***When the Lord Visits His City***

**Meeting God in the Psalms: Psalm 87 October 10, 2021**

***He has set his foundation on the holy mountain;  
the Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob.  
Glorious things are said of you, O city of God . . . .*Psalm 87:1-2 (with help from John Newton)**

**Psalm 87: God’s love for his “city”**

Of the Sons of Korah. A psalm. A song.

1 *He has set his foundation on the holy mountain;*

*2 the Lord loves the gates of Zion*

*more than all the dwellings of Jacob.*

*3 Glorious things are said of you,*

*O city of God: Selah*

*4 “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.’ ”*

*5 Indeed, of Zion it will be said,*

*“This one and that one were born in her,*

*and the Most High himself will establish her.”*

*6 The Lord will write in the register of the peoples:*

*“This one was born in Zion.” Selah*

*7 As they make music they will sing,*

*“All my fountains are in you.”* [NIV]

1. “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken” is a celebration of God’s presence: We are the “Thee”

2. The Lord’s “foundation” turns our attention back to creation

3. The key question is one of identity: Where am I registered?

4. Psalm 87 helps close out Book IV, encouraging the people of God to remember God’s promises  
(see the chart below)

**Who are the gates?**

1 *He has set his foundation on the holy mountain;*

*2 the Lord loves the gates of Zion*

*more than all the dwellings of Jacob.*

*3 Glorious things are said of you,*

*O city of God: Selah*

Psalm 87:1-2 (see Revelation 21:9-21)

1. Gates are important, the very center of the life of the community

2. Zion is where to look for God at work, where his “choosing” love is evident (see Romans 9:1-29)

3. It seems to Pastor Fakkema that it is God who is speaking these “glorious things” of his church

**The surprise mission of the people of God**

4 *“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.’ ”*

*5 Indeed, of Zion it will be said,*

*“This one and that one were born in her,*

*and the Most High himself will establish her.”*

*6 The Lord will write in the register of the peoples:*

*“This one was born in Zion.” Selah*

Psalm 87:4-6

1. We would never expect *Rahab* and *Babylon* to be invited inside the “gates”

2. “Acknowledging God” is a beautiful way to think about a new relationship with God

3. We accept *Philistia* like we accept one “native-born”

33 *“ ‘When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. 34 The alien living with you must  
be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt.*

Leviticus 19:33 (see also Romans 15:7-9)

**Being the gates**

7 *As they make music they will sing,*

*“All my fountains are in you.”*

Psalm 87:7

1. “Fountains” ARE the blessing, the evidence of God’s Spirit flowing out of us Philistines

13 *Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”*

John 4:13-14

2. “Fountains” are now and eschatological – the purpose of the church and the future of the church

17 *For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd;*

*he will lead them to springs of living water.*

*And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”*

Revelation 7:17, the hope of the Tribulation church (see also Revelation 21:6 and 22:1-5)

3. The gates of this city are designed to be open!

-- God, not me, is responsible for who comes in

-- Our job is to call those who enter the gates to acknowledge the Lord of this city

-- Our celebration must include witness, story and testimony

Diagram, engineering drawing

Description automatically generated

**Resources for the Psalms**

Please be sure to have a copy of the [Bible Project’s poster](https://bibleproject.com/downloads/posters/) on the Psalms.

I appreciate the [*bibestudytools.com*](https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/christ-centered-exposition/psalms51-100/the-city-of-god.html)study of Psalm 87 in the “Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary” series. I’ve attached this study to my notes.

Dr. [Ron Allen has a wonderful study](http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/19-Psalms/Text/Articles/Allen-Ps87-BS.pdf) of Psalm 87 in “Biblioteca Sacra”.

James E. Smith’s *Wisdom Literature and Psalms* (College Press, 1995) has been a very helpful resource.

The *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Zondervan, 1991) has a helpful commentary on the Psalms.

I can see Dr. Ron Allen’s influence in the study notes on the Psalms in the *Nelson Study Bible* (Thomas Nelson, 1997). This is a NKJV text Bible which gives a wonderful new translation to read.

**The City of God**  
at [*bibestudytools.com*](https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/christ-centered-exposition/psalms51-100/the-city-of-god.html)

Psalm 87

Main Idea: God has established a city to be the eternal hub of his worship and the habitation of his children.

I. The Consecration of God’s City (87:1-3)

II. The Citizens of God’s City (87:4-6)

III. The Celebration of God’s City (87:7)

Have you ever heard someone say, “I can’t get that song out of my head!”? You’re going to hate me for this, but I’m willing to bet that at least one of the times you’ve heard someone say that, they were referring to the Disney theme park ride, “It’s a Small World.” The attraction features more than three hundred audio-animatronic children in traditional costumes from cultures around the world. As you make your way through the ride, you’re overwhelmed by a diverse multitude of children frolicking in a spirit of international unity, singing that title song.

That ride seared the words and melody of its theme song indelibly into many of our minds. That’s exactly what its creators wanted to happen. The entire exhibit is a microcosmic representation of an agenda its originators wanted to champion: world peace. All of the robotic children in the feature are indicative of the multitude of tribes, nations, and languages on the earth living together in harmony. The ride is fantasy, but its message has been a real hope of a lot of people throughout history.

In similar fashion, Psalm 87 describes a microcosm that God established to whet his people’s appetites for real hope as well but one that’s far more certain than world peace. And he wants this miniature model to make this hope ring in our ears and remain firmly established in our minds so we won’t ever forget it! What is this hope? It’s the predetermined metropolis of Jew and Gentile alike, the place of the coming conversion of old enemies and their full incorporation into the city of God, the spiritual home for the redeemed from every tribe, nation, and tongue. God has established this city to be the eternal hub of his worship and the habitation of his children.

God’s microcosm is the city of Zion, a place in the Old Testament variously called Jerusalem, Salem, Mount Moriah, the city of God, the city of David, and the city of the great king. While it has served as the historical center of Israel’s life and worship, God destined it for so much more. It was to prefigure a better city than its earthly precursor ever has been or ever will be. The author of Hebrews tells Christians as much:

Instead, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God (the heavenly Jerusalem), to myriads of angels, a festive gathering, to the assembly of the firstborn whose names have been written in heaven, to a Judge, who is God of all, to the spirits of righteous people made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which says better things than the blood of Abel. (Heb 12:22-24)

Like Disney’s “It’s a Small World” ride, the earthly city of Zion is an imperfect miniature. But unlike the popular theme park ride, the city of Jerusalem represents something that actually will come to pass as a result of the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. Zion—the city of God—is a little slice of the hope of heaven that reminds us how small the world really is after all. This psalm shows us this city and its purpose in three simple divisions.

**The Consecration of God’s City, Psalm 87:1-3**

The psalm begins by describing Zion, the historical city God set apart to be the hub of his worship. The writer leaves no doubt that he’s talking about that special place God consecrated from all other locales throughout all of history—past, present, and future. It’s the city Israel’s God chose as his residence (2 Chr 6:5-6), that served as a constant source of delight to Israel’s songwriters (e.g., Pss 48:1; 78:68-70; 132:13), and that became a consistent source of envy for Israel’s opposers (68:15-16). Here the psalmist specifically notes three reasons for this city’s uniqueness.

First, this city is set apart because God established it (v. 1). In Hebrew the word founded actually opens the psalm and provides an emphatic introduction. It’s the work of God, not of men. And as a result of God’s establishment, its location is rightly called “the holy mountains” because he’s there. God is holy, and his dwelling place has taken on his nature. “Mountains,” plural, refer either to the multitude of hills in the Jerusalem area or simply to the magnification of the place where God dwells. The Lord chose this spot for his dwelling place, and that sets it apart forever from all other hills on the planet.

Second, the city of God is consecrated because God esteems it (v. 2). The verb loves is an active participle and connects God’s establishment with his endless affection (cf. Deut 7:6-8). Ross says, “He established Zion as his dwelling-place by elective love, and his love for it as his dwelling-place remained constant” (Ross, Psalms, vol. 2, 794). While the word translated “dwellings” certainly is metaphorical for all other possible abodes, it is a common designation for the Lord’s sanctuary. So the psalmist may be contrasting this city with other sanctuary cities (e.g., Gilgal, Bethel, Shiloh). God didn’t choose other religious centers for his dwelling place. He chose this one as the center of his worship.

The object of God’s love for Jerusalem is specifically identified as “Zion’s city gates” (v. 2), a metaphorical substitution that represents the city as a whole. The gates of the city not only provided protection from enemies but also served as the primary pathway of entrance, where both visitors and citizens gained access. Inside the gates usually was a plaza where friends met together, the people bought and sold their goods, city officials pronounced legal decisions, and preparations were made for entering the place of worship. In essence, Zion’s gates represented Israel’s heart and soul (Ross, Psalms, vol. 2, 794). God set his delight on the essence of their very being.

Third, the city of Zion is set apart because God exalts it. The general commentary on what he’s done in choosing Jerusalem is in verse 3. The word said designates the introduction to an oracle from God. While praise for the city—both spoken and sung—is offered by those who experience and observe its wonder, their words actually articulate God’s perspective. Through their voices he lauds all that has happened in the holy city that attests to his divine presence. He founded it. He loves it. He has established it as the hub of his worship in all the world. He has made it a place where his glory is witnessed and proclaimed!

God’s establishment, esteem, and exaltation of the historical and physical city of Jerusalem was not his end game, however. In the songs of Zion, praise is due the city of God, not just because of its physical and earthly splendor but for its spiritual and eternal significance. Even in other psalms the writer is clear to equate God’s favor on the holy city to someplace that is beyond the earthly realm. He connects it with the heavenly realm—“The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord—his throne is in heaven” (Ps 11:4)—and designates it as God’s dwelling place for eternity—“For the Lord has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his home: ‘This is my resting place forever; I will make my home here because I have desired it” (Ps 132:13-14).

In Revelation 21–22 John sees this larger purpose in vivid detail when God unfolds for him the vision of what believers often refer to as heaven, God’s eternal kingdom. It’s here where the earthly city finds its ultimate purpose. The “new Jerusalem” (Rev 21:2; cf. 21:10)—as it’s called here—is described as “coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev 21:2). This picture likely isn’t a reference to the church as the bride of Christ as in some other places in the New Testament (John 3:29; 2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:25-27,30-32; Rev 19:7-8; 22:17) but merely a simile that portrays something of great value being presented to another.

The voice emanating “from the throne” (Rev 21:3) of God introduces the heavenly city as the place he has been preparing for his children, much like a bride would be prepared for her husband. This reality becomes clear as God declares, “Look, God’s dwelling is with humanity, and he will live with them. They will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them and will be their God” (Rev 21:3). God determined long ago to make this city his final and eternal abode with redeemed mankind. When God came to earth, he dwelt temporarily with mankind in the flesh of Christ Jesus (John 1:14). When mankind goes to heaven, they will dwell eternally with God through ultimate union with Christ Jesus.

A number of things will be noticeably different about this new city, demonstrating its obvious superiority over the earthly model. For example, unlike the historical Jerusalem, God “will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more, because the previous things have passed away” (Rev 21:4). This verse contains one of the most glorious truths in the whole Bible! As believers in Christ Jesus, we long for this day when there will be no more cancer, broken relationships, loss of loved ones, domestic violence, sexual abuse, loneliness, abandonment, murder, or anything else that causes us to shed tears and harbor broken hearts. Certainly, in all of its conflict through the years, this is something that can’t be said of the present-day earthly city. Nor can it be said of any human being’s current status. But it is the certain hope to which we now cling.

Another difference is that there will be no “temple in it, because the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (Rev 21:22). This was God’s ultimate intention of his instructions to build a physical temple in the Old Testament—to whet his people’s appetite for eternal communion with him! While there’s no temple currently located in Jerusalem, it remains the desire, dream, and delight of the Jewish people to see it rebuilt. However, in heaven there won’t be any need for it. A physical temple will be irrelevant because God’s people will experience perfect, intimate, and perennial communion with him through Christ Jesus. And there will no longer be any chance of mistakenly substituting a physical location for the intended end!

Another difference between the two cities is that the heavenly one “does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, because the glory of God illuminates it, and its lamp is the Lamb” (Rev 21:23; cf. 21:11). Again, this can’t be said for the earthly city. Like every place on the planet, they still need the sun. In fact, life as we know it depends on it! But the hub of God’s ultimate worship and the locus of the radiance of his glory won’t be a physical structure or a celestial body. Instead, it will be a spiritual reality in the heavenly sphere. The ultimate object of God’s worship will be himself as he’s manifested in his Lamb-Son, Jesus Christ. When Jesus dwelt with people on earth, they saw “his glory, the glory as the one and only Son from the Father” (John 1:14). When he dwells with us in heaven, we will see that glory to its fullest degree, and it will compel us to worship the Father forever!

The forever dwelling place of God with man. The true temple of God. The full and brilliant radiance of God’s glory. Finally, all that God intended for his children—when he consecrated an earthly city to be a foretaste of his glory—will be realized in the new Jerusalem.

**The Citizens of God’s City, Psalm 87:4-6**

Much like the festive atmosphere of riding on a boat through the “It’s a Small World” ride at a Disney park, the setting of Psalm 87 may have been one of the festivals in Jerusalem when both Israelites and proselytes would have been present. On such an occasion the worship leaders likely would have started by declaring the glories of Zion, but their words would have extended far beyond the microcosmic earthly city to anticipate the fulfillment of its intended goal. That goal was for the city to be the eternal dwelling place of God where he would finally gather his redeemed of both Jew and Gentile people.

The “glorious things” (v. 3) that make up Jerusalem’s high reputation aren’t all left to the reader’s or singer’s imagination or knowledge of history. Some particulars are provided in verses 4-6. The bottom line is that Zion’s grandeur largely will be seen in the diversity of those citizens of the city who were not naturally born there. Moreover, this diversity will be the prophetic fulfillment of the gathering of people from all nations who will make up the city’s membership register. As Isaiah prophesied,

In the last days the mountain of the Lord’s house will be established at the top of the mountains and will be raised above the hills. All nations will stream to it, and many peoples will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us about his ways so that we may walk in his paths.” For instruction will go out of Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. (Isa 2:2-3; cf. Isa 26:1-2; 60:15-22; 61:1-7)

This city is not just for Israelites but for people from “all nations” and tribes and tongues under the sun. God is worthy of the worship of every person on the planet, and the glory of his city was always intended to reflect that merit.

The psalmist, therefore, begins in verse 4 to cite God’s oracle that was introduced in verse 3. The first-person pronouns me and I (v. 4) refer to him as the speaker. God is about to point out some examples of people of whom it will be said that—regardless of the place of their natural birth—they were “born there.” Such is the common thread that ties verses 4-6 together. Citizenship in Zion isn’t determined by location of physical birth or identification of ethnic heritage. If you’re a citizen of God’s city, it’s as if you were born there!

Verse 4 is a roll call of the people groups in God’s city, and it’s somewhat of an unlikely catalog! The representative list is made up of nations that played menacing roles in Israel’s history. “Rahab”—or Egypt (cf. Ps 89:10; Isa 30:7)—and “Babylon” were arguably Israel’s greatest oppressors. “Philistia and Tyre” were at the very least the nation’s regular troublers. And “Cush”—of the upper Nile—consistently enticed Israel to chase after the things of this world. None of these Gentile nations makes the cut in a political sense, for they were all Israel’s enemies. Instead, select individuals from among each one will participate by faith in God’s worship as “reborn” citizens of Jerusalem, just as if they were native born in his holy city (cf. Isa 19:19-25; Zech 2:11-12; Mal 1:11).

The official and permanent status of these foreign-born citizens in God’s city is stated strongly in three ways in these verses. First, God identifies each one as being “of those who know me” (v. 4). These Gentiles are ones who—by faith—trust in him, acknowledge his words, and worship him in obedience because they’ve now been adopted by him. Although they were born as citizens of nations that worshiped a myriad of false gods, they now know the one true God, Yahweh of Israel.

Second, God says, “The Most High himself will establish her” (v. 5). This composition of such a diverse and undeserved privilege of citizenship in Zion is his doing. While the great city was founded as a literal and historical city, God says he’s orchestrating its true establishment and will ultimately open its gates to the nations and “peoples will stream to it” (Mic 4:1; cf. Isa 54:1-2; 62:4-5; 65:18-24). That’s when Jerusalem will fulfill its ultimate purpose (Goldingay, Psalms 42–89, 639).

Third, God claims himself to be the one that’s actually recording names in the citizenship registry (vv. 5-6; cf. v. 4). It’s the cosmic clerk of the universe who’s logging people into the archives (see Exod 32:32-33; Ezek 13:9; Mal 3:16), and he’s the one who’s guaranteeing these foreigners their rightful position as citizens. Because God is the one keeping the roll, they will be as natural-born citizens forever, as if they had been so from the beginning.

The obvious emphasis in these verses is the citizenship that results from one’s newly declared birth. Regardless of the location and nationality of a person’s physical birth, citizenship in Jerusalem comes about when God declares him or her to have been born there. This declaration is similar to the conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus, who came to Jesus apparently wanting to know how someone gained citizenship in God’s kingdom (John 3:1-21). Jesus said you had to be “born again,” or “born from above” (CEV). In other words, you have to have two births—one that’s physical and one that’s spiritual. The physical birth comes about by “water” and is fleshly. The spiritual birth comes about by “the Spirit” and is spiritual. The physical birth grants one citizenship in an earthly kingdom. The spiritual birth makes one a citizen of God’s heavenly kingdom.

Nicodemus had a hard time processing this dual citizenship about which Jesus spoke. So Jesus told him,

“Do not be amazed that I told you that you must be born again. The wind blows where it pleases, and you hear its sound, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” (John 3:7-8)

In other words, people don’t question where the wind comes from when they see, hear, and feel its effects. Any good Jew simply attributed it to Yahweh, the Creator of the universe. So it is with spiritual birth, Jesus told Nicodemus. We see its effects, but we can’t necessarily wrap our limited mind around its divine mystery. Years later Peter would declare this sovereign and mysterious work of God:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you. You are being guarded by God’s power through faith for a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Pet 1:3-5)

The new birth is the effect of the sovereign and mysterious grace of God on humanity, and that effect gives us a glorious hope!

A second birth is the only way a person can become a citizen of God’s heavenly city. God must declare a person to have been born there. He has to record their name in his registry. That’s what John said about “the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev 21:10; cf. 21:2). He said, “Nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Rev 21:27; cf. Phil 4:3; Rev 3:5; 13:8; 20:12,15). God’s book is called “the Lamb’s book of life” because therein are recorded the names of those who have become citizens through the shed blood of Jesus Christ, “the Lamb who was slaughtered” (Rev 13:8; cf. Gen 22:7-8; Exod 12:3; Num 28:3-10; Isa 53:7; John 1:29,36) for the sins of the world. Acknowledging Jesus as this Lamb and throwing yourself at his mercy is the only way for your name to be written in this book.

True to God’s promise to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) and true to Israel’s stated assignment as God’s nation of priests who were to lead all people to worship him (Exod 19:5-6), the population of the New Jerusalem will comprise natural-born citizens from every nation on the planet. John says, “The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. . . . They will bring the glory and honor of the nations into it” (Rev 21:24,26). Into this heavenly city people from every nation will come with their gifts and sacrifices of praise to our Lord. This will be the gathering John saw earlier: “a vast multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language, which no one could number, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands” (Rev 7:9). Finally, God’s plan for a far more glorious Zion will be a reality, and his holy city will be the center of life and worship for all humanity.

The Septuagint includes the word mother in the first part of Psalm 87:5, the translation of an additional two-letter Hebrew word that may have been eliminated accidentally. The NEB renders it, “Zion shall be called a mother in whom men of every race are born.” Paul seems to have this understanding in mind when contrasting slavery to the law and freedom in Christ: “Now Hagar represents Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother” (Gal 4:25-26). Citizenship merely in the earthly Jerusalem leaves one in bondage to sin, while citizenship in the heavenly Jerusalem through Christ Jesus means one has been set free. This citizenship is no longer defined by circumcision (Gal 6:12-16) or limited to those who are from the bloodline of Abraham (Gal 3:7-9). It’s now available to all who will trust Christ, regardless of where they were born or their ethnic heritage.

As believers, this truth compels us to several responses. First, this text should make us—of all people—most thankful. We are these outsiders! We are the people of Egypt and Babylon, the citizens of Philistia and Tyre and Cush. The easiest thing to do in this passage is to see ourselves as the natural-born citizens of Jerusalem and to see everyone else as people who need to experience the grace of God. Remember, however, the Jews are the natural-born citizens. They are God’s chosen people. Everyone else—including most every one of us reading this passage—are the Gentiles. We are the outsiders, the enemies of God. Paul reminds us that

God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. How much more then, since we have now been declared righteous by his blood, will we be saved through him from wrath. For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, then how much more, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. (Rom 5:8-10)

We were God’s adversaries, standing on the outside of his kingdom and defiantly looking in. Yet through Christ and the grace of the gospel, we’re “born again” into the citizenship of his kingdom. This passage should prompt a gush of gratitude in all of us.

A second response to this glorious truth should be for us—as newborn citizens of God’s kingdom—to leverage our entire lives to get this gospel to every person on the planet, regardless of geographic location or skin color. This demands that we see immigration issues as more than political policies that benefit us. This motivates us to fight hard against racism and social injustice. The gospel is for everybody, and our Lord has called us to make disciples from among all people groups (Matt 28:19-20) because that’s what’s going to characterize his holy city. Heaven is going to be made up of all kinds of people because our God is worthy of their worship. So we’d better start practicing for that kind of diversity by making the church on earth look like it’s going to look in heaven.

**The Celebration of God’s City, Psalm 87:7**

The adoption of people from every tribe, nation, and tongue into the citizenship of God’s glorious city will prompt a big party! This festivity is represented by “singers and dancers,” icons of two of Israel’s most cheerful forms of celebration (cf. 68:25; 150:4). The city will pull out all the stops to rejoice in this amalgamation of individuals from so many different backgrounds into the makeup of God’s people.

This celebration, however, isn’t prompted merely by the diversity of people in God’s city. The gladness ultimately is the result of the sustenance and blessing these citizens get to experience as a result of being in God’s presence. In the Old Testament springs are metaphorical images for true life, the life that only God can give (e.g., 36:9; Jer 2:13). Here the psalmist acknowledges Zion as the “source” of both physical and spiritual sustenance that comes from him. The psalmist previously said of the city, “There is a river—its streams delight the city of God, the holy dwelling place of the Most High. God is within her; she will not be toppled. God will help her when the morning dawns” (Ps 46:4-5; cf. Ezek 47:1-12). The true reason for celebration is that people from every nation get to experience the true life that only God can give!

The image of a water source and fountains as representing the true, eternal life that comes only from God continues in the New Testament with our Lord. Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well, “If you knew the gift of God, and who is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would ask him, and he would give you living water” (John 4:10). Then a while later, on the last day of one of the Jews’ treasured feasts, Jesus interrupts the festivities by standing up in the middle of the crowd and crying out, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. The one who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, will have streams of living water flow from deep within him” (John 7:37-38). Jesus clearly and confidently claims to be the source and supplier of the true life from God.

The description of these events that the psalmist declares of the earthly Jerusalem find their ultimate fulfillment in the New Jerusalem, God’s heavenly city. Revelation 4–5 contains mysterious descriptions of the awe-inspiring praise God will receive from elders, living creatures, tens of thousands of angels, and every creature in the universe. Then in Revelation 7 John sees,

. . . a vast multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language, which no one could number, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: Salvation belongs to our God, who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!

All the angels stood around the throne, and along with the elders and the four living creatures they fell facedown before the throne and worshiped God, saying, Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and strength be to our God forever and ever. Amen. (Rev 7:9-12)

As with the “singers and dancers” (Ps 87:7) in historic Jerusalem, there will be a great celebration of worship at the throne of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ in the heavenly city.

Furthermore, as in the earthly Jerusalem, the celebration in the celestial city will be fostered by the new life the redeemed of mankind get to experience in God’s presence. This time the life is forever. Here God’s children will experience his redemption and restoration in Christ in its fullness. Not only will he “wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more” (Rev 21:4), but he will provide them with something that is curiously reminiscent of the psalmist’s reference to a “source” in Psalm 87:7. John says,

Then the one seated on the throne said, “Look, I am making everything new.” He also said, “Write, because these words are faithful and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will freely give to the thirsty from the spring of the water of life.” (Rev 21:5-6)

In Jesus Christ, God freely restores to his children the life he created them to have (Gen 1:25-26), a life that had been forfeited because of sin, and a life that none of us deserved to get back.

God isn’t finished. John says,

Then he showed me the river of the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the city’s main street. The tree of life was on each side of the river, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree are for healing the nations, and there will no longer be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will worship him. (Rev 22:1-3)

The eradication of sin and its effects among people from every tribe, nation, and tongue will mark the DNA of the New Jerusalem, a nature the old Jerusalem could only foreshadow. In God’s heavenly city people from every nation will experience healing from sin forever, and they will worship him accordingly.

Conclusion

John appropriately concludes the record of his glimpse into eternity with a passionate invitation: “Both the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ Let anyone who hears, say, ‘Come!’ Let the one who is thirsty come. Let the one who desires take the water of life freely” (Rev 22:17). That’s what the gospel does. It gives all people—regardless of ethnicity, geographic location, track record, family upbringing, skeletons in the closet, or any other thing that characterizes their physical birth or life history—the opportunity to drink from the fountain of God’s true life. The gospel provides the only sure hope of the forgiveness of sins and true life forever in God’s presence. It makes heavenly citizens out of all kinds of people from all kinds of earthly kingdoms.

One line in Psalm 87—“Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God” (v. 3 KJV)—was the inspiration for John Newton’s great hymn, “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken,” which he published in 1779 as part of the Olney Hymns hymnal. Although Newton wrote other great hymns like “Amazing Grace,” this particular one is considered by many to be his best composition. Why? The songs in that hymnal were written for use in the Anglican clergyman’s rural parish, which was made up of relatively poor and uneducated congregants. “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken” is the only joyful hymn in the hymnal. Newton apparently understood that expressing the wonders of God’s city and anticipating its habitation served a special purpose in lifting the spirits of the hopeless. That same hope of the New Jerusalem gives us a song to sing that God doesn’t ever want us to get out of our heads. He doesn’t ever want us to forget that our citizenship is not on earth but in heaven. So with that tune stuck in our heads, let’s spend our lives telling others the good news that participation in this heavenly city of God is not by ethnicity or socioeconomic status but by faith.

Reflect and Discuss

1. God has had, and may still have, grand plans for the city of Zion. Is the earthly Jerusalem the end goal, or does the current city foreshadow something greater?
2. What is the connection between the city of God in Psalm 87 and Revelation 21–22? Compare and contrast these two cities.
3. How does a vision of the new city of God fuel missions to the nations?
4. Should every believer/local church be concerned with the nations? What are practical ways a local church can get involved in the global context of the Great Commission?
5. How do new covenant, Gentile Christians relate to God’s covenant people? In other words, what status did Gentiles have in the old covenant, and has that status changed in the new?
6. We live in an age of racial tension, both at home and all over the world. How does the Christian hope of a New Jerusalem speak powerfully into the issue of racism?
7. How should the vision of the New Jerusalem at the end of Revelation spur on the local church to seek diversity? How should the local church reflect the community?
8. How can the language of “each one was born there” be connected to Jesus’s conversation with Nicodemus regarding the true nature of kingdom citizenry?
9. What are some biblical examples of warnings given to those who would rely on their natural birth, as opposed to their spiritual birth?
10. According to the end of Revelation, what are the key characteristics about life in the new city of God?