

A MIGHTY FORTRESS IS OUR GOD

Psalms 46-48

Introduction:

Every age of human history has had its troubles. War, crime, poverty, hunger, disease, natural catastrophe, and death—these and many more ills have plagued the human race from Eden to our own time. Human ingenuity has found ways to alleviate some of these problems, but the basic cause remains the same: unwillingness to acknowledge the sovereign rule of God in human affairs. This is the sin that leads to all other sins, great and small.

Only when mankind acknowledges God's sovereignty will worldwide peace and blessing come. The human race is not going to do this voluntarily. But Scripture tells us that "every knee will bow" (Rom. 14:11) and that when Israel's Messiah comes to earth the second time, He will put down all enemies and will indeed be the King over all the earth. That is essentially the theme of Psalms 46-48.

Though we don't know with certainty the occasion for these psalms, it is quite possible that each was written to celebrate a particular aspect of a single event—a time when God's people had been miraculously delivered from their enemies and were rejoicing in His intervention for them.

Two such deliverances are possible settings. One of these is the defeat of Sennacherib of Assyria during the reign of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18-19). This is a prime possibility because of the dramatic nature of the deliverance, that many see mirrored in Psalm 46:6, 9 and Psalm 48:4-6. The other possibility is the defeat of Moab and Ammon during the reign of Jehoshaphat (2 Chr. 20).

But, as important as the historical setting might be, we cannot lose sight of the prophetic message of these psalms. Judah's victories in the events we just mentioned, were incomplete and temporary. Yet, when we look at these psalms we see language of complete and permanent triumph by God and his hosts. We can see in these psalms a foreshad-

owing of God's final victory over His foes and the establishment of His universal kingdom at the time of Jesus' second coming.

These three Psalms seem to follow a progression of thought. In Psalm 46, God is portrayed as the defender of His people. Psalm 47 celebrates His rule over all the earth. In Psalm 48, He is reigning from His holy city on Mount Zion. We are going to take a fast trip through these three psalms this morning

(Note: I have borrowed this outline and a significant amount of material from SP Adult Teaching Guide, Mar-May 1993)

I. God, Refuge of His People

A. In Catastrophes

Read vv. 1-3. These opening verses speak of His protection from natural catastrophes. Earthquakes, landslides, tidal waves, and volcanoes—these unpredictable and utterly devastating events are things that God's people need not fear because God Himself is their protector. Whether the writer intended his words to be understood of natural catastrophes only, or of political and military upheaval as well, the outcome is the same—Almighty God is an adequate shelter in any trouble.

On July 31, 1976 a Colorado cloudburst turned the Big Thompson River into a wall of water and sent it rampaging through a narrow mountain canyon. In a matter of minutes, 130 people died, among them several staff members of a Christian organization. (Others – Hurricane Katrina, Japan tsunami, Haitian earthquake)

Did God fail to protect them? Was the psalmist only hoping that God is an adequate shelter in any trouble?

As Christians, we are not promised immunity from the tragedies that occur in this fallen world. But at the same time, we can face life without fear because we know that God is with us and is our protector in every situation of life. Death, formerly the ultimate disaster, has become a doorway into the presence of our Lord.

Verses 1-3 would well express a strengthened trust in God for his people who had recently been victorious in battle. But they go far beyond that. These verses have comforted and inspired many people, including Martin Luther, who used them as the basis for the great reformation hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Today, when unrest is everywhere, God is still our "ever-present help." He is our refuge and strength, not only in catastrophes...

B. During Rebellion

Read vv. 4-7 – This serenely flowing river and its tributaries form a striking contrast to the roaring, foaming waters of the previous verse. The “tossing sea” of the troubled world has been replaced by the life-giving river of the city of God.

The only streams flowing through Jerusalem were a small stream that flows from the Gihon spring down to the Pool of Siloam, and the Kidron brook, which was dry most of the year. It seems likely that the psalmist is envisioning that stream of life about which the prophets wrote in their visions of the future kingdom of God, and which John described as “the river of the water of life... flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb” (Rev. 22:1). This life-giving river symbolizes God’s presence in His city.

v. 5 – Evidence of God’s presence will be seen when the morning dawns, as it was when Sennacherib was routed (Isa. 37:36), and when Jehoshaphat was victorious (2 Chron. 20:20). Even when nations are in conflict and kingdoms are tottering, God is in control. When He raises His voice, the earth melts before its power – v. 6. With this reassuring thought comes the refrain of verse 7 to remind the people that Jehovah, who commands the heavenly hosts, and who is the God of their father Jacob, is on their side. He is their fortress. He is our fortress, our refuge ... in catastrophes ... in rebellion ...

C. In Warfare

Read vv. 8-11 - God’s people are now invited to see for themselves the results of Jehovah’s efforts on their behalf. Verses 8-9 describe a deserted battlefield, strewn with debris. Such a scene was certainly in evidence after Sennacherib’s defeat (2 Kings 19:35), as well as after Jehoshaphat’s victory over Ammon and Moab (2 Chron. 20:24-25).

Once again, as great as these victories were, they symbolize a much greater victory that God will one day win, when He will establish and enforce worldwide peace. “He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth” (Ps. 46:9). The ancient dream of universal peace will at last be realized. At that time Messiah will address the warring nations with the words: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). While these familiar

words have been a blessing to many Christians, the words are really addressed to rebelling nations. They are God’s command to cease their rebellion and acknowledge His sovereignty throughout the earth.

Psalm 46 concludes with a repetition of the refrain of verse 7. While this psalm had meaning at the time of its writing and has encouraged God’s people in every age, it will have its final fulfillment when Christ returns to establish His worldwide reign.

II. God, Ruler over All

A. God’s Sovereignty on Behalf of His People

Read vv. 1-4. This is a psalm of jubilee, celebrating God’s triumph in battle and His sovereign rule over the earth. In the first part, the emphasis is on what He has done for His people, “the pride of Jacob whom He loves” (v. 4).

The atmosphere of jubilation is set in the first verse, which directs all nations to clap their hands and shout. Such demonstrations were common at times of national celebration, such as the coronation of a king. Here the call to rejoice results from God’s establishing His people in the land of their inheritance. This may recall the miracles of Joshua’s time, when hostile nations were subdued and Israel occupied Canaan, but it may also be indicative of Jehoshaphat’s victory over the Ammonites and Moabites.

B. God’s Sovereignty over All the Earth

Read vv. 5-9. In the second part of this psalm, the horizon widens from God’s chosen people to the entire earth. Having completed His work on behalf of His people, Jehovah ascends to His throne “amid shouts of joy” and “the sounding of trumpets.” From there He reigns over all nations. The people are called on to “sing praises” to Him.

There are many possible explanations for the description of God’s ascent to His throne. But it would seem that the best understanding is a reference to the final ascent of the Messiah, to His throne in Jerusalem to exercise His sovereign rule over all peoples. He speaks of great celebration with shouts of praise and the sound of trumpets. Perhaps the

psalmist caught a glimpse of that great day when the Lamb that was slain will receive glory, honor, and power.

Verse 9 sums up the situation that will prevail when God's sovereignty has been publicly established over all nations. At that point not just Israel but the entire Gentile world will acknowledge His power and will be assembled before Him. The "kings of the earth" belong to Him. He—and He alone—is highly exalted on the holy throne of the universe.

We need to quickly look at Psalm 48, where we see...

III. God, Reigning from His City

Now the battle has been won, and the victor has returned to His palace in the city of God. Mount Zion is an object of admiration not so much for its own sake, but because it is the dwelling place of the Almighty.

A. Beauty of Mount Zion

Read vv. 1-3. In this first stanza, attention is directed to the beauty of Mount Zion, which is called "the city of the Great King" (v. 2). The city is actually Jerusalem, but in the Old Testament it is often called Mount Zion because the fortress around which the city developed had been called "the fortress of Zion."

At the time of this psalm, Mount Zion was portrayed as a beautiful city because of God's presence (see Ps. 50:2). It was "the city of our God" (48:1), "the city of the Great King" (v. 2). It was where God had established Himself as a fortress "in her citadels" v. 3. It was "beautiful in its loftiness" v. 2. The city was an object of special admiration because of God's presence.

B. Breaking of God's Enemies

In verses 4-8 we have a retrospective look at a time when the nation's enemies had gathered together for assault and then had retreated in panic. This involved a whole coalition of enemy nations who came up against God's people, but fled in panic when God set up ambushes against them. The sudden and unexpected attack on the attackers threw them into such confusion that they destroyed each other, leaving only corpses to be viewed by the inhabitants of Judah (v. 24). This may

indeed have been the "panic" that "seized them there" (Ps. 48:6), comparable to the pain and anguish of childbirth.

This section of Psalm 48 concludes with an affirmation of faith (v. 8). What had been reported of God's intervention for His people in the past had not been actually seen by His people in the present. They had witnessed His faithfulness in delivering Mount Zion from invaders, which told them of His intention to establish His city forever.

C. Beneficence of the Almighty

Read Psalm 48:9-14. The concluding verses of this psalm may have constituted a hymn of praise to Jehovah for the victory that He had given. After the victory was won and the spoil taken, the people, the army, and the king returned to Jerusalem rejoicing, once more accompanied by music. What did they sing? It may well have been an early form of Psalm 48, especially verses 9-14. Here is a recognition that the victory was entirely the fruit of God's love and goodness.

Finally, the people are invited to walk around the city and see for themselves that its towers, ramparts, and citadels have been preserved intact. They are to pass on to their children this eye witness report of God's loving-kindness.

The greatest result of this survey was not a report on the number of towers or other architectural details. Rather, it was the conclusion: "This God is our God for ever and ever" (v. 14). He had defended and protected His people in a time of crisis, and He would continue to do so right up to the moment of death ("even to the end"). This God can be depended on in all circumstances!

Conclusion

Well we have covered a lot of territory in a short time. We have looked at God's amazing deliverance of His people when they were surrounded by enemies. We have seen the response of the psalmist to the work of God. But how do we bring this down to where we live? Well let me ask you a few questions that we all need to consider:

- How big is your God? If He is the God whom these psalms celebrate, He is a great and mighty sovereign indeed.
- Is this great God the King of your life? Or are you rebelling against Him?
- Is He your refuge and strength? Or are you trying to handle your problems yourself?

There is no other answer to the world's problems, or to yours, than God. Whatever problem you may be wrestling with, turn it over to Him and let Him win the victory for you. Rejoice in His loving-kindness! Like the sons of Korah encouraged the people of their day, (read 47:6-7)