

### 3. Safe only in the City of God: An Unmistakable Task

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 30 January 2008

Preacher: William Philip

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, open your Bibles, would you? It's Psalm 48. It's page 472, 472 in the Church Bibles. And it's the third week we're on this psalm, so we'll be getting familiar with it now.

Let me read it once again. A psalm of the sons of Korah. 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 the whole earth.

Mount Zion in the far north, the city of the great king. Within her citadels, God 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.

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.

[ 1 : 13 ] 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. Well, keep the text there open in front of you.

And we're thinking today about the unmistakable task that we have as Christian believers. Now we've seen in this psalm already the unashamed confidence that the true believer has.

The person who knows that they have absolute safety and security in life and in death because they are citizens of this city, the city of God.

[ 2 : 20 ] That is, they are members of the place where the one true God dwells. Where the one true God of heaven and earth has revealed himself to human beings in this world.

Look at verse 3. Within her citadels and nowhere else, God has made himself known. And he's made himself known, it says, as a fortress, that is, as a place of salvation.

God has revealed himself in history and he has acted in history. And he has shown himself to be a fortress, a place of salvation.

And so it's this place, says verse 8, if you see there the end of verse 8, this place that God will establish forever. God's city is unassailable because of who God is and because of what God promises to do.

And that's why the true believer can have great assurance, isn't it? Great and unashamed confidence. It's because our safety depends not on ourselves, but on God.

[ 3 : 27 ] On his strength and on his power. But, this psalm shows us very clearly, that is not so, alas, for the unbeliever. For the person who refuses the protection of God's city.

Who remains outside, who's arrayed against God's city. Now, as we saw last time, there is an undeniable contrast between those inside and outside the city of God.

We can't miss it here. Look at verse 5. Those outside, the enemies who are against God's city, they're in panic. They took flight.

Trembling took hold of them. That's what happens to people when they come up against God and his eternal city. It's an undeniable contrast, isn't it? Between that and, well, look at verse 9.

The serenity and the calm of that verse, where God's people are inside his city, in his holy temple, in his dwelling place, meditating, thinking on his unfailing love.

[ 4 : 28 ] In total safety. Total security. Not a hint of danger. And that contrast is seen, and we saw this last time, in both the present attitude and the ultimate destiny of the people of the one true God.

The one who have the unique and the only revelation of God in Jesus Christ. And on the other hand, those who refuse that revelation. Who refuse God's place of safety in Christ.

Who refuse his kingdom. It's a total contrast. On the one hand, we have eternal safety and security and peace. But on the other hand, we have, well, eternal shock.

Shattering. The very opposite of peace. And that's what's vividly portrayed, isn't it, in the language of this psalm, in terms of armies besieging a city.

But actually, it's just the constant message, isn't it, of the Bible, right from the beginning to the end. We've been looking at it on Sunday mornings, actually, in Genesis, in the last few weeks.

[ 5 : 36 ] Genesis 10 and 11. The whole of the Bible, though, the whole of the story of human history is really a tale of these two cities. The city of God and the city of man.

The city of God, of those who accept God and rejoice in God and obey God and submit to God. And the city of man, a society, a world that is against God, that's ignoring God.

It's in opposition to God. Now, we've remarked already, haven't we, that in our world, our relativistic world, that kind of language is very offensive to people.

Maybe it's offensive to you. Talk of two alternatives. Of the arrogance, of daring to say that you can have an unashamed confidence that your way is the right way.

It's anathema in our world today, isn't it, to talk about undeniable contrast between those who are in and those who are out. Well, be that as it may, that is the Bible's consistent message.

[ 6 : 43 ] No two ways about it. Ultimately, every human being in this world must either heed the command of God, our Creator, our Lord, and swear allegiance to him, to be in his city.

Or, if we refuse to buy the deed of Jesus Christ, if we refuse that, we will inevitably consign ourselves to being an enemy against God, against his city, an enemy of his Son.

So we can't deny either the good and the proper unashamed confidence that the Christian believer can have, and indeed must have, or the undeniable contrast that there is between the true believer in Christ and the person who is not a true believer.

The contrast, says the Bible, between the friend of God and the enemy of God. And, if we're going to take the Bible seriously, we can't, I'm afraid, get around that.

But, and this is very important, listen carefully, this does not mean that there can ever, ever be any grounds of self-righteousness on behalf of Christian people, believers in Christ.

[ 7 : 53 ] In fact, it must be quite the reverse, mustn't it? Because they know that the only thing that there is, that is giving them the security of that privilege that they have of being inside God's city, is the privilege that God has given them of being inside that city, and being within his walls of salvation.

It's not their strength, it's not a believer's strength that protects him. It's not a believer's faith in the sense of holding on to God and clinging on to him.

It's quite the reverse. It's not our ability to hang on to God, it's God's promise and his power to hang on to us, and to have his walls of salvation around us. So, no Christian believer can ever, ever be smug.

No true Christian could ever be supercilious. Rather, they'll be the opposite, won't they? They'll be absolutely humble. And that means, too, that all their focus will never be upon themselves, because they know there's nothing in themselves worthy of God's protection.

No, all their focus will be on the God who has protected them and who is keeping them. That's what you see if you look at verses 9 and 10 of the people in this psalm. You see, they're taken up, aren't they, with God and his steadfast love.

[ 9 : 10 ] You see verse 10? And they also grasp, excuse me, you see verse 10, they grasp that there is a purpose for which God has saved them.

That having chosen them to receive his revelation of himself in this world, he has a purpose that through them his name, do you see, will reach the end of the earth.

As your name, O God, so your praises reach to the ends of the earth. You see, the implication there is that there will be people to the ends of the earth to praise his name.

Isn't that right? And don't be taken in by some of the ridiculous things that you might have heard sometimes about the Old Testament scriptures. You sometimes hear people say, well, in the Old Testament, you see, before Jesus came, there's no interest at all about anybody outside the land of

Israel or outside the people of Israel.

No, no. All the focus is just on the Israelites. And that's just nonsense, isn't it? If you read the Old Testament, you don't have to read the Psalms to see how much emphasis there is on people of the nations hearing about the true God.

[10:23] Listen to Psalm 67. God's people say, may God be gracious to us and bless us, that your ways be known on earth, your salvation among all the nations.

May the peoples praise you, O God. May all the peoples praise you. Just look at the very last verse of the Psalm that comes before our one, Psalm 47, verse 9.

Do you see? The princes of the peoples, that's the Gentile nations, they gather as the people of the God of Abraham. You see, God's people always, right from the very beginning, have been there because God's purpose is that all the nations should praise him, that all peoples should recognize him as the one true and living God.

And that brings us, you see, to our focus today as we get towards the end of this Psalm. Because God's people, those who are privileged to have been called into the safety of God's eternal city, God's people have an unmistakable task, don't they?

Just because they are members of Zion's city, just because they are called to be Christ, they are to be the light to the whole world, to the nations. They are to draw other people to see him, to know him, and to come and enter into his city.

[11:44] So that, as verse 2 says, Zion's city, the city of God, the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, is truly the joy of the whole earth. Now that's always been the unmistakable task of God's people, and it still is today.

And God's people will only be like that, won't they? If their meditation, if the focus of their thoughts is, as verse 9 says, focused on the steadfast love of God.

What does that mean? Well, that's a technical term almost in the Old Testament, the steadfast love. The covenant love of God. The loving faithfulness of God.

It's God's promising, saving love that he gives to his people. In other words, it's his gospel. And God's people will only meet their unmistakable task if their minds are full all the time of the steadfast love of God, of the gospel of God.

Isn't that right? Now you know, because when you've read the Old Testament, you've seen that God's people, Israel, often lost that focus, didn't they? You don't have to read the many books of the Old Testament to see that.

[13:02] You need to read the prophets calling them back to their true task. They turned their focus away from God, away from the Lord and his grace, and they began to focus on themselves and they became proud and they became inward-looking and they lost the sense of God's purpose for the world.

They lost all sense of their task to tell the world, to manifest to the world the truth of this God. And of course, we have to admit, don't we, that the Christian church's history hasn't been necessarily all that different a lot of the time.

Isn't that right? We've lost our focus so often on the covenant love of God, on the gospel of God. And that's why, through the ages and at various times and places, the church has been much, much more ineffective than it should be.

The church has been weak. It's been insignificant. It's fallen prey to its enemies. It's been weakened in mission. All because we've lost that focus on the gospel of God.

And that's what happens when God's people lose sight of the true gospel and its demands. It doesn't matter where we are in time or in history or in space. If we lose sight of God's steadfast love, his covenant love that is going to take his promise to the ends of the earth, if we lose sight of the message that is there so that the whole earth may see the gospel as the joy of their lives, then we'll never fulfill the task that God's given us.

[14:41] Only minds that are full of that preoccupation will be able to be the people that God wants us to be. And only minds that are full of God's desire that all peoples, of every tribe and tongue and nation should hear him and respond to him.

Only people like that can be balanced in our thinking about other things about God. Rejoicing, as it says in verse 11 there, in God's judgments. See, this verse speaks of God's people rejoicing in God's judgment over his enemies and over his people's enemies.

But you and I can only rejoice like that if we really understand and love the gospel. Because it's a gospel that tells us that it's Christ's triumph over his enemies that is accomplishing his great work, his proper work, which is to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. In fact, it's only when we really do get a right grasp of the gospel and a right understanding of God's judgments that we can grasp the very thrust of the gospel and the urgency of the gospel. Isn't that right? We need to understand that there is an undeniable contrast between those who are inside God's city and those who are not. We need to grasp grasp the eternal moment of what we're involved in, the seriousness of it, the urgency of our unmistakable task to know and to tell the gospel of God.

[ 16 : 20 ] Let me put it this way. The Bible makes it very clear and this psalm makes it exceptionally clear that you've only really grasped the meaning of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

You've only really grasped what the steadfast covenant love of the great King is for your life and for this world if you're somebody who not only knows but tells of that word to the ends of the earth and to the next generation.

If you're not a teller, you're probably not a knower. Look at verses 12 and 13. 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.

What do you see? They're to go around, they're to look at, they're to feast their eyes upon the means of their salvation, their city. Not because of its physical height and strength if you've been to Jerusalem, you'll know it doesn't really have that.

But they're to look around it and see the unscathed nature of this city that they're in. It's got enemies arrayed against it, huge armies coming against it, but every citadel is there, every tower is standing, it's unscathed.

[ 17 : 50 ] And it's because of the protection of the steadfast love of God. And when you see that wonder, you see you've got to tell about it.

To have all the armies of the earth outnumbering you, facing you down, in terror, and yet to be utterly unscathed because you are in God's city and he will keep you.

Well, that's something marvelous to be told, isn't it? And it's the same for us, isn't it? When we fathom the far greater reality of the height and the depth and the length and the breadth of God's love to us in Jesus Christ, isn't that something that has to be told?

In verse 14, you see, it says, we have to say, this is our God, there is no other. That's exactly the kind of language that the New Testament is always using, isn't it?

It tells us, doesn't it, that we are God's dwelling place, we're his city, we're his temple, we're his household. Think about what Paul says in Ephesians. We're built, he says, on the foundations of the apostles and the prophets and Jesus Christ himself is the chief cornerstone.

[ 19 : 04 ] And in that letter, Paul's telling us, look around, consider it, see the greatness of your salvation. He's praying that they will know the height and the depth and the length and the breadth of all that is theirs in the salvation of Jesus Christ.

Think about your future, he says to them, the heavenly city where God's presence is going to be in the midst forever with his church. See, Paul's letters in the New Testament do exactly what this psalm does, tells us to look at the salvation of our God so that we might tell of that salvation.

See, at the end of the letter to the Ephesians, that's what he does, isn't it? He says, be strong in the Lord and put your armor on. Take the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God, the Gospel of God and prayer.

Know so that you can tell. That's the constant message of the New Testament Gospel. Tell that this is our God. You see, the unmistakable task of God's believing people, the citizens of his city, hasn't changed from the beginning right up until today.

In fact, you know, it's only if somebody tells you that you know that they actually know something. Isn't that right? If you say to me, well, I know a lot, I'm going to say to you, well, tell me something then.

[ 20 : 28 ] And it's only if you're telling that you keep that knowing fresh in your mind. Last year, I was going to Portuguese night classes and do you know what? I can't remember the faintest thing.

I can't string two words in Portuguese together anymore. Why is that? I know you're going to say it because I don't spend nearly enough time on holiday in Portugal and I'm going to try and rectify that, but because I'm not speaking it.

Isn't that right? Now, if you are never speaking and sharing and telling of the glories of your salvation, those glories are going to fade in your mind.

The reality of it to you is going to disappear. You're going to forget. You show me somebody who tells the gospel, who loves to share the good news, who's constantly looking for opportunities to do that with other people, who's constantly wanting to bring others to hear the joys of the gospel that they know, and I'll show you somebody who knows the gospel, who's really got it in their heart. Whereas if you say, well, I know it, I know the gospel, I've known it for years. I never tell of it, I never share it. But according to the Bible, it may very well be that you're not nearly so sure of what you know as you think you are.

[ 21 : 48 ] So we need to ask ourselves, you see, are we taken up with these gospel landmarks? Are we taken up with them so that we really are telling others about them? It's so often a tragedy in the Christian church that we're taken up all the time with the wrong landmarks, with physical things, with buildings and finances and statistics and all kinds of stuff.

Now that's all necessary, of course it is, but it's so easy to forget the real landmarks of Zion City. Rejoicing in the landmarks of the truth of our salvation.

And unless we do that, friends, the next generation and the ends of the earth, they're never going to hear the things that really matter about the church of Jesus Christ, are they? There's a real danger there, isn't there?

Even for those of us who know the gospel. Because when we just assume things, well, I'm afraid they very easily get forgotten, don't they? We need constant reminders.

We need to constantly refocus our energies and fill our vision, fill our thoughts with the ramparts and the citadels of the truth of the gospel that we may tell.

[ 23 : 01 ] And that's our unmistakable task if we're citizens of Zion's city. And it's not a suggestion either, is it? Look at verse 12 and 13 again.

It's not, here's a suggestion. It's a command, isn't it? Walk about Zion. Look and tell. It's a command, isn't it?

Just as Jesus left his church, not with a suggestion, but a command. Go into all the world and make disciples, proclaiming the gospel.

You don't have to wait as a Christian for a call from God to do things like that. No, we've had a command from God already, haven't we? We have an unmistakable task, every one of us has. And that's the reason that God has brought us into this city. It's the reason he's brought us together. It's the reason, very probably, that he's brought you into Glasgow to live, or into the centre of Glasgow here to work.

[ 24 : 00 ] It's the reason God has called us to have this service in the middle of lunchtime, on Wednesday. It's so that we can know more, that we might tell more of the glories of Christ's salvation.

It's our unmistakable task. And it's a big responsibility, isn't it? But I hope you also notice in this psalm that that's not going to happen by accident, is it?

We know that in our own experience. But the psalm makes it very clear, doesn't it? It demands effort, and God does demand effort from us. First, in verse nine, you see it says we've got to teach ourselves the gospel.

That's verse nine. Thinking. Thinking about God's covenant love, so that our minds are full, so that we're feeding our minds with the truth, so that it becomes a part of us.

We're to be thinking about his steadfast love, his gospel of grace. But that's not enough. We've also got to train ourselves in the gospel and train ourselves in its communication.

[ 25 : 02 ] That's verses 12 and 13, isn't it? We're to go around it again and again. We're to learn every detail. We're to be practiced, to pass on everything that we've taken in. You won't get a job, will you, as a guide in the National Trust property, unless you know every inch of the place and can answer every question.

Well, go around, learn every detail, train yourselves in speaking of the gospel of Christ. And then, as verse 14 tells us, we'll be able to be tellers.

We'll be able to tell the world around. We'll be able to tell the generations to come that this is God, that it's him and no other that we're to worship through Jesus Christ.

Teaching, training, and telling. That's our unmistakable task. That's what it means to be a citizen of the city of God.

