

Hope in God, O My Soul! The Psalms of the Sons of Korah

**Psalm 87: “O City of God”**

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**A Psalm of the Sons of Korah. A Song.**

**87** *On the holy mount stands the city he founded;*

<sup>2</sup> *the LORD loves the gates of Zion  
more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.*

<sup>3</sup> *Glorious things of you are spoken,  
O city of God. Selah*

<sup>4</sup> *Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon;  
behold, Philistia and Tyre, with Cush —  
“This one was born there,” they say.*

<sup>5</sup> *And of Zion it shall be said,  
“This one and that one were born in her”;  
for the Most High himself will establish her.*

<sup>6</sup> *The LORD records as he registers the peoples,  
“This one was born there.” Selah*

<sup>7</sup> *Singers and dancers alike say,  
“All my springs are in you.”*

**City of God, City of Man**

Where were you born? Where are you a citizen?

If someone asked me those questions without any context, I would answer that I was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma on March 26, 1974, and I am a natural-born United States citizen. There’s nothing wrong with this answer. It is true. But it is not the complete truth, is it?

The Apostle Paul was born a Roman citizen, because he was born in Tarsus in Cilicia, present-day Turkey. At least three times, he used his Roman Citizenship to escape harsh, illegal, and unjust punishment or death.

And yet, he wrote in Philippians 3:20, *“But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”* And in Galatians 4:26, he wrote, *“But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.”* For Paul, as for all Christians, our earthly citizenship and our earthly place of birth is not the highest and truest aspect of who we are. We have a citizenship in heaven, in the Jerusalem above, in the heavenly Mount Zion, as the writer of Hebrews says so beautifully in Hebrews 12:22-24:

*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. - ESV*

This dual citizenship and dual residency is true of every believer in Jesus Christ. We remain on earth and citizens of our earthly home, but our truer, higher, and more eternal home and citizenship is in heaven. We are already seated in the heavens spiritually with Christ, according to Ephesians 2, and we already have our citizenship and our home there.

Understanding and living faithfully in the tension of this dual-citizenship has always been a source of struggle for God's people. In the year 410, barbarians attacked and sacked Rome, a shocking and humiliating defeat for "the eternal city." Many pagans blamed the defeat of Rome on the Christians, saying that the city was overthrown because people stopped worshiping the pagan deities who had protected the city.

In response Augustine of Hippo, one of the most influential thinkers and writers in the history of Christianity, wrote his major work, *The City of God*. In a centrally important section of this book, Augustine argues that two cities – the city of God and the city of man – both exist at the same time, one established in heaven and the other established on earth. The city of man serves the glory of man and purposes of man. The city of God was established by God and serves the glory of God. Every manifestation of the city of man is temporary, short-lived, as kingdoms and nations rise and fall. But the eternal city of God is unconquerable and eternally glorious.

Augustine was directly challenging Rome as "the eternal city" and the Roman Empire as the glorious empire of the world. He was calling Christians to a higher loyalty, while not denying that we also have a calling from God to serve our neighbors and seek the good of the earthly city of man in which God has placed us for our time of exile and pilgrimage to our heavenly home.

Psalm 87 speaks powerfully to these realities. In seven short verses, it paints a somewhat confusing but ultimately compelling picture of the heavenly city, of Jerusalem, Mount Zion, the city we just sang about in "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken." In verses 1-3, we see how much God loves the holy city. In verse 4, we see the relationship between the holy city and the surrounding nations of the world. And, finally, in verses 5-7, we see the great joy and eternal strength of the holy city and her children.

## **I. The Blessed and Beloved City of God, vv. 1-3**

*1 On the holy mount stands the city he founded;*

*2 the LORD loves the gates of Zion*

*more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.*  
<sup>3</sup> *Glorious things of you are spoken,*  
*O city of God. Selah*

The first thing we see about the holy city is that God founded it and loves it. Jerusalem is proclaimed as the city God has founded on the holy mountain. In the original Hebrew, mountain here is plural, and it could be referring to the two main mountains of Jerusalem, Mount Zion, where David built his palace, and Mount Moriah, where Solomon later built the Temple. Solomon filled in the area between these two mountains as he expanded and enclosed the city behind a larger wall, and the two mountains merged into one, known as Mount Zion.

Interestingly, Mount Zion is where King David reigned and where God made His Davidic covenant with David, recorded in 2 Samuel 7, that someone from David's line would sit enthroned as king forever. Mount Moriah was the mountain where Abraham was called to offer up his only Son, Isaac, almost 1,000 years before David reigned. God spared Abraham's son, Isaac. After God spared Isaac, we read "*Abraham called the name of that place, 'The Lord will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.'*" (Gen. 22:14, ESV) And then God renewed His covenant promise to Abraham that God would bless His offspring and specifically that "*in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.*" (v. 18, ESV) Just about 1000 years after Abraham and Isaac stood on Mount Moriah, Solomon built the Temple there, where sacrifices would be offered for about 1,000 years. And just about 1,000 years after Solomon built the Temple, Jesus, the Son of David, stood on this same Holy Mount and was condemned to die as "The King of the Jews," but was in fact offering Himself as the sacrifice to provide for the sins of His people and fulfill the Lord's promise to bring the blessing of God to the nations.

So, these holy mountains – this Holy Mount where God established Jerusalem, is full of rich Gospel promise and would be the scene of rich Gospel fulfillment. It is the site of covenant promise twice – the Abraham covenant promise of blessing to all nations through the offspring of Abraham and of an offspring of David to sit on the throne as king forever. It is the site of pictures of Gospel promise, from the scene of Isaac carrying wood on his back up the mountain to the ark of the covenant being carried up by David to the Temple being built.

And for us, as Christians, the holy city is a picture and a foreshadowing of the church of Jesus Christ and the coming holy city, New Jerusalem. The Jerusalem on earth is meant to lift our eyes to the Jerusalem above, which is our mother and our true spiritual home, embodied here on earth in the true church.

When we hear that God has founded Jerusalem on the holy mount, we can understand that to mean that God has established His church on His holy Gospel covenant promises, fulfilled in Jesus. The covenant promise He made to Abraham to bless all the nations on

earth through his offspring and the covenant promise to David that he would have a son who would reign as king forever are both fulfilled in Jesus, and these covenant promises fulfilled in the Gospel are the sure and stable foundations of the church.

Verse 2 “*the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob*” tells us that God loves the gathering place of His people, where they gather in worship to hear His word, than all of the scattered places where they live, and so God loves the gathered church in worship more than the private and scattered parts of His church, even when we’re worshipping privately at home. There’s a great blessing and God is pleased to move more powerfully for He loves the gathering of His saints to praise His name.

Verse 3 says “*Glorious things of you are spoken, O city of God.*” This, of course, is the title of the great John Newton hymn we sang, which draws on Psalm 87. We have seen some of these “glorious things” spoken of Zion even this summer in our series in the Psalms of the Sons of Korah.

Psalm 46 tells us that God is in the midst of the holy city, and she shall not be moved. It also tells us that there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.

Psalm 48 proclaims:

*Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised  
in the city of our God!  
His holy mountain, so beautiful in elevation,  
is the joy of all the earth, - vv. 1-2, ESV*

And Psalm 48’s closing also shows us that within the city of God, we can see that God is present and will be our guide forever and ever.

Psalm 84 declares God dwelling place to be so lovely, so dearly loved. It also tells us that having a heart set on pilgrimage to the holy city makes us blessed and refreshes us with strength and joy on our journey.

The citizens of the holy city have a glorious citizenship, in a kingdom that will never fall or fade but endures in eternal glory.

The holy city enjoys glorious benefits, all of which flow from the presence of God in her midst – We are guided, protected, well-supplied, and dearly loved.

The holy city has received glorious blessings – Ephesians 1:3 says we are blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus – forgiveness of our sins and adoption as the children of God chief among them.

The holy city has been given glorious promises. Jesus said to Peter: “On this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Romans 16:19 promises us that the God of Peace will soon crush Satan underneath our feet.

The holy city has a glorious future, revealed in powerful imagery in Revelation 21-22, as the perfected holy city-bride of the Lord Jesus Christ. We will have no fear, no night, no evil, and all the treasures of the nations will be brought into the glorious Holy City where the Lamb of God will be in our midst as our light.

Indeed, such glorious things are spoken of the holy city of God. We should speak and believe and live in the light of these wonderful glorious promises.

## **II. The City of God & the Nations, v. 4**

Verse 4 says something absolutely and shockingly unexpected about the holy city, especially for the times when it was written hundreds of years before Christ:

*<sup>4</sup> Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon;  
behold, Philistia and Tyre, with Cush —  
“This one was born there,” they say.*

This verse has a list of five nations which surrounded Jerusalem and the people of God and were their fearsome enemies at different times in their history. Rahab is a reference to Egypt, and Egypt, to the South of Israel, was the first enemy of the people of God, holding them in bondage and slavery. Babylon was the current enemy, far to the North, which had terrorized and dominated the people of God and would lay siege to Jerusalem and take the people of God captive. Philistia and Tyre are on the Mediterranean Coast to the Southwest and Northwest of the people of God, and both were fierce warriors, while Tyre was also a nation of wealthy sea-traders. Cush is a reference to the lands south of Egypt, present-day Sudan and Ethiopia. Their warriors were known for their fierce courage, and the Cushites had even conquered Egypt for a time.

All of these nations – pagan warriors, fierce enemies of God’s people – are named as those who know God and His holy city and who have people among them who are born in the holy city. How can this be? These people don’t know God and have no respect for His holy city. How could any of the be born there?

This is a prophecy, a foretelling of the spiritual fulfillment of the holy city in the church of Jesus Christ, which would have children among the Egyptians and Cushites, the Philistines and the Babylonians (present-day Iraqis). Indeed, the Gospel of Jesus Christ has spread throughout the whole earth to such a glorious extent that you can’t go anywhere in the world anymore without being in a country where Jesus Christ has a church, a people, where the holy city has children.

And so this “born there” is not a reference to natural birth in an earthly city but to heavenly re-birth, being born from above as a born-again citizen of the heavenly holy city.

God’s vision for His holy city is that it would continue to expand and to include people from every tribe, tongue, people and nation, until King Jesus has royal citizens praising His name and proclaiming His rule in every language under heaven. We’re not quite there yet, and so we should be stirred on by verse 4 to reach out to those we think of as our fearsome enemies and share the Gospel with them.

### III. The City of God & Her Children, vv. 5-7

The last part of Psalm 8 describes the city of God and her children more:

<sup>5</sup> *And of Zion it shall be said,  
“This one and that one were born in her”;  
for the Most High himself will establish her.*  
<sup>6</sup> *The LORD records as he registers the peoples,  
“This one was born there.” Selah*  
<sup>7</sup> *Singers and dancers alike say,  
“All my springs are in you.”*

Verse 5 lets us know that not everyone who is in Zion has necessarily been born in Zion, really belongs in Zion by holy new birth. Just as those outside the church need the new birth to make them citizens of the city of God, so those within the church need the same new birth. You must be born again and have true and saving faith in Jesus, whether you grew up outside the church as an enemy or grew up in the church as a part of the city of God, the community of faith.

This is God’s work, the new birth, and it is how the Most High establishes His holy city. The holy city also has a holy register. Malachi calls it the Book of Remembrance, and the Book of Revelation calls it the Lamb’s Book of Life. How do you know if you’ve been registered in the Lamb’s Book of Life? Well, do you believe in Jesus?

2 Timothy 2:19 tells us of the foundation establishment of the holy city and the registration of God’s people: “But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: *“The Lord knows those who are his,”* and, *“Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.”* – ESV

The Lord knows those who are His. Does the Lord know you? Does He love you? Do you love Him? Are you trusting in Him by faith in His Son, Jesus Christ? Can you say of the Lord Jesus, “I know I am His and He is mine by faith”? If so, wonderful! Your life should reflect this changed heart and loyalty, as you belong to Him.

If you don't know or if you know that you're not His, the Bible promises in Romans 10:

*if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." – Romans 10:9-13, ESV*

### **Where are your springs?**

And this brings us to the final verse of Psalm 87, and the last thing we need to see in this wonderful Psalm –

*<sup>7</sup> Singers and dancers alike say,  
"All my springs are in you."*

Now, another translation would be "All those who sing and all those who make music say together: 'All my springs are in you.'"

Singing and dancing and making music are all expressions of joy and longing and satisfaction. And we are called together in worship to sing and make music as an expression of our joy and longing and satisfaction in the Lord.

Springs are sources of fresh water, which brings relief, refreshment, and joy to the thirsty soul. So, as we close, let me ask you: Where are your springs? Where do you look for relief, refreshment, and satisfaction when your soul is thirsty? Television? Sports? Vacation? Or do you long to come together in worship with God's people in His holy city and sing, "All my springs are in you!"?