

The Church Part 7: Beautiful Temple on Mount Zion

Psalm 48:1-14; Hebrews 12:18-24, 28-29

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Dear congregation of Christ: “The whole of America is Zion itself from north to south,” so declared Joseph Smith, the founder of the Latter-Day Saints, popularly known as the Mormon Church. Mormons believe “in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes; that Zion (the New Jerusalem) will be built upon the American continent.” And where in America would this “Zion” be built? In “the land of Missouri... the land of promise, and the place for the city of Zion.” So, in 1831, 1,200 Mormons settled there, but in 1838, 10,000 were expelled from Missouri by a militia after a long war. Today, Mormons still believe that the “Redemption of Zion” and the “Millennial Temple” will be built in Independence, Missouri at Christ’s Second Coming.

But what does the Scripture says about Zion? Is it a place, is it a building, or is it a people? Our text today, Psalm 48, is about the God who established and defended Mount Zion. It is described as a mountain, a city, a temple, and its past, present and future as God's special dwelling-place. It consists of three main parts. Verses 1-3 is a celebration of and praise to God who is the Great King of Mount Zion, a beautiful city that is the joy of all the earth. Verses 4-11 recall how the Lord defended her from enemies who attacked her, and how the city rejoices in the Lord's preservation. Lastly, verses 12-14 is an invitation to consider how God has built Mount Zion's strong defenses, and to tell the next generation about the God who guides and preserves his people forever.

So then, Psalm 48 is not mainly about the majesty and beauty of Mount Zion, but about the steadfast love, goodness and might of the Lord their God. Without God, the holy city will be destroyed by God’s enemies. And this focus on God is vital because Mount Zion is a foretaste of God's indestructible, eternal holy city, the Church.

In our text in Hebrews 12, when God called Israel to assemble at Mount Sinai, he inaugurated Israel as his holy nation, his treasured possession, and his church in the wilderness. On that mountain, God made a covenant with his people, and his people worshiped him. There, God promised that he would dwell with them in the tabernacle, and Israel vowed to obey his laws and commandments for their worship and life in the Promised Land. As they traveled through the wilderness, God dwelt with them in the ark of the covenant. Four centuries after they settled in the Promised Land, King Solomon built God’s temple at Mount Zion to be God’s dwelling-place in Israel. The ark of the covenant rested in the temple’s Most Holy Place.

The temple is a foretaste of the eternal *“city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.”* While the earthly city waits for the heavenly city, it will be continually harassed, attacked, and persecuted by the pagan kings of the earth. But these attacks will be futile, for God himself is the city’s fortress. And even as these attacks continue, the faithful church will continue to flourish, and reach the whole

earth. Therefore, our theme today is, **The Church Part 7: A Beautiful Temple on Mount Zion**, under three headings.

Where the LORD Dwells With His People Forever

Like many other Psalms of praise, Psalm 48 opens with a praise of God, “*Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God!*” In Psalm 96, we read two reasons why. First, he does “*marvelous works,*” especially in saving his people (2-3). Second, “*he is to be feared above all gods*” because he made the heavens (4-5). Only the Lord can do these things, there is no other, “*Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable*” (Psa 145:3).

In the Old Testament, the “city of our God,” “the holy mountain” and “Mount Zion” all refer to Jerusalem and its Temple. It is his own possession, “*the city of our God... the great King.*” Mount Zion is the mountain on which the temple was built. God is not only praised in this temple, but he also actually dwells in it. This city, this mountain, this temple is praised as “*beautiful in elevation.*” Just as the LORD dwelt in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve, and in the tabernacle with Israel, he dwelt in Mount Zion. It is his presence that makes the mountain beautiful. Since Mount Zion is the holy and beautiful mountain where God dwells, how are we to gather every Lord’s Day in his presence? We are to be “holy and blameless,” with “clean hands and a pure heart” (Eph 1:4; Psa 24:4). And we are to be “beautiful” in his sight, in “splendor,” and “clothe [ourselves] with fine linen, bright and pure” (Psa 48:2; Eph 5:27; Rev 19:8), and not come in our normal or work clothes, but with our Sunday best. Since God is the Great King and Righteous Judge of the whole earth, would you appear in his heavenly court before him “as you are” in your t-shirts, shorts and sneakers? God forbid!

It is in the glory of the LORD that his people have joy. But not only Israel has joy. In the end, Zion is “*the joy of all the earth,*” and God's praise “*reaches to the ends of the earth*” (10). Psalm 22:27 also looks forward to that day when, “*All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you.*” Though not completed yet, this prophecy started unfolding during Jesus' earthly ministry. Christ tasked his apostles to preach the gospel to “*the end of the earth*” (Acts 1:8), to “*bring salvation to the ends of the earth*” (Acts 13:47). And they did. By the time Paul wrote his letter to the Colossian church, the gospel “*has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven*” (Col 1:23).

So Gentile nations will be blessed with the gospel of Christ. The psalmist even locates Zion north of Jerusalem in a place called *Zaphon*, where the pagan god Baal sits in a pagan temple. Even Isaiah says, “*the mount of assembly [is] in the far reaches of the north*” (Isa 14:13). As the gospel spreads, the God of Israel will drive Baal out of his temple and sit on his throne in the north. And at the end of the age, when all of God's elect has been sworn in as citizens of his kingdom, he will usher in “*the joy of all the earth*”! And this joy will be forever in the Lord (Psa 23:6).

Kings Surrounded Mount Zion But are Shattered

Psalm 46 says that this city of God is peaceful, not in upheaval, so it rejoices because of its peace, security and prosperity. There is a river that flows through the city and provides for the

needs of its people, their animals and trees. God is the fortress of his city, well-protected and secure with its high walls and watchtowers. God himself dwells with them in the city. *“God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.”* When the city is attacked, God fights for his people. This is why Psalm 48:3 also says, *“Within her citadels God has made himself known as a fortress.”*

But in Psalm 46:4-6, the psalmist contrasts the safe, secure and well-provided city of God, against the city of man in uproar against God, *“The nations rage, the kingdoms totter.”* Mankind is in rebellion against God and Christ; they plot against the people of God. In many parts of the world, to carry the name of our Lord Jesus Christ is a sure sentence of prison, torture and even death. The gospel of Christ is forbidden to be preached. They don't want any mention of our God. They only want to worship their idol-gods.

Today, our nation is anti-Christian nation. Most politicians end their campaign speeches with, “God bless America!” but what kind of God? It is a nebulous God of all kinds of religions, whether Christian, Islam, Buddhist, Hindu, or New Age, the “unknown God,” as Paul calls pagan gods in Acts 17:23. On August 31 last year, California bill SB 107 was given to Governor Newsom for his signature. This bill would allow courts to take custody of minors from out of state who come to California for gender transition surgeries and cross-sex hormones, even if the minors' parents oppose these actions or even if they do not know about them. Daily, Christians are ridiculed, harassed, and even prosecuted by our “democratic” government. A pro-life advocate who peacefully protested against an abortion clinic faces eleven years in prison, three years supervised release, and fines of up to \$350,000 if convicted on federal charges.

So in verses 4-8, the psalmist recounts attacks by enemies of God's people Israel, *“For behold, the kings assembled; they came on together,”* but they were astounded, panicked, fled, trembled, and were in anguish. Nations assembled together to destroy Mount Zion, but they panicked, trembling as they fled when they saw that the LORD God dwelt there in glory and might. His promise to David of an everlasting kingdom will never be broken by any mighty invading army (Psa 48:8).

Christ's promise to us today still rings true, *“I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”* (Matt 16:17-18). Not terrorism, not martyrdom, not persecution by legal means, not by false gospels, not by wolves pretending to be sheep. Nothing shall separate you, as Christ's church, from the love of God, because our church is founded on Christ. For 2,000 years, the kings of the earth have tried and failed. Even on the last day, wicked antichristian forces will attack the church in a vain attempt to destroy the church.

Then in verses 9-11, the psalmist encourages you to meditate on God's unchanging love, whether in your home or every Lord's Day assembly: to think of his marvelous works of creation and his grace and mercy in saving you from sin, and to rejoice and be glad as worshipers in Zion because of his righteous authority. Then, on that last day, believers from all nations will gather in a great assembly in heaven, not like kings in rebellion, but as righteous citizens God's kingdom to praise and give thanks to him for his judgments.

Mount Zion Reaches to the Ends of the Earth

In this last section, verses 12-14, the psalmist invites worshipers to review the beauty and might of the holy city, *“Walk about Zion, go around her, number her towers, consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels.”* Now that the invaders have been destroyed, they walk out of the city gates to find their enemies' dead bodies. They are to consider how God has defended the city with her towers, ramparts and citadels. But the mighty fortress was not their only defense, because God himself who dwelt there was their sure rock and fortress. As long as the LORD was with them, they will not be moved.

Why is it important for the people of Mount Zion to know and believe that the Lord is their defense? Verses 13-14 tell us, *“that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever.”* The church will remain and be established forever when the former generation teaches the coming generation who our God is, its creeds and confessions, its songs, its prayers, and most of all, the unchanging true Word of God.

Our connection with the past is also our connection with the future. Together, we believe the same doctrines, partake of the same bread and wine, sing the same songs, and pray the same prayers that our forefathers did. And when we teach them to our children, they will also do the same. We believe and teach the same mighty wonders that the Lord has done in the past ages.

When you as a church do not neglect this duty to the next generation, the psalmist assures us that this God will also be their God who will guide their lives forever and ever. This is why the writer of Hebrews exhorts you to be *“looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.”* To *“desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.”* And God's promise is that *“he has prepared for them a city,”* our eternal heavenly dwelling-place (Heb 11:10, 16).

The LORD has promised his Old Testament people that Mount Zion would reach the ends of the earth. In our reading of Hebrews 12:18-24, at Mount Sinai, they were terrified when God revealed himself as *“a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a [deafening] voice.”* There, God made a covenant with them, declaring them as his holy nation and treasured possession (Exo 19:5-6). But at Mount Zion, God's holy church from all nations, peoples, and languages assembles in “festal gathering,” in the “marriage supper of the Lamb” where they would be with their Savior and Redeemer forever.

Beloved Christian friends: Believe that this eternal city that you enter in every Lord's Day assembly such as this is a foretaste of *heaven itself*, a meeting with *“God, the judge of all... and [with] Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.”* You, the church, is *the city of God, his holy mountain, Mount Zion, the city of the great King.* Today and every Lord's Day, *“You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem”* (Heb 12:22-24).

Therefore, let us not neglect the Lord's Day gathering (Heb 10:25), for beware, desecrating the Lord's Day for their own pleasure and business is one of the sins for which God condemned and punished Israel (Isa 58:13-14). And *“let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe,”* for God is still and forever, *“a consuming fire”* to those who worship him without fear and trembling, and to those who worship other gods (Heb 12:28-29).