



Sermon Transcript

July 16, 2017

Psalms: Prayers of Faith and Hope

Jesus: The City of Our God

Psalm 48

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on July 16, 2017 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Psalm 48

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 her citadels God has made himself known as a fortress.

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. 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

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!

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.

Introduction

Every city has its attractions. San Francisco has the Golden Gate Bridge. New York City has the Statue of Liberty, San Antonio the River Walk, Boston has Fenway Park, New Orleans the French Quarter and Philadelphia has Independence Hall. If you have been to any of these cities and you hear that someone is going there for the first time, you might be tempted to chime in with some good advice. “Make sure when you go to San Antonio, you spend an evening eating outside and taking a stroll down on the River Walk. We readily share this information because these attractions are enjoyable and worth seeing and so we have no hesitation “singing their praises.”

I find that when I go to a city and take in some of the attractions, it is often the hidden gems that I find the most enjoyable. If you told me you were going to Columbus, Ohio, I would tell you about some cream puffs that are worth going out of your way for. If you were heading up to Boston, I would direct you to where you can get one of the best cannoli's I ever had. If you were heading to Kansas City, I would talk to you about the barbeque options. If you were going down to Dallas, I would tell you about the Tex-Mex food. If you were going to Philadelphia, where we lived for thirteen years, sure I would tell you about the cheesesteaks. But the hidden gem most people from outside the area don't know about is Stock's Pound Cake. That is like gold in our house. Do you notice a certain theme to what I consider to be attractions? It is the food! Once you taste and enjoy it, you have no problem singing its praises and you want others to enjoy it as well.

Our psalm this morning begins with an exuberant song of praise. “*Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised.*” It can be translated this way, “*Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise.*” It strikes me that the quality of the worship or the praise that is offered is commensurate with the object of our praise. God is great! And so there should be nothing half-hearted about our praise of God. He is “*most worthy*” of it. In fact, whatever it is that this psalm says about God that is so great, we find in verse 13 that it is only natural to tell the next generation about this great God. It says, “*that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever.*”

But here is what strikes me about this psalm. As you read through Psalm 48, you discover that the focus of this psalm has to do with a city. “*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.*” Again this city comes into focus in verse 8 where we read, “*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.” And then an invitation to take in the sites of this city is issued in 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.”*

Now you don't have to be a Bible scholar to figure out what city is being referred to in this psalm. It is the city of Jerusalem, also known as Zion. This is the city that King David made the capital city for Israel and it remained the capital city for Judah after Israel was divided into two. It is to this city that David brought the ark of the covenant and it is in this city where his son, Solomon, built the temple. In the Jewish mind this was the center of the world. When they spoke of going to Jerusalem, they always talked about going up to Jerusalem. In verse 2 it says of this lofty city that it is *“beautiful in elevation.”* Now it didn't sit on the highest peak in all of Israel. But what made it so lofty and *“beautiful in elevation”* was that God was there. In that sense, there was no city higher than this city. And hence, as it says in verse 2, it *“is the joy of all the earth.”*

So what is the attraction of this city and what is the focus of this psalm? The writer for this psalm is not working for a travel agency who is trying to convince you to come to the holy land and to tour the ancient city of Jerusalem with all of its holy sites, as wonderful as that would be. In fact, if you make your way through this psalm and you fail to get beyond the brick and mortar of this ancient city, you will miss the main attraction of this city and the ultimate focus of this psalm.

Again, we come to this psalm on this side of Jesus. Jesus is the focal point of all of Scripture. He said of himself after his resurrection from the dead in Luke 24:44, *“that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”* In saying this, he is not talking about a verse of prophecy here or there that predicts the events of the life of Jesus. Rather every king and every priest and every prophet points us to Jesus, THE Prophet, THE Priest and THE King. Not only is he the priest, but he is also the sacrifice. He is the temple, too. Did he not say of himself, *“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”* And so it is with Zion. We must see Mount Zion, Jerusalem, through the lens of Jesus.

I was reading this week in Isaiah, and because of the topic of my message this week, it caught my eye when I came to Isaiah 24:23. Here the prophet speaks of the future of Mount Zion. He says, *“for the LORD of hosts reigns on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem.”* And then in the next chapter, it talks about how from Mount Zion, God will swallow up death forever. In Isaiah 25:6-9 it says, *“On this mountain, the LORD of hosts will make for*

all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. It will be said on that day, 'Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.' I can't help but think of Hebrews 12:22 here. Here it says to followers of Jesus, *"But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem . . . and to Jesus."* Graeme Goldsworthy puts it this way, "Zion is where Jesus reigns now at the right hand of God and this is where we come by faith in the gospel."¹ Or as we will sing at the end of our service, "out of Zion's hill salvation comes."

So if you walk through the city of this passage, Psalm 48, and fail to see Jesus at every turn, then you will miss the attraction of this city. This picture of Zion, the city of our God, leads us right to Jesus. This psalm points us and our prayers to Jesus. He is the presence of God in this world. He is our protection. He is the fuel for our praise of God. He is our peace. Everything that is sung about Jerusalem in this passage is sung about Jesus. And when you taste of this Jesus, like at the end of the psalm, we find that we can't be quiet. We can't help but sing his praises and it is our delight to *"tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever."*

So let me show you around the holy city this morning. In doing so, let me show you Jesus.

The Place of God: God is Here

So what is it that makes this city so attractive? Psalm 48 begins by saying , *"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.."* As we have already noted, there are signs of "the city" all over these three verses. Here we read of the *"city of our God"* and the *"holy mountain"* and *"Mount Zion"* and the *"city of the great king."* These are very spatial words. They speak to a specific city that exists in a specific location. It is the city of Jerusalem, the capital of the nation of Israel.

But the closer you look at these three verses, it really is not the city that is the focus of the praise that comes from these three verses. What really puts this city on the map, the

attraction of this city, is the presence of God. It is “*the city of our God.*” It is the “*city of the great King.*” Or as verse 3 affirms, “*Within her citadels God has made himself known as a fortress.*” Even here, as revered as the city of Jerusalem was, it really was the presence of God that was the attraction to the city. Jerusalem was the “place of God.”

Why Jerusalem? Why this city? Well simply, this is the place where God chose to dwell among his people. He says in 1 Kings 11:36, that Jerusalem was “*the city where I have chosen to put my name.*” It is here where David’s son, built the temple. It is in the temple where sacrifices were made to atone for the sin of the people. Now we know that God cannot be contained by a building. And yet, by God’s grace, he chose to draw near and to make his presence known with his people. In 1 Kings 8, when Solomon dedicated the temple, it says that a cloud filled the temple. It was the glory of God. This was the attraction of Jerusalem. The temple was here. God drew near. God was here.

There is a collection of psalms called *The Psalms of Ascent*. They would be sung by the Jewish worshipers as they would make their way up to Jerusalem to celebrate the prescribed feasts. As they sang these psalms, there was a sense of anticipation as they made their way to the holy city. You can hear the sense of anticipation in Psalm 122 when they sing, “*I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD!’*” Why? This is the place of God. God is here.

Now if you were to go to Jerusalem today, you would find that the temple is no longer there. It was destroyed in 586 B.C. by the Babylonians. It was rebuilt, only to be destroyed again by the Romans in 70 A.D. If that is the case, where is the presence of God in the world today? It is interesting that when Jesus comes along, much of the drama, the story, that unfolds in his life centers around the city of Jerusalem. When he was born, it was said of him in Luke 2:38 that he would bring redemption to Jerusalem. The idea that Jerusalem was in the need of redemption, suggests that when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, it never regained the glory it once had. In fact, in Ezra when they go to rebuild the temple and lay the foundation it says that they cried so loud because it was nothing compared to the glory of the previous temple,. And so the prophets spoke of a day coming when God would restore the fortunes of Zion and redeem Jerusalem.

So we read of Jesus in John 1:14, *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*” Literally, the word *dwelt* means that Jesus “tabernacled” among us. He is the presence of God among us. He even says of himself in Matthew 12 that *someone greater than the temple is here.* When talking with the woman at the well in John 4, her big question had to do with where to worship God? Is it in the city of Jerusalem like the Jewish worshiper

says? Or, is it on our mountain where we are to worship God. Jesus said, *“The hour is coming and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth.”* She said, “when the Messiah comes, he’ll tell us the answer to that question. Jesus said, *“I who speak to you am he.”* This is why the writer to the Hebrews says in Hebrews 12:22 of those who turn in faith to Jesus *“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem . . . and to Jesus.”* When Revelation 21 tells us of a new heaven and a new earth that is to come it speaks of a “new Jerusalem” that is to come. And then it says, *“Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall their be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”*

Is it any wonder that our psalm this morning begins with exuberant praise of God. *“Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God!”* In Jesus, God has drawn near to us. In Jesus, God is with us. There is comfort just in knowing that God is with us. It is not accidental that the last words of Jesus to his disciples in the gospel of Matthew is the reassurance that *“I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* You can know God. You can know the presence of God. He is here. He is present among his people. As we proclaim Jesus to you this morning, and as he is lifted up before you this morning in our worship and preaching of the good news of Jesus, through the Holy Spirit he stirs within your heart and draws you to God. You can see him in the love that comes from his people. Therefore you can find him and know him.

The Protection of God: God Will

The second thing we discover about *“the city of our God”* is that if God is there, then the city is well protected. Look what it says starting in verse 4. *“For behold, the kings assembled; they came on together. As soon as they saw it, they were astounded; they were in panic; they took to flight. Trembling took hold of them there, anguish as of a woman in labor. By the east wind you shattered the ships of Tarshish.”* These verses picture *“the city of God”* coming under attack. It is somewhat reminiscent of what we saw in Psalm 2 when the nations took their stand against God and his Anointed One. There it says, *“He who sits in the heavens laughs.”* It comes across as a laughter of absurdity. Are you going to actually take your stand against God? He goes on to say in Psalm 2, *“As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.”* And so he ends Psalm 2 by saying, *“Blessed are all who take refuge in him?”* Why? There is refuge in the presence of God. God’s presence brings God’s protection.

There are various stories in Israel's history when an army does in fact surround the city of Jerusalem with the intention of bringing it to ruin. I think of the story when Sennacherib, King of Assyria, comes against the city of Jerusalem. He had already leveled many a city, and as far as he was concerned, Jerusalem was like any other city he came against. As he laid siege to Jerusalem, he taunted her people. But King Hezekiah, turned to God in prayer. And God said in Isaiah 37:35, "*I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.*" And we discover in the next verse that, "*the angel of the LORD went out and struck down a hundred and eighty five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians.*" The next day, the people of Jerusalem woke up and dead bodies surrounded the city. God protected them.

And yet when you read this passage, there seems to be more here than just the deliverance from a mere army. In verse 8 we see hints of something bigger and more grand than that. He says, "*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.*" When you read those words, "*God will establish forever*" it is hard not to see the kind of protection Jesus speaks of when he talks about his presence with his people in the kingdom of God.

It is a kind of protection that speaks to the resolve and the will of God to bring to completion what he has promised. God will do it. This is why God gets that praise and this is why God is called great. He will build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Nothing can pluck the elect from the hand of God. He who began a work in you will complete it. When Peter says that "*the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour*" the protection of Christ on his children is confirmed when he says in 1 Peter 5:10, "*And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen and establish you.*" I love the line in Martin Luther's famous hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*.

And though this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us
The Prince of Darkness grim,
We tremble not for him
His rage, we can endure;
For lo, his doom is sure
One little word shall fell him

In fact, for those in Jesus, we can say with all confidence, *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever!* And so, "*Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God!*" Why? In Jesus there is protection.

The Praise of God: God Saves

The third thing we see as we tour this city and look at Jesus is that it is God's act of salvation that causes us to be glad and to rejoice. He says in verse 9 that when they come into the temple they "thought on God's steadfast love." I hope that is true for us when we come and gather on a Sunday morning. I pray that this is what is fueling your song and your prayers and your praise of God this morning. I hope you are pausing this morning and "thinking on God's steadfast love" for us in Jesus. That is a very important word that refers to God's mercy. Out of his grace and mercy, through Jesus, he does not treat us as our sins deserve. That is why we sing, "*Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised!*" If you notice in verse 10, it is a grace that "*reaches to the end of the earth.*"

Psalm 89 is the last psalm of BOOK THREE. It is the only lament out of nearly 60 laments in the Book of Psalms that ends with no hope. Do you know what the psalm is about? It is about the destruction of Jerusalem. The first part of the psalm sings about the glory of the city. But the last part of the psalm, as if in shock, laments the destruction of the city of God. In Psalm 89:49, the psalmist cries, "*LORD where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?*" He is asking for God's loving mercy which was promised to David. David was promised a son who would reign forever over God's people, with justice and peace. And now the city lies in ruin and not only is the presence of God gone, but so is his protection.

And so the prophets began to talk about a time when God, in his loving mercy, would save his people. But that salvation would come through the promised Messiah, the Son of David. The fulfillment of the promise of God's love and mercy for his people is found in Jesus. Jeremiah, the prophet, said this in Jeremiah 33:14, "*Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.*" How will God fulfill his promise. "*In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in that land.*" Listen to what he says next. "*In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called, 'The LORD is our righteousness.'*"

I love that phrase, "*The LORD is our righteousness.*" It is the same thing affirmed in verse 10 of our passage, "*Your right hand is filled with righteousness.*" Because of God's loving kindness, when we repent of our sin and turn in faith to Jesus, God graciously forgives us our sin and puts on us the righteousness of Jesus. Why? Because this is who God is. He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger.

Is God really that forgiving? Will God really forgive your sin if you come to him in faith, repenting of your sin and putting your trust in Jesus? I came across a liturgy that is based on William Bridges book, *A Lifting Up For the Downcast*. It was written in 1648 and it is a response to those who might think God's grace is too good to be true. It starts out with how God disclosed himself to Moses in Exodus 34. It goes like this:

Leader: Who is God?

All: He is the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty.

Leader: But does God really want to help me?

All: He is a God merciful and wants to help.

Leader: But what is there in me to move him to care?

All: He is a God gracious, motivated by his own love.

Leader: But I've been sinful and backward for too long.

All: He is a God slow to anger.

Leader: But I've sinned extremely, blatantly, aboundingly.

All: He is a God abounding in steadfast love.

Leader: But I'm weak and unfaithful to him.

All: He is a God abounding in faithfulness.

Leader: But God works only with big important people.

All: He keeps steadfast love for thousands.

Leader: But I've sinned in so many different ways.

All: He forgives iniquity and transgression and sin – all kinds.

Leader: But if I let myself believe this, it makes God seem unserious.

All: He will by no means clear the guilty. But if any sinner desires God, he may have God as his mighty Friend through Christ. This we believe, and we live again.²

This is why it says in verse 11, *“Let Mount Zion be glad! Let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of your judgments!”* God's praises are sung because our God saves!

Peace of God: God Stays

Psalm 48 ends with this great statement starting in 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.”* Do you know what he is saying here? In Mount Zion, you are never ever alone.

It is interesting that in Ephesians 2, Paul says that now through Jesus, God has torn down the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile and that we are now one body in Christ. And he uses the temple as an image to make his point. But it is not a temple like the one we find in Jerusalem. Rather, it is a temple made of people. Jesus is the cornerstone. The apostles and the prophets are the foundation. As each person comes to faith, we are added to that temple, one person at a time. Do you know what that means? The presence of God has moved from a building and now resides in a people.

As the church gathers, God is present. Jesus said when two or three are gathered in my name, I am there. Jesus is among us this morning. But it is also true of us individually. Christ dwells within us. He is as close to you as he can get. He will never leave you. You will never be alone. Therefore, as we read in Psalm 46, God is our very present help in our time of trouble. So God whispers from our heart to our ear, *“Be still, and know that I am God.”* This is our peace.

Conclusion

It is quite an attractive city. Or should I say, *“Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised!”* Look what he has done through Jesus.

He is the presence of God: God is here!

He is the protection of God: God will!

He is the praise of God: God saves!

He is the peace of God: God stays!

This is our joy! It is Jesus. He is the attraction of the city! Turn in faith to him. Taste and see that he is good. Tell of him to the next generation!

¹Graem Goldsworthy *Gospel and Kingdom* (U.K. Paternoster Press, 1981) 91

²Ray Ortland “Who Is God?” www.thegospelcoalition.org November 23, 2012

