

"THE GLORIOUS CITY"

I. Introduction

- A. We all know what it is like to take pride in being a member of a particular community.
1. Perhaps you have memories of what it was like to take pride in your high school.
 2. My high school was attended by the kids who lived in a large township that bordered the city.
 3. Because of this, our sports rivals were the schools in the city.
 4. At one of our football games, the students from one of those schools started making fun of our team by calling us all farmers.
 5. I think they even came up with some kind of cheer about this.
 6. Now, the vast majority of our students did not know the first thing about farming, but we quickly took that name and used it to express our school pride.
 7. From that point on, the day when we played that particular city school was designated "Farmer Day", and students were encouraged to wear overalls and straw hats to school.
 8. We wanted to make it clear that we took great pride in being members of "the Farmer high school."
- B. Psalm 87 speaks of the glories of being a member of God's city.
1. There are many great cities in this world, but none of them is fit to be called glorious.

2. This psalm speaks of the one city that truly is glorious: Zion, the city of God.
3. Zion was a hill in the northern part of Jerusalem, and Israel's temple was built upon it.
4. The psalms often use the name 'Zion' as a symbol for God's kingdom because in Old Testament Israel the temple was the place where God's redemptive reign was made manifest.
5. Of course, in our era of redemptive history, God makes his redemptive reign manifest in the church.
6. In light of this, whenever we see the name 'Zion' in our Bibles, we should think of Christ's church.
7. As we study Psalm 87 today, we will see three qualities that make Zion (or the church) glorious.
8. Zion is glorious because it has been founded by God.
9. Zion is glorious because it is the bearer of the children of God.
10. And Zion is glorious because it is the source of joy for God's children.

II. **Founded by God**

- A. We begin by looking at verses 1-3, where the focus is upon the fact that Zion has been founded by God.
 1. Zion is the only city that God has set up to be the seat of his redemptive rule.
 2. As Calvin explains, "While other cities were founded and built by the governance and power of God, merely for the sake of civil government, Jerusalem was his peculiar sanctuary, and his royal seat."

3. What was true of Jerusalem in a shadowy sense under the old covenant is true of the church in a far greater sense under the new covenant.
 4. In this present age, the church is the only place where God's redemptive rule is made manifest.
 5. While God rules over all the peoples of the earth, the church is the only place where we see him reigning over his people through the mediation of Christ the Redeemer.
- B. Literally speaking, Mount Zion was more like a hill than a mountain, but it was a symbol of the unshakable foundation upon which God's kingdom is built.
1. Jesus is the reality to which Mount Zion pointed.
 2. He is the church's one foundation.
 3. As Peter writes in his first epistle, "As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'" (1 Pet. 2:4-6)
 4. Or as John Newton puts it in his great hymn "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken", which was based upon Psalm 87:

*He whose word cannot be broken
Formed thee for his own abode:
On the Rock of Ages founded,
What can shake thy sure repose?
With salvation's walls surrounded,
Thou may'st smile at all thy foes.*

5. As long as our feet remain firmly planted upon Christ, nothing will ever be able to shake us from the hope that we have in him.
- C. In verse 2, the psalmist declares that “the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.”
1. Zion was special because God caused his presence to dwell in the temple.
 2. And notice that Zion is founded upon God’s love, not upon anything that the city’s inhabitants have done.
 3. God made the same point in the book of Deuteronomy, where he told the Israelites, “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.” (Deut. 7:6–8)
 4. God does not set his love upon his people because there is anything in us that is lovable.
 5. As Martin Luther so profoundly put it, “The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it.” [*Heidelberg Disputation*, thesis 28]
 6. God loves us because it pleases him to love us.
 7. This is a great mystery, but it also gives us great security.
 8. If we did not do anything to earn God’s love in the first place, then we can know that our sins and failures as Christians will not cause God to stop loving us, as long as we continue to look to Christ in

faith.

- D. In verse 3, the psalmist writes, "Glorious things of you are spoken, O city of God."
1. This serves as the introduction to the things that God is going to say about Zion in verses 4-6.
 2. The name 'city of God' was used by Augustine in his classic work that bears that name to distinguish the church from what Augustine referred to as the city of man.
 3. In Scripture, the epitome of the city of man is Babel, the site of mankind's futile attempt to make a name for himself by building a tower that reached up to the heavens.
 4. That project resulted in failure and shame, as the Lord confused the people's languages and scattered them all over the earth.
 5. Set in sharp contrast to Babel is Zion, whose glory does not come as a result of man's efforts but as a gift of God's free grace.
 6. We see this in the book of Genesis where, immediately after the account of the tower of Babel, God gives this promise to Abraham: "I will bless you and make your name great." (Gen. 12:2)
 7. While it is futile for us to try to make a name for ourselves, God promises to bestow a great name upon us when we trust in Christ.
 8. He makes us a part of the city of which glorious things are spoken.

III. Bearer of Children

- A. We turn now to verses 4-6, where we see that Zion is glorious because she is the bearer of children for God.
1. God is the speaker in these verses, and he is describing the members of the city of God.

2. The first thing that he says about these people who belong to his city is that they know him.
 3. Knowing God is at the very heart of biblical religion.
 4. Jesus made this clear in his high-priestly prayer in John 17, when he said that eternal life consists in knowing the one true God through the mediation of the Son. (see Jn. 17:3)
 5. As a Christian, the thing that God wants from you more than anything else is that you seek his face, that you strive to know him more and more with each passing day.
- B. As our text continues, God goes on to list those who know him.
1. He names Rahab (which was another name for Egypt), Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, and Cush (which was in the area to the south of Egypt).
 2. Egypt was to Israel's south, Babylon was to the east, Philistia was to the west, Tyre was to the north, and Cush was often used to represent distant lands.
 3. All the points of the compass and beyond are included.
 4. These nations were Israel's enemies, yet here they are described as citizens of Zion.
 5. God is saying that he is going to bring people from all nations, from all across the globe, even those who previously hated him, into his holy city.
 6. As it says in the preceding psalm, "All the nations you have made shall come and worship before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name." (Ps. 86:9)
 7. This points to the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed.

8. It points to the glorious day described in Isaiah 2, when all the nations shall flow to the house of the Lord.
 9. It points to the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, and to the worldwide spread of the gospel that began on that day and continues on into our day.
 10. God is knitting together one people for himself by drawing individuals from all races, nationalities, and backgrounds into his church.
- C. Of the people who come to Zion from distant lands it will be said, "This one was born there."
1. Of course, if they came from other nations they were not literally born in Zion.
 2. This is a spiritual birth.
 3. God is saying that people will renounce their citizenship in the city of man in order to become citizens of the city of God.
 4. This is what Jesus meant when he told Nicodemus, "unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (Jn. 3:3)
- D. The reason why Psalm 87 speaks of people being born in Zion is because the Holy Spirit works through the church's ministry to bring about the new birth.
1. This is why the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Galatians that the Jerusalem above is our mother. (see Gal. 4:26)
 2. God works through the church's proclamation of the gospel to bring people into his kingdom.
 3. That is what God has done for you if you trust in Christ today.

4. He has caused you to be born again to a living hope, to an inheritance that is being kept in heaven for you.
 5. He records your name as one who has been born in Zion.
 6. And if you have not yet believed on Christ, then I urge you to do so today.
 7. If you do, you too will be registered as a member of God's own city.
- E. It is easy for us to get discouraged about the things that are taking place these days in our culture, and even in many branches of the church.
1. But we should not lose sight of the work that God is doing in his church.
 2. Glorious things are still being spoken of the city of God.
 3. Have you considered the fact that even though there is no societal benefit to being loyal to Christ and his church in our day, there are still many people who display such loyalty?
 4. How do you explain this?
 5. What causes you and your fellow believers to keep following Christ when doing so doesn't earn you anything in the eyes of the world?
 6. This stands as evidence of God's power to produce and preserve children for Zion.
 7. As Calvin puts it, "It is in truth a singular benefit of God, and at the same time, a signal miracle, that, amidst the great and various revolutions of the kingdoms of this world, he enlarges [the Church] continually from age to age, and preserves her from destruction; so that in the whole world there is nothing enduring but the Church."

IV. Source of Joy

- A. This brings us to the last verse of the psalm, where we see that Zion is glorious because she is the source of joy for her people.
1. The psalmist says, "Singers and dancers alike say, 'All my springs are in you.'"
 2. Singing and dancing are ways of expressing joy.
 3. Now the point here is not that we should start incorporating dancing into our worship services.
 4. Maybe some of you would like that, but I can assure you that you would not like it if you had to watch me dance.
 5. This is a symbolic way of describing the saints' joyful response to the blessings that God lavishes upon us through his church.
 6. We should respond to the gospel with joyful hearts, hearts that overflow with praise.
 7. As Paul says in his letter to the Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." (Phil. 4:4)
- B. When these singers and dancers say that their springs, or fountains, are "in you", they are speaking of Zion, the city of God.
1. We might wonder why they would not say that their springs are "in God."
 2. Other psalms do say things like that.
 3. We see one example in Psalm 63, where it says, "O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water."
 4. In that psalm God is the fountain, but in our psalm the church is the fountain.

5. There is no conflict between these two psalms.
 6. The church is our source of spiritual sustenance and refreshment because the church is God's temple.
- C. The church is the place where God meets with us to bless us through his appointed means of grace.
1. This is what the psalmist is talking about in Psalm 46 when he writes, "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High." (Ps. 46:4)
 2. It is what the apostle John is describing in Revelation 22 when he says this of the new Jerusalem: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the streets of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations." (Rev. 22:1-2)
 3. In this present age, the water of life, and the healing fruit that is produced by the tree of life, are conferred upon us by the Lord through the ministry of reconciliation that he has given to his church.
 4. All of your fountains, your source of refreshment and comfort and hope and joy — these things are found in Christ through his church, even in this local expression of his church.
 5. As Newton puts it:

*Who can faint, while such a river
Ever flows their thirst t'assuage?*

...

*Fading is the worldling's pleasure,
All his boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting treasure
None but Zion's children know.*

6. If you are a member of the city of God, then you have those solid joys and that lasting treasure.
7. And Zion is the source from which the Lord pours those blessings out upon you.
8. “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. Within her citadels God has made himself known as a fortress.” (Ps. 48:1–3)