

A psalm of belonging

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[0:00] Here's a thing. One of these. You know what that is? It's a passport. This is a passport to show somebody who's a citizen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

! That's a passport. And some people would pay thousands and thousands of pounds to get one of those, wouldn't they? And they would cross thousands of miles to have one of those. I have one, not because I'm particularly worthy or special. I just happen to be born here in God's mysterious providence.

But if you want to find some other route, this is from expaptica.com. Understand how to get a British passport and take the UK citizenship and more.

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And as all the terms and conditions, notice please if you come from Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland, it's different. Anyway, how to get citizenship. Not something I've ever had to exercise myself with, but we know, and maybe some of you know personally, that's a thing, to get hold of one of those.

[1:30] Now then, it's about the privilege, the protection, the status, the security of citizenship. We're going to look into this psalm, Psalm 87, and it is a song.

It tells us it's a psalm, a song, right at the beginning. It is a song about the Lord God, the God of Israel. Not just any God, but the Lord God.

It is a song about a particular place, his mountain. And in the time when this was written, God, in a sense, sort of limited himself geographically and had a geographical center of operations, his mountain, upon which was a city, his city.

And there it is, if you like. And it's about the people in the city. And there's some of the people. The city is called Zion, which is another word for Jerusalem.

You know, we have that name now. Zion, Jerusalem, same thing. And this psalm starts with, and people would have understood it to refer to, a physical, earthly city.

[2:47] All those years ago, this was written more than 2,000 years ago, starts with a physical, earthly city. But it goes further and higher than that physical, earthly city.

And in the end, it leaves behind the physical, earthly city. Until the time when one day the city of God will come from heaven down to, and the dwelling of God will be with men.

And so there will be a physicality and an earthliness, but only in the very last day, when the city becomes everything, really. So that's the theme of this psalm.

And my plan is, it's a celebration of belonging to the city, of being a citizen of God's city. So I've got three things to say.

One, the secure foundation of the city. So Maria was right to think foundation, but it wasn't the exact word at the last end, but foundation is important. Number two, the marvellous grace of the city.

[4:00] So secure foundation and marvellous grace. And thirdly, delightful privileges. Something that I hope, if I do it properly by God's help, ought to make us go home thinking, I'm really glad to be part of that.

Okay, one, two, and three. Here's number one. The secure foundation of the city. I want to say there is something that just comes in straight off the bat. Very definite, strong, fixed, asserted about the city.

It says, verse one, he has set his foundation on the holy mountain. It doesn't even say he has set. It just says, his foundation on the holy mountain.

It's a good way to start a song. It's an assertion. His foundation on the holy mountain. Something strong and secure. He has set his, he has founded, he has established this city strongly.

Bam! Set his foundation on the holy mountain. And as we go through, I'd like you to think, how strong is that foundation? Because I would like us to come away thinking, actually, that strength is stronger than any other.

[5:22] The other bond that I can think of in the whole created world. This establishment lasts forever. The mountains shake, but the city stands forever. The cosmos shakes, but the city stands forever.

There's a song which says, the city of God remains. So I'd like us to think that that is a strong foundation. And it's a strong foundation, not on any ordinary mountain, but on the holy mountain. He set his foundation on the holy mountain. And let's not bypass what holiness is. It is the moral and relational character of the Lord God himself sort of distilled down and the essence of that. And he says, that's what is on this mountain. This mountain is holy with my holiness. That's a special thing about this mountain.

Of course, the Mount Zion, the physical one, never achieved that. But that's what's said about this. This is a holy place. Holy with the holiness of God.

[6:29] And the second thing he says in this security is, the Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob. The word was a little bit the other way around in the original, but it starts off with loves.

It says, loves. The Lord loves this mountain, this city more than any of the other places that you could think he could love. And the love, now then, those of you who often come know that I have a particular word for love that I like to emphasize.

But it's not that one. It's not that one. It's the other one. And the other one is a choosing love. It's where there is no prior commitment, making a prior commitment, or making a commitment to say, so of all the mountains that the Lord looked at, he said, well, which one shall I love?

I'll love that one. The Lord set his love on that mountain. No, why did he do that? We don't know.

But it says, that's what he did.

Of course, that's the secret of its security, isn't it? That the Lord chose to set his love on this place more than anywhere else. The Lord loves the gates of Zion.

[7:51] The gates, I think, being the place where the business happens. But this place here, more than all the dwellings of Jacob, he sets his love on this place.

So it's not the steadfast love word. It's the choosing love word. Nowhere else is more loved than this. That's what it says, isn't it? Nowhere else is more loved than this.

And I think, isn't that an amazing thing? That God should set his love on, well, actually anywhere but here.

And this here involves the people. And the wonder that he should set his love upon anyone, anywhere, because we're sinners. And the Lord says, I love.

I set my love upon that city. And there's some other things. So we're still talking about the secure foundation. I'm dotting around through the verses because things crop up in various places.

[8:52] Look at this verse 5. The Lord Most High himself will establish her. Or you could translate it, the Lord Most High will make her stand.

Not quite the same as the earthly Jerusalem. The earthly Jerusalem fell, didn't it? To everybody's shock. The promises are made about Zion. So how could the earthly Zion fall?

How could the Babylonians ruin it? How could the Romans destroy it? Which shows, of course, that God's promise isn't really about a physical mountain and a physical city.

But it's about something. And the Lord Most High will establish her. And here's the question. How strongly is she established? And I'm going to say she's established more strongly than anything, than creation itself.

Do you know? I reinstalled the operating system and everything. And it's still doing it. It outlasts the earthly Zion.

[9:59] In Galatians, Paul says, he talks about the present. So this is in the New Testament times.

After Jesus has died and risen and gone to heaven, he says that the present city of Jerusalem is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above, the heavenly Jerusalem, is free. And she is our mother, says Paul in the New Testament. And in Hebrews 12, he says, of the privileges of being a Christian.

Let me just find it for you. In Hebrews 12, he says, What have you come to as a Christian? You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire. But you have come to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God.

[10:57] And if you're a Christian, that's where you are now. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven.

You have come to God, the judge of all men, the spirits of righteous men made perfect. That's where you are in that abiding, eternal, secure city of God.

This is the city that outlasts all others. And what we've been celebrating this morning is just reiterating the promises by which we belong by faith to the people of God, to the church of Jesus Christ.

And let me just pick up one other very definite thing about this in Psalm 87, which is the recording of names.

So there's a name written on the scroll. And this is a little bit of a mischievous thing. I wonder if anybody knows whose name that is.

[12:07] So I'll give you a clue. Aaron, you might know more than anybody else whose name that is. It is. Well done. Yeah. If that's, yes. Just the simplest one I could think of to spell.

Okay. And it says here that the citizens' names are definitely recorded. Look at verse 4. I will record then some names. And it says in verse 6, the Lord will write.

And he writes in a register. So I will record. The Lord will write in the register. So three times, really, it's saying these are names written down. There is something about putting these names, you know, your name, Aaron's name.

The names are written in this register. And there is something definitely in or out. Is the name on the register? It's a little bit like going through immigration. Do you actually have a passport?

Is your name on the role of people who have a citizenship? Yes or no? You know, there's no halfway. It's a yes or no. And this is the same thing here. You're definitely in or out.

[13:15] And our church membership says, count me in, doesn't it? It doesn't make you a Christian to become a church member in that sense. You become part of Jesus Christ, part of his church by faith, as we shall see when you're born again.

But it's just putting up your hand and saying, I've got this and I'm up for it. Count me in. And this is writing by the Lord. I will record.

I will record. The Lord will write the name in the register. I think that's something, don't you? The Lord writes it down.

Nobody can rub that out. If he has written my name in, then no one can erase it. I think that's the same thought that the Apostle Paul has in a slightly different context.

But in Romans chapter 8, he says, if we belong to Christ, then neither life nor death, nor principalities nor powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[14:29] I think that's a wonderful promise. It says this is secure. If your name's in that book, nobody can blot you out. If he's written it down, nobody can erase it.

Nothing can separate us. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. There's something very definite and secure about this.

And to have that security, it seems to me, brothers and sisters, that the logic of the Bible is if you have that security, security, really and truly, other things don't matter so much.

I'm just going to say that because it's quite a radical thing to say. If we've got that security that our names are written in heaven and can never be written out, there's lots of other things that we might

be upset about.

But actually, if you've got that, everything's actually okay. And he says that how much more will he, if he hasn't spared his own son, how much more will he give us all things, all providences, all situations.

[15:38] They're all in God's hands and they're all come through his love and for his purposes. To have that security is to have everything, really. So that was number one, the secure foundation of the city.

So number two is the marvelous grace of the city. So the word grace I'm using to mean, not sort of elegance of beauty, like a graceful tennis shot, but grace meaning not according to natural right or earning.

So grace is a benefit that comes not because it's a natural right and not because you've earned it. It comes from some other method. And I'm thinking of the people of the city.

And the city, of course, is not an empty city. We're not just admiring the architecture of the city, but thinking of the people of the city. Please look at the names of the people. Verse four.

I will record Rahab. You might think that's a nice name. You know, like, what could you name a child?

[16:46] Rahab? Veruca? Influenza? All sorts of beautiful child's names like that. Rahab, though. That's something, isn't it?

Rahab. And what's the next one? I'm going to have a flag for Rahab. Babylon. Babel.

Whatever it's in your language. Somebody from Babylon. Philistia. Philistia. Philistia.

So there's the Philistines. What happens to the Philistines? What do you usually do with Philistines in the Bible? You usually kill them. Yeah. Because they're David's enemies.

The enemies of the kingdom. And so there's a Philistine flag. Tyre. Tyre was a trading center.

[17:43] It wasn't a Jewish place. It was, in a way, the bit that you tried to steer clear of. It was pagan. But particularly, it grew a reputation for trade. For money.

You know, like big business. Kush. I think the thing that Kush is famous for is just being a long way away.

And when they talk about Kush, they think, that's miles away. And look, these are the people who are recorded in Zion. And I'll just take a moment for you to pick your jaw up off the floor.

Because this is not what we would expect. The city is not empty. The, I will record Rahab, Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, Cush.

And we'll say of them, these, what does it say? These acknowledge me, verse 4. And these were born there, verse 4. And these people are either total enemies, complete enemies, or totally unsuitable.

[18:56] Yeah? Do you agree with me? This list of people are people who are complete enemies, or they're totally unsuitable. Rahab is Egypt. That was the enemy.

Babylon was the enemy. Philistines were the enemy. Tyre is not interested in Israel. God's just interested in making money. And Cush is so far away, it's completely irrelevant, as it were.

And these are the people that God says, I'm going to have them in my city. I mean, not all of them, but people from Egypt are going to be in my city. And people from Babylon are going to be in my city.

And people from Tyre are going to be in my city. They're totally unsuitable by culture or by distance. And these people, somehow, not all of them, but some of them end up in Zion.

And I think this is a very bold statement that how could God include this lot in his holy city? And I think there's something going on here that is grace.

[20:02] Do you get me? It's grace. It's God saying to people who are totally unsuited or even enemies and say, I'm going to woo you and win you and change your heart and bring you and make you suitable to be in my holy city.

Could he do that? Apparently, yes. And I'm reminded of the apostle Peter on the day of Pentecost, the day that the gospel exploded to all the nations.

And he makes a promise through Jesus Christ. His listeners say, what must we do? And he says, and what does he say? Repent and believe in Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

Come to Jesus Christ and you can be part of this city. And who does this apply to? Well, it applies to you. So if you're inhabitants of the ancient city, it applies to you.

And if you're children of those who belonged in that ancient city, it applies to you. And if you are far off, if you are in Egypt, it applies to you.

[21:14] And if you are an inhabitant of Babylon, it applies to you. And if you're in big business, that promise that you can come to Jesus Christ, have a changed life, a changed heart and belong in the city, that applies to you.

And even if you're a long way off and nobody's ever heard of where you actually come from, whatever it is, that applies to you too. It's wonderful, isn't it? It's gospel. It is marvelous grace. And notice that what is said here in verse 4, Philistia and Tyre along with Cush will say, this one was born there.

In verse 5, indeed of Zion it will be said, this one and that one were born in her. So there's something about birth. You know, you struggle to get your head around it, don't you?

Because somehow it can be possible to say Egyptians were born in Zion or Babylonians were born in Zion or people who are totally unsuitable were born in Zion.

[22:20] And the city is their mother city. I think I've got a picture of a pregnant lady on there somewhere, but I don't click in case it's wrong. This city becomes their mother.

And how, there we go, and how does that happen? A little bit like the question Nicodemus asked Jesus. Do you remember Nicodemus asked Jesus a how question?

How can these things be? And Jesus says, do you not understand what it's all about? Flesh gives birth to flesh.

Yeah? Babylonians give birth to Babylonians. Egyptians give birth to Egyptians. Flesh gives birth to flesh. But the spirit gives birth to spirit.

And the spirit gives birth to a Babylonian to become a citizen of Zion. You must be born again, said Jesus.

[23:18] You must be born again. He's not talking about being baptized as a baby. He's talking about the spiritual, the work of the spirit. The mysterious and deep work of the spirit in a human being that makes them new.

Gives them a new citizenship. They are born again. And this one and that one were born in her. And they get written down in the record.

They belong to Zion. And I just pause to say, maybe this is the one thing that you have come along to church this morning lacking.

You have come along this morning and you know the people. You know the songs. You're familiar with the Bible in a sense. But your heart has never been changed.

And maybe that's the one thing you need to go home and say to God. You know, those people are born again. I want to be born again. Do that for me.

[24:25] Whatever it takes. Do that for me so that I'm born again. Born in her. Thirdly, the delightful privileges of the city.

So not only has it got strong security and marvelous grace. So I chose the word marvelous because I think we should marvel at that grace. But also delightful privilege.

In other words, it's not a boring or indifferent matter to belong to this city. So let me just take us to the very last verse here. Which says, verse 7. As they make music, they will sing.

All my fountains are in you. So right after we get to the end of it, we've talked about the city. We've talked about the foundation of it. We've talked about being born. And we've talked about the register.

And now we come across these people singing. And in the original it says something like the flute players and the musicians. So there's a sort of team effort here.

[25:24] They're singing. And what they're singing is, all my fountains are in you. I presume the you is the city. It could be God, couldn't it? But let's take it as being the city.

And they sing. They're glad. It's a place of joy. It's a place where people sing. Yeah, it is, isn't it? It's a place where people sing.

And the singing here is glad singing. I'm glad to be a citizen of this city. It's great to be a citizen. You know, wow, this is amazing. They're amazed and overwhelmed.

And perhaps it's the security. You know, I'm secure in this city of God. Perhaps it's the grace that makes them sing. Oh, isn't it an amazing thing that I, who are so far off, I'm, you know, Babylonian or whatever I might be.

Maybe a barbaric English person. I have come to be a member of this city. This is great. Makes the heart sing. Perhaps for the goodness and holy beauty of the city.

[26:30] I'm in a holy place where God is. For the privileges of the city. They know the Lord, it says. Did you notice that in verse 4? I haven't stopped on everything that it was said.

They know the Lord. And, of course, it's God himself. I understand it. Verse 3. I think that's God saying that, or at least certainly agreeing with it.

This is a glorious place. And it would make you sing, wouldn't it, to belong to a glorious city? This is my city. I thought of Isaiah's songs where he says something like this.

Therefore, the redeemed of the Lord will return and come with singing to Zion. And everlasting joy will crown their heads. To make your heart sing, even a little bit. To think part of that city.

They sing. Now, I'll just qualify it slightly. It's not the only emotion that the Psalms have. Because there's sad Psalms. Maybe you're singing a sad Psalm this morning.

[27:39] But it's not the only emotion that there is. And it's not all the time. But they do sing. This is a singing city. And what are they singing about?

Well, a particular thing is, all my fountains are in use. So I thought I'd just emphasize, we've got that living water. Probably didn't look like that.

But there's water that springs up inside this city. Now, that was actually geographically true.

There was a spring inside the city. And they actually had to defend that spring of water against sieges. And we sang.

And it's there in Psalm 46. There is a river, the streams of which make glad the city of God. There is a bubbling spring. It's a flowing river.

[28:34] There is a flowing river within God's holy city. That refreshes and makes glad the people of God. It's a place of living refreshment is what I put up there.

Jesus commented on this. I think this is what he was commenting on. Personally, when he was ministering in Jerusalem, it was the Feast of Tabernacles.

If I remember correctly. You can correct me if I'm wrong on that. And the Feast, in the time that Jesus celebrated it, had lights. And it had a water-pouring ceremony.

And the rabbis were so proud of it. They would say, you know, if you haven't been to Jerusalem, when the lights were shining and the water was being poured, you haven't lived. And at that feast, it says of Jesus, on the last and greatest day of the feast, Jesus stood up and said in a loud voice, If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.

And out of his belly will flow streams of living water. He says, I... Do you see what Jesus is saying? That actually, here's the truth of it, that the living water doesn't actually come from a bit of a city.

[29:57] It comes from the king of the city. It comes from Jesus himself. And John's Gospel goes on to explain, By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.

For the Spirit was not yet given. Have I put that? Because Jesus had not yet been glorified. The key to the giving of the Spirit, the key to the flowing of the river, is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

When he has been glorified, which means dying on the cross and rising from the dead, when he has been glorified, then the Spirit is given.

And if anybody is thirsty, come and drink from the water that Jesus gives. And if you want to put it poetically, which is where my mind always goes on this, at the cross, Jesus was stabbed with a spear, and out of his side flowed blood and water.

And it's a poetical thing rather than a theological thing or exegetical thing. But where does the water that gives us life come from?

[31:11] It comes from the wounded side of Jesus. The delightful privileges of the city. So we've looked at this psalm. It's a song about the Lord God and about his mountain and about his city.

And it's about the people in the city. We've talked about the secure foundation of the city, an eternal foundation, I would say. The security of having your own passport of being written in the register by the Lord himself.

We've talked about the marvelous grace of the city. How amazingly Babylonians, Egyptians, enemies are brought in and made suitable by being born again.

We've talked about the delightful privileges of the city. It's a place of joy. Songs are sung there rightly. There's a good reason to sing them.

Fountains of living water are found in that city to refresh the weary soul, to give life to the dehydrated. It's not a city on earth.

[32:17] It is the city in heaven. But one day, heaven and earth will be united in a new heaven and an earth. So, to close, I want to say, if you're a member of that city, be glad.

Isn't that what it's saying? What a privilege. Let's have our eyes open to that. What a privilege. Glorious things are spoken of you. And live as a citizen.

We're no longer Babylonians. We don't do the old Babylonian stuff. And we're no longer citizens of Tyre. We don't do the Tyre stuff. We do the Jerusalem stuff. We live as blessed children of God in his holy mountain.

And if you're not in, I would say, don't rest till you get in. Don't rest until you have somehow got a good reason to see your name written down by God.

Yeah, I'm in that book. Amazing as it may be. If you're in, be glad. If you're not in, get in. Let's sing a song together to close. Let's sing a song together to close.