

King of Heaven, King of Earth

A Mighty Fortress is our God

Psalm 46:1 *To the choirmaster. Of the Sons of Korah. According to Alamo.*
A Song.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

² Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,

³ though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵ God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.

⁶ The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.

⁷ **The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.**

Selah

⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD, how he has brought desolations on the earth.

⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire.

¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!"

¹¹ **The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.**

Selah

Psalm 47:1 *To the choirmaster. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah.*¹

All you strong ones, clap your hands, acclaim, you gods, with shouts of joy.

² For Yahweh Most High is awesome, the Great King over all the earth.

³ He made nations prostrate beneath us, and peoples under our feet.

⁴ He chose for himself our kingdom, the pride of Jacob whom he loves.

Selah

⁵ God has gone up amid shouts of joy, Yahweh to the sound of a trumpet.

⁶ Sing praises, you gods, sing praises, sing praises to our king, sing praises.

⁷ For he is king of all the earth, O gods, sing a skillful song.

⁸ For God is king over the nations, has taken his seat upon his holy throne;

⁹ O nobles of the peoples, gather round! The God of Abraham is the Strong One; truly God is Suzerain of the earth, greatly to be extolled.

Psalm 48:1 *A Song. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah.*

Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain,

² beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King.

³ Within her citadels God has made himself known as a fortress.

⁴ For behold, the kings assembled; they came on together.

⁵ As soon as they saw it, they were astounded; they were in panic; they took to flight.

⁶ Trembling took hold of them there, anguish as of a woman in labor.

⁷ By the east wind you shattered the ships of Tarshish.

⁸ As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the LORD of hosts, in the city of our God, which God will establish forever. *Selah*

¹ Moving away from our usual pattern of simply using the ESV, I have decided to preach the translation of Dahood for Psalm 47. We will discuss this in the sermon. See [Mitchell Dahood S.J., *Psalms I: 1-50: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*](#), vol. 16, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 283.

⁹ We have thought on your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple.

¹⁰ As your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth. Your right hand is filled with righteousness.

¹¹ Let Mount Zion be glad! Let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of your judgments!

¹² Walk about Zion, go around her, number her towers,

¹³ consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels, that you may tell the next generation

¹⁴ that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever."

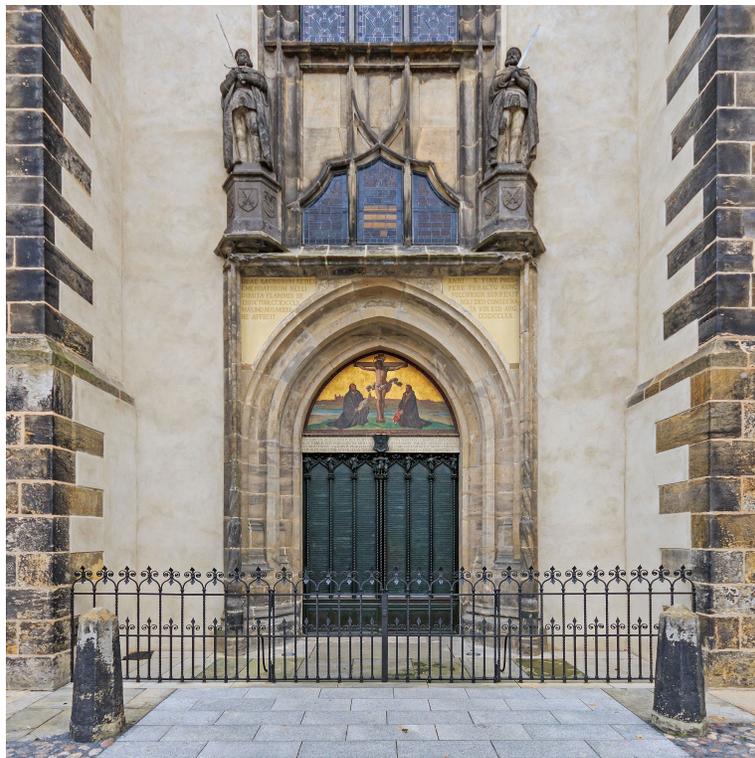
Psalm 46-48

A Mighty Composer

THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION celebrates its 500th year in 2017. Known for many things, it was perhaps most important for its recovery of the confidence and power in the Word of God, especially the word of the gospel which is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16). Most of us probably associate this power with the centrality that was placed upon the Word as it is preached. After all, “How shall they hear without a preacher?” (Rom 10:14). But it was by no means confined to the preached Word. In fact, they knew that the Word needed to get into hearts through various prescribed ways,

and thus the **sacraments** (the visible Word), **public reading** of the Bible (the Word proper), and **singing** (the Word to our souls) were just as important in the liturgies of the Reformers.

Martin Luther was the catalyst God used to finally bring long awaited and much needed reform to his church. It began in 1517 when the German Augustinian monk decided to placard 95 propositions against abuses in the Church on the internet- newspaper-billboard of his time: the great door at the University of Wittenberg.



Memorial of the Wittenburg Door (which burned down long ago)
Luther is buried about 10 feet inside

But while the *95 Thesis* were instrumental in sparking the needed debate and controversy that brought about eventual reform, it was perhaps **his songs** that were **the emotional sparkplugs** of the Reformation.

Until Luther, it was virtually unheard of to have the congregation singing during the worship service. This was a task reserved for the “professionals” (like almost everything else). But for Luther, “**Next to theology no art is equal to music; for it is the only one, except theology, which is able to give a quiet and happy mind.**”² He wrote at least **36 hymns**, the most famous of which is *Ein Feste Burg*. You say, “I’ve never heard of that.” Sure you have: *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*.

Sometimes called *The Battle Hymn* of the Reformation or “**the greatest hymn of the greatest man of the greatest period of German history,**”³ and translated into over 80 languages, it so incensed the Roman Church that it was said that his song(s) “**destroyed more souls than all his writings**”

² See **Martin Luther**, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 49: Letters II*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 49 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 428.

³ **J. Don Jennings**, “Martin Luther’s Psalm: Psalm 46,” *Jennings Scripture Studies* (2009), 10. http://www.drdonjennings.com/documents/textSermons/MartinLuthersPsalm_Ps46.pdf, accessed May 3, 2017.

and sermons.”⁴ Stunning words, given that this hymn is based largely on Psalm 46, known more affectionately as “Luther’s Psalm” because he regularly used to tell his young protégé Philip Melanchthon when they were struggling with some great challenge, “Let’s sing the 46th.”

The Mighty Psalms

Tim Challies writes, “The hymn became closely associated with Luther himself, as it embodied in its words and melody so much of the character of its author—bold, confident, defiant in the face of opposition.”⁵ This comment could equally be said about the Psalm, and the set of psalms in which it finds itself. How?

Last week we looked at **Psalm 45-46** and saw how the theme of the **bride-city** overlaps them both. God is the great protector and warrior who fights for his beloved. Therefore, you are to be happy and full of joy, confident and bold in

⁴ Probably from the writings of the Jesuit **Contzen**, the confessor of Elector Maximilian I of Bavaria. Cited in **Rebecca Wagner Oettinger**, “Luther, *Leider* and the Power of Song,” in *Music as Propaganda in the Reformation* (Routledge, 2017), n. 1.

⁵ **Tim Challies**, “Hymn Stories: A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” *Challies* (July 7, 2013), <https://www.challies.com/articles/hymn-stories-a-mighty-fortress-is-our-god>, accessed May 3, 2017.

the face of opposition. These two songs make up a series of “songs of Korah” (42-49) that have many overlapping themes. Not only does 46 have things in common with 45, but some have seen Psalm 46-48 as a set.⁶ (Others have seen 47-49 as a set).⁷ Thus, even though we looked at Psalm 46 last time, I want to look at it briefly again this morning against the backdrop of this bold, confident, and powerful God in the face of opposition. We’ll use Luther’s hymn as a guide as well.

Psalm 46: King of a Mighty Fortress

Luther’s great hymn begins, “A mighty fortress is our God.” This is taken directly from the refrain of Psalm 46, “The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress ... The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress” (Ps 46:7, 11). He sings next that God is “our

⁶ David M. Steimle, *Preliminary Biblical Studies, Old Testament & New Testament* [Phoenix: Grand Canyon University, 2015], 189 and n. 730 (i.e. Pierre Auffret, ‘L’ensemble des trois Psaumes 46, 47, et 48: Étude structurelle,’ *SEE* 43, no. 3 [1991]: 339. He cites how Psalm 46 and 48 both have God as protective citadel (i.e. a mighty fortress; 46:7, 11; 48:1) who is the source of joy and praise (46:10; 48:2, 11), while Psalm 47-48 have eleven chiasmic elements linking them together (Auffret, 342).

⁷ Michael Sadgrove, “Eternity and Mortality: The Ninth Evening: Psalms 47, 48, 49,” in *I will Trust in You: A Companion to the Evening Psalms* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2009).

helper amid the flood.” “Though the mountains be moved into the heart of sea” (46:2), the psalmist sings as well about the flood. So *A Mighty Fortress* is certainly about Psalm 46.

The second verse begins to sing about a certain man. “Were not the right man on our side, the man of God’s own choosing. Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is he; Lord Sabaoth, his name.” Sabaoth. Hosts. The LORD of hosts. The Warrior-King. “The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.” And Luther again, “... through him who with us sideth.” Luther sees Psalm 46 as a psalm about Christ, God with us, Immanuel. We saw how Psalms 45-46 were both read Christologically by the NT last time. Jesus is the King of the Psalm.

In between the revelation that God is our fortress and the unveiling of Jesus in the song, there are lyrics that come quite out of the blue. The lyrics sing of “our ancient foe” who “seeks to work us woe.” “His craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate, on earth is not his equal.” It is he whom Christ battles in the song (“and he must win the battle” and “one little word shall fell him, that word above all earthly powers”).

As I was thinking about this ancient enemy and the psalms this week, something struck me about the introduction of “[the Prince of Darkness](#)” at this point in *A Mighty Fortress*. Why might Luther have done this? It is possible that he just wanted to write a song because of his strongly held belief in the devil and the need we all must understand his doom, and so he added it for no more reason than this. However, Luther was deeply biblical and was tethered to the text.

There are many things in our psalms today that got me wondering about this. My thought process started with a comment about Psalm 47 and 48 in a commentary. “[The song of God’s heavenly reign is followed by a psalm that celebrates how his kingship is focused in a specific place on earth.](#)”⁸ The author of this quote obviously sees the first song (Ps 47) as a song about [heaven](#) and the second one as a song about [earth](#). It isn’t quite that neat and tidy, and even he admits as much. But it is certainly more curious than a lot of translations allow you to see, especially of Psalm 47. This isn’t unrelated to Psalm 46 as these psalms are related to one another.

⁸ [Sadgrove](#), no page.

Psalm 46 has connections to Psalm 48 as well. Especially the, “**holy habitation of the Most High**” (4) which shows up in the midst of the raging seas, calm and tranquil with a river flowing from its center. In Psalm 46 this is called the **city of God** who is the King of the city. In Psalm 48 it becomes **Mt. Zion**, the holy mountain (48:1ff). In both, the imagery goes back to Eden. The mind could easily travel to Ezekiel 28 here as the prophet speaks mysteriously of one who says, “**I am a god, I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas ... You were in Eden, the garden of God ... you were an anointed guardian cherub ... you were on the holy mountain of God ... [but] you sinned; so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God, and I destroyed you, O guardian cherub**” (Ezek 28:2, 13, 14, 16). In other words, he speaks of the satanic being of Eden, the great foe of mankind, who sought to usurp the holy habitation of the Most High and was punished.

Psalm 46 clearly has darkness in mind, for God helps “**when morning dawns**” (Ps 46:5). During the night, the fight is against the darkness, hence the **Prince of Darkness grim**. But then the Morning Star dawns as King of the night. During the night, a great flood depicted in **vv. 1-3** created

great darkness and upheaval upon the earth. Like the holy habitation in the seas, though Luther didn't like it, the Psalm's reference to the Flood certainly could bring to mind the fallen heavenly beings of Genesis 6, like it did with Peter (2Pe 2:4) and Jude (1:6). Much of *A Mighty Fortress* takes the language of the Psalm then and “interpret[s] and appl[ies it] to the church of [Luther's] own time and its struggles ... He did not write it to express his own feelings.”⁹

Finally, the language of God's works of desolation (Ps 46:8) through his mighty voice melting the earth (6) is a deliberate harkening back to Psalm 29, which is all about God being enthroned as King over the Flood (Ps 29:10) and over the heavenly beings to whom the psalm is addressed: “Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings (*elohim*)...” (1). These are all echoes of the satanic struggles we face on a daily basis against the powers and principles in heavenly places that Luther sings about. Is Psalm 46 about Satan directly? No. But indirectly, you can certainly see reasons why he might start thinking about this and decide to write what he did.

⁹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 53: Liturgy and Hymns*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 53 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 283.

Psalm 47: King of Heaven and Earth

This last part about Psalm 29 provides an interesting segue into Psalm 47, which is quite difficult at times to translate. After the brief introduction the song begins, “Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God (*elohim*) with loud songs of joy!” (Ps 47:1). This is the basic way that most translations render this verse. But it can be taken very differently in the Hebrew. I’m going to take it this other way for the sake of our sermon, even though you can obviously read it the way the ESV translates it.

“All you strong ones, clap your hands, acclaim, you gods (*elohim*), with shouts of joy.”¹⁰ Here, the “strong ones” would be the gods of the Gentiles, the sons of God who were given to the nations as punishment for Babel (Deut 4:19-20; 17:3; 29:26; 32:7-8). They would be compared to The Strong One of Abraham—Yahweh.¹¹ This is a similar kind

¹⁰ Mitchell Dahood S.J., *Psalms I: 1-50: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, vol. 16, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 283. Here, *ammim* (usually “peoples”) is translated as “strong one.” See Dahood, 112-13 for many examples.

¹¹ This is vs. 9. The ESV reads, “The princes of the peoples gather as the people of the God of Abraham.” It can be translated, “O Nobles of the peoples, gather round! The God of Abraham is the Strong One” (again, the word *am* or “people”). These princes could then be either human princes or heavenly princes (see Dan 10:13, 20). Read in the supernatural way, the entire psalm reads like a song of the divine council where Yahweh is inviting the heavenly beings in heaven to look at what he has done and is doing on the earth.

of beginning that we just saw in **Psalm 29:1**.¹² In the Bible, the “prince of this world,” Satan, is the chief among them.¹³ He is clearly among the heavenly beings (the *elohim*).

The translator is obviously left with a decision. This decision should be based on the best available evidence in the Psalm, in the context of the psalms, and not because of a bias for or against one translation.¹⁴ Some argue that the context is clearly on the peoples of the earth.¹⁵ No doubt, the peoples of the earth are certainly in this psalm. But heaven is also clearly here, as our earlier commentator noted—this is a psalm about heaven. So can we decide? Perhaps not without some hesitation, but there is one objective thing that to me lends itself strongly in favor of the supernatural

¹² It is possible to translate Psalm 63:33, “O kings of the earth, sing! O gods, sing praises to the Lord!” (with a 3+3 rather than 4+2 meter). This is similar to Deut 32:1, “Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; and hear, O earth, the words of my mouth” (cf. Isa 1:2). Or “worship him, all you gods!” (**Ps 97:7**; cf. **Heb 1:6**).

¹³ There is reason to believe that he is called the prince of this world, because he is actually the prince of Rome (like there is a prince of Greece and Persia and Israel in the book of Daniel). Some Jewish traditions identify Satan as the prince of Rome.

¹⁴ Dahood’s commentary is unique in that it deliberately uses Ugaritic material to help aid difficult translations. But he clearly does not have some kind of agenda here as **Psalm 49:1** says, “**Hear this, all peoples! Give ear, all inhabitants of the world.**” Though it is the same word for “peoples” (*ammim*) here as it is in 47:1, and it could thus be rendered “Hear this, all strong ones [as in the gods of the nations],” Dahood translates it, “**Hear this, all your peoples, give ear, all your dwellers in the world.**”

¹⁵ Craigie, another Ugaritic expert argues that Dahood is taking it out of context because “peoples” is a theme running throughout the psalm. **Peter C. Craigie**, *Psalms 1–50*, 2nd ed., vol. 19, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 2004), 347, n. 2.a. and 2.b.

interpretation. This is **the meter of the song**. What do I mean?

Martin Luther is often said to have stolen his song from bar tunes which he then “Christianized,” like many Christian songs today do either when they use an exact song or the same genre in their music. But this rests on a misunderstanding. Yes, Luther liked his beer. But Luther was a good musician in his own right, and often employed the best musicians to compose his hymns. There is absolutely zero evidence that *A Mighty Fortress* was ever a secular **bar-tune**. However, it was composed in a musical notation style known as “**the bar form**.” Hence the confusion.

This form of music follows the pattern: AAB coda (ending), where the first two lines of music repeat exactly, you have a second part, then a short ending. In English the first two lines of his poem have eight beats (in German it is 8/7). Compare:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	A	might-	y	fort-	ress	is	our	God
	Ein'	Fest-	e	Burg	ist	un-	ser	Gott
2	A	bul-	wark	nev-	er	fa-	il-	ing
	Ein	Gu-	te	Wehr	und	Waf-	fen	

3	Our	Help-	er	He	a-	midst	the	flood
	Er	hilft	uns	frei	aus	al-	ler	Not
4	of	mor-	tal	ills	pre-	va-	il-	ing
	Die	uns	jetzt	hat	be-	trof-	fen	

The next line(s) (the b set) add something to the first (“for still our ancient foe, doeth seek to work us woe, his craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate”), and then the whole thing is capped off with a short ending (“on earth is not his equal”). By the time all four stanzas are sung, you have sung the “A” section eight times, thus ensuring you will remember the tune the next time.¹⁶ Here’s the point. Luther is following a set rhythmic style. This is what poets throughout history often do.

Psalm 47 clearly works on a pattern. Typical of most psalms, each verse has two parts that feed off each other:

1. Clap your hands, all peoples
2. Shout to God with loud songs of joy

¹⁶ For more on this see Benjamin Kolodziej, “Music Notes,” *Lord of Life Lutheran* (Oct 27, 2016), <http://planolutheran.com/music-notes/a-mighty-fortress/>, accessed May 3, 2017; also Paul S. Jones, “Luther and Bar Song: The Truth, Please,” in *Singing and Making Music* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), 173 [171-78], <http://faithreasons.net/uploads/Luther%20and%20Bar%20Song.pdf>, accessed May 3, 2017.

1. For the LORD Most High, is to be feared
 2. A great king over all the earth
- (etc. this is our ESV)

In Hebrew, the beats of the two sections of each verse are consistently parallel (4+4 or 3+3), with only the last part of the two sections breaking the pattern of equal beats. UNLESS, that is, vs. 7 breaks the rules, thereby creating poetic chaos, which is how most people translate the verse with something like, “For God (*elohim*) is the King of all the earth” and “sing praises with a psalm.” This results in a Hebrew of 4+2, which destroys the harmony of the rhythm. It would be like translating Luther as saying,

*A mighty stronghold and bulwark is our God
Never failing*

Good luck singing that!

But if the psalmist is following a pattern like Luther was doing, then it makes objective sense to translate “elohim” in the second part of the verse so that you get, “For he is king

of all the earth” and “O gods, sing a skillful song.”¹⁷ This idea would then parallel verse 1 with the call for the gods to praise the LORD and the other difficulties in translation would be easily solved.

Vs.	First Line				Second Line					
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4		
1	כָּל	הָעַמִּים	תִּקְעוּ	בָּר	הַרְיֵעוּ	לְאֱלֹהִים	בְּקוֹל	רָנָה		4+4
2	כִּי	יְהוָה	עֲלִיּוֹן	נִרְאָה	מִלֶּדֶד	גָּדוֹל	עַל־כָּל	הָאָרֶץ		4+4
3	יִדְבַר	עַמִּים	תִּחְתְּנוּ		וְלֵאמֹים	תַּחַת	רַגְלֵינוּ			3+3
4	יִבְחַר	לָנוּ	נִחְלַתְנוּ		גָּאוֹן	יַעֲקֹב	אֲשֶׁר	אָהַב	סֵלָה	3+4+selah
5	עָלָה	אֱלֹהִים	בְּתִרְעָה		יְהוָה	בְּקוֹל	שׁוֹפָר			3+3
6	זָמְרוּ	אֱלֹהִים	זָמְרוּ		זָמְרוּ	לְמִלְכֵנוּ	זָמְרוּ			3+3
7	כִּי	מִלֶּדֶד	כָּל־הָאָרֶץ	אֱלֹהִים??	אֱלֹהִים??	זָמְרוּ	מִשְׁכִּיל			4+2 OR 3+3 ????
8	מִלֶּדֶד	אֱלֹהִים	עַל־גֹּיִם		אֱלֹהִים	יָשֵׁב	עַל־כֶּסֶא	קִדְשׁוֹ		3+4
9	נְדִיבִי	עַמִּים	נֶאֱסָפוּ		עַם	אֱלֹהֵי	אֲבֹרְתָם			3+3
	כִּי	לְאֱלֹהִים	מִגִּבֵּי	אָרֶץ	מֵאֵד	נִעְלָה				4+2

The reason to bring any of this up is for the sake of the sermon. Whether you take it as God or like I am as gods,

¹⁷ You wouldn't translate it as God, because God would never sing to himself. So it would be "gods." The problem comes because *elohim* is actually the middle word of the verse,

Ki melek kol-ba'ares 'elohim zammeru maskil.

Thus, you have to decide if it belongs to the first or second part of the verse:

Ki melek kol-ba'ares 'elohim zammeru maskil

or

Ki melek kol-ba'ares 'elohim zammeru maskil

you can find support for either idea in other places in the Bible. So that isn't the issue. But what I want to show you now in Psalm 47 is how the thought that God is king from Psalm 46 is taken by the placement of Psalm 47 right after it to tell you **where he is the King** and **who he is King over**. This is more easily seen in the translation I'm using. So I'm going with that. Hence, Luther is actually on the right track even in bringing up Satan. This idea of "where" will continue in a complementary but more specific and special way in Psalm 48.

If the answer to this is what I think it is, this has great implications. Because, first, it means you can trust God over even the great evil powers of this world. Second, it means that this God is omnipotent and *you* must bow to him.

So **where is God king** in Psalm 47? He is king of heaven and all those in it. Let's look at the whole psalm in this light. "**All you strong ones, clap your hands, acclaim, you gods, with shouts of joy**" (Ps 47:1). The song begins with a call to the heavenly created beings to clap and sing and praise. We see some doing this in Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4 when they sing, "**Holy, Holy, Holy.**" But I do not think this command

excludes the fallen gods of the nations, including Satan. They must also praise.

First, **who must they praise?** “Yahweh Elyon” (2)—The LORD Most High. Most High is what the Canaanites called El, the Father God, and the term in the Bible is usually in mind when the nations are in view. So here, the sons of god, the national gods would certainly be in view. They must praise The LORD Most High.

Why must they praise him? Because he is Most High. *But also* because he is “awesome.” This is a very overused word in our culture. Everything is “Awesome, dude,” especially when you are in fifth grade! But awesome here has a context. He is “The Great King over all the earth” (2). This actually makes sense to tell the heavenly sons of God, because they were given charge over the nations of the earth. This means that the sons of God, called to praise, have to recognize that they are under Elyon’s authority, because he is king of the earth, not them. This is part of what it means to praise God. You recognize your place in the world. This is also what it means that he is awesome.

This becomes more concrete in the next two verses as they show his absolute **sovereignty**. First, God’s sovereignty

is depicted against the nations. “He made nations prostrate beneath us, and peoples under our feet” (3). In other words, they were forced to bow before God’s people. Both their kings, and their gods (remember when Dagon “fell over” in the foreign temple at the foot of the ark [1Sa 5:1-5], bowing as it were to Yahweh?) bowed. They had no choice. He defeated them (the Pharaoh and his gods; the Philistines and their gods; the Babylonians and their gods; etc.). Meanwhile, God and his people were glorified among them all.

This can remind you of God’s sovereignty against someone’s will, where they hate him and so he defeats them like we find throughout the days of Moses, Joshua, the Judges, and the early kinds of Israel. Or when he makes Dagon bow before him. Or, it could remind you of God taking someone’s heart and melting it in humility, like he did with the queen of Sheba, who came and bowed before the LORD in Solomon’s court. Sometimes God hardens, sometimes he softens. That is God’s prerogative and what it means that he is awesome and king. And there is nothing that anyone in heaven or on earth can do to thwart his will in these matters.

Second, his sovereignty is seen over his own people. “He chose for himself our kingdom, the pride of Jacob whom he loves” (4). This is God’s wonderful power of election, choosing people who “were not” and calling them “as though they were;” choosing people who did not know him, and revealing himself to them so that they become his very own. He rules over them as their King. They become his kingdom, and he takes great delight in them. He loves them. He is the Lion. They are his pride.

Whenever sovereignty and election come into view in the Scripture, it demands that you stop and think long and hard about it, for it is a difficult doctrine—not to understand—but to accept. **Just ask the angels**, who rebelled against the LORD, even though they were created by him and he is King over the whole earth. **Just ask a sinner** who likes to think of himself as autonomous, not under God’s authority of command, able to do anything he wants, thinking he gets away with it. Hence, the first half of the song stops here with the *Selah*—pause. Rightly so. Have you bowed your knee to God’s sovereignty, or do you kick against the goads, inflicting unknown damage upon yourself

as you rebel against your loving Heavenly Father, even though it is the most senseless thing a person could ever do?

The second half of the song is all about praising this God. This is the correct response to his sovereignty over the earth. Nothing else is acceptable. Simply worship.

“God has gone up amid shouts of joy, Yahweh to the sound of a trumpet” (5). This verse describes King Yahweh going up, probably on the ark of the covenant after a great victory over an enemy. The peoples are gathered together. The trumpet blasts. Worship ensues in the form of song, like this one, like *A Mighty Fortress*.

“Sing praises, you gods, sing praises, sing praises to our king, sing praises” (6). “Praises” is repeated four times. I imagine a crescendo: Praise him. Praise Him. PRAISE Him. PRAISE HIM! He is the King. He is our King. This becomes a kind of central chorus as we move our way back through earlier themes.

“He is king of all the earth, O gods, sing a skillful song” (7). The word “skillful” is *maskil* (see Ps 32:1, 42:1, 44:1, 45:1). The sons of Korah love it, because this was their job as temple singers. They were to arrange not ditties, not rework bar-tunes. But **compose excellent songs** worthy of

this king. Sometimes you will hear that Luther said, “Why should the devil have all the good tunes.” This is another myth. He never said anything like that. But Rev Rowland Hill of Surrey Chapel in London did, in 1844. Ironically, this was “a call for quality liturgical and hymnological compositions of great quality in their own right. He was not calling on the Church to use ‘devil’s tunes,’ but for the Church to come up with better ones in the service of God!”¹⁸ God obviously thought this was so important that he both placed professional song writers in his temple and inspired them to command the heavenly beings to do the same thing.

Why? Again. Because “God is king over the nations” (9). He is not buddy, boy-friend, girl-friend, pal, genie-in-a-bottle, The Big-Guy-Upstairs. He is King of the nations of the earth who commands heavenly angels. This king has “taken his seat upon his holy throne” (8). This is not a park-bench, not a seat at a football stadium, not a seat he is voted in to take in congress, not a dinner table seat, not a break-room seat, not a car seat. It is a throne. The ark was his earthly throne so glorious if you touched it you would die, so majestic it was hidden away behind not one wall, but

¹⁸ Kolodziej, *ibid* (see n. 15).

three. It mirrored the one he sits upon in heaven which is guarded by tens of thousands of holy angels.

The song finishes, “O nobles of the peoples, gather round! The God of Abraham is the Strong One; truly God is a Suzerain of the earth, greatly to be extolled” (9). These “nobles” are “princes” (*archons* in Greek) and I think they could be either earthly or heavenly princes. If the latter, this is a **divine council** scene. Really, the whole psalm already is that. God of Abraham as the Strong One (*ammim* again) is in contrast to the “strong ones” of **vs. 1**. Who is really the Strong One here? Yahweh. He is the Great Suzerain (the ESV reads “**the shields of the earth belong to God**”). All others are vassal servants under covenant obligations to the Great King of all the earth. Therefore, he is greatly to be extolled.

This glorious way to end the song reminds me of the center verse of the poem and one more thing we need to say about it before moving to Psalm 48. The ESV reads, “**God has gone up with a shout, the LORD with the sound of a trumpet.**” Two things need to be said here. First, many have taken this in church history as a prophecy about **Christ’s ascension**. Someone writes,

We can take the acclamation to mean either that God's victory has already happened and is manifest for all to see, or that it is coming and is the hope that sustains the people. When Christians sing this as a proper psalm on Ascension Day, they mean it in both senses. Christ, the risen and victorious king, has already 'gone up with a shout' and now reigns for ever. However, the full realization of his kingship is yet to come, and it is this ultimate hope that runs through the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, 'they kingdom come; they will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'¹⁹

Not only is this helpful for you to think through as you learn to sing this song and praise God for the things in it. I was struck by how he said that the victory can be seen as having **already happened** or that is still **a coming hope** of the people. I found this so interesting because of a fascinating word parallel that shows just this from a verse in 1 Thessalonians. For us, the ascension has now happened. Yet, we await the Second Coming. Not every enemy has been made his footstool.

¹⁹ Sadgrove, *ibid.*

Consider this verse in view of **1Th 4:16**, “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.” The following words are the same in the Greek of both verses: **Lord, God, trumpet, sound**. Both have words for “**shout**.” But the big difference is that in the Psalm the LORD **goes up**. In the Epistle, he **comes down**. And who comes down? The Lord Jesus! Why? To raise the dead, to judge the nations, and to set up his eternal kingdom once-for-all. **Where?** Let’s turn to Psalm 48.

Psalm 48: King in the Midst of His People

The psalm begins as *a song of the sons of Korah*. It then picks up immediately where the previous song left off: Praising God. “**Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised**.” Where? Now it returns to the idea of Psalm 46: **in the city of our God (Ps 48:1)**. But it adds an idea to this now. “**His holy mountain...**” (1). When God is going up in Psalm 47, where is he going? Psalm 48 answers, to the holy mountain.

The holy mountain is itself a picture of a link between heaven and earth. God is on the top. The people are usually on the bottom, until they are invited to come up with him, like Moses was, like the people were when Solomon finally built the temple upon Mt. Zion. How does the song describe this mountain? This is important. What we are going to see here helps us see even more the supernatural in these psalms.

“Beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King.” First of all, Zion is not exactly very high. It is only about 2,510 ft. Compare that to something like Mt. Saphon in Syria 5,607 ft. or Mt. Hermon which is 9,232 ft. Both of these were considered cosmic mountains like Olympus (7,979 ft.) at various times. The gods dwelt there. Saphon was where Baal and later Zeus were said to dwell.

I mention this because it tells us next that Mt. Zion is in “the far north.” The problem, of course, is that it isn’t. No matter how you look at it, it is right in the middle of Israel. Hermon could be considered the far north, but not Zion. However, the word “north” is actually the word *tsaphon*. *Tsaphon* = Saphon. In other words, this direction in Hebrew is supercharged with supernatural meaning. What is going

on here? This is an explanation of where God has chosen to dwell, by mocking Baal and his mountain. It is not Saphon that is beautiful (it *is* much more beautiful from a purely aesthetic point of view than Zion is). It is not Saphon that is elevated (it *is* much higher than Zion is in feet). It is not Saphon that is in the far north (Saphon *is* much father north than Zion is). It is Mt. Zion that is these things.

But beloved, God does not care about outward features. He chooses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. Zion is nothing. And so it becomes everything. Just like his people. It is upon Zion and not Saphon or Olympus or Kailash (the holiest mountain of India at 21,778 ft.) or Everest (29,029 ft.) that God has chosen to dwell. This is his prerogative and it teaches you something vitally important about him vs. all the other deities whom he addressed in Psalm 47.

They dwell far off in places that are **inaccessible**, **inhospitable**, or **unwelcoming**. But God has put his holy city literally upon Mt. Zion. **Not only God dwells here, but so also do his people**. This is basically unheard of in the world's religions. People don't dwell with gods, much less the gods dwell with them!

“Within her citadels God has made himself known as a fortress” (3). The fortress theme returns again, but now we learn that not only do we come to him to be our fortress, *he descends to us* to be our fortress. Or better, he brings us up to himself. Or, in Christ, it is both! The holy city, you will remember, is the name given to the church, the bride (Ps 45-46, Rev 21-22). Therefore, what is being described here is a mystical union between Christ and his people. He is not remote. He is nearby, with them. Again, God with us. This is unheard of. How can God dwell with man?

This makes the peoples of the earth furious, for what god of theirs ever did this? None. “Behold, the kings assembled; they came together” (4). Is this just to deliberate together about what to do? Or is this the result of the deliberation and as such is a foretaste of Armageddon, the great assembly of war against God and his church? There are definitely echoes of this, for Armageddon literally means “Mt. of Assembly.” It is an evil assembly against God’s holy mountain and his people.

“As soon as they saw it, they were astounded; they were in panic; they took to flight” (5). Gods do not do this. They do not dwell among men knowingly, openly. What does it

mean for them? Ask the peoples of Canaan when they heard that God had parted the Red Sea for his people and was dwelling in their midst! God is coming after them!

“Trembling took hold of them there, anguish as of a woman in labor” (6). They could not hold in their terror and shaking. It comes upon them in uncontrollable waves of pain and horror. “By the east wind you shattered the ships of Tarshish” (7). The east wind is the direction of God’s coming. It drove the Red Sea to part in two (Ex 14:21). But this wind has now reached to the farthest outskirts of the known world—to Spain, where the sea-faring peoples have their final port before the unending bleakness of the dark blue sea of the Pacific Ocean. The reaches of our God in Christ have gone to the ends of the world. No one is safe from his arrival.

And yet, he does not come only to judge. But also to save. There is good news for the nations that tremble. “As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the LORD of hosts, in the city of our God, which God will establish forever. *Selah*” (8). God has not come to his city to destroy it, but to establish it forever. The peoples do not understand this, *until they are told the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.*

And when this news comes to you, you must pause and think long and hard on the mystery and the paradox of God putting his city and his people on his holy mountain.

The sons of Korah thought about it. And they concluded, “**We have thought on your steadfast (covenant) love, O God, in the midst of your temple**” (9). They had an insider’s view of God from the temple. He was somehow infinitely more majestic than the place they worked each and every day composing songs. And yet somehow, he was there with them in covenant love, a great Suzerian who comes in love to his servants in the temple. This, after he had destroyed their great ancestor by opening the earth itself to swallow him whole for his rebellion. They understood grace!

“**As your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth**” (10). They will sing and tell everyone about this love and his condescension to them in their midst. This is what we tell them as Christians of our Lord Jesus. And so did they. “**Your right hand is filled with righteousness**” (10). He is the **man at God’s right hand**, Luther’s **right man on our side, the man of God’s own**

choosing. He is righteous and holy. Without sin. Without spot. Untainted in all he ever did. Able and willing to save.

“Let Mount Zion be glad! Let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of your judgments!” (11). Judgments both as punishment for sinners who will not repent, and against one who did not deserve it so that he might grant repentance to the people given to him by the Father. Praise the LORD for these things.

How does it end? Not by walking out of the service silent about these things to one another or when you go back out into the world, hiding your light under a bush. No. Go and tell others what you have seen. “Walk about Zion, go around her, number her towers, consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever” (12-14). God is our fortress, our rampart, our bulwark never failing. Lord Sabaoth, the Warrior, who fights against our foe and he must win the battle. Do not fear, for God has willed his truth to triumph through you. His kingdom is forever.

Given these many things, is it any wonder that Martin Luther sang about Satan and his defeat at the hands of the

Lord Jesus Christ? He was singing the 46th, yes. But he was also singing the 47th and 48th psalms as well. And he did so to bring great cheer to the people of God who had the word of God withheld from them by evil popes and priests who hated him for giving it back to them. You are no longer in that position today, thanks to the brave, boldness, and defiance of people like Martin Luther and the other Reformers who lived 500 years ago and stood against those who would keep this good news from you.

But tragically, it is possible that you are withholding the word from yourself—not reading it, not singing it, not putting it into your heart. Not telling it to others. Do not let this be you, but take confidence in the little word that fells the devil, the good news of the Gospel that Jesus died for sinners and welcomes all who are thirsty and come to him. Sing the 46th. And the 47th. And the 48th. But do so before the terrors of that Great Day arrive, when he returns with the trumpet and shout of the Archangel to judge the living and the dead. Be found in the city, on the holy mountain of God, the stairway to heaven, the Lord Jesus who has ascended on high, and very soon will descend to claim that which rightly belongs to him.