

A Mighty Fortress

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[0 : 00] Psalm 48 is not a Psalm for the elite or for the self-assured, for the self-reliant and the strong, because the city of God is not for the strong and mighty who can make their own way and who can look out for themselves.

The city of God is for wretches like you and me who are just tossed about by life, tossed about by death and financial concerns, deep anxieties and depressions that we can't shake, and worries that we keep on sinning and we can't seem to be good enough, and maybe God's grace isn't sufficient for us.

That's who this Psalm is for. But the Psalmist wants us to know, and God wants us to know tonight, that it's going to be okay, because God is with us. But that's not all roses and peaches.

This is not a Psalm of rose-colored glasses. The Christian life, of course, is not, by any stretch of the imagination, an easy life. And this Psalm takes that into consideration.

How do we know? Because it's full of language of defensive structures, right? Citadels and ramparts and fortresses and things like that. You only need those when you're under attack.

[1 : 25] So this Psalm is for the battered Christians in life. It makes me think of that 500-year-old hymn by Martin Luther, a mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing, our helper he amidst the flood of mortal ills prevailing.

Because Luther is acknowledging, it's actually based on Psalm 46, which is the sister Psalm to this one. Luther is seeing scriptures say over and over again, life is going to beat you down, but God is a mighty fortress for those whom he saves.

So God is offering us real sinners, real comfort for our real trouble. So this Psalm begins in verse one.

It says, great is the Lord and greatly too we praise. So now we know what it's about. It's about the greatness of God. It's a psalm of praise, but it goes on immediately to start praising the city of God. They often, he'll call it Mount Zion. Mount Zion is kind of a synonymous term you can use to refer to Jerusalem, the city of God, but the prophets in Psalmists often use the term Zion to talk about the city in light of its future.

[2 : 44] And that's a really important concept. They're talking about the real city in light of its future. But in its most plain meaning, Mount Zion would be the hill that the temple is built on right in the very heart of the city.

And the temple is where the presence of God is thick. And that's a really important key for what we're going to be discussing tonight. So the psalm says that God is great by saying that his city is great.

That might sound weird, but if we had you over for dinner and my wife cooked a really lovely meal, and afterwards you said that was an excellent meal, you wouldn't wait for the mashed potatoes to stand up and say, thank you.

You're complimenting my wife who cooked the meal by complimenting the meal itself. And that's exactly what the psalmist is doing here. Is he saying God is great because look at this city that he's built.

So we're going to go through the psalm following the shape of the psalm, and it's split up into kind of three main chunks, if you will. We're just going to go chunk by chunk and ask a question per section.

[3 : 48] So the first question, look at verses one through three with me. The question is, what makes this city special? Let's read. Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God.

His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth. Mount Zion in the far north, the city of the great king, within her citadels, God has made himself known as a fortress.

I just want to zoom in on a couple of things right here. First of all, it says that it's a holy mountain. Why does that matter? Well, mountains were considered holy in the ancient world because they were higher.

That's why you get so many references to high places in the Old Testament as places of worship because they viewed the realm of man as earth and the realm of divine and deity as the heavens. And the higher you got to that, the nearer you are to the presence of God. That's the way that they viewed reality. So the fact that it's a mountain is really important.

[4 : 51] This is near God's space. But building on that, it's a holy mountain. Now just like when Moses sees this burning bush and God is in it and he says, take your shoes off because you're standing on holy ground, the nearer we get to God the holier it is.

Holiness grows in nearness and proximity to God. So the city is holy because God is in its midst. Look, at verse 3, it says, within her citadels, God has made himself known as a fortress. So we know that God is actually locating himself and his presence thickly in that city, and that is what makes this city so remarkable and so special, which means that the city of God is not special because it's full of squeaky clean, pure pious do-gooders because it's not.

We have not earned our way here. Look at me again. Look with me at verse 3. Within her citadels, God has made himself known as a fortress.

So he's made himself known, which means that God is a God who says something about himself. He shows you what he's like, and he does so in the defensive structures right in the middle of this city.

[6 : 18] So if you want to know God, that's the place that you want to be, is in the city of God. That's where he makes himself known. But he doesn't make himself known as kind of a cosmic micromanager or as a benevolent grandfather in the sky who's there to give you sweets and all of your wishes.

He makes himself known as a fortress because we need a fortress. So what ultimately sets this city apart, what makes it holy is that God is in the midst of this city.

Now, the New Testament often calls us saints, and that word literally means holy ones. That's just what it means.

So we as the holy ones of God are actually made holy when we believe on Jesus because God makes his home with us.

The story of the Bible is actually a story of a God who loves his people and wants to be with his people and is determined to make that happen in spite of his people's failures and sins.

[7 : 29] So of course the Bible starts in the Garden of Eden. God creates everything, and then he creates this special garden where he can be with us, where he can dwell with us, where we can enjoy the presence of God, we can enjoy the safety and comforts and security of God.

But it didn't last long. And we chose sin, we chose our way instead of God's way. We chose to be our own security and comfort instead of take comfort and refuge in him.

And so fellowship with God, nearness to God became impossible. We broke that fellowship, and we were expelled from the presence of God.

Fast forward hundreds of years, and God's people are so far from the felt presence and security and safety of the presence of God that they're in Egypt as slaves, serving Pharaoh who thought of himself as a God.

But God wasn't going to abandon them there, and he went in and he redeemed these people. He purchased them out of their slavery as a people for himself. And when he took them into the wilderness, what did he do?

[8 : 37] He met them on a mountain, and he gave Moses instructions to build a tabernacle, basically a tent, like a mobile mountain where God could meet with his people.

And he gave them sacrificial laws. These sacrifices provided a way for God's people to once again come into fellowship with God and enjoy the presence of God.

Fast forward a few hundred more years, and you have King David and King Solomon, and King David sets out to build a temple, and Solomon actually builds this temple for God in Jerusalem on Mount Zion.

And in that temple, this beautiful, glorious structure is where God, his presence, dwells thickly among his people. Now all the way to the New Testament in John's Gospel, it says, Jesus tabernacled among us.

It says, Jesus dwelt among us. That word is very literally tabernacled, because John is trying to tell us something so important. The very presence and nearness of God that we've always been longing for, it's our deepest desire, is fulfilled in Christ himself.

[9 : 51] God made a way. And Jesus, who was God himself, he died for our specific sins, and he conquered death, and he rose from the grave, and he ascended to heaven so that he could send God the Holy Spirit to dwell in us.

So the entire storyline of the Bible is about a God who yearns to dwell with his people and is absolutely determined to make that happen. And in fact, I love this, in Acts chapter one, when Jesus, I think it's chapter one, when Jesus ascends to heaven, you know, he floats up, and so the disciples naturally are standing there looking up after him as he goes.

And then two angels appear, and they say, why are you looking up? And they're like, well, Jesus just floated that way. But I think the point is this, they said, why are you looking up?

Because through the Holy Spirit, Jesus was more with them then than he ever was. Because we are a dwelt with the Holy Spirit, Jesus is more profoundly near and with us today than when his feet were on Galilean soil.

That is a remarkable truth. But that's not the end. So question number two is how do we respond?

[11 : 12] But I want to take a minute and zoom over to Revelation 21, because that's the end of the story. And remember how I said the psalmist is looking at the city in light of its future?

Revelation 21 is its future. So turn with me, if you will, to the last book of the Bible, Revelation 21. We're going to read verses one through four.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them and they will be his people.

[12 : 12] And God himself will be with them as their God. So what will it be like when God is with us as our God in that way?

Well, it doesn't leave us to wonder. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away.

That's our future. That's the future of the city of God. It is a sure future. So in light of that future, there are two responses and we see those, let me turn back to Psalm 48, we see those in these two chunks below, verses four through eight is the first response and it's fear.

Let's read it. For behold, the kings assembled, they came on together. As soon as they saw it, the city, they were astounded. They were in panic. They took the flight. The trembling took hold of them there, anguished as of a woman in labor.

By the east wind, you shattered the ships of Tarshish. 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.

[13 : 36] Astonishment, panic, trembling, childbirth-like anguish, when God's city is revealed on that last day with God in her midst, the inevitable responses for those outside its walls, for the enemies of the city and for the enemies of God is that kind of fear.

It's not a pretty picture. But let's look at the second response. It's in verses nine to eleven. We have thought on your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple.

As your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth and your right hand is filled with righteousness. Let Mount Zion be glad. Let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of your judgments.

So while chaos is ensuing outside the city and there's fear and panic and fleeing inside the city, there's a calm, peaceful, worshipful contemplation of the steadfast love of the Lord in the temple, in the very center of God's presence, if you will, that reflecting on his undying, unshakable, steadfast commitment to the well-being of his people.

So there's one city and two responses. Why the two responses? Why is there comfort on the one hand and fear on the other hand? Well, verse 10 and 11 gives us the answer.

[15:12] Your right hand is filled with righteousness and let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of your judgments. Justice and judgments are the cause of either fear or comfort.

But we know this because if we think about a really good judge, a seasoned judge who sits on the bench, you know, 40 years he's been doing this and he's excellent and he's just and he has a firm hand, that great judge will be in absolute comfort to the innocent and the humble.

But to the guilty and the proud, that same judge will be a terror because they know they're going to have no quarter with him. So God's just wrath was poured out for his people on Jesus at the cross, which means that when Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead, all who have put their trust in him will be safe, will have deep comfort, comfort that we can have today.

He reminds me of a forest fire. You know, the safest place to be in a forest fire is in the part of the forest that's already been burned up. If you believe on Christ, that's where you stand.

You stand where the fire has already fallen and you have nothing to fear. So his righteousness and his judgments bring us comfort.

[16:40] So the third question is for the last chunk of the Psalm, verse 12 through 14. And the question is, will you explore the city?

Verse 12, walk about Zion, go around her, 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, he will guide us forever.

This is not just a future reality. This isn't just a one day everything will be okay reality. This is a right now reality, even though it doesn't feel like it.

God is with us. And our future is incredibly bright. I want to take a moment and look at Psalm 46 just briefly, verses one through five.

As I mentioned before, Psalm 46 is kind of a sister Psalm. These are the two kind of Psalms of Zion that invite us to experience the comfort of being in the city of God. So turn there if you like, or just listen, Psalm 46, one through five.

[17:54] God is present tense, our refuge and strength, a very present help and trouble.

Therefore, we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters of roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the most high. God is in the midst of her. She shall not be moved.

God will help her when morning dawns. That present tense at the beginning of the Psalm will change everything for us, because it's not just that one day God will be with us, it's that we have a taste of that right now.

God is really with us right now. The resurrection of Christ, the ascension of Christ, it's like Thomas preached this morning. We're reaching through the future into the resurrection eternal life in the future and bringing a little bit of that back right now.

It's real for us today. So today God is giving us all an invitation. Will you explore this city?

[19:08] A couple weeks ago I took the kids to Craig Miller Castle and we were there early in the morning and it was absolutely frigid cold, so we were the only ones there.

And the kids had a wonderful time running about and I just couldn't help but just putting my hands on the stones and thinking, if these stones could talk, if these walls could just tell stories, the things that the political intrigue and the great dinners and Mary, Stuart dining there and incredible stories, if only these walls could talk.

Well the Bible is 66 books of talking walls. That's precisely what we have here. Explore it. Run your hands over it.

Hear the stories that it tells. And if you haven't yet put your trust in Jesus, here's an invitation to you. Explore the Bible.

Explore the church and ask yourself, could Jesus save me? Could that future be mine?

[20:19] Because I'll tell you what, he's an expert. The city of God is full, packed full of sinners saved by grace.

And if you do believe on Jesus, the story of the city of God is your story.

So what is that story? I mentioned Mount Zion at the beginning. The psalmist mentions it quite a few times. Zion is a fascinating word. He could have said the temple, he could have said Jerusalem, he could have named the city, you know he could have said the capital of Judah or whatever.

But he chose to use the word Zion. Now the first time we see the word Zion is when a young king David is marching up to a Jebusite, Canaanite, pagan fortress full of the enemies of God and the enemies of God's people and pagan practices and horrible sacrifices and you name it, the worst of the worst, a dark, dirty, foul place.

And King David marches up and conquers it and God says, I'm going to put my name in my city right there. David didn't found Jerusalem, he didn't start a new city, he captured an old, unclean pagan city.

[21 : 32] That's the city of God. And that's our story. We didn't come into this squeaky clean.

Paul says that we were dead in our trespasses and sins which we once walked. We were dead men, dead women. But God saved us and he redeemed us.

The city is a redeemed city and we are a redeemed people and that's a crucial part of our story. But secondly, the city is kept.

This again, all the defensive structures, towers, ramparts, citadels, a fortress, those are for keeping and guarding the city.

And it's within her citadels in the defensive structures it says in verse three that God has made himself known as a fortress. So God will keep his city, God will keep his people.

[22 : 28] To switch metaphors, Jesus the good shepherd will not lose a single sheep. You have nothing to fear. You cannot send your way out of this.

And thirdly, this city's story is that it will be a glorified city. That's again what Thomas was preaching on this morning was when we're glorified, we get that eternal weight of glory that makes our small dot of life look absolutely minuscule.

That beautiful city of revelation is our future. You notice in fact it says in Revelation 21 what we read that the city was dressed as a bride.

If you try to picture that too hard, your mind will break. Cities don't dress as brides because it's talking about us. It's using all sorts of rich biblical imagery, Psalm-like imagery to say that we, the bride of Christ, will be presented to Christ, perfect and glorified, finally, rid of all this filth, no longer wretches who are just thrown about by life, but ultimately an eternally stable and secure, and every tear will be wiped away, and all of our mourning will be turned to dancing.

We all hate platitudes when life gets really hard. There's really nothing worse than platitudes. We need something concrete to turn our hearts to God and turn our mourning into dancing and to turn our fears into comforts.

[24 : 10] So just saying, I'm in the city of God, it's going to be okay, that won't cut it. Just saying, God loves me, I'll be fine, it won't cut it.

It's too abstract. You need something you can put your feet down on. The Bible is chock-full of concrete stories of God's love for you, and they're as hardened as tangible as stone.

So only running our hands along the stones of this city will give us the sort of deep comfort and surety in the face of trouble that we really need. So will you explore Zion?

Have you? Will you take comfort in its story? Will it be your story? Here is your comfort, Christian. God is with you. He's made himself known as a fortress full of steadfast love and faithfulness. Paul says to Timothy that even when we are faithless, he remains faithful because he cannot deny himself, which means that his commitment to you is as unshakable as the very nature and character of God himself.

[25 : 22] That's real safety. That's real comfort. Pray with me, will you? Heavenly Father, we are so humbled by your unfailing commitment to us when we so often are faithless to you.

And we praise you that you are the Redeemer God, the Lord of hosts, who redeems and saves us with a sure and mighty hand.

We thank you for keeping us safe and for being our comfort and our security so that no one can snatch us from your hand. And Lord, we really look forward to that day when your city will be the joy of all the earth and your glory and your praise covers the earth like waters.

Come quickly, Lord Jesus, and give us who trust in you real comfort for our real troubles. And for those here who do not yet know you, Lord, please reveal yourself to them in a mighty and gentle way and bring them into your city and save them.

And we ask this all in your name, for your glory. Amen. Thank you.