

Psalm 48: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 18 November 2020

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[0 : 00] 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. With 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 labour. 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 for ever. 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.

[1 : 08] 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 for ever and ever.

He will guide us for ever. Psalm 48, like Psalm 46, is a psalm about Mount Zion, the place where the Lord has put his name. The significance and the glory of Jerusalem arises not from its people, from its geographical importance or its topological prominence, from its buildings or its fortifications, nor even from its might and grandeur.

Its importance comes from the fact that the Lord has chosen to dwell there, among his people in his holy temple. The psalmist describes the city in ways that seem almost embarrassingly inappropriate to its actual strength, location and prominence.

Much in this psalm might remind us of Isaiah chapter 2, especially verse 2 and the verses that follow. It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills, and all the nations shall flow to it.

And many people shall come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths.

[2 : 28] For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples. And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. Mount Zion is re-envisioned in a sort of a new theological topology. The great mountains of surrounding people shrink, and the low ridge of Jerusalem is elevated to become like Mount Everest in its awe-inspiring height, inspiring worship, and striking fear into the hearts of all who would assail her.

The whole world flows to and from it. The glory of the city is the one who dwells there, and what a glory it is! Various scholars have suggested that a specific historical event likely prompted the writing of this psalm, perhaps the defeat of the besieging Assyrian army in 701 BC.

The psalm begins with a declaration of the Lord's praise, a praise that is located in the city of Zion. Zion is the place where the Lord's glory is most especially seen and present.

Mount Zion is described as beautiful in elevation, the joy of all the earth, and in the far north. All of these descriptions seem more than merely hyperbolic, clearly inaccurate.

[3 : 47] Jerusalem isn't in the north, it is on a very low mountain, and it was of relatively little renown among the nations. The psalmist is not discouraged in his surprising praise, however.

Irrespective of how Jerusalem might have appeared to the untrained eye, the truth was that this mountain had been exalted over all others by the Lord's determination to dwell there.

The expression in the far north might be a reference to Mount Zaphon, the mountain where the chief god of a near-eastern pantheon dwelt. But Zion is the true Zaphon, the true holy mountain of the Most High God.

Elsewhere, in Psalm 68 verses 15-16, other mountains are rebuked for their attitude towards Mount Zion. O mountain of God, mountain of Bashan! O many-peaked mountain, mountain of Bashan! Why do you look with hatred, O many-peaked mountain, at the mount that God desired for his abode? Yes, where the Lord will dwell forever. While there might be many pretenders to the claim of the holy mountain, Zion is unique.

Zion is the city of the great king, of the Lord himself, the king of kings. God dwells in the midst of Jerusalem's citadels, and by his dwelling acts as a fortress for the city.

[4 : 57] He is its great elevation. He is its high walls. The Lord, as the great fortress of Zion, has defended the city from assault. Mighty kings might try to assemble against her, but Zion will be secured from harm, and her enemies put to flight and shattered.

In Isaiah chapter 10, verses 32 to 34, the Lord prophesies the deliverance that he will grant Jerusalem from the Assyrians. This very day he will halt at Nob.

He will shake his fist at the mount of the daughter of Zion, the hill of Jerusalem. Behold, the Lord God of hosts will lop the boughs with terrifying power, the great in height will be hewn down, and the lofty will be brought low.

He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe, and Lebanon will fall by the majestic one. The enemies of the Lord will be struck with trembling and travail. They will be wrecked like ships in a storm.

Isaiah chapter 33, verses 20 to 23, describes this. Behold Zion, the city of our appointed feasts. Your eyes will see Jerusalem, an untroubled habitation, an immovable tent, whose stakes will never be plucked up, nor will any of its cords be broken.

[6 : 10] But there the Lord in majesty will be for us a place of broad rivers and streams, where no galley with oars can go, nor majestic ship can pass. For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our king, he will save us.

Your cords hang loose, they cannot hold the mast firm in its place, or keep the sails spread out. Then prey and spoil in abundance will be divided. Even the lame will take the prey.

The psalmist now reflects upon God's character, his steadfast love and his righteousness. His name and its praise reach to the ends of the earth. He acts faithfully and justly in his defence of his people from their enemies.

Considering all of this, the psalmist summons various groups to join him in his expression of praise, both the inhabitants of the city and its surrounding towns and villages, the daughters of Jerusalem. The hearer of the psalm is encouraged to walk about Zion, reflecting upon its defences, and upon the way that the Lord is the one who truly upholds them. As they do this, they should prepare themselves to pass on the message about the Lord as the glory and the defence of Zion to coming generations.

[7 : 24] A question to consider, how does the reign of the Lord from Zion relate to other nations in Psalms 47 and 48?