

Psalm 48: Celebrating God's Powerful Presence

Psalm 48 is a *descriptive hymn of praise* that belongs to a group of psalms called *songs of Zion*, psalms that celebrate the city of Jerusalem and the temple as the epicenter of cosmic reality. The purpose of these *Songs of Zion* is to enliven our minds and hearts with thankfulness, praise and longing for the presence of God with us, as we learn to worship by worshipping.

Both **Psalms 46 and 48** describe Jerusalem under attack and could refer to any of the attacks upon Jerusalem. These *songs of Zion* praise God as the one who is present with the community of faith in Zion (Jerusalem); they show God protecting the city of Zion and its people.

1. Leviticus 23 and 24 give some indication of the periodic festivals and daily worship in Israel's tabernacle and temple. Read **Leviticus 23:15-22** to learn about the Feast of Weeks, called *Pentecost* in the New Testament (Acts 2:1, from the Greek word for "fiftieth"). Also called the Feast of the Harvest, the *Pentecost* feast's purpose was to recognize YHWH as the provider of all crops and the one who deserves the first fruit of all produce.

We can use our biblical and historical knowledge in combination with our imagination to picture Israel worshipping YHWH with **Psalm 48**, perhaps at a pilgrimage festival soon after an amazing time of protection and rescue from Israel's enemies. Read **Psalm 48** aloud as though you are a member of that worshipping congregation.

As an ancient Israelite, what are you saying about YHWH in verse 1? What do the poetic images of verses 1-3 reveal about Jerusalem? (Jesus quotes **48:2** in Matthew 5:35.) What makes this city so special?

The mention of the "north" or Zaphon in **48:3** refers to the sacred mountain of the Canaanites where their god Baal had his house. Of course, many Israelites were tempted to worship Baal, and this implied comparison is a way of attacking Baal worship: Why bother with Zaphon and its god Baal when YHWH dwells on Zion right in Jerusalem?

What do you think might have been attractive about Baal worship to Israelites? Why do you think people thought they could mix YHWH worship and Baal worship? Why might it be important to read Psalm 48 in its Old Testament context before proceeding to its New Testament interpretation and application?

2. The next stanza of **Psalm 48, 48:4-7**, describes attacking foreign nations with language similar to Psalm 2, mocking the futility of foreign kings who think

they can overwhelm the city of Jerusalem. **Why do you think the kings of the earth find Zion so terrifying compared to other cities they've conquered?**

Notice “For behold” at the beginning of verse 4, alerting the worshippers to the amazing *reason for their praise*: the greatness of YHWH in his actions and in people’s experience of hearing about and seeing for themselves God’s protection.

With its poetic sweep, **Psalm 48** tells a story of danger in the past and deliverance in the present, a powerful recalling of that experience. N.T Wright writes of **Psalm 48**: in *The Case for the Psalms*, pp. 82-83:’

It begins and ends with a celebration of Zion and of God’s abiding and effectual presence within it, and holds within that framework, first, the overthrow of the kingdoms of the earth and, second, the pondering of God’s love and victory by his people.

3. Read the statement of confidence in God by his people in verse 8 and notice what follows. What seems to be the specific purpose of *Selah* after verse 8?

Because of *who God is*, the promise of **48:1-3** is fulfilled in the events of **48:4-8**.

4. After this pause, what four aspects of *who God is* are voiced by **48:9-11**?

What’s the purpose of God’s people telling one another to “walk about Zion”? What do the “towers, ramparts, and citadels” represent?

What do you learn about the ultimate security, mission, and hope of the people of God in **48:12-14**? How are you engaged, and how would you like to be engaged. in communicating God’s power and love to the next generation?

5. Of course, the truth is that Israel grew presumptuous about God’s protection of the city, not listening to the temple dedication prayer that made it absolutely clear that God does not really live in the temple. (1 Kings 8:27) Both Jeremiah 7 and Ezekiel 9-11 gave warnings about Israel’s presumption and God’s eventual abandonment of the temple on the eve of the building’s destruction by the Babylonians. Psalms 74 and 79 are poetic acknowledgments that the city and temple have been destroyed. After both the city and temple were devastated, Lamentations bemoans the sad condition of the city, even alluding to **Psalm 48:2**:

All who pass your way clap their hands at you; they scoff and shake their heads at Daughter Jerusalem: “Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth? (Lam. 2:15)

The city and temple were indeed rebuilt decades later, after the Persians allowed a return of the exiles to Jerusalem. But this temple where Jesus worshipped and taught and where Peter preached in the power of the Holy Spirit on the Day of

Pentecost (enlarged by Herod and completed in the AD 50's) was destroyed also in AD 70 by the Romans, as Jesus had said that it would be.

The Zion theology was not smothered in the ashes of Jerusalem. It was transposed to a new key...the Zion psalms with their marvelous claims and promises were not discarded but were no doubt sung in anticipation of the new, the true, the ideal Zion to come. These psalms are undoubtedly part of the background to the picture of the new Jerusalem in Revelation 21, 22, the perfect place of worship under the new covenant, which will have no temple because 'the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple' (Rev. 21:22). (Hayes, *Understanding the Psalms*, quoted by Grogan, *Prayer, Praise, and Prophecy*, 115)

6. Allen Ross gives this summary of the central theme of **Psalm 48**:

The Lord is worthy of all praise and honor because, having defeated his enemies, he preserves his presence with his people and guides them throughout life by his faithful love and righteousness.

The motifs of Psalm 48 appear throughout the pages of the New Testament. (Ross, *The Psalms, Vol. 2*, p. 136-137)

Psalm 48 is a "we" and "us" psalm, a psalm about the security and the beauty of being part of the community of the faithful both in heaven and on earth.

Here is a quote from the Kellers's *Songs of Jesus*. p. 100:

The community of God's people is to be "the joy of the whole earth" (**Psalm 48:2**)—an alternate human society based on love and justice rather than on power and exploitation. The earthly Jerusalem never did draw in the nations, but the transformed community of believers in Christ did (Acts 2:41, 4:32-35). Do our churches do that today?

On this Pentecost Sunday, what stands out to you from what we've discussed as it applies to the church and to you as a part of the church? What are the promises to the church? What are the warnings to the church?

Here's a final quote from the Kellers's *Songs of Jesus*, p. 101:

Jesus is the true temple (John 2:21), and when we unite with him by faith we receive his Spirit and become a living temple in which God dwells (Ephesians 2:19-22)

In him, you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Ephesians 2:22