

“Citizens of a Surprising City”
Psalm 87
Rev. Rob Looper
June 4, 2023 • Sunday Morning Sermon

We will be looking at Psalm 87 which is a Psalm of the sons of Korah and because it's God's Word we know it's much more than simply a psalm for it is God speaking. This is God's holy and inerrant Word. Psalm 87:1-7 says *[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. [3] Glorious things of you are spoken, O city of God. Selah*

[4] Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon; behold, Philistia and Tyre, with Cush— “This one was born there,” they say. [5] And of Zion it shall be said, “This one and that one were born in her”; for the Most High himself will establish her. [6] The LORD records as he registers the peoples, “This one was born there.” Selah

[7] Singers and dancers alike say, “All my springs are in you.”

May the Lord add His blessing to the reading, hearing and preaching of His word.

Please be seated. I want to take you somewhere – the anticipation of diving into a cheeseburger plate with onion rings and the chocolate milkshake from the Bantam Chef. The taste of a huge banana split with hot fudge covered with peanuts from the ice cream parlor. The Friday night buzzing of the stadium lights at Bruce Field for high school football as the weather just starts to chill. My favorite, is the uber macho revving up of engines of Camaros, Firebirds and pickups as people cruise Main Street after the game with cassette tapes blaring Boston. I try to forget the mullets, though. Now these are just some of the things I remember from my hometown, which is Pickens, South Carolina. What's so interesting to me is how vivid those memories are now, as opposed to 20 years ago, which is really the halfway point from when I graduated 40 years ago.

Why are those images so vivid to me now? Well, I think it's probably because I belong to at least three Pickens Facebook groups. Why three? All everyone talks about on those pages is how good it was to be from Pickens. People post pictures, share stories, honor teachers or friends that have passed, posting all manner of things as long as they are all Pickens all the time. There is an irony that I find in this because 40 years ago, almost every one of us couldn't wait to get out of that Podunk place. It's just to leave and never look back again. Now it seems like there's no grander thing to do than speak the glorious things of our hometown.

There's a lot of reasons to conclude why we do this and why so many others across the country do the same. Just look on social media and look for hometown pages. They are everywhere. Nostalgia, perhaps, but at the very least, we are reminiscing about a place that shaped us and helped define who we were and ultimately became a place where we felt we belonged or hoped to belong, at least a place of security and comfort. Like so many of our longings in this world, I believe this is because God made us to live with just this sense of identity and security by living in communion with Him and in community with others who share that same longing. Even though we have fallen and are sinful, that longing is still there.

As believers in Christ, we are like Abraham, of whom the writer of Hebrews 11:10 said he was looking forward to a city that has foundations whose designer and builder is God. The Bible calls that city Zion – the New Jerusalem, and that city is nothing less than the people among whom God Himself lives now and forever. What an amazing thing to even consider. It is

the Church of Jesus Christ bought with His own blood, and it is the ultimate hometown for those who are born again and so it's no surprise that glorious things are spoken of Zion.

Over the years, many outside the church have repeatedly written the church's obituary, and in the last few decades, even those within the church have concluded that the church is a Podunk town. They can't wait to leave or at least transform in their own image. She has to be redesigned. She has to be rebuilt. She has to be re-imagined, rebuilt to look sleek and gleaming, to be appealing because the old town just can't compete with the flash and dazzle of our culture. Those people are not only wrong, they're dead wrong. As in no other period of our lifetime practicing the peace, purity and protecting the message and mission of the Church of Jesus Christ are critical commitments for us – His people right here, right now in the Church at large and in this church, Briarwood and in all churches where Christ is preached. We must love Zion the church, and recognize what is glorious about her, about her message, her mission, and her ministry. We must long this for all individual local churches in all places that the church would be awakened, revitalized.

Zion is spoken of first in the Bible in II Samuel 5, where we learn that David and his mighty men before he was king, captured the city of the Jebusites, Jerusalem and a stronghold called Zion on the highest ridge there in those mountains. Almost immediately after capturing it, it became known as the City of David and he began to work to transform it. He brings the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, placing it in a tent that becomes functionally the temple and the ark represented God's presence with His people so bringing it there, it made Zion to be the place where God manifested His presence with His people. So it became known as the city where God's presence was manifest – Zion, the place where God visited His people in a special way. David wanted to build a temple, but of course, that fell to his son, Solomon. When Solomon built the temple, even though he realized what God had promised to do by manifesting His presence there, he said this in his prayer of dedication in I Kings 8:27, [27] *“But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!”* Still in His abundant grace, Zion, as the Temple city was the place where God chose to manifest His presence among His people in a special way.

I think that's what is referred to herein Psalm 87:2 which says [2] *the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.* Yes, God is omnipresent and yes, God loves all the cities in Israel because they belong to the land He promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and their dwelling there was the fulfillment of that promise. But as this verse says, because it is where He has chosen to manifest Himself above all the cities, this is the place the Lord loves and shows Himself to His people. He loves Zion.

Pastor Reeder loved the Church, so we know he loved Briarwood, but he loved the Church because Jesus loved the Church and his heart was for those pastors and churches that were beleaguered for so many reasons, some being their own limitations, sins and the squabbles that took place within the church leadership, the culture around them that seemed to harass them, a loss of vision. It was his heart for the church to realize that God loved the gates of Zion and out of that, to transform their work in His power. We're called to have that vision and think of the glorious things that are spoken of us. We are the city of God.

Glorious things are spoken of Zion, as we see in the Bible, the physical city because of who founded it, God Himself. Psalm 87:1 says, [1] *On the holy mount stands the city He founded;* You can't get any simpler or plainer than that. We can say in the providence of God, David captured the city and it began to grow. And all the things that happened in making it that center of worship were the foundation of God's providence. As astounding, as it is to say, that

God chooses to make His presence known in any physical place or location, glorious things are spoken of, Zion, not just simply because He founded the city, but because God Himself lives in it. Zion is not merely a physical city God establishes as a central location. It's not merely God's intention to visit His people. It's a mystery even to say that God can show up in one place, more, in essence, than in another place. Scripture tells us that He would manifest His presence which is God's intention. It has always been His intention to be with, to live with His people.

It's the Immanuel principle – from the very beginning, God does everything He can to communicate to His people bit by bit as each covenant unfolds. His desire is to be near them, and so He makes a way for them to draw near Him through sacrifice, picturing ultimately the final sacrifice of Jesus. Then He literally fleshes out that principle – Immanuel God with us – in the Incarnation as Jesus comes to fulfill it, and then He gathers us as His people so that He might live among us. We'll look at that in a moment. But ultimately, His desire, as we see in the Book of Revelation, is that the dwelling place of God is with man forever. Zion is the people of God, the Church He established through the giving of His own Son.

I believe the Holy Spirit may have brought Psalm 87 to the Apostle Paul's mind when He inspired him to write these words in Ephesians 2:17-22 which says *[17] And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. [18] For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. [19] So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, [20] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, [21] in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. [22] In Him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*

Paul is speaking here to those Gentiles who have been brought near, made one with the people of God in this covenant promise. All who have been saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. I don't think we can possibly take in the magnitude of that reality. Yes, we believe that God dwells within us individually for Jesus Himself said, 'If anyone loves me, we will come to him and make our home, set our tent up with you' (John 14:23). But this is God dwelling in the midst of His people, living even in the church. That's glorious and it's something that the world cannot know.

It's also glorious is the reality that God's dwelling in His people is our source of sustenance and of everything we truly need to live. All who have been touched by this grace in any measure have come to see that God Himself is that ever-flowing spring of life. Psalm 87:7 says *[7] Singers and dancers alike say, "All my springs are in you."* Another psalm by the sons of Korah is Psalm 46 and it says in Psalm 46:4-5, *[4] There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. [5] God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.*

In our world of a zillion brands of bottled water and all of them having all kinds of different flavors it's kind of hard for us to truly appreciate the critical sustenance of springs, life giving springs. Maybe when the city has to shut the water off for some reason or the electricity goes off, then we realize how dependent we are on things like that. But it's never really a crisis moment for us because we have access to water everywhere. Civilizations were built on access to ready supplies of water, particularly a steady rushing supply from fresh springs. That's why they pop up around rivers and springs – cities that we're fortunate enough to have those springs within their walls could withstand sieges because they had sustenance, or if they were deep water springs, they could even survive periods of drought.

It hasn't been that long in our own history really, that that's been the case. I'll never forget my grandfather taking us to the ruins of his boyhood home, a log cabin outside Cashier's, North Carolina. All that was left was the roof and some split cedar shingles. He told us how he and his brothers had to go multiple times throughout the day down the hill to the embankment where the spring was because it was the best water ever – cool, clean. He remembers how glad he was that it was close by when he had to walk uphill with two buckets strung on a pole, balanced on his shoulder. We take that for granted.

The Psalmist pictures God Himself among His people with His life that springs and gives them life. He is the springs and I love that it says, 'Singers and dancers alike say, "All my springs are in You"' – of the joy, the worship that comes from realizing God truly is our all in all, not just a song we sing – solid joys and lasting treasures, none but Zion's children. No, it's no wonder that Jesus cries out in John 7:37-38, [37] *"If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. [38] Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'"* Jesus ultimately is that life giving spring. God has chosen to dwell within His people - Zion, the Church and glorious things are spoken of us because we are the beneficiaries of that indwelling.

He's given us the means of grace by which He gives us Himself as He springs up through the preaching of the Word, the Table of the Lord's Supper, the reading of Scripture that proclaims to us that our sins are forgiven, and that there's therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). It is with His presence among us as we gather together in worship that the writer of Hebrews 10:24 says, 'We stir one another up to love and good works and encourage one another.' It is because He is our life springing up through those means. These are glorious things and they belong to us and no one else. We could get proud about that but we'll look at that in a moment. How grateful and humble we are to know that we have this access, God's presence and the means which allows us to drink from Him and grow.

It's no wonder that the devil attacks the Church. It's no wonder Satan tries to cloud our hearts and minds to believe the lie that our springs actually run outside of this blessed city made of living stones. It's no wonder he wants us to doubt the importance of the preached Word – we can get it online. I can listen to a sermon. I don't have to come and gather and hear God's minister proclaim the Word. It's no wonder he wants us to accept the lie that we can walk with Jesus just as well outside of this city as within – away from the gifts we need from our brothers and sisters, and withholding from them the gifts they need from us. It's no wonder Satan wants us to think this way. So doing we rob ourselves not only of sharing the glories together, of being the God founded community of grace, but also of blessing one another by speaking these glorious things to one another.

The reason why the Scripture says to build each other up, to encourage one another, because we speak the truth of who we are, the beneficiaries of grace, the people of God in whom He dwells and whom He is sanctifying. No, we're not there yet but He, who began a good work in us, will complete it because He intends to move in forever. He intends to be with those who know Him and that is what's most amazing in my mind, at least from our human perspective that is spoken about Zion. Glorious things are spoken of Zion, not only because God Himself was there, but also because those who know God live there with Him.

It's at this point that we realize truly starting in Psalm 87:4 and following, that we are not merely talking about a physical city, we're not talking about Jerusalem on Earth, we're talking about the City of God, the spiritual reality of Zion. Psalm 87:4-6 says [4] *Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon; behold, Philistia and Tyre, with Cush— "This one was born*

there," they say. [5] And of Zion it shall be said, "This one and that one were born in her"; for the Most High himself will establish her. [6] The LORD records as he registers the peoples, "This one was born there."

Here we see a list of Israel of God's enemies. It's a census of the bad guys – the nations that have harassed, conquered, plundered and despised Israel for centuries. Any faithful Israelite would see this as a register of unclean people, strangers to the covenant, but the psalmist says these are the ones who are born in Zion. The world is going on. What kind of strange city is this? It's surprising. Even the temple court had a wall to keep the unclean nations from trampling where only God's people could approach. How can the psalmist begin to say that these are born in Zion? It's because He isn't talking about the physical Zion, but the spiritual Zion and the most profound truth mentioned here is not that God says Gentiles know Him, but how it is that they come to know Him.

We see in Psalm 87:5-6 that this is nothing less than the work of God's sovereign grace in the new birth. People say, "The new birth didn't exist in the Old Testament" and that's baloney. There is only one way to know God, and that is to be born again, to be regenerated. They just didn't understand how it happened under the old Covenant, but it's impossible to know God as a dead rebel. We must be made live saints so that we may know Him and love Him. There's nothing more surprising than the idea that God takes dead rebels and makes them live saints who know Him and love Him – enemies of God reconciled to God by God Himself.

If I've come to understand this grace of God, as I think, every born-again citizen Saint of Zion does, the most surprising thing here really is not that Gentiles are said to have been born in God's heavenly city. They're examples of Old Testament Gentiles. The most surprising person that I should expect to see on the register of those born in Zion is me. This year is the 250th anniversary of John Newton who was a pastor, hymn writer, former slave trader, writing the hymn Amazing Grace. One author said this about Newton and his view of grace; 'Newton's cry was amazing grace for raff did not surprise or offend him. He knew of his wretchedness, his own deep depravity. He was already convicted that he was fully deserving of God's justice. So it was grace that shocked him. It was grace that seemed so out of place. If there was any offense to the Gospel, it was that God would take the sin of a very bad man like John Newton and place it on the perfect man, Jesus Christ.'

A lot of people often say, "I think we're going to be surprised who we see in heaven." I don't believe that because if I'm there, I won't be surprised that anyone is there, because if God can save me, He can save anyone. This one and that one was born there and what's so interesting about that flourish of grace in that phrase this one and that one is that it's a Hebraism that you could translate that one and that one and that one or that man, that man. There are so many over and over again. Think of that picture in Revelation 7, in which the throng which no one can number cries out 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the lamb,' that is glorious.

Finally, in light of that truth, the size of the multitude, glorious things are spoken of Zion, because of who passes through its gates. Perhaps you have noticed that the first sub point of every one of these is God Himself. Always make God the center. I would fail my homiletics class because of co-extension, but God is always the focus. Gates, if they are more than just merely decorative or designed, have an important function for they keep out the undesirable. They keep out the dangerous, the unwelcome. Why else do people have gated communities? In other words, they are a first line of protection, but they also let in those who belong – those who have business or are honored in the city. Most of us have heard how in ancient near Eastern

culture, the elders and leaders of a city would sit in the city gates having their fingers on the goings on by way of being aware of the goings in and the goings out.

Psalms 24:7-8 says [7] *Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.* [8] *Who is this King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle!* There is debate among scholars as to what ‘gates’ are in view, but I believe it could be both – the Gates to Zion, the Heavenly City, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone and the ancient doors of His heavenly sanctuary, His people in which He dwells. The scene is out of the Lord, the King of Glory, passing through the gates, entering triumphantly, having defeated His foes and leading His conquering army in his train – a glorious procession carrying the plunder and the spoils of victory. What is this victory? The victory of King Jesus over sin through His death on the cross, giving forgiveness and removing condemnation now and forever, for all who trust in Him. The victory of King Jesus over death, through His resurrection from the dead, to give eternal life now and forever for those same ones who trust in Him.

What is the spoil? It is the people the Lord has plundered from His enemies – Rehab, Babylon, us, those whom He has registered from before the Foundation of the world to be born in Zion – man after man, person after person redeemed from death and rebellion, who He leads to their ultimate place of security so that He Himself may dwell among them forever. John says in Revelation 21-2-3, [2] *And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.* [3] *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. Immanuel forever.*

The city is not only glorious because of who passes through the gates to come in but it’s also glorious because of who passes through the gates to go out, specifically those seeking the ones yet to come home. I think this is so important for us to understand. If the register of those born in Zion is indeed the Lamb’s Book of Life, and I think it is, then it is the register of all of those for whom Jesus died – past, present and future, which in turn means that there are still those who have yet to know that they belong to this heavenly city, that they have been born in Zion. These are our brothers and sisters, and they are not yet safe at home in Christ in Zion. So those who know their citizenship is in Zion must go through the gates, as it were, out into the world and seek them – the waiting elect, the registered, but not yet home. It’s not complete. The city is not filled. There will be woman after woman, man after man, boy after boy, girl after girl; all registered in the holy eternal census, now wandering sheep harassed by their own sin and the sin of others who we need to bring home.

Not too long after we moved to Pensacola, when our kids were all under six years of age, we went to Pensacola Beach one night when Lisa’s family had come to visit us. We ate, and then we went to the boardwalk filled with seafood and ice cream. We had done this so many times before when we came to Pensacola on vacation but now it was home. So did thousands of other people ambling around, when we realized that our son Bennet who was around five was not with us. First your heart skips a beat and you stop and scan and you call “Bennett! Bennett!” And then your heart begins to beat as you began to run all over the boardwalk panicking, but trying not to panic. Running into the local shops saying, “Have you seen a curly headed boy with such and such a shirt?” I don’t remember the shirt, but a green bucket. I remember the green bucket for he got it at Flounders. He loved that bucket. We scrambled all over.

People began to realize what we were looking for and they began to search with us and a lady came up to me and said, “Are you looking for a boy with curly hair and a bucket?” I said, ‘Yes.’ She said, “I saw him in the parking lot talking to a man.” I ran to the parking lot and he

wasn't there. I ran back to the boardwalk just in time to hear that Lisa's sister had heard over a loudspeaker that a little boy was found and was back at the restaurant. When we got there we ran to Bennett and we were crying. All we could think of as we have to take him home. Our family was lost and now they are found. All Bennett cared about was whether or not we were going to take away his green bucket, but he was safe at home.

We were ready to move mountains to look like fools and to wrestle down any and all bad men if necessary because our family was lost. They were out there. They had to come home. How that perspective changes the way we should look at evangelism instead of seeing it merely as a task of obedience and it is. Instead of worrying about rejection and denial, which happens, we are going out seeking our brothers and sisters whom God has registered as born in Zion, by telling them the Good News that Jesus Christ, their King has prepared for them an Eternal City, and it's time to come home. Come, they will because God loves the gates of Zion.

Jesus said in His High Priestly prayer to the Father, 'of those you have given Me out of the world, I have lost not one' (John 17:12). As we go out the gates calling with the Master's voice, with the Gospel, we know that He said, 'My sheep will hear My voice' (John 10:27). If you don't know God through Christ, if you have not come to know and trust Him, but you believe that His voice may be calling you, then hear this; Jesus said in Matthew 11:28, "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." On the cross Jesus paid the full penalty for our sin, gave us His righteousness so that it is true that there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus and He, rising from the dead, has given us new, eternal life. Now we belong to Him and His people in His City.

If God is calling you to trust in repentance and faith in Him, please call us at Briarwood at (205) 776-5200 for we would love to talk and pray with you about this decision. We'd also like to give you some material that will help you understand what it means to belong to this blessed, glorious City, Zion. It's time to come home and for us who already know Him, it's time for us to love the Church like we have never loved the Church before and ask God to build her up like never before. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, we know You love Your Church far better than we love the Church, but give us that love for one another in this congregation and for other congregations and for those not yet home that we would go and seek our brothers and sisters, our family who are registered in heaven but not yet home and You will get the glory as You build us up together as that place in which You dwell. We pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.