

The Dwelling Place of God

Psalm 48

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Give me a few minutes to set up Psalm 48. What I want to do is ask some questions so we can drill down into our hearts to help us think about what we really need in a crisis.

Think about it: There are seasons in life when everything seems stable. You know what I mean. The bills are getting paid. The family is doing well. The job is secure, and it seems like you have a plan. You know what tomorrow should look like.

And then something happens, and it seems like the wheels fall off. A frightening health diagnosis or perhaps your health fails. A highly valued relationship falls apart. Perhaps you lose your job. You have to relocate. Your child begins to struggle. Someone you love dies. Perhaps some financial security you thought would always be there suddenly isn't.

Then you find yourself asking: What can I actually count on? What is secure? What won't change? What won't collapse? What won't let me down? *What is it that I actually need right now?* Friends, Psalm 48 tells us what we absolutely need in that moment. And the answer of Psalm 48 is not: *"You got this."* The answer is: *We need the presence of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.*

Before we get into Psalm 48, I need to rewind just a bit to Psalm 46. Psalm 46 introduced us to God's powerful presence. Remember Psalm 46:4-5,

*There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
⁵ God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;
God will help her when morning dawns.*

These verses tell us about the powerful presence of God that we so desperately need when life feels fragile and uncertain, when it seems like the foundations are being destroyed.

Then Psalm 47 praises God as our Great God and King. This morning Psalm 48 teaches us that because the Lord is the great King who faithfully dwells with His people, we can rejoice in His presence, praise Him for His protection, and proclaim His steadfast love to the next generation.

So, here's the deal: When we read Psalm 48 through the lens of biblical theology, we discover something even greater. *"Zion"* points beyond itself. *Jerusalem*, *"the city of our God,"* points beyond itself. The *"temple"* points beyond itself to the coming of the fullness of the presence of God in our lives. Here's the bottom line: *All of these point to the presence of God among His people, which finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ, God the Son who came to dwell among us.*

When I hear people talk about their favorite Psalms, Psalm 48 is rarely, if ever, mentioned. Why? It is a Psalm of praise that is lofty, and we usually don't know what to do with high praise of God. There's also a lot of poetic imagery that we're not familiar with, so when we read a Psalm like this, we usually read to help us praise God and then move on to a more familiar or popular Psalm.

But here's what we need to understand as we dig into Psalm 48. Psalm 48's message is the redemptive storyline of the Bible. It reminds us that our greatest need is the majestic presence of Almighty God in our lives. It has been God's desire and plan to dwell with His people since He created all things.

Finally, Psalm 48 ultimately directs our eyes to Christ—the King who secures His people, the Savior who establishes His church, and the Shepherd who will bring His people safely into God's everlasting city.

Psalm 48 has four stanzas, so we will work through it using these stanzas as our outline. Here's the outline: In the presence of God we find (1) our praise, (2) our protection/peace, (3) our promise, and (4) our purpose.

I. The Presence of God in our Lives is our Praise (vv. 1-3)

Verse 1 picks up the trajectory of Psalm 46, which emphasized God's powerful presence in our lives. Now, v. 1 calls us to rejoice in God's powerful presence in our lives. Listen to vv. 1-3 again:

*Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised
in the city of our God! His holy mountain,
 ² beautiful in elevation,
 is the joy of all the earth,
Mount Zion, in the far north,
 the city of the great King.
 ³ Within her citadels God
 has made himself known as a fortress.*

Let's break these verses down. The "city of God" in v. 1 is Jerusalem. The Psalmist is painting a picture of what it is like to see Jerusalem, "the city of our God." Jerusalem was significant because God had chosen it as the place where His presence would dwell. The city was not inherently sacred because of its architecture or geography. Its sacredness came from the glory of God's presence.

Then v. 2 calls Mount Zion: "beautiful in elevation" and "the joy of all the earth." The psalmist uses "the city of our God," "Zion," and "Mount Zion" synonymously. They are all pointing to the place where God's presence dwells. All of these names for the physical city, Jerusalem, were beautiful, but, here's the deal, they were only pointers to the deeper beauty of the presence of God.

Look in these verses and notice what the psalmist does. He immediately directs our attention to God. The first word of importance is not "city." It is not the "holy mountain." It is not even the "people." It is "LORD." The LORD, Yahweh. We now see God's covenant name in Book 2. Prior to this, the Sons of Korah had been primarily using the Hebrew word *Elohim* for God. Now we see God's covenant name, and we must understand it because God's covenant and God's presence are inseparable, as I will show you later.

Here's what we need to notice: Verse 1 is the thematic verse of Psalm 48. Everything flows out of the presence of God. So, the psalmist begins with God's greatness because everything else flows out of it and depends upon it. Verse 1 is also pointing to the heart of Psalm 48, which is v. 9. Verse 9 is the Arkenstone verse of Psalm 48. It is the heart of the mountain, *Mount Zion*.

The bottom line is: God's people have reason to rejoice because God is great. The Lord is not merely somewhat greater than other gods or earthly rulers. He is infinitely greater because He is the Creator and sovereign Lord over all things. He is in a class by Himself. There is none like Him, He says in Isaiah. Therefore, He is "greatly to be praised."

Our worship, praise, and rejoicing in God should correspond to the greatness of our God. A small view of God produces small worship. A large view of God produces awe, humility, confidence, and joy.

I will always remember the illustration John Piper used in his book *Desiring God* to describe what it means to magnify God in our worship. He said there are two ways to magnify things. One is with a microscope. A microscope makes small things large so you can examine them. Then there is a telescope. A telescope takes ginormous things and brings them into view so we can behold the greatness of that object as much as we possibly can. The Word of God and the worship of God are like using a telescope to magnify God in our worship. We can't behold the fullness of our infinite God because we are finite, but we should strive to behold as much of Him as we can.

So, how do you worship and rejoice in God? Is your worship of God based on putting God under a microscope and trying to magnify Him by analyzing Him, or are you blown away by the greatness of who God is in His greatness and that His very presence dwells with you through Christ?

The late 20th-century pastor and writer, A. W. Tozer, consistently challenged the church to have an exalted view of God. He wrote in his wonderful little book *The Knowledge of the Holy*,

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man’s spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God. Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God. For this reason, the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the Church. Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God.”¹

Listen, the *holy mountain, the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, the city of the Great King, His citadels*, and *God as our fortress* are not about rejoicing in places and locations. They’re not about trusting places and real estate. It’s about trusting in and rejoicing in a person – the person of Jesus Christ.

Look, I want you to see what the Sons of Korah saw. They magnified God's greatness because they saw what God was doing. He was going to do something truly amazing through the promised Messiah.

I’m going to whet your appetite just a bit by reading Revelation 21:3. We’re going to come back to this later, but we need to hear its truth now:

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.”

Here’s the deal: If you have repented of your sin and trusted Christ as your Lord and Savior, then Christ dwells in you. Our hearts are temples of Christ's presence through the Holy Spirit. In Christ, the presence of our Great God and King dwells in our hearts.

Listen closely to what I’m about to say. If you’re a Christian, you should never say, “*I’m all alone.*” Now listen, you may “*feel*” alone, but you are not alone. Your emotions are lying to you. The enemy is lying to you. Someone is lying to you, and you need to believe Jesus and not the lie. Jesus was forsaken so you would never be alone.

If you’re feeling alone, you need to talk to someone who will listen and point you back to the person and work of Jesus. You need someone to pray for you, counsel you, and encourage you in the truth of the gospel. For the gospel is about the presence of God invading your heart and life. Christ in you is the hope of the glory of God dwelling in you.

However, if you’re not a Christian, then I’ve got bad news because you are all alone. No one truly has your back, and you’d better hope you’ve got this, because it’s up to you. But here’s the good news: You don’t have to be alone. Jesus came to save sinners out of the darkness of isolation and bring you into the marvelous light of the family of God. Cry out to Jesus to save you and He will.

II. The Presence of God in Our Lives is Our Protection and Peace (vv. 4-8)

Verses 4-8 praise God for how He protects His people and therefore gives us peace:

¹ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperCollins, 191), 1.

*For behold, the kings assembled;
 they came on together.
⁵ As soon as they saw it, they were astounded;
 they were in panic; they took to flight.
⁶ Trembling took hold of them there,
 anguish as of a woman in labor.
⁷ By the east wind you shattered
 the ships of Tarshish.
⁸ 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*

Christopher Ash says this stanza unfolds with a staccato rhythm. The kings came; they saw; they were terrified; and they fled. Verse 7 tells us that the Lord summoned the east wind and destroyed the ships of Tarshish, which had the strongest known merchant ships and navy in the world at that time. Then v. 8 concludes with the praise of the city of God. We know this to be the language of God's presence with His people. The bottom line is that God's presence protected His people.

The message of vv. 4-8 is really clear. *Does the presence of God cause you to panic or give you peace?* Those who did not have the presence of God in their lives were in a panic when they encountered His presence. In fact, they were going to go to war with God, but when they saw His glorious presence with His people, they despaired. The power of God's presence threw them into a panic.

On the other hand, those who belong to God as citizens of His Kingdom are protected and filled with peace. This is what v. 8 means. They have seen the LORD and know His presence is with them and that they will endure.

The fullness of v. 8 is seen in Christ's church. What God's people now understand is that by their faith in Jesus, they have the presence of God in their lives. *Jesus is the city of God.* He is the Prince of Peace who is established for all eternity as our dwelling place. In His presence we are protected because we belong to Him. We can rest in Him.

The question is: Does being in the presence of God cause you to panic or give you peace? Do you belong to Him so that, when you are in the presence of God, you know you are protected, have peace, and are not in a panic?

So, if the thought of being in God's presence causes you to panic, the question is: *How do we have peace with God?* We must go to Jesus, the Prince of Peace, who by the blood of His cross made peace between God and man.

For he himself [Jesus Christ] is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.

The only way to have peace with God is by trusting in the finished work of Christ on your behalf. While we were enemies with God, Jesus, the Prince of Peace, reconciled us to God by the blood of His cross. He purchased the peace of God so that when we stand in the presence of God we won't panic because we don't stand in our righteousness but clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

As I worked on these verses, I quietly started singing the old hymn, "*He Paid a Debt He Did Not Owe.*"

*He paid a debt He did not owe,
I owed a debt I could not pay,
I needed someone to wash my sins away;
And now I sing a brand new song,
"Amazing Grace," [the whole day long]
Christ Jesus paid a debt that I could never pay.²*

Do you want peace with God? Then you need to trust in the One who paid your debt of sin that you could never pay, and He will reconcile you to God by His blood.

III. The Presence of God in our Lives is Our Promise (vv. 9-11)

You have got to love vv. 9-11. Look at what's going on in these verses. Let's read them again:

*We have thought on your steadfast love, O God,
in the midst of your temple.
¹⁰ As your name, O God,
so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth.
Your right hand is filled with righteousness.
¹¹ Let Mount Zion be glad!
Let the daughters of Judah rejoice
because of your judgments!*

The people have gathered in the temple for corporate worship. They rejoice in God's covenant love for His people. They are praising God for preserving His people.

Here's what I want you to do. I want you to circle the word *temple* in v. 9. I'm going to come back to the idea of the *temple* in this verse at the end. Remember what I told you: v. 9 is the Arkenstone of Psalm 48. It is the heart of this Psalm, and the idea of joyfully worshipping God for His steadfast love in the temple is the pinnacle of Psalm 48.

Here's what I want you to do right now. Look in v. 9 and underline the phrase "*steadfast love*." The Hebrew word for "*steadfast love*" is *hesed*. It means God's covenantal, unfailing love. The people of God rejoiced that God made a promise and kept it, and now in worship they celebrate God's faithfulness.

Next, vv. 10-11 have an eschatological vibe. They tell us that the church's praise of God reaches the ends of the earth. It says the whole earth knows and sees what God has done in the past to save His people through His righteousness and preserve them.

So, as they thought on God's steadfast love, they looked back to the promise made to Abraham, when God promised him He would give him as many descendants as the stars in the sky. It also looks back to God's powerful deliverance of His people from Egyptian slavery and the Passover. It also looks back at the gift of the Promised Land. It also recalls every miraculous act of deliverance God performed to preserve His people, so the promise of the Messiah would be fulfilled in Jesus' coming.

Ultimately, as we read vv. 9-11, we see the promise made and the promise fulfilled in Christ. Jesus stepped out of heaven and came to earth. He was born of a virgin. Lived a sinless life. He kept and fulfilled God's law perfectly. He fulfilled the Law and the covenants because we wouldn't and couldn't. He died on the cross as our substitute to pay for our sins against God. He received the full wrath of God for our sin on the cross. He was buried in a borrowed tomb. But the grave couldn't hold the Son of God. He rose from the dead three days later, defeating death and hell, and set His people free from the curse of sin. He ascended to Heaven and is even now our advocate and mediator before God. Y'all listen to me! This is why we worship! We don't worship the law; we worship the One who fulfilled the law as our substitute and on our behalf. We fix our eyes on Jesus.

² <https://hymnary.org/hymn/SNP21979/21>.

If you're not a Christian, what should be your response to what Christ has done? You need to look to Jesus. It is to turn from our sin and trust in what Christ has done to save by fulfilling the promise of God. It is to praise our Great God and Savior Jesus Christ. We must sing vv. 9-11 with the gospel in mind and also with an eye to the final victory that Jesus will bring when He returns to take His people.

At that point we will see the fulfillment of v. 10 where every knee will bow on the earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord! What about you? Do you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior today? Have you come to Him and bowed your knee and confessed you are a sinner and called on Jesus to save you?

IV. The Presence of God in Our Lives Gives Us Our Purpose (vv. 12-14)

In this final stanza, the singing congregation is invited to go on a walk-about and tour the strength of *Zion*. The psalmist gives five imperatives to the people of God as they marvel at the place where the people of God dwell. Look at vv. 12-13a:

*Walk about Zion, go around her,
number her towers,
¹³ consider well her ramparts,
go through her citadels,*

This poetic imagery calls us to consider all that God has done to save His people and to cause His presence to dwell with His people. We are to walk about the word of God, and marvel at God. We are to worship Jesus, and we marvel that He came to dwell with us. We are to marvel at all He has done to save His people.

When we consider vv. 12-13a, listen to me: God does not call us to marvel at a building. God doesn't dwell in some special building. He dwells in the hearts of His people. He couldn't be closer to you. He lives in the hearts of His people so that you are never alone.

Listen, God's presence in our lives gives us purpose. Look at the next verses because presence and purpose are not at odds with one another:

*That you may tell the next generation
¹⁴ that this is God, our God forever and ever.
He will guide us forever.*

These two verses are one of the clearest applications in the Psalm. God's faithfulness is not merely something we enjoy. We are responsible for communicating it. Parents have a particular responsibility to teach their children what it means to have faith in Jesus Christ. The church also has a responsibility to come alongside of parents and help them disciple the next generation. We must not assume our Christian faith will automatically transfer from one generation to the next; we must be intentional about passing it along.

Friends, God's presence in our lives gives us our mission. When God's presence invades our hearts through the Spirit of Christ, our hearts begin to beat with His purpose. His presence in our lives motivates us to make sure every nation, tribe, and language hears about the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. You see, we exist not only to enjoy His presence but also to invite all peoples to come and enjoy His presence.³

Conclusion: Friends, the message that we can have God's presence in our lives is the heartbeat of Scripture. It is the question: *How can I know God? How can I have God in my life?*

Now, let's look at the Arkenstone of Psalm 48. Look at v. 9 again:

*We have thought on your steadfast love, O God,
in the midst of your temple.*

In the Old Testament, the temple is where God's presence powerfully dwelled with His people. The presence of God in the temple is described as deep, dark smoke or a dark cloud that is also filled with light. It

³ J. Josh Smith and Daniel L. Akin, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Psalms 1-50*, 335.

descended into the temple and dwelt between the wings of the cherubim on the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant. This was how God's presence dwelled with His people in that day.

However, the temple, as the place where God's presence dwelled, looks back to Genesis and creation, when God dwelled with His people in perfect relationship in the Garden of Eden. Then, after Adam and Eve sinned, the relationship was broken, and they were removed from the presence of God. That separation from God is what we are all born into. We are all born separated from God by our sin.

So, since Genesis 3, God began to work His plan to bring sinful man back into His presence through the seed of the woman. After the Exodus, He gave Moses and Aaron plans to build a tabernacle so His presence would dwell among the people as they traveled to the Promised Land. Then God gave David plans for the temple, and his son Solomon built the temple after David's death. At the dedication of the temple, the glory of the presence of God descended on the mercy seat in a thick cloud and smoke. However, the temple was never the final objective. The temple was a shadow that pointed forward to the greater temple, Jesus Christ. Jesus said in John 2:19-21,

"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But he was speaking about the temple of his body.

Then v. 22 tells us that was exactly what happened:

When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Jesus goes to the cross as the Ultimate Temple of God, and His body was destroyed by the wrath of God because of our sin. Then, on the third day, Jesus rose from the dead, victorious over death, to restore what was lost in the Garden of Eden. Not only was it restored, but it was made so much superior that we can even fathom what He has accomplished on this side of Heaven. When we get to heaven, I believe we will be shocked and embarrassed at all the amazing things Jesus did in our lives through His presence that we had no idea was going on.

Remember how I've been whetting your appetite with Revelation 21:3? Here it is. From Genesis to Revelation, the storyline of the Bible has been to get us back into the presence of God, which, by the way, is what we most need every second of every moment of our lives:

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.

Listen to me: Jesus suffered and died on the cross. He was separated from God by our sin so that in our suffering we would never be separated from the presence of God. The Apostle Paul said in Colossians 1:27,

To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, when we think of the steadfast love of God in our worship, we cannot help but proclaim v. 1:

Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised!

If you are here this morning and you are not a Christian, I urge you to call on the name of the Lord Jesus to be saved. Turn from your sin of ignoring and rejecting God and call on Jesus to save you. Give Him control of your life and begin to follow Him.