

THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING

Psalm 48

Jeffrey S. Carlson

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SCRIPTURE

Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God. His holy mountain, ²beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King. ³ Within its citadels God has shown himself a sure defense. ⁴ Then the kings assembled, they came on together. ⁵ As soon as they saw it, they were astounded; they were in panic, they took to flight; ⁶ trembling took hold of them there, pains as of a woman in labor, ⁷ as when an east wind shatters the ships of Tarshish. ⁸ As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the LORD of hosts, in the city of our God, which God establishes forever. ⁹ We ponder your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple. ¹⁰ Your name, O God, like your praise, reaches to the ends of the earth. Your right hand is filled with victory. ¹¹ Let Mount Zion be glad, let the towns of Judah rejoice because of your judgments. ¹² Walk about Zion, go all around it, count its towers, ¹³ consider well its ramparts; go through its citadels, that you may tell the next generation ¹⁴ that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will be our guide forever (Psalm 48 NRSV).

MESSAGE

Jerusalem is one of the most famous cities in all the world. The name goes back at least three thousand years. The city is set high in the hills of Judah, about 30 miles from the Mediterranean coast.

Zion is the name of one of those hills. It is often used interchangeably with Jerusalem. It is also called the city of the great King. King in this context does not refer to David but to God himself.

The Sons of Korah were probably a family of singers who performed in the Temple in Jerusalem (see Num 26:58). They wrote several of the songs in the Book of Psalms including Psalm 48. This is a song about Jerusalem in the aftermath of some battle that threatened the city but where the citizens emerged triumphant.

The prophet Isaiah referred to Jerusalem as the holy city (Is 52:1). To this day it often receives this title. Probably the reason for this title was that Jerusalem contained the

Temple, the shrine where God was willing to come down and meet his people. It is also the place where Jesus was killed and later came back from the dead.

Jerusalem is considered sacred by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. The common ground is Abraham. Consider the incident involving the testing of Abraham through the would-be sacrifice of Isaac – a difficult passage. God says to Abraham:

"Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about" (Genesis 22:2).

Abraham complied. His response is often explained as either blind, loyal obedience or that he knew there would be some sort of last-minute provision. Blind obedience is the traditional Muslim interpretation of this account and trusting that God will provide an alternative is the traditional Jewish explanation. The traditional Christian view is similar to the Jewish view but adds something deeper: Abraham could obey God because death was not a threat. If God could bring Isaac from a lifeless womb he could also bring back Isaac from the dead (see Heb 1:17-19). In any case, the majority view in Judaism and Christianity is that Mount Moriah is identical with the Temple Mount and so we are brought back to the city of Jerusalem (see 2 Chron 3:1).¹

It is difficult to overestimate the influence of Jerusalem on world history. As Christians we can reflect on the idea that Jerusalem can be considered a powerful metaphor that points to all that is good about religion, all that is bad about religion, and all that God would transform about our religion.

Jerusalem can point to what is good. We must recognize that a great deal of good has been done in the name of religion. Terry Muck describes it this way:

The figures would be very difficult to come by, but the facts of the case – such as the single-handed raising of the world's health quotient and life span by Christian medical missions, and the comparative freedom and level of justice enjoyed by people living in countries that have a majority of Christian people – are enormously satisfying to those of us who

¹Most Muslim scholars say that Ishmael and not Isaac was offered as the sacrifice and that Ishmael was in on it from the beginning. He, like his father, completely surrendered to the will of God (Allah) even though it meant Ishmael's death. The words Muslim and Islam come from an Arabic term meaning something like, "complete surrender or submission." Furthermore, they hold that Moriah is near Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

passionately believe in the health and growth of the Christian church. I know that the other major world religions – Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and others – have their share of civilizing successes. . .Buddhist missionaries to China, Japan, and Tibet provided social stability and meditative practices that positively influence those cultures to this day. Muslim contributions to science, philosophy, and medicine are evident worldwide.

Let us recognize that religion is the most powerful force in human society. When it is good it is very good. Unfortunately, when it is bad it is very bad.

But Jerusalem can point us to the good. It reminds us that God is at work in the world gathering a people to himself. The Bible is really the story of one family, the family of Abraham and Sarah. God chose to reveal through this family his plan for saving broken persons enslaved to sin and restoring all people to their Creator. Jerusalem provides our faith with historic continuity to this reality.

The word religion etymologically means “to tie back,” that is, to bind together, and surely one good thing that healthy religion does is to bind us with the past, to reconnect us with things that last, giving us roots and traditions and memories. If we know what we are about, we will not sever today from yesterday, will not attempt to replace Jerusalem with Hollywood. We downplay the ancient city of our God to our own detriment. It is good and right to have places and seasons and words and rituals that connect us with the faith of our spiritual parents.

To be fair, Jerusalem can also point to what is bad. Its long history has been marred by hostility and warfare, rebellion and betrayal, hypocrisy and oppression. Today it represents the conflict between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Sadly, even among the various Christian Churches that lay claims to parts of the old city there is great division.

For many people, religion is an obstacle to faith because they regard all religions as bad, including, and sometimes especially, Christianity. They point out that great evil has been done in the name of religion and they think that the world would be a much better place without it.

And there seems to be considerable evidence to support this claim. Examples would include: the Christian Crusades (a series of armed onslaughts from Western Europe against Arabs in Palestine (both Christian and Muslim!)), the Islamic Janissaries (kidnaped Christian children raised and trained as fierce warriors and sent back to kill Christians), the forced conversion of Galileans to Judaism, inquisitions, tribunals, the

denial of human rights, the subjugation of women, Protestant and Catholic strife in Northern Ireland, suicide bombers, and the religious collaboration with conquest and colonization in both ancient and (relatively) modern times, to name just a few.

Religions also fight within themselves and even if the adherents are not trying to kill each other they often quarrel and separate. Christianity is no exception. There are over 41,000 denominations in the world and the number is increasing.²

A man was shipwrecked all alone on a deserted island. A few years later a freighter happened by and rescued him. The Captain was curious because he saw three huts on the island and so he asked the man about them. “The first hut is my home,” said the man, “The second hut is my church. And the third hut, well, that is where I used to go to church.”

I am fascinated by this story, not only because it is humorous, but also because it is so revealing of the human character. Jesus prayed for unity (John 17) and we have labored diligently to make sure his prayer is not answered.

Jerusalem is a powerful symbol for religion. It reminds us of what is good about faith. It reminds us of what is bad about faith. But Jerusalem can also lead us to the wonderful hope of the transformation of our faith. Now it was natural for Paul and John, seeing that the earthly city of Jerusalem was far from perfect, to designate the place where God dwells in true holiness as “Jerusalem which is above” (Gal. 4:26) and the “new Jerusalem” (Rev. 21:2). John writes:

And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (Rev 21:2-4 NRSV).

Those who trust in Jesus Christ become citizens of this redemptive city.

Many people are bothered by the fact that heaven is described as a city. This is not what we expected. It goes against our experience. We tend to associate large urban areas with

²“Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population”, The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, December 19, 2011.

bad things like pollution, crime, noise and overcrowding. We long to escape from such places and seek the beauty and solace of natural surroundings. We feel especially close to the Creator when we behold the breath-taking majesty of high mountains, the robust symphony of the ocean, the artist's canvass of colors by lakes and forests. So it comes as quite a shock to think that heaven is more like Detroit and less like the Grand Canyon.

To understand this we need to look at what the Bible means by city. The first biblical city was Enoch, built by Cain and named after his son. Cain was the one who asked the haunting question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4:9). The answer was supposed to be "yes" but Cain gave it a murderous "no" and slew his brother. Ever since then, the word "city" has been symbolic in the Bible for brother-hating.

Here then is the message of heaven. Heaven is not escape from the city. It is the redemption of the city. To use the language of Augustine – The City of Man has been invaded by the City of God. It is the end of hate and the restoration of brother-keeping, that is, caring for one another regardless of our perceived differences. It is the end of the earthly Enoch and the establishment of the heavenly Jerusalem.

As citizens of the City of the Great King we are ambassadors for the city. We are to represent the redemptive power of God's love in the world. We are to proclaim the end of hate and the triumph of compassion. We are to tell the world the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Jerusalem points the way to transformation. Coursing throughout the biblical witness is the tantalizing dream of the city that must come, the holy mountain where they really won't hurt or destroy anymore and where God will truly be all in all. That is precisely where our New Testament ends, with the vision of the new Jerusalem descending out of heaven like a bride adorned for her husband. The vision is not a mirage. What God has begun, God will complete! To this city not made with hands and to its Builder we are called and invited. Using all that is right within our faith and renouncing all that is wrong within it, let us gladly march on to Zion, the beautiful city of God.