

4. Safe only in the City of God: An Unavoidable Eternity

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[0 : 00] Let's read Psalm 48, a song, 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 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. For behold, the kings assembled and 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. As your name, O God, so your praises reaches to the end of the earth.

[1 : 05] 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. We'll keep that open and let's just pray together, shall we, before we study this together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you that it is indeed a living word, a word that spoke to your people then, thousands of years ago, and yet a word which speaks just as directly to us, your people today, because you are the God who never changes the same yesterday, today and forever.

And we know that our own human hearts have not changed from the very first days when man rebelled against your rule and turned his back upon you and sought his own way.

[2 : 18] Many things in the world have changed and are ever changing around us, and yet the sin in our hearts remains constant and constantly keeps us from you.

Yet, Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have not left us in our sin and our shame, but you are the God who has revealed yourself, who has made yourself known in your great city, made yourself known in the gospel, through the words of the prophets and the poets, and above all through the living word, your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

And so, Father, we thank you that in his name we can draw near to you and we can seek your word to us and that you don't hold it back, but you long and love to speak with us a word of power, a word that brings light in the darkness, a word that lifts us up and puts our feet upon a rock and shows us the way to your eternal dwelling.

So, Father, you have shed much light for us already from this psalm. We pray that you would be with us now as we study it one last time. May its message be etched into our hearts, we pray, for we ask it for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ and in his name.

Amen. Well now, Safe Only in the City of God. That's been our title as we looked at this psalm. And we've been in it now, as I've said, for three weeks.

[3 : 55] This is our fourth. And there's always a lot more in God's word, isn't there, than we think at first. That's why, of course, we need to meditate on his word, to think on it day and night, as, in fact, verse 9 of the psalm suggests, doesn't it?

We have thought on your steadfast love in the midst of your temple. Well, we've been doing that the last few weeks and we've seen so clearly the message of this psalm as we've done that, haven't

we?

It's a message that speaks, first of all, of the unashamed confidence of the true Christian believer, of the one who knows that he's found ultimate safety, ultimate security in both life and in death. And that's because he is a citizen of, he's a citizen, rather, of the city of God. Because he's found the one place in which the true God, the only God, reveals himself and dwells among his people. It's the message of verse 3, isn't it? Within the citadels of the city of God, that's where God has made himself known. That's his chosen place for his unique revelation of himself.

[5 : 00] It's his chosen place where he reveals his salvation for his people. And for the psalmist, of course, it was Zion City, Jerusalem, the city of the great king, the place where God dwelt in the midst of his holy temple.

But, of course, for every Christian believer, since the fulfillment of God's purpose in Jesus Christ, in the Lord Jesus himself, who is the eternal temple, who is the place where God himself dwells in bodily form.

For every true believer since then, that eternal place of God's dwelling with his people is in the Lord Jesus Christ, because he is Emmanuel. That's the message of the incarnation, isn't it?

He is Emmanuel, God with us, forever, dwelling in the midst. And so every true believer in Jesus Christ does have this unashamed confidence.

Not in himself, but in the strong tower of his salvation. The walls of salvation that have been accomplished around us by the death of the Lord Jesus Christ forever for sins.

[6 : 09] His walls of salvation, which surround every true believer that has cast their cares upon him. His walls protect from every enemy, from every accusation that there might be against us.

And they preserve forever those that love him. Alas, though, we have to say it's not so for the unbeliever, for the enemies who are still on the outside of God's city, who are refusing his protection, who scorn his offer of peace.

No, there's an undeniable contrast, isn't there, between the safety and the security of those who are inside God's city, and the shock and the shattering of those who are outside it.

Look at verse 6 again. It portrays it so graphically, doesn't it? Trembling and anguish, shattered by the winds of God. That's those who are against God's city, who refuse to enter, who come against it as enemies.

But that contrast, of course, can never be a cause for self-congratulation, can it, for those who are inside the city? No.

[7 : 22] We saw last week, didn't we, that it rather gives the people of God an unmistakable task, to know and to tell the gospel to the whole world, and to every succeeding generation, to rejoice in God, to know the truth, to come to find refuge in his city, in the place of salvation, in Jesus Christ.

That's why we saw last time, in these last few verses, 12 and 13 and so on, that we as God's people are called to teach, to teach ourselves about the gospel. That's verse 9, isn't it?

Meditating on his steadfast covenant love, that is his gospel promises. And we're called also as God's people to train ourselves to communicate the gospel.

That's what verse 12 and 13 is all about. Walking about Zion, becoming absolutely clear about the dimensions and all the varied wonders of our citadels of salvation, so that we can tell the world.

Verse 13, that you may tell the generations that this is God, that he alone is the God to be praised and to be worshipped. That binges us, doesn't it, to this very last little verse, verse 14.

[8 : 36] Let's look at it. What are we to tell? We're to tell that this, that our God, this God, is God forever and ever. He will guide us forever, literally, or as the footnote says, beyond death.

You see, the psalm ends, doesn't it, by reminding us of the most compelling reason of all for everything that it's urged on us so far. And that is, that there is, for every single living human being, there is an unavoidable eternity, a forever and ever.

This God is God forever and ever, not just for our lifetimes. And he will be the guide, the leader, of the eternal destiny of every single human being who has ever lived or will ever live.

He will be that leader and guide, either one way or the other. He will guide us forever. Some versions translate that as, he will lead us forever.

Literally, the Hebrew says something like this, he will drive us or lead us. It's a word that really means the picture of shepherding. He will drive us or lead us even over death.

[9 : 53] And that's why the footnote there says, he will guide us beyond death or forever as our text says. That's from the Greek translation which says, he will shepherd us into the ages.

And that little phrase, into the ages, is the New Testament's way of speaking about eternity. You see the point. What the psalm is reminding us is that this God is an eternal God and therefore the message of this God, the gospel of God, is an eternal gospel.

It concerns things not just now for this life, but it concerns things forever and ever. It goes beyond our mere mortal lives.

Our mere mortal lives, the Bible reminds us, are just like a puff of wind. They're like grass. They disappear compared with the ageless ages of eternity.

Excuse me. But this God, the psalm says, is a God who will shepherd the people of this world unto death and through death and even beyond death forever.

[11 : 05] But, we must ask the question, what kind of shepherd and what kind of shepherding will that be? You see, if this God is the only God, then there are only two possible ways that we can be related to him.

Isn't that right? You're either inside his city and you're a friend or you're outside this city and you're an enemy.

That's the picture of this psalm. Very plainly, isn't it? Unmistakable. That contrast. But you see, what has been true through all of time and history will also be true will also be true forever onwards right into eternity forever and ever.

That's the message of this last verse. You see, the psalm pictures for us the truth as it's been through human history and as it's been in our own experience and as it is today.

The undeniable contrast, the divide between those who are with God through the Lord Jesus Christ and those who are against him. But therefore, it is also picturing for us the ultimate eternal truth, isn't it?

[12 : 18] The consequences of that for the enemies and for the friends, for those outside and against and for those inside who are for. So on the one hand, you have forever security and safety.

Verse 8, established forever. And therefore, as verse 9 says, in the midst of God's dwelling place filled with the knowledge of the love of God.

Or, forever, it's like verses 5 and 6, isn't it? Terror and trembling and pain and anguish. Now you see, if we believe this last verse of the psalm, we've got to take that seriously, haven't we?

What the psalm is depicting here is something that the New Testament makes absolutely plain, absolutely explicit, unmissable. Our last few Sunday mornings, we've been looking to the ultimate end of the world as we know it.

We're still in the book of Genesis, but we're finding right there, there's prophetic material speaking about the very end of the world as we know it. In both senses of that word, end, on the one hand, there's the terminus, the absolute finish of the city of man, the world against God, which is destroyed forever.

[13 : 41] And on the other hand, there's the triumph of the city of God, God's kingdom and his people gloriously vindicated forever. And on Sunday mornings, we've looked all the way to the end of the Bible, to the book of Revelation, where again, we have graphic portrayals in that dream, that vision that John has of that end of the world as we know it.

It might be helpful if we just turn there today to have a look at it. Perhaps you'd like to turn to Revelation chapter 7. You'll find it on page 1032 in our Bibles.

It's worth looking at because it helps us to see how this undeniable contrast that this psalm pictures for us, how it becomes forever set in that unavoidable eternity for every person, every person in this world.

Just read from Revelation chapter 7 at verse 13 because it's a wonderful, wonderful passage, isn't it? It speaks of the eternal destiny of those who have loved the Lord Jesus Christ, who have rejoiced in his city here on earth, who have loved his gospel, who have loved his people, and who are secure.

Just look at it. Then one of the elders addressed me saying, Who are these clothed in white robes and from where have they come? I said to him, Sir, you know. And he said to me, These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.

[15 : 09] They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple. And he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more. The sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For, listen, the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water.

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. You see, he will be their shepherd. He will guide them to springs of living water. That's our psalm, isn't it? He will guide us. He will shepherd us forever beyond death.

And isn't that a wonderful and glorious picture of that shepherding beyond death of the Lord Jesus Christ? To the place of living waters? To the place where every tear is wiped away?

Isn't that something that you long for? We don't think about it very much most of the time, do we? But perhaps when there are tears being shed, perhaps when there are great longings and sadnesses, perhaps when there are feelings of many enemies and stresses and strains in our lives, the thought of the shelter of that glorious shepherding of the Lord Jesus.

[16:28] A wonderful, wonderful picture. But alas, in Revelation, that's not the only picture, is it? Turn back one page. What a contrast there is for the unbelievers, for those who have scorned and rejected the Lord Jesus Christ.

Revelation 6, from verse 12. This is the other side, the dark side. When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.

The sky vanished like a scroll that's being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth, and the great ones, and the generals, and the rich, and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb.

For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand? That's a terrible picture, isn't it? Hiding from the wrath of the Lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Listen to these awful words, too. Don't look them up from Revelation 19. He, that's Jesus, will rule them, shepherd them, guide them, same word, with a rod of iron.

[18:10] He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. You might remember another psalm that we studied a little while ago.

Psalms 2 uses that language, doesn't it? He will rule them, he will shepherd them with a rod of iron, he will dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel. Well, here it is in its graphic fulfillment.

You see, that is the undeniable contrast that's expressed in this psalm, extended into the unavoidable eternity that awaits every creature under heaven in this world.

There is an unavoidable eternity. You see, this God, the only true and living God, the God made known ultimately and forever in the Lord Jesus Christ, he will shepherd, he will rule every single human being over death and into that eternity forever in one of those two ways that we've just read about.

either as a wonderful shepherd leading to streams of living water, places of delight, wiping away tears, taking away every want, or else as a shepherd who leads you face to face with the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.

[19:37] It's very frightening, isn't it? As well as very wonderful. Revelation chapter 22 sums it up like this very starkly, Blessed are those who have washed their robes, who have believed the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, so that they might have the right to the tree of life and that they might enter the city by its gates, but outside the city are all of those who have rejected God and his ways, everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

And friends, that's how the Bible ends. Inside forever or outside forever. And you see, it's our attitude, our attitude to God and his city now, today, when we're alive, that will determine the attitude of God and his city to us then.

It's as simple as that. That's the message of the gospel. And that's why this psalm, like the whole Bible, that's why this psalm poses us a question that none of us can avoid, about an eternity that none of us can avoid.

And it's this, which side of the gates of that city of God are you on right now, today? Inside or outside?

Because safety in time and eternity is only found inside the city of God. Only in the dwelling place of God with men through our Lord Jesus Christ.

[21 : 21] Nowhere else in time or space or eternity. It also poses a great challenge too, doesn't it, though, to all who are safe within Zion's city who have trusted the Lord Jesus Christ.

It challenges us and says that we can and we must have that unashamed confidence in the uniqueness of Christ as Savior, in the uniqueness of his church as the only refuge for the whole world of every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

The only refuge from that wrath to come. It challenges us that we must recognize that there is today, now and forever an undeniable contrast between those who are inside the city and those who are outside.

They're not just the same. Those who have come to Christ and repented and those who have not and are still enemies and the wrath of God is still upon them. That is an undeniable contrast and we must never ever seek to sweep that away.

But therefore we must recognize that we do have that unmistakable task to know and tell the gospel to the ends of the earth and to every succeeding generation because there is an unavoidable eternity an eternity of wrath and fury for those who do remain as implacable enemies of the Lord Jesus Christ and his city but an eternity of rejoicing and gladness and wonder for all who will come to him and enter his city for all sorts even those who were once and for most of their lives even the greatest enemies of that city ever there were.

[23 : 07] Think of Saul of Tarsus becoming Paul the apostle. The greatest enemy will become the greatest friend. the only thing that has to change is they have to come from outside to be inside.

And Jesus says I am the door whoever comes in through me shall be saved. And everyone who does that however much of an enemy they have ever been he will shepherd lead guide to streams of living water the place of abundant joy.

So as we finish this psalm friends let none of us miss that great question or that real challenge to those of us who are Christians to know the safety and to proclaim the safety that is found only only in the city of God only in the place where God dwells forever as Emmanuel only in the person and the work of our Lord Jesus Christ but there is safety and there is security and it can be found it's found only in him to father bear and and father man wonderful .

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