

Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: The Master Musician's Melodies

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Psalm 87 — O, Zion!

1.0 Introducing Psalm 87

- Psalm 87 picks up the prophecy of 86:9 that “All nations whom You have made shall come and worship before You.”
- This psalm interprets Psalms 46 and 48 (also by “the sons of Korah”).
✓ Consider the verbal similarities:

Psalm 87	Psalms 46–48
“in the holy mountains” (v. 1)	“His holy mountain” (48:1)
“dwelling places of Jacob” (v. 2)	“the holy dwelling places” (46:4)
“city of God” (v.3)	“the city of God” (46:4) “the city of our God” (48:1, 8)
“those who know me” (v. 4)	“know that I am God” (46:10)
“the Most High” (v. 5)	“the Most High” (46:4)
“Himself will establish her” (v. 5)	“God will establish her” (48:8)
“my springs <i>of joy</i> are in you” (v. 7)	“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God” (46:4)

- Augustine chose verse 3 for the theme and title of *The City of God*.

2.0 Reading Psalm 87 (NAU)

87:1 A Psalm of the sons of Korah. A Song.

His foundation is in the holy mountains.

87:2 The LORD loves the gates of Zion
More than all the *other* dwelling places of Jacob.

87:3 Glorious things are spoken of you,
O city of God.

Selah.

87:4 “I shall mention Rahab and Babylon among those who know Me;
Behold, Philistia and Tyre with Ethiopia: “This one was born there.””

87:5 But of Zion it shall be said, “This one and that one were born in her”;
And the Most High Himself will establish her.

87:6 The LORD will count when He registers the peoples,
“This one was born there.”

Selah.

87:7 Then those who sing as well as those who play the flutes *shall say*,
“All my springs *of joy* are in you.”

A Song. A Psalm of the sons of Korah.

For the choir director; according to Mahalath Leannoth.

3.0 Understanding Psalm 87

3.1 Outline

- I. Zion’s Sovereign Selection (vv. 1-3)
- II. Zion’s Selected Citizens (vv. 4-6)
- III. Zion’s Celebrating Citizens (v. 7)



3.2 Notes

- **v. 1** “His foundation”
 - God is the founder of the city of Zion. See verse 5 and Isaiah 14:32.
 - “In the holy mountains”: God selected and sanctified the range of hills/mountains upon which Jerusalem sits, that it might be the residence of His Presence, His Shekinah glory. See Psalms 125:2 and 133:3.
- **v. 1** “The LORD loves the gates of Zion”
 - Ancient rabbinic exposition on the Psalms observes that, “The king has a palace in every province, but which palace is best loved by him? The palace which is in his own province. Hence *The Lord loveth the gates of Zion*. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: I love the synagogues and houses of study. But what do I love even more? Zion, for it is my own palace” (*Midrash Tehillim* 87.4).
 - See Deuteronomy 7:7-8. God loves and chooses on the basis of His divine purposes, not on the basis of merit.
- **v. 2** “dwelling places of Jacob”
 - The psalmist uses this poetic expression to refer either to all the other cities of Israel or to the previous locations where the Ark of the Covenant had resided (Gilgal [Joshua 4–5; Judges 2:1], Shiloh [Joshua 18:1, 10; Psalm 78:60], Nob [1 Samuel 21:1-9], and Gibeon [1 Kings 3:4-5; 1 Chronicles 16:39]).

- **v. 3** “Glorious things”
 - The Hebrew word occurs only here in the Old Testament.
 - ✓ Compare the use of “glorious” in Isaiah 9:1 and 60:13.
 - ✓ Psalm 48:1-2 reveals the kind of things spoken about Zion.
 - Those who say these things left unidentified—they might be Israelites, Gentiles, angels, or even God Himself.
 - ✓ Often a passive verb is a way to refer to God indirectly—a so-called “divine passive.” E.g., “Moab was subdued” (Judges 3:30; cf. Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, New American Commentary 6 [Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1999], 148, 302).
- **vv. 4-6** All Nations Worshipping God
 - See Psalm 22:27-28; 48:9-10; Isaiah 2:2-4 (//Micah 4:1-2); 19:23-25; 45:22; 56:6-7; Zechariah 2:10-11; 8:22-23; 14:16-19; Malachi 1:11; Ephesians 3:4-7; Philippians 2:9-11; Revelation 7:9-10.
- **v. 4** “Rahab”
 - Rahab is a poetic name for the nation of Egypt (see Isaiah 30:7).
- **v. 5** “Zion”
 - The Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament two centuries before Christ): “Mother Zion.” Compare Galatians 4:26.
 - Believing Israel’s numbers shall be augmented by believing Gentiles, so that the offspring of long barren Jerusalem will be more than she formerly possessed (cf. Isaiah 54:1-3; 66:7-14).
- **v. 6** “This one was born there”
 - Some interpreters conclude that such phrases refer to the Jews in the Diaspora—they have been born in various nations around the world. For this viewpoint, see Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, trans. by Hilton C. Oswald, Continental Commentary (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 187-89.
 - One Jewish commentator writes: “the chief lesson that emerges from the psalm is that Zion is the birthplace of all those who come to it to serve God there, even if they are non-Jews and even if they come from very far-off lands.”—Amos Hakham, *Psalms*, 3 vols., Koschitzky Edition (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 2003), 2:300.
 - This birth is not the natural birth, but the supernatural birth. Compare John 3:10 and 4:19-24.
 - For registering the birth, compare Daniel 12:1; Isaiah 4:3-5.
- **v. 6** “All my springs of joy are in you”
 - “Just as natural springs were essential for the life of many a village and town, so Jerusalem, the city of God, is here being depicted as the source of all that is essential to the God-centered life, a life bubbling over with all the good things that God gives.”—Robert Davidson, *The*



Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 289.

- v. 7 “play the flutes”
 - Preferably, “dance” (see the marginal note in NAU).
- **Musical Subscription:** “A Psalm of the sons of Korah”
 - Note how this psalm begins with its Superscription.
- **Musical Subscription:** “Mahalath Leannoth”
 - Since Psalm 88 is perhaps the most mournful and gloomy of all the psalms, this tune hardly seems fitting.
 - The meaning could be “to be sung at a dance” (Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, trans. by Herbert Hartwell, Old Testament Library [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962], 585 n. 2). If so, it fits Psalm 87, due to its reference to “dance” (v. 7) and its exuberance and joy.

4.0 Singing Psalm 87

Zion, Founded on the Mountains (Tune: “Saviour, Like a Shepherd Lead Us”)

Zion, founded on the mountains,
God, thy Maker, loves thee well;
He has chosen thee, most precious,
He delights in thee to dwell;
God’s own city, God’s own city,
God’s own city, who can tell?
God’s own city, God’s own city,
Who can all thy glory tell?

Heathen lands and hostile peoples
Soon shall come the Lord to know;
Nations born again in Zion
Shall the Lord’s salvation show;
God Almighty, God Almighty,
God Almighty, strength bestow.
God Almighty, God Almighty,
Shall on Zion strength bestow.

When the Lord shall count the nations,
Sons and daughters He shall see,
Born to endless life in Zion,
And their joyful song shall be:
“Blessèd Zion, blessèd Zion,
Blessèd Zion, all in thee.”
“Blessèd Zion, blessèd Zion,
All our fountains are in thee.”



Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken

1 Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God!
He, Whose Word cannot be broken,
Formed thee for His own abode.
On the Rock of Ages founded,
What can shake thy sure repose?
With salvation's walls surrounded,
Thou may'st smile at all thy foes.

2 See! the streams of living waters,
Springing from eternal love;
Well supply thy sons and daughters,
And all fear of want remove:
Who can faint while such a river
Ever flows their thirst t'assuage?
Grace, which like the Lord, the Giver,
Never fails from age to age.

3 Round each habitation hovering,
See the cloud and fire appear!
For a glory and a cov'ring
Showing that the Lord is near.
Thus deriving from our banner
Light by night and shade by day;
Safe they feed upon the manna
Which He gives them when they pray.

4 Blest inhabitants of Zion,
Washed in the Redeemer's blood!
Jesus, Whom their souls rely on,
Makes them kings and priests to God.
'Tis His love His people raises,
Over self to reign as kings,
And as priests, His solemn praises
Each for a thank offering brings.

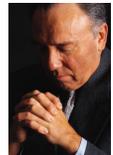
5 Savior, if of Zion's city,
I through grace a member am,
Let the world deride or pity,
I will glory in Thy Name.
Fading is the worldling's pleasure,
All his boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting treasure
None but Zion's children know.

— **Words:** John Newton (1779)

— **Music:** "Austria," Franz Haydn (1797)

5.0 Praying Psalm 87

- May You bring peace to Jerusalem, O God. [v. 2; Psalm 122:6]
- Praise the Lord for those who know Him in many nations. [v. 4]
- Father, help people understand that physical birth is not the truly important issue. [vv. 4-6]
- May I always find my greatest joy in You, Lord. [v. 7]
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6.0 Applying Psalm 87

- Jerusalem is loved and chosen by the Almighty God.
- Gentiles who know God are included among His people.
- Salvation is for those who are "born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13).