

Glorious Thing of You Are Spoken - Song Meaning

For the “Psalms of Zion” sermon series, we will be introducing and singing together a new “old-hymn” that really works well as a theme song for this particular series. We will be singing a new musical setting of John Newton’s great text (from 1779) that begins with a quote from Psalm 87, “Glorious Things of You Are Spoken, Zion, city of our God.” It’s certainly important that we know what it is we are singing about on Sunday mornings, and this hymn is not the easiest one to crack, so let’s take a moment to consider the meaning of this hymn that draws so richly from God’s word.

To start, in the first verse of this hymn, we’re not singing to God directly. Verse 1 has us singing to Zion, the city of our God. The word “Zion” is a word that I knew very little about, and was therefore a stumbling block for trying to ascertain the meaning of this hymn! One of the first things that David did as king was to conquer and take Jerusalem from the Jebusites. He had to conquer an impenetrable fortress called “Zion” that strategically sat on a small mountain in Jerusalem. **God’s presence** and power would allow King David and his army to conquer the Jebusites and take this fortress, David would renovate and build upon that fortress and set up his new throne there on “**Mount Zion**” which he would rename the “**City of David.**” These two terms became interchangeable during David’s reign. They represented the southwest side of Jerusalem where David’s fortress stood. God blessed David mightily and he became “more and more powerful, **because the LORD God Almighty was with him.**” This phrase is so important to understanding the term “Zion,” because Zion represents **God’s presence** with His people. When King Solomon would later build the temple and move the ark there, the term “Zion” shifted to reflect more broadly **God’s presence** throughout all of the city of Jerusalem (not just the southwest side with the fortress). John Piper says this, “So most of the time (in its 150+ uses in the Old Testament) ‘Zion’ refers to the city of Jerusalem, not just as another name, but because it is the city of **God’s presence** and the city of great hope for God’s people.” All this to say that, we can look at this city, at this mountain, and this temple as **symbols of God’s presence with His people.**

Let’s take a closer look at verse one of this hymn to consider how John Newton uses this word “Zion.” I think this line gives us a hint (now remember that he is singing to Zion with these words): “on the Rock of Ages founded, what can shake your sure repose?”. Now compare Newton’s text to Paul’s words from Ephesians 2:19-22 [ESV] “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, **Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone**, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him **you** also are being built together into **a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.**” Paul’s talking about **the Church** here, not the building where they gather, but the people that make up the universal Church. It is this Church that is built on the **cornerstone**, Christ Jesus Himself (Newton draws from this concept, replacing the word “cornerstone” with “Rock of Ages” which just means “everlasting rock”). Also, consider Christ’s words to Peter here from Matthew 16:18 [ESV] “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Compare those words with Newton’s, “What can shake your sure repose?” Jesus’ answer to that question? “Not even Hell!” So, here’s the deal, in this song, I believe when we sing to “Zion,” we aren’t only singing to the ancient city of Jerusalem; we aren’t only singing to our future heavenly city; we aren’t even only singing to Jesus as cornerstone of Zion - we’re singing to the church as well! **God’s presence** resides with His people, namely, those who trust in Jesus Christ and bear the seal of the Holy Spirit. It’s not that we’re infatuated with ourselves and so we’re going to sing a love song to ourselves. We are rejoicing in **God’s presence with us**, His protection over us, His provision for us as our Living Water, and in His unquenchable love for us that He shows us in Jesus.

In verse 3 we sing about His faithfulness in the past with the people of Israel as He led them out of slavery to Egypt and provided for them as they journeyed through the wilderness with a cloud by day, fire by night and manna from heaven. Our goal in singing this is to encourage each other with God’s promises to His Church, and to worship Him in response to His faithful presence to His people in the **past**, His presence and loving kindness through the good and bad that we experience **presently** in this life, and the **future** hope that we have eternally with Christ. Shouldn’t we rejoice when we consider that Jesus purchased us and redeemed us from slavery to sin and death with His own blood?

One technical thing to keep in mind with this hymn and many other great hymns that have stood the test of time is that they are written metrically to form a certain cadence or rhythm where every verse has the same number of syllables and the cadence should put emphasis on the proper syllables of each word. On top of that, hymn writers often utilize rhyming, which is beautiful, poetic, and makes for lovely lyrics to be sung. However, as a result, in order to put emphasis on the proper syllables, and in order to make rhymes happen, put words in a strange order they must (read that with your best “Yoda” impersonation). So, on the back side of this page, you will find on the left side the original text to this hymn, and on the right side, I’ve rearranged the words to help clarify meaning.

Original Text

1. Glorious things of you are spoken,
Zion, city of our God;
He whose word cannot be broken
formed you for His own abode;
on the Rock of Ages founded,
what can shake your sure repose?
With salvation's walls surrounded,
you may smile at all your foes.

2. See the streams of living waters
springing from eternal love,
well supply your sons and daughters,
and all fear of want remove.
Who can faint while such a river
ever will their thirst assuage?
Grace, which like the Lord, the Giver,
never fails from age to age.

3. Round each habitation hov'ring,
see the cloud and fire appear
for a glory and a cov'ring,
showing that the Lord is near!
Thus they march, the pillar leading,
light by night and shade by day,
daily on the manna feeding
which He gives them when they pray.

4. Blest inhabitants of Zion,
washed in the Redeemer's blood!
Jesus, whom their souls rely on,
makes them kings and priests to God.
'Tis His love His people raises
over self to reign as kings,
and as priests, His solemn praises
each for a thank offering brings.

Bridge

As we have heard, so we have seen
the great things of our Savior King:
“and on this rock I'll build my church,
and the gates of hell shall not prevail,
the gates of hell shall not prevail.”

5. Savior, since of Zion's city
I, through grace, a member am,
let the world deride or pity,
I will glory in Your name.
Fading is the worldling's pleasure,
all his boasted pomp and show;
solid joys and lasting treasure
none but Zion's children know.

Tag:

May every tribe, every heart
hear these glorious things You've done
See the glorious God You are.

Simplified Text (w/ words reordered for the sake of clarity)

1. Glorious things are spoken of you,
*Zion, city of our God; [*the people that make up Christ's Church]
He whose words cannot be broken
formed you for His own *abode; [*dwelling place]
founded on the *Rock of Ages, [*everlasting rock or fortress—Jesus]
what can shake your sure *repose? [*rest, stillness, peace, confidence]
Surrounded with salvation's walls, you may smile at all your foes.
**[Psalm 46; Psalm 48:1-3; Psalm 87:1-3; Isaiah 60:18;
Matthew 16:18; Hebrews 12:22; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Cor. 3:11]**

2. See the streams of living waters (springing from eternal love)
supply your sons and daughters well and remove all fear of *want. [*lack]
Who can faint while such a river
will [for]ever *assuage their thirst? [*quench or “satisfy”]
Grace never fails from age to age just like the Lord, the Giver.
**[Psalm 23; Isaiah 33:20-22; John 4:10-14; I John 4:18-19;
Ephesians 2:8-10]**

3. See the cloud and fire appear hovering [a]round each habitation
for a glory and a covering showing that the Lord is near!
Thus they march [with] the pillar leading,
light by night and shade by day,
feeding on the manna daily which He gives them when they pray.
[Exodus 13:22; Exodus 16:4-18; Isaiah 4:5; John 6:30-35]

4. Blest inhabits of Zion,
washed in the Redeemer's blood!
Jesus (whom their souls rely on)
makes them kings and priests to God.
It is His love [that] His people raises over self to reign as kings,
and as priests, each brings His solemn praises for a thank offering.
**[Acts 2:38, 41, 47; Ephesians 1:7; Revelation 1:5-6;
Revelation 5:9-10; Revelation 7:14]**

[The Bridge and the Tag were both written by our very own, Maggie Fensler. She borrowed the first line from Psalm 48 and wanted to communicate that the faithfulness of God that we **hear about** in scripture is something that we also **see and experience for ourselves** on a regular basis. God's faithfulness lives on forever!]

5. Savior, since I am a member of Zion's city through grace,
let the world *deride or pity [me], [*express contempt for - or - ridicule]
I will glory in Your name.
The worldling's* pleasure is fading, [*“a person engrossed in the
concerns of this present world”]
all his boasted *pomp and show. [*ceremony and splendid display]
None but Zion's children know solid joys and lasting treasure.

[For verse 5, we now direct our singing away from singing **to Zion about** Zion and we turn our gaze to our Savior, Jesus. This last verse is a more personal prayer and a vow to renew our commitment to God's Kingdom over worldly treasures, even if it means we receive contempt from the world. This is our natural response when we consider that God is our lasting treasure.]

[For the tag, we express our hope that more people will join us as Zion's children and will glory in His name with us.]