



Psalm 87 - The Joy of Living in Zion

Of the Korahites. A Psalm. A Song.

Introduction

This is a psalm celebrating Zion as the chosen city of God; it looks forward to people of all nations – even nations that have been enemies to Israel – becoming citizens of this city, carrying forward the ideas of Psalm 86:9. This brief song provided themes for the Christian hymn, “Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God.”

Charles Spurgeon observed, “This ‘Psalm or song’ was either composed by the sons of Korah, or dedicated to them: as they kept the doors of the house of the Lord, they could use this beautiful composition as a Psalm within the doors, and as a song outside.”

Psalm 87:1-3 - The Lord Loves Zion.

The opening section describes Zion, the capital of God’s people, as the city God founded, the city whose gates the Lord loves, the city of God: <<**He built altars in the temple of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, “In Jerusalem I will put my Name”**>> (2 Kings 21:4). Its location on the holy mount shows why it is so glorious: it is the place of the temple, where God’s people meet him.

- 1 On the holy mount stands the city he founded;
- 2 the Lord loves the gates of Zion
more than all the dwellings of Jacob.

Psalm 87:1-2

On the holy mount stands the city he founded. Yahweh is not a local deity; the whole earth belongs to the Lord: <<**Moses said to him, ‘As soon as I have gone out of the city, I will stretch out my hands to the Lord; the thunder will cease,**

and there will be no more hail, so that you may know that the earth is the Lord's'>> (Exodus 9:29), and: <<The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it>> (Psalm 24:1). Yet he has a special regard for Jerusalem, which is described as in the holy mountains.

God's foundation is in Jerusalem also in the sense that it was the centre of his redemptive work. Since God's work happens in time and space, it had to happen somewhere, and God chose Jerusalem as the place where much of it happened:

- There Melchizedek, king and priest of God Most High, reigned and served: *<<And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High>> (Genesis 14:18).*
- There Abraham was willing to offer Isaac on the mount of the Lord on which his perfect sacrifice would be provided; refer to Genesis 22:1-19.
- Israel's greatest earthly king possessed it and made it the kingdom's capital: refer to 2 Samuel 5:6-16.
- There the tabernacle of God found its fulfilment and permanence in the great temple David designed and Solomon built; refer to 1 Chronicles 29:1-9 and 2 Chronicles Chapters 3-7 respectively.
- There the institutions of sacrifice, worship, and priestly service were established for centuries.
- There Jesus recognised and honoured the city and observed the festivals and temple rituals.
- There Jesus died for the sins of all, was buried, and rose from the dead.
- There Jesus ascended to heaven to return to the Father but with a promise that he would return: *<<They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven'>> (Acts 1:11).*
- There the church was born on a day of Pentecost; refer to Acts 2:1-36.
- There the apostles served and from which the Gospel went forth.
- There God has promised will be the physical centre of his ultimate kingdom upon earth.

The Lord loves the gates of Zion. For all these reasons and more, God has special love for Jerusalem, regarding it even more than the rest of his Holy Land Israel, i.e. more than all the dwellings of Jacob: *<<The Lord will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem>> (Zechariah 2:12).*

³ Glorious things are spoken of you,
O city of God. Selah

Psalm 87:3

Glorious things are spoken of you. The psalmist praised Jerusalem by noting what others said about the city. Many spoke glorious things about the city:

- Glorious faith was exercised in Jerusalem.
- Glorious things happened in Jerusalem.
- Glorious things were taught in Jerusalem.
- Glorious worship was offered in Jerusalem.
- Glorious atonement was made in Jerusalem.
- Glorious anointing was poured out in Jerusalem.
- God's glorious presence was evident in Jerusalem.
- A glorious future awaits Jerusalem.

O city of God is the royal city of Zion: <<***Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God. His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King***>> (Psalm 48:1-2). God's special regard for Jerusalem does not take away from the fact that he is Lord and God over all the earth. Still, there is a special way in which Zion can be called the city of God, because out of places in the earth God chose that place to centre his redemptive work for the whole world. This line from Psalm 87 was the inspiration of the title and concept of Augustine's great work, The City of God. Augustine also chose it as the theme verse for his great masterpiece of Christian historical philosophy, 'The City of God'.

Selah, used 71 times in the Book of Psalms and three times in Habakkuk, has never been fully understood because the Hebrew root word is undefined. Many take it to be an instruction related to either the music, such as an interlude, or the cadence of the song, e.g. stop and reflect.

Psalm 87:4-6 - Zion, the Mother City of All Manner of People.

The second section is startling: one expects a reference to those who know God, but the list is composed of Gentile nations: Rahab - a nickname for Egypt in Isaiah 30:7, Babylon, Philistia, Tyre - a Phœnician city, culturally Canaanite, and Cush - Nubia, the region south of Egypt – all of which had been, at one time or another, enemies of God's people and the city of Jerusalem. And yet, the Most High himself will establish Zion in order to allow the peoples to be treated as if they were born there. When the people of God sing this, they are keeping themselves focused on their God-given purpose, to be a light for the Gentiles; refer to the comment made on Psalm 86:8-10. Paul can call the full citizenship of Gentile Christians in the people of God a 'mystery,' because it was not made known in the OT in the same way it has been revealed to the apostles: <<***This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles – for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given to me for you,***>>

and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel>> (Ephesians 3:1-6), but this passage certainly points that way, anticipating what is to come.

- ⁴ Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon;
Philistia too, and Tyre, with Ethiopia –
'This one was born there,' they say.

Psalm 87:4

Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon. After a focus on Jerusalem itself, God spoke of the Gentile nations on every side of Israel, their rivals and often enemies. God promised that even among them there would be those who know me - those who have true relationship with him. Rahab is Egypt, and so called for its strength and pride. Babylon was the capital city of the Babylonians. These were deadly enemies to Jerusalem, which was ground between them as between a pair of millstones.

This one was born there. This is both a promise and an invitation to the Gentile world. They could be accounted by God as the privileged one who was born there in Zion. They could be regarded as citizens of Jerusalem and be registered among God's people.

This is a reminder that even though God made his ancient covenant with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants, relationship with him was not based on genetics. Any from the Gentile world were welcome to honour the God of Israel, surrender to his Lordship and be reckoned among God's people. This was true of Melchizedek, true of Rahab, true of Ruth, true of Naaman and true of anyone who calls on the name of the Lord: *<<Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls>> (Joel 2:32).*

It is also a prophetic picture of what God would do in and through the Gospel, bringing Gentiles into true and real relationship with him, and doing it through a new birth. In a spiritual sense, it can be said of the one who is born again: *<<Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again">> (John 3:3 NIV), i.e. this one was born there.*

The confident words this one was born there are even more wonderful because the citizen does not say it of himself; God says it of him or her. This also speaks of God's love and attention for the individual, as Spurgeon commented, "Man by man will the Lord reckon them, for they are each one precious in his sight; the individual shall not be lost in the crowd, but each one shall be of high account."

- ⁵ And of Zion it shall be said,
'This one and that one were born in it';
for the Most High himself will establish it.
- ⁶ The Lord records, as he registers the peoples,
'This one was born there.' Selah

Psalm 87:5-6

And of Zion it shall be said, 'This one and that one were born in it.' The psalmist repeated the thought from the previous verse and expanded it. The identification with Zion, the city of God, would be so wonderful and precious that it would be valued to say, "This one was born there."

If a city is regarded as great or important, people enjoy identifying with that city. When the high regard God has for Zion, the city of Jerusalem, is appreciated, the value in being regarded as a citizen is also appreciated because it is the city established by the Most High himself.

Paul had this verse in mind when he penned: <<*But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother*>> (Galatians 4:26).

The Lord records, as he registers the peoples. This citizenship and birthright is declared and recorded by God. It is he who registers the peoples.

The Bible clearly speaks of God's special regard towards the land of Israel and Jerusalem specifically. Yet the idea of being a citizen of Zion and being registered as a born-citizen of his city is also a spiritual concept. The NT speaks of a heavenly Zion and the registration of Christians there: <<*But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel*>> (Hebrews 12:22-24).

In Jesus Christ, every believer can have the privilege of registration in Zion, of being a citizen of the heavenly city of God. This does not eliminate the special

regard God has had, presently has, and will have for the literal land of Israel and Jerusalem, but it surpasses it. However, there are many in the church who should ponder on what Charles Spurgeon noted, “Jehovah’s census of his chosen will differ much from ours; he will count many whom we should have disowned, and he will leave out many whom we should have reckoned. His registration is infallible.”

Psalm 87:7 - All Alike Delight in Zion.

The singers and dancers, who assist in the worship that takes place at the sanctuary in Zion, have this as their song: <<*all my springs are in you*>>, i.e. in Zion. This probably is an image of the life and refreshment that will pour forth from Zion in this future era: <<*There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High*>> (Psalm 46:4); refer also to Ezekiel 47:1-12.

⁷ Singers and dancers alike say,
‘All my springs are in you.’

Psalm 87:7

Singers and dancers alike say. This coming point was so important that both the singers and musicians of Israel emphasised it.

All my springs are in you. The springs refer to the spontaneous flowing sources of water and to the life, refreshment, and goodness they bring in a dry land. These springs are in you, and there is debate as to if ‘you’ referred to Zion or to God himself. It is better to see it as a reference to God.

The goodness of God often comes like water from a spring. It seems to bubble up from a hidden, secret source. Spurgeon also commented, “If all my springs are in God, then let all my streams flow to God. All the rivers run into the sea, because they all came from the sea. It was from the sea that the sun drew up the clouds which fed the thousand rills which fall into the rivers, and so the rivers run back to the sea. Let us do the same. What we have had from God must go to God.”