

# 1. Safe only in the City of God: An Unashamed Confidence

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, if you'd open your Bibles, we're going to read Psalm 48. It's page 472, page 472 in our church Bibles here. And I'm sure many of you will know this psalm.

Begins a song, a psalm of the sons of Korah. Psalm 48, page 472. 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, he has made himself known as a fortress. 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.

[ 1 : 06 ] 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. 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. Your right hand is filled with righteousness. Let Mount Zion be glad. Let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of your judgments.

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. Amen. Well now, I want to think, first of all today, about what it means to be safe only in the city of God.

And about the unashamed confidence that the message of the Christian gospel gives us. In our culture today, in the world that we live in here in the West, we live in an increasingly, what we call it, a pluralist culture, don't we?

[ 2 : 23 ] A pluralist mindset. Our governments, our media, our institutions, they're all obsessed, aren't they, with a message, a gospel even, of relativism and tolerance.

That means that everything is to be tolerated except, well, there's one view that can't ever be tolerated. And that, of course, is the view that there is, in fact, an absolute morality.

That there is a definite and clear and permanent and forever set of values that tell us what is right and wrong. That's the one thing our tolerant society can't seem to tolerate very well.

We can't think that. We can't tolerate someone who says, for example, that there's only one true religion. Or that there's only one true morality, one true truth.

A truth by which everything else and every other thing in the world must be measured. Our society is one that rejects that view. It says, well, there's no such thing anywhere as universal truth.

[ 3 : 34 ] All truth, all values are just, well, they're just cultural. They're just bound by a particular time or place. And therefore, they can't be superior to another set of values.

Now that's, when you think about it, a very convenient way of thinking, isn't it? It's not surprising that it's so popular, because what it means is that in all kinds of things, nobody can tell me that I'm wrong.

So, on matters of sexual practice, for example, you can't dare to say that your values must be universal. If I want a promiscuous life, if I want to have a sexual life in all kinds of different ways that's against what you believe, what is it to you?

Why shouldn't I? How dare you tell me that I shouldn't live my life the way I want? We saw that, didn't we, just a little while ago. Do you remember? There was a big hoo-ha in the European Commission.

It's interesting, isn't it? The European Union seems very happy to have absolute rules for everybody as long as it makes the rules. You know, if it's matters of really vital global importance, like, you know, selling bananas by the pound, or not allowing to have cucumbers that don't have the right curvature, you know, really important things like that.

[ 4 : 50 ] We can impose that upon the whole continent. But, interesting, the European Commission doesn't seem to like anybody else having absolute morality from somewhere else.

So, do you remember a year or two ago, there was that Italian chap, I think Buttiglione was his name, wasn't it? And he was appointed as a European Commissioner. And he, it was a great outcry, and he was forced to step down.

Do you remember why? Well, he was a very devout Roman Catholic. And he'd been on record as saying that he believed that homosexuality was wrong. Homosexual practice, that is.

And he was on record as saying that marriage ought to be upheld as special, and having a sanctity of its own. Remember that? Now, because he held to those things, he was forced out of his place as a Commissioner in the European Union, because he can't have that kind of thing.

And it's ironic, isn't it? At the same time, we live in a world where the press and everybody else seems to constantly get into all kinds of self-righteous frenzies, all the time, when public figures seem to have transgressed or made a mistake.

[ 6 : 05 ] You're all the interest in Mr. Sarkozy at the moment, and his recent divorce, and his new supermodel girlfriend. We're always getting that, aren't we? So on the one hand, we can't impose our values on anybody else, or rather, nobody can impose them on us.

But at the same time, we're very, very quick, aren't we, to get outraged at what other people do. It's funny how we can be so supposedly tolerant and yet be very intolerant at the same time, don't you think?

Well, you see, we can pretend to be, because in fact, we've really redefined what it means to be tolerant. In the past, you see, we thought of tolerance this way.

Tolerance meant a willingness to put up with, to tolerate points of view which you strongly and sincerely disagreed with. Views that you thought were wrong, but you tolerated them.

It's a mark of a civilized society, isn't it, to do that? You don't go and murder your neighbor just because you think his religion is wrong. Of course not. But you still might think it's quite wrong. You don't give up in your belief that you're right and he is wrong, but you tolerate him.

[ 7 : 16 ] In fact, if you think about it, to be tolerant presupposes a belief in absolute truth. You don't tolerate something, unless you actually believe it to be wrong in the first place.

Isn't that right? Otherwise, there wouldn't be anything to tolerate. But you see, now, tolerance has come to mean something very different indeed, hasn't it? It means a refusal to accept that there actually is anything absolute, like right and wrong.

No absolute view of the truth at all. And in fact, the so-called tolerance has actually come to mean total intolerance of anybody who does hold firmly and unashamedly to a set of convictions, especially if those are convictions that go against the current mood of society, as to what everybody should be thinking.

That means that the new tolerance that we live in and amongst today isn't really tolerant at all. In fact, it really is a very great stride towards totalitarianism.

And that's something that Christians, Christian people, need to be aware of because it affects us. Anybody who reads the literature, for example, that comes from the Christian Institute, you'll know that many Christians have already fallen foul of these kind of attitudes in our society.

[ 8 : 36 ] These attitudes that are progressively becoming enshrined in the laws of our land as legislation is pushed through Parliament, supposedly in the name of tolerance, but actually, well, very intolerant indeed.

So you might have read of an elderly couple in the north of England last year who were arrested and who were put in the cells and were interrogated by police. Now, what had that elderly couple in their 80s done to deserve this?

Well, they'd written a letter to their local council and they just said that they felt it wasn't a very good thing that so much of their taxpayers' money, local income tax money, was being paid to promote

homosexuality.

And so they were visited by the police, arrested, interrogated, and put in the cells. Similarly, another man was arrested and charged with a breach of the peace because he was standing in the middle of a town street with a sandwich board that had texts from the Bible written on it.

And these were deemed to be offensive. You'll have heard that some of the university Christian unions, including the one at Edinburgh University, were banned from using all university property to meet on.

[ 9 : 48 ] Why? Were they threatening to bomb people or kill people or maim people? No, no. They were running a course called Pure, which simply is a course that teaches what the Bible says about sexual purity.

But that can't be tolerated in our tolerant world. But this prevailing attitude that's getting stronger and stronger in our world actually has affected the church, I think, in a much more dangerous way, a much more insidious way than these things.

These things, we may think, are scandalous. But we expect to be persecuted as Christians, so we don't worry too much. But far more dangerous is when our thinking in the church gets moulded and shaped by the thinking in the world.

So consciously or unconsciously in the church, we're thinking to ourselves, well, we've got to relate to the world that we live in. And of course, that's right, isn't it? That's true. But not, not if it leads us to changing and watering down and ultimately rejecting altogether the finality and the uniqueness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

Not if it means that the truth of the gospel gives way to relativism and so-called tolerance, the tolerance of multi-faith approaches to worship and belief, inter-faith thinking.

[ 11 : 19 ] No, if the church of Jesus Christ is to be faithful, it must be faithful to the faith once and for all delivered to the saints, as Jude says.

And we must contend for that faith in an ever more pagan and hostile world. And we must keep very, very clear in our minds that our message, the message of Scripture, the message of the Christian gospel, is an exclusive message.

It's a message of final truth and of absolute truth, not just one option among many. And that means, of course, that in a society like ours, as in any society, it's going to be an offensive message.

But we, as Christians, must be unashamed of that message, however offensive it may seem, because it's the truth. And because only that message is the biblical gospel.

And only the biblical gospel is an answer to the need of the people of this world. And indeed, the planet of this world that everybody's now getting, at long last, so worried about.

[ 12 : 35 ] And the world and the world's people, and here's the truth, according to the Bible, the world and the world's people can find safety only in the city of God.

That's what verse 1 of our psalm is really all about. It's saying that only in right relationship with this God, the Lord, the God of the Bible, the only God, only there is help and hope to be found.

So we're going to look at this psalm over the next few weeks, and we'll see that it couldn't possibly have a more contemporary message for the church today and for the world today. So I want to look today just at these first three verses.

And they're all about the unashamed confidence that is to be ours in the God that we know. Let's just read those verses again. 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.

[ 13 : 47 ] You see, he's saying we can have and we must have an unashamed confidence in the great king and in his one unique city.

There is one God. There is one faith. There is one church. There is one way of salvation. That's the Bible's message from beginning to end.

And it's the message of this psalm. The city of God, the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ is, as verse 2 says, the joy of all the earth, the whole earth.

That means that the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is for every tribe and tongue and people and nation, for every culture, for every background, for every intellect, for the whole earth.

That's what the New Testament tells us, isn't it? That's just what's being said here in the words of this psalm. It's very, very easy, isn't it, to lose confidence in the Christian gospel.

[ 14 : 55 ] And that's the root of so much failure of us as the church to be what we ought to be and to achieve what we ought to achieve. Because when we lose confidence in the gospel, we very quickly lose confidence in ourselves as well.

But you see, this psalm reminds us that our confidence is in one place alone. What is it for the psalmist that makes Jerusalem so great? Well, it's the presence of the Lord in that place, isn't it? Just like in Psalm 46, verse 5, God is in the midst of her. Well, look at verse 3. Within her citadels, he says, he has made himself known. God was present, wasn't he, in the midst of the temple in Jerusalem.

His covenant presence was represented by the Ark of the Covenant. That's why, if you read in 1 Samuel in the early chapters, when the Ark was captured, they said, Ichabod, the glory has departed.

God himself has departed from the midst of his people. And likewise, when the Ark returned, there was great joy because God had come back. And you see, that's an abiding eternal principle.

[ 16 : 04 ] It tells us about the uniqueness of the place that God chooses to dwell. Now, for the psalmist in the Old Testament, it was real enough. God was present there in the city with his people.

And yet, it pointed, didn't it, to something far greater, to a far greater fulfillment in Jesus himself. Do you remember what Jesus said? He said, he himself was the temple.

That's why he's called Emmanuel. In Jesus, God is with us in the midst forever. That's why Paul talks about the church as being the temple of the Holy Spirit of the Lord who dwells in the midst of his people now.

That's why when you get to the very end of the Bible in the book of Revelation, the heavenly city, it's ultimately fulfilled. God is in the midst of his people dwelling in the midst of his city forever.

The city of God is the unique place where God chooses to dwell forever. And that is now the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 17 : 13 ] That place alone is the fortress that can never be shaken. That's where the great king has revealed himself forever. That's where the great king reigns now and will do forever.

The New Testament tells us that terribly plainly in 1 Corinthians 7. As he said, Paul says of believers that we ourselves are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Peter in 1 Peter 2 calls us living stones who are being built into a dwelling place for the Lord himself.

He means those people who have been called into God's city, into his church, into his kingdom through the gospel. Now you see, we need to grasp, don't we, what an absolute claim that is.

And yet we need to hold to it with an unashamed confidence because that is the gospel truth. It's not like the confusion of all these New Age spiritualities that we have around us today, all the many books you'll find in borders, all the gurus, all the techniques to try and find inner peace and harmony and meaning and all these sorts of things.

It's not at all like the Eastern religions, the animism and the mysticism and Hinduism and all that kind of thing where you look for good luck and karma, by going to shrines, by doing meditation, all that sort of stuff.

[ 18 : 41 ] It's not at all about gleaning insights from all the different religions put together or from Islam or Buddhism or whatever it might be. No. This psalm and the whole Bible is unashamedly confident in the absolute assertion that this God, the God says verse 2, is God of all the earth.

There's nowhere else to go. That's such a common refrain all through the Psalms. It talks about God being the creator of the heavens and the earth. He's the only one, the all-powerful one.

That's made very clear actually in a very provocative way here in the second half of verse 2. Look at it. Our version says, His holy mountain, Mount Zion, is in the far north.

If you have an NIV, it says, the utmost heights of Zaphon is Mount Zion. Zaphon just is the word for north. But it often meant a particular mountain in the north, in Lebanon, where among the people of that ancient culture, the Canaanites, the pagan people there, they believed that that was where all the gods lived, on that mountain, Mount Zaphon, the mountain up in the north.

A bit like Mount Olympus, isn't it, for the ancient Greeks? That's where all the gods lived. Well, that's what these pagans lived. That's what they believed anyway. There's a reference to it, if you want to look it up later, in Isaiah 14, verse 13, where it talks about the amount of the assembly of the gods in the realm of the far north.

[ 20 : 16 ] And you see what the psalmist is saying here is he's just tackling that belief head on and saying it's all nonsense. All that stuff about pagan gods living on a mountain up north is all rubbish. It's Mount Zion, the city of God alone that is the utmost height.

It's Mount Zion alone that is the seat of the only true God. He is the one who dwells in the city. He is the great king. There aren't any others. Within her citadel, says verse 3, and the implication is there alone is the divine revelation.

There he has made himself known. See what the psalmist is saying is, I'm not ashamed to say that our God is unique. I'm not ashamed to say that our God is overall.

And I'm not ashamed to say that his city, his church, is to be the joy of the whole earth. It's a remarkable thing, isn't it? Right back there in the middle of the Old Testament, a clear recognition that the God of Israel is the only hope for all the peoples of the earth.

Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, just as the New Testament gospel proclaims it. You see, there's just no room for pluralism.

[ 21 : 37 ] No possibility that there's just, you know, as some people say, well, it's all just one mountain and all the religions are different roads up to the same place in the end. No, there's one place, says the psalm.

There's one way, there's one God. God. And to find him, you have to come to the place where he has chosen to make himself known, to reveal himself.

That's why it's so disastrous, disastrous, when in the church today, people are reluctant to evangelize, Muslims or Jews or Hindus or whatever, so as not to offend them.

I remember coming across a hospital chaplain who had refused to speak to somebody in hospital who was a Hindu about the gospel of Jesus Christ, even though that person had asked him to explain the gospel to him.

And then the same man was outraged when another Christian who had been visiting somebody else did go and speak to them and he tried to stop them. A man wearing a dog collar pretending to be a Christian chaplain.

[ 22 : 43 ] But no, you see, this psalm and the whole Bible tells us, no, we're to be unashamed. And we're to be confident in a unique God and in a unique way of salvation, which is proclaimed for all the earth and which offers joy to all.

That's why Paul says we're not ashamed of the gospel, because it's the power of God for salvation to all who believe, the Jew and the Gentile alike. The city of God, says the psalmist, is the joy of the whole earth.

God. The clear implication, of course, is that you can only either be for this God and his city or against him and his city. It just won't do to say that all religions are ultimately the same.

That's one of the reasons why that book by Richard Dawkins, *The Delusional God*, is such a weak piece of work. It just assumes that all religions are the same. But is a religion, let me ask you this, is a religion that says, well, beggars in the streets just deserve everything they get because of what they've done in a previous life.

Is that the same as faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who says, love your neighbour, whoever he is?

When I was in India not long ago, I saw a policeman kicking a beggar who was in the middle of the street, kicking his crutches away, kicking them under the traffic where they got smashed to pieces and kicking him as he wound his way on his back across a six-lane road.

[ 24 : 14 ] And I asked my companion, I said, won't anybody do anything about that? And he said, oh no, beggars deserve to be beggars. He said to me, all those people in the West who love Hinduism and Eastern mysticism, he said, they should come to India and see what that belief has done in a culture and in a country.

Is a religion that says, kill the infidel to advance the holy territory of Islam, is that just the same?

There's faith in Jesus who said, love your enemies and bless those who persecute you.

Is there no difference between the fanatical martyr who will die so as to try and kill as many people as possible and a Christian martyr who is willing to lose his life, to bring life to others, to save others, not to kill them?

Is there no difference? You only have to say it to realize how preposterous it is. Try and say all religions are just the same. They're not.

And so the first message of this psalm is a call to boldness, to unashamed confidence, because to be safe in the city of God, to be a citizen of God's city, is to know the truth, a truth that's revealed to

all who inhabit his dwelling place, that great is the Lord, the one true God, that he is the unique and great king of all the earth, and that in him alone is to be found joy for all the peoples of this earth.

[ 25 : 54 ] And our tolerant society will tolerate everything, friends, apart from that truth. That's what you'll find when you proclaim it and when you make it known. But we must be unashamed and confident of it, because this gospel alone, says the apostle Paul, is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.

Unashamed confidence in the God of the city and in the city of God. That's what we're called to in our tolerant culture today.

Well, let's pray. Lord, we do ask that you would give us confidence in your unchanging truth in the midst of this changing world. Help us, we pray, to be unashamed of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and of the one way alone of salvation and of joy.

And may we be strong and purposeful in pointing people continually to the God of our salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. And we ask it in his name.

Amen.