

THE GLORIOUS CITY

PSALM 87

Introduction:

A prophet wrote this psalm. God opened his eyes so that he could see beyond the present into the future of the people of God. Interpreters have struggled in their attempt to give meaning to the psalm for the modern reader.

Jewish interpreters heard in the psalm a word of hope about the future of Jerusalem and the people of Israel. They saw their beloved city becoming the capital city for a mighty world empire.

The old Christian interpreters saw in the psalm a prophecy concerning the church. They declared the central truth to be that the church would become the spiritual home for people from all of the nations of the earth. They heard a witness to the power of the gospel to convert even the heathen.

Some of us hear in this psalm a sound that becomes much clearer in the full light of the New Testament. The excitement of the psalmist was caused by a vision of the New Jerusalem, the city that John saw coming down from God out of heaven. The psalmist saw through a haze the outline of a distant city that would indeed be the city of God. Augustine held this city up before the

crumbling Roman world as being the hope of all mankind. All human attempts to build a continuing earthly city have resulted in disappointment.

Man started building cities in the earliest days of human history as he sought meaning for a life without God. He thought there would be safety in numbers and in the institutions that they could build. But to this point he has never been able to build a “continuing city.” Every city that man has built has begun to decay almost immediately, and proves to be a place inhabited by powers of evil.

Is there a possibility of the city of God? Is the psalmist just dreaming or has he really seen something that we need to consider? He calls it the glorious city. Consider what the Psalmist saw, and you will see why the city is so glorious.

I. IT IS GLORIOUS BECAUSE OF ITS FOUNDER.

The psalm has an abrupt beginning. The abruptness may be explained by the emotions that surged through the heart of the psalmist as he saw the city.

The first thing he notices is the Founder of the City.

1. He lays the foundation.

“His foundation is in the holy mountains.” His foundation refers to the foundation that the Lord God has laid for the city. He chose to set the city on the holy mountains.

God kept the hope of such a city before His people in the Old Testament, especially in some of the later prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel. The New Testament writers seized on these truths about the city, especially when they wrote of Heaven. The writer of Hebrews declares, “For he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” (Hebrews 11:10) This refers to the faith of Abraham that refused to settle down in an earthly city because he was looking for this city which God has built. He died in hope, never having found the city.

The writer of Hebrews also refers to the city as “Mount Zion.” “But you have come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels.” (Hebrews 12:22) It is interesting the way the city and the people of God are so closely associated. The Lord God has laid a sure foundation for His people, and sure foundation of the city He has prepared for His people.

2. He loves the city.

“The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob. Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God.”

The love of the Lord of the covenant for the dwellings of Jacob is beyond dispute. He chose the descendants of Abraham to be His people, and chose to make His home among them. But the fullest measure of His love is reserved for the city that He builds for Himself and for His people, the city of God.

The finger prints of David and Solomon were all over the Zion that they built. But the final heavenly Zion will have only fingerprints of the Lord of Glory upon it. It will be designed entirely to suit His tastes and to meet the eternal needs of His people. Jesus assured His disciples before He left them, “And I go to prepare a place for you.” This city of God is the result of His activity.

II. IT IS GLORIOUS BECAUSE OF ITS CITIZENS.

The primary focus of the psalm settles upon the citizens of the city of God. It is the surprising nature of the citizenship that sets the heart of the Psalmist to leaping within him. He must have expected that the citizens would be from the twelve tribes of Israel, but there are more than the sons of Israel in the city.

1. Their citizenship is based on birth.

It was our Texas Baptist pioneer L. R. Scarborough who first called my attention to this truth. In a book of sermons published in the 1930's he used

this text to call attention to how one gains entrance into the city. You must be born into the citizenship of the city. They all come through birth—none are naturalized.

God speaks, “I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon to those who know Me; Behold, O Philistia and Tyre, with Ethopia; ‘This one was born there.’”

What a surprise! “Rahab” is an ancient name for Egypt, the perennial enemy of Israel, the enemy that enslaved them for four hundred years. “Babylon” was the most recent enemy of the people of Israel, the one that had burned down their city and destroyed the temple and enslaved the people. “Philistia” attempted to prevent the people of Israel from ever occupying the land the Lord gave them, and stubbornly refused to submit to their rule in the land. “Tyre” was the famous city on the coast that prospered so much, and was famous for its idolatry and sin. “Ethiopia” was the dark race from Africa—no kinship with the elect people. Yet all of these have an inheritance in the land.

Their inheritance is based on their birth. God announces, “This one was born there.” But they were not born there physically. What could this mean?

Evangelical scholars have seen in this a prophetic reference to what Jesus would introduce as the “new birth”, or being “born from above.” This means that they are born spiritually into a relationship with God that brings with it

citizenship in the city of God. Based on this spiritual birth, this work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts, they are enrolled as citizens in this glorious city.

“And of Zion it will be said, ‘This one and that one were born in her.’” This is a clear reminder to us of the heavenly nature of the new birth, and that it is an absolute necessity. Citizenship in Zion, the New Jerusalem, requires it.

2. Their citizenship is a matter of grace.

What right does an Egyptian have to citizenship in the glorious city? What right does a man from Tyre have to citizenship? He has the same right as a man from Bethlehem or Nazareth. It is a privilege bestowed upon them by the grace of God.

Does this not give hope to all of us? You may feel excluded because you are from Rahab, but cheer up. God has opened the door to citizenship to all men of every nation. He pays the expenses and offers it as a gift to those who will receive it. The Holy Spirit stands ready to do a work of grace in the heart of all who call upon the Lord to be saved. Regardless of your natural heritage, color, religious background, grace opens the door to you. The God of heaven stands ready to enroll you as a citizen in the eternal city of God.

3. Their citizenship is permanent.

“And the Most High Himself shall establish her.” What a promise! The “Most High” is the God of all power. “Establish” means that He will secure her. The very root idea in the word translated “city” seems to be that of security and protection. The “city of God” is one that has the Most High God as the guarantee of its security. Surely it will never be shaken or moved. You will have no need to move because the city has failed.

There is an old Southern Gospel tune that speaks of “When I make my last move up to heaven so bright.” The grace and goodness of God will make it such a permanent place.

III. IT IS GLORIOUS BECAUSE OF ITS JOY.

“Both the singers and players on instruments say, ‘All my springs are in you.’” This last refrain is evidently a reference to the joy of the city. “Players of instruments” is translated by most modern translators as “dancers”, so all of the singers and all of those who dance find their reason for singing and their reason for dancing in the glorious city.

1. There is full joy.

You will notice that “All” my springs are in you. They are in the glorious city because the glorious city is the temple of the eternal God. Those who

live in the city enjoy his presence every moment of eternity, and thus they live moment by moment with the source of all joy.

2. There is satisfying joy.

In the closing vision of the New Testament, John saw this truth in symbol. He described the “river” that flows out from under the throne of God. He added words about the “tree of life” that grew along side the river. He heard the resounding songs of the redeemed as they marched around the throne of God in joy and celebration. He noticed that there was no night there—because the Lamb is the Light of the city. These are odd sounding images to our modern world, but what they indicate is that in this city man will at last have found that which satisfies the deepest longing of his heart. That thirst which was placed in him when he was created in the image of God, and was renewed when he responded to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, will have been quenched at last. He will thirst no more! O what joy divine! He must sing and dance! The joy requires it.

Conclusion:

This does have a relationship to the church, our earthly Zion. The worship of the people of God in their earthly Zion should be characterized by joy. It should be a place where they dance and sing for the thrill of the grace that

has saved them. Until the day we enter the city of God, let us make our earthly Zion as much like the heavenly as possible. Amen and Amen.