

Born in Zion

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Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0 : 00] Hello and welcome to our pre-recorded evening service for Sunday the 23rd of March.! This service is brought to you by Calvary Church Brighton. My name is Steve Ellacott and I'm one of the deacons.

If you're not a local, Brighton is a city on the south coast of the UK, directly south of London. Our congregation in normal times is about 70 to 80 people. And if you're one of our regulars, then thank you for joining with us in this virtual way, even though we would prefer to meet in person as we have started to do in the mornings now.

If you're not part of our regular congregation, then a particular welcome. I trust you will find something helpful in these extraordinary times. So let's start our meeting together by prayer. Let's pray.

Father, as we come to you, we acknowledge that you are holy and constant, but we are not. We praise you for your holiness. And we acknowledge that even in this pandemic is only your judgment on a sinful world.

We pray that people might learn the lesson and turn and seek you again. And we thank you that the evil is restrained and that in mercy you have provided us an escape through these vaccines.

[1 : 17] We bring before you those throughout the world who are fighting to end this suffering and ask that you will give them success. And then this suffering reminds us of the suffering that Jesus endured for us.

And we pray that in this dark times, Jesus will be glorified. As we'll be thinking later of the peace of Zion, we cannot but be reminded of the renewed war in the earthly Jerusalem and ask that you will restrain those who seek to gain their ends by violence.

We thank you that a ceasefire does seem to have been announced. We pray for our other needs as a church, particularly the need for future ministry as Pastor Philip prepares to retire.

We acknowledge our need of your help and thank you for the service that Philip has given to you in the church over many decades and continues to give us now. And we thank you that we've been able to reopen our Sunday morning meetings. Father, bless this new beginning.

We pray for our sister churches in Brighton. We remember particularly New Life Brighton as it enters into a new partnership with the Grace Baptist Initiative. We lift up to you every church in our city that holds out the light of life in a dark time.

[2 : 36] May the message of Jesus Christ shine out and may your church be a city set on a hill and a light that cannot be hidden. So we lift our hearts up to you now as we meditate, sing and study your word.

Bless our time together. And may we be like that tree planted by water that gives fruit in due season. We ask these things in Jesus name. Amen.

So Jerusalem, the city of Shalom, the city of completeness, of peace. And yet can there be a city in the world more fought over?

Once again, violence erupts on its streets. There are those who claim that the world is becoming more peaceful, but it's difficult to see much evidence of this.

Wars once fought with siege towers and chariots are now being fought with aircraft and rockets. It's true that since 1945, Europe has enjoyed a time of relative peace.

[3 : 40] But that just shows how Eurocentric our vision is and how, what's more, how dependent it is on a Christian consensus. There's been no peace in the world.

And as the pandemic causes stress to our civilization, we're seeing signs that violence is returning to our streets. Fueled by internet hate or simple despair, suicide and domestic violence are reaching epidemic proportions.

Hard-run freedoms such as we think of the American First Amendment that guarantees freedom of speech are being attacked in the very name of freedom.

Those claiming to speak for racial equality promote divisive anti-white propaganda that will most likely backfire and do more harm than good in the cause it claims to support.

History is being rewritten to suit a woke agenda. Whether on the political right or left, those who take to the streets in the name of justice seem to think that gives a license for mob rule.

[4 : 46] What are we to make of this as Christians? The fact is that we acknowledge that violence lurks in the heart of each of us. It merely needs a spark to ignite it.

And of course, professing Christians have fallen prey to it sometimes. When in a position to do so, Christians have resorted to violence.

The murder of Hypatia in AD 415 casts a long shadow down the ages. Christians sometimes have supported slavery and injustice.

Christian history is far from squeaky clean. And yet Christianity over the centuries created the nearest thing the world has yet seen to a peaceful and just society.

Which the world is now in the process of dismantling in the name of freedom. But this is not unexpected. Jesus himself said that the gospel would bring conflict to the world.

[5 : 47] And yet the gospel is a message of peace, of enemies reconciled. And in our reading today, we find a remarkable description of this.

So our study for today is Psalm 87. Let me read it to you. Of the sons of Korah, a Psalm, a song. He has founded his city on the holy mountain. The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the other dwellings of Jacob. Glorious things are said of you, city of 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.

Indeed of Zion. Indeed of Zion, it will be said, this one and that one were born in her. And the most high himself will establish her. The Lord will write in the register of the peoples.

[6 : 49] This one was born in Zion. As they make music, they will sing. All my fountains are in you. May God have a blessing to the reading of his word.

Normally, when I've been taking these studies in Psalms, we have sung the Psalm at the end. But this time I propose to end with John Newton's hymn, which is based on this psalm, but which gives it a more personal emphasis. So we will sing the psalm itself now in the version in praise. Number 87 in praise. Zion founded on the mountain. God your maker loves you well.

He has chosen you as precious. He delights in you to dwell.

[8 : 13] God's own city. God's own city. Who can all your glory tell?

Who can all your glory tell? God's own city.

Glorious things of you are spoken. Zion city of our God.

People of all tribes and nations have one birthplace to record.

Born in Zion. Born in Zion. Born in Zion. This is written by the Lord.

[9 : 11] This is written by the Lord. Born in Zion. Born in Zion. Born in Zion. Born in Zion.

Born in Zion. Born in Zion. Born in Zion. Born in Zion. Born in Zion. Living water, God himself shall be their song.

God himself shall be their song. Where you live matters, doesn't it?

We all want to live somewhere pleasant, somewhere we can feel at home. Of course, we may have different ideas of what pleasant means, but the one thing nobody wants to be is a refugee.

And it matters where you were born, too. It affects your citizenship, doesn't it? Where you have a right to live. The sons of Korah were a Levite clan who formed one of the two temple choirs, the other being Asaph.

[10 : 38] As we've been going through book three of the Psalms, we've seen that most of them are attributed to one of these two choirs. As the temple musicians, Jerusalem was where the sons of Korah would call home, as they tell us in verse seven.

The temple was their place of work, but they weren't commuters in a hurry to get back to the leafy suburbs. This was the place they loved, the place they delighted to be.

Jerusalem didn't have its own natural water supply, which was always its defensive weakness as a city. And yet the psalmist describes it as a place of refreshing springs.

The sons of Korah considered it a privilege to live there. For this wasn't a privilege they jealously guarded.

They acknowledged that Zion is the spiritual home of all the descendants of Jacob. Verse two. But what makes it such a special place? It's not the natural environment on top of a mountain.

[11:44] In fact, according to Strong's, the word Zion actually means a parched place, not a place where you expect to find refreshing fountains.

No, the attraction of Zion is a desirable residence, as it is the place where the Lord himself loves to be. Zion is glorious because it is the city of God.

The place where the Lord himself makes his home. Of course, it has had glorious rulers in the past, particularly in the time of David and Solomon.

But they don't even get a mention in this brief song. The essential point, the point that the sons of Korah want to remind us, is that it is a pleasant place because it is the city of God.

But at this point, the song takes a rather strange turn. What we'd expect at this stage would be a description of Jewish pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem.

[12:45] There are many psalms that do have that. In fact, there's a whole block of them. Psalms 120 to 134, which are called the Psalms of Ascents. And they're thought to have been sung by pilgrims approaching the city and the temple.

Yet Psalm 87 is not one of them. This is not a song, if you want to put it in those terms, of Jewish nationalism. In fact, it must have been quite shocking to those who first heard it.

So shocking, in fact, that some translators suggest the meaning is just that the nations would acknowledge the primacy of Zion. But it's quite clear the spiritual interpretation is intended here.

As we have said, Jerusalem has no natural springs. And if it just means those who are literally born in Zion, why would the Lord have to write the register?

So we have this list of undesirables, foreign powers, most of whom were indeed Israel's enemies. Rahab is a poetic term for Egypt.

[13:56] Babylon, the city to the east, the great oppressor. Philistia was the old enemy, the old foe whom Israel never quite managed to dislodge from their towns on the coast.

Tyre was the merchant city to the north. At the time of Solomon, it had been an ally, but more often it was hostile to Judah. And then we read of Kesh.

Kesh is the upper Nile, Ethiopia, as we might say today, perhaps representing more distant nations. This is nothing less than a song about the adoption of foreigners into the kingdom.

It's nothing less than an invitation to these ancient people. And indeed today to you and me today to join in the kingdom, which God himself establishes.

Whatever your background, says this psalm, you're welcome. But you do need a new loyalty. Who is the I of verse four?

[15:07] It's either the Lord himself or perhaps Zion as the personification of the city of God. And what it is, what is said of these nations? The sense here in the Hebrew is of a formal announcement or proclamation, which is repeated as in verse six.

When our sister Anya became a British citizen, she had to do a lot of tests and paperwork and stuff. But then there was a formal welcome declaring the fact that all the paperwork was in order.

It was all done and dusted and put in the official records. And this is what we are talking of here. An acknowledgement of the citizenship of those who are not natural citizens.

But notice that the psalm does not say that all the people of these nations are included. They are singled out. This one and that one. Verse five. It is only those who know or acknowledge the Lord who are counted in.

As I said, this may have been quite shocking to the original hearers of the psalm. But it's not only here that we find it.

[16:17] Isaiah made a very similar point. In Isaiah chapter two, verses two to three, we read. In the last days, the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains.

It will be raised above the hills and all nations will stream to it. Many people 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 his ways so that we may walk in his paths. The law will go out from Zion. The word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And yet there is something even stranger here.

The psalmist does not just say that the register of the people will declare them as citizens, as Anya was declared to be a UK citizen. It says much more than that.

It tells us, in fact, the foreigners are issued with a new birth certificate. That it will be said that this one was born in Zion. How can we be recorded as born in Zion if we were not?

[17 : 35] It all depends on the nature of the city and the nature of your birth. And so the prophet Ezekiel would write a revision that he had.

The hand of the Lord was upon me and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley. It was full of bones. He said he led me to and fro among them.

And I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley. Bones that were very dry. He asked me, son of man, can these bones live? I said, oh, sovereign Lord, you alone know.

Then he said to me, prophesy to these bones and say to them, dry bones. Hear the word of the Lord. This is what the sovereign Lord says to these bones. I will make breath into you and you will come to life.

I will attach tendons to you, make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin. I will put breath in you and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.

[18 : 40] So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound. And the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them.

But there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to it, this is what the sovereign Lord says. Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain that they may live.

So I prophesied as he commanded me and breath entered them. They came to life and stood up on their feet, a vast army. Then he said to me, son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say our bones are dried up and our hope is gone. We are cut off. But of course, that was only a vision. And from Ezekiel's words, prophesying the return from exile, one might conclude that only the descendants of Jacob are meant here.

That was Ezekiel 37, 1 to 11. And he goes on to talk about the exiles returning. But the psalmist takes a different tack.

[19 : 55] Having expressed his delight in being as a Levite, a natural citizen of Jerusalem, our psalmist goes on to extend this privilege to those who are not even Jews.

And that takes us right into New Testament territory. There was a Jewish rabbi called Nicodemus.

And he met with Jesus one night, apparently in secret, to ask him questions.

And he asked if Jesus essentially was he was the Messiah. In reply, Jesus declared, John 3, verses 3 to 10.

I tell you the truth. No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. How can a man be born when he is old? Nicodemus asked the obvious question.

Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born. Jesus answered, I tell you the truth. No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the spirit.

[21 : 03] Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying you must be born again. The wind blows wherever it pleases.

You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the spirit. How can this be? Nicodemus asked. You are Israel's teacher, said Jesus, and you do not understand these things.

Notice Jesus' reference to the wind. Remembering perhaps Ezekiel's prophecy of the four winds that will come and breathe life into those dead bodies.

As a rabbi, Nicodemus probably knew Psalm 87 off by heart. Yet it seemed he had not grasped its radical message. It is not the Levites who are the true citizens of Zion or even the children of Jacob. As Psalm 87 verse 6 makes clear, it is not a genealogical connection at all that validates their citizenship. The Lord himself must write the record and issue the birth certificate.

[22 : 19] In his discussion with Nicodemus, Jesus brings out the point and describes how it works. The reference to the water in John 3, 5 puzzles people.

But if you look back to Psalm 87 verse 7, it makes sense. Notice what the psalm says. All my fountains are in you.

It is not that there will be a supply of water in the parched place of Zion like the aqueduct of Hezekiah's time. In fact, we are told that Zion will be the only supply of this water, the place of all the fountains.

This water comes from Zion, except no substitute. As Jesus explains, this spring represents the spirit himself. And so in John 4, verse 10, Jesus was talking to a Samaritan woman, again, somebody who was not a purebred Jew.

Jesus answered her, Later on in Jerusalem, John 7, 37 to 39.

[23 : 42] Jesus was speaking 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. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.

John adds the comment that by this he meant the spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Perhaps the psalmist imagined all this happening on Mount Zion in Israel.

But if so, his vision surpasses his imagination. And as the New Testament makes clear, the true Jerusalem is not limited to an Israeli hill over which there continues to be so much warfare.

In fact, the writers to the Hebrews may well have had this psalm in mind when he wrote to his scattered readers. But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God.

You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. Notice those whose names are written in heaven by the Lord himself.

[25 : 07] Hebrews goes on. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

And the apostle John, who was the one who recorded that conversation with Nicodemus, would later on, probably towards the end of his life, write the book of Revelation, where he had a vision of the heavenly city.

And he describes the spring that is found in the center of Zion in these words, Revelation 22, verses 1 to 3.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city.

On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

[26 : 19] No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. This one, or that one, was born in Zion.

So each of us needs to ask ourselves, if that refers to me. The Lord will write in the register of the people, this one was born in Zion.

But who are those who are written down? The psalm tells us it's those who acknowledge the Lord. And as we found in the New Testament, those who apply to Jesus for your old citizenship in this world to be revoked, and your name written in the book of life.

Jesus invites you to claim your place in the holy city, the city where all, the city of delight, where all the fountains of refreshment are found, that refreshment that comes not from human water supply, but from the Holy Spirit.

But if you've already had that change of heart, that change of citizenship, and if you know and understand that the Lord says of you, this one is born in Zion, if you have that seal of the spirit, which Paul describes in Ephesians, that testimony of a new life, then what does the psalmist consider to be the proper response?

[28 : 03] Well, it is to sing, isn't it, in verse 7. As they make music, they will sing, all my fountains are in you. It is to sing of those refreshing streams that make glad the city of God.

So we'll finish our time together by singing that great hymn of John Newton, Glorious things of you are spoken, Zion, city of our God, which is based on this psalm, but makes it personal.

So it says, Saviour, if of Zion's city, I through grace a member am, let the world deride or pity, I will glory in your name. If we are citizens of the heavenly kingdom, then let us sing.

Amen. Glorious things of you are spoken, Zion, city of our God, He whose work cannot be broken, For due for his own abode, On the rock of ages sounded, What can shake your sure repose?

With salvation's walls surrounded, You may smile at all your foes.

[29 : 57] See the streams of living waters, Springing from eternal love, Well, supply your sons and daughters, And all fear of want, Reveal, Who can faint for such a river, Ere the flows, Their flows to sway, Praise, Praise which like the Lord, The giver, Never fails from age to age, Round each habitation hovering, See the cloud and fire appear, For a glory and a covering,

Showing that the Lord is near, Thus they marched through the pillar leading, Light by night and shade by day, Daily on the man of Eden, Which he gives them as they pray, Saviour sins of Zion

city, High through grace and heaven were hand, Let the world deride all pity, I will glory in your name, Trading other worlds best pleasures, All its close,
Stay calm and sure, Solid joys and lasting treasures, None but Zion's children know.
Fading are the world's best pleasures, All its boasted pomp and show, Solid joys and lasting treasures, None but Zion's children know.
Let us finish with that prayer from Psalm 80. Restore us, O Lord God Almighty, Make your face shine upon us, That we may be saved.
[32 : 45] Amen. May God bless you in this difficult time.