

The Glory of Zion

Psalm 48

The nations and princes of the earth gathered to exalt the Lord at the end of Psalm 47. They continue that celebration in Psalm 48 but now within Zion, the Lord's city. This psalm celebrates the Lord's beauty, victory, mercy, and strength bestowed upon His people. We no longer rejoice in the earthly Zion but in the heavenly one, in Christ and His kingdom.

Summary & Structure

In Psalm 48 the sons of Korah rejoice in the presence of God on Mount Zion, the city of God. The psalm opens and closes with celebrations of the city of God and at the center the ships of Tarshish are shattered and the city established (vv. 7-8). God is greatly to be praised in a particular city in His holy mountain (v. 1). God's people have always met Him on a mountain, and the issue isn't the exact elevation but the symbolic proximity to God. Zion is beautiful in height and the joy of the whole earth, the great King's city (v. 2). Her towers are places of refuge, but more fundamentally, the psalm says God is there and He is the refuge of Zion (v. 3). The kings who aligned against her saw the citadels of Zion and were astonished, troubled, and fled in fear (vv. 4-6). The Lord shattered the ships of Tarshish (v. 7). Just as we heard God has done, so we have seen Him do in our city; He will establish it forever. *Selah*, meditate on it (v. 8). We remembered Your covenant mercy in the temple (v. 9). God's name is known and praised to the ends of the earth so rejoice Mount Zion and let the daughters of Judah be glad for the judgments of the Lord (vv. 10-11)! Walk about Zion, count her towers, number her bulwarks, and consider her palaces so you can tell the next generation (vv. 12-13). This is our God who will be our God forever and ever. He will guide us beyond the grave (v. 14).

Great in Zion

God is great in His person: all-powerful, all-knowing, present everywhere and infinite. He is great in His being, limited only by Himself. But systematic definitions are not enough. Scripture also tells us He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is the God of armies who drowned Pharaoh's chariots, the one who led in a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. He makes the barren fruitful and feeds the hungry with good things. He is present in Zion, on a mountain, in a city, in a temple, where those people sang, prayed, read, listened, sacrificed, rejoiced and were blessed. The "sides" or "remotest parts of the north" was referred to in Canaanite religion as where Baal lived, similar to Mount Olympus in Greek religion. This is where Lucifer wanted to ascend (Is. 14:13), the meeting place of heaven and earth. This is an argument: God is greater than Baal and His mountain is better. Here is where God reigns and though He dwells in heaven in a temple made without hands, He has come to earth to dwell with us, to be our God and to take us for His people. If you confine God to earth and think you can contain Him in stuff made by people, you're an idolator. But you're equally deceived to think He can be confined to heaven. Idolators and agnostics live on two sides of this false coin. God is great in Zion and that city is like Him: beautiful in elevation. Those strong towers are nothing without Him but with Him they are a bulwark for God's people. Whereas the Lord dwelt in the holy of holies in the tabernacle and temple in the old covenant, after Christ reconciled us to the Father, the Spirit was poured out upon the entire church at Pentecost, bringing us to Zion in every place:

For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest... But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel. –Hebrews 12:18, 22-24

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Zion is the Christian Church and marked by word and sacrament. We are in Zion now worshipping here united with all the saints doing so across the world.

Being Scary

The kings who gathered to attack Zion ended up fleeing in panic. It's not because they appeared weak or lacked resources. The ships of Tarshish were steady vessels but no match for the Lord's storms (v. 7). This fear could have been unnecessary. In Psalm 47 the kings of the earth willingly gather to Christ. We don't convert people at the point of a sword. But those who see God and His great works and despise Him are left to fear. Fear is inescapable. You either fear God or you will fear man. Those in Zion either rest in God's presence with them or look at the gathering armies and freak out. Some in Zion are troubled by the fact that our enemies are troubled and afraid, and that's another reason to learn this psalm. God promises to bless and protect Israel by sending His terror before them (Ex. 23:27; Deut. 2:25). Under His blessing, "An hundred [of your men] will put ten thousand to flight" (Lev. 26:8). Our ultimate goal is not make people afraid, but when it happens to those who see our strength and despise it, it's a good outcome. You can see this play run by a small child who tries to get his way by screaming (or threatening to), knowing his weak parents will do anything for that not to happen. It works the same with manipulative adults, factions, parties, and nations. The psalmist is glad the nations are overwhelmed and scared by the awesome appearance and power of Zion. Any time the gospel goes forward and the Church strengthens, the enemies of mercy cry out in fear and lie about injustice.

Joy in Covenant Mercy

Their fear is not to be yours. Think with the inhabitants Zion about God's *chesed*, His covenant mercy (v. 9). Consider the way He has preserved His people through plagues and famine, false teachers and heresies. The early church dealt with attacks on the person of Christ, His deity and humanity. The Middle Ages faced Islam, plague, and the corruption of the Roman Church. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries fought Higher Criticism trying to undermine the inspiration, infallibility, and authority of Scripture. Today we face sexual perversion, feminism, and holdover Marxism as God continues to bless and strengthen His people. We can say of church history as Herbert Schlossberg said about Scripture: "The Bible can be interpreted as a string of God's triumphs disguised as disasters." God rules in Zion and His *judgments* make the daughters of Judah glad (v. 11).

Walk About Zion

The Lord's people are commanded to walk about Zion and pay attention: go everywhere, count her towers, mark her bulwarks, ponder her palaces. Why? So you can tell the next generation (v. 13). Teach your children about what who God is and what He has done, raising them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. How has the gospel gone out and transformed the world? How do we glorify God in all we do, whether we eat or drink? How does Scripture apply to the issues of our day? What is happening in Zion, throughout the Church today? You might notice some parts of her needing remodeling, others that need expanding, and all the strength of her towers and bulwarks. All the blessings received on Mount Zion in the old covenant apply *a fortiori*, how much more today. God was with them, even through death (v. 14). How much more is He our God in the new Jerusalem, the heavenly Zion with Christ having defeated death?