

Glorious things spoken of Zion

8 May 2011

Ps. 84: 1, 5, 6

Ps. 26: 1 – 3, 6, 7

Ps. 87: 1 – 3

Ps. 68: 6, 7

Ps. 48: 1, 3, 4

Scripture reading: Psalm 87

Text: Psalm 87

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

The Lord has spoken glorious things about His church. Glorious promises have been given to her, and she awaits a glorious future.

If we would judge the church purely by that which meets the eye, we will surely be disappointed. For the excellence of the church is not founded on the excellence of men, or on the excellence of her performance in this world, but founded on the firm foundation of God's promises. The church is founded on the invisible foundation of God's electing grace. The church stands firm on the solid rock-foundation of Christ, who gathers and preserves a church unto eternal life.

Yes, if you look at men, you may be disappointed. A certain church member might have hurt you, or certain church members might have been gossiping about you. Something like that might take away much of the joy of belonging to the church. Then your communion with those in the church may come under strain. You may then struggle to see the beauty of the church, and to experience the joy of belonging to the church.

Or maybe you grew up in the church. Maybe your ancestors were members of the church from generation to generation, so that you start to take it for granted that you also belong to the church. And because you start to take the church for granted, you may even become a bit bored with the church and its ecclesiastic traditions.

Then it may happen that you are no longer so excited about the fact that you are a member of the church.

Other situations may also arise.

As it happened so often in church history, it may happen that there is a trend of deformation in the church. At first you make a big alarm when you see that something is going wrong, and you resist every error that starts to creep in, but later you become tired of the constant strife. You start to keep quiet, and to endure a lot of wrongs, but your membership is not such a joy as in the past anymore.

There were also times of persecution.

And times of persecution may come again. How will you view the church, when the true church is treated like a sect and despised by everyone around you? Will you then also become ashamed of the church?

Yes, how do **you** view the church? What glorious things do **you** speak of her?

If you measure the excellence of the church to the measure of her social activities, you might find that the world offers more social activities than the church.

If you measure the vitality of the church to her ability to invent new things and to her creative power, then you will certainly be more impressed by the world than by the church.

If you measure her peace to the time span between one strife and the next struggle, you may also be disappointed. Then you might find the world more peaceful than the church.

What is it then that causes you to speak glorious things of the church; and what are these glorious things? What is it about the word *church* that makes you to sing about her with joy?

Dear congregation, in a world that hates and despises the true church, Psalm 87 comes to us as a great comfort. While the church has often lain in ruins in the history of this world, while her state in this world often seemed hopeless, and while we may sometimes be disheartened and disappointed with the state of the church, and while she is often the object of the ridicule and scorn of men, we are greatly strengthened when we turn to this psalm and read what glorious things **God** speaks of her.

We do not know **who** wrote this psalm; neither do we know **when** it was written, but – like the rest of Scripture – it was clearly written also for us.

I proclaim God's Word to you with the theme...

Glorious things are spoken of Zion

We will note...

1. Zion's foundation
2. Zion's children
3. Zion's fountains

In the first place we note...

Zion's foundation

Zion is the mountain on which Jerusalem is built, but it is also used as a synonym for Jerusalem itself; and, in the language of the prophets, Zion often refers to the church – as it does in this psalm.

Also in the NT the church is sometimes called Jerusalem.

Psalm 87 is a prophecy about the church, the mother of all believers. That is one of the glorious things that are spoken of her.

But the first glorious thing about Zion, the first thing that the psalm mentions to us, is that the **LORD** has founded her. **He** laid her foundation on holy mountains.

That is why the psalm does not start with the words “her foundation”, but “His foundation” – that is: that which the LORD has founded, that which He laid firm.

Jerusalem is built on a mountain, and this now becomes a picture of the foundation on which the LORD builds His church. It is an immovable and lasting rock-foundation.

This is the first thing that the psalm mentions to us – the foundation.

That is not usually the first thing **we** notice. When we look at a house, then we may easily be impressed by its brickwork, its appearance, its colour, and so forth. When you admire a beautiful house it is not likely that you will exclaim: Look its fantastic foundation!

More often the foundation is hidden from our eyes.

Yes, the foundation of a house is usually not the first thing that impresses us. But if a house does not have a proper foundation then such a house won't last – no matter how beautiful its colours, how artistic its interior, how expensive its decorations! One big storm will turn it all into a heap of rubble.

It's the foundation that makes the house to stand firm and to last.

And the same is true of the church. We can easily overlook its foundation. But it is the foundation of the church that guarantees that she will stand firm even in the midst of storms and assault. No storm or enemy can shake her or move her from her place, for the Lord has laid her foundation on holy mountains.

The rest of Scripture makes clear that our Lord Jesus Christ is the rock on which the church is build.

“...thus says the Lord God: Behold, I lay in Zion a stone for a foundation, a tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation...” – Isaiah 28: 16

The apostle Peter quotes these same words and says that it speaks about Christ. **He** is the cornerstone of Zion (1 Peter 2: 4 – 6).

And the apostle Paul writes to the Ephesians that the church is being built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets – that is: the Word of God in both Old and New Testament – and that Jesus Christ Himself is the chief cornerstone in whom the whole building grows into a holy temple in the Lord – Eph. 2: 20, 21.

Christ is the rock-foundation that ensures that not even the powers of hell can prevail against the church.

The glorious future of the church does not depend on man.

God in His sovereign grace has laid the rock-solid foundation in Christ.

Yes, kingdoms may rise and fall, and the world itself will perish, but the church will stand forever, for God is her builder and maker.

Abraham waited for this city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God – Hebr. 11: 10.

Our text continues to say that:

“The LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob.”

He passed by all the other cities and chose Zion as His dwelling place.

Why? What is so special about the mountains around Jerusalem? They are not big or impressive mountains. If **we** could choose any mountain in the world to build a mighty city, we would not have chosen Zion. There is nothing impressive about her. Why would anyone get excited about the little hill Zion?

There is nothing special about these mountains around Jerusalem apart from the fact that **God** decided to build Jerusalem on them.

The Lord has chosen Zion, **therefore** she is holy.

It is by the sovereign grace of His good pleasure that He chose **her** as dwelling place.

Yes, He loves the gates of Zion. Why?

Not because of Zion.

He decided, according to His own good pleasure, to love her. He chose her as His dwelling place, while He passed by other cities that were much greater and more impressive than Jerusalem.

Her glory is **not** founded in earthly splendour or in the excellence of man, but on the solid granite blocks of God's eternal counsel and sovereign grace in Christ Jesus, the foundation and cornerstone of Zion.

Zion is the city of His choice and of His love; even His favourite among the dwelling places of Jacob, for the Lord has chosen her to be His holy dwelling place.

He even chose her to be the mother of all His children.

We note that in the second place...

Zion's children

"I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon to those who know Me..."

We should rather translate the Hebrew text:

"I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon **as** those who know Me..."

The meaning is that Rahab and Babylon will be among those who know the LORD.

This is confirmed further by what follows:

“...behold, O Philistia and Tyre, with Ethiopia: this one was born there. And of Zion it will be said, ‘This one and that one were born in her; and the Most High Himself shall establish her. The LORD will record when He registers the peoples: ‘This one was born there.’”

When the LORD opens the Book of Life to register those who know Him, those who belong to Him, it will be found that from every tribe and nation His children were born in Zion.

No matter what their physical birthplace may be, if they know the LORD then they were born in Zion.

Now, first of all, we have to note that the list of nations that is given here is not merely a list of nations. It is a list of Israel’s fiercest enemies; the great enemies of the Lord, the vicious enemies of His church.

Rahab means *raging monster*, and this name is applied to Egypt. We may think for example of Ezekiel where the LORD says:

“...Behold, I am against you, O Pharaoh king of Egypt, O great monster who lies in the midst of the rivers...” – Ezekiel 29: 3

Or we may think of Isaiah 30: 7 where the LORD calls the Egyptians *Rahab*.

Rahab is also described as a great serpent that dwelt in the sea: the Leviathan. Isaiah says of this sea monster:

“In that day the LORD with His severe sword, great and strong, will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent; and He will slay the reptile that is in the sea” – Isaiah 27: 1

In other places this same sea monster, or quick serpent that dwells in the sea, is called Rahab. For example where Isaiah says:

“...Are You not the arm that cut Rahab apart, and wounded the serpent? Are You not the One who dried up the waters of the great deep; that made the depths of the sea a road for the redeemed to cross over?” – Isaiah 51: 9, 10.

Again the reference is to Israel’s deliverance from Egypt when the Lord drowned Pharaoh and his host in the sea.

Or think of a similar passage in the Psalms:

“You divided the sea by your strength; You broke the heads of the sea serpent in the waters. You broke the heads of Leviathan in pieces...” – Ps. 74: 13, 14

And again:

“You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, You still them. You have broken Rahab in pieces, as one who is slain; You have scattered Your enemies with Your mighty arm” – Ps. 89: 10

In all these passages Rahab, the Leviathan, is portrayed as the enemy of God and His people. And the prophet Isaiah gives this name, Rahab, to Egypt – Isaiah 30: 7.

It is not without reason that psalm 87 uses this unfriendly name for Egypt. When we hear the name Rahab we think of God’s enemy, a raging monster.

And the same applies to the rest of the list.

Babylon – the world power that came and destroyed Jerusalem.

Philistia! This is the country of the Philistines, the ancient foe of Israel.

Tyre – Tyre is mentioned in Ps. 83 as God’s enemy, an enemy that seeks to destroy Israel.

And the last one here in the list of Psalm 87 is Ethiopia. The Hebrew text does not have the name Ethiopia, but Cush.

Cush was the father of Nimrod (Gen. 10: 8) and the beginning of his kingdom was Babel in the land of Shinar. And therefore, when the prophet Micah speaks of Assyria, he calls Assyria the land of Nimrod – Micah 5: 6.

It is not just any list of names that are given here in Psalm 87. No, it is a list of the names of God’s fiercest enemies, the most deadly enemies of His people.

They will be registered among those who know the LORD, and their birthplace is Zion!

In the time of the Old Testament this psalm must have been a profound mystery. How can this ever be true?! What does it mean?

There are a few parallel passages, found in the Old Testament, that help to explain this to us. In Isaiah we read:

“In that day Israel will be one of three with Egypt and Assyria – a blessing in the midst of the land, whom the LORD of hosts shall bless, saying, ‘Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance.’” – Isaiah 19: 24, 25.

Already in the Old Testament the Lord revealed that He will add Egypt and Assyria to His people, and that all the nations will come to Zion to serve the LORD.

We find this wonder also in Psalm 68 where the LORD is described as a mighty warrior who conquers His enemies and takes them captive.

“You have ascended on high, You have led captivity captive; You have received gifts among men, **even from the rebellious**, that the LORD God might dwell there” – Ps. 68: 18

Men who were previously rebels and enemies have now been taken captive by Christ. They have become the spoil or the loot of His victory. Christ conquers them and makes them His servants.

But the words of our text are even more striking. Not only will Egyptians and Assyrians and Babylonians and Philistines become citizens of Zion, no, they will be **born** in Zion. Zion will be the mother of all believers of every people and nation and tribe. As the apostle Paul says: Jerusalem above is the mother of us all – Gal. 4: 26.

How then will it happen that Zion gives birth to people who had their natural birth in Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and Philistia? Psalm 87 speaks about the wonder of rebirth. It is a wonder which the Lord works through the preaching of the gospel. As Isaiah also prophesied and said:

“...it shall come to pass in the later days that the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and **all nations shall flow to it**. Many people shall come and say, ‘Come, and let us go to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths’. For **out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the Word of the LORD from Jerusalem.**” – Isaiah 2: 2, 3.

The Word of the LORD shall proceed from Zion. It is the church that administers the preaching of God’s Word, which is the seed of regeneration. By this ministry of the church, and by it alone, we are born again. All the prophets and apostles and preachers of the gospel proceeded from the church. There is no preacher of God’s Word to be found who is not called by God and sent out by His church. The Word proceeds **only** from Zion, and therefore she is called the mother of all believers, giving birth to all who receive and believe her preaching.

Zion will give birth to a great multitude from every people and nation and tribe. They will all be born within her walls. And **thus** they will be registered in the Book of Life.

“Sing, O barren, you who have not borne! Break forth into singing, and cry aloud, you who have not laboured with child! For more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married woman, says the LORD” – Isaiah 54: 1

The LORD promised to Zion that **He** will give her children, although she was a barren woman. The birth of her children will be a miracle.

These words were spoken to comfort Jerusalem in the time of her desolation in the time of her exile when the city was in ruins.

Yes, there were times when Zion literally looked like a heap of rubble. When we look at church history, then we see a small miserable church struggling. To the human eye the state of the church may often look desperate. But the Most High Himself shall establish her. He will ensure her offspring, and fill His holy city by the miracle of rebirth, so that rebels and enemies receive a second birth within the walls of Zion.

O Zion, glorious things are spoken of you!

Dear congregation, Psalm 87 mentions one more thing about the church. Her children will sing and say of her:

“All my springs are within you.”

We note that in the last place...

Zion's fountains

“Both the singers and the players on instruments say, ‘All my springs are in You’.

Like in the rest of this psalm we should not seek the reason for this joy by staring at the literal spring that is found on mount Zion. There is nothing about that spring to get excited about. It is not big or impressive. Yet, it is the only water supply of the whole city! All who are thirsty have to drink from that fountain.

Now, the water well or fountain is often used in Scripture as a symbol of the source of life. And in the New Testament the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, is called a stream of living water that gives life.

In this regard we are again reminded of the prophecy of Isaiah where he says:

“Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; ‘for Jahve, the LORD, is my strength and song; He also has become my salvation. Therefore **with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.**” – Isaiah 12: 2, 3.

He speaks of the wells, or fountains, of God’s salvation. We find this image more often, also in the NT – the fountains or streams of God’s salvation from which we may freely drink.

But now it is said that all these fountains are in Zion. You won’t find them anywhere else.

Again this refers to the gospel of salvation in Christ. Christ Himself is the One who gives us freely to drink from the water of life. There is a river of living water that flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb. Whoever comes to Him and drink from the water that He gives, will never thirst again. But the springs of salvation, the fountain and the river of life are only found within the walls of Zion.

Outside the church there is no salvation. Not that the church saves us, but Christ saves no one apart from the church. He has poured out His Spirit on the church, and not on other places. Yes, He has poured out **all** His blessings on the church. We receive life and rebirth only within the walls of Zion. Outside of Zion no one will be saved. Outside of the church there is no fountain of life to be found. Within the walls of Zion we are born, and there our thirst is quenched by the preaching and administration of the gospel.

Let us not seek the Lord’s blessings outside of Zion, but let us rather confess with the saints of all times: All my fountains are in Zion.

Others may despise the church and think very little of her, but let us rejoice in the glorious things that the **Lord** has spoken of her.

Do not look at men. Do not seek her beauty in earthly splendour. But see her glory which is founded on the promises of God. He founded her, and established her forever.

Let us not join the world in despising the church, but sing of the riches that has been entrusted to her.

Here, in the midst of the congregation, Christ pours out His blessings.

God has founded us on the rock-solid foundation of Christ our Lord and Saviour.

He gathers for Himself a church, even from among those who were rebels and enemies, and quench our thirst with the fountains of His salvation.

Let us be glad in Him, the Maker and Builder of Zion, now and forevermore.

Amen.