

SAFE IN THE CITY OF OUR GOD

PSALM 48

INTRODUCTION:

What makes a place special? It seems like all cultures have a fascination with certain places—places they hold sacred, places they make pilgrimages to, places they visit as tourists. We often mark places that are special to our culture as monuments or parks that are even protected by laws. Some, of course, are natural wonders that are simply marvels to look at. But many have nothing to do with physical grandeur but with history. They are special places because of what happened there or who lived there.

A few years ago, on a mission trip to the Philippines, the Ransoms took our team to a cemetery and memorial dedicated to thousands of Americans and Filipinos who had given their lives in that country during WWII. In addition to the rows and rows of crosses marking burials, there are stone slabs inscribed with thousands upon thousands of names of those from that war who went missing in action. To be sure, it is a beautiful place in its landscaping and geography; but its true beauty and specialness lie in the soldiers that it memorializes.

Psalm 48 is a song about a special place—a special city. It was written for people to sing to remind themselves how this place was special and why it was special. And as they sang it, and as we read it, we quickly realize that it is not the place that is special, in and of itself, but it was special, holy, and glorious because of the Great King who dwelt there with His people—the Lord God.

This psalm praises the God who dwells with His people and teaches us that His presence is our joy, our protection, our hope, and our proclamation.

But this psalm doesn't just teach us; it shows us these things by transporting us to that ancient city of Jerusalem or Mount Zion. We are given a tour of the city in this "Song of Zion." We are shown its beauty, its palaces, its towers, and ramparts. Why? To visually remind us that all who put their trust in the Lord are forever safe in the city of God. This is a message we need to hear today with so much uncertainty in the world and difficulties in our lives—God's people are forever safe, for God is with us.

And in this psalm, we are shown three things very clearly:

- A. The fame of God's city (vv.1-3)
- B. The fear of God's enemies (vv.4-7)
- C. The faith of God's people (vv.8-14)

EXPOSITION:

A. The fame of God's city (vv.1-3)

The psalmist begins with a burst of praise and joy, all revolving around either God or this city of God. The city, of course, is Jerusalem, also known as Mount Zion—the holy mountain. For the ancient Jewish believer, God and Jerusalem were somewhat intertwined; He was the God of the city, and it was the city of God. This was where the temple, the center of Israel's worship, was located. It was here where God

visibly made His dwelling after Solomon finished and dedicated the temple (*1 Kin.8*). It was here where the sacrifices for sin were made, intercession on behalf of the people occurred, and where exuberant praise to the Lord was offered.

The fame of the city was, therefore, bound up with the fame of God. We are given three descriptions of this fame that should help us to praise and trust in the Lord.

1. Greatness (v.1)

- ¹Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, in the city of our God, His holy mountain.

God's greatness should inspire our praise. How great is God to you? We use the word "great" all the time without really thinking. "This burger is great; my dog is so great; that's such a great show." It's really just another word for "not bad" or "pretty good." But when the Bible talks about greatness in relation to God, it's a much heavier word. It speaks of his utter bigness, His dazzling glory, His unrivaled majesty.

Last week, in Psalm 47:2, we were told that the Lord is a great King. In other places, we are told that His power is great, His wisdom is great, His works are great, His mercies are great. But here, He is described simply as "great." That is, everything about the Lord is great; greatness is who He is. His status, His authority, His might, His love, His knowledge, His compassion, His justice, are all great!

- **Psalm 104:1**—Bless the LORD, O my soul! O LORD my God, You are very great; You are clothed with splendor and majesty.

God's greatness says that God is big, eternal, infinite, majestic, holy. He is great! His very being is great—beyond even our imagination or comprehension.

- **Psalm 145:3**—Great is the LORD, and highly to be praised, And His greatness is unsearchable.

And then we come to the New Testament, and we hear the angel, Gabriel, in talking to a teenager named Mary, ascribing the greatness of God to a baby:

- **Luke 1:31-33**—And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; ³³ and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.

God is great in His being. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are great. And because the Lord is so great, it is only fitting that we are told to praise Him greatly (*v.1*). We are to praise Him with everything in us—our hearts, minds, and lives filled with worship, adoration, wonder, love, and devotion to our great God.

2. Beauty (v.2)

- ²Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion in the far north, The city of the great King.

God's people are made beautiful because of His own beauty. Because God is present with His people on Mount Zion, this city is beautiful. You see, at the time, Jerusalem, in and of itself, was not

terribly impressive compared to many other cities. It was tiny compared to places like Nineveh in Assyria, or Babylon, or Memphis in Egypt. It didn't have giant pyramids or renowned hanging gardens.

But it was "*beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth*" because of the beautiful One who dwelt there. It was the city of the great King. Just as God's throne is holy because He is holy, so His city is beautiful because He is beautiful. His presence is what makes the city beautiful and the joy of the whole earth.

Do you see the beauty of God? If you want to see how beautiful God is, go back to the Gospels and look at Christ.

And in the church, we need to understand that God's people are beautiful because of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. If we understand this rightly, it should help us obey Christ's command to love one another.

3. Strength (v.3)

- ³ God, in her palaces, has made Himself known as a stronghold.

God's strength gives us strength. There is strength in the city. But what is the strength of the city? Is it in its size, its walls, or its defenses? No, God, Himself, has made Himself known as a stronghold, a strong tower, a mighty fortress. The people of Jerusalem were not to take confidence in the thickness of their city's walls or the might of their armies, but in the Lord, who dwelt with them in the city—He was their stronghold. The city stands against the rage of the enemy because God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved (*Ps.46:5a*).

This is the fame of the city—it is beautiful and strong because the great God of beauty, strength, and power is present there.

Application: And just as the psalmist takes joy and confidence in the presence of God in this place among His people, so we, the church, should do the same. Let's face it, we are not much, in and of ourselves. We are a motley bunch of people who do and say foolish things, who struggle with sin constantly, who often fail miserably, but God dwells among us. By His Holy Spirit, He is present with us. And therefore, the church is beautiful, the joy of the whole earth, where God has made Himself known as a stronghold.

- **Psalm 73:25-26**—Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. ²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

We ought to boldly proclaim that the Lord is great and greatly to be praised in the church, the congregation of His people, for He has done great things—He's so good to us!

B. The fear of God's enemies (vv.4-7)

The picture given in verse 4 is that of a coalition of God's enemies that has been formed. Kings have joined forces against God and His people. They have amassed a great army intent on crushing their city. But when they arrive and "pass by" the city and look at it, how do they react?

- They were astonished—“*they saw it, then they were amazed*” (v.5a). It was not what they expected. They expected a weak city and people ripe for the taking. They were shocked at what they saw.
- They became terrified (vv.5-6). They were terrified, they fled, and they panicked (*lit. trembled*). Their fear was visceral. They were in anguish like a woman in childbirth.

Why? What did they see? We aren't actually told outright what they saw that threw them into a panic. Certainly, they weren't terrified by the size of Jerusalem's walls. They didn't flee and panic at the sight of her soldiers. Again, at this time, Jerusalem wasn't really that impressive compared to many of the cities of the age.

No, we are to understand that they were terrified by the presence and power of the Lord, the Great King, who dwelt in the midst of His people. Somehow, they saw or understood that God was with His people in this place. They saw or understood that they were no match for this Great King, for His power is such that He can call a wind and break even the great ships of Tarshish. This realization caused their faces to turn white and the whole coalition to flee for their very lives.

Application: Let us never be confident in ourselves or think we can save ourselves from our enemies by our own strength or intelligence. It is only God with us, Immanuel, who can preserve and protect us from the onslaught of our enemies. This has been a theme for the last several psalms, which must mean we need to hear it. The battle is real; our enemy is strong; our flesh is weak—but His church will not be overwhelmed, and His people will not be overcome, for God is with us. And our God is a mighty King and a victorious Warrior. If God is for us, who can be against us? (*Rom.8:31*).

C. The faith of God's people (vv.8-14)

While the enemies see the presence of God with His people and flee in terror, so now we are told that God's people see the same thing. Our reaction is to be different. We are to react with faith.

The psalmist is calling on the people of God to exercise their faith—to build up their faith muscles. We are given four exercises to build up our faith: remember, meditate, praise, and proclaim.

1. Remember His preservation. (v.8)

- ⁸As 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.

Remember that God preserves His people. God's people have heard what He has done in the past for His people, and they put faith in Him. But they have also seen with their own eyes, they have experienced His presence and protection, and their faith is strengthened all the more.

So many here in this church can testify of this in your life. How do you find strength and faith for today? Through His Word and through remembering how He has saved, kept, and grown you in the past. You remember, and your faith is built up all the more so that it spills over into the future. God has established His city and His people, and God will establish His people. He will build His church, and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it (*Matt.16:18*).

2. Meditate on His lovingkindness. (v.9)

- ⁹We have thought on Your lovingkindness, O God, in the midst of Your temple.

"**We have thought on**" comes from a verb that has to do with comparing or likening—to ponder a comparison. When they compared the lovingkindness (*hesed*) of the Lord in the midst of His temple, they found there was no comparison. No other so-called gods or kings compared to their Great King and God. When they meditated on His lovingkindness, they understood that God stood alone and unmatched.

He set His love on them. He entered into covenant fellowship with them. He gave Himself to them and made them His very own. He proved His love over and over again. Even when they had been unfaithful to Him, He was faithful and merciful, and gracious to them (e.g., the story of Hosea and Gomer).

And when they meditated on His lovingkindness, it gave them hope, as it should give us hope. He will not leave us nor forsake us. He will not give us into the hand of the enemy. He will protect us and guard us as His own children.

Who loves you like the Lord? For all who come to Him by faith in Jesus Christ, He has given you everything, as a Heavenly Father to His precious child. He has given His Son; what more could He give?

- **Romans 8:32**—He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?

Just ponder that thought. Meditate on it. Make it a practice to meditate on the lovingkindness of God every day. Go to His Word and stay awhile and meditate on the truth of His lovingkindness to you and His people. It will not only encourage you; it will fortify you for the trials of the day and provide protection against the fiery darts of our enemy.

3. Praise Him for His righteousness and judgments. (vv.10-11)

- ¹⁰As is Your name, O God, so is Your praise to the ends of the earth; Your right hand is full of righteousness. Let Mount Zion be glad, let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of Your judgments.

God's name is a shorthand way of describing God's whole character. As God's character is made known to the ends of the earth through His great and mighty works, so all peoples should praise Him appropriately. He is worthy of the praise of all peoples. And the psalmist specifically highlights two closely related attributes of God as reasons for all the earth, and especially the inhabitants of Zion, to praise Him: His righteousness (*v.10c*) and His judgments (*v.11c*).

God's righteousness refers to His moral perfection. His righteousness is His rightness in everything. He never acts or speaks in any way that conflicts with His nature and His Word. He is true to Himself and His Word, always, without fail, without deviation. He is righteous. He cannot do wrong but will always do what is right, whether we understand it or not.

- **Psalm 145:17**—The LORD is righteous in all His ways and kind in all His deeds.

And in Psalm 48:10, the psalmist says that He is worthy to be praised because His *"right hand is full of righteousness."* His right hand is the hand of power by which He acts in the world to judge, and protect, and save. So, His powerful actions are righteous actions. Praise the Lord, all the earth, for He judges in righteousness and saves in righteousness.

Similarly, His judgments flow out of His perfect righteousness. He judges righteously. Earthly judges may be competent, but they are not infallible, and they are not omniscient. But God is a perfect judge. He never makes a wrong decision or a bad move. He never gets confused, flustered, or manipulated. He is a righteous Judge.

- **Genesis 18:25b**—Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?

And we see these two related ideas often used together in Scripture to describe God's perfectly upright character and right dealings with people.

- **Psalm 119:137**—Righteous are You, O LORD, and upright are Your judgments.
- **Revelation 16:7**—And I heard the altar saying, "Yes, O Lord God, the Almighty, true and righteous are Your judgments."

4. Tell of His faithfulness. (vv.12-14)

- ¹² Walk about Zion and go around her; count her towers; ¹³ Consider her ramparts; go through her palaces, that you may tell it to the next generation. For such is God, our God forever and ever; He will guide us until death.

The psalmist calls on God's people to walk around the city and take it all in. Check out the towers and ramparts; walk around the palaces. Take a tour of Jerusalem. Why? It is not because they are to be impressed with what they have built here. And it's not so that they will take confidence in their towers and ramparts. He tells us why—that you may tell it to the next generation (v.13c). Look at this city so that you may tell the next generation what?

- ¹⁴ For such is God, our God forever and ever; He will guide us until death.

They were told to tour the city and take stock of these architectural pieces because they were visible reminders of God's faithfulness and presence with His people. God had kept this city; it was still standing. God had protected His people. He was with them.

Application: Realize and remember this and tell it to the next generation. Parents, we cannot fail to do this. We must tell our children and grandchildren about God's faithfulness. Tell them how He has loved you, how He has saved you, how He has protected you, how He has preserved you, and how He is growing you.

And tell them how He loves them and commands them to come to Him for salvation through His righteous Son, Jesus. Tell them about their need for repentance and faith in Christ Jesus, the Lord. Tell them that God can be trusted to save them forever, to never fail them, to never leave them, to never disappoint them—*"for whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed" (Rom.10:11); and "whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom.10:13).*

Tell your children, grandchildren, brothers, sisters, parents, neighbors, co-workers, strangers near and on the other side of the world—wherever the Lord gives you the opportunity, tell them what God has done through Christ and that this is "*our God forever and ever; He will guide us until death*" (v.14b).

This is the God we serve. He does not change. He will always be faithful.

Tell out, my soul, the glories of His word!
Firm is his promise, and His mercy sure
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
To children's children and for evermore!¹

CONCLUSION:

Are you exercising your faith in these ways? We often pray that God would increase our faith, and that is a good and right prayer because ultimately, only God can grow our faith. But in His Word, He has given us ways to exercise our faith. We are told to "*build ourselves up on our most holy faith*" (Jude 20). Here, within a great song of praise celebrating God's presence with His people, we see that His people are expected to exercise our faith by:

- Remembering His acts of preservation in our lives, in this local church, and in the church invisible all over the world.
- Meditating on His incomprehensible lovingkindness most gloriously demonstrated in Christ and His cross.
- Praising Him for His righteousness and perfect judgments by which we can trust Him to always do what is right and best according to His holy nature.
- Telling of His faithfulness, goodness, and salvation to our children, friends, strangers, and whoever will listen.

God expects citizens of His kingdom, the people of His city, to do these things. If we would discipline ourselves to do these things consistently and constantly, who knows how God would grow our faith and usefulness for His Kingdom work? May God help us by His grace, power, and Spirit.

Amen.

¹ Dudley-Smith, *Tell Out My Soul*, 1961

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