

“THE CITY OF GOD”

I. Introduction

- A. Certain cities have a special importance to certain groups of people.
 - 1. The city of Rome is central to Roman Catholic piety.
 - 2. New York City and Hollywood are revered by many as producers of culture and lifestyle trendsetters.
 - 3. Philadelphia is the mecca for lovers of the cheesesteak sandwich.

- B. Psalm 87 speaks of the city that outstrips all others: Zion, the city of God.
 - 1. The psalmist calls Zion the city of God because the temple, the place where God caused his presence to dwell with his people, was built upon Mount Zion in the northern part of Jerusalem.
 - 2. You may know that Augustine, the great theologian of the early church, wrote a book entitled *The City of God* in which he said that the world consists of two cities: the city of God and the city of man.
 - 3. The city of God is made up of true believers and is destined for eternal blessing, while the city of man is made up of unbelievers and is destined for eternal condemnation.
 - 4. In this present age these two cities intermingle with each other.
 - 5. But ultimately, people belong to one or the other and share in that city's destiny, whether of destruction or glory. [see VanDrunen, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms*, 14]

- C. Psalm 87 is about the glorious city, the city of God.
 - 1. As we study this psalm today, we will see three qualities that make it glorious.

2. Zion is glorious because it is a city specially founded by God.
3. Zion is glorious because it produces loyal citizens for itself.
4. And Zion is glorious because it is the source of true life and refreshment.

II. A City Founded by God

- A. We begin by looking at verses 1-3, where the focus is upon the fact that Zion has been specially founded by God.
 1. Zion is the only city that God has set up to be the seat of his redemptive rule.
 2. As John 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 solid foundation.

3. As the apostle Peter says 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. Every Christian is a part of the structure that is being built upon the cornerstone of Jesus Christ into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.
5. John Newton expresses it this way in his great hymn “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken”, which is 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.*

6. As long as our faith remains firmly fixed 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 is not founded upon anything that the city's inhabitants have done, but upon God's love.
 2. God made the same point in the book of Deuteronomy when he said this to 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)

3. God does not set his electing love upon his people because there is anything in us that is lovable.
 4. As Martin Luther so profoundly expressed it, "The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it." [*Heidelberg Disputation*, thesis 28]
 5. God loves us because it pleases him to love us.
 6. This is a great mystery that we cannot fully comprehend.
 7. At the same time, it is also the basis of our security.
 8. If we did not do anything to earn God's love in the first place, then we can be confident that our sins and failures will not cause God to stop loving us if we continue looking to Christ in faith.
- D. In verse 3, the psalmist writes that well-known line, "Glorious things of you are spoken, O city of God."
1. As we noted earlier, the antithesis of the city of God is the city of man.
 2. 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.
 3. That project resulted in failure and shame, as the Lord confused the people's languages and scattered them all over the earth.
 4. Zion stands in sharp contrast to Babel.

5. Zion's 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.
- E. We should also note that it is likely that at the time this psalm was written, Jerusalem was not very glorious.
1. While we cannot be certain of this, some commentators, including John Calvin, have argued that Psalm 87 was written after the return from the Babylonian exile.
 2. If this is correct, the rebuilt temple was nowhere near as impressive as Solomon's temple had been.
 3. On top of that, the population was much smaller than it had been prior to the exile, and the nation was still under foreign control.
 4. Yet the psalmist can say that glorious things are spoken of Zion because he is not referring to physical Zion in and of itself.
 5. He is referring to the spiritual reality that Zion embodied during that period.
 6. This psalm directs our gaze to the heavenly Zion, the true and lasting home of God's people.
 7. It fosters the same mindset that the epistle to the Hebrews ascribes to Abraham when it says of him, "For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God." (Heb 11:10 ESV)

III. A City That Produces Loyal Citizens

- A. We turn now to verses 4-6, where we see that Zion is glorious because she produces loyal citizens for herself.
1. God is the speaker in these verses, and he is describing those who belong to the city of God.
 2. The first thing that he says about these people is that they know him.
 3. Knowing God is at the 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. Knowing God is the only way to properly understand who we are and why we exist.
 6. In the words of John Calvin, "Man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself." [*Institutes*, 1.1.2]
 7. 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, not in a mystical sense but through the revelation that he has given in his Word, 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 below Egypt in Africa).
 2. Let's think for a moment about the geographical spread of these nations.

3. Egypt was to Israel's south, Babylon was to the east, Philistia was to the west, Tyre was to the north, and Cush was sometimes used to represent distant lands.
 4. All the points of the compass and beyond are included here.
 5. It is also notable that though these nations were Israel's traditional enemies, here they are described as citizens of Zion.
 6. God is saying that he is going to enfold into his holy city people from all nations, from all across the globe, even those who previously hated him and his people.
 7. 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)
 8. This 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 in our day.
 10. God is knitting together one people for himself by drawing individuals from all races, all nationalities, and all backgrounds into his church.
- C. Of these 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. We might wonder why Psalm 87 speaks of people being born in Zion instead of being born by the power of the Holy Spirit.
1. The reason why the psalm speaks this way is because the Spirit works through the church’s ministry to bring about the new birth.
 2. This is why the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Galatians that the Jerusalem above is our mother. (see Gal. 4:26)
 3. Listen to John Calvin’s comments on that passage: “To the church, under God, we owe it that we are ‘born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible,’ (1 Pet. 1:23) and from her we obtain the milk and food by which we are afterwards nourished. Such are the reasons why the Church is called the mother of believers. And certainly he who refuses to be a son of the Church in vain desires to have God as his Father; for it is only through the instrumentality of the Church that we are ‘born of God,’ (1 Jn. 3:9) and brought up through the various stages of childhood and youth, till we reach at manhood.”
 4. God works through the church to bring people into his kingdom and then to rule, defend, and care for them.
 5. This is what God has done, and continues to do, for you if you trust in Jesus Christ.
 6. He has caused you to be born again to a living hope, to an inheritance that is being kept in heaven for you.
 7. He has recorded your name as one who has been born in Zion.
 8. And if you have not yet put your faith in Christ as he is set forth in the biblical gospel, then know that the offer of salvation is being extended to you this very day.

9. If you will receive and rest upon Christ as he is offered in the gospel, you too will be registered as a member of God's own city.
- E. To be a son or daughter of a particular city is to be one of its citizens.
1. Think of what it means to be a citizen of a particular nation.
 2. The philosopher Roger Scruton argues that meaningful citizenship is based on "loyalties rooted in a sense of a common home and of the trans-generational society that resides there." [cited in Scruton, *Conservatism*, 153]
 3. Scruton further develops this idea by drawing a contrast with other conceptions of national identity, saying, "National loyalty means attachment to the territory that we share with our neighbors... [This] is threatened... by the culture of repudiation that prevails on the left, and which denounces every attempt to defend our inheritance as 'racist' or 'xenophobic.'" [*Conservatism*, 153]
 4. Scruton's point is that a robust and healthy nation is one that produces citizens who love their nation and who want to preserve it and see it flourish.
 5. This notion of national loyalty provides us with a picture of what it means to be a citizen of the city of God.
 6. The city of God gives birth to citizens who embrace its heritage as their own and who place its interests even above their own lives.
- F. It is easy for us to get discouraged about the things that are taking place in our culture these days, 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. Consider the fact that even though there is no cultural 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 that?
5. What causes you and your fellow believers to keep following Christ when doing so doesn't benefit you in the eyes of the world?
6. The loyalty that believers have to Christ and his church is 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 [striking] 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. A City That Is the True Source of Life and Refreshment

- A. This brings us to the last verse of our psalm, where we see that Zion is glorious because she is the source of life and refreshment for her people.
 1. The psalmist says, "Singers and dancers alike say, 'All my springs are in you.'"
 2. There is some uncertainty about the term that the ESV translates as "dancers," which other translations render as "pipers" or "instrumentalists."
 3. Whatever the precise meaning, it is clear that the psalmist is talking about those who either make music or accompany it in some way.
 4. Music is a way of expressing joy.
 5. This verse is a symbolic description of the saints' joyful response to the blessings that God lavishes upon us through his church.
 6. We should have a deep love for the church, for its ministry and for its people.

7. We see David expressing this in Psalm 122 when he says, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD!'" (Psa 122:1 ESV)
 8. Likewise in Psalm 16, where David says, "As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight." (Psa 16:3 ESV)
 9. Can you say those things about Christ's church?
 10. I hope you can.
- B. We might wonder why these musicians would not say that their springs are "in God."
1. Other psalms do say things like that.
 2. We find 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."
 3. In that psalm God is the fountain, but here in Psalm 87 it is the church that is the fountain.
 4. There is no conflict between these two psalms.
 5. The church is our source of spiritual sustenance and refreshment because the church is God's temple.
 6. The church is the place where God meets with us to bless us through his appointed means of grace.
 7. 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)
 8. 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)

9. In this present age, the water of life, and the healing fruit that is produced by the tree of life, these are conferred upon us by the Lord through the ministry of reconciliation that he has given to his church.
10. As a believer, all of your fountains, all of your true refreshment and comfort and hope and joy — these things are found in Christ alone, and Christ works through his church to pour them out to you.