



This Week in the Word

Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens. Ps 119:89.



Pondering God's Steadfast Love

Study Scripture: Psalms 48:1-3, 9-14

Lesson 11, February 9, 2019

Key Verse

For this God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death.

Psalm 48:14

The Lesson Study is of a 'Psalm', a word which means a 'joyful song', written by the sons of Korah, who were Levites descended through Kohath, Korah's father. Their allotted task was to perform the Temple music.

Their existence is quite interesting for Scripture tells us that when Israel was wandering in the desert Korah led a rebellion of 250 leaders of Israel against Moses. God judged them and Korah among the other leaders and their families perished. See Numbers 16. But what might be a surprise to us is the fact that the sons of Korah were spared by God and later God had even employed them in the Temple and there they performed their music in gratitude to God for His mercy. They dedicated themselves to producing and performing the special music used to praise God during the journey of Israel with the wilderness Tabernacle and later in the Temple in Jerusalem.

The very superscription of this 'Psalm' or 'joyful Song' tells us that even if you have reprobate fathers and mothers and family if you elect to be devout in your recognition of and worship to God, no child needs to be kept from serving God because of the sin of his or her parents.

In addition of course if you have devout fathers, mothers and family there is no need for children to be kept from serving God but in fact should be encouraged to do so and every opportunity presented to them to so perform beautiful service to God.

The Psalms all address the common problem of depression when we feel the blues coming on and we think that God has forgotten us and we cannot seem to get back on track with God.

There is such a thing as "the dark night of the soul" and this puzzling condition affects Christians like other people. So our Lesson today encourages us to turn to the Psalms as well as this one in particular, for this is called a Song of Zion referencing Jerusalem as the city of God, the very city of God Almighty. All are invited to walk about the city, go around her, count its towers, and meditate on the strength of its great ramparts. This is confidence in the security brought by the presence of God.

All of this is to be done by worshipers, says this Psalm, for God is there and this God who dwells in Jerusalem is to be praised.

This Psalm appears to focus on the blessedness of Jerusalem which is termed Zion, but in reality it is a Psalm of praise to God who occupies Zion. So it begins and ends appropriately as follows:

"Great is the Lord, and most worthy of praise,
in the city of our God, his holy mountain.

And so it closes by reminding us that there is a reason that we should never forget God's great promises:

For this God is our God for ever and ever;
he will be our guide even to the end".

The existence of Jerusalem has been a great mystery. It is sacred to several religious traditions including the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. All of these consider it to be a holy sacred city.

"The Encyclopedia tells us it is the ancestral homeland of the Jewish people since the 10th Century BCE and in ancient times it was considered the centre of the world and where God resided.

According to the Hebrew Bible the First Temple at the site of the Temple mount today, was built by King Solomon and finished in 950 B.C. This was on Mount Moriah where Abraham almost sacrificed his son and talked to God. When the Babylonians captured the city in 580 B.C., they destroyed the Temple and sent the Jews into exile. All worshipping was practised in the temple, and only the temple. From the Babylonian capture, Judaism was codified. The Tanakh (Old Testament) laid the foundation for both Christianity and Islam".

The Lord Jesus Christ in the Scriptures warn that Jerusalem after the exile of its inhabitants and its destruction in 70 A.D. would become a sore spot and a stumbling block for the peoples of the earth. Its sad state and the disagreements and hostility it generated would continue until He the Messiah who was crucified there returned and straightened out

the affairs on the earth. See Psalms 2 for how the affairs of the earth will transpire before the return of Jesus Christ.

But Christians are told by the Apostles to carefully regard the status of Jerusalem for it is the city of the Great King. There is to be no hostility or low regard for that city irrespective of what is happening in the politics of the world.

What Jerusalem is and how God regards that city is therefore in this Psalm defined for all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are called to remember that if we belong to God and are members of His Kingdom we are secure for God has promised that by accepting His Son we will reign with Him forever. God's promises are innumerable and God watches over His people who are in covenant relationship with Him.

God is our strong tower and our bulwark or rampart and none will ever be able to breach these defences.

So we are invited to consider the watchful providences of God over His people and remember His omnipotence and omniscience. We would be wise to note especially the innumerable promises God has made to His people and pay attention to those promises, marking those blessings and impressing them on our minds, passing these promises on to the next generation. We must never forget that our security will never be diminished. Consider your weak hearts and remember what this writer states below as he exhorts us to change how we think of life and God's providential care for His people:

"The conclusion that this Psalm draws is that the God who dwells at Zion is immeasurably great and will be a sure defence of all who put their trust in him".

It is instructive to point at this stage to three different persons in the church that Charles Spurgeon looks at when he advises that they should each think and speak more of the loving kindness of God. He states for our benefit:

"Now, my dear sister, you have talked about that rheumatism of yours to at least 50 people who have been to see you; suppose you tell your next visitor about the loving kindness of the Lord to you".

And,

"Yes, my dear brother, we all know that trade is bad, for you have told us so, every day, for I do not know how many years. And you have always been losing money, though you had no capital when you started; yet, somehow or other, you have managed to have something left even now.

Well, we know that old story; could you not change your note just a little, and talk about the lovingkindness of the Lord"..

And,

“Yes, my friend, I know that many professing Christian people are not all that they profess to be; I have heard you say so ever so many times. You say also, ‘There is no love in the church’. Well so far as we can see, you are not overstocked with it. You say, ‘There is no zeal among the members’. But have you any to give away to those who need it? Now, henceforward, instead of always harping on the faults and failings of God's people, - which, certainly, are numerous enough, but have not become any fewer since you talked so much about them;-- would it not be better to think and talk of the lovingkindness of the Lord?”

Let all therefore brethren make a commitment to ponder God's steadfast love and meditate on His covenant relationship and promises and show Him the praise due to His name.

THE TEXT

Verse 1. This most popular Psalm which has inspired many hymns such as “Great is the Lord” and “Mount Zion Stands Most Beautiful” is a Psalm which does more than praise the Jerusalem that exists in Israel. This Jerusalem is the home of God, located on the far side of the North, and it is the refuge of God's people and the joy of the entire earth. It appears to refer to a Jerusalem that is the frustration to the kings of the earth and a stumbling block to them, a place to which there is hostility for the ways of God are not welcome to the kings of the Earth.

Some believe that this Psalm not only refers to the holy city of Jerusalem that is on Earth presently but it refers prophetically to the holy city, the new Jerusalem, that is above and which will eventually come down to Earth in due course. But of course for the writers of this Psalm there is quite likely an emphasis to the existing Jerusalem for the city had been chosen by God as His dwelling place on earth and He allowed the Temple to be built so that constant worship and atonement for the sins of the nation could be made..

Noted scholars believe that this is a song of thanksgiving for victory and that it is connected with Psalm 46:1-11 and Psalm 47:1-9 which exalts Jehovah among the peoples of the earth as well as highlighting Jerusalem as a glorious and strong city which is protected by God who sits enthroned in it.

The God who delivered this tiny nation which sits in a vulnerable position on one of the major land bridges of the Earth over which all kinds of nations march as they go to fight each other then simply describes the greatness of God and His worthiness to be praised.

The praise of the Lord God is then immediately connected with Jerusalem which is stated to be the city of God, located in His holy mountain.

This immediately raises the contrast to Mount Sinai which is stated to be another holy mountain, which was so holy that a fence had to be erected according to Exodus 19 to keep the people away from it. It is to be noted that Galatians 4: 24-26 and Hebrews 12: 18-24 examines this contrast between the two mountains of Mount Sinai and Mount Zion, the latter being Jerusalem.

This Jerusalem is superior to Sinai and comes with greater and eternal promises. But in every case the city declares the greatness of God and this is a cause for praise for this is God's city.

Verses 2. Some are inclined to think that holiness is something boring or unattractive but remember that in Scripture God is holy and as well He is Beautiful. See Psalm 27: 4 and Isaiah 33: 17. Psalm 96: 6 emphasizes that strength and beauty are in God's sanctuary, and Psalm 50:2 stated:
"Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God has shone forth".

God and His people are therefore always to display the Lord's beauty. Holiness and joy therefore are stated to go together. So do not be afraid of living a life of holiness and proclaiming that holiness is beautiful and that in contrast sin is an ugly thing.

Since the city of Jerusalem is linked to the God of heaven its real beauty is the beauty of the Lord who lives in Jerusalem. As such therefore the city is the joy of the whole Earth for it is so appointed that this is the center of the hope of the Earth.

There is a very difficult phrase in the Psalm which states that Mount Zion is "on the side of the north" alternatively interpreted as "in the far north". One scholar looks at the difficulty in the phrase as follows:

"The NIV transliterates the Hebrew word for "north" as Zaphon, which was a pagan mountain north of Ugarit where Baal was worshipped. This line of interpretation argues that Israel borrowed from Canaanite and other pagan religions the idea that the supreme place where the gods reigned was a mountain in the north. But the Jew is contended that the living and true God reigned in the north, on Mount Zion. This view claims for support Isaiah 14:13, where the king of Babylon arrogantly claims, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north". Derek Kidner understands "the far north" (48:2) to use this imagery to connect the earthly Mount Zion with the heavenly one (Psalms 1:72).

Note that Isaiah 14: 13 uses the phrase "the farthest sides of the north" to refer to heaven, the place where God is enthroned. "By an effective turn of phrase it portrays the literal Zion in terms of the heavenly one-the community whose King is God-by identifying with the far north"(Kidner).

But other commentators (Franz Delitzsch, J.A. Alexander, J.J.Perowne) argue that the Jews would never have used this pagan mythological idea to describe God's dwelling in Zion. These writers take the phrase to refer to some geographic aspect of Mount Zion; it is not clear exactly how this fits so I do not know how to explain it.

But don't let the difficulty cause you to miss the point, that as the city of the great King, we are to extend God's joy to the whole Earth. To proclaim His joy, we must be experiencing it as we rejoice daily in His great salvation. Thus, God's city should proclaim His greatness, His Holiness, and His joy".

Note therefore that the redemption obtained there according to Revelation 5:9 rescues people from every tribe and tongue. It is therefore represented as the cause of joy for all

people for it is the city of the great King where redemption was wrought and death was destroyed and this makes Jerusalem wonderful.

Verse 3. The presence of God is proclaimed. God is in its places or citadels which are beautiful. In ancient Israel the presence of God was symbolized by the Ark of the Covenant which was in the Most Holy Place in the Temple.

Do not forget however that God has placed in us personally His Holy Spirit as promised by Jesus and recorded in John 14: 16-17. This is a great reality for the Holy Spirit who lives within us is a very great bulwark against the world, the flesh, and the devil, one writer reminds us. So we are protected against sin and temptation.

Verses 4 -8. These verses indicate why the psalmist knew that God was the fortress of the city. God had delivered the nation and the city from their enemies. This idea links Psalms 46, 47, and 48.

We do not know if the specific incident from which nation was delivered was the deliverance from the attacking armies of Ammonites, the Moabites and the armies of Mount Seir in the days of Jehoshaphat recorded in 2 Chronicles 20, or the deliverance from Sennacherib in the reign of Hezekiah recorded in 2 Kings 18-19.

But we do know that some nations were united and advanced together against Jerusalem but when they saw what was in it they were dumbfounded and overwhelmed and fled away in terror and panic. They came to conquer but they didn't even use their weapons for they fled from the city in fear and in pain just as the pain experienced by a woman when she was in childbirth.

God had done so marvelously just like when He had destroyed some ships of an attacking nation, an incident probably referred to in Ezekiel 27.25-27.

The exhortation therefore is that it is important for the acts of God in the past to be told to the children and the next generation. It is also important that the children and the succeeding generations see for themselves the power of God to understand that God acts in the past and He also acts in the present in the same way. One writer therefore reminds us:

“This should be the testimony of every mature child of God. It is important to know about God's past acts. Indeed, it would be impossible to be a Christian without knowing about them, for we become Christians through faith, and faith consists in knowing, believing, and acting upon what God has done, especially what he has done for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But our experience shouldn't stop there. We have also heard what God has done in the lives of other people, how he provided for them in hard times, protected them in moments of danger, and comforted them in loss. Perhaps you were told of such special acts of God by your parents. As you learn to trust him, you should begin to experience such personal blessings yourself, and you should be able to say, “As I have heard, so have I seen”.

Remember therefore that the city belongs to the Lord. It is His city and therefore God will establish it forever. Jerusalem is here to stay.

Remember also that if you are a child of God, God's Holy Spirit is living in you and you will belong to the Lord God of Israel forever.

Verse 9. The people now begin to offer a prayer of praise personally. They have remembered God's covenant love. This love has made God provide an atoning sacrifice of a substitute as well as sacrifices to give thanks to God. God has provided a place where He sits enthroned and where they could pray and also offer incense to send up a sweet smelling savour to Him.

Verse 10. God's name stands for His revelations of His love, power, might, faithfulness, justice, mercy, kindness, and all His virtues. All of the attributes were shown in His temple, and in His deeds of righteousness. His name is filled with majesty and greatness and His judgments and righteousness extend all over the Earth so that all Earth would praise Him, for as stated, His right-hand is full of righteousness. God is therefore a God that brings blessings and He has proved Himself to those who practice righteousness and justice.

Verse 11. As a result of the nature of God, and the fact that He has proven Himself by His righteousness and justice, and His deliverance of His people, in view of the righteous judgment of God the people must rejoice.

Verses 12-14. God is faithful. This can be proved by simply taking a tour of Jerusalem looking at all its palaces with the royal dignity and its strength and defences. Everything that is seen must be marked well and told to all generations.

The city is no longer in view but now the view is of God alone. This is appropriate for the beauty and strength of Jerusalem comes from God. It is He that has built Jerusalem and has kept it. He has beautified Jerusalem. This same God will be our guide even to death. He will never leave us or forsake His people.

CONCLUSION

God loves His people whether of ancient Israel or those of Gentiles origin. This is a great tribute to God's promise to serve as a refuge and a bulwark to protect His people. It speaks of God's grace as well as His mercy, His justice and His judgments.

So here we have a beautiful and precise statement of faith from the Sons of Korah. Their statement of faith reinforces our belief in God's protection and lovingkindness. It tells us of the age to come when we will see our God.