

Summer in the Psalms: Our Identity

Psalm 87
ABC 8/28/22

If you got into a conversation with someone you just met & they said: *Tell me about yourself*. What would you say? What defines you as a person? How would you identify yourself? What labels would you use? You may answer based on a relationship. *I'm the grandmother of...* & name them off. Or, *I'm the husband of...* Or maybe it's based on what you do or have accomplished. *I'm a butcher, baker, candlestick maker*. Maybe you're a fan of an athlete or a sports team. Or maybe you say you're an American, an Oregonian, or an Ashlander. How we identify ourselves is a factor that guides us, influences who we associate with, & how we make decisions. John Piper's defines it this way:

*Christian selfhood is not defined in terms of who we are in & of ourselves. It's defined in terms of what God does to us & the relationship He creates with us & the destiny He appoints for us. God made us who we are so we could make known who He is. Our identity is for the sake of making known His identity.*¹

Open to Ps 87. While it speaks to our identity, it's not immediately clear what God is saying.

The story's told of a professor from Dallas Seminary who was to preach from Ps 87 in a small, rural town. As he sat in his seat he read in the bulletin that the psalm would be read by one of the men in the church. When the time came, a man stood up & walked to the platform. He was wearing polished, highly-tooled leather boots. He was wearing a shirt with a western cut. He had the build & look of a Western cowboy & the professor became anxious about how this psalm would be read.

The man stood at the pulpit, looked at the professor & then down at his Bible. Then he said, *Howdy, folks. I read over this psalm twice last night. It didn't mean a thing then. I read it this morning & it still don't mean a thing. Well, you listen & see*. Then he read the psalm. He looked at the professor & then to the congregation & said, *See what I mean? It still don't mean a thing*. Then he went & sat down.²

That's an honest assessment of Ps 87. There are some parts of the Bible we can read & be blessed by the truth that's so clear. There are other parts we have to read & study to discover the truth that's more obscure because what we're reading was written in a different time & culture. **Ps 87:1-**

7

This psalm is a glorious celebration of **Zion, Jerusalem, the city of God**. It looks ahead prophetically to the ingathering of the nations into Jerusalem in the coming messianic kingdom when the nations

¹ www.desiringgod.org/messages/christian-identity-and-christian-destiny

² Chris Loose, www.rabatchurch.org/sermons/born-in-zion/

of the world will come to **Zion** to worship God. It follows nicely on Ps 86, which prophesied that **all nations whom You have made shall come & worship before You, O Lord, & they shall glorify Your name** (9). Ps 87 more fully develops that thought. This psalm must be read on 2 levels. It's a prophecy of the future kingdom, when all nations will come to Jerusalem to worship (Is 2:1-5), & also a picture of the heavenly Zion where the children of God have their spiritual citizenship (Lk 10:20; Gal 4:21-31; Phil 3:20-21; Heb 12:18-24).³

1. City of God (1-3) This psalm starts abruptly. **His foundation is in the holy mountains** (1). It is **His foundation** from which God has built His great work of redemption (Is 14:32.). **Salvation is from the Jews**, Jesus said (Jn 4:22). Were it not for Israel, the world wouldn't have the knowledge of the true & living God, the inspired Scriptures, or the Savior. Jesus died & rose again outside the walls of Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit descended on the church meeting in Jerusalem on Pentecost, & it was from Jerusalem that the early Jewish believers scattered to bring the gospel to the nations. In Jerusalem was not only the temple of the true God, but also the throne of David, & it would be the Davidic line that would give us our Savior, Jesus Christ. In the end times, Jerusalem will be a center of controversy & conflict, but the Lord will rescue His beloved city (Zech 12:1-13:1). God chose to "dwell" in Zion. He chose to make His presence known there. True, God is omnipresent, but He chose to make His presence tangible in a special way in Jerusalem. The point isn't that Zion, Jerusalem, is the foundation of the living God, as if He were somehow dependent on Zion. The point is that God Himself has established Zion. He's based His foundation there. The reason why God's people are secure is that their foundation is God. Even though every other foundation can be shaken, nothing can shake this foundation. As the psalmist meditates on the city of God & the glory of God's people, the 1st thing that comes to mind is the fact that God Himself is the foundation of His people, & therefore His people are secure. This should remind us of Heb 11:10 which praises Abraham because **he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect & builder is God**. Hebrews makes clear it was a heavenly city not an earthly residence that Abraham was seeking. Even in OT days the saints didn't set their affections on earthly Jerusalem alone, but loved

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Worshipful*, 1st ed., "Be" Commentary Series, p 280

it as a symbol of something greater to come. As Christians today we should love our local church in much the same way. The church we're a part of should be something very precious to you & you should pray for its welfare & be involved in its life. But the earthly church is only a small foretaste of the heavenly & we should be looking from the earthly to those invisible glories that will never pass away.⁴

As we've seen, in Ps 48 there's a special delight God has for Zion. & Zion is a picture of His chosen people, His children. He **loves the gates of Zion more than all the other dwelling places of Jacob** (2). Since the gates protect the city, the psalmist sees God's love as resting upon them, granting security. Zion didn't choose God, but God chose Zion. This isn't a new thought. In Dt 7 Moses explains that God didn't choose the Jews because of something they'd done or because of some quality they possessed. God chose them because He chose to love them. In Dt 7 Moses says,

You are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you & kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand & redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt (6-8).

Moses makes clear to the Jews that their status is due to the love of God freely set on them by His choice alone. Their best qualities didn't bring about God's love. They didn't somehow by their numbers induce God's love. Their righteousness didn't evoke God's love. God, in His inscrutable wisdom & His unfathomable goodness & kindness set His love on them. The same is true of us. Until our security is in that kind of divine choosing love, we won't be secure. If our security is in something we've done, then we'll never be secure because we're fickle. We know we change. We resolve, & we mean it with all our hearts, but we then break our resolutions. But if our security is based on something which never changes, which is outside of us, which is dependable, which is divine, then we can be secure in this life & forever. Our security resides in God as our **foundation** & God's love is the thing that has made us to be His people. God didn't choose you because of something in you, yet you are glorious to Him. The psalmist is saying that Zion, God's people, is

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 42–106: An Expository Commentary*, p 710

exceedingly precious to Him & He delights in them. As a Christian, one of God's family, you need to understand that God delights in you. He glories in you. You're precious to Him. If that's how God thinks about His people, then shouldn't we also have a high view of His people, of His body, of the bride of His Son, of His church as well? That's important, because we don't just love some abstract entity out there called *the church*. That love has to be expressed concretely within the bounds of the local fellowship of believers, where the effects of the fall are still evident; where we hurt one another & disagree with one another & let each other down. & yet, never is our value of the people of God to be different than God's esteem of His people. The psalmist is raising our eyes to something of God's glory in His people as He describes this city of God, this Zion. **3**

We talked about this 2 weeks ago (Ps 48) & how John Newton used this as the basis for his famous hymn, *Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken*.⁵ In response to these truths of vs 1-2, **Glorious things are spoken of Zion**. Why? Because it was the **city of God**, the place where God uniquely met His chosen people in worship. But the prophets also wrote some **glorious things** about the future Jerusalem & the apostles have written even more glorious things about the heavenly Jerusalem. What is it that's been said in praise of Zion? Here's a few: **Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, Is Mount Zion /in the far north, The city of the great King (Ps 48:2). The Lord has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His habitation (Ps 132:13). Is 2:2-3 says:**

In the last days the mountain of the house of the Lord will be established as the chief of the mountains, & will be raised above the hills; & all the nations will stream to it. & many peoples will come & say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us concerning His ways & that we may walk in His paths.' For the law will go forth from Zion & the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

Not only did Newton choose vs 3 as the theme of his great hymn, Augustine also chose it as the theme for his book, *The City of God*. Augustine reminds us that even greater things have been spoken of the church than have been said of earthly Jerusalem. The author of Hebrews makes this point, saying,

You have come to Mount Zion & to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, & to myriads of angels, to the general assembly & church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, & to God, the Judge of all, & to the spirits of *the* righteous made perfect, & to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, & to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than *the blood* of Abel (12:22-24).

⁵ 8/14/22, www.ashlandbiblechurch.com/august-14-2022-psalm-48.html

Charles Spurgeon said that although *glorious things were taught in Jerusalem's streets, & seen in her temples, yet this is more true of the church: she is founded in grace, but her pinnacles glow with glory.... Whatever glorious things the saints may say of the church in their eulogies, they cannot exceed what prophets have foretold, what angels have sung, or what God Himself has declared. Happy are the tongues which learn to occupy themselves with so excellent a subject.*⁶

A pastor friend said this: "The church is imperfect, but according to Jesus & His word, at its best, the Bible describes the church in this list of ABC's he's put together:

The church is an Ancient & Apostolic Atoned-for Assembly who Are Adopted & Accepted in the Agape of our Abba!

The church is His Body & Bride — Blood Bought, Bible Believing, Baptized into the Beloved, Born again, & Bound together in Brotherly love.

A Counter-Cultural, Christ-Centered, Cleansed, Covenant Community of Countless Christians each Called to Carry our Cross.

Disciples who are Dependent on Divine Doctrine to Discover our Destiny!

Elect Exiles Equipped to Engage & Evangelize the lost till we Enter in to our Eternal Enjoyment.

The church is the Forgiven & Forgiving Family -- A Fellowship of Faithful Farmers seeking to bear Fruit for the Fame of our Fathers name.

Grounded in the Gospel, a Garden of Grace — Gathering & Growing together for the Glory of God, as we Give of our spiritual Gifts!

We're a Hope-filled, Heaven-bound, Humbled, Habitation of the Holy Spirit!

The church is International, Invincible, Interdenominational, Interdependent & Immersed in Immanuel's Identity through His Indwelling Spirit.

Joined to Jesus, on a Journey of Joy seeking Justice (as God defines it!)

A Kingdom to whom the King has given Keys of the Knowledge of Himself.

We are the Light of the world, Liberated by the Lamb for ever-Lasting Life in His Love.

A Multiethnic, Multigenerational, Multitude --- all Members of our Merciful Messiah's Mission.

Neighbor-loving, Name-bearing, a New creation, brought into the New covenant!

The church is an Organic Organism of Openhearted Overcomers who are Outpouring...

Passionate Prayers & Praises as a Purified Priesthood of Peacemaking People & Pilgrims...

Whose Quest for Christ-like Qualities ought to cause Quarrelsome inQuirers to Quizzically Question the status Quo.

⁶ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, vol. 2a, *Psalms 58–87*, p 478

Through Repentance, Regeneration & Reconciliation the church is a Radiant, Royal & Redeemed Remnant on the Road with our Righteous, Resurrected Rabbi...

Sealed by His Spirit, her sanctified Saints & Soldiers are the Salt of the earth, Submitted to the Savior & His Sacred Scriptures, Striving...

from every Tongue & Tribe, Tied together by Truth as a Trinitarian Temple Towering...

Upward in our Unshakable Understanding of God's Unconditional love for Us in Christ,

Whose Vital Vision is to be Victorious & Virtuous...

Women & men Worshipping & Witnessing to the Worthiness & Wisdom of God —

eXiles who eXist to eXalt the eXcellencies of our eXemplar as we eXuberantly & eXegetically eXplore the text...

in Yielded, Yearning for Yahweh as we...

Zealously await our King's return to Mt. Zion.⁷

Do you think of your church this way? This is how we're to be; how God wants us to be. Which brings us to vss...

2. City of Nations 4-6

To whom does God speak here? The answer is to **those who know Me**. Who are these people? They could be the Gentiles who are coming to know God in the latter days (Is 2:2), or the Jews dispersed among the Gentiles, or the Jews in Zion. Probably God is telling the Jews that He's keeping a register of the Gentiles as He sees each one who has faith & notes, **This one was born there**. God is the God of the Gentiles as well as the Jews. In the latter days envisioned by the psalmist, the Gentile nations will join the sons & daughters of Israel in acknowledging & worshiping the true God. In that future day all the nations of the world will come to **Jerusalem** to **worship** God. The emphasis is upon the global scope of the praise to be offered to God. To show what he means the writer mentions 5 representative nations: **1) Rahab** The psalm doesn't say who Rahab stands for, but other texts show it was a name for Egypt, the great power to the south of Israel (Is 30:7; 51:9-10). The word itself denotes pride or ferocity. **2) Babylon** is next, the great power to the east. Babylon, would destroy Jerusalem & ravage the kingdom of Judah, & take them into captivity for 70 years,

⁷ Rousseaux Brasseur, 2/21/22, sermon titled, *Church: Trinity Identity Community*, <https://vimeo.com/channels/thestoryashland/page:6>

& the Jews would vow to pay her back (137:1, 8–9), but she, too, will be part of this glorious kingdom. **3) Philistia** The 1st 2 nations pointed to major world powers, the 1st to the south, the 2nd to the east. Philistia was a closer, more immediate threat, one they never completely conquered. It was located to the west. **4) Tyre** was a powerful, wealthy city-state to the north. With these 4 names all 4 points of the compass are covered. **5) Cush** stands for Ethiopia, often used as a representative of far-distant nations. In a very short space, this psalm indicates that in the day of God's future blessing the representatives of all the nations of the world will come to know & praise the true God in Zion. God's city has liberal immigration laws; its gates open to all **those who know Him**. It's hard to read this without thinking of the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost & of how God began to draw people from diverse backgrounds & races to faith in Jesus (Acts 2:9–11). The names of the nations had changed from the psalmist's day, but many from all the points of the compass are mentioned: **Parthians & Medes & Elamites, & residents of Mesopotamia, Judea & Cappadocia, Pontus & Asia, Phrygia & Pamphylia, Egypt & the districts of Libya around Cyrene, & visitors from Rome, both Jews & proselytes, Cretans & Arabs...** The vision of Gentiles & Jews together knowing & praising God is frequent in the NT (Rom 11; Eph 3:3–9; Heb 12:22–23; Rev 7:9; 14:1–5; etc). When the Lord establishes His glorious kingdom & Jesus reigns from Jerusalem, Israel's enemies will be transformed into fellow citizens. Through the preaching of the gospel today, this miracle is already happening in His church (Eph 2:11–22; Gal 3:26–29). The church is the true Israel (Gal 6:16) & heaven is the true Zion (Heb 12:22). Gentile believers are grafted into the root of Israel (Rom 11:16–24). Jesus has taken away the wall of division between Israel & the nations. Noticing the parallel between Ps 87 & the Christian church, one has said,

*This is the glory of the church, that into her the fullness of the nations shall enter—the proud from Egypt, who for her haughtiness is called Rahab; the worldly from Babylon, the city of confusion; the wrathful from Philistia, so long the enemies of Israel; the covetous from Tyre, the rich city of the traders; & the slaves of ignorance from Cush...*⁸

It's true that we don't yet see all the peoples of the world bowing in grateful submission to Jesus as we will one day. But we do have a foretaste of this in the joy & unity of spirit & purpose the

⁸ "Plain Commentary" in Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 2a:483

people of God have within the fellowship of the church locally & around the world. 2 things are said of those who will be brought to the worship of God in the days the psalmist envisions.

A. The people know God The word **know** in vs 4 is a translation of a Hebrew verb which has a rich variety of meanings. It can mean *acknowledge, understand, be sure, know about, experience,* & many other variations. In the NIV it's translated more than 190 different ways. Here it means more than merely admitting there is such a God as Yahweh or even acknowledging Him as the one true God. It means coming to Him in a saving relationship, bowing before Him, & seeking to know Him better. It's exactly what Jesus meant when He said in His high priestly prayer in Jn 17, **This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, & Jesus Christ whom You have sent** (3). To those who consider themselves wise or strong or rich or distant, the very categories suggested by the names of these nations, we say with Jeremiah,

“Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, & let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands & knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice & righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the LORD (9:23–24).

The greatest blessing that can come to any person of any nation is that they might know & worship the one true God.

B. The people will be born again. The 2nd thing recorded of the nations is that it will be said of them, **This one was born there**, in Zion (4, 6), & **This one & that one were born in her** (5). Since this is repeated 3x in such a short psalm it's clear it's important. But what does it mean? It can't mean that all the people of the world will one day literally be born in Jerusalem. It can only mean that it will be set down in the official records as if they had been born there, meaning they'll be given the status of true citizens. God speaks of how those people will be treated as if they were born in Zion. God's recording of the names in the register of the peoples may have the idea of the **book of life** behind it, mentioned in Ps 69:28, where the psalmist asks God to remove his enemies from the **book of life**, asking God to bring about their deaths.⁹ Here it's the opposite. These Gentile people will be citizens of Zion in the sense of being native-born.¹⁰ But probably even more than this. If the

⁹ Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction & Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 15–16, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, p 318

¹⁰ H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms*, pp 624–25

vision of Ps 87 is being fulfilled in the church, as I believe it is, then being *born again* is what's necessary. Being born in Zion is to become a spiritual Jew, that is, a member of the people of God, which is what the new birth signifies. Interestingly, in the Septuagint version of vs 5 the additional word *mother* appears, which gives the sense: *& Zion shall be called a mother in whom men of every race are born.*¹¹ This lies behind Paul's saying in Gal 4:26, **the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother**, which means he interpreted Ps 87 as pointing to spiritual rebirth.¹² This city of God isn't just a city filled with Jews; it's a city filled with people from all nations who've been born again or **born there** in Zion. By this divine edict each of them is invested with the full rights & privileges of citizenship as though they'd been born in Zion. Does this mean God saves everyone? No. He's saying that His plan is to have more than the children of Israel as His children, citizens of His kingdom. God said to Abraham in Gen 12 that **in you all the families of the earth will be blessed** (3). One of the things this must remind us of is that missions is rooted in the OT as well as in the NT. We can never fail to have a concern for the work of world missions, because it's God's purpose to bring Egyptians & Babylonians & Philistines & Hondurans & Zambians & North Koreans & on & on into His kingdom. It's His purpose to bring them in & register them among the people of God. If that was an OT concern, that the peoples of the world would come to know God, & God doesn't change, it's still His desire. It has always been God's purpose to make His name known among the nations & this psalm is emphasizing that. Therefore, we must be concerned for missions. It's not an option for us. & it's not just a NT thing or just an OT thing. It's a Bible thing, a God thing. Paul made it absolutely clear that both Jew & Gentile are equally guilty before God, & that the Law which was the great advantage of the Jew equally condemned Jew & Gentile (Rom 2). The basis on which they'd be brought into the kingdom would be by the grace of God through the shed blood of Jesus. We must proclaim that around the world. God makes it clear that He's going to bring the nations to Himself in the most striking of ways: through the humiliation & crucifixion of His Son;

¹¹ New English Bible's translation

¹² Boice, p 712-714

through the death, burial, & resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's what it takes to bring the nations, to bring you, to a saving knowledge of God.

3. City of Joy The last vs of this short & beautiful psalm is about those who have been reborn & who praise God for it. 7

The **springs** are metaphorical for life; they represent life-giving water (Is 41:18). In John's gospel Jesus promises that when the Holy Spirit comes, rivers of living water will flow from us (Jn 7:38–39). As citizens of Zion & the children of God, Jews & Gentiles not only live together but they sing together & play musical instruments as they rejoice in God's blessings. This image is echoed elsewhere. In Ps 46:4 we read of **a river whose streams make glad the city of God**. Ezek 47:1 describes **water was flowing from under the threshold of the house** in heaven which became a great river of blessing.¹³ This city of God's people which is made up of the nations is a city of joy. What all this is saying is that **every good thing given & every perfect gift is from above** (Js 1:17). All we are or hope to be, all we have or ever hope to have, all we attain or ever hope to attain is from Him. The people of God acknowledge this & praise Him for it. Do you do that? Or do you take credit for who you are or what you accomplish? May I suggest that if you acknowledge that all your **springs of joy are in God**, as they truly are, then you'll have joy in your salvation &, what is more, you'll be encouraged to keep on serving God since you know He'll sustain you. You will know that **He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus** (Phil 1:6).

To this present day, **Jerusalem** remains the apple of God's eye, the city in which He's promised to display His glory uniquely. God's **foundation** is in Jerusalem, the center of His redemptive work. Since God's work happens in time & space, it had to happen somewhere, & God chose Jerusalem as the place where much of it happened. There Melchizedek, king & priest of God Most High, reigned & served. There Abraham was willing to offer Isaac on the mount of the Lord where His perfect sacrifice would be provided. There David, Israel's greatest earthly king, reigned & made it the kingdom's capital. There the tabernacle of God found its fulfillment & permanence in the great temple David designed & Solomon built. There the institutions of sacrifice, worship, & priestly

¹³ Boice, p 714

service were established for centuries. There Jesus recognized & honored the city & observed the feasts & temple rituals. There Jesus died for our sins, becoming a curse under the law for us. It was in Jerusalem that Jesus rose from the dead, triumphant over the grave. It was from the Mount of Olives at Jerusalem that Jesus ascended back to heaven. There the church was born on the day of Pentecost. There the apostles served & sent out the gospel. It was there that Christ 1st built His church. There God will establish the physical, geographic center of His ultimate kingdom upon earth. & it will be in Jerusalem that He will rule & reign over the earth for 1,000 years. The city of God is both our origin & our destiny. Regardless of where we're born, we must find Jerusalem as our mother, our true city, where we were born. As Augustine said, all earthly cities will fade & fail. God's city, however, endures. Glorious things are spoken of her because God Himself establishes her.

This psalm celebrates Zion, the location of the temple, the place where God makes His glorious presence known in the world. During the time of the OT, the foreign nations were enemies, but this psalm looks to the future when peoples from the nations will find their spiritual home in Zion. In the NT, God makes His presence known through Jesus, & the nations are invited to participate in the good news & enter into a relationship with God through Him. Paul may have had Ps 87 in mind when he reminds his Philippian readers that **our citizenship is in heaven** (Phil 3:20). But most significantly, in the light of this psalm, we think of that future day in the new Jerusalem when **the glory & the honor of the nations** is in it (Rev 21:26).

We are eternally blessed if we know, worship, & serve Him. Don't worry, if you know God through Christ, you were born in Zion. Jesus has gone ahead to prepare a place for you (Jn 14). You are not 1st & foremost an American. You were born in Zion. That's who you are. That's your identity. Aug