

## **Psalm 87**

A PSALM OF THE SONS OF KORAH. A SONG.

### **I. Psalm 87:1** — What He founded is among the holy mountains;

Does that feel like an awkward way to start a Psalm? The psalmist doesn't say *who* "he" is; neither does the psalmist say *what* "he" founded—not at first. How are we to explain this? One commentator writes: "The poet is absorbed in the contemplation of the glory of a matter which he begins to celebrate, without naming it" (Keil). The psalmist is caught up and enraptured with thoughts of Zion, and so when he puts pen to paper it's only natural to begin without any other introduction: "What He founded is among the holy mountains." But I think there's another reason why the psalmist begins so "abruptly" – or at least why he never fixed his "mistake." He knows that when we sing these words we'll be forced to ask the questions we've just been asking: Who is "he"? And *what* is it that he has founded? Never mind that the answers would have been immediately obvious or that he'll answer them in the very next line. The point is that in forcing us to ask the question, we're invited in with the psalmist to be absorbed ourselves in the contemplation of this glorious theme. Who is "he"? And *what* has He founded among the holy mountains? It is *Zion* that *Yahweh* has founded among the holy mountains.

A city, in the Bible, symbolizes many things. Its walls and gates symbolize protection and security. Its streets and houses and public squares symbolize the joy of community and human companionship. Its natural springs and the surrounding fields and vineyards symbolize provision for a full and abundant life. The city, in the Bible symbolizes the kind of "home" that we all long for. So we read in Psalm 107:

- Psalm 107:4–9, 35–37 — Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way till they reached a city to dwell in. Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man! For he satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul he fills with good things... He turns a desert into pools of water, a parched land into springs of water. And there he lets the hungry dwell, and they establish a city to live in; they sow fields and plant vineyards and get a fruitful yield.

Protection and security. Community and companionship. Provision and abundance. A city to dwell in symbolizes all the true joys and happiness of home – and even of life itself. But what the psalmist is meditating on here is not just any city. This is the *city* that *He* has founded. If there is such a city, a city founded by God, isn't that the one place out of all the places on earth that we should rejoice to call our home?

To say that God has founded this city, which already existed long before the days of King David, is to say that He *chose* this city as the *place* where He would put His own name in the temple and where He would establish the throne of His anointed king forever. In choosing this city, God founded it, not so much physically or politically but spiritually as something new – something it had never been before. God took the geo-political city of *Jerusalem* and transformed it by His own special presence there into the spiritual and theological reality of *Zion*, the *city of God*. So

this is the city where God's people can experience *His* protection (think of the city walls and gates), *His* provision (think of the springs of water and the surrounding fields and vineyards), and the festive joy of living in community with *His* chosen people (think of the city streets and squares). This is the city where God's people can worship Him for all these blessings that they enjoy.

“What He founded is among the holy mountains.” Remember, this is the poetic language of love and admiration. It's an “ode to Zion.” The plural “mountains” could just be emphasizing the glory and the beauty of that single mountain upon which the city of Jerusalem was built – Mount Zion (ESV; NIV; NRSV; NLT; Ross; NICOT). In that case, we would translate, “What he founded is *upon* the holy *mountain*” (though the Hebrew *b* favors “among” rather than “upon”). On the other hand, the plural “mountains” (or “hills”) could be referring to the mountains or hills that surround Jerusalem and which are described as “holy” because of their close association with Zion. The psalmist writes in another place:

- Psalm 125:2 — As **the mountains surround Jerusalem**, so the LORD surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore.
- Psalm 133:3 — It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on **the mountains of Zion!** For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.

In the light of these verses, we could translate here in Psalm 87: “What he founded is *in the midst of* the holy mountains” (NET translation note; Calvin). Remember, the point here is not a geography lesson (though geography is certainly involved), but the language of poetic delight and admiration. But finally, the “holy mountains” could be a reference not just to the mountains immediately surrounding Jerusalem, but to all the mountains of Israel which are all holy just by virtue of being a part of the “holy land” of promise. Sometimes the whole land of Israel is described in terms of its mountains and hills.

- Isaiah 65:9 (cf. Isa. 14:25; Ezek. 38:21) — I will bring forth offspring from Jacob, and from Judah possessors of **my mountains**; my chosen shall possess it, and my servants shall dwell there.
- Ezekiel 36:8 (cf. Ezek. 37:22; 38:8) — You, **O mountains of Israel**, shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to my people Israel, for they will soon come home.

In the light of these verses the “holy mountains” in Psalm 87 would refer to the whole land of Israel “at the center of which Zion is founded” (Goldingay). One commentator writes: “[This] God-founded city (surrounded on three sides by deep valleys)... rises aloft [in the midst of] all the... dwelling-places [or we could say, ‘in the midst of all the holy mountains’] of Israel” (Keil). In other words, no matter where you lived in Israel, your heart was given to Zion. Zion was the city of all God's people, not just of those who lived there year-round. It was the city where all of God's people rejoiced to go on pilgrimage at least once in the year. We read in Psalm 87:

- Psalm 84:5–7 — Blessed are those whose strength is in you, **in whose heart are the highways to Zion**. As they go through the Valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the

early rain also covers it with pools. They go from strength to strength; **each one appears before God in Zion.**

In light of all this, we can read again in Psalm 87: “What he founded is in the midst of the holy mountains.” It’s as though we can see the city of Yahweh with its walls and its gates and it’s streets and squares and its fields and vineyards standing there on the very highest mountain at the very center of the land as a shining beacon of peace and security and hope and joy. This prepares us to understand, then, what we read in verse 2:

**II. Psalm 87:2** — the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.

This isn’t an insult to all the other mountains and dwelling places of Israel, because they, too, are “holy.” But the source of their holiness flows outward to them *from Zion* – which explains why the people who live in all these dwelling places of Jacob love to go on pilgrimage *to Zion*—the true “home” of all God’s people. Maybe this is why the psalmist says specifically that the Lord loves the “*gates*” of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob. The gates stand for the whole city because there are gates on all sides of the city; but even more importantly, as one commentator says: “Anyone who loves a city delights to go frequently through its gates” (Keil). The wide open gates of a city stand as welcoming invitations to enter in and to enjoy all the blessings of life lived in that city – in the safety of its walls and the joys of its people and the worship of the God who has *set his love* not just upon Zion but upon all the true sons and daughters of Zion who enter through its gates.

**III. Psalm 87:3** — Glorious things of you are spoken, city of God. *Selah*

The psalmist turns now from speaking *about* the city to speaking directly *to* the city. Once again, this is an “ode to Zion” composed by someone who loves that city and who calls that city “home.” This isn’t idolatry, is it? The psalmist isn’t worshipping Zion; but he does extol this city *in so far* as it is the city of God – in so far as this is the place where all the gifts of God are freely made available to, and enjoyed by, His people. “Glorious things of *you* are spoken, *city of God.*”

Now maybe when this Psalm was originally composed the city of Jerusalem was secure and there was a righteous king sitting on the throne and there was joy in the streets and public squares. But more often that not, when God’s people sang these words they would have had to sing them by faith. Sometimes the evidence of God’s special love for the gates of Zion seemed non-existent. Sometimes there were wicked kings ruling in Jerusalem. Sometimes there was bloodshed and oppression in the streets. As a result of Israel’s sin, sometimes there was famine and starvation. Sometimes there were enemies battering down the gates and breaching the walls. But even in times like these the faithful in Israel could still see beyond *Jerusalem* (as a political and nationalistic city that could be conquered and destroyed by enemies) to *Zion*, that true and indestructible city of God that was only faintly represented by the earthly type and shadow. The writer of Hebrews says of Abraham:

- Hebrews 11:9–10 — By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

If Abraham could be looking forward to this city without even having the type and the shadow of an earthly Jerusalem, how much more could the psalmist? Can you see how even when Jerusalem lay in ruins, the people of God could still sing these words by faith? Because they, too, were ultimately seeking for the city that was still to come – their true home (cf. Heb. 13:14). And can you see, too, why this matters so incredibly for us?

The Old Covenant city of Jerusalem was home to the Jewish people. There were many individual Gentile proselytes to Judaism who could say to some extent that Jerusalem was their home. But it was impossible for Gentiles to be citizens of Jerusalem in the fullest sense – in the same way that the native-born Jews were citizens of Jerusalem. Equally as important, it was impossible for that Old Covenant city to absorb all the nations of the world and, in fact, that wasn't what the nations wanted in the first place. But when we see beyond the shadow and the type of that political and nationalistic *Jerusalem* in Palestine to the greater theological and spiritual reality of *Zion*, the city of God, isn't it obvious that *this* city is ultimately the birthright equally of all the nations?

“Glorious things of *you* are spoken, *city of God*.” Who is it that has spoken these glorious things? It is Yahweh Himself. And what are these glorious things that He has spoken?

**IV. Psalm 87:4** — I will declare\* that Rahab [Egypt; cf. Isa. 30:7] and Babylon are among those who know me; even of Philistia and Tyre, with Cush, I will declare: “This one was born in her.”

Egypt, to the south, was the nation that enslaved God's people at the beginning. Babylon, from out of the north, was the nation that destroyed Jerusalem and exiled God's people at the end. Philistia and Tyre were close neighbors of Israel who, in Psalm 83, were conspiring against God's people (Ps. 83:1-8). Cush was a nation to the south at the furthest end of the known world. These five nations, then, are symbolic of *all* the nations of the earth (even the former enemies of God's people), and this is what Yahweh declares: “One day they will all ‘*know*’ me experientially and savingly as *their own covenant* Lord.” One commentator reminds us that “the psalmist is not referring to these countries in the political sense [most of them no longer even exist in the political sense]; rather, he is referring to large numbers of people from [all the nations of the earth] (metonymy of subject) who will participate by faith in the worship of the Lord” (Ross). One day it will be said of all the nations: “This one was *born* in [*Zion*].” One day all the nations of the earth will rejoice to enter through the gates of *Zion as native-born citizens*. One day *Zion* will be *able* to absorb all of these nations, so that they will all together call *Zion* “home.” Are you seeing here the glorious calling that we have today to the work of global evangelization and church-planting?

**V. Psalm 87:5** — Of *Zion* it shall be said, “This man and that man [this woman and that woman] were born in her”; For he himself—the Most High—will establish her.

The Hebrew expression “a man and a man” communicates the sense of one after the other, after another, after another, gradually adding up to an innumerable multitude. We see pictures in the Old Testament of a city full to overflowing not in the negative sense of being overpopulated but

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\* The Hebrew here is *za-kar* with the Hiphil stem. The idea is not just that God will cause it to be remembered, but that He will cause it to be known. For the translation of this verse see Tate (WBC; cf. Goldingay).

in the positive sense of needing to expand its walls and boundaries and build new dwellings in order to make room for all its sons and daughters.

- Isaiah 49:19–20 (cf. Zech. 10:10) — Surely your waste and your desolate places and your devastated land— surely now you will be too narrow for your inhabitants, and those who swallowed you up will be far away. The children of your bereavement will yet say in your ears: “The place is too narrow for me; make room for me to dwell in.”

Of Zion, then, it shall be said that first one, and then another, and then another were born in her—until finally we lose all count and the city is filled with multitudes of people from all the nations. This, again, is the goal of missions and the joy of missions – whether we’re on the front lines or partnering with those who are on the front lines through our prayers and giving. These are people who have renounced all their previous allegiances and citizenships just for the privilege of being able to call Zion *home* – of being able to enter through its gates.

But how can any city sustain this kind of growth? How can any city stand for long enough until it is “the metropolis of all [the] nations”? (Keil) The psalmist answers: “For he himself—the Most High—will establish her.” Though the Old Covenant Jerusalem may fall and be destroyed, the true Zion—of which that Old Covenant city was a shadow and a type—will be established by God and stand forever. Isn’t this *permanency* the security that we all long for? And it’s only found in Zion.

In verse 4 the Lord declares of each one of the nations, “This one was *born* in her [in Zion].” In verse 5 it’s said of Zion, “This man and that man [even to an innumerable multitude] were *born* in her.” And now we read in verse 6:

**VI. Psalm 87:6** — The LORD records as he registers the peoples, “This one was *born* there.”  
*Selah*

How can it be said that Gentiles—like you and me—are *born* in Zion? For the psalmist and for all those Old Covenant saints who sang this Psalm, they could only imagine that in receiving citizenship in Zion it would be “*as if*” the Gentiles had been born in Zion or “*as though*” they had been born in Zion. But now we come to the miracle of the true fulfillment of Psalm 87. Through faith in Jesus Christ we have all been born again—born from above (Jn. 3:3-8)—as citizens not of the earthly type and shadow, but as citizens of the true and everlasting Zion, the Jerusalem that is above, and that will one day come down out of heaven from God. The Apostle Paul says that while the present Jerusalem is in slavery with her children (the unbelieving Jews), “the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother” (Gal. 4:25-26). We have been born in her; and it’s our citizenship by birth in this heavenly Jerusalem that the Apostle Paul says is fulfilling this prophecy in Isaiah:

- Isaiah 54:1–3 (cf. Gal. 4:27) — “Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married,” says the LORD. “Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen

your cords and strengthen your stakes. For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left, and your offspring will possess the nations and will people the desolate cities.”

Isaiah imagines the city itself breaking out into singing because of the multitude of those from all the peoples and nations who have been born anew as its citizens. The psalmist, on the other hand, describes the joy of all those who by God’s sovereign grace can call Zion “home” – of all those who by God’s sovereign grace have the right to enter through its gates.

**VII. Psalm 87:7** — The singers sing as they dance: “All my springs are in you.”

Remember the imagery in Psalm 107 of the city that’s built around pools and springs of water? We can picture that city standing as an oasis and a source of life to the traveler whose soul was fainting away as he wandered in the pathless and uninhabited desert. So when God leads us to Zion and causes us to be born again as citizens of Zion and gives us drink from the springs and fountains of Zion, how can we not dance with joy, and sing as we dance: “All my springs are in you[—in Zion, the city of God]”? What other place could we possibly want to call *home*? Where else could we possibly find—and be satisfied with—all that our hearts desire?

Already, Paul says, “you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (Heb. 12:22). Already, we have come to know in part the safety and protection of its walls and gates, the joy of community in its streets and squares, the provision of abundant life in its streams and springs of water, and the privilege of fellowship and communion with the God who dwells there forever. Even now:

➤ Philippians 3:20 — Our citizenship *is* in heaven, and from it we *await* a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

*When* He appears, *then* Zion will come down out of heaven from God and its gates will never be shut, and we who have washed our robes will enter the city by the gates and we will drink from the river of the water of life that flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb (Rev. 21:2, 10, 25; 22:14; 22:1-2). *Then* we will know *fully* the safety and protection of Zion’s walls and gates; the festive joy of community in its streets and squares; the provision of abundant life in its streams and springs of water; and the privilege of fellowship and communion with the God who dwells there forever. Then we *will* dance with joy, and we *will* sing as we dance, “All my springs are in you.”

## **Conclusion**

Where is your “home”? Where is your heart? Have you seen the glory and the beauty of Zion? Have you washed your robes in the blood of the Lamb so that you might have the right of entering through its gates? Have you been born from above as a citizen of that city? In these days, it ought to be easier than ever for us to be reminded of the reality that “here we have no lasting city” (we never have!). Therefore, we shouldn’t be setting our minds or our affections on earthly things (Heb. 13:14; Phil. 3:19). As the hymnwriter says, “Solid joys and lasting treasure none but Zion’s children know” (John Newton). This isn’t a way of escaping from the present.

This isn't escapism—not by a long shot. Instead, this is the only way to live faithfully and joyfully in the present.

Do you know where your home is? Will we live today in the light of what he has founded among the holy mountains? Can we say even today of Zion, the city of God: “All my springs are in you”?