

IN PRAISE OF THE KING AND HIS CITY

Psalms 47; 48

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We're going to look at two psalms together that are somewhat linked by a theme. They're very upbeat psalms. I'm going to call these two psalms by one title "In Praise of the King and His City." Psalm 47 focuses on the praise to the king. And Psalm 48 focuses on the praise to the city of the king. I think we'll simply start by looking at Psalm 47.

"Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy. How awesome is the LORD Most High, the great King over all the earth! He subdued nations under us, peoples under our feet. He chose our inheritance for us, the pride of Jacob, whom he loved. *Selah*. God has ascended amid shouts of joy, the LORD amid the sounding of trumpets. Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises. For God is the King of all the earth; sing to him a psalm of praise. God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne. The nobles of the nations assemble as the people of the God of Abraham, for the kings of the earth belong to God; he is greatly exalted" (Psalm 47:1–9, NIV).

The language and the spirit of this psalm reflect what happened in the enthronement of a king. Psalm 47 really is a celebrative poem that takes an earthly enthronement of a king and translates that into a greater enthronement, where the sons of Korah, under the direction of the Spirit, put before the heart and the mind of the worshipper the imagery of God being enthroned as king. All of the people to whom this psalm would have come, who were Jerusalemites, would have had the earthly experience of watching a king enthroned.

Psalm 47, as an upbeat psalm, is one of six enthronement psalms in the Psalter. Each of these psalms focuses upon God reigning. They may be called "The Lord Reigns" psalms: Psalm 93,

OF PRAISE OF THE KING AND HIS CITY

Psalms 47; 48

96, 97, 98, 99. All feature prominently the aspect of the Lord reigning. They're wonderful psalms of praise and adoration to the king.

We look specifically at Psalm 47 as the first enthronement psalm. We want to ask how this psalm should be interpreted. There are three broad interpretations for an enthronement psalm. The first is to treat it as an historical psalm. There are some who would hold that this psalm was written when one of the Davidic kings assumed his enthronement. Therefore, this should be located as belonging to a particular king. Maybe this then became a psalm that was used repeatedly when a new king was anointed.

It may well be that the psalm had that kind of usage. But there are strains of language in the psalm that go beyond any human king. There are aspects which go way beyond historical situations.

It is suggested that we interpret the psalm in a second way: as used in liturgy or in worship. As given directly to help the people through song, drama, and dance, to celebrate the victory of God as well as the enthronement of a Davidic king. There are several references in the psalm that would lend it to easily be used in liturgy.

There are a lot of choreography possibilities with this psalm to be used in worship as well.

The third possibility for interpreting the psalm is to see it as a prophetic or eschatological psalm.

It looks forward to an end day, when all the world will see the Lord as king. This way of interpreting the psalm takes into account the general and universal character of the psalms. That it really is describing things that are not—nor have they ever been—true within human history.

There has never been a time when all the nations shouted to God with cries of joy. Nor has there ever been a time that the nations rejoiced that Israel had been established by God in the land. Nor has there been a time when the world has recognized that God has ascended amid shouts of joy.

OF PRAISE OF THE KING AND HIS CITY

Psalms 47; 48

There's much in this psalm that looks forward to that future moment, that the Book of Revelation takes us to, when the Lord is seen as enthroned in the heavens.

It may well be that whenever we read an enthronement psalm like Psalm 47 we should take all three views and realize it was probably used in historical situations. It was used most certainly in worship. And also, it lends itself extremely well to the understanding that there is a future day coming when we will see in the heavens with our own eyes the fulfillment of what Psalm 47 is talking about.

From the first word to the last, this psalm commemorates the excitement and jubilation of God himself being enthroned. It's interesting that in both Jewish and Christian use, this psalm has had an important usage. In Jewish use, this psalm was used as the key psalm for welcoming the New Year. It marked a time to remember that God is enthroned. In Christian use, this psalm has been especially connected with the Ascension. One can easily see how it can be linked with the Ascension by the phrase "God has ascended amid shouts of joy" (verse 5). What do you think the angels in heaven were doing the moment the Lord came back into heaven? I can't imagine that heaven at that time was going on with business as usual.

It's wonderful to think, when we commemorate the ascension of Christ, which is kind of a neglected theme in Christian circles, that this psalm can be used for that. The background is praise and worship. God is ruling. God is reigning.

I. The psalm itself is in three parts.

A. The first may be called "Our king, their conqueror," Psalm 47:1-4. Why it's called that is obvious from the vantage point of the psalmist who is writing as a Jew that God indeed is being celebrated by the Jewish people as king. Yet he has conquered other nations and they are now giving tribute to him as the conquering one.

OF PRAISE OF THE KING AND HIS CITY

Psalms 47; 48

The psalm does an important thing. There is in Israel today, among orthodox Jewish people, a kind of sectarian narrowness which is sort of like, “God bless me and you, us four and no more.” One of the things the gospel of Jesus Christ did was bring the good news that we are children of Abraham through faith to all the nations, the Gentiles. This psalm is wonderful in what it does. It anticipates the coming of the Gentiles into the kingdom of God. For those within the orthodox Jewish community today who look upon the Gentile in much the same way that the orthodox community did in the time of Jesus, they must have to move this psalm into a kind of prophetic mold. “When God has vindicated our position that day, then ultimately people will come around to our point of view.” From a Christian point of view, this is a remarkable psalm because it’s showing God, not as simply over one narrow group, but as the God who busts out of tribal and ethnic boundaries, and it’s a call to all nations and all peoples to celebrate the kingship of God. The nations are called to be jubilant before God on two grounds. One, who God is: He’s the awesome “LORD Most High, the great King over all the earth” (verse 2). The second reason they’re called to be jubilant is because of what God himself did for Israel. The idea of all the nations being summoned to rejoice because God has reestablished Israel in the land is not on the contemporary horizon. This Scripture is lifting us to a time when the nations, remaining in the world perhaps during the millennium, recognize that the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Christ and of his God and He shall reign forever and ever. What has been done for Israel as a people—instead of being a cause of division and stumbling and instead of Jerusalem being a divided city and a city that is over with—will become a cause for great rejoicing in all the world.

Certainly something to greatly look forward to.

OF PRAISE OF THE KING AND HIS CITY

Psalms 47; 48

I think if I were a Palestinian Christian, I probably would do a lot of thinking before I was able to say Psalm 47:3–4. Can you imagine having had your land confiscated or a road built through your property or having little civil rights in the country and yet saying, “How awesome is the Lord who has subdued the Arab nations under the Israeli power”? Maybe that can’t be done until the day when the Lord himself accomplishes it. When He reigns, His reign will be so just that all the nations will be able to say of Him, “How wonderful the Lord is.”

I find it difficult to be pro Jewish at the expense of being anti-Arab, because it’s obvious that a lot of injustice has been done to Arab people, including Arab Christians living in Israel. There’s tension. Here in safe Orange County, we can glibly trip through Psalm 47.

B. The second part of this psalm, verses 5–7, is the royal march and the royal welcome. The allusion in verse 5 to the fact God has ascended amid shouts of joy goes back to an historical event seen in 2 Samuel 6:15. When David brings the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem for the first time, God’s presence is epitomized in the coming of the ark, which carried the tablets of the Law, the pot of manna, and Aaron’s rod that budded. Those sacred instruments marked God’s signs to his people, Israel, in the exodus and in the wilderness. When the ark was coming up, David had a tremendous procession and danced mightily before the Lord. That scene is now taken and lifted out in a universal sign that when God comes amid shouts of joy, then there will be great sounding of trumpets and great praises to the Lord.

When the Lord is seen as enthroned and victorious, God’s people don’t stand by idly as this happens. They sing praises. In the Hebrew “sing praises” is one brief word, which signifies a much swifter and livelier action to the drama.

Finally, in verse 7 of that particular section of the royal welcome, there is an additional admonition, “Sing to him a psalm of praise.” The word is the word we have encountered as a

OF PRAISE OF THE KING AND HIS CITY

Psalms 47; 48

superscription of many of the psalms, which identified that psalm as a “*maskil*.” A *maskil* implies that it’s didactic or teaching. It involves singing a psalm that teaches a lesson. Generally, what is involved is something that has real content to it. What we have in the enthronement, the royal procession and the royal welcome, are two kinds of music. Simple words repeated over and over again, which give a beauty and harmony and come out of the heart. Then there is a *maskil*, a song that has more than a word or two to it of repetitive nature. Something that has profound teaching insight. Christian worship needs to bring both of those dimensions into it. We must do these kinds of things—of welcoming and praising the king—by saying the simple phrases—“Sing praises! Sing hallelujah!” But we also must put to our hymnody and our singing what Paul said, “I will worship the Lord with my mind. I will sing with my mind” (1 Corinthians 14:15). There’s that involvement as well.

C. Then verses 8–9, the focus is on one throne, one world. God reigns over the nations. God is seated on his holy throne. The nobles assemble as the people of the God of Abraham.

This psalm is saying that Abraham’s children are not only those who descended from Jacob, but Abraham’s children are also the nobles of the earth. This psalm, therefore, breathes a kind of universalism to it in terms of the multiplicity of backgrounds from which people come to worship the King of kings and Lord of lords. God is enthroned.

Psalm 47 is a great psalm of enthronement. On days when we think our own personal world is out of control, Psalm 47 is a great psalm to get out in a time of national danger or personal danger, and remind ourselves again that the Lord is in control and the Lord is enthroned and he’s not about to abdicate his throne. Earthly kings may abdicate their thrones, but God will not.

Psalm 48 adds to Psalm 47. They’re not generally treated together as a unit. But if Psalm 47 is in praise of the king, Psalm 48 is in praise of the king’s city. Jerusalem is seen as lifted up and,

OF PRAISE OF THE KING AND HIS CITY

Psalms 47; 48

really, as the capital of the earth. It also has a tremendous atmosphere of elation to it, that perhaps is there because the city has enjoyed a recent deliverance. Therefore, Psalm 48 can be linked with Psalm 46, which celebrated God's deliverance of the city from siege.

This Psalm 48 belongs to a category of psalms called the "Songs of Zion." Psalm 47 to the "Enthronement Psalms." There are, in all, five songs of Zion. Five of the psalms particularly celebrate the glories of Jerusalem. Psalms 48, 76, 84, 87, 122.

These songs of Zion are what pilgrims sang as they came on pilgrimage, on foot, in Bible times to the capital. They immersed themselves in this language. God is enthroned in his city. This psalm, likewise, can be broken down rather easily in terms of content. Psalm 47 is used for the Ascension, but Psalm 48 is used for the Day of Pentecost. It is in Jerusalem that the Spirit was outpoured and the church was born, and therefore it's an appropriate psalm to say, "Great is the LORD, and most worthy of our praise" (Psalm 48:1, NIV). Where else but in Zion? Where the Spirit was poured out upon the company of believers.

II. Psalm 48 falls into four parts.

A. The first part is the king in residence (Psalm 48:1–3). "Great is the LORD, and most worthy of praise, in the city of our God, his holy mountain" (verse 1, NIV). What is the psalmist doing here? First of all, he's seeing this city as it will be when all the nations flow into it. Isaiah 2:1–5 presents the theme of the day when Jerusalem shall be the capital of all the world—the political and spiritual capital—and all the nations will be flowing into it. Therefore, Psalm 48 picks up the language of liturgy and worship that can be used on such an occasion. Where Jerusalem, instead of being in contention in the world and being a divided city, will be the joy of the whole earth. The picture of Psalm 48:1–3 is not the picture of a religious sect in charge of Jerusalem that is mandating worship upon people. The picture in verses 1–3 is a joyous throng of all humanity,

OF PRAISE OF THE KING AND HIS CITY

Psalms 47; 48

who is coming to Jerusalem to sing voluntarily songs to God, who resides in His city. It will be a wonderful day when we can sing the songs of Zion on the temple mount. We cannot do that presently.

How do we treat this verse 2? When you're in Jerusalem, this makes much more sense if you read it in the King James. "Zaphon" is a term used in Isaiah 14:13. What the psalmist means becomes clearer if you cross-reference it with Isaiah. The whole of Isaiah deals with the king of Babylon, who wants to ascend into heaven. It's a picture of, not only the earthly king of Babylon, but it's taken by most Bible students as a reference to Satan himself, who is exalted in his heart and lifted up against God. To this king of Babylon, this satanic representation—or Satan directly—Isaiah says that God is saying to him, "You said in your heart, 'I will ascend into heaven. I will raise my throne above the stars of God. I will sit enthroned on the mount of the assembly on the utmost heights of the Zaphon.'" The devil is saying, "I will sit in the assembly of the highest mountain. I will be enthroned on Zaphon."

We're indebted to the linguists regarding what is meant by "Zaphon" and what it evidently meant within that time and culture. Evidently, among Semitic peoples, there was a common mythology that held that Zaphon was a high mythical mountain somewhere where the gods held counsel. When Isaiah is writing, the Spirit causes him to use this common understanding, this common false view that people had—but nevertheless a view that fits well—that Satan says, "If there's an assembly of gods anywhere, I'm the chief one. Go to the highest mountain and I'm ruling." Satanic worship is therefore seeing itself as the Everest of world religions.

What this psalm is saying is that it's not Satan at all that rules from the highest mountain—this mythical mountain—but God rules on that mountain. Nobody else is sitting on any throne, even

OF PRAISE OF THE KING AND HIS CITY

Psalms 47; 48

on the highest mountain. Zion is like that. It's elevated in the heavens. If you go to the highest spot on earth, there you will find God reigning. God is in residence.

Zaphon, in Psalm 48:2, represents the aspirations of all people for a place on earth where God's presence can be experienced. God's presence, of course, was experienced mightily on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, although I believe Jesus meant for His presence be experienced anywhere in the world. That's why He said, "They that worship the father must worship him in Spirit and in truth" (John 4:23). The psalm is saying that there's going to come a day when God will literally reign in Jerusalem. It's in effect a millennial psalm. I think it lifts us to the heavenly Jerusalem as well. God is in residence. God is not absent from his world. He's not absent from His universe.

B. The second part of the psalm is the kings in rout (verses 4–8). Since God is in the city, "When the kings joined forces, when they advanced together, they saw [Zion] and were astounded; they fled in terror. Trembling seized them there, pain like that of a woman in labor. You destroyed them like ships of Tarshish shattered by an east wind" (Psalm 48:4–7, NIV). It's interesting that ships should be used on a siege of Jerusalem, because Jerusalem, of course, is far from the ocean. What it's saying is that even the naval armada that came against Israel was smashed by an adverse wind. An east wind blows them back out to sea. God is intervening to defend his people. The imagery of a terrorized and broken enemy is succinctly put in these words, so the psalmist was able to say, in verse 8, "As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the LORD Almighty, in the city of our God: God makes her secure forever" (NIV). Verses 4–8 are appropriate for a time when Jerusalem, with its walls, has undergone siege and God has delivered her mightily. Jerusalem historically is a well defensible city, because it's surrounded

OF PRAISE OF THE KING AND HIS CITY

Psalms 47; 48

by natural defenses on three sides, with mountains. The only side it can be penetrated is from the north, but even there, with ramparts and walls that were built, it was difficult to take the city.

C. The kings are routed by God, who is in residence in His city. That brings us to verses 9–11, the third part of the psalm, which is a chorus of praise. “Within your temple, O God, we meditate on your unfailing love. Like your name, O God, your praise reaches to the ends of the earth; your right hand is filled with righteousness. Mount Zion rejoices, the villages of Judah are glad because of your judgments” (NIV). It’s interesting that in verses 4–8 the sight which horrified kings and put them to rout is the same sight that thrills the pilgrim. What frightens one person, to another brings rejoicing. To the pilgrim, to the one who has faith in God, Jerusalem (and the God protecting her) was not an impregnable fearsome fortress. But a city permanently established by God, offering peace and protection, so while the nations are scattering in flight because of God’s protection on the city, the pilgrim comes and, within the quiet of the temple, contemplates and meditates upon God in utmost security. It is therefore an appropriate text which suggests to us that in a world where many times we feel we are under siege, we may come to God in his city, and in our hearts find that we too are worshipping within his temple and we are safe there, meditating upon his name.

D. The last part of this psalm is a review of the ramparts of Jerusalem (verses 12–14). Verses 12–14 are a wonderful invitation to walk the walls of the city. This is really an invitation to periodically review your own personal and spiritual history in your life. Get to a vantage point and see the moments when God has met with you personally. When you’re going through a battle, you forget those things. You’re so engaged in the present that you don’t have perspective on the past. All of us have a personal history in which we have found God at work. From time to time, we need to “walk the walls” of what God has done in our life and recapture again that sense

OF PRAISE OF THE KING AND HIS CITY

Psalms 47; 48

of enthronement. If God can be in His city, then certainly God is in His people. We're called to celebrate that—to consider it and tell the next generation about him, that he's our God forever and ever.

I think these psalms present for us an opportunity to give a dynamic response to God in worship.