

Psalm 87

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[0 : 0 0] Nelson Mandela is dead, and the world remembers his life and legacy with a sense of almost reverential awe. He was, without doubt, a colossus of a man. In his inauguration address as South Africa's president, delivered on the 10th of May 1994, he shared his vision for a post-apartheid South Africa. And among what he said, he said these words, We shall build a nation in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity, a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world. A rainbow nation. Now, the language of a rainbow nation that we've already shared a little about with the children was first coined, as far as I can investigate, by the irrepressible Archbishop Desmond Tutu in speaking about his hopes for South Africa. And it was adopted, if you wish, by Nelson Mandela in that speech that we've just quoted from. And of course, the reality is, and I would imagine those who are from South Africa who could speak with much more authority than I, but I imagine that the jury is still out as to whether

South Africa has become or is becoming that rainbow nation that Nelson Mandela spoke about and dreamed of, a nation at peace with itself and the world. But you know, long before Mandela emerged from Robben Island with a blueprint for a new South Africa, God had described another nation as His own rainbow nation. Zion, that we have sung of and that we have read of in Psalm 87, is God's rainbow nation.

And this reality is nowhere more beautifully described than in the Psalm that we have read and that we want to consider this morning. Psalm 87. Let's just read what God says of Zion and of those who populate Zion. There in verse 4 of the Psalm, I will record Rahab, a poetic name for Egypt and Babylon, among those who acknowledge me, Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush, and will say, this one was born in Zion.

This one is a citizen of Zion. Zion represented by God Himself as an international, multicultural, diverse gathering of people gathered by God. Every nation, every language, every continent represented and belonging to this, if you wish, rainbow nation of a God. And at the heart of the Psalm, the Psalmist declares, glorious things are said of you, O city of God. Glorious things are said of you, O city of God.

And what we want to do this morning is to discover in this very Psalm what the glorious things that are said of Zion are. And that is what we'll dedicate our time to. But before we do that, we do need to just clarify what we are speaking about when we speak of Zion. What is Zion? When the Psalmist speaks of Zion as the city of God, we are speaking of Jerusalem, the city where God chose to dwell in a special way in the midst of His people. In Psalm 48, we also have a beautiful description of Zion, and we're told, here is the city where the great King dwells. Here is a city where God has chosen to dwell in a special way.

[4 : 3 9] Zion is where God dwells with His people. Now, for us, in the New Testament age, the church, the church of Jesus Christ, is Zion. In the letter to the Hebrews, we are told that as believers, we have come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. Believers, Christians the world over, are citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, members of the church of Jesus Christ. We are God's rainbow nation, made up of men and women and boys and girls from every nation, tribe, people, and language. Psalm 87, then, speaks of the church. It tells us, glorious things concerning the church. Well, what glorious things does it tell us concerning the church?

In the psalm, we hear a number of voices expressing an opinion concerning Zion. We have the psalmist himself expressing his opinions, inspired by God, undoubtedly, but nonetheless, his opinions. There in verses 1 and 2, he has set his foundation on the holy mountain. The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than the dwellings of Jacob. The opinions of the psalmist. The psalm also records the opinions of God Himself concerning Zion. I will record Rahab and Babylon among those

who acknowledge me. God is speaking. And also, in verse 6, we have what God writes concerning Zion. So, we have the psalmist's voice raised describing Zion. We have God's voice heard and recorded for us. We have the voice of others. Then in verse 5, we read, Indeed, of Zion it will be said, This one and that one were born in her, and the Most High Himself will establish her. Others expressing an opinion concerning Zion. And then we have the voice of believers in the final verse, As they, the citizens of Zion, make music, they will sing, All my fountains are in you.

And all these voices form a rainbow choir celebrating the beauty and glory of God's church. And what I want to do is to journey through the psalm verse by verse and identify some of the glorious things that are said of Zion, that are said of the church of Jesus Christ.

Well, let's begin at the beginning. The first thing that we want to say is that the church, Zion, is that which has been chosen by God. We read in verse 1, He, that is God, He has set His foundation on the holy mountain. He has set His foundation on the holy mountain.

It was a constant source of quizzical delight to God's people in the Old Testament that God had chosen Jerusalem as His dwelling place, the physical place where Jerusalem was established, established. It was a source of delightful bemusement that He had set His foundation on the holy mountain, spoken of in this psalm. And the reason for that is that the question that could not be evaded or suppressed was the question, why? Why Jerusalem? What was so special about this mountain? You can go and visit Israel today. You can go to the very physical place that God fixed His eyes upon to establish His city. Well, what was so special about it? So many mountains, so many hills that He could have chosen from. Why did He choose this particular mountain? And of course, the answer that we are repeatedly given in the Scriptures is that Mount Zion was special because God chose it. It was a holy mountain because

[9:16] God set it apart, not the other way around. God didn't decide, well, I need to go and find a holy mountain that would be suitable as a dwelling place for me. I need to find a mountain that has all the right characteristics. And when I find that mountain, well, there I will establish Jerusalem. No, that's not the way it worked at all. God, of His own divine prerogative, fixed His eyes on Mount Zion and said, well, this is the mountain where I will establish my city. God's sovereign choice of Zion, of Jerusalem, is what made Zion a holy mountain, a mountain set apart by God for a holy purpose. And of course, what was true of Jerusalem as a physical place was and is true of the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem. Then and now, what was true of Jerusalem as a city is true of the citizens of God's rainbow nation. We are special because we have been chosen by God. He is the one who makes us special. He is the one who has set us apart and has made us a holy people. Not that God was looking for people who were holy and said, well, you'll do. You're the kind of person I need to form part of my people. You're a nice person.

You're a good person. You're a holy person. Come on board. No, that's not the way it works at all. It is God who determines who He chooses, and in choosing us, we become holy. We are made holy by Him, just as was so with that mountain in Palestine that God fixed His eyes on and said, this is the mountain where I will build my holy city. God's choice of His people has nothing to do with any merit or attractiveness in us, and everything to do with God's sovereign and gracious prerogative to choose whom He chooses. What glorious things are said of Zion. Well, this is one glorious thing. It is a glorious thing that Zion, that the church, is chosen by God. He has set His foundation on the holy mountain. But as the psalm continues, we discover another glorious truth concerning Zion, and it is this, that Zion is loved by God. He has set His foundation on the holy mountain.

And the Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob. And what the psalmist says here in this second verse really follows on from what we have just said.

Together with the Israelites, as represented by the psalmist, as we ponder in bemused wonder at God's choice of the likes of us to be citizens of His rainbow nation, we inquire in hesitant tones, but why? Why has God chosen us? We've established that the reason that Jerusalem was a holy mountain was because God chose it. We've established that the reason we are a holy people is because God has chosen us. But the question that continues to demand and answers, but why? Why has He chosen us?

[12:56] And it is in this verse that we have the heart of the answer. The Lord loves the gates of Zion. Why did He choose Zion? Because He loves Zion. Because God loves the gates of Zion. Because God loves the church and He loves the gates of Zion. And He loves all those He has chosen to form part of His church.

But again, you might ask, but why? And I think the only answer we can give is, He just does. He just does. He has chosen to love us. And we bow before, gratefully bow before, His divine prerogative, so to do. This is, of course, what we read and what we discover in Deuteronomy in chapter 7 and verses 6 to 8, where this same theme is being addressed in this part of the Bible in Deuteronomy chapter 7.

And in verse 6, what do we read? For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples in the face of the earth to be His people, His treasured possession.

Again, the question, why? And the answer given, the Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.

Nothing in Israel, nothing in the Israelites that was particularly attractive, that would set them apart from the crowd. And what does God go on to say? But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath He swore to your forefathers, that He brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. God loves Zion. God loves the church. God loves His church. God loves this church that forms part of His one church. But as we read what is said there in verse 2, we're left perhaps with a question. What is meant by the comparison that is made with all the dwellings of Jacob? You see, in verse 2, it doesn't just say, the Lord loves the gates of Zion. If that's all that it had said, perhaps it would be simple enough. But no, the psalmist goes on. He says, the Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob. What does that mean? Why is it stated that He loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob? Jacob is just another name for Israel. And so, what we are being told here is that God loves Zion, or Jerusalem, the capital, if you wish, more than Jacob, the whole country. And that preference, if you wish, that greater love for Zion, for the gates of Zion over and above the dwellings of Jacob does seem difficult to understand or fathom. I think what is being said, and I invite you to give your own thoughts to this, but I think what is being said is that God takes particular delight in the gathering together of

[16:22] His people, and very especially as they gather to worship Him in joyful unison. Jacob, or Israel, was indeed made up of many households, many dwellings, all loved by God. They all formed part of the whole, loved by God, chosen by God. God's affection was upon each family, each household, each dwelling. But when, and as we think of the history of Israel and the manner in which God had instituted their corporate worship, when at times of festival, the many households of Israel would make their way from the four points of the compass to Jerusalem, when they would gather as a people, as one people in Jerusalem, and they would gather with the purpose of worshiping God together, well, this was a source of profound delight for God. And so, the psalmist is able to declare, the Lord loves the gates of Zion, those very gates that the people would flood through, that they would make their way to the temple, that together they would worship God in the manner that He had appointed. This was God's special delight. And of course, we don't need to simply consider this as a curiosity of history. This is true for us also. God loves each and every one of His own. He loves His own people with an eternal love. But there is a real sense in which God takes special delight in His church as we gather in unity and harmony to sing His praises and exalt His name. And it rather leaves me with a somewhat uncomfortable thought. How can it be that that which God so delights in, we often fail to delight in?

This is what God delights in. This is what God loves to witness and, in a sense, to participate in, the gathering of His people to worship Him. Glorious things are said of you, O city of God, and it is a glorious thing that Zion, the church, is loved by God, chosen by God, loved by God. But we can also say this, another glorious truth concerning Zion that we find declared in this psalm, that Zion, the church, is gathered by God. In verse 3, we have the declaration that we're using as our starting point. Glorious things are said of you, and we're finding in the rest of the psalm what those glorious things are. And so that leads us on to verse 4, that we summarize in this way, Zion, the church, gathered by God. I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me, Philistia too, and Tyre along with Cush, and will say, this one was born in Zion. It is here in verse 4 that we find God speaking directly for the first time in the psalm. And the punctuation employed in the version that we are using, I think rightly, directs us to the words of verse 4 as constituting in the first instance, and primarily, the glorious things that are spoken of Zion by God Himself. Notice there in verse 3 the manner in which this is punctuated, I think, helpfully. Glorious things are said of you, O

city of God.

And then it's clear that what follows constitutes, certainly in great measure, the glorious thing that is said of Zion. Other glorious things are said, and we're looking at other glorious things that are said in the psalm. But very especially, the words that follow are the glorious things spoken of Zion. And what is it that God declares? Well, He declares that He is the God who gathers His people.

He gathers those who will form part of His rainbow nation. Now, in considering this glorious truth, let's distinguish between the identity of those gathered and the means employed by God to gather His people into Zion. Two aspects of this bigger truth.

[20 : 50] The identity of those gathered and the means employed by God to gather His people. First of all, the identity. Who are gathered? And I think as we think of who are gathered, two words help to answer the question. Individuals and internationals. Individuals. What does God say? This one was born in Zion. Indeed, this phrase repeats itself two times from the lips or pen of God, and a third time in slightly different form by observers looking on. But clearly a central truth in the psalm.

This one was born in Zion. And my focus here is on that little word, one. This one was born in Zion. The overall impression created by the psalm is of a great multitude from all the nations.

But that multitude, and it is a multitude that no man can number, is gathered one by one. This one was born in Zion. God personally calls each one of His people. He calls us. He calls you by name. Yes, you. He calls you by name. This one was born in Zion. Who are gathered? Men and women. Boys and girls.

Individuals. Individuals like you and me. But of course, the language of God also highlights that those who are gathered are internationals. God gathers from every people and tongue. The nations mentioned by God. Possibly the idea here is that these nations are being addressed by God, but regardless of how we understand what is being said, they represent the whole wide world. Rahab or Egypt and Babylon, the first and last great enemies of Israel, Philistine and Tyre, those pesky and proud neighbors of Israel, Cush or Ethiopia, representing, it would seem, the ends of the earth. For an Israelite to speak of Cush was to speak of that which was beyond even imagination. And so, in the Old Testament, as with this psalm, God points forward to a day coming when His nation would be a gathered rainbow nation. His people are a rainbow people. And today, thanks to Jesus and His work, we live in the age not of shadows, but of the reality, not of prophetic expectation, but of present fulfillment. As we approach Christmas, we could perhaps remember the words of Simeon as he tenderly held Messiah Jesus in his aged arms.

[23 : 38] Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people. And then, very especially, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel. And then, of course, at Pentecost, we have a list of the nations who gathered in Jerusalem. Yes, in Jerusalem, a list not dissimilar in its flavor to the list in this psalm of all the nations hearing and responding to the gospel message and being welcomed into God's rainbow nation as they put their faith in God's Messiah.

And when Jesus had completed His mission and ascended to the right hand of the Father, what was His commission to Saul and by extension to the church delivered on the road to Damascus, recorded for us there in Acts chapter 26.

I am sending you to the Gentiles to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God so that they may receive forgiveness of sins in a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me. A place, a place for the Gentiles, a place for the nations, a place for the Babylonians, a place for the Egyptians, a place for the Ethiopians, a place for all the nations of the world. It's a rich irony that we live in a society that talks much of diversity, but we belong to the church of Jesus Christ that embodies diversity to a degree and extent that human society can only dream of. And, and be very clear on this, in God's opinion, this is what makes the church glorious. Glorious things are said of you, O city of God. And what are these glorious things? Well, here we have it. I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me, Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush, and will say, this one was born in Zion. The identity of those gathered. But as we think of this great truth that the church is gathered by God, we also pose the question as to the manner of our in-gathering. How are we gathered? How do we, one by one, become citizens of Zion? This one was born in Zion, declares God. God is

declaring that though His people may have been physically born in Cairo or Baghdad or Beirut or Gaza or Addis Ababa, to think of the modern-day cities that are represented by these locations. Though physically born in these places in a multiplicity of others, God's people are spiritually born in Zion. God's people experience what we could call a second birth, a new birth. And of course, in the light of the New Testament, we know exactly what it is the psalm is speaking of. This is not to stretch what is being said in the psalm. Rather, we find in the language of the New Testament a clear echo. The truth that the believer experiences a second birth, born spiritually into Zion is beautifully echoed and confirmed in the words of Jesus to Nicodemus there in the account recorded in John's gospel, you must be born again. You must be born again. God, by His Spirit, by a work of regeneration in the soul of a man or woman, births us as citizens of His rainbow nation. And note also that the language and reality of a new birth highlights our new status as full citizens of Zion. And really, we would need to dwell on this, but we're not going to for reasons of time. But to speak of God's people as being born in Zion speaks in rich tones as to our status, full citizens, not just day visitors or resident aliens or even valued migrants, but full citizens of Zion, full citizens with all the privileges of citizenship of the heavenly Jerusalem. It is a glorious thing that Zion, the church, is gathered by God. Chosen by God, loved by God, gathered by God, much more briefly, governed by God. In verse 5, we have onlookers in amazement, declaring what they see. Indeed, of Zion it will be said, this one and that one were born in her, and the Most High Himself will establish her. They echo what God had already said in verse 4. And the picture is of those who witness what God is doing, standing in open-mouthed amazement as they declare, this one and that one, they're all citizens of Zion. How can that be? How can they be part of one family? How can they be part of one church? How can they mix together and love each other? How can that be? But notice that the inspired onlooker adds, and the Most High will establish her. The Most High will establish her. You see, God does not only gather us to then abandon us to our own devices. No, He establishes His people. He governs His church. He cares for and directs His own.

[29 : 41] In Jesus Christ, we have the One who is the present and active head of the church, establishing His church, and He does so forever. I imagine that many in South Africa are in certain fear and trepidation of what will happen now that Madiba is gone, and perhaps they have good cause to be concerned. But citizens of Zion need harbor no such fears, for God is the One who establishes Zion. He establishes His church. It is a glorious thing that Zion, the church, is governed by God. And one final glorious truth concerning Zion, as we move on to verse 6, that Zion is secured by God. The Lord will write in the register of the peoples, this One was born in Zion. Again, it is God who is the One speaking, or more correctly, He is being recorded as writing. And of course, He's saying the same thing that has already been said in verse 4. So, what does this add to what we've already said? Well, even if we just focus on this picture of God writing in the register of the peoples, it's the same truth, but here it's described as God writing in the register of the peoples. And just imagine the picture that's being painted. This is a vivid one. Imagine a book, a mega big book, a big, seriously big book, with the names of every man, woman, and child who has ever lived and who will ever live. And God opens the book, and one by one identifies His own people within that book. And with masterly strokes of divine calligraphy, writes next to each of His own, to each of His own people, this One was born in Zion.

This One is Mine. This One is eternally Mine. And nobody will take this One from Me, for this One is Mine. This One was born in Zion. We as God's people are secured by God. We are secured in God. He who has gathered us, keeps us. Our citizenship of Zion is eternal and secure. It is a glorious thing that Zion, the church, is secured by God, chosen by God, loved by God, gathered by God, governed by God, secured by God. In the light of all these glorious truths, we would do well to echo the words of the psalmist. Glorious things are said of you. But how do we respond? And with this we end. How do we respond? Let me suggest three ways in which you should respond. The first one is a very important one. Make sure that you are a citizen of Zion. Ask yourself that question this morning. Am I a citizen of Zion? This heavenly Jerusalem, this people of God, this rainbow people of God that is so blessed and so cared for and so loved? Am I a citizen of Zion? You see, all of this means very little to you if you are an outsider looking in. But by all means, look in to say, I want to be there. And if that is what you wish to be, a citizen of Zion, a member of the church of Jesus Christ, then the manner in which you become such a citizen is by the new birth. This one was born in Zion. Cry out to God and say, make me, birth me into your people. That is what I want to be. I

come and put my trust in the one that you have provided to be my Savior, to bring me in by the hand into the people of God. I put my trust in Jesus. Make sure you're a citizen of Zion, but also echo the words of God. God delights in Zion. And if God delights in Zion, can we do any less? It's suggested that there in verse 3 that we've been kind of revolving our thoughts around, where we read, glorious things are said of you. The language in which this psalm was written allows for that final part of the verse to possibly mean, glorious things are said in you. Of you, in you, both are possible. Having to choose, I think, what is in our Bibles is a good choice. But just for a moment, think of that. Glorious things are said in you. We are in Zion. We too are to echo the words of God and delight in Zion. It is a concerning thing that the church God delights in is the very same church that His people, us, you and me, so often grumble about. But finally, celebrate the goodness and grace and sufficiency of God. That is how the psalm ends. As they, the citizens of Zion, as they make music, they will sing, all my fountains are in you. All my delight is in you. All my satisfaction is in you. All my needs are met in you. In the Zion, constructed by God and governed by God and where God dwells. Some of you will be familiar with Isaac Newton's hymn that is built around or takes as its starting point this psalm, and very particularly these words, glorious things are said of you. Glorious things of thee are spoken. And Isaac Newton celebrates this truth that ends the psalm, all my fountains are in you. He paraphrases these words with these words, solid joints and lasting treasure, none but Zion's children know. And so, let us recognize that and celebrate that and make music and sing in celebration of that. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word, and we thank You for Your church. We thank You that Your church is a delight to You, and we pray that we would know something of that delight as we consider our great privilege of being part of Your church. We do pray that it would be true of each and every one of us, that we would be citizens of Zion, that it would be said of us that God, that You Yourself would say of us, this One was born in Zion. And so, we thank You that You're a God who continues to gather Your people to Yourself. And we pray that even today, as we have considered the beauty and the wonder and the glory of Your people, that You would be drawing more and more from the nations, and indeed from among ourselves, gathering and drawing those who would be citizens of Zion. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, let's close our service by singing this psalm that we've been giving some thought to this morning. This is perhaps one of many psalms that when we sing them, sometimes we sing them and wonder, well, what is this all about? Because the language isn't immediately perhaps comprehensible. Well, I trust that in the light of the thought that we've given to the psalm this morning, we'll be able to sing with greater understanding and indeed with greater delight as we ponder on and celebrate the glorious things that are true of the church that we are part of.

[37 : 35] Psalm 87, we'll sing the whole of the psalm. We'll sing to the tune, Love Divine. Psalm 87, and it's on page 87 of our psalm books. Psalm, page 115, sorry, let me just find that.

On Jerusalem's holy mountain, He has founded His abode. More than all of Jacob's dwelling, Zion's gates are dear to God. Let's stand to sing this psalm. Zion's gates are dear to God.

Zion's gates are dear to God.

Zion's gates are dear to God. Let's sing this psalm.

of Zion, this and that one near belong, and on earth the highest blessing will descend and live the strong.

[39 : 59] For in Zion God will enter in the people's register.

They will sing as they may use it. All my mountains are in earth.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always. Amen.