

Sharing With Others

Psalm 87

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¹ On the holy mount stands the city he founded; the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob. ³ Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God. *Selah*

⁴ Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon; Philistia too, and Tyre, with Ethiopia—'This one was born there,' they say.

⁵ And of Zion it shall be said, 'This one and that one were born in it'; for the Most High himself will establish it. ⁶ The LORD records, as he registers the peoples, 'This one was born there.' *Selah*

⁷ Singers and dancers alike say, 'All my springs are in you.'

In the summer of 1989, I was part of a delegation that went to a Church Youth Conference in Estes Park, Colorado. Since the Conference began on a Sunday afternoon, our group began the trek on Saturday morning. The general plan was to travel from Lubbock to Colorado Springs on Saturday, and then on to Estes Park that Sunday morning. However, when I arrived at the church early that Saturday morning, I discovered that our group leader had actually put together a much more detailed timetable. He had carefully measured out the distance between key stops along the way. And beginning at 7:14 am – the time he selected for our departure – he had estimated arrival and departure times for rest stops, gas stops, a picnic lunch, and our check in at the hotel in Colorado Springs. He had it down to a science. Our first stop would be in Amarillo for gas and restrooms. We had 18 minutes to get four vehicles refueled and 25 teenagers in and out of a convenience store. Somehow, we did just that.

I was so impressed with the planning and precision of this that I decided to create a similar timetable for our family's summer vacation. It was fun to see how close to the schedule we would stay. Well, it was fun for me. I don't know that the rest of the family was as thrilled with the tight schedule and my insistence that we stay close to my estimated arrival and departure times.

Creating these timetables was a fun thing to do for several years. But this was in the days before the internet was mainstream. Soon, Mapquest came along and it could construct in nanoseconds what would have taken me several hours of planning. And then the amazing power of Mapquest was replaced with the widespread availability of GPS systems. With GPS, you didn't need to construct a plan. It could all be done in real time. Your GPS could tell you the most direct route. It could provide turn-by-turn navigation, with estimated arrival times for each marker. And, the wealth of features on the GPS allowed us to plan ahead for restrooms, for gas, and for adding side trips to scenic sights like the *second largest ball of twine on the face of the earth, which is only four short hours away*...to quote a famous movie.

While GPS systems have some limitations, one of the best things about GPS is if you get off the suggested route, the system works to get you back on track. Older GPS models used to shout "recalculating" at you, while newer models omit that scolding by simply providing the next best option for getting back on course. Whether you come across construction, an unplanned stop, or an incredible opportunity to view a large ball of twine, the great thing about the GPS is that it always stays focused on helping you get to your final destination.

This morning, we are looking at a group of psalms that function like this – sort of a spiritual GPS. These psalms, known as the Psalms of Zion, take us from where we are and point us in the direction of our final destination. These psalms point us to "Zion."

But what is “Zion?” What does the word “Zion” mean? Most of us couldn’t answer this question, even though the Bible suggests that’s where we should be heading. Luckily, we are in good company when it comes to this lack of clarity. Even though the word “Zion” occurs 154 times in Old Testament, even scholars find the word “Zion” confusing. Scholars think that its origins lie buried in ancient Semitic references to mountains, specifically to mountains with fortresses built upon them. But, the Bible doesn’t only use this definition when using the word “Zion.”

In the Bible, the word “Zion” refers first and most often to the hill on which the ancient walled city of Jerusalem was built. But there are three other ways that “Zion” is referred to in the Bible. First, when King David made Jerusalem the capital around 1000 BC and began arranging for the adjacent hilltop – Mt. Moriah – to be the permanent location for the Temple, the name “Zion” was extended to that hill as well. Second, over time, all of God’s chosen people – Israel – began to be known as “Zion.” And third, when the prophets began to talk about the future state of blessing that God was moving His people and all of history towards, that heavenly future began to be described as “Zion” as well.

To help give clarity to the complexity of “Zion,” the ancient church developed an interpretive method known as the *Quadrige* – a Latin word that referred to a chariot pulled by four horses. This interpretative method assumes that the Bible has four levels of meaning: a literal sense, a moral sense, an anagogical or “spiritual” sense, and an allegorical or “eternal significance” sense. Analyzed this way, the word “Zion” was understood to refer to an actual place in Israel (the literal “Zion”), to the human heart where the Spirit of God dwells (the moral or personal “Zion”), to the church (the spiritual “Zion”) and to heaven (the eternal “Zion”).ⁱ And such was the case in Psalm 87.

The first three verses of Psalm 87 sing about the literal “Zion” - “Zion” as God’s city. God founded it. God loves it more than any other. It is the envy of the whole world. Glorious things are spoken of Zion.

It’s after speaking these truths that the word *Selah* appears at the end of verse three. *Selah* is a difficult-to-translate Hebrew word. Eugene Peterson suggested that it was David’s word for “Hang on, I broke a string.” It’s most often understood to be a worship-leader direction to the congregation that means “stop and meditate on that for a minute.” And that is what we must do to properly understand what “Zion” meant to ancient Israel.

“Zion” – the city of God – was a place where the people of God went to be with God. Numerous times this summer, I have talked about the pilgrimages that devout Jews made three times each year to Jerusalem. For them, Jerusalem – “Zion” – was a holy place; a place to be present with God.

Today, we don’t quite grasp the extent of this concept. As Protestant Christians, we don’t have an attachment to a particular place – at least not like our Jewish forebears do with Jerusalem, or our Catholic friends with the Vatican. Perhaps the closest we come to this is Athens, Texas.

As you know, Athens, Texas, is the home of Disciples Crossing, the camp our children and youth here at First Christian go to multiple times each year. About ten years ago, a group of high school students started calling Athens, Texas, “heaven on earth.” The relationships they formed and the experiences they shared there at camp were different from anything else in their worlds. Eventually, the camp picked up on this and began to sell t-shirts and other swag with this phrase emblazoned across it.

Theologically, I had issues with our students calling Athens, Texas, “heaven on earth.” But, their notion was right. Camp was a place where they experienced the

presence of God more deeply; where they had an encounter with the holy. By calling it heaven, they were attempting to describe a place where God could be known.

In similar ways, this is how “Zion” was known among the Jews. “Zion” (Jerusalem) was the place of God’s special presence among his people.ⁱⁱ To know that city was to know God. In fact, in the view of ancient Israel, the city itself made God known. In Psalm 48, one of the other Psalms of Zion, the psalmist declares: “Walk about Zion, go all around it, count its towers...Tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever.” (Psalm 48:12, 13b-14)

To say it a little differently, many ancient Israelites looked on the city – its walls, its temple, its strength – as a “means of grace.”ⁱⁱⁱ In theological circles, a “means of grace” is something through which our faith is fortified. Things like prayer, preaching the word, and bread and cup are examples of “means of grace.” Often, they are common elements – like bread and juice – that do an uncommon work, confirming our trust in God. That’s how “Zion” – how the city of Jerusalem – functioned for the Jews. The city reaffirmed to them that they were God’s beloved. Here, they believed, they could go to God for protection from evil – for help and deliverance. The city itself fortified their faith.

Jerusalem has also been a place of significance for Christians as well. We recall that Jerusalem was the place where Jesus was brought as a child to be “presented” at the Temple. We read in the Gospels that Jesus attended festivals in Jerusalem, and that he preached and healed there. And of course, we know that Jesus gathered with his disciples in an “upper room” in Jerusalem, and then was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, put on trial, crucified, and buried in Jerusalem. This city was also the site of his resurrection and ascension.

In similar ways, both Judaism and Christianity claim Jerusalem to be significant because it serves as a picture that points to something much greater. For Jews, it points

to God's presence with them. There they could gladly go into the house of the Lord (Psalm 122) and dwell in the presence of God. There they could go for help and deliverance.^{iv} For Christians like us, Jerusalem also points to God's presence - the reality of how God became present with the world – through Jesus Christ; Emmanuel; God with us. For Christians, Jerusalem is the place where God set the Chief Cornerstone, where we see the fulfillment of “Zion” in the fullest sense: God dwelling with God's people. And, as Christians, it also points toward the place we call home – the heavenly “Zion.”

There has been lots of activity across the street this week. College students have been moving into their dorms; back into their apartments; back to Wichita Falls for the next 13 weeks. While we get to claim them as ours for the next 13 weeks, most of these MSU students were born somewhere else. They have a home elsewhere. They are still citizens of Kyle or Rockwall or Arlington or Keller or Amarillo or Lawton or wherever they grew up. Yet, regardless of where home is, Wichita Falls is also home.

In the final four verses of Psalm 87, a similar, but even more profound, declaration is made. Verses 4-7 reveal that there are citizens of the City of God resident in all the nations of the world. In fact, the Psalm even suggests that some of these residents aren't Israelites. Psalm 87 lists some of the known enemies of Israel – Rahab (Egypt), Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, and Cush (Ethiopia) – and claims that there, in these countries, too, are residents of “Zion.” Clearly, they were not born in “Zion.” Clearly, “Zion's” constituency is not truly made up of the physical descendants of Abraham.

Instead, there is a ‘Zion’ whose citizens are the sons and daughters of Abraham by faith – a citizenship shared with others. In other words, the theological distinctiveness that Psalm 87 declares is that those who acknowledge the Lord have birthright status in “Zion” – they belong to God - no matter where they live. Their true home is the place toward which their spirits turn in yearning for God.^v This is the “Zion” of

eternal significance. It's the final destination in our spiritual GPS systems. It's the new Jerusalem – the eternal “Zion” - where we will see God face to face (1 Corinthians 13). It's where we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever (Psalm 23). It's where Jesus prepared a place for us (John 14:1-6).

What the Psalms of Zion do for us is provide a focus. They remind us that life has a direction and a destination. It's about being with God. And, if you know where you are going – the destination you are aiming for - it helps you “recalculate” along the way. Said another way, knowing where we are going should impact what we do today: the routes we take, the trouble we avoid, the opportunities we select. We could get thrown off course by a coworker who suggests that no one will know if we do something a little shady to win this client. We could get delayed by a small disagreement that causes us to break ties with a particular community. We could get overwhelmed by opportunities to chase power and wealth and status. But, if we want to stay the course – to keep following the correct route – the key is to anticipate. To anticipate...before you participate. With some help from the Holy Spirit prompting us to follow the route laid out for us, we can do just that. This is the personal, or inner, “Zion” – the human heart. It's here that we let the Holy Spirit dwell with us and shape our actions.

And just as the inner “Zion” directs us to anticipate before we participate, the spiritual “Zion” – the church – directs us to anticipate when we participate. When you went to bed last night and when you got up this morning, did you anticipate that God would be waiting for you here at church? Did you anticipate that God would do something powerful in your life or in the life of someone else here this morning when you participated in worship this morning? What every one of the Psalms of Zion suggest is that Jews approached Jerusalem (literal “Zion”) for feasts with the anticipation of an encounter with God. As Christians, we should approach worship, the spiritual “Zion” with exactly the same kind of expectation. For it is here where the

bread of Communion is broken and the cup is poured out that Jesus promised he would be present. It is here, when the Word is faithfully proclaimed, that Jesus Christ promised to be present, opening our eyes and warming our hearts. It is here, where two or three people gather in his name, that Jesus Christ promised to be in our midst. Every time we make our way to this place, shouldn't we anticipate that God is present here in our midst in very specific and special ways?

This is what a focus on the final destination – the eternal “Zion” – does for us as individuals and the church in the meantime. It keeps our attention on where God is now and where God promises to be with us for all of eternity. C.S. Lewis once suggested that this kind of eternal focus “isn't a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is...Instead, we are to aim at Heaven and you will get earth “thrown in.” Aim at earth, and you will get neither.”^{vi}

In just a moment, we are going to sing a Communion Hymn (*Come Share the Lord*) that speaks of this reality. Its third verse claims: *Now we anticipate the feast for which we wait.* This is what verse 7 of Psalm 87 proclaims. “All my springs are in God – my whole source of joy is in you.” When we recognize that we are God's children and that God will one day be calling us home for supper, it helps us see more clearly more clearly where we are heading...and what we should do to keep “home” in sight.

Selah. Maybe we should take a moment to meditate on that.

ⁱ Skinner, Douglas B. *Vertical Habits – Psalms of Zion*. August 25, 2013.

ⁱⁱ Piper, John. “Out of Zion, the Perfection of Beauty, God Shines Forth” in *Desiring God*. October 8, 1989.
<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/out-of-zion-the-perfection-of-beauty-god-shines-forth>

ⁱⁱⁱ Jacobson, Rolf A. and Karl N. Jacobson, *Invitation to the Psalms: A Readers Guide for Discovery and Engagement*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013.

^{iv} Piper.

^v Mays, James L. “Psalms” in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

^{vi} Lewis, C.S. *The Weight of Glory*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001.