



Psalm 48 - The Glory and Strength of Zion

A Song. A Psalm of the Korahites.

Introduction

Like Psalm 46, Psalm 48 is a hymn celebrating Zion as God's special city, which he defends for the sake of the world. It commemorates some great event, in which Gentile powers had besieged Jerusalem but came away dismayed; it recognises that although material fortresses may have their place, it is crucial that God himself be the defence of his people.

The Korahites were Levites from the family of Kohath and were descended from Korah. By David's time it seems they served in the musical aspect of the temple worship (2 Chronicles 20:19). Korah led a rebellion of 250 community leaders against Moses during the wilderness days of the Exodus (Numbers Chapter 16). God judged Korah and his leaders and they all died, but the sons of Korah remained. Perhaps they were so grateful for this mercy that they became notable in Israel for praising God.

Psalm 48:1-3 - The Lord, the King, Resides in Zion

The mention of his holy mountain (v.1) and the temple (v.9) shows that God resides in his sacred city through the sanctuary in which his people come most fully into his presence. 'In the far north' (v.2) is apparently an idiom for where God has his throne: <<*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 reaches of the north'*>> (Isaiah 14:13 ESV), where 'the reaches of the far north' is also translated as Mount Zaphon' the most sacred mountain of the Canaanites; and thus the physical location of Mount Zion is not itself the focus here. It is the joy of all the earth, not yet in fact but in God's own plan (v.10).

In Matthew 5:35, Jesus gets a name for Jerusalem, <<*the city of the great King*>>, from v.2; the sacredness of the city to God is why one should not take oaths by it.

- ¹ 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.
- ³ Within its citadels God
has shown himself a sure defence.

Psalm 48:1-3

Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised. The psalmist began simply describing the greatness of God and his worthiness to be praised. He connected this praise with a place: Jerusalem, described as the city of our God, on his holy mountain.

Great is the Lord. He is great indeed:

- He is greater: <<*God is greater than any mortal*>> (Job 33:12b).
- He is greatest of all: <<*For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods*>> (Psalm 95:3).
- He is greatness itself: <<*his greatness is unsearchable*>> (Psalm 145:3b).

The idea of Jerusalem as a holy mountain is a thought provoking contrast to another holy mountain, Mount Sinai. Sinai was so holy that a fence kept God's people from it, lest they die (Exodus 19:12-13). The NT develops this comparison and contrast between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion, i.e. Jerusalem, in Galatians 4:24-26 and Hebrews 12:18-24. This is a reminder that although the psalmist certainly had the literal, historic city of Jerusalem in mind, he was also carried away by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to also see the idealised city of Jerusalem, the city of God, the New Jerusalem of Revelation 3:12 and 21:2. The two aspects do not cancel each other out; they complement each other.

Mount Zion, in the far north. Commentators are divided on the meaning of this phrase. Many or most think it describes Jerusalem's situation mainly on the northern slope of Mount Zion, although this is contested. It is possible that 'in the far north' the psalmist intended a connection literal Jerusalem with God's heavenly city.

Beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth. Jerusalem is idealised as elevated and the cause of joy for all peoples. Certainly, the redemption there won rescues people <<*from every tribe and language and people and nation*>> (Revelation 5:9b).

The city of the great King. Ultimately, this is what makes Jerusalem wonderful. There are cities with better natural resources and more natural beauty. Yet there is only one city of the great King, the King of kings. He is present within its citadels God and is its sure defence.

Psalm 48:4-8 - The Kings of the Earth Thwarted from Attacking Her

These verses recount an event in which Gentile kings assembled to assault Jerusalem but were foiled by the magnificence that God gave the city, together with an east wind that destroyed their fleet. The lesson is that God will establish his city forever.

- 4 Then 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,
pains as of a woman in labour,
- 7 as when an east wind shatters
the ships of Tarshish.

Psalm 48:4-7

Then the kings assembled. With God the refuge of Jerusalem (v.3), the kings of the earth come to it, yet they cannot attack. Instead they marvelled and they were troubled.

Trembling took hold of them there. When they saw and understood the great King guarding his holy city, they were afraid to either attack the city or offend the King. They hurt like a woman in labour and they were scattered like ships in a storm: <<*Pangs and agony will seize them; they will be in anguish like a woman in labour. They will look aghast at one another; their faces will be aflame*>> (Isaiah 13:8b), and: <<*Why do I see them terrified? They have fallen back; their warriors are beaten down, and have fled in haste. They do not look back – terror is all around! says the Lord*>> (Jeremiah 46:5).

The ships of Tarshish were capable of long voyages in the Mediterranean, with Tarshish probably being at the western end of the sea in modern Spain. This was Jonah's intended destination as he fled from God: <<*But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord*>> (Jonah 1:3).

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 establishes for ever. Selah

Psalm 48:8

As we have heard, so have we seen. This is a simple yet beautiful statement of God fulfilling his promises and working in the present day, not only in the past. One should always be aware of the great things he has done in the past ages, i.e. we have heard, and pray with faith for great works to be done in the singer's own time, that is, so we have seen.

The apostle John also reveals the importance of seeing for oneself: <<*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth*>> (John 1:14), and: <<*We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us – we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete*>> (1 John 1:1-4).

In the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our God. The repetition is for emphasis. This city belongs to God. It is his city, which God establishes for ever, that is, he makes the city secure: <<*In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness'*>> (Jeremiah 23:6), <<*And it shall be inhabited, for never again shall it be doomed to destruction; Jerusalem shall abide in security*>> (Zechariah 14:11).

Selah, used 71 times in the Book of Psalms and three times in Habakkuk, has never been fully understood because the Hebrew root word is undefined. Many take it to be an instruction related to either the music, such as an interlude, or the cadence of the song, e.g. stop and reflect.

Psalm 48:9-11 - The Lord's Presence Brings Joy to His People

The people assembled for worship reflect on how God has displayed his steadfast love, not simply in personal deliverance and forgiveness but in preserving them as his people, whom he called so that his praise might reach to the ends of the earth, i.e. so that the Gentiles would come to know him. Such reflections on God's judgements, which display his righteousness and covenant faithfulness, should lead the towns and villages of Judah to rejoice.

⁹ We ponder your steadfast love, O God,
in the midst of your temple.

¹⁰ Your name, O God, like your praise,
reaches to the ends of the earth.
Your right hand is filled with victory.

¹¹ Let Mount Zion be glad,
let the towns of Judah rejoice
because of your judgements.

Psalm 48:9-11

We ponder your steadfast love, O God. The thought turns from a focus on the strength and majesty of God to a consideration of his covenant love: <<**Turn, O Lord, save my life; deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love**>> (Psalm 6:4).

In the midst of your temple. Being at the temple led the psalmist to consider the steadfast love of God. In many ways the temple itself testified to the covenant love of God to his people. God's covenant love was shown in providing:

- A place to meet with him for both Jews and Gentiles.
- Atoning sacrifice of a substitute.
- Sacrifice to give thanks.
- A place to receive prayer as sweet smelling incense unto him.
- A place for him to be enthroned among his people.

Your name, O God, like your praise, reaches to the ends of the earth. God's name is filled with majesty and greatness; so is his praise: <<**All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him**>> (Psalm 22:27). His praiseworthy character is shown in his righteousness and judgements.

Psalm 48:12-14 - Zion Endures to Tell the Next Generation

The singing congregation addresses one another, inviting them to review the strength of Zion; as vv.1-3 made clear, this is not purely the city's material defences. The worshippers know that the people of God are secure, and are commissioned to tell the next generation of their security and their mission (v.13).

- 12 Walk about Zion, go all around it,
count its towers,
13 consider well its ramparts;
go through its citadels,
that you may tell the next generation
14 that this is God,
our God for ever and ever.
He will be our guide for ever.

Psalm 48:12-14

Count its towers, consider well its ramparts. The psalmist asks the singer to take a tour of Jerusalem, noting its defences, strengths, and citadels reflecting royal dignity: <<*On that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah: We have a strong city; he sets up victory like walls and bulwarks*>> (Isaiah 26:1). Nehemiah undertook this task with a view to re-establishing the physical strength of the city: <<*I went out by night by the Valley Gate past the Dragon's Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire*>> (Nehemiah 2:13).

That this is God, our God for ever and ever. In these last two verses the city itself fades from view to reveal God alone. All these marks of Jerusalem's glory and strength come from God, and this should be told to the next generation. The same God that builds and beautifies Jerusalem is our God forever and ever, knowing he will be our guide for ever, even through death: <<*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me*>> (Psalm 23:4 ESV), and: <<*they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them*>> (Isaiah 49:10).