Meditation on Psalm 48

First in a series called The Primary Purposes of the Church

# Scripture: Psalm 48

# Key Thought: Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised!

# Why did the Psalmist praise God?

## The beauty and security of the city of Zion – Jerusalem

Think back to when you were a boy or girl about 10. Home was a pretty important place to you. It was a place of safety and it was a place where your needs were met too. Usually, that safety and need-meeting was pretty much personified in Mom or Dad or both. Their presence is what made it home; what made it safe, what made it the place where snacks were handed out. As a growing boy my Mom controlled access to the refrigerator. When we came home from school, she would give out a snack. My favorite was a piece of bread and butter covered with brown sugar and a little cream added to moisten it. There was no doubt in our house that when we thought about home, it just would not have been home without Mom’s presence. So I look at pictures of the old homestead, sure I remember the building, because my brother still lives there, but when I think of my childhood it is mom’s and dad’s presence that I remember.

That illustration will help us very much to understand the Psalm. The Psalm writer is rejoicing in the beauty of the capital city Jerusalem. He calls it by its affectionate name Zion, a name which applied specifically to the height of the city upon which the Temple was built. Physical beauty may be part of the writer’s affection for Zion. The Temple mount was at the highest point of the city. No doubt Solomon’s temple was beautiful to look at. But the main theme of the Psalm writer is the beauty of the presence of God in the Temple and therefore in the city. This is what he really rejoices in. This presence has just been demonstrated by God’s deliverance of the city from its enemies one more time as the writer described in verses 4-8.

## The victory of God over Israel’s enemies

We are not told the occasion of the writing of this Psalm. So we are left to study the Old Testament and guess which of the victories that are described there might have been the occasion for the Psalm.

One commentator suggested the occasion may have been the great victory of Jehoshaphat that is described in 2 Chronicles 20. Israel was being invaded from the East by a huge coalition of Moabites, Ammonites and Meunites. Jehoshaphat responded by calling the nation to prayer and leading that prayer himself in God's temple. The people joined him in prayer and fasting. The Spirit of God revealed the military situation to one of the men of the assembly. Jehoshaphat appointed people to praise God before the Army. God set ambushes against the enemy coalition. When the Army arrived at the scene according to the divine instructions, they found only the bodies of the enemy troops. Instead of engaging in battle they simply carried off the plunder. God had won a tremendous victory for them. The army of the enemy was routed by divine panic and gave Israel a great victory.

The Psalm features a strong contrast between the panic of those who attacked Jerusalem and the confidence in God of the Psalmist. The enemies are described with words like; “astounded,” “in panic,” “trembling,” and overtaken by pains such as a woman would have during labor. On the other hand, in sharp contrast, the city of God is established, it is rejoicing, its people are pondering God’s steadfast love. Which group would you rather be in? That is part of the message of this Psalm. It is good to be on the side of God, the Victor.

## The character of God

The Psalm writer also finds himself being taught once again about the character of God through this time in his nation’s experience. The third part of the Psalm (verses 9-11) celebrates the wonderful character of God.

Take just a moment and think about how your spouse or best friend has acted toward you this past week. Think of three key words that would describe their character.

That’s what the Psalm writer did in these verses. Three keywords are used to help us think about and meditate upon the personality of our heavenly Father. They are chosen because they fit what God has done in helping Israel. What are they?

###  Steadfast love v. 9

The Hebrew word here is a special one, beloved by all students of the OT. It is Hesed. It was translated in the KJ version as mercy or lovingkindness. Sometimes it is simply translated as love. But I have always liked and preferred the RSV, NRSV, ESV translation family’s choice for it – steadfast love. It speaks both of the goodness and kindness of God toward his covenant people and of the faithfulness of God to his covenant. To the Psalm writer, the victory that God has just given them is perfect evidence of both the kindness of God to his people and of his faithfulness to his covenant to be their God and to hear prayer offered in his house.

###  Victory/ righteousness v. 10

The second characteristic of God for which the Psalmist gives thanks and offers praise is translated in the NRSV as victory. Actually this is a very unusual translation of this word. Most occurrences are translated as “righteousness.” NIV and ESV both translate it this way here as well. The intention of the translators, was to point out the thought that it was the righteousness of God, in the Psalmist’s view, that had brought about Israel’s victory. To be righteous is to do justly, to act uprightly and virtuously. That is how the Psalmist felt that God had treated them by delivering Jerusalem, his city, from its enemies.

###  Judgments v. 11

The third characteristic for which the Psalmist gives praise is the judgments of God. The word is sometimes translated as justice also. It refers to those decisions of God as to what is right and best. In this case Israel had benefited from God’s decision because of God’s mercy and their seeking of God’s face. If the incident in history that we mentioned during the time of King Jehoshaphat is the right one, then God had chosen to act decisively in answer to fasting and prayer by his covenant people and uphold the justice of their cause against the invaders.

The Psalm concludes with an important call to tell the next generation about the victory God gives and to praise his holy name, helping them to identify the Lord as their God as well. (vv 12-14)

# Why should we gather to praise God as well?

## The beauty and security of the family of God and the blessing of his house

One important way to apply this Psalm to ourselves today is to check the use of the word Zion in the Bible. Nearly all the time in the OT it either refers to the temple mount or is a synonym for the city of Jerusalem. But in Zec 2:7-8

 "Come, O Zion! Escape, you who live in the Daughter of Babylon!" 8 For this is what the Lord Almighty says: "After he has honored me and has sent me against the nations that have plundered you — for whoever touches you touches the apple of his eye” — NIV

Here Zion refers to the people of God – the nation that God is building rather than the physical city.

Taking this cue, we read 1 Pe 2:6-7 with a different prespective.

"See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." 7 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone," NIV

God sent Jesus to be one of his people Israel, and more than that --- the firstborn of many brothers and sisters who follow after him in faith; the cornerstone of the new building of God the Christian church, the family of NT faith.

So when I read this Psalm today, I can apply it by thinking about God’s faithful presence in his church, his covenant people of today. As I read about Mount Zion rejoicing, it reminds me that we as the church of Jesus Christ must also rejoice and for very similar reasons. And, just as in the Psalm, the villages of Judah, the small points around Jerusalem where the people of God went after they worshiped at the temple also rejoiced, so also the individual churches, the small gathering places of the people of God today, need to be places of rejoicing. It is one of the purposes of the church of God in every location—to rejoice in who God is and celebrate his holy and faithful character.

Php 4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice NIV

Heb 13:15-16 Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise — the fruit of lips that confess his name. NIV

This is one reason I start each service with songs of praise. Our praise to God in song and in testimony is part of the purpose God has for us as a church.

## The victories he gives us in Christ

Just as the Psalmist invited Israel to worship in the congregation God Almighty who gave them victory; so we also worship in the church God who gives us victory in Christ.

Think of personal victories that Jesus has helped you to win -- What about steps forward as a church or obstacles overcome as a church?

The ultimate victory is ours in Jesus. 1 Co 15:54-57

 “When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

55 "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. NIV

Every Sunday is a small celebration of the resurrection of Jesus and the victory he has won for us through it. This is the victory our faith celebrates. As St. John wrote, 1 Jn 5:4-5

“This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. 5 Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.” NIV

It is not only victory over death, but victory over the power of sin and selfishness in our lives as well.

1 Co 10:13 No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. NIV

## The character of God

As we celebrate the victory of Jesus, we also praise God for his character – honoring him for those same three characteristics that the Psalmist mentions in Psalm 48,

###  Steadfast love v. 9

###  Righteousness v. 10

###  Judgments v. 11

Consider the summary of Psalm 89:14-18 where the same thoughts are used.

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you. 15 Blessed are the people who know the festal shout, who walk, O Lord, in the light of your face, 16 who exult in your name all the day and in your righteousness are exalted. 17 For you are the glory of their strength; by your favor our horn is exalted. 18 For our shield belongs to the Lord, our king to the Holy One of Israel. ESV

# Conclusion

# So what is the purpose of the church that we are focusing on today?

 It is to echo the words of Psalm 48:1 with our voices and our lives: “Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised.”