

Secure in Christ

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[0 : 00] Let me pray before we start. Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you that you've given it to us so that we may be encouraged and we may live by it.

Help us to receive it humbly and joyfully today. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, friends, many of you, I'm sure, are like me, parents.

And we learn a lot of things, don't we, as parents? Certainly that's been that way for me. And one of the important things I've learned as a parent is how crucial having a sense of security is.

You see, I see it firsthand in my two daughters, what a big impact it has on them. The difference it makes to them to know that they are safe, that they have people that they can turn to for help.

People who love them, that they can rely on. It's a basic human need, isn't it? And we need it even as adults, don't we? A safe haven, a place where we feel protected.

[1 : 08] Where there are people that we can trust and rely on. And I suppose it all starts in the womb. Swimming in the warmth of the amniotic fluid, probably.

Hearing the comfort of our mother's heartbeat. One of the first things I learned as a father was how to swaddle little Emma, to recreate that feeling of security.

Alyssa would say that I was strangling her, but I think it's just, you know, creating security. And which baby doesn't love to be sleeping in their mother's arms, where it's secure, warm, and comforting.

Now, as a child grows and it takes his first step away from that security, the first thing they do is to seek out other forms of security. The kind and nurturing kinder teacher, perhaps.

A group of close friends at school. And after that, every time we enter a new situation, our first task is always to re-establish that sense of security.

[2 : 09] Without which, I don't think we can really function well. So imagine, for example, an employee who fears that she's lost the confidence of her boss.

Will she be able to keep performing well? It's unlikely. Or here at church, if you don't trust your pastor, Andrew, all the people in your Bible study group, would that cause you to open up and share your life with them, to serve them sacrificially?

It would be really hard, wouldn't it? If not, impossible. And so security and safety, and the safety that flows from it, are basic human needs. And we tend to take it for granted when it's there, but when it's not, we realize how important it really is to us.

And so it's no different for the people of Israel. God had given them the land of Canaan, but they needed the security to know that they were safe from their enemies, that God is watching over them.

And for them, they found that in the city of Jerusalem. That was their symbol of security. That's why the Bible has numerous Psalms about the city, Psalms of Zion, so-called, because it's named after the mountain on which the city sits.

[3 : 24] And Psalm 48, the psalm we're looking at today, is one of those psalms. Now, the modern city of Jerusalem looks a bit like this on the slide. I'm not sure if you can make out the walls of the city, but impressive though that city is today, these walls actually are only from the 16th century.

So we really don't know what the original walls were like, the walls when King David was around. But no doubt, judging from the psalm, it would have been quite an impressive city, with its walls and ramparts and watchtowers.

For those of you who know the city, there's even a spring that flows into the city from outside, which meant that there was always a source of fresh water, even when the city came under siege.

Now, as we begin to look at the psalm, it's pretty clear, isn't it, that the psalmist knows that Jerusalem's security rests not on the walls, or the watchtowers, or the ramparts.

Rather, the psalmist praises God because He's the one who gives Jerusalem its security. And so this is the first point of the psalm, and really the most important point, that God is Jerusalem's security.

[4 : 39] Jerusalem is great because God is great. God has chosen to dwell in it, to make it the focus of His protection, and therefore, His presence makes Jerusalem secure.

So look with me, verse 1, and we read, 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 Zephon, is Mount Zion, the city of the great king. God is in her citadels. He has shown Himself to be her fortress.

The psalmist sees the beauty of the city, but he turns immediately to praise God. Jerusalem is God's city, God's holy mountain. God is the great king who rules from it.

Now, if you've never been to Jerusalem before, it's quite easy to take this psalm literally, to think that Jerusalem sits on the top of a tall mountain. So you may think that the city is a bit like this, this other town, the town of Lebo.

[5 : 45] Some of you may have been there in Provence, which sits on top of the mountain. And the logic is, the higher the city is in the mountains, the more impractical it is.

Just like Minas Tirith, for those of you who are Lord of the Rings fans. And yet, if you are familiar with Jerusalem, you'll know that there's actually poetic license being taken here, because Jerusalem actually doesn't sit atop of a high mountain.

It actually sits on a lowly hill. It's about 750 meters above sea level. And there are actually a lot of taller mountains around it. What's happening, of course, is that the psalmist is speaking through the eyes of faith.

Mount Zephon, in verse 2, is actually another mountain, an actual mountain. It's twice the height of Mount Zion, about 1700 meters. But its actual site is to the far north of Israel.

But, because God is protecting Jerusalem, the psalmist is saying, is as though she is on top of Mount Zephon, and therefore impregnable. God is in her citadel, as the psalmist says in verse 3, and he has shown himself to be her fortress.

[6 : 59] Now, did you notice that switch in imagery there? From saying that God is present in the fortress, the psalmist now says that God is her fortress. God is the real source of security.

He's not taking refuge in Jerusalem. No, instead, Jerusalem is taking refuge in him. Now, how has God shown himself to be a fortress?

Well, let's read on and we shall see. By protecting her from her enemies, verse 4. When the kings joined forces, when they advanced together, they saw her and were stounded.

They fled in terror. Trembling seized them there, pain like that of a woman in labor. You destroyed them like ships of Tharshish, shattered by an east wind.

Now, here again, the psalmist is employing poetic license. Because as far as historians know, the details of these verses don't actually match any specific conflict, whether in the Bible or anywhere else.

[8 : 02] Rather, what the psalmist has done is to bring all the victories that God has won and put it into a single poem here. So, from the victory over Pharaoh at the Red Sea to the battles with Edom and Moab in the wilderness, and then to Joshua's victory over the Canaanites.

In fact, compare these verses with Exodus 15 and you'll see numerous allusions to it. So, Exodus 15, if you're unfamiliar, is the Song of Moses and is found straight after the crossing of the Red Sea.

Remember that story that Pharaoh's army rode in, chasing the Israelites into the Red Sea, only to have God rout the army, right, as the waters closed in over them. So, in Exodus 15 and verse 14, Moses says that as they hear of God's exploits, the nations will hear and tremble.

Anguish will grip the people of Philistia. The chiefs of Edom will be terrified. The leaders of Moab will be seized with trembling. The people of Canaan will melt away and terror and dread will fall on them.

And just a few verses earlier, we have the closing of the Red Sea described. But you blew with your breath and the sea covered them. They sank like lead in the mighty waters.

[9 : 20] Do you notice the allusions then between Exodus 15 and Psalm 48? There's numerous descriptions that correspond to each other, don't they?

But there's actually another less obvious one as well. You see, when in verse 7, it speaks of the ships of Tarshish, it's actually a reference to those tall ocean-going ships anchored in the Mediterranean.

But again, if you think about the geography, were these ships to be destroyed in the Mediterranean, it would actually have to be a west wind, not an east wind. So why the reference here to an east wind?

Well, it's because it's precisely an east wind which destroyed Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea in Exodus. If you read chapter 14 and 15, that's exactly what the Lord says.

So what's the psalmist trying to do here? Well, he's using Jerusalem as a symbol for where God's presence is. Jerusalem now isn't just a physical city, but it's anywhere and everywhere that God's presence dwells.

[10 : 27] And so as the armies came upon them in the desert, God was with his people in the desert. And so God's people became Jerusalem. They were, as it were, a mobile Jerusalem.

And because God was with them, dwelling among them, they were as secure as if they were in the physical Jerusalem with its walls and its ramparts.

God's presence, you see, not the walls, not the ramparts, God's presence itself was their fortress. And so the psalmist draws the stanza to a close and he draws upon Israel's history on all that he's seen and heard to again reinforce this main point.

As we have seen, verse 8, so we have, as we have heard, verse 8, so we have seen, in the city of the Lord Almighty, in the city of our God, God makes her secure forever.

So as we now then finish with stanza one and move to the second stanza, that is verses 9 to 14, we see the focus now turn to how Israel ought to respond to God's security.

[11 : 32] Now that Israel knows where Jerusalem's security lies, in God their king, how are they to respond? What are they to do? Well, in verse 9, the psalmist urges God's people to meditate on God's unfailing love in his temple.

So in verse 10, they are to proclaim his name and praise him to the ends of the earth, to rejoice at his justice and rule, and be glad, not just in Zion, but as they return to their villages across Judah.

And then in verses 12 and 14, as the people step out into the streets of Jerusalem, perhaps here they're in procession at one of their festivals, they are to count her towers, they are to view her citadels, and as they do, they are to tell or pass on the stories of God's salvation.

Tell their children and their children's children. Tell them what God has done for Israel. Tell them that God will continue to do what he's done. Verse 14, For this is our God, not just in the past, not just for today, but forever and ever.

And he will be our guide even to the end. And so in general, Israel is to worship God in response, to hold fast to him, to remind themselves again and again that God is their security, to tell others about it, including the next generation and the generations after that.

[13 : 04] Well, that's the psalm in a nutshell. It's not very complicated. It's pretty simple actually. It's fairly reassuring too for the people of Israel, provided things could have just stayed that way.

But we all know, didn't we, that history has shown us that that didn't happen, did it? The physical city of Jerusalem did fall. Its walls, its towers, its ramparts.

Now, was it because God was not up to that task? No. It was because Israel failed to respond as they should.

Perhaps they trusted in the strength of the city itself. They might even have misunderstood the psalm, thinking that it was an unclad promise, that God will keep protecting them, whether they trusted in him or not.

But we know that God had warned them that this was not the case. Like, in Deuteronomy, he said, forsake me and I will scatter you. I will leave your cities in ruin. And so, when warning after warning came to nothing, God finally acted.

[14 : 12] And so, if you know your history, in 587 BC, God allowed the Babylonians to capture the city to take the people into exile. Now, was God being vindictive when he did that?

No. But what he needed to do was to make his people learn again the hard way that security is not to be found in God's gift, but in God himself.

One of the great ignominies at the time was that as they were in exile in Babylon, they were actually forced to sing psalms like this one.

It was their captives' way of mocking them, of rubbing salt into their wounds, a bit like POWs that are made to sing victory songs as they are marching to their concentration camps.

In fact, we actually have a record of this, and it's in Psalm 137. Now, if you're old enough, you might remember a reggae group called Boney M, came up with a song called By the Rivers of Babylon.

[15 : 11] It's actually based on the words of this psalm. So I wonder if you just turn with me a few pages on to Psalm 137, page 620. Let me read you the first four verses of that psalm.

Psalm 137. Psalm 137. I'm tempted to sing it, but I'm not going to. By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.

There on the populous we hung our harps, for there our captives asked us for songs. Our tormentors demanded songs of joy. They said, sing us one of the songs of Zion.

How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land? The psalm keeps going on a bit like that. So imagine you're one of them sitting by the river in the shadow of this other city called Babylon with its own impressive walls and towers and then you're made to sing the verses of Psalm 48.

You're made to sing 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.

[16 : 31] For this is our God forever and ever. He will be our guide even to the end. Imagine doing that. It would be pretty painful, isn't it?

Not to mention requiring great faith. You'll be thinking, can the promises of Psalm 48 still be true? Can we still trust that God is in control?

That He is still our fortress? But of course, Psalm 48 was still true because God was still with them.

With or without the citadels and ramparts, God has always been their fortress. When they were in the desert and at the Red Sea, God had been with them.

Even then, there were no towers. Even though there was just a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, God had kept them safe from their enemies.

[17 : 29] And as Christians, we know that God eventually did rescue His people again. He did take them out, not just from Babylon, but actually, He saved them from their own rebellious hearts.

He saved them from a slavery that was worse than physical slavery, which was the root of their problem in the first place. They had only gone there because they failed to trust God.

And how did God do that? Well, we know, God did that by sending His Son. And not just for His people in the past, but for His people of all time, including us.

And so, Jesus becomes for all God's people our ultimate and final security. And for us, God no longer dwells in one location, Jerusalem, but God dwells with His people wherever they may be by His Spirit in Christ.

And all those who put their trust in Jesus enter this new Jerusalem, this fortress, and find security in Him. And that was our second reading, which Allison read.

[18 : 36] It was at the end of Revelation. Turn with me. I'm going to read you a few verses from there again. So, page 1252, Revelation chapter 21.

The whole chapter, actually, is about the new Jerusalem, but I'll just read a few verses just to give you a taste for what a wonderful vista that is. So, verse 2.

I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Look, God's dwelling place is now among the people and He will dwell with them.

They will be His people and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away.

Then in verse 10, and He carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper clear as crystal.

[19 : 49] It had a great high wall with twelve gates and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west.

The wall of the city had twelve foundations and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And then finally, verse 22, I did not see a temple in the city because of the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it for the glory of God gives it light and the Lamb is its lamp. The nation will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it.

On no day will its gates ever be shut for there will be no night there. The Lamb, of course, is a reference to Jesus sacrificed for our sin and dying on the cross for us.

He did that so that we may have security not just against physical enemies but against the enemies of sin, death, and evil. So friends, there is no great security than we can find in Christ.

[21 : 10] We are to put our trust in Him as our new Jerusalem, give our lives over to Him and we are as secure as we can ever be. And as I stated at the start, security is a basic human need.

So there is actually nothing wrong with seeking security. In fact, we can't help it but do so. The question though is, where do we find our security?

For often we are tempted to look in the wrong places, aren't we? Just as Israel did in the walls of the city, we too seek it in the wrong places.

For us, it may be material things or our qualifications or our achievements or our net worth. Even the very things that God has given to us as gifts, we turn them into our source of security.

But that is not where security lies. No, it lies in Jesus. I don't know about you but I sense that there is a bit of an unease at the moment in society with all the things that are sort of happening in the world, the state of American politics, the shock of Brexit and its ramifications and even last night.

[22 : 28] I don't know how many of you have had a sleepless night, probably not many, but people have a, I don't know, I sense that people are fearful of their way of life, fearful that their security is being threatened.

And if you add to that the threat of terrorism, the never ending problems in the Middle East, and now even we hear that North Korea seems to be closer and closer to having long range nuclear capability.

And you get the sense that insecurity is rising, isn't it? And then for us as Christians, well, it seems that the tide of public opinion is increasingly rising against the Christian faith.

The walls of Christendom, as it were, are crumbling around us if not totally in ruin, so it seems. And perhaps as you go to work or you read the papers, you may feel like you're sitting by the rivers of Babylon.

You're having Bible verses thrown back at your face with people mocking and saying, you mean you still believe in those verses? What century are you living in? It does feel a bit like we're back where Israel is after the fall of Jerusalem, doesn't it?

[23 : 39] But brothers and sisters, we must take heart because we know that security still lies in Christ and history will bear that out. You see, when you look back through time, all empires have come and they have gone.

The Egyptians, they've come, they've gone, so too the Babylonians, the Syrians, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans. The British Empire, it's had its day.

And so too American power and might. Now some say that China's snakes, hooray for the Asians, but let me tell you, that too will pass.

But in and through all these ups and downs of empires, one kingdom remains. God's kingdom has come and it will not end. And it's been growing, not through the might of armies, not through nuclear capabilities, or through the presence of mighty walls and towers.

But the amazing thing is that this kingdom has grown by the life, the death, and the resurrection of one man, just one man, God's son, Jesus Christ, who came into this world, lived a humble life, and died a humiliating death.

[24 : 56] But God raised him up to life, and by his spirit, all those who put their trust in him now are growing that kingdom. All those who trust in him can find in him security.

And so, friends, we are to respond as God's people the same way the psalm tells us to. We don't have to look at the walls and ramparts of any city anymore, but we keep coming back again and again to Jesus, looking onto him to hear and see again the beauty of this life, his words, his deeds, and to keep proclaiming his name to the ends of the earth, to keep rejoicing at his righteousness.

And then it falls to us to keep telling the next generation, our children, our children's children, because they're not going to hear it increasingly from school or in the society anymore.

So it comes down to us, the church, Christian parents, to tell them that this God, this God is our God forever and ever. He will be our guide even to the end.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your son, Jesus. We thank you that you have given him to us to save us, that we can find our ultimate security in him.

[26 : 31] Father, for those of us who are concerned and anxious for things that are happening in this world, help us not to lose heart. Help us to see that you are in sovereign control.

Though even the church may be asked to go through a time of testing and suffering, yet we will be victorious because of Jesus, not because of us, because Christ has already won the victory.

Help us to keep trusting in him and help us to keep telling others, including our children, that this is our God and he will be our guide forever.

We pray this in his precious and mighty name, in the name of Jesus. Amen.