

True Security

Psalm 48

In the midst of a world like ours, where do people look for security? So many things threaten our security.

- The things we call natural disasters: earthquakes, floods, cyclones, volcanoes, tsunamis.
- The things we call accidents: road smashes, plane crashes, collapsing buildings, simple clumsiness.
- The things we call economics: the global financial crisis, increasing unemployment, rising interest rates, new government taxes.
- The things we call crimes: murder, rape, theft, assault, arson, forgery, blackmail.
- The things we call diseases: from the common cold all the way through to the "c" word.

When you start listing off everything like that, it's a wonder anyone gets out of bed in the morning – and I don't simply mean because of choice!

We try to protect ourselves.

- We take out insurance on our houses and our cars and possessions and income and even our lives.
- We put away nest eggs for a rainy day.
- We have locks on our cars and security mesh on our doors and windows.
- We avoid the unsavoury parts of town at night.
- We don't travel by plane and take great care when driving.
- We take our vitamins, eat healthy, wash our hands religiously and even wear masks in public.

Then, if we make it safely through all those, we still face old age and death.

Where do *you* look for security?

- The Australian lifestyle?
- The fortress you call home?
- Your family and friendships?
- Your impeccable investment strategies?
- Your healthy diet and exercise regime?

Security's an important subject. It's also the subject of this psalm.

Mount Zion

Psalm 48 talks a lot about God's city, God's holy mountain, Mount Zion. These sorts of references are right through this psalm. Indeed, scholars identify it as one of the Songs of Zion. The focus is Jerusalem.

What's said about Jerusalem? Verse 2:

It's beautiful in its loftiness.

Jerusalem's situated in the Judean mountains – although some would call them only hills, since they're under 1000 metres. Jerusalem herself was at 750 metres. She wasn't the highest point in the area – and certainly not the highest point in Israel. Yet, people travelled up to Jerusalem. It was a place that could be defended against invading armies. It was a strategic location.

More than that, though, the city was David's capital. It's strongly associated with God's promises to Israel – even though it was possessed only a long time after the promises were made. Partly that's because it's associated also with God's promises to David – promises of a dynasty ruling in Jerusalem.

It was also the location of the temple and the ark – the symbol of God's presence with His people. Each year,

the people made their festive pilgrimages to Jerusalem to celebrate the various feasts that were part of their religious calendar. Each day, the priests offered the sacrifices required by the law and the voluntary sacrifices brought by God's people. Thus, it was the focal point of Israel's political and religious life.

A second thing in verses 4-7: the kings of the earth flee from her. Scholars ask when this happened.

- Some suggest it's the story in 2 Chronicles 20. The Moabites and Ammonites came with a vast army to war against Judah. Jehoshaphat the king prayed to God. God intervened. He caused them to turn on each other. Judah didn't even have to fight.
- Others suggest it's the story in 2 Kings 18-19. The Assyrian army had wiped out the northern kingdom of Israel. They then turned their attention to Judah and Jerusalem. Hezekiah the king prayed to God. The angel of death went through the Assyrian army and killed 185,000 soldiers. The rest decided to go home rather quickly.

That's the sort of picture we have in the psalm. Perhaps one of those occasions gave rise to the words of this psalm. Perhaps some other event's behind these words. It doesn't matter much. The reality remains the same. They came to conquer. They looked and were overwhelmed. They fled in terror. They're smashed like ships in a fierce storm.

A third thing in verses 12 and 13: people are encouraged to contemplate Jerusalem's security – to count her towers, look at her ramparts and view her citadels.

- Perhaps this was a review of the defences after the lifting of a siege.

- Perhaps this was a procession around the city that was part of a religious feast.
- Perhaps it was an invitation to people in a temple service to go out from the temple and contemplate what they'd heard there about the city.

We don't know. But they were to contemplate the security of Jerusalem – and to pass on the lessons to the next generation.

So, Jerusalem's held out as a place of security – a place that's impregnable; a place where people can dwell without fear. A question immediately springs to mind: Is this true? The reason the question springs to mind is because we want to say "no". We think Jerusalem's not totally secure – she's not impregnable.

- Think back to 587^{BC}. The Babylonians conquered her. They broke down her walls, destroyed the temple and took the people into exile.
- Think back to 167^{BC}. The Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes thought the city in rebellion against him. His soldiers slaughtered many and he established the worship of Zeus in the temple.
- Think back to 70^{AD}. The Romans entered the city and destroyed the temple.

So, how can we affirm what this psalm says?

God

Two things. First, if you read the psalm more carefully, you'll see that true security lies in God. Jerusalem herself isn't the main focus. While the psalm does focus some attention on Jerusalem and talks at some length about the city, it focuses even more attention on God. Notice how the psalm begins and ends. Verse 1:

Great is the LORD, and most worthy of praise

Verse 14:

*For this God is our God forever and ever;
He will be our guide even to the end.*

And look at the middle – the end of verse 8:

God makes her secure forever.

And how is Jerusalem described?

- the city of our God (verses 1, 8)
- His [that is, God's] holy mountain (verse 1)
- the city of the Great King (verse 2)
- God is her fortress (verse 3)
- the city of the Lord Almighty (verse 8)

And in verses 9 to 11, it's God's temple and God's name and God's right hand and God's judgments.

There's nothing magical about Jerusalem. There's nothing magical about God's temple. There's nothing magical about the Ark of the Covenant kept in God's temple. These things aren't secure in themselves. These things can't provide security for anyone else.

Israel found that out the hard way. In Jeremiah's time, the Babylonian armies advanced on Jerusalem. They came to conquer and destroy. Some of the Israelites thought they were safe. After all, no one had conquered Jerusalem before. The previous world empire, the Assyrians, had come and destroyed the surrounding towns and laid siege to Jerusalem – but they'd retreated without success. God miraculously intervened. God protected His city. God protected His temple. And so they developed a temple theology. It's in Jeremiah 7. They had a mantra:

The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.

Jeremiah tells them they're wrong. There's nothing in the temple itself that will save Jerusalem. Security lies in God, not God's temple. And they've thumbed their noses at God and chased after other gods. It's God Himself who brings the Babylonians against Jerusalem. He's withdrawn His security from the city. Ezekiel has a vision of God departing the city. Unless they repent, they have no security – for God fights against them. They didn't repent and the rest is history. Jerusalem was destroyed. The people found they were not secure.

The main point the psalm makes is that true security is found in God – and only in God. When you remember who God is, that makes total sense. God alone is self-existent. God alone has unlimited power. God alone brought the rest of creation into being. God alone rules in His universe.

- Is there anyone in all creation who can overpower God and stop Him doing what He wants to do?
- Is there anyone who can fool God and slip under His guard?
- Is there anyone who can sneak up on God while He's busy elsewhere or asleep and take something from Him?

If God protects a city, then that city is safe. If God's against a city, then nothing anyone can do will stop God taking action. So, we continue to affirm the psalm from that perspective.

Jesus

Secondly, we need to ask how this psalm fits with Jesus. Here, I want to pursue two lines of thought. First, how does Jesus relate to Jerusalem in the New Testament?

- Luke 9:51 tells us, at that particular point in His

ministry, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And Luke continues to draw our attention to this in the chapters that follow.

- Luke 13:34 tells us Jesus wept over Jerusalem because she's unwilling to turn to Him and accept Him as Messiah and enjoy the rescue He offers.
- Luke 19:41 tells us Jesus again wept over Jerusalem because of the trouble that's coming because she refuses to acknowledge Jesus – trouble that did indeed come when the Romans destroyed the city in 70AD.
- Luke 23 makes it clear Jesus is condemned in Jerusalem and is crucified on a hill nearby.

The earthly city failed to act like God's city. This was the city where God's temple was. Here the sacrifices were offered daily. Here the people honoured God with their lips. Yet, when God Himself came to them in the person of Jesus, they rejected Him and maligned Him and killed Him as a common criminal. It looks a far cry from Psalm 48. Where's the beauty of a people bowing in submission to the great King? Where's the beauty of righteousness and justice in her midst?

- Verse 14 says: this God is our God forever – and these people kill Him on a cross.
- Verse 14 says: this God will be our Guide till the end – and they crucify the One who is the Way.

Jesus brings the issue to a head. The earthly Jerusalem was never the reality. Don't get me wrong here.

- It was a real city.
- It was chosen by God for a purpose.
- It was a real temple built there.
- It had the real advantage of having God's word.

- God sent real prophets with real messages. But Jerusalem was always populated by sinful people – people with an inbuilt tendency to rebel against God. And that's what they did – rebel – time and time again. That rebellion reached its peak when they crucified God incarnate.

So there could never be any true security in the earthly Jerusalem. True security lies in God alone – and these people in the earthly Jerusalem kept rebelling against Him. They kept proving themselves to be candidates for God's judgment – not God's protection.

The earthly Jerusalem pointed forward to a greater reality – the heavenly city; the kingdom of God. This was God's promise. This was God's vision of the future.

- A city characterised by people truly praising God.
- A city characterised by complete righteousness.
- A city characterised by rejoicing and peace and true security.

That's the longing of Psalm 48.

And it's through this death of Jesus at earthly Jerusalem that the way to true Jerusalem is opened.

- And so, Galatians 4 tells us the earthly Jerusalem and her children are in slavery; but the Jerusalem above is free and she is our mother.
- Hebrews 12 reminds us we have come to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God – and to Jesus the Mediator of a new covenant.
- Revelation 14 pictures Jesus standing on Mount Zion with His followers – and Revelation 21 pictures the new Jerusalem descending from heaven, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed.

This is the reality tied up with God's promise. This is the true security God provides – a security that's guaranteed by the death of His Son. When we look for security, this is where God directs us to look.

That's the first line of thought; now to the second: How does Jesus relate to the temple? In John 2, Jesus comes to the temple and drives out the merchants. He says:

Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!

It was not an action calculated to win friends – although He was trying to influence people.

Like Jerusalem, the temple expressed rebellion. Israel was to be a light to the nations. That is, she was to be an example of right and godly living so the nations could see the beauty of true life under God. In this way, they were to attract the nations to the light. People from all nations would come to the temple to pray to the true God – to pray to this God who had such a magnificent people. It's included in Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple (in 1 Kings 8). But they'd set up a market in the Court of the Gentiles. They'd squeezed the nations out of God's temple. They put barriers in the path of people worshipping God.

The Jews asked Jesus about His authority to do this – to drive the merchants out of the temple. Jesus says:

Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.

John explains this in verse 21:

The temple He had spoken of was His body.

In other words, this physical temple in Jerusalem also spoke of a greater reality. It too pointed forward to some-

thing greater that would come. In Jesus, that something greater was present. He is the true temple. In Him, God and man truly meet.

More than that, through Him – and especially through His death in our place – we have open access into God's presence (a major purpose of the temple). We're adopted into God's family. By His sacrifice, we have assurance – security – that we won't be turned away. He's guaranteed our forgiveness and our cleansing. He's guaranteed our place in God's kingdom.

Mount Zion Today

And so the New Testament tells us – those of us who belong to Jesus:

But you have come [note the past tense] to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. (Heb.12:22)

What's it mean by this? Is Bathurst somehow changed into Jerusalem? Have we been on some pilgrimage to Jerusalem in Israel? No, it's not like that. This is the real Jerusalem – the heavenly city, the kingdom of God.

In becoming Christians, we've become citizens of God's kingdom. This earth is no longer our real home. Sure, we still live here and work here and play here. We have real lives. But we're only pilgrims. This isn't our permanent location. We're headed for a better place – a more permanent place, a more secure place.

- The place we're headed is beautiful in its loftiness. It's the kingdom of God – what could be more beautiful or more lofty than that?
- The place we're headed is full of the praise of God. It's full of people who know the greatness of their

God and the greatness of what He's done for them – why wouldn't they rejoice in His goodness?

- The place we're headed is characterised by righteousness. Everything's done according to God's will. There's no sin or evil or wickedness – why wouldn't people revel in such security?

Yet, this is where we run into the tension.

- On the one hand, we have come to Mount Zion.
- On the other hand, we're pilgrims on our way.

Both are true – and we need to affirm both.

What's it mean for me to affirm I'm already there? Take a couple of New Testament verses.

- Colossians 2:13 – *when you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins.*
- Ephesians 1:3 – *praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.*

Forgiven. Made alive. Given every spiritual blessing. And it's completely secure:

Romans 8:38-39 – for I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It's the picture of Psalm 48.

And so, to pick up the thoughts of Psalm 48, rejoice. Enjoy the beauty of God's city. Admire its structure and

arrangement. Enjoy its security. Praise God. Meditate on His magnificent unfailing love to you in Jesus. Think of His justice and righteousness. Tell the next generation. Do all these things.

But don't make Israel's mistake. Don't separate the city from God. Don't think your presence in the city gives you a licence to ignore God, to excuse rebellion against God, to thumb your nose at God. This is God's city. It's pure according to His standards. It reflects His goodness. No evil can enter.

What's it mean for me to affirm I'm still on my way? Two things for this morning. First, this world isn't my true home – and so I don't settle down here. This world – not in the sense of the physical earth, but in the sense of the people and the cultures and the systems of thought – rebels against God. It's anti-God. It doesn't want to submit to God or to pay attention to Him.

Now, although I still live on this earth, I'm not part of that system anymore. I'm now God's person – so I work at resisting the way that anti-God system keeps pressuring me to live just like everyone else.

- To have the same attitudes as them.
- To value the things they value.
- To desire the things they desire.
- To want the experiences they want.
- To think in the self-centred ways they think.

My mind – the way I think – is to be transformed by God's word. That's revolutionary – but it's absolutely basic to living as a Christian.

Secondly, I'm growing in godliness. While we live on

this earth, we aren't instantly perfected. We still sin. We still think wrong things. We're not instantaneously perfect. Yet, we are changed. We're given new hearts. God's Spirit now dwells within. And that means changes in the way I live. That's what I should see as I'm on the way. In Colossians 3, Paul puts it this way:

- Put to death whatever belongs to the earthly nature – immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed, anger, rage, malice, and so on.
- Instead, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and so on.

That's the sort of growth I should see in my life – because that's the sort of new person God's made me. If I don't see those sorts of changes, perhaps it indicates I'm not really heading towards the heavenly Zion.

Think it through a bit more in terms of the logic of Zion. The security of the city, as I said earlier, is based on God. If God defends someone, then nothing will get through God's defences. The person is secure. But there's also a very real sense in which the security of the city is based on godliness. Why don't we feel secure today? A big part of it's because of sinfulness.

- It's because people want what others have and break into homes and steal.
- It's because people get angry with others and want to express that anger and resort to violence and murder.
- It's because people have sexual urges they won't control and so impose themselves on others.

And so it goes on. How can you have security in God's city if there are people who are greedy and lustful and proud and angry and selfish? Such people would destroy both the beauty and the security of the city.

And so, as we head to the heavenly Zion, part of what we look forward to is God perfecting us – changing us so that sin's no longer part of our nature or desire. He will bring to completion the salvation He's begun in us. He'll make us fit citizens of His perfect, eternal kingdom. Then we'll enjoy true security.

So, is this where you look for security? How do you tell?

- One way is to check your reaction to bad events in your life. Do you grumble and complain against God? Or do you remember that nothing slips past God's guard and He uses even evil things to achieve His good purposes in your life? Bad things can't destroy the salvation He's given us.
- Another way is to check where you're putting your time and effort. Is it different from those who don't follow Jesus? Is there evidence that it's different? Are you living for God's kingdom? Or do you have other priorities that overshadow God?

Psalm 48 presents an important reality. Verse 8 brings it out well:

*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.*

May God grant that this reality increasingly shape our thinking and our values.