

# The City of the Living God

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 27 July 2025

Preacher: Ben MacDonald

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, good morning, everyone. It's great to be back with you. I was a student here at Bronzefield, so it's a real joy. It's kind of odd to be this side of the platform, but it's great fun. As mentioned, my name's Ben. I'm a pastor in training just down the road at a church called Charlotte Chapel. We're so thankful for you guys' partnership in the gospel. We pray for you regularly, and it's a joy to bring God's word to you this morning.

Let me just pray again briefly, and then let's get cracking. Dear God, as we come to your word, comfort us, challenge us, change us, we pray. Lead us into the comfort that is only found in your presence. In your name, amen.

Amen. Okay. I think at times, church feels weak and ugly. Big statement to making someone else's church right in front of their pastor.

But I think it's true, right? Here's what I mean. If your church is anything like mine, and I think it probably is, you feel its weakness. You know, and it's summer, and loads of people are away, and it just feels empty, and you've got a guest preacher from down the road.

You feel weak. Do you know when that dear old saint dies, and you feel the weight? Or when that family who are so plugged in move on to another church, and you're just left feeling, oh, we're weak.

[ 1 : 2 6 ] Do you know when for decades you try and reach the people who I can literally see into the living room right now, and yet they just seem to close the curtains, shut the door, and want nothing to do with church?

We feel weak, don't we? Not only that, at times, church is ugly. We argue with each other.

Our sin just seems to get in the way all the time. You don't need to be around church long to feel that what we're doing here is, in a sense, weak and ugly. In Psalm 48, this great song for God's people, we together this morning are invited to walk around Zion.

This great city of the living God, and to see its beauty, and to see its safety. Now, there is so much biblical theology tied up in Zion.

But we need to keep this in mind. As we walk around, we this morning are being invited to see everything that these verses point towards. In our weakness and ugliness, we are being invited to see the beauty and safety of Christ.

[ 2 : 4 0 ] The beauty and safety that is ours now is his new covenant people, the church, and the beauty and safety of the Zion to come in heaven with him forever.

And so if we ever feel weak, I pray that Psalm 48 will be like a booster shot to our souls. As we gaze on the great God of Zion in his beautiful city, we might see that Christ's church right here in Brunzfield, even in its weakness and ugliness, is the most beautiful and safe thing that you could ever be a part of.

And so to help us along that path, I think Psalm 48 invites us to do four things. And the first one is this. You this morning are invited to delight in God's presence.

Our psalm begins, verse number one. In the last few psalms, we've been encouraged to praise the sovereign Lord, the one who is exalted.

He is the fortress for his people, Psalm 46. He's the one who reigns over all the nations, Psalm 47. And he's the one, as we begin Psalm 48, who is worthy of all praise.

[ 4 : 10 ] But we're not invited just to look. This morning we are invited to enter his dwelling, to ascend his holy mountain and into this great city of God, Zion.

Where we see in verse number two, that it is beautiful in its loftiness. The joy of the whole earth, like the heights of Saphon, is Mount Zion in the city of the great king.

Right, just get your mind on the most beautiful place you've ever been. Right, just right up front. Got it? The place that we've been invited to look at blows out of the water.

This is the most beautiful place you can ever imagine. Saphon literally just means far north. Which we know from Isaiah 14 is meant to be a reference to this great mountain.

Far higher than anything in Jerusalem. You see, for the Israelites, the people of God of old, Mount Zion in the city of Jerusalem is where the temple was.

[ 5 : 20 ] This great symbol of God's dwelling. But the mountain's not very high. And yet here this morning, the psalmist invites them. The psalmist invites us.

Not to consider a physical place. But they are painting a picture of the presence of God. Beautiful, joyful, lofty, high.

It is meant to lift our eyes. This is where the great king, our God, dwells. He himself is in her citadels.

Verse 3. He has shown himself to be her fortress. Well, we have to understand this. This great city is beautiful and safe.

Not because of its architecture. Not because of its high walls. But because God is there. And where God dwells is the joy of all the earth.

[ 6 : 23 ] It is beautiful and safe. Last year, I went to Rome. It's beautiful. And like every other tourist in the world, I went to St. Peter's Basilica.

Right in the heart of the Vatican. And as you walk around, it really is one of the most beautiful buildings I think man's ever made. You see all the statues and the art and the craftsmanship.

It's just breathtaking. Everywhere you go, you're told to stand behind these wee velvet ropes. Right? There's whole sections that you're not even allowed to enter. And there's men in like sharp black tailored suits with earpieces looking menacing.

They're not there to protect you, are they? They're there to protect this great city, the Vatican, from you. Even as you're invited to kind of look on, its beauty is always held at a distance.

In Psalm 48, we, you this morning, are invited not just to gaze on the beauty of Zion, but its king has allowed you to enter.

[ 7 : 30 ] With full access, somewhere which makes St. Peter's look like that ming in Edinburgh Uni building across the meadows. You see, in Christ, we are brought into the very dwelling place of God.

Just try and wrap your head around that. Through faith and repentance, we have been brought into the throne room of the living God, no velvet ropes, to delight in the beauty of his presence.

That's the language of Ephesians 2, isn't it? This morning, however you feel coming to church, if you're a Christian, God has raised you up with Christ and seated you with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.

There is a very real sense in which you are already in Zion. And it is beautiful and safe because it's where God is.

And we're not just seated there with him. He is here with us now. By being united to Jesus, his spirit dwells in us.

[ 8 : 39 ] And so this morning, on a rainy Sunday in Brunsfield, Christ is making his church beautiful. Not because you've got a beautiful building.

Because right now, his presence is in all who believe. And he is building us this morning into a living temple. Even in our weakness and imperfection.

Even as we long for the Zion, heaven to come. Belonging to church is belonging to the great city of God as the people of God now. Maybe we just feel weak.

Because we fall into a trap of thinking church is about us. We come this morning thinking about the route we're serving on. Or the person we need to speak to. Or just the thing we need to get done.

Now firstly this morning, we are invited and reminded, before we do anything else, that as we gather as his church, we have been brought into his beautiful presence to gaze on the beauty of the God of Zion.

[ 9 : 45 ] And so having been brought in, God says, look around and delight. That before you do anything else, you might say this morning, great is the Lord.

And most worthy of praise. We're invited to delight in his presence. Secondly, we're invited to know his protection.

In the psalm, this great city comes under attack. Do you see that in verse number four? When the kings joined forces, when they advanced together.

Now we're not giving any detail of which kings. To guess would just be speculation. But we know against God's great kingdom, there's always been rebellion. We're back in Psalm 2.

It's the nation's kings conspiring together against God. What unites them? Well, it's rebellion against God. It's really a summary of sinful human rebellion against the God Almighty.

[ 10 : 50 ] And yet, as these kings approach the city, they saw her and were astounded, verse five. They fled in terror. Trembling seized them there, pain like that of a woman in labor.

You destroyed them like ships of Tarshish, shattered by an east wind. Faced with the strength and the beauty of the city in which God dwells, the forces of rebellion are forced to flee.

They're left trembling and astounded before God. Their pain is that of a woman in labor. Unbearable and inescapable. And ultimately, they're destroyed.

I'll be honest, I've got no idea what's going on with the ships of Tarshish. I wasn't convinced by anyone that does. And yet, it's clearly a picture of overwhelming strength and majesty, isn't it?

And yet, faced with the living God, the ships are sunk and rebellion is shattered. God's city is shown to be impregnable.

[ 12 : 04 ] Do you notice, there's not even a fight. The mere sight of where God dwells sends the enemy running. And the psalmists are left, knowing only the protection of their God.

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

Do you notice, there's two responses to seeing Zion. There is trembling fear for the kings who oppose God. And there is unending assurance and safety for his people.

Because to be in God's presence is beautiful and safe. This morning, we are invited to hear and to see with the eyes of faith, the protection that is found in God's kingdom.

And the impregnability of his church. In a hostile world. Where your neighbor still won't come to church.

[ 13 : 14 ] When the church down the road abandons the teaching of God. When you look around Brunsfield Evangelical and are tempted to think, flip me, we are so helplessly weak.

Know this. God will establish his city forever. As the risen Christ gathers his church, against which the gates of Hades will not and cannot prevail.

Christ has defeated sin and death. Satan awaits his certain destruction. God's kingdom will grow. His city is secure. And therefore, so are you.

Regardless of how you feel this morning, if you are in Jesus, being united to him by faith, you have been brought under his protection. Against which all the kings of earth can only tremble and flee.

I know that at times, life's hard, isn't it? So when we feel weak, when life's just a slog, when the thought of facing another day just feels too much, Psalm 48 says, look around.

[ 14 : 34 ] See your brothers and sisters in this room. As you read your Bible tomorrow morning, you are invited to hear and see in the pages of Scripture and in the life of this church, that your future with God has already begun.

That he will keep you and he will bring you into the heavenly Zion, which he himself makes secure. Have you heard? Do you see?

In the city of the Lord Almighty, in the city of our God, God makes her secure. Forever. Thirdly, we are invited to praise his love.

Read to me from verse number nine. Within your temple, O God, we meditate on your unfailing love. Like your name, O God, your praise reaches to the ends of the earth.

Your right hand is filled with righteousness. Mount Zion rejoices. The villages of Judah are glad because of your judgment. Did you notice we read in verses nine to 11 in this great story of a beautiful city, of a thwarted attack, absolutely nothing happens.

[ 15 : 52 ] It's like the psalmist, having seen the glory of Zion, just has to take a wee moment just take it all in. And yet we move from gazing upon the city to entering its gates and now we find ourselves in its very center, the temple, in God's dwelling.

that we might know his love. This is why his presence is beautiful.

This is why his presence is safe because it is where we see and know his love. This is so much more than affection. This is hesed love, unfailing, promise-keeping love.

love. This is the love that has brought rebellious, sin-stained people into the very presence of the beautiful, great, and holy God.

This is the love which delivered his people of old despite their constant moaning and rebellion. The love that allowed them to experience temporarily the blessings of being in God's presence.

[ 17 : 14 ] It's a love which allowed them to say this great God that's our God. And this is the love which has now been revealed fully in Christ.

A love which was displayed in 8K Ultra HD as he willingly went to die on the cross. Taking the punishment for our sin and it's a love which is secure because it is sealed right now in the risen Jesus who reigns with all authority in his city.

God has kept his promises of old and is delivering for himself a people from every corner of the globe. So the people of God, the citizens of Zion, the villages of Judah, it's a picture of all God's covenant people are just left rejoicing.

As they reflect on God's unfailing love to them, they are glad, they're overflowing with praise at the God of Zion, the beautiful one who's kept them safe.

I wonder what's made you truly glad this summer. Maybe for some it's just the opportunity to have a break.

[ 18 : 37 ] Do you remember like two weeks ago we had like seven days of sun and it was just glorious. Made me glad. A couple days ago I was walking along the meadows and I saw a dog catch a frisbee from like, it must have been 150 metres.

And I tell you what, in that moment my wee heart was glad. if only gladness lasted longer than a holiday, lasted longer than a fleet in Scottish summer, lasted longer than that big guy could throw a frisbee.

Here's the beauty of Psalm 48. If you want gladness that lasts, it's available to you. it is by meditating on God's unfailing love to you in Christ.

If you're a Christian this morning, just take a moment and just reflect on your own testimony. It's like a hundred different stories in this room and yet one thing that we all share in common. We were in rebellion against God and we have been brought to know in Christ his unfailing love together.

So I take so much encouragement from the fact that this morning we can be glad. That this morning we can praise him even at a time when the church feels weak, when it feels perhaps small, perhaps even when you feel this morning that you are just clinging onto your faith by your fingernails.

[ 20 : 11 ] Because our gladness, the gladness of the people of God is never in acting we do well. Ach, isn't our church just growing? It doesn't just all seem to be well in my life.

Our source of gladness is wholly outside of ourselves. We're glad not to do with anything because of ourselves but because of God's judgments.

We are glad because we have a perfect just judge who will defeat evil. We are glad because of our safety now in Christ and we are glad because we are certain that he will keep his people safe.

So as we look around Brunsfield Evangelical this morning, I hope we see that God is doing something here. Amongst us now that is unbeatable.

Every single testament in this church is evidence of that. all of us deserve to be left trembling before God and then destroyed like ships against a rock because of his great love can sit this morning able to rejoice and praise his unfailing love in the safety of the city of God.

[ 21 : 34 ] So you better believe you can sing this psalm in weakness because we together this morning sing of the one who is strong.

We are singing of the strength the safety the unfailing love of God with a certain hope of a future where we will rejoice in heavenly Zion forever.

When my wee heart when your wee heart will forever be glad. So much better than talking with a frisbee isn't it? And yet I know in a room this size there's almost certainly people who don't know this gladness for themselves who are still just exploring life with Jesus.

If that's you this morning I pray that you will see there is a beauty and a safety in Jesus that nothing in this world can come close to. Whatever's going on in your life this morning you can be glad by knowing the love of God.

It starts by seeing that your rebellion of him is futile. And yet at the cross of Christ rebellious people are offered to come to Jesus and find the gladness of an eternity dwelling of God.

[ 22 : 56 ] We are invited to praise his love. And lastly we're invited to proclaim his glory. The psalmist finishes by saying in verse number 12 read with me walk around Zion go around her count her towers consider well her ramparts view her citadels that you might tell of them to the next generation for this God is our God forever and ever he will be our guide even to the end.

As the psalm closes for the first time we're given something to do. God's people are told to walk, to go, to count, to consider. Because you see meditating on God's love always moves God's people to action.

The heroes are told to walk around the city, to take it all in, to bask in its glory, count in the towers, to see for themselves how safe the ramparts are, to look at the beauty of the citadel.

Why? That you might tell the next generation that people of God having seen the city of God are to become like a walking tourist boat.

I'm studying with a French guy. He is the most French man the world has ever known. And every summer he goes back to France. And he came home a couple of days ago.

[ 24 : 31 ] And my goodness me, that man cannot stop talking about France. He looks at the rain coming out of the sky and he just pines for the sun of France.

I walked up on Monroe with him recently and he looked around and said, why do you Scottish people even bother doing this? If you've seen the Alps, it's not even worth it. Right?

He loves France so much. Having seen its beauty, he just overflows with it. Here's the thing that infuriates me about that. It really makes me want to go.

This is how God's people are to be about Zion. And yet you notice its citizens having gazed on the city, they never say, oh, what a wonderful place.

They're left saying, what a wonderful God. God's God's glory of what he has built, they say, oh, you have got to know the king who dwells there.

[ 25 : 34 ] The church is to ponder on what God is doing and then proclaim him to the generations to come. You see, we this morning as Christchurch don't just offer a good kids program.

We don't just offer a nice cup of tea. We don't just offer a nice space to come out of the rain. Because we're not competing with the world. We are primarily proclaiming the glory of God.

We are saying, look at our king. He is safe. He is beautiful. He is glorious. And you've got to know him. Because this God, that's our God.

Forever and ever. He will be our guide even to the end. The God of verse one, great and worthy of all praise.

The one who dwells in his magnificent city, Zion. That's my God. If you're a Christian this morning, that's your God.

[ 26 : 41 ] Not for a while. Not dependent on how we go in our Christian walk, but forever and ever. You see, we are given confidence as God's people of where we are going together because we are given confidence in who is taking us there.

So the church is given assurance that even in our weakness, even at times in our ugliness, as we look around the ramparts through the eyes of faith, we know that means I'm safe in Jesus.

that means I have a beauty that the world cannot touch. That means when all is said and done, those who care nothing for Jesus will be terrified as they see the glory of his church.

An old wise guy called Dietrich Bonhoeffer commenting on the Psalms, and this one in particular described it like this, and this is how we'll close. what Zion and the temple were for the Israelites is for us the church of God in the world.

The gracious God present in Christ to its congregation is the end of all joy, of all thanksgiving, and all yearning. It is beautiful and safe.

[ 28 : 07 ] Let's pray. Dear God and Heavenly Father, thank you that you are the God who is beautiful and safe.

Thank you that through faith in Christ, you are making us beautiful and safe. Thank you that we have a home in heaven with you that is forever secure, forever beautiful, and forever safe.

Lord, in our weakness now, please let us lift our eyes, help us by your spirit, to gaze on the beauty of Zion, and then to be those who are just so desperate to tell the next generation.

I pray these things in your name and for your glory. Amen.