

am - Psalm 137

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Date: 04 November 2012

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[0 : 00] As you've picked up, I come from Portsmouth, down south, Eastleigh Evangelical Church, where I'm the assistant pastor. And I bring you greetings from there.

And as I say, I've never been to Whittybill before, but there's a few people who mention that they've come across this church in the past years. They've been on holiday and they've enjoyed and been blessed by the ministry here.

So they were particularly enthusiastic to hear that I was coming here. Right, if you'd like to have Psalm 87 open in front of you, and we'll be thinking about that.

But before we do, let's ask God to help us, shall we? Dear Father God in heaven, we do thank you for your word. We thank you that you speak to us.

And we do pray now that you will speak through this psalm. Help us to hear. Help us to obey. Help us to trust you. And to grow closer to you.

[1 : 08] In Jesus' name we ask. Amen. Now there are plenty of people who claim to be Christians, but say they don't need church.

That's their claim. They say, well, yes, I believe in God. I'm a Christian. I've always been a Christian. But I don't feel I need to go to church.

And if you look at surveys, they seem to back this up, that a lot more people would call themselves Christians than those that say they go to church. In fact, one of the more optimistic surveys recently said that there are 15% of people who would go to church once, at least once per month.

Now that sounds a lot more optimistic than other statistics that I've read, that there's a much smaller percentage of people, certainly who are weekly churchgoers, but a much larger proportion of people who would claim to be Christians.

Why? Why do they not need church? Well, I'm sure there's a variety of answers. But often, people who I've spoken to who take this view would say, well, I have a private faith.

[2 : 26] It's between me and God. I don't need to share it. I don't need to be meeting in a kind of stifling meeting once a week on a Sunday in order to worship God.

I can worship God in my own way. A private faith. Now, sometimes you can understand why they're keeping church at arm's length.

Sometimes you go to a church, you might have gone to churches yourself and thought, well, if this was my experience of church, I might start to go along the lines of private faith myself.

And some people have had some very negative views, very negative experiences of church. But ultimately, we would want to say to that person, and I'm assuming that most of us are quite positive towards church because we're here, we would want to say to that person, well, yeah, you should go to church.

You should give it a try. But if they asked us why, we may struggle. I don't know. We may struggle to give a good reason.

[3 : 42] We might have thought this all through. We might say, well, yeah, the Bible teaches that if you're going to be a Christian, you need to meet with God's people. But there's reasons that we find in this psalm, Psalm 87, that we read earlier, that we might not think of giving as a reason for going to church, as a reason that Christians should meet.

Why is the church so special? Well, I think this psalm is telling us it's special because the church is glorious.

You see, the psalm says that Zion is glorious. Verse 3 says, glorious things are said of you, O city of God. called Zion in verse 2.

Zion is a glorious place. Zion was the name of Jerusalem, a word that they used to describe Jerusalem back in those days. And Zion was the kind of heart of God's people.

Now, it's not anymore. Zion today is the church, really. You see, Jerusalem is the people of God. And since Jesus came, the people of God are not based in one particular area, geographically bound.

[5 : 06] They are scattered throughout the world. The church is Zion. And in fact, the church ultimately, or the Zion ultimately, is heaven when God's people come together at the end of time.

So when we're reading about this psalm, reading about Zion, what's that all about? Well, it's all about the church. Not just any one specific local church, but Christ's church on earth.

The group of people who will be ultimately united together in heaven. Why is the church so special? Well, actually, looking at it, there's three things that I want to focus on particularly here.

Why is it so special? Because it is safe. And secondly, because it is loved. And thirdly, because it is glorious.

If you've got the notes, those are your three main points there. It is safe, it is loved, it is glorious. That's why the church is so special. So firstly, the church is safe.

[6 : 19] Have a look at verse 1. He has set his foundation on the holy mountain. Now mountains were a place of safety.

And Jerusalem, he's talking about Jerusalem here. He has set his foundation on the holy mountain. He's built, Jerusalem was built on seven hills, really.

But they were a kind of stronghold, a protection. Jerusalem was a difficult place for an army to attack because of where it was.

And it wasn't put there by people, according to this psalm. It was set there, established there by God himself. Jerusalem was protected.

But those mountains, those hills, they're a kind of physical feature. But more importantly, God himself protected his own city. So for instance, when you read about this in 2 Kings 18 and 19, Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, decided that he was going to attack.

[7 : 32] He'd been going through the region, attacking city after city. And city after city had been falling to him as the Assyrian Empire swallowed up whole countries, whole cities.

And then, he came to Jerusalem. And Hezekiah, the king of Israel, he was in the walls of Jerusalem. He was quaking in his boots, thinking, well, what am I going to do? They've got this enormous army wanting to take Jerusalem away from me.

How can we possibly resist them? Well, to cut a long story short, the angel of God went through the Assyrian camp and he killed thousands of their soldiers so that in the morning, that was during the night, in the morning, it was discovered that the Assyrian army were devastated.

They couldn't stay. They went back home to Assyria. God had protected Jerusalem from attack.

Now, if you know your history well enough, you'll know that eventually the Babylonians came along. Nebuchadnezzar sent his army to attack Jerusalem and they did destroy it. And so suddenly, in the Jewish mind, they're thinking, well, what's going on now?

[8 : 52] God's supposed to be protecting our city, Jerusalem. But God had not given up on Zion even when Nebuchadnezzar had devastated the place, destroyed the walls, knocked down the temple.

In fact, what he was doing from there on was looking towards the true Zion above. And he was looking towards the Zion that would be the church.

you see, Jesus said that only the word of God lasts forever. When his disciples were talking about the new temple that was built, the one that was replaced, the one that replaced Nebuchadnezzar's destruction, his disciples said, isn't that wonderful?

And Jesus said, no, it's going to all fall down eventually. Only the word of God lasts forever. But that doesn't mean to say that Zion is lost. God will protect Zion.

Nothing lasts forever. Even Comet has gone into administration, we hear in the news. One of those, another one of these high street staples, things that we can rely on, going to go from the high street.

[10 : 11] Brings back painful memories of Woolworths, doesn't it? But nothing is indestructible. Nothing lasts forever, it seems, except God's word.

And except that which God establishes, that which God sets in place. He has established Zion. It's on his word that Zion is built.

And so the question for us is, are we trying to set ourselves up, trying to establish ourselves? Are we living the best life that we can, obeying the Ten Commandments as best we can, trying, trying, trying to make ourselves good enough?

Or, are we allowing him to establish us? Because it's only by his gospel work in our lives, lives, that we will be established.

We cannot do it ourselves. Or thinking a bit wider, are we working hard to make the church successful, to make the church grow, to make the church work, to establish the church?

[11 : 35] Making sure the church goes on and doesn't die out, because you see so many churches around that have faded and eventually been closed.

If we're trying to establish the church through our own effort, then what hope is there for us? If even a city like Jerusalem is temporary, then we can't rely on ourselves to establish anything, can we? God has to establish us. I can't make myself right before him. No church can establish itself through hard work.

It has to be his word that establishes us. Only the gospel can give us a solid foundation. Only the gospel can be like our mountain.

So why is the church so special? Well, because it is safe. And secondly, because it is loved.

[12 : 44] Verse 2 says, The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob. God loves his people.

He loves Zion. Now it says, he loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob. Jacob is code language for the nation of Israel.

Jacob was the one whose name was changed to Israel, and from him, of course, his 12 sons became the 12 tribes of Israel, the nation. And so it is saying that God loves Jerusalem more than any other city in Israel.

But immediately, that makes me ask and probably makes you think, well, why is it that the capital city gets all the love? When the Olympics were being organized and when they are on, there was a lot of talk about the Olympic legacy, but there was also a lot of resentment, I think, from those who weren't in London, because it was all, why does London get all the legacy?

what about Birmingham? What about Manchester? What about Whitby? Why does the capital get all the love?

[14 : 09] Well, you see, Jerusalem, Jerusalem was where the temple was. And what the temple was, the place that God had promised to be, is the place where he had kind of concentrated his presence on earth.

Now, that's a paradox, because God is everywhere, and yet, God was particularly in the temple. You went into the temple and there were special areas that you could only go into if you were a certain, if you were a priest and you'd been through certain rituals, and then there was the very heart of the temple, this one room, the Holy of Holies, where the Ark was, with the Ten Commandments in, and that was God's throne room, essentially.

That was where God said he was, and where the focus was. And so that was, that Jerusalem was the place where the people met with God, where God met with his people.

It's the place where all the festivals focused on, where people would travel in from around the nation, at special times of the year. God's gathered people.

And so it was the true spiritual home of all Israel. So in one sense, all Israelites could call themselves a citizen of Jerusalem, even if they were born in Bethlehem, or one of the other cities.

[15 : 40] They could say, Jerusalem is our true home. Or, to put it in a slightly different way, those of you that are grandparents, you love your children and you love your grandchildren.

Even though they're perhaps scattered all over the country or all over the world, in some cases, you love them all as individuals where they are. But, when the family gets together, you love that.

You really love it, to have all the family together. Don't you, if you're a grandparent. And, that's the special time, when you truly, you really love that more than other times.

It's not that you love individuals, your individual family members less. The love of the gathering is built on your love of the individuals.

And, that's what we're talking about here, is that God loves his gathered people. He loves them being together. What does that mean for us? Well, it means that, yes, God loves each and every one of us.

[16 : 52] If we're members of his family, if we are followers of Jesus, he loves us as individuals, but, he really loves it when we gather. He loves the gathered family.

Sundays might be a routine to us, but for God, this is a highlight. he really loves the gathered family.

This is actually a taste of heaven, of course, because what we're practicing for is the great gathering. That's the great purpose that God has got. If you read through Ephesians chapter 1, you read a kind of history of the world from God's point of view, and you realize that what he's doing is aiming to bring all things together under him and his church, his people, will be gathered in his name. God's great aim is to bring his people together in unity, and he loves unity. He loves it when it's expressed, when we come together.