

Zion, the City of the great King

Some thoughts on Psalm 48

by Jeffrey Brett

In recent weeks and months, the eyes of the world have been on Israel and its conflict with the Palestinians, with consequent fighting in Jerusalem and elsewhere. This psalm is a celebration of the future reign of the King in Zion, the city of God, at last delivered from every enemy and established as the centre of government for the whole earth. The city of Zion in the Scriptures is Jerusalem not as now the city of trouble and fighting, but as it will be, through the grace of God and His mercy. This will be the centre for the administration of God's blessing on the earth during the thousand years Reign of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The sons of Korah

We must remember when we read the Psalms that the title is part of the Psalm and should always be read. This will help us to understand the Psalm. The title here is: "A Song. A Psalm of the sons of Korah". In the days of David this family had a privileged place in the service of the tabernacle. Since they are frequently mentioned in the Psalms, we believe they were the singers in the tabernacle services. This is remarkable because they had a very bad beginning in the days of Moses.

We read about this in Numbers 16, where Korah and 250 other princes rose up and rebelled against the authority that God had given to Moses. In so doing they were really rebelling against God. The judgement that fell upon them was terrible. Numbers 16:32 describes it as follows: "And the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed them up". And yet many years later under David the King, after he had been set upon the throne of all Israel in Zion, they came into the service of God. This can only be by the grace of God. Nothing in themselves warranted such high favour, but under grace they came into it. This is also true of every believer. We all had dreadful beginnings as having come under the power of sin. But instead of the judgement falling upon us, it fell upon the Lord Jesus, when He bore our sins upon the cross of Calvary. Because of that wonderful expression of the grace of God, we have come into a place of blessing and favour.

A series of Psalms

Psalm 48 is the completion of a series of psalms commencing with Psalm 44. In Psalm 44 the godly, having heard from their fathers of God's deliverance in days of old, look to God to redeem Israel from the power of the enemy.

Psalm 45 presents the Lord Jesus as the answer to their cry for help. He is the One through whom deliverance will come.

Psalm 46 expresses the confidence in God gained by the actual experience of God's mercy in the present, and not simply the report of what God has done in the past.

Psalm 47 celebrates the intervention of God on behalf of His people, establishing Christ as "King over all the earth", exalting Israel over all the nations, and calling upon all nations to join with Israel in the praise of Jehovah.

Psalms 48 presents the King established in Zion, the centre of government for the whole earth. Thus the psalmist says in verse 8: "As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the LORD of Hosts, in the city of our God: God will establish it for ever. Selah".

Zion in the Old Testament

The name Zion in Scripture does not in any way refer to the Church as we speak of it today, but refers to a time, yet to come, of blessing on the earth after the Church has been caught up to be with Christ in Heaven. We will get confused if we do not see this.

It is very often useful to see in the Bible the circumstances surrounding the first mention of a thing. The first mention of Zion is in Second Samuel 5:7. There we read: "Nevertheless David took the stronghold of Zion: the same is the city of David". We further read in verse 10: "And David went on and grew great, and the LORD God of hosts was with him". Previous to this, the nation of Israel had been brought down to a very sad state due to the evil reign of Saul, who was the king the people had asked for. During that time they even lost the Ark of God to the Philistines. Not once in his reign did Saul consult it for guidance (1 Chr. 13:3). He eventually perished at the hand of the very enemy that he had not subdued, which he could have soon done had he relied upon God. During his reign he had persecuted David, who was God's anointed king. But where we have just read, the men of Israel had gathered themselves together unto David and he had been crowned king.

The first thing that David did was to lead his men against the Jebusites who were the inhabitants of Jerusalem. They taunted David saying: "Except thou take away the blind and the lame, thou shalt not come in hither: thinking David cannot come in hither. Nevertheless David took the stronghold of Zion" (2 Sam. 5:6-7). This is a beautiful picture of the Lord Jesus. When He was on earth He healed the blind and the lame, and although like David He was rejected, yet by dying He has conquered the enemy and now has the keys of death and of Hades.

The next thing David did was to bring up the Ark of God to Jerusalem and set it in its rightful place, the centre of Israel. "And they brought in the ark of the LORD, and set it in his place, in the midst of the tabernacle that David had pitched for it: and David offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD. And as soon as David had made an end of offering burnt offerings and peace offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts. And he dealt among all the people, even among the whole multitude of Israel, as well to the women as men, to every one a cake of bread, and a good piece of flesh, and a flagon of wine. So all the people departed every one to his house" (1 Sam. 6:17). This is a picture of what the Lord Jesus will do when He becomes the King in Israel. He will establish the true worship of God and then Israel will become the centre from which the blessing of God will flow out to the whole earth. This is what Zion is a picture of in the Scriptures.

Zion in the New Testament

There are seven references to Zion in the New Testament, two of them are in the Gospels:

(1, and 2) Both Matthew and John quote a verse from Zechariah 9: "Fear not, daughter of Zion: behold, thy King cometh, sitting on an ass's colt" (Matt. 21:5; John 12:15). This was when the Lord Jesus was approaching Jerusalem and it would seem as though some thought that He was about to set up His kingdom. So they cried: "Hosanna! Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord" (John 12:13). The Lord Jesus did not say that they were wrong. He seems to confirm that this will indeed happen, not then, but in a future day. He finds a young ass, and sits upon it, illustrating what will happen when

Zechariah 9:9 will be fulfilled. He will bring everything into subjection to Himself, typified in His sitting on an ass that had not been broken in. Then He will bring salvation, which is the meaning of "Hosanna", to Israel.

(3) In Romans 9 the apostle Paul laments over his fellow countrymen not receiving the Lord Jesus and so failing to obtain righteousness before God. The Gentiles had done, having believed the Gospel that Paul preached. He refers to the Lord Jesus as a 'stumblingstone' upon which the Jews had fallen. In verse 33 Paul quotes Isaiah: "Behold, I lay in Zion a stumblingstone and rock of offence: and whosoever believeth on Him shall not be ashamed". The language makes it clear that the stumblingstone was the Lord Jesus Christ. He came to His own city as its rightful King, but was rejected and crucified. So He became a rock of offence to the Jews, but an object of faith to those who believed on Him.

(4) Also in Romans 11, Paul mentions Zion, not this time in regard to their rejection of their own Messiah, but in regard to their deliverance. When the fullness of the Gentiles is complete, which is a reference to the present state of the world which is dominated by Gentile powers, the Lord Jesus will come to save His people on earth. Verses 25 and 26 tell us: "Blindness in part happened to Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles be come. And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, 'There shall come out of Zion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob'".

(5) The writer of the letter to the Hebrews refers to Zion in chapter 12. He tells those Jews who had believed the Gospel, and so apparently had lost everything in Judaism, that in a spiritual way they had come into all the blessing that the nation will come into when Christ comes as King. So he says in verse 12: "But ye are come unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God". Those Jewish Christians would understand what Zion meant; it was the ultimate blessing of Israel. It was theirs now because they had believed on the Lord Jesus Christ.

(6) Peter refers to Zion in his first letter, which again was written to Jewish believers. He also uses the illustration of a stone, not a stumblingstone but a living stone. He quotes Isaiah 28:15. "Behold, I lay in Zion a chief corner stone, elect, precious". That very Stone which the leaders of Israel, called in verse 7 'builders', had cast away as not fitting into what they were building, "the same is made the head of the corner". Whatever Israel has done in rejecting the Lord Jesus in no way hinders what God has planned. He will be the Head of every corner in the world to come and men will be blessed because of it. The believer has come into this already.

(7) There is only one reference to Zion in the Revelation. It is in chapter 14:1, where we read: "And I looked, and, lo, a Lamb stood on the mount Zion and with Him an hundred forty and four thousand, having His Father's name written in their foreheads". Those that will be faithful to Him while the Beast and the Antichrist ravage the nation of Israel, are seen blessed by Him on Mount Zion.

We can see very clearly from all these New Testament references to Zion, that it is a future name which will involve the coming of Christ as King to set up His Kingdom on earth; where the nation of Israel will be the centre of administration of blessing for the whole world. The fact that Israel today is in the middle of so much conflict only emphasizes the mercy and grace of God that will deliver them from every enemy after they repent and believe on Him whom God sent. It will not be by strength or military power, neither the help of America or any other nation, but by the intervention of God in mercy.

The glory of Zion

Psalm 48 opens with an ascription of praise to Jehovah, who has established His throne in Zion: "Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of His holiness" (v. 1). There follows a description of the glory of the city: "Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King. God is known in her palaces for a refuge" (vv. 2,3). Holiness having been established, the city which had been desolate now becomes beautiful, the joy of the whole earth. The words, "on the sides of the north", may refer to the fact that those nations that had tried to destroy Israel had come from the north, but they were defeated and destroyed themselves. That point of attack is now seen as a place of glory. God was now dwelling in the city as its defence and security, so it becomes holy, beautiful, a place of joy and a refuge for God's people.

Verses 4 to 7 describe the sudden judgement by which the city had been delivered from the enemies of God's people. The confederate kings had assembled against the city. They mustered their hosts and passed by in battle array, only to find themselves confronted, not simply by man, but by the mighty power of God. Astonished and dismayed they fled, seized with sudden panic. They trembled like a woman overcome with the pain of giving birth, and dispersed like a navy in a storm.

In verses 8 to 10 the godly celebrate the fact that they not only had heard of what God had done for their fathers in days of old, but they had now experienced it themselves. Moreover, the city now delivered will be established for ever, not as had happened so often to Israel in the past: "As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the LORD of hosts, in the city of our God: God will establish it forever. Selah" (v. 8). When they were cast out of the land, they had thought of the lovingkindness of God. Now that they have been delivered from every enemy, they delight in His lovingkindness in the midst of His temple. And so God is praised according to all that He is, as set forth in His name: "According to thy name, O God, so is thy praise unto the ends of the earth: thy right hand is full of righteousness" (v. 10).

In that day the whole world will be characterized by righteousness, not as it is now, by wickedness, greed and every moral evil. The Lord Jesus will have dealt with every expression of Satan's power and sway in the world, by the terrible judgements that we read of in the Revelation. He will deliver His people and will establish righteousness in the whole world and so the blessing of God will flow out through Zion to the ends of the earth. We may have difficulty in believing this in the light of the policies of many nations at the moment. But the centre of government during the reign of Christ will not be Washington, London or Moscow, or any other powerful place, but it will be Jerusalem. The whole world will come to acknowledge it and thus will be blessed. I believe this is the clear teaching of Scripture. We will do well to remember it when we read so much of the schemes of men in the world now.

Let Mount Zion rejoice

The Psalm closes in verses 11 to 14 with a call to Mount Zion to rejoice and to the cities of Judah to be glad. In peace the inhabitants can contemplate the beauty of the city. They look at her bulwarks and palaces, and can tell to future generations about this great deliverance for ever and ever: "Let Mount Zion rejoice, let the daughters of Judah be glad, because of thy judgements. Walk about Zion, and go round about her: tell the towers thereof. Mark ye well her bulwarks, consider her palaces; that ye may tell it in the generation following". Never again will the nation turn aside to idolatry. Throughout their lives God will be their God and their Guide: "For this God is our God for ever and ever: for He will be our Guide even unto death".

This consideration of the faithfulness of God to His unfaithful people, should encourage us in our lives to trust the Lord Jesus every day. Despite the fact that often we are unfaithful and

let Him down, He will never go back on anything that He has promised. As Israel in a coming day will come into wonderful earthly blessing, so the believer will come into heavenly blessing. This will not be because of anything that we have done, but by the grace and faithfulness of God. Praise His name. Amen.