

Embedded in Psalm 86's personal plea for spiritual renewal is a prophecy that anticipates the theme of Psalm 87 and the global reach of the gospel. The psalmist declares, "All the nations you have made will come and worship before you, Lord; they will bring glory to your name" (Ps 86:9). The Sons of Korah celebrate this amazing truth with a psalm dedicated to the City of God and the gathering of God's people from "every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev 5:9).

We cannot pray this psalm today without hearing the Lord's great commission to go and make disciples of all nations. We remember the Magi who came from the east to worship the one who was born king of the Jews (Matthew 2:1-2). We recall the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42), the Roman centurion (Luke 7:1-10), and the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24-30), all of whom put their faith and trust in Jesus. The exclamation of the Roman soldier at the foot of the cross, "Surely he was the Son of God!" has become the testimony of many from every nation and people group. Psalm 87 anticipates the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the world-wide impact of the gospel.

The terse, staccato style of Psalm 87 lends itself to a burst of praise. Exuberance describes this good news psalm. It deserves to be sung or shouted. The gates of Zion are flung open to the world so that all may enter into the city of God and the joy of the Lord. The inclusiveness of the Kingdom is glorious and the songs of praise never cease.

The City of God

*He has founded his city on the holy mountain.
The Lord loves the gates of Zion
more than all the other dwellings of Jacob.
Glorious things are said of you, city of God:
Psalm 87:1-3*

The psalm begins with an "abrupt and emphatic" statement of fact.¹ God "founded" this place. The meaning and purpose of this city on the holy mountain is established in the will of God. Place matters, but not because of geography. The place itself is not holy. God makes it holy. His presence is what sets this place apart as holy. The "gates of Zion" stand for the whole city and represent the bustling human activity that brings energy and joy to the city. The Lord's love for the "gates" is a metaphor for his electing love that makes this place his home and the people his people. The psalm will go on to prove that the Lord's exclusive love for Zion, "more than all the dwellings of Jacob," is for the sake of inclusion. The reason "glorious things" are said about this city is because everybody is welcome – everybody can find their true home here.

We explored the meaning of Zion earlier in our discussion on Psalm 14. Zion, the City of David, is the *place* from which salvation comes. When Jesus Christ came *person* replaced *place*. The

¹ Kidner, Psalms, 314.

Incarnate One fulfilled and embodied everything about salvation. For “salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). In himself, Jesus summed up the meaning of Zion and the meaning of the “land” was replaced by the meaning of the person. Chris Wright explains, “The physical territory of Jewish Palestine is nowhere referred to with any theological significance in the New Testament. The land as a holy place has ceased to have relevance. . . . Furthermore, the geographical land of Israel has no place in New Testament teaching regarding the ultimate future of God’s people.”² Instead of the holiness of *place*, “Christianity has fundamentally. . .substituted the holiness of the *Person*: it has Christified holy space.”³

Even before the coming of Jesus Christ, the meaning of Zion was always been more spiritual than political and more universal in scope than ethnic. “Salvation was not a matter of making earthly Zion the center of life; it was a matter of trusting in the Lord and being guaranteed a place in a more glorious city in his eternal kingdom.”⁴ Psalm 87 corresponds with the prophecy of Isaiah and the glory of Zion, when all the nations will gather to recognize what God has done:

“Your gates will always stand open. . . .The children of your oppressors will come bowing before you; all who despise you will bow down at your feet and will call you the City of the Lord, Zion of the Holy One of Israel. Although you have been forsaken and hated, with no one traveling through, I will make you the everlasting pride and the joy of all generations. . . . Then you will know that I, the Lord, am your Savior, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob” (Isaiah 60:11-16).

The author of Hebrews also envisions Mount Zion welcoming the people of God. “You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm. . . .But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God” (Heb 12:18, 22). All the identifying qualities of Mount Zion are relationally God-centered and culminate in Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, whose sprinkled, sacrificial blood is powerful to save.

“But you have come to Mount Zion, // and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, // and you have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, // and to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven, // and you have come 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” (Heb 12:22-24).

The apostle John sees “the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev 21:2). This Holy City is home to the 144,000 who stand on Mount Zion (Revelation 14:1; Joel 2:32; Hebrews 12:22; Galatians 4:26). They represent “the totality of God’s people throughout the ages,” as well as the militant last generation of believers fighting to the end.⁵

² Chris Wright, *An Eye for An Eye*, IVP, 1983, 93.

³ W. D. Davis, *The Gospel and the Land*, 368. Quoted in Wright, *An Eye for An Eye*, 93.

⁴ Ross, *Psalms*, 798.

⁵ Beale, *Revelation*, 733; see Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 229-232.

John's reference to Mount Zion echoes the Lord's promise, "I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain" (Ps 2:6).

The Citizens of Zion

*"I will record Rahab and Babylon
among those who acknowledge me –
Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush [the upper Nile region]
and will say, 'This one was born in Zion.'"
Indeed of Zion it will be said,
"This one and that one were born in her,
and the Most High himself will establish her."
The Lord will write in the register of the peoples:
"This one was born in Zion."
As they make music they will sing,
"All my foundations are in you."
Psalm 87:4-7*

Without hesitation or prejudice the psalmist quotes the Lord's description of what is so glorious about Zion.⁶ The citizens of Zion are drawn from everywhere, even Israel's enemies and rivals. The most unlikely candidates for conversion become the citizens of God's kingdom because they know him and worship him. Shockingly, archenemies and oppressors are suddenly fellow citizens with God's people, rejoicing side-by-side and singing their hearts out, in praise of Yahweh. The five nations listed, Egypt (Rahab), Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, and Cush (Nubia and parts of Ethiopia) all have a history of violence and hatred against Israel. But the tragic past is not remembered in the wake of this glorious news. Apparently two of John Newton's hymns could be sung in Zion, *Amazing Grace* and *Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken*.

It is not just that these foreign nationalities have been accepted and assimilated into Israel. Miraculously, these Egyptians and Babylonians and Ethiopians have been reborn in the City of God. They are not second class citizens. The Lord himself declares, "This one was born in Zion." And then he repeats it for emphasis: "Indeed of Zion it will be said, 'This one and that one were born in her.'" And then again for the third time: "The Lord will write in the register of the peoples: 'This one was born in Zion.'" The psalmist uses the language of birth to speak of conversion and in doing so "anticipates the later language of being 'born again' in the New Testament."⁷ The new birth is not a matter of natural descent nor of human enterprise. This is a work of the Holy Spirit. "Every conversion is a virgin birth. With human beings this [new life] is impossible; but with God absolutely everything is possible (Mt 19:26). The Holy Spirit, in other words is the miraculous *how* of New Life."⁸ The only way to become the children of God is to be born of God (John 1:13). The psalm's expression, "this one and that one" (Ps 87:5), emphasizes one person at a time. One by one we enter the kingdom of God.

⁶ Ross, Psalms, 795.

⁷ Ross, Psalms, 796.

⁸ Bruner, John, 24.

It is not difficult to imagine that Jesus had in mind Psalm 87 when he said to Nicodemus, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (John 3:3). Undoubtedly Nicodemus understood himself to be a solid citizen of the kingdom of God – the ultimate insider if there ever was one. He was a Pharisee who sat on the Jewish ruling council. But Jesus implied otherwise when he repeated, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. . . . You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again’” (John 3:5-7). It must have been shocking to Nicodemus to realize that he had to “born of the Spirit” just like God-fearing Gentiles from far flung nations.

The meaning of Psalm 87 is played out throughout the Gospels. For Matthew, the magi represent the unexpected, but very welcome, citizens of the Kingdom of God. They are like Rahab, the surprising recipient of God's grace when the Israelites entered the promised land. They are like Naaman the Syrian, trusting in God's Word. They are like the Queen of Sheba, but they are bowing before the one greater than Solomon (Matthew 12:42). They are like the Samaritan woman in the Gospel of John and the Roman centurion in Luke's gospel. Surely if God can raise up the children of Abraham from stones, as Jesus said, then he can extend His grace to Eastern magi and Mongolians and Latin Americans. If God's grace can overcome the distance between Babylon and Bethlehem, it can overcome all cultural and intellectual barriers. As Jesus said, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen....there shall be one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:16). The impact of the gospel led the apostles to see the promise of Zion fulfilled in the heavenly Jerusalem. Paul wrote, “the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother” (Gal 4:26).

The psalm ends on a note of joyful celebration, and “as they make music they will sing, ‘All my springs are in you’” (Ps 87:7). A similar theme is sung in Psalm 46:4: “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God” (see Ezekiel 47:1). In an arid land where water is scarce and a constant concern, there is nothing like an endless supply of fresh running water to symbolize life. If the language of new birth invokes Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, then, springs of fresh water make us think of Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well. “Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14).