Sheol,
to the “remote parts of the pit.”

So Isaiah 14 contrasts “the mount of assembly in Zaphon” with Sheol.

In other words, while Jerusalem is the place where God’s *name* dwells,
the mountain of the north is the mountain of assembly –
the heavenly mountain where God himself dwells!

Likewise, Jeremiah 6 speaks of people coming from the “north country,”

“the farthest parts of the earth,” to bring judgment against Jerusalem;
and again in Jeremiah 50:41,
“a people comes from the north; a mighty nation and many kings
are stirring from the farthest parts of the earth”
in order to bring judgment upon Babylon.

Also, Ezekiel 38-39 also speaks of the hordes coming from the uttermost parts of the north.

Back at the beginning of Ezekiel, when the LORD appeared to Ezekiel in Babylon,
the storm of the LORD came out of the North (Ezekiel 1:4).

Now, in Ezekiel 38, God raises up a great army out of the uttermost parts of the north –

the “recesses of Zaphon” – the same phrase as in Psalm 48 –
and then God will destroy the great army of Gog, Meshech and Tubal,
“on all the mountains of Israel.”

And then, in Ezekiel 40, God shows to Ezekiel a vision of the new temple –
a temple on the highest of all mountains in the middle of the land.
And when you look carefully at Ezekiel’s geography,
you begin to realize that Ezekiel’s holy mountain is *nowhere* near Jerusalem.

So, what’s the point?

The point is the one that Solomon made at the dedication of the temple:
“Heaven of heavens cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built.”
The earthly Zion is glorious –
but it is only glorious because it is inhabited by the heavenly Zion –
also identified with Zaphon – the mountain in the far north.

Psalm 48 is engaging the Canaanite religion in a form of apologetics.

Think of this way:

the Greeks have Mt Olympus for Zeus,
the Canaanites have Mt Zaphon for Baal,
but the true joy of all the earth –
the true Zaphon (true north) is found in Zion!”

Or to say it another way:

Yahweh is not merely the king over Israel.
He is the great king – the King over all the nations –
the King before whom every knee must bow and every tongue confess.

Psalm 48 could have said, “Baal? What Baal? There’s no such thing as Baal!”

But most of scripture takes a different route:
it’s not that the idol doesn’t exist –
it’s that the idol isn’t what you think it is!

Sing Psalm 48

Read Matthew 5:17-48

How much time do you spend praising God?

Is *praise* a regular part of your life?

The Sons of Korah tell us that the LORD is “greatly to be praised in the city of our God.”

Psalms 42-48 all emphasize in different ways how God is to be praised.

If you struggle with knowing how to praise God,

I would encourage you to use the Psalms –

whether singing them, or praying them –

the Psalms give us useful direction in how to praise God for all his wondrous deeds!

A Song. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah.

1. The City of the Great King (v1-3)

a. The Great King Is Greatly to Be Praised! (v1)

*Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised
in the city of our God!*

You hear echoes of the Psalms all through Jesus' teaching.

In Matthew 5, Jesus says that Jerusalem is the "city of the great king" (quoting Psalm 48),
and that heaven is God's throne, and earth is his footstool.

In other words, the city of God is the place where earth and heaven meet.

Jerusalem is first and foremost the *city of God* – the city of the great king.

The reason why I wanted to start with a discussion of Zion as the heavenly mountain
is because I wanted us to see that Psalm 48 connects Jerusalem with the heavenly city.

At the same time, it is important to see that the earthly Jerusalem is not herself the heavenly city.

Jerusalem is beautiful and glorious and exalted
only because God's glory and wisdom and power dwell in her.

As one commentator put it,

"the Psalmist describes not the external but the internal glory of Jerusalem,
views it not with fleshly eyes, but with the eyes of faith,
speaks not as a geographer, but as a divine" (Hengstenberg, p. 161, Vol. 2).

And that is why the Psalmist speaks of Mt Zion as the "joy of all the earth."

b. Mount Zion Is the Joy of All the Earth (v2)

*His holy mountain, ² beautiful in elevation,
is the joy of all the earth,
Mount Zion, in the far north,
the city of the great King.*

In the Bible, Jerusalem and Zion are often used interchangeably.

But there is a difference.

Jerusalem is the city.

Zion is the mountain – the hill where the temple is located.

So from a geographical standpoint Jerusalem is bigger than Zion.

But Psalm 48 is one of several passages

that suggests that Zion is actually more comprehensive than Jerusalem.

As we saw earlier, by identifying Zion as the heights of Zaphon

the Psalmist is saying that Zion *is* the glorious city – the city of the great king.

The Psalmist is plainly saying that the people living in Jerusalem in his day
are living in Zion,
and are to praise the LORD “in the city of our God!”

But he is making claims about Zion that can only be made of the heavenly city.
We saw this earlier when we sang Psalm 46.
“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.”

There is no river in Jerusalem!

But Psalm 46 says that there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.
Likewise Ezekiel will speak of a river flowing from the temple in the heavenly city.

Zion is the city of God – the city of the great King –
the holy city *as it should be*.

Psalm 48 will also talk about the present Jerusalem,
because the heavenly city is embodied in the earthly city,
but the two should be confused!

Think of it this way:

Paul says that the heavenly city – “the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.”
(Galatians 4:26)

The heavenly Zion is our mother.

That heavenly city is embodied in the visible church here on earth –
and so it is appropriate to speak (in a sense)
of the visible church as mother.

But if you confuse the heavenly city with the earthly city –
if you start to think that the visible church on earth *is* the heavenly city,
then you do precisely what Israel did to the earthly Jerusalem,
and the visible church becomes a new Hagar –
bound in slavery with her children.

The whole point of Psalm 48 – and Paul’s allegory in Galatians 4 –
is to show us that the glory of the heavenly city
is found precisely in the fact that she is not under the control of man,
but of God!

And that is the central point of verse 3:

c. God Has Made Himself Known as the Fortress of the Citadel (v3)

³ *Within her citadels God
has made himself known as a fortress.*

Yes, in one sense this refers to the earthly Jerusalem.

God made himself known as a fortress to the faithful sons of David in Jerusalem.
But when you “count the towers” of Jerusalem (verse 12),
it is not that Jerusalem is more impressive than Ninevah!
You do not see with physical eyes the fortress known as “the God of Israel.”

2. The Triumph of the Great King (v4-8)

a. The Panic and Pain of the Kings of the Earth (v4-6)

⁴ *For behold, the kings assembled;
they came on together.*

⁵ *As soon as they saw it, they were astounded;
they were in panic; they took to flight.*

⁶ *Trembling took hold of them there,
anguish as of a woman in labor.*

In verse 4 we are told that “the kings assembled; they came on together.”

When they started on their march they did not expect to see the “Fortress” –
but when their eyes were opened,
and God revealed himself to the kings of the earth,
“they were astounded; they were in panic; they took to flight.
Trembling took hold of them there, anguish as of a woman in labor.”

They may have thought that Jerusalem would be easy pickings.
After all, from a merely human standpoint,
Jerusalem was a small country fortress.
The kings of the earth had conquered far greater fortresses than this!

Isaiah 13 – the chapter immediately before the one we read earlier,
speaks of how when the day of the LORD comes,
the nations “will be in anguish like a woman in labor,” (13:8)
and God will bring to nothing the pride and arrogance of the wicked.

The image of a woman in labor is often used to speak of great anguish and pain.
After all, there are few other pains that are as universal as labor pain!
To put another lens on it,
the universal experience of women
is that when your labor pains come upon you,
either you are going to have a baby, or you are going to die!
And either way, it’s really gonna hurt!

The point of the Psalmist is that if you are foolhardy enough to go up against the holy city,
then it’s gonna hurt!

b. The East Wind Delivers the City of Our God (v7-8)

⁷ *By the east wind you shattered*

the ships of Tarshish.

⁸ *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. Selah*

In verse 7 we hear that God shattered the ships of Tarshish by the east wind.
The east wind is the wind of judgment that blows off the desert.
It is a hot, dry wind that never brings rain –
and only brings destruction.

And even so, as we have heard,
so have we seen in the city of the LORD of hosts.

Notice the order:

“as we have heard, so have we seen.”

We have heard of your great and mighty deeds in the past.
And we have seen them *in the city of our God.*

Hengstenberg (vol. 2, p. 163) points out that “In the church of God
the seeing is at all times bound up with the hearing
which, every century, receives fresh materials.
God never directs her alone to what he has done in former times.
He demands faith in the past
always only on the ground of what he is doing at the present time.”

Zion is unconquerable!

That doesn't mean that the earthly city will always prevail!

No enemy ever conquered Jerusalem, so long as the Spirit of God dwelt in the temple.
But Ezekiel records how he saw the presence of the LORD depart from the temple
because of the idolatry of his people.

If the LORD is our fortress, then we cannot be overcome.

Jesus said, “The gates of hell will not prevail against my church.”

That doesn't mean that any one congregation or denomination will always win.
It means that the heavenly Jerusalem will continue to fend off the assaults of hell
in *every* generation on earth!

In every generation it looks hopeless.

"Few seem to perceive what appears fearfully evident to the writer,
that our existent Christianity is almost universally corrupt,
and is becoming more so continually;
that unless its present tendencies be speedily reversed,

a state of worse than medieval darkness will soon settle upon Christendom;
not a state of intellectual decrepitude and enslavement,
but one of intellectual triumph and haughty independence;
not a state in which the Church, like a besotted despot,
will drag men in chain-gangs behind her bloody car,
but one in which man will rise in proud supremacy,
and either trample the Church under foot,
or else spare her in Gibeonite degradation,
to become a 'hewer of wood and drawer of water'
about the gorgeous Temple of Mammon!
Or, to say the very least, the Church and the world will move on in harmony,
neither disposed to assert its own peculiarities."
(William Henry Ruffner, Charity and the Clergy, 1853)

He was describing the evangelical church in the United States in 1853.
I could find similar quotes from pretty much any decade in church history!

But God is faithful!

“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!”

It's not because we are so strong – or so smart – or so clever!
I spoke recently with an elder in an OP church who is often asked,
“why do you go to such a small church?”
He says, because in our little congregation of 60 people,
nearly a third of them are converts from the world.
In a big church you often just have Christians rotating from church to church.
But here in this small, dinky little church,
people are coming to faith in Jesus Christ.
And I find that exciting.

“As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the LORD of hosts.”
It's not about clever strategies –
it's about the glory of Jesus being made manifest in the church!

And that's why:

3. The Praise of the Great King Reaches the Ends of the Earth (v9-14)

a. The Temple and the Ends of the Earth (v9-11)

⁹ *We have thought on your steadfast love, O God,
in the midst of your temple.*

¹⁰ *As your name, O God,
so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth.*

Your right hand is filled with righteousness.

¹¹ *Let Mount Zion be glad!*

*Let the daughters of Judah rejoice
because of your judgments!*

Psalm 48 insists on a world-wide vision of the kingdom of God.

But that worldwide vision is centered on the temple.

God's steadfast love is first revealed here, at the temple.

Because here, at the temple, is the place where earth and heaven meet.

Here, at the temple, is where God deals with sin,
and restores humanity to fellowship with him.

Jesus said, "destroy this temple, and I will rebuild it in three days."

The earthly temple was a picture of Jesus.

Jesus is the place where earth and heaven meet.

Jesus is the place where God deals with sin,
and restores humanity to fellowship with him.

And, because Jesus is this new temple,
therefore all who are united to Jesus by faith,
become part of this new and living temple –
a holy dwelling place for God.

And so as "your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth."

It's not enough to say that God is the king of Israel.

God is the great king over all the earth.

This is the foundation for the Great Commission:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 29:18-20)

Notice how Jesus interprets and applies the principles of Psalm 48.

The authority of the triune God has been given to the incarnate Christ.

The jurisdiction of the kingdom of God has been given to the resurrected Son of God.

And the righteousness that fills his right hand makes Mount Zion glad.

His judgments give joy to the daughters of Judah.

b. The City and the Next Generation (v12-14)

¹² *Walk about Zion, go around her,*

number her towers,

¹³ *consider well her ramparts,*

go through her citadels,

that you may tell the next generation
¹⁴ that this is God,
our God forever and ever.
He will guide us forever.

Verses 12-14 then calls on the people to inspect Zion
so that they can describe her to future generations.
If this was speaking purely of the physical city,
then it would make little sense.

But notice where the description of the city goes!
Number her towers, consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels,
that you may tell the next generation that this is God,
our God forever and ever.
Once again, the physical city blends into the heavenly city.

But think about what this means.
Walk around Zion.
Study her.

Why?
So that you can tell the next generation.

Do you remember what the Psalmist said earlier,
“as we have heard, so have we seen.”

Where did the Psalmist hear about the mighty works of God?
From the last generation!
We hear from them the mighty works of God that he wrought in their day –
and then we see God’s faithfulness and power made known in our day.
Then we tell the next generation of the things that we have seen.

They hear from us – and then they see the mighty deeds that God will do in their day!

This is why I love to study and teach church history.
I get to tell the stories of God’s faithfulness.
When you study them carefully,
you often discover how weak and foolish God’s people have been.
But you always discover how faithful God has been!

Because our Lord Jesus Christ wasn’t kidding when he said,
“All authority on earth and in heaven has been given to me.”
Jesus is Lord!