

When the psalms are used as they were intended by the psalmist in the Spirit they inspire real worship. They deepen our understanding of God. They open our eyes to the meaning and trajectory of salvation history. They open our heart to the truth, humility, and justice of God (Ps 45:4). To ignore the psalms is to be like the person in Jesus' parable who came to the royal wedding banquet dressed like a fool. Was he rebellious or just oblivious? We don't know. The king said to him, "Friend, how dare you come in here looking like that!" (Matthew 22:12 MSG). Apparently, the man was caught off guard, because he had no defense; he was speechless. However, the king wasn't speechless. He ordered the attendants, "Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 22:13).

These royal psalms (45-48) line up well with Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God. The last days have begun in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. The beginning of the end has passed and the end of all endings awaits his second coming. Jesus prayed these royal psalms and they are reflected in his teaching on the kingdom of God.

The psalms are important in their historical context, but they are also important in these last days for the Church. We are not passive observers of the royal wedding of Christ and his bride, the Church (Ps 45). Nor can we say, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble" (Ps 46:1) without confessing God's "help" in Christ's Parousia, his Passion, his gift of the Paraclete and his abiding Presence. In the Spirit, we have been given a prayer book that Jesus not only prayed but fulfilled. "Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him, but we do see Jesus" (Heb 2:8-9). We cannot pray these royal psalms without imagining Jesus' ascension and enthronement. He is the one of whom the Father said, "I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain" (Ps 2:6). These four royal psalms (45-48) strengthen our praying imagination by drawing us out of our small worlds into the global Kingdom of God. Worship is not optional, it is essential. It is not an imposition, but our greatest desire. "For God is the King of all the earth; sing to him a psalm of praise" (Ps 47:7).

Mount Zion

*Great is the Lord, and most worthy of praise,
in the city of our God, his holy mountain.
Beautiful in its loftiness,
the joy of the whole earth,
like the heights of Zaphon is Mount Zion,
the city of the Great King.
God is in her citadels;
he has shown himself to be her fortress.*

Psalm 48:1-3

Metaphor is a powerful tool in building the psalms. The psalmist takes physical, tangible,

concrete objects and transforms them into symbols that testify to the nature of God. Meaning is deepened when that which can be seen and touched is compared with what is unseen and intangible. These biblical images resist idolatry and embrace testimony. The psalmist builds up the believer's understanding by using these visual aids to bring out the essence of who God is and what God is doing for us. The same truth could be spelled out conceptually in philosophical categories, but poets know that metaphor is more compelling in communicating truth to both heart and mind. It is easier for us to internalize the truth when we can visualize its meaning.

The fortress city of Zion with its high towers and ramparts is the psalmist's vivid resource for describing the majesty of God. However to understand the psalm we have to realize that the fortress metaphor is not meant to "picture" God, but to proclaim that God *is* our fortress. The motive of the psalmist is not to inspire Israel's engineers to get to work building Jerusalem into the biggest walled castle known to man. There is no pride of place, only the passion to praise the Great King. The psalmist is not boasting about the greatness of Jerusalem nor does he intend to trigger a tenth century B.C. "arms race." Instead, the psalmist is using the object lessons of defense, security, and military superiority to describe the unique and transcendent nature of the majesty and splendor of the Great King of Israel. After all, Yahweh is the One who makes wars to cease and breaks the bow (Ps 46:9).

When the psalmist describes Mount Zion as "beautiful in its loftiness" he's not literally claiming that Mount Zion is "the joy of the whole earth" because of its spectacular elevation. The aesthetics of Zion are relational, not statistical. The psalmist's spacial imagery equates mountain grandeur with human fulfillment. The apostle Paul did much the same when he challenged "the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ (Eph 3:18).

The psalmist uses two names for God, Yahweh and Elohim. Yahweh stands for the personal, I-Am, covenant-keeping God of Israel. Elohim is the plural of intensity, derived from El the common word for god, and declares to all people everywhere that Israel's God is the transcendent God exalted over all other gods. The psalmist backs up the theological primacy of Elohim by likening Mount Zion to "the heights of Zaphon" (Ps 48:2).¹ "In pagan mythology, the chief god of the pantheon dwelt on Mount Zaphon."² The psalmist is implying that the true presence of God can only be experienced on Mount Zion, "the true Zaphon."³

The comparison between Zion and Zaphon suggests a dynamic cultural equivalent. Popularly perceived centers of power have proliferated around the globe exerting a compelling gravitational force. Human nature is drawn to these centers of power. But our personal experience of these centers of influence and culture quickly tends to demystify them, and often the height of our aspiration is matched by the depths of our disillusionment. Working at the center is not what we

¹ Wilcock, Psalms, 173. Wilcock suggests that the psalmist embeds ingeniously the four points of the compass, covering north (Zaphon = north), east ("east wind," Ps 48:7), south ("right hand =south, Ps 48:10), west ("behind," Ps 48:13). Craigie, Psalms, 353, finds the evidence for this interpretation tenuous.

² Ross, Psalms, 123. Ross writes, "The reference may be to a mountain in Syria, thirty miles north of Ugarit, called Jabel as-Agra'."

³ Craigie, Psalms, 353.

thought it would be.⁴

Although Mount Zion was not overly impressive geographically it represented the very presence of God, and that's what made it so special. The dynamic relationship between Mount Zion and Yahweh corresponds to Jesus Christ and his Church. The essence of Christ's power is made manifest in and through the church, the body of Christ, which is often not very impressive either. As surprising as it may seem, the supremacy of Christ over all things creates a special identity and purpose for the church. Jesus is not only Lord of the universe but the head of the church and his presence fills not only the cosmos, but the church! The apostle Paul extends this "fullness" to the church, the body of Christ in the world. God "placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything *for the church*, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way" (Eph 1:22-23). We might think that the cosmos is a far greater priority than the church, but just the opposite is true. Jesus is the Lord of the universe for the sake of the church.

"At the center of all this, Christ rules the church. The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ's body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence" (Ephesians 1:22-23, MSG).

God's plan is for the world to grasp Christ's cosmic supremacy through God's new society the church, even as it was God's plan for Israel to convince the world that Mount Zion was "the city of the Great King" (Ps 48:2).⁵

The Kings of the Earth

*When the kings joined forces,
when they advanced together,
they saw her 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.
As we have heard,
so we have seen
in the city of the Lord Almighty,
in the city of our God:
God makes her secure forever.*

Psalm 48:4-8

A coalition of hostile armies are terror struck by the mere sight of the city of God. Panic stricken

⁴ Webster, Follow the Lamb, 118.

⁵ Webster, The Christ Letter, 25.

they flee in dread. They are swept away and shattered like ships caught in a fierce storm. The very thought of fighting against Zion causes them to tremble and fills them with sharp pain – like the intense pain of a woman in labor. The kings of the earth cannot even look in Zion without quaking in fear and running away. This battle scene may not be prophetic, but it’s hyperbole points forward well beyond Israel’s experience.⁶ It is difficult to imagine the coalition reeling and fleeing at the mere sight of Jerusalem. As Kidner suggests, “the scene is more like the world-wide conspiracy of Psalm 2. . . .The language is sweeping enough to celebrate the great victories in ‘the wars of the Lord,’ and to anticipate the end itself.”⁷ It is reminiscent of the apostle John’s description of the fall of the great city Babylon (Rev 18) and the great supper of God (Rev 19).

The sight that terrified the kings of the earth inspires thanksgiving and shalom in the minds and hearts of the people of God. One person’s abject dread is another person’s absolute joy. Two radically different visions are compared. “The sight the horrified kings saw was the same sight that thrilled the eyes of pilgrims as they approached the city of Jerusalem.” The kings saw “an impregnable fortress keeping them out.” The pilgrims saw “a city permanently established by God, offering them joy and protection.”⁸ The pilgrims have *heard* and *seen* that the city of God is a place of everlasting security. They know this truth from the faithful testimony of the saints who have gone before and they know this truth through their own personal experience. They have heard it, seen it, lived it. They are ready to worship!

Meditation and Testimony

*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.
Walk about Zion, go around her,
count her towers,
consider well her ramparts,
view her citadels,
that you may tell of them to the next generation.*

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

Psalm 48:9-14

The holy city invokes meditation on God’s unfailing love and inspires a global testimony that

⁶ Ross, Psalms, 124. Ross argues that these verses “represent the way that God has delivered the city in the past. They do not present a vision of the future, a prophetic word, but an account of an event or events that serve to maintain the traditional glorification of the city.”

⁷ Kidner, Psalms, 180.

⁸ Craigie, Psalms, 354.

reaches the ends of the earth. His Name and his actions are “filled with righteousness” and the people of God rejoice because of God’s wisdom. The psalmist encourages the people to walk around Zion and “count her towers,” and “set their hearts on her ramparts,” and “examine her citadels.” Ironically, this metaphoric invitation is the psalmist’s way of redirecting the people’s hope away from military might to the Lord’s righteousness and judgment. What counts is not the superiority of Jerusalem’s defense system, but God’s unfailing love (Ps 48:9), the power of God’s righteousness (Ps 48:10), and the wisdom of God’s judgments (Ps 48:11). God is their fortress. He is their high tower, ramparts, and citadels.

This metaphoric link between the character and might of God to the visible, tangible, concrete images of defense corresponds to the architectural and building metaphors of the New Testament. You will not find a single word about church facilities in the New Testament, but the apostles enjoyed elaborating on the images and metaphors that describe the community of God’s people.⁹ The apostle Paul spoke of building on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone. “In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph 2:20-22).

The relational and spiritual character of this “house,” built by God *of people*, is no less material, temporal, spatial, and concrete, than if it had been built with stone and steel. The apostle Peter drew on a similar metaphoric impact when he wrote, “As you come to him, the living Stone - rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him - You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual household to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:4-5).

Clearly, the strength and solidarity of the people of God were not reflected in church buildings but in their union with Christ Jesus and in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Early Christians had a sense of place, a feeling of being at home, not in a facility but in a family of shared faithfulness to the Word of God. There was no outward temple or tall steeple to symbolize their place, but as they met together there was a powerful presence of the risen Lord Jesus. The early Christians knew that “the Most High does not live in houses made by men” (Acts 7:48).¹⁰

The final verse of Psalm 48 glorifies God, not Zion. The importance of the city of God lies in the presence of God among his people. The permanency of his covenant promise and abiding presence lasts for ever and ever. Like a shepherd he is faithful and will guide his people through all that threatens, even the ultimate threat of death itself. Once again we are reminded of the “upper room comforts” - the Parousia, the Passion, the Paraclete, and the Presence. Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us and he has promised, “I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:3). Meanwhile the Lord Jesus commissions us to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

⁹ Webster, *The Christ Letter*, 57.

¹⁰ Webster, *The Christ Letter*, 57.