

## 2. Safe only in the City of God: An Undeniable Contrast

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- [ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, let's turn to the Bible, shall we? It's page 472, page 472 in our church Bibles, and Psalm 48. And it begins, 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 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 we have 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 Lord, 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.
- [ 1 : 1 4 ] Let Mount Zion be glad, that the daughters of Judah rejoice because of your judgments. Walk about Zion. Go about 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 your Bibles open and let's just pray, shall we? Heavenly Father, as we come in the midst of a busy day and of a busy week, we turn our minds and our hearts to you, knowing that you are the God who is not distant but near, who is not silent but speaks, and who is not uncaring but desires, the good and the blessing of all of your people.
- And so we thank you, Lord, that we come to your word, knowing that you promised that as we gather together in your name, so you also will gather with us and be in the midst. And as we draw near to you, so you also will draw near to our needy hearts, giving us grace and mercy in all our time of need.
- So come to us now, O God, we pray, and speak to us. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, last time we focused, didn't we, on the first three verses of this psalm, and we said that those verses display for us the unashamed confidence that the Christian believer has in the God that we know, in the God that we trust.
- [ 2 : 5 4 ] An unashamed confidence, that is, in, well, an unequivocally unique and exclusive message about God and his salvation. It's a message that says that so clearly all through the Bible, but it's illustrated very plainly indeed in this particular psalm.
- A message that said there is one God alone, and therefore there's one place alone where God's salvation is to be found. You can be safe only inside the city of this God.
- That is, salvation is to be found only in one place, in the place where God has chosen to reveal himself, the place where God has chosen to make his dwelling place, where he can be found and known.

And in the language of this psalm, that means in the very heart of the kingdom of God himself, where he rules forever, that is, in the city of God, as verse 1 calls it. The holy mountain where God has chosen to center his salvation.

Mount Zion, the psalmist calls it. That is Jerusalem. The city, he says, of the great king. And it's there, says verse 3, within her citadels, no others, that God has made himself known as a fortress, as a place of salvation.

[ 4 : 17 ] Because there he was with his people. He was dwelling in the midst. He was preserving them as he presents himself in his temple in the midst of the city. And of course we reminded ourselves of the New Testament language, where we find exactly the same unashamed confidence in the unique revelation of God in one place alone.

And therefore an exclusive salvation in one place alone. And that is in Jesus Christ. Because he is the full and final revelation of God forever in this world and for the world.

And therefore he alone is the one place of salvation. Because he alone is the joy of the whole earth. And Jesus himself tells us that he is the fulfillment of everything the temple spoke of and foreshadowed.

The place where God dwelt. But he was and is Emmanuel. God with us. God dwelling with his people in their midst forever.

And so you see the Old Testament and the New Testament together are united and unashamed in their confidence in this unique gospel. Which is, says Paul, the power of God for salvation to all who believe.

[ 5 : 37 ] Jew and Gentile. Israelite. And all the nations. The joy of the whole earth. But of course to speak of that unashamed confidence today and to speak with that unashamed confidence in our kind of culture, our pluralist world, well it will inevitably provoke a reaction, won't it?

In fact that message has always provoked a reaction. There is nothing new in that. It has provoked very different, very opposite reactions when it has been proclaimed. And actually that's just what we see in the very central section of this psalm that we're going to concentrate on today.

It speaks of an undeniable contrast that there is between those who are members of Zion's city by the grace of God and those who are on the outside who don't know God and therefore in fact are opposed to God.

And again, that kind of language about inside and outside, about friends or enemies of God, righteous and the wicked, that kind of language is terribly offensive today.

But I'm afraid it's an offensiveness that it's just not possible to avoid if we're going to take the Bible's true message at all seriously. So let's look at verses 3 to 11 in particular today.

[ 7 : 01 ] And as we do, let's notice the undeniable contrast that they illustrate in both the ultimate destiny and in the present attitude of those who are outside the city of God as enemies and we see that especially in verses 4 to 8 and those who are inside as the people of this God.

We see that especially in verses 9 to 11. It's an undeniable contrast, isn't it? And it's one that's been there all the way through the history of this world right from the very beginning and right to the very present day and will be to the end.

That was true for the psalmist and it's just as true today. Look at verse 8. As we have heard, as it used to be in the past, so we have seen. So it is in our experience today.

Some will always rejoice in the discovery of the great God and the great King and will enter his city and rejoice in the midst of it. But others, others will always remain bitterly opposed and as enemies raging against God and his city.

So first then, let's look at what the fact of God's presence in this city means for the ultimate destiny of those who are enemies on the outside and for those who are God's own on the inside of the city walls.

[ 8 : 23 ] Look at verses 3 to 8. Now if you look carefully at these verses, you'll see there's a certain symmetry to this section of the psalm. It's a very common thing in Hebrew poetry. In our poetry, we tend to do things by rhyme, don't we, and rhythm.

So you have one line that rhymes with the next and so on. But it's not that way in Hebrew poetry. They don't rhyme. But what they do is they use symmetry a lot. And you have matching things at the beginning or the end of a section of a poem.

And it works its way in sometimes to the middle where the real focus is to be found. And you'll see that we have that here. If you look at the brackets in verse 3 and verse 8, we'll find that this little section begins and ends with God.

God, if you like, is surrounding his city. So verse 3, he is in the citazels of his city. And verse 8, he will establish his city forever.

That's just the line of the hymn that we just sang there. With salvation's walls surrounded. And you see, with such a safe and secure defense to the enemies, God's city is a fortress of war.

[ 9 : 34 ] It's impenetrable. For behold, kings assembled, verse 4, they came on together. But as soon as they saw it, they were astounded. They were in panic. They took to flight. Trembling took hold of them there.

Anguishes of a woman in labor. They were shattered by God. But by contrast, and complete contrast it is, to God's own people, the walls are a fortress of refuge.

And they rest safely within them. Look at verse 8. As we have heard, so we have seen in the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our God, which God will establish forever.

And they're inside, verse 9, thinking about his steadfast love, singing the praises of his name, quite safe. And as we have heard, it was so in the past, they say, so it is today.

We're safe in the city of the Lord of hosts. In a way, the symmetry of this little section focuses our eyes right on the very center of the whole thing, which is the second part of verse 5 and the first part of verse 6.

[ 10 : 39 ] And it's the enemies and their experience of God. They're in panic and flight. They're in trembling and anguish.

John Calvin, the great 16th century reformer, comments that what we see here is the very reverse of Julius Caesar's comment. Remember, *veni, vidi, vici*, I came, I saw, I conquered.

He says, they came, they saw, and immediately they were conquered. And you see what it's saying, this whole picture here in the psalm. It's showing us, isn't it, graphically, the total sovereignty of God over time and eternity.

It's he alone who keeps in and it's he alone who keeps out. It's not that God's people are superior in any way.

They don't have a superior army. They don't have superior weapons. It's not that their battlements or their citadels are superior. No, it's all about God. God destroys his enemies.

[ 11 : 46 ] And God makes secure his city and that's always the way. The past and the present and the future. And what matters is not the strength of the people, but what matters is whether the people are inside his city and having taken refuge there or whether they're outside the city and they've refused and they've set themselves against God.

That's the only thing that counts, isn't it? And it's that which determines your ultimate destiny. And you see, it's exactly the same, isn't it, with the church of Jesus Christ on earth.

The Bible tells us it is utterly secure forever. If it had been possible for the church of Jesus Christ on earth to be destroyed, it would have been destroyed long, long ago, wouldn't it? It would never have got off the ground after the resurrection.

The apostles would have been martyred and killed and the church would have died out. Or under the persecution of Nero or a hundred other tyrants throughout history. Behind the Iron Curtain or the Communist block of China or today in our Western secularism.

But it has never been possible to destroy God's church. It keeps on growing. And so also in terms of the eternal destiny of the church of Jesus Christ, the city of God.

[ 13 : 08 ] The New Testament is very clear, isn't it? It talks about a very real cosmic warfare that goes on in the heavenly realms. It tells us that our real battle is not just against flesh and blood but against powers and authorities arrayed against God and his people in the heavens.

But in Ephesians chapter 3 verse 10 Paul tells us that God's plan and his purpose for the whole of eternity is this. That through the church the manifold wisdom of God might be made known to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.

In other words all the foes arrayed against God and his people in the heavenly realms will be shattered and scattered. And the New Testament tells us, doesn't it, that that plan and purpose came to its fulfillment in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ in history.

Just like in verse 5 of our psalm when those enemies saw and they fled in terror. So also the enemies of God and his people saw the triumph of the Son of the Most High God on the cross and in his resurrection and they fled in terror.

That's what Colossians 2 verse 15 says. He disarmed rulers and authorities and put them to open shame triumphing over them in his cross. And just as in our psalm where the people see in verse 8 and are secure forever in God's city.

[ 14 : 41 ] So in Christ Paul tells us God gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Friends, I hope you can see that just as clearly as the psalmist here sees it in our psalm.

It's so important that you see that of where your protection really is. When evil assails you when perhaps you feel that enemies are coming against you. Might be enemies from outside wanting to mock or deride your faith or frighten you or oppose you as you seek to witness to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Or very often it may well be enemies within. Temptations. Accusations from our accuser the devil. Things that come into your mind and heart and seek to unsettle you and destroy your faith and make you feel as though you are not good enough.

But no. You are safe if you're in the city of God. And the Lord of hosts with all his vast power will protect you.

This is our God who establishes you forever and ever. You're in the city of God which God will establish forever and ever. That's so important you see because that means that it's not your feeble strength that you have to rely on is it?

[ 16 : 07 ] It's God who makes you secure. It's he who establishes you forever. The ultimate destiny of all of God's people is in his powerful hands.

It's not in your feeble faith. Isn't that a wonderful thing? See, he guards and protects his city and he will not allow the enemy to come in and defile those who are under his protection within his walls.

See, some Christians live with terrible fear, don't they? Some Christians live with fear of dark powers, of evil spirits.

They get frightened and scared about the occult and things like that. They may fear that perhaps they could be possessed by a devil or something. But if Jesus Christ is within us and we are shut in with him in the city of salvation then we are secure forever.

No enemy can touch us. We can't be prey to evil or magic spells or curses or anything else like that. Verse 5 is true. They see and they flee in terror just as the demons fled in terror from the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ as we read about him in the Gospels.

[ 17 : 23 ] Isn't that right? There's other Christians that I've met who live in fear that somehow their salvation can be lost. That they're unworthy of God that they're well maybe they've sinned the unpardonable sin.

Maybe you know people like that maybe you're like that. I've sinned the unforgivable sin and there's no hope for me. But listen this psalm is telling us and the whole Bible is telling us it's not our citadels that protect us and preserve us.

It's the citadel of the grace of God in the Lord Jesus Christ with salvation's walls surrounded you may smile at all your foes because all your foes can do nothing against the bulwarks of the grace of God that has saved you.

The city is surrounded by God he is within his city he's within his church and he makes her secure forever. I hope you realise that friends that is a wonderful comfort to any Christian believer especially if you're struggling as I often am a wonderful comfort.

My destiny doesn't depend upon my faith in the sense of my feeble hanging on to God no it depends on the fact of God hanging on to me and never letting go forever and ever.

[ 18 : 51 ] it's the fact of his presence with his people that is our security forever. Of course there is a sobering challenge there as well isn't there?

It's the fact that he is present within his city and not outside his city and that has stark implications too doesn't it for those who choose to be outside his city to side with his enemies.

for them safety and security like that can never be their ultimate destiny can it? It can only be as this psalm pictures shattering shock of total defeat.

That's an undeniable contrast isn't it? Here and all through the gospel. But it's not just in ultimate destiny that there's such a contrast between those inside the city and those outside his enemies the fact of God's presence inside his city with his church with the people he calls his own also reveals an undeniable contrast in the present attitude of people between those on the inside and the outside of the walls of salvation because those walls mean very different things to those two groups of people and that contrast in attitude also is evident in this psalm as well isn't it?

Outside you can see in verses 4-8 there's bitter opposition there's ferment there's rage and yet they're utterly defeated but inside within God's temple in his presence there's great joy look at verse 9 we have thought on your steadfast love O God in the midst of your temple the New Testament uses just that same kind of contrasting language doesn't it?

[ 20 : 40 ] For example Ephesians 2 Paul talks about those who are outside of Christ as being foreigners without God without hope object of wrath but those who are inside Christ he says have been made alive have been seated with him in the heavenly realms who are under grace and it's just the same here you see verse 5 they the enemy saw and it was terror to them and yet verse 8 we have seen and it leads to joy and wonder and security a totally undeniable contrast isn't it?

that's the undeniable contrast between the true Christian believer and the unbeliever it's often hidden of course in the humdrum of life but you see it you see it in moments of crisis you see it when people are forced to come into contact with God and the gospel and to consider the claims of Christ these things reveal that contrast starkly one of the things that reveals it most starkly that I see as a minister is the faces of people at funerals for example sometimes there are people there whose faces are just full of the horror of grief without any hope and you can see in their faces and in their body language the discomfort of just being in the whole church service they're desperate to get out they don't want to be there they want to go away and block out the reality of everything you've had to sit through and yet others are there equally full of emotion and grief but it's just not the same at all because for them there is hope there's joy even in the pain they're still singing the praise of God like verses 10 and 11 look at that your right hand is filled with righteousness they sing let Mount

Zion be glad let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of your judgments total contrast you sometimes see it in faces of people in any church service like today or a Sunday or anywhere where the gospel is being preached it's a difference between people who really do know and love the Lord Jesus Christ and therefore are rejoicing even in his righteous judgments and those who don't who may pretend to to others or themselves but they're really outside the city of God they sit through a church service well and quite a lot of discomfort as if even being in proximity to God's truth was difficult for them and uncomfortable like a woman in labor as verse 6 says not that it's about self righteousness of course it's not look at the focus of the praise in these verses 9 to 11 there's nothing smug about it is there the focus isn't on their own achievements it's not on themselves it's not all about me no it's all focused on God can you see that verse 9 they're thinking about your steadfast love verse 10 they're talking about your name being exalted and praised verse 11 they're talking about your righteous judgment it's not all subjective about me and us and how good we are it's all about God it's all about rejoicing in him and knowing him and being known by him and that is the undeniable contrast there is in attitudes to

God now between the true believer and the one who is really well whether they know it or not actually in truth siding with God's enemies there's the enemy of God who doesn't realize he is an enemy but his attitude to God is really all about himself he may think he's religious but what he really wants to know is what he can get out from God what he deserves from God what he wants from God God actually is his servant to do his bidding and therefore often that sort of person their attitude towards God is one of resentment because God hasn't always done their bidding and then of course there are those enemies of God who know that they are enemies of God and their attitude to God tends to be one of frank rage and hostility like the enemies here whenever they're faced with the things of God or talk about God you can see it but you see the true believer in her attitude or his attitude there's somebody who simply rejoices in the name of

God and in the love of God and in the righteous judgments of God there's an undeniable contrast isn't there in these attitudes to God as we have heard it's been in the past so we have seen it still as today and always will be I wonder what side of that undeniable contrast you find your own personal attitude is to God as made known in the Lord Jesus Christ is it resentment at God even rage sometimes or is it rejoicing in his name and his love and his judgments even in the face of danger and toil and snare well that undeniable contrast in our attitudes now promises promises a contrast in our destinies forever an undeniable contrast between the safety and the security forever of those who are rejoicing inside the city of

[ 26 : 28 ]    God in his dwelling place and the shock and the shattering of those who keep themselves outside in the place of rage or resentment undeniable contrast today and forever that's the message of this psalm it's the message of the gospel a lot to think about isn't it but very very important let's pray heavenly father grant that we may be those who rejoice in your walls of salvation because they have surrounded us and they have brought us in that we might rejoice in your steadfast love praising your name and being glad even in your just judgments in our lives so help us we pray through your son our lord jesus christ to see the truth and the light and therefore to walk in the way the one way the only way of true salvation for we ask it in jesus name amen but the next is one sorry aarest one one one one two one one