

Psalm 48

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[0 : 00] So good to be with you this morning. Let's turn our Bibles now to Psalm 48. I love that song that we just sang. You are worthy to be praised with every thought and deed.

A great God of highest heaven. And the psalm we have today is a psalm of great praise to that same God. So let's pray before we come to God's Word.

Great God of highest heaven, King over all the earth, thank you that you have revealed yourself to us through your Word.

Thank you that we can sing your praises together. Please help us now to listen humbly to your Word, to what you have to say to us. Please change our hearts and our minds to be more like Christ.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. So reading from Psalm 48. A song, a psalm of the sons of Korah.

[1 : 05] 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. 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. Selah.

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.

[2 : 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. So what is it that makes a city great? Or what makes a nation great?

I asked Google AI, what makes Australia great? Here's what it said. Australia's greatness stems from its stunning natural beauty, unique wildlife, vibrant multicultural cities, high quality of life with excellent health care and education, laid back lifestyle, strong economy, and abundant outdoor activities, all set within vast, diverse landscapes from beaches to rainforests and deserts.

What do you think about that? Sounds pretty good, right? Do you agree? Do you agree? Do you agree? Yeah. I'd say it's accurate. But I'd like to suggest maybe a little nuance that these are all things that are great about Australia, but not really what makes Australia great fundamentally, right?

[3 : 28] I mean, take the stunning natural beauty as an example. There's some pictures up here behind me. Yep, there we are. Now, these are all from the same country.

Hint, it's not Australia. I wonder if you can guess which country these are from. Have a look, have a chat, the person next to you. Rolling hills, lush valleys, mountains in the clouds, grassy plains, glassy blue lakes.

New Zealand. New Zealand. New Zealand, who you reckon? No, I. Any others? Canada. Canada. Argentina. Argentina.

Thailand. Thailand. Thailand. Well, these are actually all Nigeria. Who would have guessed? Would you describe Nigeria as a great country?

I would assume most of us maybe wouldn't. Maybe you don't know much about Nigeria. But if we wouldn't call it a great country, it's clearly not for the lack of stunning natural beauty.

[4 : 39] Nigeria has been in the news a lot recently. You may remember back to November last year, when 315 children and teachers were abducted from school.

Here are some news headlines I found just by scrolling the BBC Nigeria page back to November. I've only went back three months. And this is what I found.

It's a place marked by corruption, terrorism, crime, poverty, violence and injustice. And just last week, 160 people were abducted from three churches.

We can praise God that the students and teachers who were abducted in November have now been released. And we can only pray that the same will happen for these 160 brothers and sisters. So what makes a nation great? Well, a nation rises and falls on the shoulders of its leaders. A study in 2020 titled Leadership and Nation Development, which focused on Nigeria specifically, they concluded, no nation develops in oblivion or in abeyance of a competent, good and people-orientated leadership.

[5 : 59] Bad leadership in Nigeria gives rise to ill development, which manifest in the form of vicious monstrosities, such as misgovernance, corruption, ethnic or religious chauvinism, crime and terrorism, poverty, etc., which reinforce the distemporing of any positive development process.

We are blessed here in Australia to have leaders who, by and large, have our best interests at heart and are seeking to serve rather than to power grab. Now, I'm not ignorant.

We all know that it's not perfect. But I do think we all realize that when a nation is doing well, we praise its leader. And when it's doing poorly, we blame its leader.

And I think the Bible agrees, and that's why we should pray for our leaders, just as Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 2, which we read out a few weeks ago in our alternate Bible reading. He says, So all this is to say that the quality of leadership, has a real impact on the people of the city and nation.

What makes a nation great? Its leader. So as Paul has urged us then in 1 Timothy 2, let us now do. I feel like we need to pray in light of recent events in Nigeria.

[7 : 48] We can pray for the government there, and also for our own government. So please join me. Sovereign God, who is above all earthly rulers and authorities, you have given the kingdoms of men to whom you will.

You have appointed leaders over us to govern us, to reward good and punish evil. Father, we grieve when these leaders fail to submit to your rule, and corruptly seek their own glory and power, rather than yours.

We pray especially for the president of Nigeria, Bola Tenubu. We ask that he would seek to serve and protect the people under his care. That he would care about injustice, and would seek to use his power to put an end to the violence that is so widespread in his country.

We pray for these 160 Christians recently abducted. Father, have mercy on them, and return them safely to their communities. Above all, please keep them in your name.

Help them to persevere, to trust you, to stand firm, and boldly proclaim Christ, even to their kidnappers. We pray that you would convict the hearts of those who do evil, turn them back to you, turn them from their evil ways.

[9 : 05] But God, we thank you that you care about injustice, that one day soon you will right all wrongs, and execute justice on the evildoer. God, we pray also for Anthony Albanese.

We thank you that we Christians enjoy freedom from violence and persecution here in Australia. We pray that he will be wise in his leadership, that he will seek the good of his people, and he would know his position under you, the true and living God.

May we continue to live peaceful and quiet lives here in Australia, as we proclaim the good news of Jesus' kingship. It's in his name we pray. Amen.

So as we come then to Psalm 48, we are called to look at Mount Zion, the city of our God, and praise God, the King.

Over the last few weeks in the Psalms, we've been seeing that Jesus is the King of God's city. We saw his wedding in Psalm 45. We saw that he is our fortress in Psalm 46, though the earth and everything else in it gives way.

[10 : 18] And last week in Psalm 47, we saw that he's the King of all the nations, not just Israel. And now, we're invited to look at his city, Mount Zion, glorious and beautiful.

At the sight of it, God's enemies turn and flee, and God's people praise him. The aim of this Psalm is to lift our eyes, to see the prospering, glorious and mighty city of God, and respond by praising him, and telling the next generation that this is our God.

But where is this city? In the immediate context of this Psalm, it's Jerusalem. And we don't know exactly when this was written, or in what context.

By the language in it, it's likely to have been after a great victory, possibly during the reign of Hezekiah, and the victory God gave to his people over Assyria. Or maybe it was written during the height of King Solomon's reign, when it's praising the height of Jerusalem. And the section about God's enemies is maybe a hypothetical, that none will come against it when God is the king. But in any case, we know that today, Jerusalem isn't the city it was in Solomon or in Hezekiah's day.

[11 : 40] A mosque now stands where the temple once did, and it's a city that has been constantly, and still is, war-torn. So which city that God will establish forever, is this Psalm pointing us to?

Well, through Jesus, it's been revealed that it's us. We are God's city. The church, the gathering of God's people, we are the bride of Jesus.

We see that in Revelation 21, which we'll come to at the end. But we are God's glorious city.

Really? Doesn't quite feel like it, does it?

Especially on a hot Sunday morning in a school hall. Church can feel mundane. Life is messy and stressful. And yeah, we're probably all feeling a bit hot and bothered this morning.

Are we really God's magnificent city? Oh, yes we are. And I hope through this Psalm, to lift your eyes out of the dreary every day, to see how great our God is, that His salvation plan proclaims His glory, to rouse you to praise Him, and to spur you on in proclaiming His praises to the next generation.

[12 : 59] So without any further ado, let's look at this marvelous Psalm together. It starts with, 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.

The psalm begins by praising God. He is great, and greatly to be praised. The sons of Korah chose to use God's personal name, the Lord, capital L-O-R-D, Yahweh.

There's no confusion here from the outset, of who we are talking about. We are talking about the true and living God. Our attention is quickly turned to His city, His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, raised above its surroundings, exalted from among the landscape.

When I first read this psalm, it made me think of that scene, in Lord of the Rings, where Gandalf arrives in Gondor. He's riding up a hill, and the camera follows, to reveal, over the crest of the hill, a shining white city, glorious and magnificent, Minas Tirath, the city of kings.

[14 : 23] But here we're having described to us, an even greater city, the city of the great King. It's the joy of all the earth. And it's wonderful, isn't it, how arranged the psalms are, so that Psalm 47 came just before this.

Because we've just seen, that God is king over all the nations. Have a look back at 47 verse 8 and 9. God reigns over all the earth, and all the peoples.

So God's city is the joy of all the earth, the picture of his magnificent might and rule, brings joy to his people. Mount Zion in the far north, the city of the great king.

Now the far north, is probably referring to the dwelling place of deity. Because if you're familiar with Israel, you know that Jerusalem, isn't really in the north of the country. So what's this talking about? The NIV translates this verse, like the heights of Zaphon is Mount Zion, the city of the great king.

Mount Zaphon, or Baal Zaphon, is historically known to have been considered by the Canaanites as the dwelling place of Baal.

[15 : 42] Mount Zaphon is in the far north, and just have a look at this map. It's on the border of modern-day Turkey and Syria. And the sons of Korah then, are stating that the Lord is God.

It's his city, not Baal's, that is in the far north. He alone is God over all the earth. Mount Zion, the city of the great king, God's city is in the far north.

It is the dwelling place of deity, the only true deity, the Lord. The sons of Korah lead us in praising God by looking at his glorious city and attributing its glory to the God who reigns over it and from it, over the whole earth.

So what makes this city great? What makes her unshakable? Its leader, God. God is the fortress. He is her king.

And as we saw in Psalm 46, the only one who can stand firm and be a trustworthy fortress. He has made himself known as a fortress.

[16 : 53] How? That brings us to the next section. I'll start from verse 3. 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 we have seen. In the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our God, which God will establish forever.

So this section in verse 4 starts with a 4, telling us that what came before it is important. God has made himself known as a fortress.

For behold. And we see the way that God's enemies respond to seeing Zion. They assembled together against God and against his city.

[17:56] But as soon as they saw it, they were astounded. They were hit with panic. They fled away. Trembling and anguish overtook them. They knew they were defeated before the battle even began.

All at the sight of God's city. In a backwards kind of way, they see God's city and recognize God's glory.

They respond in terror because they are God's enemies. God destroyed them. By the east wind, he shattered the ships of Tarshish.

Those great and glorious ships, the epitome of wealth and prosperity, destroyed by the wind, by the God who controls the wind. The Lord alone is God over the earth.

The sons of Korah vocalize, as we have heard of these great victories, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our God, which God will establish forever.

[19:04] God's city proclaims his glory because it stands uncontested. It stands uncontested because God himself, the Lord of hosts, literally Yahweh of armies, is in her and has made himself known as a fortress.

The existence and endurance of Zion proclaim the greatness of the God who rules over, sustains and protects her. He is her God and he will establish her forever.

That brings us to the next section. 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.

[20:13] He will guide us forever. So the sons of Korah then turn their attention to God himself. They tell and invite us, their hearers also, to join in as they dwell on the steadfast love of God.

That defining character trait. He not only is a powerful ruler, able to silence and destroy his enemies, shattering their ships, but he is loving and his love is steadfast, unwavering, loyal, faithful. The existence of his temple in the city shows that he is with them. His name and praise go out together to the ends of the earth. God is known as the benevolent and powerful ruler of the whole earth.

His right hand is filled with righteousness. His judgments are worthy of rejoicing. He is the God of this impressive city Zion.

Just look at her, number her towers, how many of them there are. Consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels. Will any enemy dare come against so great a city?

[21:31] This is God. But as we've thought about briefly, we know that ultimately Jerusalem isn't the city described here.

No, there is an even greater city to come, where we will be its inhabitants. Now, just like when ACDC does their concert here in Brisbane, they'll address the crowd as, Brisbane, the city and the people are the same.

We are that greater city. We are members of it now, through Jesus. Come with me to Hebrews chapter 12. Hebrews 12, starting in verse 22.

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to the innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

And then come also to Revelation 21. Starting in verse 1. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

[23 : 20] And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.

He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more.

Neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. We are members of that new and glorious and greater city.

Through the redemption that is in Jesus, we have been saved out of the world. And into God's city that will not be shaken. When the psalmist calls us to look at the city of God, he calls us to look at the church of Jesus Christ.

Look at these people. Look how many there are. Look at how God has saved them. Look at how they follow Jesus the King. Look at his mighty work God has done.

[24 : 29] He hasn't left them dead in their sin. He has ransomed them, raised them to life with Christ, and prepared them to be the bride of his son. This is God, our God.

How great is he? And having looked at this great city, how are we to respond? With praise. Be glad. Rejoice greatly. This is God. God. Not only is he God, the king over all the earth, but he is our God forever and ever. Tell the next generation so that they know God too.

Tell them that this is our God, their God. Praise him. And so we return to where the psalm began. The Lord God is worthy of praise in all the earth.

He has rescued his people from the hands of his enemies. He has established them forever. While the cities of man rise and fall on the shoulders of their leaders who often let them down, God's city is forever.

[25 : 39] God is her fortress. He is with us as our God and we are his people. Praise him. Amen. So in the dreary every day as we gather in this heat, let us lift our eyes to see our God.

Look around. He has done this. He has gathered us. And one day soon we will be gathered together with all God's people from around the world in the new Jerusalem, the city of our God. Praise him. Amen.