

With salvation's walls surrounded

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[0 : 0 0] Now let's pray together. In some words from Psalm 46, a psalm very closely associated with Psalm 48. Psalmist says, There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

God is in the midst of her. She shall not be moved. God will help her when morning dawns, the nations rage, the kingdoms totter. He utters his voice, the earth melts.

The Lord of hosts is with us. God of Jacob is our fortress. Father, we praise you for these words. These words, ancient words, and yet when we read about the nations rage and the kingdoms tottering, we realize we are very much in the world of today as well.

The warring nations, the particular little land of Syria, but many other lands where conflicts and turmoils rage, where there is famine, where there is oppression, where there is tyranny, where there is little sense of freedom and little opportunity to live lives of peace and happiness.

We commit to you this world, the world that you made, the world that you love, the world that one day you will remake, so that the whole earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

[1 : 2 8] And we thank you for these moments that we can draw aside from the good things and the bad things, from busyness, from leisure, from work, from all the other kind of things that occupy most of our days.

And we can come to listen to your voice. He utters his voice. The earth melts. And we thank you for the power of that word. We thank you that you have come to us, not in a way that we have to struggle and grow up ourselves in the darkness to find you, but you have given to us the written word, which so fully and faithfully points to the living word, Christ Jesus, the light of the world.

And Father, as we are here today, we pray that you will speak to us because we thank you. This is not just a big message for the universe and for the world and for the nations.

It's a message for each of us as individuals. We believe you have words to say to us, words that we need to hear. And we believe that these words can transform us.

We believe that because they are your words, that they speak into every generation, into every situation, including all our situations. So open your word to us now, Lord.

[2 : 4 6] Help us as we look at it together. And send us away from here, encouraged, strengthened, and challenged, as we ask all in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen. Now, if you would turn in your Bibles, please, to page 472 it is actually, Psalm 48.

This is a stand-alone service. It is not part of a series, but we are going to be looking at this psalm today. So we're going to read it together.

Psalm 48, which is on page 472. 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.

[3 : 46] Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great king. Within our 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 a panic. They took to flight. Trembling took hold of them, their anguish, as of a woman in labor.

By the east wind, who 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 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.

[5 : 08] He will guide us forever, or he will guide us beyond death. Amen. This is the word of the Lord, and may he speak to us through it. It is unlikely that if there had been competitions for the greatest city in the world at the time this psalm was written, that Jerusalem would have won.

It was, after all, a rather unimpressive little mountain fortress beside the great cities such as Babylon, Nineveh, great cities of Egypt, such as Memphis and Thebes.

It must have seemed very small and very provincial. And at first reading, you could imagine the psalmist is going over the top. Is this the psalmist being parochial?

This is my city. This is my home territory. Therefore, it must be better than everywhere else. That's making one elementary mistake.

The psalmist is, in fact, not talking about Zion, Jerusalem primarily. He is talking about God, the God of Zion, who has chosen to place his name in this insignificant mountain fortress.

[6 : 21] Just centuries later, he was to bypass Rome, Athens, and Alexandria, and become incarnate in Bethlehem. So it is here.

And we're going to look at this together. I've taken the title from the hymn we've sung, one of the many hymns based on this psalm, With Salvation's Walls Surrounded.

In this city, there is peace. In this city, there is security. In this city, there is happiness. And why? Because God is in the city.

Not because of its great buildings, not because of its industries, not because of even the famous people like David, but because the Lord himself is in it. The other thing to remember is this.

And when the Bible talks about Zion, Jerusalem, it means, first of all, of course, the literal city, which David made his own city.

[7 : 21] The city he took from the Jebusite inhabitants of the land and made it the capital of his kingdom. But also, this is the people of God in all times and in all places.

Savior of Zion's city, I, through grace, a member am. So let's remember these two things always when we read Jerusalem and Zion right through the Bible.

This is, and this poem, a poem of great beauty and great power, let's see, has inspired many songs, including the one we've just sung. It seems to me the poem really develops in three movements.

First of all, in verses 1 to 3, there is the beauty of Zion. Zion, as I say, is fundamentally beautiful because God is there.

God has chosen it. The city of our God, verse 3, within her citadels, God has made himself known as a fortress. This is the place, this is the time, this is the venue, if you like, for meeting with God.

[8 : 25] And I want to develop a little bit these two points I've just mentioned. This city, the city of our God, the holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is first of all, the heavenly city.

That language would be extravagant if applied to the earthly city. Holy mountain, beautiful in elevation. Zion is actually a rather unimpressive little hillock.

It's not a great towering mountain. There's no Mount Everest, there's not even Ben Nevis. It's a small and rather unimpressive little place. The psalmist talks about going up to Zion, but in fact, if you come from the Judean highland, you actually go down to Zion.

It's reflected in another psalm, as the mountains are round about Zion, so is the Lord round about his people. And yet, this is the place the prophets tell us the nations will come to.

Another song, we could have sung today, is, behold, the mountain of the Lord in latter days shall rise. Isaiah's great prophecy of how the nations will come to Zion and praise the God of Zion.

[9 : 32] And the author of Hebrews talks about, you have come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God, a place of angels in festivity, and to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant.

The reality of what happens beyond time and space. that means that when we worship God, we can never be parochial. This God, this God is the God of the whole earth.

So it's the heavenly city. But it's also the earthly city. Within our citadels, verse 3, God has made himself known as a fortress. This city needs to be defended of salvation's walls surrounded.

And this is going to be the theme of the next section of the psalm. within her citadels, God has made himself known as a fortress.

What's the real defense? It's not the city walls. It's not the fortifications which the kings of Judah, David and Hezekiah and others, put up. That's not what saves the city.

[10 : 37] It's the city of God surrounded by the prophet Zechariah at the end of the Old Testament speaks about the city surrounded by fire, the presence of God himself.

So, Zion is a beautiful place. Not beautiful because of the admittedly distinguished people who pass through it. Not beautiful because of its buildings.

But beautiful because it's become a window into the new creation. And through the Bible and the prophets, very often, like the prophet Isaiah for example, very often he switches about between the new heaven and the new earth and the holy mountain.

That's the mountain of Zion. So, that's the first thing. Now, the second thing in verses 4 to 8 is the safety of Zion with salvation's walls surrounded.

You may smile at all your foes. And this echoes an earlier psalm. The kings of the earth take their stand. The rulers gather together against the Lord and against his anointed one.

[11 : 43] That's 2. So, you see, once again, as we saw, there is a general application here. Verse 8, As we have heard, so we have seen.

Now, as we have heard, in other words, we have heard these stories about God defending Zion. Because hearing is the basis of all our faith. Faith comes by hearing.

And hearing by the word of God. And in a way, the psalmist drawing together the earlier scriptures and anticipating the other ones. He's talking about the stories of how that city was rescued.

But there's also probably a specific reference here. The kings assembled, they came on together. It's very likely that Psalms 46 and 48 refer to a specific time, a specific danger in the history of Jerusalem and of God's people.

And you can read the story of it in 2 Kings 18 and 19. You can also read another version in Isaiah 36 and following and a shorter version in 2 Chronicles 32, I think it is.

[13 : 00] This refers to the time when the great Assyrian king came against Jerusalem with his armies. The kings assembled, they came on together.

And this, of course, is a general reference, but the specific reference here to that time of great, great danger. And if you read the story in the scriptures, you'll discover that Sennacherib from Assyria, basically the land we call Iraq nowadays, from Nineveh on the Tigris, a far greater, far more impressive, far more dazzling, far more significant city, if you like, than Jerusalem.

He comes with his great hordes and on his way he has destroyed everything in front of him, destroyed Damascus, he's destroyed all the other towns of Judah, and now he comes against Jerusalem.

And indeed, Sennacherib has left his own account of this, his scribes, or more likely his spin doctors, tell the story. He talks about how Hezekiah was shut up like a bird in a cage in his holy city, Jerusalem.

Strange thing is, he never goes on to talk about capturing Jerusalem. He never goes on to talk about taking Hezekiah away in chains and in humiliation to Nineveh.

[14 : 25] He doesn't do it because it didn't happen. Because he came up against the greater king. He thought he was up against Hezekiah, this tiny little mountain fortress.

How could this possibly stand against him when greater cities, greater kings had fallen? But he didn't realize he was up against the great king himself. He didn't realize this was not the city of King Hezekiah, this was the city of the great king.

If you read the account, you'll discover that the Assyrians were destroyed by the angel of the Lord. God himself defended the city.

And that's probably what's referred to here. They were in panic. They took to flight. Trembling took hold of them. Anguish as of a woman in labor. Now, not all the details refer to that time.

But that time, like the verses I read at the beginning in Psalm 46, God is in the midst of her. She shall not be moved. God will help her when morning dawns. And the account in Kings says, when morning dawned and the people of Jerusalem looked out over the walls.

[15 : 31] The Assyrian army was gone. The beauty of Zion, the safety of Zion. And in verses 9 to 14, this is applied more widely, the message from Zion.

What is this actually saying? Tell the world what God has done. Verse 10, As your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth.

This isn't just an incident in history. This is the subject of praise to be told to further generations. Verse 9, We have thought on your steadfast love, O God, this great word, steadfast love, that means the covenant love that God commits himself to his people with promises he cannot and will not break.

in the midst of your temple. Now, at the time of the psalm, that of course means the Jerusalem temple, where God revealed himself, where God made himself known.

But it also, of course, means the whole of creation. Very often in the Bible, the temple is the whole of creation. The temple on earth was simply, if you like, an object lesson of that.

[16 : 50] And indeed, that begins right at the beginning of the Bible, when God created a place in the unfallen world, the Garden of Eden, where he could meet with his people.

And this is dramatized by the tabernacle and then by the temple. And even Solomon recognized that God was not confined in buildings.

The heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain you. How much less this house that I have built. Really ought not to call our own church buildings the house of God.

Because after all, the temple was a dramatic visual aid. The house of God in the New Testament was the people of God. The living stones were built up as a temple into the praise of God.

And notice the daughters of Judah, verse 11, rejoice because of your judgments. you notice that this is a theme that runs through the idea of God judging the world.

[17 : 54] The psalmist rejoice at that. Rejoice before the Lord, says Psalm 19, for he comes to judge the earth. And in the New Testament, in the book of Revelation, I want to ask you, where is hallelujah mentioned in the New Testament?

It's mentioned in only one passage, indeed Revelation 19, and it's mentioned three times, hallelujah, the Lord our God, the Almighty reigns, and he has judged, he's judged the great city of Babylon, the anti-God city.

And therefore, the judgment is actually a necessary preparation for the coming of the new creation. If God had not judged Sennacherib's army, if they had been left to destroy Jerusalem, if God had not, if God at the end is not going to destroy evil, then the new creation can't possibly come.

It's a groundswell of praise, as the nations praise God. There's a great theme in the Psalms, all the nations you have made will come and praise you, O Lord, and give glory to your name, and of course, the name of God carries all the authority, the character of God.

God. And verses 12 to 14, there is the praise and then there is the story to tell. Walk about Zion, go around her, that you may tell the next generation.

[19 : 24] Now, once again, of course, there are two elements here. There's the local element. Consider her ramparts, go through her citadels, number her towers. In other words, Zion is still there.

God has rescued the city. God has not allowed it to be destroyed. Tell your children as they grow up. Take them round the walls, show them the citadels and say, our God rescued this.

Tell the story of God's protection. But secondly, there's the universal application. Hundred or so years after that, the city was to be destroyed by the Babylonians.

The Lord did not rescue it then. Indeed, not only did the Lord not rescue it, he actually sent the Babylonians as judgment. It was rebuilt, destroyed, and rebuilt.

But the living temple grows to become a holy temple in the Lord. So you see, it's not enough to look back at this great story, the rescue of Jerusalem from the Assyrians.

[20 : 36] By the time of Jeremiah, had become a story which had made people complacent. They believed God would rescue the city from the Babylonians. In spite of the warnings of Jeremiah in Jerusalem and Ezekiel in Babylon, the city will fall, these prophets said.

But the city that will not fall is the city of God. You may tell the next generation that this God is our God forever and ever.

The local, if you like, dramatizations of Zion, any particular group, any particular church, at any particular time comes and goes.

But the city of God cannot fall. Faded for the world's best pleasures, all its boasted pomp and show, solid joys and lasting treasures, none but Zion's children know, because Zion is founded on the Rock of Ages.

So as we read this psalm, it's a great example of how the Bible presents the story. It takes this local story of Zion, this story of a small insignificant city rescued from a bully.

[21 : 56] But through that we look as if we're looking right down through long, long corridors to the time when God will create the new heaven and the new earth.

That's why the psalm ends as it began, not with Zion, but with God. Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised. This is God, our God, forever and ever.

He will guide us forever. And that's why our faith can never be in buildings and institutions and personalities. Our faith must rest on the rock of ages, Christ Jesus himself, who will bring in the kingdom.

Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. God, our Father, we praise you for the city of Zion, the pictures in the Old Testament and the reality to which they point.

We pray indeed that we may live as citizens of Zion, looking to the time when the whole earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

[23 : 06] Amen.