

PSALMS

Chapter 48

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. ⁴ 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* ⁹ 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! ¹² Walk about Zion, go around her, number her towers, ¹³ consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels, that you may tell the next generation ¹⁴ that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever

Ps 48† A celebration of the security of Zion (as viewed with the eyes of faith) in that it is the city of the Great King. It may have been sung by the Levitical choir on behalf of the assembled worshipers at the temple. Structure and theme are beautifully matched. The first and last verses combine to frame the whole with a comforting confession concerning Zion's God. The center, v. 8, summarizes the main theme of the body of the psalm. Four stanzas (having a symmetrical pattern in Hebrew: three lines, four lines, four lines, three lines) develop the theme: (1) the beauty of Zion as God's impregnable citadel (vv. 2–3); (2) the futility of all enemy attacks (vv. 4–7); (3) Zion's joy over God's saving acts (vv. 9–11)—related to the second stanza; (4) Zion as impregnable citadel (vv. 12–13)—related to the first stanza. Regularly distributed between the four main stanzas are allusions to the four primary directions suggesting that the city is secure from all points of attack. Christians see the fulfillment of these words in God's promises to the church. (CSB)

Song of Zion (vv 2, 11–12; cf 76; 84; 87) that, like previous psalms (46–47), takes up the theme that the Lord Most High, the “great king over all the earth” (47:2) dwells in little Jerusalem, “the city of our God” (48:1, 2, 8; cf 46:4; 87:3). No specific event or attack is named; the psalm breathes a setting greater than just a local conflict. Accordingly, this place is the “joy of all the earth” (v 2), a “fortress” against every enemy (vv 3–4), and the place of His “steadfast love” (v 9) for His congregation. Jewish writings collected in the Mishnah indicate that the Levitical choir sang Ps 48 (LXX Ps 47) as the assigned psalm for the second day of the week for the morning and evening sacrifices (cf 2Ch 2:4) before the temple was destroyed in AD 70 (Tamid 7:4). (TLSB)

Format: Vv 1–3, royal Zion; vv 4–8, the king's panic; vv 9–11, joy in God's love and righteousness; vv 12–14, God will guide us forever. (TLSB)

This psalm continues the theme of Psalms 46 and 47. Most of the comments on those psalms apply to this psalm as well. (PBC)

48:1 *great is the Lord and greatly to be praised* – His greatness (s.v. Ps. 34:3) will be evidenced in this psalm by his powerful destruction of threatening armies. And because he is great, he is to

be “greatly praised” (s.v. Ps. 33:1). The word praise means to describe something in lavish, glowing terms; and here that is to be done “greatly.” (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

in the city of our God, his holy mountain – In the Bible the city of God is Jerusalem, but it is Jerusalem on three levels: the earthly city, the church on earth, and the church in heaven. We should not minimize the importance of the earthly Jerusalem. It was the place God chose for his earthly dwelling place, the temple. It was the only place where sacrifices could be made to him. It was the place where God’s Son the Messianic King, gave his life for us. Jerusalem was the launching from which the gospel went out to the whole world. Yet the city itself was not large. Mount Zion, the mountain on which it was built, was not particularly high. Many of the surrounding hills were much higher. The importance of Jerusalem is not its size or majesty, but the majesty of the King who gave his life there and whose kingdom went out from Jerusalem. (PBC)

our God – The phrase “our God” appears as a frame (vv 1, 14) and as thematic center for the psalm (v 8). (TLSB)

48:2–3 Describes the lofty impregnability of Mount Zion. (CSB)

48:2 *beautiful* – Its loftiness and secure position are its beauty – His unfailing benevolence). (CSB)

elevation – Although not the highest ridge in its environment, in its significance as the mountain of God it is the “highest” mountain in the world – The mountains surrounding Bashan, including the towering Mount Hermon, are portrayed as being jealous because God has chosen Mount Zion as the seat of his rule, making it the “highest” of mountains; Isa 2:2). (CSB)

joy of all the earth – Perhaps referring to admiration from other nations, like that expressed by the queen of Sheba (see 1Ki 10:1–13). (CSB)

Jerusalem is only an earthly city. Yet God is present to save sinners by His service in the temple sacrifice and later by His Son, who is to be crucified just outside the walls. This brings the joy of salvation to all the earth. (TLSB)

Mount Zion – Moriah, north of Zion. It rejected the Canaanite notion that the seat of the gods on Mount Zaphon was the center of the universe (Ezk 28:2; Is 14:13). (TLSB)

Great King – A title often used by the imperial rulers of Assyria. (CSB)

48:3 God himself, not her walls, was Zion’s defense, a fact on which the next stanza elaborates. (CSB)

her citadels – The truth that the God of Israel can be depended on as being a true refuge in the day of trouble. (Leupold)

48:4–8 The futile attacks of hostile nations—they fled in panic when they saw that the Great King was in Zion. Such events as the destruction of the confederacy in the days of Jehoshaphat (see 2Ch 20) or the slaughter of the Assyrians in the time of Hezekiah (see 2Ki 19:35–36) may have been in the psalmist’s mind. (CSB)

The nations fear God’s present wrath but are not driven to repentance by it. (TLSB)

They were Sennacherib's vassals. He himself had described them as kings in a passage that revealed his practice of using conquered kings in his army. (Leupold)

48:4 *kings* – Not identified. Perhaps Sennacherib, who took the name “great king” (2Ki 18:19), and “kings” under him (Is 10:8) who were defeated in the days of Hezekiah (2Ki 19:35–36). Regardless, God's people of any time can sing this psalm with the victory of Christ and even the final judgment in mind. (TLSB)

48:5 *in panic they took to flight* – Since Zion is so important in the Lord's eyes, the poet describes the whole experience as growing out of the mere beholding of the holy city. (Leupold)

48:6 *trembling took hold of them* – This is noteworthy because these warriors of Assyria were famed for their iron courage and great strength. (Leupold)

This trembling in fear is further qualified by the first image, “the travail of a woman in giving birth.” The implied comparison focuses on the writhing in pain and the panic of the moment. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

48:7 Psalmist shifts and speaks to God directly here and in vv 9–11. (TLSB)

ships of Tarshish – Great merchant ships of the Mediterranean. (CSB)

May be Phoenician colony of Tartessus in Spain. (TLSB)

The east wind was known for its destructive strength. Ships of Tarshish were the mightiest of the sea going vessels of those day. (Leupold)

east wind – Notorious gale. God shows that even the mighty cannot withstand His power. (TLSB)

The image of God's breaking these powerful ships demonstrates his irresistible power. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

48:8 The central verse and theme – This literary device—of placing a key thematic line at the very center of the psalm—was frequently used. (CSB)

heard ... seen. “Seen” is climactic, as in Job 42:5. They had heard because “our fathers have told us what you did in their days” (44:1; see 78:3), but now in the liturgical experience of God at his temple they have “seen” how secure the city of God is. (CSB)

What they had heard of God's greatness from their fathers (cf 44:1), they now see “in the city of the LORD” where the God of Jerusalem delivers them. (TLSB)

LORD of hosts – In the account of the establishment of kingship in Israel it became particularly appropriate as a reference to God as the God of armies—both of the heavenly army (Dt 33:2; Jos 5:14; Ps 68:17; Hab 3:8) and of the army of Israel. (CSB)

selah – Hebrew; untranslatable. Mainly in the first two books of Psalms. Probably refers to the accompaniment of the harps during the psalm. (TLSB p. 993)

This often occurs in the middle of a psalm and which apparently signals an interlude. “The Sela indicates that one must be still and quickly think through the words of the psalm; for they demand a quiet and restful soul, which can grasp and hold to that which the Holy Spirit there presents and offers” (Luther). (Psalms – The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer p. 23)

Selah may be a musical notation. It could also be a point where a pause is desirable for the singer or reader of the psalm in order that the statement last made or the thought as a whole just developed may be reflected upon before the next turn of the thought appears. (Leupold)

48:9–11 The worshipers meditate at the temple with joy because of God’s mighty acts in Zion’s behalf. (CSB)

48:9 *midst of your temple* – In the temple courts. (CSB)

Earthly location of God’s love and mercy (e.g., 2Ch 5:13), as demonstrated by the blood sacrifices He commands and gives (pointing to Christ). (TLSB)

unfailing love – As is clear from vv. 10–11, reference here is to God’s saving acts by which he has expressed his covenant love for his people (see 31:21; 40:9–10). (CSB)

Hbr *chesed*, “loyalty” to one’s community; most common term for God’s grace in the Psalms (125 times). Luther described *chesed* as “goodness in action” (AE 14:50). God’s unwavering devotion to the salvation of His people finds its fulfillment in the cross of Christ. (TLSB p. 943)

48:10 *name* – The name of the Lord is the manifestation of his character. (CSB)

God has a name or reputation the world over for his mighty acts of deliverance; his praise will now be heard after what he has done for his people. (Leupold)

It reveals Him to His people and the whole world (cf 44:5, 8; 45:17). By it, He graciously “reaches” out from His temple to all peoples. (TLSB)

reaches – From the temple to the ends of the earth (see 9:11; 22:27). (CSB)

right hand – In Hebrew idiom a subtle reference to the south. (CSB)

In Israelite thought, the right hand was the favored one. As such, it symbolized the place of privilege or strength. The chief court official was seated at the king’s right hand as a symbol of his power and authority. The term can describe God’s chosen servant (e.g., King David. (TLSB p. 943)

righteousness – Righteous acts – Very often the “righteousness” of God in the Psalms (and frequently elsewhere in the OT) refers to the faithfulness with which he acts.). (CSB)

God’s righteousness is two-sided: it punishes the wicked according to their deserts; it rewards and delivers the godly according to God’s marvelous faithfulness. (Leupold)

48:11 *daughters of Judah* – Pictures towns clustering about a city as its “daughters.” (TLSB)

judgments – God’s righteous judgments by which he has acted in defense of Zion. (CSB)

48:12–13 The people contemplate Zion’s defense, viewed from the perspective of what they have “seen” (v. 8) at the temple. The strength of Zion’s “towers,” “ramparts” and “citadels” is the presence of God. (CSB)

Although the city was less imposing than other great cities, Jerusalem was a formidable fortress in its day. (TLSB)

48:12 *go around her* – Originally this instruction might have been intended for the people to examine every aspect of the city after the Lord delivered it from the enemies. But in time it may have become a ritual procession as part of the celebration of the kingship of the Lord. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

48:13 *her ramparts* – These were the outermost points of her strongly built walls. It was the not strength in itself, but by his deliverance that Almighty had invested it all with new dignity and meaning. (Leupold)

next generation – Lit. “the generation behind”; in Hebrew idiom “behind” is a subtle reference to the west. (CSB)

48:14 *our God* – His dwelling is in Jerusalem, evidenced by His saving deeds. (TLSB)

guide – The great Shepherd-King – A widely used metaphor for kings in the ancient Near East, and also in Israel.). (CSB)

forever – Lit. “death.” (CSB)

Ps 48 The Lord of heaven and earth makes His abode with humankind, where He is a strong fortress that shatters every enemy. He is, therefore, worthy of all praise, and we rightly “tell the next generation” (v 13) what He has done. What Mount Zion and temple worship were for ancient Israel, Christ’s Church at worship is for us—the place where God mercifully dwells to save by His Word. • May we consider well Your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of Your temple. Amen. (TLSB)