Our Loving God

Winter Quarter: Our Love For God
Unit 3: Songs that Glorify the God of Love

Sunday school lesson for the week of February 10, 2019
By Helen and Rev. Sam Rogers

Lesson Scripture: Psalm 48

In this final unit of the Winter Quarter we will focus on three psalms. Hopefully, you remember we studied Psalm 103 on December 16. A careful review of lesson 3 (December 16) would add to your appreciation of the literary form and power of the Psalms as the Hebrew hymn book.

The psalm for today is classified as one of the Songs of Zion (46, 76, 84, 87, and 122). All of these celebrate Mount Zion, the hill in Jerusalem where the Temple was built. Some also believe this is the location where Abraham came to sacrifice Isaac and today is holy to Islam, Christianity, and Judaism – certainly a place of importance!

The Songs of Zion are not just about the place, but celebrate the reason the place is special – God, the King, reigns there! Still today we mix religion and nationalism in strange and often dangerous ways, but these ancients did not ever separate the two.

The success or failure of crops, war, children, health – indeed life – depended on the superiority and presence of the god of the nation and its people. At first glance, these Hebrew Psalms may appear to be no different from those of other ancient nations and their gods. Isn’t this god just like all the other gods? Isn’t Israel just like all the other nations? The gods resided on mountains. What makes the god of Zion different? Even in verse 2 of this psalm a reference is made to Mt. Zaphon, where the pagan deity El lived. (Since this location is in the north, some translations use this word as a direction rather than a specific place.)

Of course, the difference is WHO this god is and His rule extends far beyond the national boundaries. Yes, the psalm celebrates the location, but goes much farther. Yahweh (rendered LORD in our translations) is the great King over all the earth.

David’s choice of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital was a strategic decision. He was attempting to unify the 12 separate tribes into a nation. Jerusalem was centrally located between north and south. Its history was not associated with any tribe but had been a Jebusite walled fortified city – a perfect location for rule and defense.

Please notice these features are not the emphasis of the beginning of the psalm – God’s greatness and worthiness of praise opens and closes the psalm. Many times in the Old Testament Jerusalem is defined as the City of David, but not in the Psalms! The Psalms were used in worship and the city was always designated “the city of our God” or Mount Zion – God’s Holy Mountain.
“The joy of the whole earth” states emphatically that Yahweh is the God not only of Mt. Zion, the city of our God, but of everyone, everywhere. The psalmist celebrates not only its physical features, but also its history. By the time this psalm was written, several attacks by foreign powers had been thwarted with reference to “Yahweh is in her citadels and has shown the Lord to be her fortress.” Martin Luther used this image in the great hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is our God.”

As grammarians, we are impressed with the tense of the verb – present perfect, indicating both completed actions in the past, but also the ongoing reality of God who was, and is, and is to come! God is the only security! The psalmist emphasizes this point by shifting the emphasis from the geography and defenses of the city to the Temple. Verse 9 is the only reference to the Temple in all the Songs of Zion. In this shift, the psalmist declares the true strength of the nation is the presence of the living God.

One writer notes in Solomon’s prayer at the time of the dedication of the Temple how God chose to dwell in the Temple, but was not confined to this place. (Read II Chronicles 6:18) Our places of worship are important primarily to remind us to reflect on God’s hesed – steadfast and unfailing love! (vs.9) This Hebrew word occurs more than 130 times in the Old Testament. We believe this is the best Old Testament word to describe “grace.”

Valentine’s Day is near, and we hope you will send messages to those you love. Don’t wait – do it now. During World War II, Sam’s dad wrote love letters to his mother. Thankfully, they were preserved, and our daughter has them. Sam has never read them, nor will he. Their privacy is important to him, but not so God’s communication with us. The scriptures are “love letters” from God. We read and re-read them. They are to be treasured not as mementoes of the past but as mail received today!

From the perspective of the worldwide outreach of God’s love, praise, and righteousness, the psalmist quickly turns to the local effect in “Jerusalem and the cities of Judah.” The god of the universe is also very personal to each one of us, His children. John Wesley said it best, “The best of all, God is with us.”

In closing, the psalmist invites us on a tour of the city’s structures. Walk, count, look, inspect – walls, citadels, towers, ramparts. We have been privileged to lead five groups of pilgrims to the Holy Land. We have indeed done all the above, but the invitation in this psalm is not to join a tour, but to share the faith with the next generation. We urge you to look back to the very first lesson of this quarter on December 2 where Moses told the Israelites how important it was to pass the faith from generation to generation.

Why? “Because this god is our God for ever and ever;
He will be our guide even to the end.” Psalm 48:14

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