

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Dr. Gordon Hughes

Lessons from the mountains of Israel: Mount Zion

Last week, we looked at Mount Sinai; today we are looking at Mount Zion.

I well remember, as a teenager, climbing Helvellyn in the Lake District. We set out from Glenridding at the southern end of Ullswater and climbed up along Swirral Edge to the summit at just over 3,000 feet. The views were magnificent. We then came back down via Striding Edge, worn out but glad to have accomplished it! Sadly, with the passage of years, it's beyond my capabilities now!

Climbing Mount Zion was a much more difficult task, certainly as we read about Zion for the first time in Scripture. It was that time when, following the death of King Saul, David had been crowned king in Hebron over the tribe of Judah.

It was not until some seven years later that the remaining tribes of Israel also acknowledged him as their king. We'll read about it now from 2 Samuel 5:4-9. "David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years. In Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months, and in Jerusalem he reigned thirty-three years over all Israel and Judah. And the king and his men went to Jerusalem against the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land, who spoke to David, saying, "You shall not come in here; but the blind and the lame will repel you," thinking, "David cannot come in here." Nevertheless David took the stronghold of Zion (that is, the City of David). Now David said on that day, "Whoever climbs up by way of the water shaft and defeats the Jebusites (the lame and the blind, who are hated by David's soul), he shall be chief and captain"... So David dwelt in the stronghold, and called it the City of David".

From Joshua 18 and Judges 1, we learn that this stronghold of the Jebusites was amongst the cities given to the tribe of Benjamin. Although commanded by Joshua to overthrow their enemies, the Benjamites had totally failed to remove the Jebusites from their territory. As a result of this failure, the Jebusites were still living there in David's day. Their continued presence, however, posed a threat to the safety of the united kingdom and David realised that something must be done about them.

The Jebusites, in their rocky stronghold, felt that they were in an unassailable position. Interestingly, the name Zion means 'fortress'. So confident were they of their superior position and of what they saw as David's supposed weakness, they mock him, claiming that even the lame and the blind would be able to hold out against him!

Archaeological exploration of this site during the last century has confirmed the existence of a vertical shaft forty feet deep, and a horizontal tunnel over sixty feet long to a fountain just outside the city walls. From 1 Chronicles 11, it would appear that Joab led a surprise attack through this watercourse and defeated the Jebusites. So the rocky fortress of Zion finally came under David's sway, becoming known as the City of David and, subsequently, more commonly as Jerusalem. Today, Mount Zion is used to describe the south-west hill of Jerusalem and the term Zion is used interchangeably for Jerusalem.

Of course, that mighty victory of David against all odds reminds us of that far greater victory that our Lord Jesus Christ, great David's greater Son, also won in that same city of Jerusalem when He died on the cross of Calvary. Of that spiritual victory, Paul writes, "Having disarmed principalities and powers, He (that is, the Lord Jesus) made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it" (Colossians 2:15). The writer to the Hebrews puts it in this way: "...that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (2:14-15).

In the time available to us this morning, we are only able to look at a few of the many references to Zion in Scripture. We will look at some of those which are found in the book of Psalms. Together, they provide a bird's eye view of the subsequent history of Zion.

Jerusalem, Mount Zion, became the capital city of a prosperous kingdom under David and, later, his son, Solomon. Under Solomon, a magnificent temple was built so that the worship of God might continue. Three times a year, every adult male Israelite was commanded to appear before God to offer sacrifice in the Temple (Deuteronomy 16:16). Psalm 48 captures something of the joy of those occasions: "Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised in the city of

our God, in His holy mountain. Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion on the sides of the north, the city of the great King. God is in her palaces; He is known as her refuge" (verses 1-3).

Psalm 84 also speaks of the joy of that pilgrimage. We have time this morning to read only part of it, but make time after this broadcast to read it all and enjoy it. "How lovely is Your tabernacle, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God...Blessed is the man whose strength is in You, whose heart is set on pilgrimage...They go from strength to strength; every one of them appears before God in Zion...For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness." Those words must challenge each one of us this morning as to how much do I long to be in the presence of the Lord!

Sadly, the nation of Israel did not continue in their obedience to God. They turned instead to the worship of idols and the day came when first, the ten tribes would be carried away captive to Assyria and, subsequently, Judah and Benjamin were carried away captive to Babylon. That beautiful capital city of Jerusalem was destroyed, left desolate by the Babylonians. Psalm 137 captures something of the sadness of those who were carried captive to Babylon: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion. We hung our harps upon the willows in the midst of it. For there those who carried us away captive required of us a song...saying "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How shall we sing the LORD'S song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her skill!" The children of Israel learned to their cost the folly of disobedience!

Today, we too need to be aware of that same lesson. The simple chorus puts it so well:

*Trust and obey,
For there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus,
But to trust and obey.*

But even before the Israelites had been carried away captive to Babylon, God had promised through the prophet, Jeremiah, that He would bring them back into the land. "For thus says the LORD: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jeremiah 29:10-11). They were still His people. God would not, could not, give them up!

Psalm 126 tells us something of the joy of those returning captives: "When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." The LORD has done great things for us, whereof we are glad...Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy".

So this morning, let us rejoice in the fact that we have a promise keeping God. The Bible is full of God's promises. Let's lay hold of them! Just a note of caution! We should be careful not to take the promise out of its context. While some of God's promises are for His people everywhere, some are exclusively for the nation of Israel. But here is one promise we can all enjoy during this coming week: "For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we may boldly say, 'The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?'" (Hebrews 13:5-6)

There are fewer explicit references to Zion in the New Testament, though, of course, Jerusalem figures largely there, particularly in the Gospels. It is worth commenting, in passing, that the translators of our Authorised Version of the Bible have chosen to use the spelling, Sion, in the New Testament. It is the same as Zion. Most modern translations use Zion consistently for both Old and New Testaments.

So when the Lord Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, on the day we call Palm Sunday, just before His crucifixion, Matthew tells us, "All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: 'Tell the daughter of Zion, "Behold, your King is coming to you, lowly, and sitting on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey"'" (Matthew 21:4-5). The prophecy quoted by Matthew is found in Zechariah 9:9.

As we have seen so far, Zion, or Mount Zion, is used to describe the physical city of Jerusalem. It is interesting that the writer to the Hebrews takes up the idea of a spiritual Zion. Writing to those Hebrew Christians, many of whom were scattered far from Jerusalem, he says: "For you have not come to the mountain that may not be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest...But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem...to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel" (Hebrews 12:18-24).

Last week, we were considering Mount Sinai. The writer to the Hebrews describes the lives of these Christians before they came to Christ as being characterised by Mount Sinai with its system of law-keeping. That could bring only death

because of their inability to keep that law. But in coming to Christ, and entering into all the benefits of His blood shed at Calvary, "[His] blood of the new covenant" (see Matthew 26:28), they had entered into life. They were now citizens of a heavenly Jerusalem, of a spiritual Mount Zion, the city of the living God. And so, by the grace of God, are we today as we trust in Christ as our Saviour!

John Newton was a slave trader converted to Christ. As a result of that conversion experience, he wrote the well-known hymn, Amazing Grace. In another hymn, he pursues this idea of a spiritual Zion.

*Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God;
He, whose word cannot be broken,
Formed thee for His own abode:
On the rock of ages founded,
What can shake thy sure repose?
With salvation's walls surrounded,
Thou may'st smile at all thy foes.*

*Saviour, if of Zion's city
I, through grace, a member am,
Let the world deride or pity,
I will glory in Thy name:
Fading is the worldling's pleasure,
All his boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting treasure
None but Zion's children know.*

This morning, we, too, can rejoice in those same solid joys and lasting treasure that we have in Christ!

The city of Jerusalem today is a sorry spectacle. It sits in a land torn apart by Arab-Israeli conflict. Where will it all end? As I write this, Tony Blair has just been appointed ambassador to the Middle East in the hope that he might be able to solve the tensions there. But will there ever be peace for Jerusalem, Zion's city?

In the time left to us this morning, we need to look at what God has in store for Jerusalem and His people. The Old Testament contains many promises from God for the future blessing of His people, Israel. The same God who kept His promise to bring back His people from captivity in Babylon will keep His promises for their future blessing. There is time this morning to look only at one such promise, but be assured of the fact that there are many.

We will read from Isaiah 2: "Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us of His ways, and we shall walk in His paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore" (verses 2-4). The world desperately needs this peace that will only be brought about by the coming of the Lord Jesus, the Prince of peace.

Other scriptures teach us that first the Lord Jesus must come to take His church, those Christians who are alive and those who, down through the ages, have died, to be with Himself in heaven. There will then follow a time of unspeakable suffering for the Jews when they will be besieged by the nations of the world. Only the coming of the Lord Jesus with His church to set up His kingdom will bring about their deliverance. After this will begin 1,000 years of blessing for this world, with Jerusalem, Mount Zion, the centre of that blessing. God's promise in Isaiah 2 will be literally fulfilled!

We have already considered the delight of the psalmist of old as he looked out upon Jerusalem: "beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion..." (Psalm 48:2). In that coming day of millennial blessing, those words of the psalmist will be fulfilled in a way beyond anything he may have considered as he first penned the words. As we look forward to that day, we can surely say, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20).

In conclusion, let's remind ourselves of the lessons that hopefully we have learned this morning from our consideration of Mount Zion:

1. As Christians, we have a mighty stronghold in our Lord Jesus Christ because of the victory He won at Calvary.
2. Do we long to be in His presence?
3. Only obedience to Christ will bring lasting happiness.
4. God always keeps His promises.
5. As Christians, we are citizens of heaven (see Philippians 3:20).
6. This world will know peace but only through the coming of the Lord Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

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