

Children of Zion

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] If you are a father of a four-day-old child, you'll be at home looking after her with the mother. So good on Michael for coming to serve us anyway today.

Congratulations Michael and Sonny, but I thought before I get into this, it would be good to pray for them as a family. So why don't you join me in prayer. Father, we thank you for the gift of new life. We thank you for Abigail and the gift that she is to the whole family, to Michael, Sonny, and all the brothers and sisters.

And Lord, we just want to pray that even as she settles into a new family, that you will guide Michael and Sonny as they look after all their four children, that they will each grow to love the Lord Jesus. And we pray particularly for Abigail and a mother, that they will both eat and sleep well, and that you will guide Michael as he leads the family as well over the coming days.

[1 : 03] So strengthen them to enjoy each other, to grow as a family, and most of all, to serve you as disciples of Jesus. We pray and ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, I know that some people may prefer not to be celebrating, but Happy Australia Day. And it being Australia Day, I want to begin with a question about Australian citizenship.

So I want to, this is not a rhetorical question. I want you to actually see if you are able to answer by putting up your hands, alright? So, put up your hands if you think that being born in Australia automatically makes you an Australian citizen.

Hands up. Okay, a few. It is a trick question. The answer is no. The right to become a citizen in Australia doesn't come automatically just because you are born in Australia.

Because, does anyone know? It depends on? Correct. Thank you, Andrew. It depends on the immigration status of your parents at the time.

[2 : 15] Which is different to some countries like the USA and Canada, where if you are born in the country or even in the airspace of the country, it automatically gives you citizenship rights.

And, of course, if you have been watching the news, that is something President Trump has been trying to change with his Day 1 executive orders. Good luck to him. Well, something similar is going on in this psalm as well, but it is related to the city of Zion.

And, of course, you wouldn't be surprised to know that the focus of this psalm is on that city, given the number of times it is mentioned. And so, for the psalmist, there is something special about this city of Zion.

And we want to explore its relevance for us today. Firstly, however, let's see what it says of Zion.

Verse 1. We discover that God, He has founded His city on the holy mountain.

The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the other dwellings of Jacob. Now, as you can see here, what we've got is a rhyming couplet in Hebrew poetry.

[3 : 23] And so, Zion is that city of God, founded by Him on the holy mountain. And many of you will know that Zion is the name often used of the city of Jerusalem, even though that name is not used in this psalm at all.

And in terms of geography, Jerusalem does sit on a hill, and on top of it is God's holy temple. And so, this is a holy place, a holy mountain.

Jerusalem was also a walled city, and so entry into the city is only through the gates, hence the gates of Zion. But most importantly, what we find here is that Zion is favored by God above all the other dwellings of Jacob.

That even though God has given to the sons of Jacob, Israel, all the cities in the promised land, this city, Zion, is the one that is preferred by Him.

And so, what we have here is a psalm that is not focused on Israel, that is God's people, even though they are God's people, but on God's city, Zion. And this place is chosen by God as His

preferred dwelling place, so that anyone wishing to find favor with God needs to come to Zion, or Jerusalem.

[4 : 39] And as we've already seen in earlier psalms over the last few weeks, we know why that is the case. It's because, as I said, the temple is there.

The courts of the Lord where the altar resides, where the sacrifices were made for atonement and forgiveness of sin. But although Zion is exclusively favored as the city of God, there is in this psalm an inclusiveness as to who can come into the gates of Zion.

And this we find in verses 3 to 6. For the psalmist says, Glorious things are said of you, city of God, that is Zion. I will record Rahab or 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 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, this one was born in Zion. Now we'll look a bit more as to the phrase, born in Zion, what that means in a while.

[5 : 49] But we may be surprised to find that those who are said to be born in Zion are not Jews at all. In fact, there is no mention of Israel. And I think that's because it's presumed that they're already taken to be born in Zion.

They're already enjoying all the blessings of it. What is surprising now is the inclusion of the Gentile nations. Rahab or Rahab, in case you're wondering, is not the woman who helped Israel defeat the city of Jericho, but as you look in your footnotes, it's an alternate name for Egypt.

And Egypt and Babylon were feared enemies of Israel. They were the countries, if you remember, who enslaved Israel. Likewise, Philistia, Ty and Cush, another name for Egypt, these are people that have fought Israel in the past.

Now, this is not intended to be an exhaustive list, but rather an indication that God is allowing foreign nations and even Israel's enemies to be part of Zion.

Thus, we have in verse 6, a generalization of this to all peoples, when it says, the Lord will write in the register of the peoples, or the nations, those who are born in Zion.

[7 : 04] So, Zion has become, if you like, the united nations of the world, where not just Israelites, but people from all nations will be allowed to be born in it.

And this will be a thing of great joy and blessing. Because in the very last verse, it says, as they make music, they will sing, all my fountains are in you.

Fountains, of course, are symbols of abundance and blessing. And here, the blessings of Zion are overflowing like water from a fountain, giving vitality to all in the city.

Now, notice that they sing, my fountains, and I think it's a reference to God's fountains. In other words, the people are singing on behalf of God, recognizing how God has chosen Zion as the source of all his blessings.

So, what does it mean then to be born in Zion, where the phrase here is used three times in the psalm? Well, as I said earlier, being born in a particular country gives people birthrights, don't they?

[8 : 16] And as many of you will know, a lot of people want to be born in, for example, a country like the US of A, because to be an American citizen gives them rights to work, to live, and in one of the richest countries in the world.

So, it's a highly sought after thing. Being born in a place gives a person birthrights. And so, likewise here, there are blessings that come with being born in Zion. But, if you read this a little more closely, I think the sense you get here is that although these peoples are said to be born in Zion, they are actually literally not born there.

Right? Rather, God is writing into the register or declaring or conferring on them the rights of being born in Zion. Rights to live in the city, rights to enter it, rights to enjoy life as anyone else who is born in the country or that city is able to.

But, there is a condition, isn't there, if you read in verse 4, it's not every foreigner that is given this status, it's only those who acknowledge God. That is, worship Him as their God, who submit to His rule and authority and therefore seek a relationship with Him.

But, just like any other citizen of a country today, once you are given birth rights or citizenship, you cannot be denied entry into that city, into Zion.

[9 : 48] They belong to God's people. They have equal status with anyone who is born in Zion.

And, these blessings are only possible because, as I've said, Zion is where God has instituted the temple, where forgiveness of sin and a relationship with God is possible only because of the

sacrifices offered at the temple.

In return, then God promises His people by saying, I will be your God and you will be my people. They will enjoy God's unwavering commitment to them.

Now, for this psalm to actually be penned by a Jew is actually quite unexpected because, throughout their history, Israel has been taught, haven't they, to set themselves apart from other nations.

Do not intermarry. Do not worship the idols of other nations. And, so, if you don't appreciate the nuance, you might be thinking that God is promoting an us versus them mentality. That is, Israel, you're good.

All the other nations, you're bad. So, don't associate with them. Don't mingle with them. Instead, as we read this psalm, I think what we get is an understanding by the psalmist of God's generous and gracious character.

[11 : 04] That's what we've sort of been hearing, haven't we, over the last few weeks in the other psalms of God's abounding love, His forgiving nature, His mercy, His faithfulness. Well, this psalm is saying that God is so generous that His love and mercy now overflows to all the other nations.

That is not reserved just for Israel alone. After all, if you remember from last week's psalm on the screen there, Psalm 86 verse 9 says this, that God is the one that has made all the nations.

So, He doesn't play favorites, does He? And exclude the other nations from His favor. Because of God's character, because of who He is, His heart is for all that He has created.

His heart is for all the nations to come to know and acknowledge Him and worship Him so that they can be blessed by Him. All of us, Jew or Gentile, we belong to Him because He created us.

But this only happens when the nations come to Zion. There has to be a gathering of all the peoples to this place because, as I said, because of the sin and the need for sacrifices at the temple.

[12 : 21] Otherwise, there is no means for our relationship to be restored with God. But once that occurs, God desires then to be an eternal blessing.

That once, you know, or once you've been told that you are born in Zion, you cannot be unborn from a place, can you? But rather, you have this birthright forever. Now, for us as Christians, we've seen over the last few weeks in the Psalms, we've looked at before, that ultimately, we don't find fulfillment in this by going to a temple in Jerusalem anymore, physical Jerusalem, but rather, that for us, these Psalms are fulfilled in Jesus, who is the true temple of God.

He is the only sacrifice that can really atone for our sins. And so, if you look at what John says in his Gospel, chapter 1, verse 12, on the slide, we read that he, that is Jesus, came to that which was his own, that is the Jews, but his own did not receive him.

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision, or a husband's will, but of God.

Now, granted, there's no mention here of Zion, but John speaks instead of being a child of God, which is the same thing. To be born of God in Christ, who is the fulfillment of Zion, is to be born in Zion.

[13 : 56] And just like the Psalm, John here, in his Gospel, isn't talking about physical birth, but spiritual rebirth, of being born again, as Jesus himself taught in chapter 3 of John's Gospel.

And notice here that it says that the children of God aren't born of natural descent, that is not from Jacob, Isaac, or Abraham, nor by human decision, because again, as the Psalm says, this is something God designates in his sovereignty.

The Psalm says that it is God who says, this one is born of God. God is the one that chooses. It is the result of God's will that someone is born in Zion. And so, this again goes hand in hand, doesn't it?

With acknowledging God, believing in Jesus' name goes hand in hand with acknowledging God in the Psalm. Because, when we recognize Jesus as God's Son, we recognize God as the Father, God and Creator.

So, I guess the first thing I want to say, brothers and sisters, is that we need to be clear that our Christian faith makes this exclusive claim that the only way to God is through Jesus.

[15 : 09] He is the true temple. He is the only way back to God. Jesus himself said in John chapter 14, on the next slide, I am the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through me.

Our faith, Christianity, has this exclusive claim at its very heart that unless you come to Jesus, there is no way back to God.

And yet, at the very same time, our Christian faith is also radically inclusive. Because anyone, anyone, regardless of race or religion, sorry, race or origin, can be born in Zion.

God's children now are not just Jews, but people from every tribe and tongue. And again, we see that in our other reading from Ephesians, where it is Jesus himself who has broken down the wall of hostility.

So, reading again from verse 14 of chapter 2, he, Jesus himself, is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.

[16:26] His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

He came and preached peace to those, to you who were far away, that's the Gentiles, and peace to those who were near, those are the Jews, for through him, we, Jews and Gentiles, both have access to the Father by one spirit.

So, nations that were once enemies of Israel in Psalm 87, Egypt, Babylon, Philistia, and Tahr, they are now united with Israel as a single united body of Christ in peace.

Jesus is still Israel's Messiah, but he's also now the Savior of the world and of the nations. And Christ has achieved this peace for all humanity through the cross, reconciling both Jews and Gentiles to God through his death.

Friends, we see a lot of conflict in the world at the moment and tensions in our society even on a day like today. And often when that happens, people of goodwill will often appeal to our common humanity.

[17:40] They would say, no, we are a single human race, so we should be accepting of one another. We need to live in peace with one another. And of course, they are absolutely right, aren't they? Often, oppression and conflicts occur when people divide along particular identity markers, whether it's race or gender or social status.

And then, when the majority who have more power use it to lord it over the minority, well, that's when conflicts and tensions arise. And so, we've seen, isn't it, in the past or even now, it's white people over black people, men over women, one ethnic group over another.

And when that happens, we all forget that we're humans deserving of equal dignity. humanity. So, what these people appeal to is actually right.

But the thing is that unless we recognize that we're actually all beholden to a single creator God who has made us all in his image, it can be very difficult, isn't it, to appeal to this common humanity. Because DNA alone does not unite us. You know, otherwise, you know, why don't we just include the monkeys as well and the apes because, you know, we share, you know, 95% or more of our DNA with them.

[18:59] No, it's only when we all recognize that it is all of us being created by God in his image that that is able to unite us in a common humanity.

And for us who are Christians, we're bound by even more than that, aren't we? Because not only are we united because we're created by God in his image, we are also now united as Christians by the blood of Jesus.

Whatever conflicts we may have because we're from different tribes, all of that needs to melt away when we find peace with God in Christ.

Because we're all now born of God, born in Zion, united by our Lord Jesus who died for us. As Paul said in Ephesians, Christ is our peace, who has brought those who are far away and those who are near together through his death on the cross.

And so friends, for us who are Christians, our first response really to this psalm ought to be to give thanks. Especially if you're not Jewish, we're able to be born again of God in Zion only because of Jesus.

[20:16] all the blessings that come to us of belonging to God's people, being part of the church, being part of Christ's body only occurs when we believe in Jesus, only because of what Jesus has done on the cross.

And I guess if you're Jewish, that applies to you as well because Jesus is God's chosen Messiah for Israel. You have peace with God if you're Jewish, the God of your forefather Abraham only because of Jesus.

And so, if there's anyone here today that is yet to believe in Jesus, then please hear this clearly. Jesus is the only way to God. And so because it's Jesus alone that unites us to God, those of us who are already Christians, we need to maintain this distinctive as a Christian.

Even though it's unpopular, we mustn't shy away from this exclusive claim which Jesus himself makes as the Son of God, that he is the only way to truth and life.

He is the only way to a relationship with God. We need to maintain this distinctive and exclusive claim even though others may want us to say otherwise.

[21 : 40] But at the same time, we also need to be radically inclusive, don't we? Because anyone, anyone can now come to God by coming to Jesus. Anyone can now be born of God and born in Zion if they believe in Jesus.

And so as a church, we need to work hard at remembering this. When we come to church and we do see people that are different to us in all a manner of ways, whether culturally or educationally or socially, let's remember that we're all able to be born in Zion because of God's gracious character, his generous generosity to us in Christ.

Now we don't need to obliterate our differences or deny them. You know, the people here in Cush, Babylon, on Taa, they still remember their origins. But once they get to Zion, those are no longer important.

Where they've come from, yes, they still have those things, but they are not the things that unite because they sing and rejoice together the fact that they all share from God's fountain of blessing. They celebrate what unites them rather than what distinguishes them. And so as a church, we need to express this truth and work hard at it. That means not showing favoritism, not excluding people, not dividing ourselves by race, gender or social status.

[23 : 10] Let's focus, and I think we've been doing that, but let's keep doing it. Let's focus more on what we have in common rather than what makes us different. And then all the more as we go out to proclaim the good news of Jesus, we need to be indiscriminate in who we share it with.

That is not pick and choose all those people we like in church, so let's share the gospel with them. No, we share the gospel indiscriminately because who knows whom God has chosen to say this one is born in Zion.

Well friends, that's the end of our reflection on Psalm 87, but I also want to end and conclude by reflecting on the Psalms that we've looked at over this summer. Now, I don't know whether you were here when we did Psalm 83, it seemed like a long time ago, but actually it was only five weeks ago, but remember in Psalm 83 we are here, what the picture was.

Psalm 83 described Israel's enemies trying to plot Israel's downfall. Well look where we've come, where we've got to now in Psalm 87, where we've ended.

We have these same enemies acknowledging God, being born in Zion, united in peace with Israel. Then in Psalm 84, the Psalmist long to dwell in the house of the Lord, remember that?

[24 : 37] Well in Psalm 87, he and anyone who is born in Zion, that is all the nations of the world, are able to do that now. They are born in Zion, therefore they can dwell in Zion, not just a day in the courts of the Lord, but all their days in the courts of the Lord.

And so what we have then is a vision, isn't it, in Psalm 87, of God's restored community, the United Nations, which is the church, which Psalm 85 actually spoke of, if you remember, where people from every tribe and tongue can live under God's love and peace, his righteousness and faithfulness.

Remember them kissing together and all that? And then last week in Psalm 86, David is prompted by the reality of the nations coming to bow down before God in worship, that was in verse 9, glorifying his name.

He is prompted by this vision to then ask God to teach him his ways, God's ways, so that he may serve God with an undivided heart. Well, we can do that as well.

Having this same vision of a glorious city of Zion, where all who are born in Zion, all who acknowledge God, all who believe in Jesus, belonging there, we too, together, that's us, can ask God to give us an undivided heart, to serve him, to praise him, to sing of the fountains of blessing, not just with our words, but praise him and serve him with our deeds as well.

[26 : 12] Well, for a start, we're going to do it with our words, so I'm going to invite the band to come forward now as we sing together as the united people of God, citizens of Zion, serving Jesus as our risen king.

So let's rise together.