

Summer in the Psalms: Zion, City of the Great King
 Psalm 48
 ABC 8/14/22

I think it's safe to say that most of us would prefer to live in the country rather than in a neighborhood. But, do you realize, as Christians we'll spend eternity living in a city? Don't let that discourage you. There your neighbors will be perfect. God describes heaven as a city, the New Jerusalem. If you want to spend eternity in heaven, you'd better get used to city living. In Biblical times, cities were the desirable places to live. To live outside a city was to be unprotected from roaming thieves, invading enemies, & wild animals. It was to be cut off from commerce, social relationships, & community support. The biblical mindset is, *Why would anyone want to move out of a city & into the wilderness?* As Americans, we have a cultural tendency toward the rugged individualist. As American Christians, we rightly emphasize having a personal relationship with Jesus, but sometimes we neglect to emphasize that the Christian life is more than just Jesus & me. Being a Christian makes you a part of His body, the church. You become a fellow citizen with the saints, a member of God's household (Eph 2:19). Or, to put it another way, you become a citizen of God's city. The great theme of Ps 48 is the presence & blessing of God in His city. At the center of the psalm stands this great expression of confidence: **8**

But what is His city? **1-2**

Mt Zion is His city. Heb 13:14 says, **Here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come.** That city is Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city to come. Unfortunately, this idea is foreign to most Christians today. We've all sung the hymn, *Glorious things of Thee are spoken, Zion city of our God...*¹ When you think of the man who wrote that hymn, you realize this biblical theme is relevant & meaningful for the most secular, unchurched, modern person today. It was written by John Newton the man who wrote *Amazing Grace*. He was, by his own admission, a very corrupt young man. He ran from his father & the law & sailed the high seas. He ran a slave trading vessel in the 1750s from the coasts of Africa. Later on, he called himself *the old African blasphemer*. In other words, he isn't the kind of person you'd expect to use biblical words like **Zion**

¹ John Newton, 1779

or to write a song like, *Glorious things of Thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God*. The most irreligious, immoral person you know is probably more religious & more moral than John Newton was. Can you imagine that person falling in love with the language of Zion? *Unthinkable*, you might say. But is it? John Newton died December 31, 1807. He wrote his own epitaph for his gravestone. It says, *John Newton. Clerk. Once an infidel & libertine a servant of slaves in Africa was by the rich mercy of our Lord & Savior Jesus Christ preserved, restored, pardoned, & appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy.*² One of the things this African blasphemer saw when God saved him & opened his eyes was the beauty of Zion. I want you to see it too. Before we get to Ps 48 we're going to look at the biblical concept of Zion. What Is Zion? A national park in Utah, right? Not what we're referring to. Ps 50:2 says, **Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God has shone forth.** What is Zion? & why is it such a rich & hope-filled word for Christians? In 2 Sam 5, where the word **Zion** is used for the 1st time in the Bible. It says of David, **The king & his men went to Jerusalem against the Jebusites... (6) & David captured the stronghold of Zion, that is the city of David (7).** Since the time of David **Zion** was synonymous with **the city of David**. What begins to make this place so significant is that immediately David brings the ark of the covenant to Zion (2 Sam 6:12). Zion becomes the center of worship & of God's presence. When Solomon moves the ark of the covenant into the temple (1 Kgs 8:1), all Jerusalem came to be known as Zion. Most of the time in its 150+ uses in the OT **Zion** refers to the city of Jerusalem, not just as another name, but because it's the city of God's presence & the city of great hope for God's people. Let me illustrate with a few vss.

- Ps 51:18, **By Your favor do good to Zion; Build the walls of Jerusalem.** Zion is Jerusalem.
- Ps 9:11, **Sing praises to the Lord, who dwells in Zion; Declare among the peoples His deeds.** Zion is the place on earth where God has chosen to make His presence known (Ps 78:68-72).
- Ps 2:6, **I have installed My King Upon Zion, My holy mountain.** It's called a mountain because David's stronghold & then the temple were on the hills in Jerusalem.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Newton

Zion was the place where God was present & near to His people. Because of that it follows that Zion became the place from which the people expected help. Zion became the source of deliverance & salvation. For example, Ps 20:2 says, **May the Lord send you help from the sanctuary, & support you from Zion!** Ps 3:4 tells us, **I was crying to the Lord with my voice, & He answered me from his holy mountain,** that is, Mount Zion. Zion was the place of God's special presence among His people & therefore, the place where they were to get help & deliverance. But because sin became rampant among the people & because divine judgment was inevitable, even on Zion (Lam 2:15), it became more & more obvious that Zion, the city of David, the earthly Jerusalem wasn't the ideal city. That Zion pointed forward to a future Zion & upward to a heavenly Zion. To put it another way, if imperfect Zion was the place of God's presence on the earth, then there must be a perfect Zion where God dwells in heaven (Acts 7:48-49). If imperfect Zion was the place of God's presence on earth, then all the promises of complete & perfect reign on the earth must mean there will one day be a new & ideal Zion on earth where God rules over all the nations. In other words, Zion, Jerusalem points upward to a heavenly Zion, & forward to a future Zion. That's what we find in Scripture.

- Is 24:23 reads, **The moon will be abashed, & the sun ashamed, For the Lord of hosts will reign on Mount Zion & in Jerusalem.**
- Micah 4:6-7 tells us, **In that day... the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion from now on & forever.**
- Is 2:2, 3b-4 says, **it will come about that In the last days The mountain of the house of the LORD Will be established as the chief of the mountains... & all the nations will stream to it... For the law will go forth from Zion & the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. & He will judge between the nations, & will render decisions for many peoples; & they will hammer their swords into plowshares & their spears into pruning hooks...**

Clearly, there's a coming time when God will rule over the nations from His throne in Zion. The old Jerusalem points forward to a glorious future Zion from which God will reign on earth. But the OT also points to a heavenly Zion where God already reigns now. There are a few key passages that show this. One is Ps 87. **His foundation is in the holy mountains. The LORD loves the gates of Zion More than all the *other* dwelling places of Jacob. Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God (1-3).** This is where John Newton got his song. The Lord Himself speaks concerning the true citizens

of Zion saying, **I shall mention Rahab & Babylon among those who know Me; Behold, Philistia & Tyre with Ethiopia** (4). He foretells the day when these pagan nations will turn & know God. Then He describes them as natural born citizens of Zion. **'This one was born there.'** **But of Zion it shall be said, "This one & that one were born in her"; & the Most High Himself will establish her. The LORD will count when He registers the peoples, "This one was born there"** (5-6). Did you catch that? If Zion is the place of God's presence, power, blessing, & protection, if Zion is the hope of God's future rule over the earth, then what's the hope of us as Gentiles? What about us whom Paul says are **excluded from the commonwealth of Israel** & have no citizenship in Zion, the city of God (Eph 2:12)? The answer is that there's a Zion whose citizenship isn't earthly. Ps 87:5 says **the Most High Himself** is establishing this Zion by declaring with sovereign freedom & with saving effect, **This one was born there**. This one in Ashland was born in Zion. This one in Medford was born in Zion. This one in Addis Ababa was born in Zion. This one in Hanoi was born in Zion. God is populating His city with people of every tribe, tongue, & nation. This means there's a true Zion in heaven, a heavenly Jerusalem. The true people of God, whether Jew or Gentile, are citizens there. To belong to the people of God your birth certificate has to say, *This one was born in Zion*. What does this mean in NT terms? Gal 4:26 says something similar: **The Jerusalem above is free, she is our mother**. We've all been born once in some earthly location. That birth made us flesh & blood & gave us a citizenship in some country on earth. But if we want to know God & be with Him in His city; if we want to be a part of that future kingdom where God rules from Zion, then we have to be born from above. We have to have a 2nd birth. We have to have our citizenship in heaven (Phil 3:20), in the Jerusalem above. Our 2nd birth certificate has to say, *This one was born in Zion*. Jesus said, **Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again, or from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God** (Jn 3:3). Heb 12:22 says to Christians, **You have come to Mount Zion & to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem...** Notice it says, **You have come to Mount Zion**, not, *you will come*. One of the great things about being a Christian is that when you're born again, you don't have to wonder anymore if you're going to be a part of the city of God. Those who are born from above have already come to Mount Zion; they're already enrolled in the heavenly Jerusalem; they're already citizens of the city of God. Paul

says to those who've surrendered to Jesus, **You have died & your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory** (Col 3:3-4). If you've trusted Jesus, you're already a permanent citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem. & when this new Jerusalem appears, you'll be there too in glory.

Okay. On to Ps 48. This psalm sings the praises of **Mount Zion, the city of our God, the city of the great King** (1, 2). The psalmist affirms that God's benevolent rule belongs only to the residents of Zion. God's kingdom is greater than Jerusalem but receives its visible expression in the temple & city of Jerusalem. God has chosen to establish His kingdom, His presence in Jerusalem.³ Ps 132:13 says, **For the Lord has chosen Zion, He has desired it for His habitation.** This vision of Zion as God's city & dwelling place isn't just for the Jews. As we've seen, the NT applies this OT concept to the church. While Ps 48 is about Zion as God's city & dwelling place, in light of the NT, we can apply it to the church, which has been grafted into believing Israel (Rom 11:17-24). Just as God promises to establish Zion forever (Ps 48:8), so Jesus promised to establish His church forever (Mt 16:18). We are God's temple, His dwelling place (1 Cor 3:16) so Ps 48 has direct application to us.

This psalm seems to have been written in response to a deliverance of Jerusalem from enemies that threatened to destroy it. While scholars differ & we can't be dogmatic, it's possible it was the deliverance under King Hezekiah from Sennacherib's army (2 Kgs 18 & 19; 2 Chron 32; Is 36-37). His army had been unstoppable & it now surrounded Jerusalem. Things looked bleak. But in response to Hezekiah's & Isaiah's prayers, the angel of the Lord killed 185,000 of Sennacherib's troops in one night. Whatever the circumstance, the psalm joyously proclaims God's greatness as seen in the splendor of His city, which He miraculously delivered. While at 1st glance it appears this psalm is praising the beauty of Zion, the 1st & last vss show it's actually a psalm about the greatness of God as seen through His city. The idea is that God's city is to proclaim the praise of His salvation to all the earth & to all generations.

1. God & His City 1-2

³ Willem VanGemeren, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 5:355

A. Praise His Greatness (1a) **Great is the Lord, & greatly to be praised...** How can we ever praise God in proportion to His infinite greatness? It's impossible. His greatness is far beyond our imagination. But we shouldn't give up just because it's impossible. We should worship Him with all we are & all we have. The Psalmist begins speaking great thoughts about God: He is the great King; His city is the joy of all the earth; He is greatly to be praised. You can't worship God without having great thoughts about Him, & you won't have a right view of yourself if you don't have a right view of God. There's nothing you can say that's too great to be said about God. & so when the Psalmist begins with **great is the Lord**, it's an understatement. Do we as individuals, do we as a church have great thoughts about God & give Him the praise He deserves?

B. Proclaim His Holiness (1b-2) The psalmist describes God's city as **His holy mountain** & adds that it's **beautiful in elevation**. What does that mean? Jerusalem is about 2,500 feet, so biblical writers talk about *going up* to Jerusalem (Ps 122:4). But the theological sense of **beautiful in elevation** is that it's here in Jerusalem that heaven & earth meet.⁴ The city's holiness & beauty, not to mention its strength, are due to the fact that God dwells there. As God's people, we're to be holy as He is holy (Lev 11:44). As God's people, we're to display His holiness to a sinful world. It's vital we judge our sin & work to make the church a holy people, beginning with ourselves (Titus 2:11-14).

C. Bring Joy To All The psalmist calls God's city **the joy of the whole earth** (2). Some try to limit this to the **joy of the whole land**, Israel, because there's never been a time yet when Jerusalem has been the joy of the whole earth. But one day it will be, when Jesus reigns over all the earth (Is 2:2-4). The most difficult phrase to interpret is **Mount Zion in the far north**. No one really knows what this means. Don't let that cause you to miss the point: As **the city of the great King**, we're to extend God's joy to the whole earth. To proclaim His joy, we must be experiencing it as we rejoice daily in His great salvation. Thus, God's city should proclaim His greatness, His holiness, & His joy.

D. Declare His Power 3

⁴ A. A. Anderson (cited by VanGemeren, 5:363)

What is a **stronghold**? It's a place that's been fortified to protect it against attack. The people of God's city know Him as their **stronghold** at all times & **He knows who takes refuge in Him** (Nahum 1:7).

The 1st part of this psalm makes the point that God's city is to proclaim His greatness, holiness, joy, & power. His power is especially displayed in the 2nd section:

2. God & His Enemies (4-7) The next few vss portray a coalition of powerful kings coming to conquer the city but they aren't able to raise a hand against it. When they see it they run. The cause of their terror isn't just the impressive walls & towers of the city, but the God who dwells in them. It's the glory of God's presence which makes Jerusalem glorious & the strength of God's presence which makes her safe.⁵ **4-7**

A coalition of kings came to Jerusalem to size it up. They're proud & confident until they **saw it**. Then they **were amazed, terrified, & they fled in alarm** (5). In Hebrew, there are 4 concise verbs. It reminded Calvin of Caesar's famous boast, *I came, I saw, I conquered*.⁶ But here, they came, they saw, they marveled, were troubled, & fled in panic. They were in **anguish like a woman in childbirth** (6) & were like sailing ships broken up by an east wind (7). Calvin applies these vss by pointing out that the church can expect to be attacked. God uses such assaults to humble us & to demonstrate His own great power. Then Calvin says, *At the same time, let us remember that a nod alone on the part of God is sufficient to deliver us...*⁷ That's why we should always look to God alone for deliverance, whether we're in a pit or surrounded by enemies. The truth is, the church will never perish. She may not seem like much to us at times. We may see her in all her weaknesses & warts. But we should never underestimate what God has planned for His people. The church is never going to cease because God is in the midst of her.

3. God & His Worship 8

Israel had heard stories of how God in the past had delivered His people from total destruction, but now they'd seen it for themselves. This should be the testimony of every child of God. You've

⁵ JJS Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*, p 389

⁶ *Calvin's Commentaries* Ps 48:4

⁷ *Ibid*, Ps 48:6

heard of how God has saved others but now He's saved you. You can add your story to that of others, that the Lord of hosts has rescued you from Satan's clutches. He's placed you in His city, which He will establish forever. We've heard of God's greatness, we have seen God's greatness. But have we thought on it? 9

Here are the worshipers remembering God in His city & praising Him in worship as they're gathered at the temple. There are 5 thoughts here that we'll only touch on:

A. Our Salvation Should Deepen Our Thoughts of His Love (9) They were thinking of how God had demonstrated His love in saving them from destruction. God is always faithful in His commitment to His love for us. Paul writes, **God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us** (Rom 5:8). We should think on that often.

B. Our Salvation Should Show Us His Name 10

God's name is all He is. It's His reputation. They were to dwell on the glory of who He is. We must do the same. After all, we'll be doing so for all of eternity.

C. Our Salvation Should Go From Us to the Ends of the Earth (10) As the story of how God delivered Jerusalem spread, so did His praise. His **righteousness** refers to His righteous judgment on the wicked kings who sought to destroy His people. As many Scriptures make clear, if we've experienced God's salvation, we're to spread God's praise & glory to the ends of the earth. When we proclaim the gospel, we mustn't neglect to tell of God's righteousness (Acts 24:25). People need a Savior precisely because they'll face a God whose right hand is full of righteousness.

D. Our Salvation Should Cause Us to Rejoice in God's Judgments 11

The **daughters of Judah** refers to the smaller towns surrounding Jerusalem. The cause of their joy, if this refers to Sennacherib's invasion, was 185,000 dead bodies of the Assyrian army. Many today that say they believe in Jesus are repulsed by God's judgments. Others tolerate His judgments, but they don't like it. But the Bible portrays God's people as rejoicing when He pronounces judgment (Rev 18:20). If we're saved, we should rejoice in God's judgments because they are always right & always good. Usually we think of God's final judgment as something that strikes fear & trembling in our hearts. &, of course, it's appropriate to view that day of reckoning with awe & reverence.

But the Bible makes clear that the day of reckoning, the day of judgment, will be a day of vindication & glory for God's people as God's enemies are brought to judgment. & here the author celebrates the judgments of God. God never acts out of character & here the psalmist is remembering God's character. When Jesus returns to defeat His enemies & establish His kingdom, His glory & dominion will be from sea to sea (Zech 9:9–10), & the city of Jerusalem will be named **The Lord our Righteousness** (Jer 23:6; 33:16).⁸

4. God & Our Future (12-14) The people have declared their remembrance of what they learned about God in the midst of worship in the temple. Now comes a challenge from those leading in worship. They turn to the congregation, & give a command: **12-13**

It's a call for the whole congregation to look at God's city & then tell their children about it. Perhaps the residents of Jerusalem had been cooped up within the walls of the city because of the army around them. But now the troops are dead & the psalmist invites the people of God to take a walk around the city. **Count her towers;** they're all standing intact, with no damage. **Consider her walls;** they're untouched. **Go through her palaces;** they're unchanged & magnificent. Then **tell the next generation** what God did to save His people in His city. Don't get this wrong. These vss aren't encouraging God's people to put their trust in Jerusalem's defenses. Rather, to see them still standing as a testimony of God's faithfulness toward His people. The city's protection was God Himself & not walls or towers. It was their responsibility to teach the coming generation about their God. The greatest danger every generation faces is that of not passing on & proclaiming the true faith. Each generation must pass along to the next generation who God is, what He's done, & what they must do in response to His goodness & faithfulness (Ps 71:18; 78:4, 6; 79:13; 109:13; 145:4; 2 Tim. 2:2).⁹ That's why we provide SS & primary church & youth activities. But realize this: Recent studies overwhelmingly stress the importance of nonparental adults in the lives of teens, especially in the church. Here's a quote:

⁸ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Worshipful*, 1st ed., "Be" Commentary Series, p 180

⁹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Worshipful*, 1st ed., "Be" Commentary Series, p 180

The #1 way churches made teens feel welcomed was when members of the congregation showed an interest in them: "More than any single program or event, adults making the effort to get to know the kids was far more likely to make the kids feel like a significant part of their church."¹⁰

You have been given the humbling responsibility of shaping how our youth view the body of Christ. So notice the kids & speak to them. Get to know their interests. Talk to them about what God has done for you. By doing this, you're following the commands of Scripture & may be making a more significant impact on their faith than any program, class, & activity ever can. Keep in mind, no church is perfect. No pastor is perfect. No parishioner is perfect. Not yet. But think about the church as God will one day reveal her to be. We need to rehearse to ourselves what the church really is & what she really will look like one day. Because Jesus is preparing His church for a day when He'll present to Himself His bride in all her glory, not having spot or wrinkle but holy & blameless (Eph 5:27).

Ask yourself, what's the most important thing happening in the world today? Is it in the cities of power in Washington or Beijing or Moscow? Where do you need to look to see the most significant event from a divine perspective? Where is the focus of God's activity? The most significant thing happening in history & today is the calling, redeeming, & perfecting of the people of God. God is building the church, the bride of His Son, Jesus. The rest of history is simply a stage God directs for that purpose. He's calling out & perfecting a people. History's climax comes when God brings down the curtain on this world & the Lord Jesus Christ arrives in His infinite glory.

Vs 14 ties the end of the psalm back into vs 1: **Great is the Lord & greatly to be praised.** This God is **our God forever & ever; He will guide us even unto death, or, He will guide us forever.** Whatever the translation, the meaning is the same. We can trust & follow & praise this God because He's faithful to deliver His people. Not even the most vile, evil rulers in this world can thwart His loving purposes for those who dwell in His city.

This psalm teaches us that the history & destiny of God's people is intimately linked with God Himself. Knowing that this God is our God gives us a sense of peace when we're under attack. It gives us a sense of purpose to serve His great cause of spreading His glory to all people. It gives

¹⁰ Kara E. Powell & Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids*

us a sense of belonging as we're a citizen of the city of Zion of this great King. Hopefully you can see how we as Christians can identify with a psalm that seems so linked to the times & places of ancient Israel. Just as the sacrifices & temple of the old covenant pointed beyond themselves to fulfillment in the coming of Christ, so the earthly city of Jerusalem points beyond itself. It stands for the heavenly Jerusalem, as we saw earlier. Zion remains the focus of Christian hope & anticipation, but not as a city in Israel. We love the heavenly Jerusalem as the present & coming place of fellowship where the people of God live with their Lord. Even the OT saints had a sense that the earthly Jerusalem pointed beyond itself, especially as they experienced the destruction of their capital. The earthly Jerusalem pointed to & is fulfilled in the heavenly Jerusalem. Peter knew the great promise that God made to Israel: **Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice & keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; & you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests & a holy nation (Ex 19:5–6a).** Peter applies this to the church saying, **you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Pt 2:9).** We're part of the people of God. Ps 48 isn't the local history of a foreign city but has significance for the ends of the earth. We can appreciate this psalm & all of the OT in a way the old covenant people could not. They had the promise; we have the fulfillment. They had the sons of Korah who wrote this psalm; we have Jesus who fulfilled this psalm. They sang in praise of the earthly Jerusalem; we sing in praise of the heavenly Jerusalem.

Let's apply this quickly: Don't despise the church. Don't be a Lone Ranger Christian. Don't move away from the city of God's people! God's purpose is bound up with a city. Move into His city & join together with the citizens of Zion in proclaiming the praise of His salvation to all the earth & to all generations. Make sure you're a citizen of the great city of the great King!

I want to close today the way the Bible closes, with an invitation to any who've never come to Mount Zion, the city of God, the new Jerusalem through Jesus Christ. The last 2 chapters of the Bible describe the New Jerusalem, coming down from heaven at the end of the age.

- It is adorned like a bride for her husband.

- In it every tear is wiped away, there is no more death, or crying or pain.
- Its radiance is like a rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal.
- There's no temple in the city because the temple is the Lord God the Almighty & Jesus Christ the Lamb.
- There is no sun or moon to shine because the glory of God Himself is its light & the lamp is the Lamb.
- At the center of the city is the throne of God & flowing out from the throne is a river of the water of life.
- On either side of the river is the tree of life that bears fruit forever.
- The dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them & they shall be His people & He'll be their God & their light & their joy, & they shall reign forever & ever.

The Spirit & the bride say, "Come." & let the one who hears say, "Come." & let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost (Rev 22:17). I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost (21:6).