

CHAPTER 13

The Holy City

Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God.

—John Newton

If you want to read some awesome and breathtaking descriptions of the Holy City, you should look at the Psalms. Many of the Psalms are written to extol the beauty of the city of God. The Psalmists wrote of the literal ancient city of Jerusalem where God dwelt among His people and manifested His glory, from where He sent out His word and established His rule. For example, they remind us that when we come together we ascend the hill of the Lord.

Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart (Psalm 24:3).

And they remind us that we have entered into a rejoicing and committed community, under God's delegated authority.

I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord." Our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem. Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together. That is where the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, to praise the name of the Lord according to the statute given to Israel. There the thrones for judgment stand, the thrones of the house of David (Psalm 122:1-5).

The city is "*perfect in beauty*" (Ps. 50:2), "*the joy of the whole earth*" (Ps. 48:2) and the place of which "*glorious things are said*" (Ps. 87:3). But the city of the psalmists pales into insignificance when compared with this city that comes down out of Heaven from God.

This city is a place of divine judgment, and it is a place of delegated authority. It is a place of glory, of joy, and of holiness—and it is the place where we belong for our citizenship is in Heaven. It does not matter what town you live in; you are a citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem. This city, which has a glorious and wonderful future fulfillment, also has an immediate blessed effect on those who now worship Jesus. We have actually come to the city that Abraham only looked forward to. We have arrived. In fact, so at home are we in this city, so excited are we to be citizens here, so privileged do we feel, that we could say with the Psalmist, "*Better is one day in Your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked*" (Ps. 84:10). He did not mean, of course, that 1,001 days elsewhere might tip the balance! He was saying, "When

I am in Your house, worshiping Your glory, serving Your purpose, I am enjoying a true millennium. I am already a citizen of Your city.”

We have already seen that this city is the bride. When we meet as the church, we come to the city of God. The writer to the Hebrews teaches this very clearly. In the twelfth chapter, he tells us that we have not come to Mount Sinai that burns with fire and is covered with smoke; we have not come to the mountain that cannot be touched; we have come to Mount Zion. We have come to the church of the first born, whose names are enrolled in Heaven. We have come to the spirits of righteous men made perfect. We have come to thousands and thousands of angels in festal assembly. We have come to God, the judge of all, for the Church is the place where God’s judgments are pronounced. We have come to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (see Hebrews 12:18-24).

Measuring the City

Let me give you an idea of what some authors have written about the new Jerusalem; this illustrates what happens when we take spiritual truths and make a literal interpretation. One wrote something like this: “It appears that the new Jerusalem comes down to the earth, although some believe it will not come all the way down. I believe this city comes to rest upon the new earth because it speaks of it having foundations, and foundations are made for something to rest on. However, some do believe that it will be a sort of sphere suspended in space above the earth.”

They begin to postulate the geographical location of the city: will it be on earth, or will it rest suspended above the earth? They hypothesize about its physical shape and size, making statements about the amount of space each of us saints might enjoy as residents of the new Jerusalem, as if we could make these calculations using human imagination and mathematics! They speculate how they might enjoy a view from their apartment houses overlooking the holy city extending as far as the eye could see, from an elevation of 1,500 miles!

To many people this is not only reasonable speculation but something of a test of orthodoxy. So, are we going to be those who interpret these Scriptures literally and turn the measurements into miles, or are we going to be those who understand that God is communicating something to us that is incommunicable, something so wonderful, so vast, so awesome, that words are insufficient to explain it? God uses symbols and signs so that something in our heart and our human intellect will at least catch a glimpse of the glory that is yet to come.

If you have a Bible that does not interpret these things so literally, it will say that the angel measured the city with a rod. Understand that in measuring the holy city we are measuring God's people, just as John measured the worshipers at the altar. The angel measures the city in which the saints of God dwell, and it says he found it to be 12,000 stadia in length and as wide and high as it is long. He measured its wall, and it was 144 cubits thick by the human measurement that the angel was using. Now, when we see these measurements, 12,000 by 144, it should not take a great leap of our understanding to see that he is talking about the habitation of God's redeemed people. It has nothing to do with how many miles wide it is. It

has nothing to do with how many square meters you get to live in. It has nothing to do with how high up on the pecking order your apartment is going to be. It has to do simply with this revelation: this is where God's people are!

The Quality of the City

There was a young man in the Book of Zechariah who wanted to go and measure Jerusalem. The angel told him not to measure it, because it was going to be a city without walls. It is limitless. God is not concerned with its size. God is communicating to us Jerusalem's qualities, and they are wonderful qualities. This is how John describes it:

It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal (Revelation 21:11).

The city looks like a jasper. Do you recall a time when John went into Heaven and saw a throne, and the one who sat upon it shone like a jasper? This city is full of the life and light of the reign of God. When Ezekiel prophesies of a perfect city yet to come and of a temple yet to be established, he is talking about the Church. He is talking of that which is not yet on the earth but will come. He looks down the generations, sees it, and says that the name of the city will be "God is there" (see Ezek. 48:35). The life of this city is vibrant, its glory majestic, its power awesome, its light irresistible, its influence cosmic—for God Himself is there. The Lamb is there. God dwells in this city, and where God dwells, there is glory. In fact, God is the light of this city, and the Lamb is the lamp, and because God and the Lamb have their throne in this city, it shines with the glory of God's throne.

The Scripture tells us that the city has 12 gates and an angel at each gate. Just as the heavenly woman was crowned with 12 stars, so the holy city seems to be crenellated with 12 great gate-towers, and each gate is a single pearl. They are pearls because you have to sell all you have to get in. In a parable that Jesus told, a man was seeking costly pearls. I cannot think of a greater, more costly pearl than the gate that brings me into the city, and I am ready to sell all I have got to get in there. I am ready to give up everything that once was gain to me so that I might gain entrance into the city of God.

It is a pearl because the pain of an oyster creates a pearl, and it is through much tribulation that we will enter the Kingdom. Our suffering, our pains, our irritations are as nothing when I see this great pearl that bids me enter into the presence of the Lamb. As Paul put it, "*For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all*" (2 Cor. 4:17). I may suffer, I may be persecuted, but all that is doing is creating a pearl by which I enter into the city of God.

These 12 gates have written on them the names of the 12 tribes. The walls of this city have 12 foundations, and on them are written the names of the 12 apostles. Chronologically speaking, the patriarchs were here before the apostles, so you would think that the patriarchs would be the foundations and the apostles the means of entrance. That would be a logical and historical way of thinking. How odd, then, that the foundation, which must be laid before a gate can ever be hung, is there before the patriarchs. But you see, the Church is older than Israel. Before there was ever an Israel, before there was ever an Isaac, before there were ever 12 tribes, before there

was ever a nation that God called to be his own, there was a record in the heavens upon which were written names, not of those who would belong to the 12 tribes of ethnic Israel, but of those who would belong to the Church of the Lamb. Before God said, "Let there be light," before God called the sun to shine, before God called trees out of the ground or set a man in a garden, there was a book in Heaven called the Lamb's Book of Life, and my name was in it!

You sometimes meet people who struggle with their personal history. You find people who are troubled by the fact that they were abused or abandoned. You find people who continue to suffer from their childhood or teenage years. You find people who still bear the wounds of parental neglect, who feel constantly the pains of rejection. There is an antidote for that. There is a wonderful cure. It is not endless counseling sessions. You can get through the pain because your natural birth was only the means for God to get you born again. Whatever rejection you feel can be lifted because God, in eternity past, had already accepted you. Your name was in the Book of Life before the foundations of the world.

The foundations of this city are all precious stones. Solomon built the temple with costly stones. Paul exhorts those of us who are involved in the ministry of the Church to make sure we build with gold and silver and precious stones. This is the ultimate manifestation of the way God builds. God always builds with that which is of inestimable value. God is not a jerry-builder. God is not a shoddy and dishonest workman. God builds for permanence, and God builds for glory. So the foundations, the very things upon which we stand, which make us strong and give us confidence, are built with

jewels. The Garden of Eden was full of jewels. In fact, when you walked through the Garden of Eden you would kick them up with your feet. Ezekiel speaks of the demise of satan and the casting down of the one who was once a servant of God; he tells us that at one time he was in the Garden, once he was on the Holy Mountain. (That is one of the evidences, by the way, that the Garden was on a mountain.) He tells us that he was arrayed with all kinds of precious stones, and he walked among the stones of fire. There were fiery stones all over the ground, and when the sun shone, the jewels—the rubies, the emeralds, the amethyst, and all the costly stones that were just scattered in the dirt of the Garden—sparkled like fire.

Adam walked in such a garden, and when he got home at night, he picked up his foot and said, “What have I here?” He put his fingers between his toes and pulled out an emerald! It reveals to us the costliness of our salvation. We have come to the city that Abraham looked for, and we have discovered it is the most precious of dwelling places.

The foundations of the city are laid out as a square. The Holy City is a cube for this reason: it exactly replicates the Most Holy Place; or perhaps I should say that the Most Holy Place exactly replicates the City. The temple and the tabernacle were only replicating what is now a reality, and it is in the form of a cube. That is why the foundations are laid out as a square.

There are rows that exactly correspond with the breastplate that the High Priest wore. He wore a breastplate of 12 precious stones, and on each one was engraved the name of the tribes of God’s people. Now, upon these four square foundation stones are the names of the apostles, and it is a replication of the

breastplate that hung over the heart of the High Priest. It tells us that although there is no temple in this city—for the Lamb and He who sits upon the throne are the temple—it is a place of priestly habitation and function.

First, Jesus our great High Priest still carries eternally on his heart the names of his people, for He ever lives to make intercession for us. Like a precious jewel you are on the heart of Jesus. Like a stone of inestimable value you are held close to the beat of his heart. And in this new city we not only stand upon stones, we also enter into the fullness of our priestly function and have stones upon our hearts too, for we have entered into the Melchizedek priesthood, of which Jesus is the eternal High Priest. That is why Paul can speak of “*the grace that was given [him] from God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God*” (Rom. 15:15-16 NASB). In this glorious city/temple the people of God enter fully into their dynamic priestly function toward God and the world.

The River of Life

The city has come and revealed itself in all its glory, but God’s purposes are not over yet. When John speaks of “a new Heaven and a new earth,” he is quoting a passage from Isaiah 65, and if you go back to that passage, it speaks of God making a new Heaven and a new earth and of great blessings that attend those who live in this revolutionary environment. It tells us that in those days weeping will not be heard, infant mortality a thing of the past, and 100-year-olds will be full of vitality and youthfulness. Life will be peaceful, work prosperous, and the environment healed. Fellowship with God will be intimate and spontaneous. And what he is saying is related to

everyday life. He is not talking yet about eternity. He is talking about an earthly reality. When this city comes, it will be a “down to earth” city, and the nations will walk by its light, and the nations will bring their glory into it.

As John looked at this city, he saw a river clear as crystal flowing from the throne. It was a river that the prophet Ezekiel, the great prophet of restoration, had previously seen. Ezekiel prophesied as an exile, just as John now prophesies as an exile. Ezekiel prophesied as one in prison just as John is now in prison. Ezekiel prophesied as one carried away from where he longs to be—and so did John. Ezekiel knew that he would never go behind the curtain to fulfill his priesthood, but Heaven was open and he saw visions—just as John did. One of the visions he saw was of the great river of life that flowed from the temple, bringing life everywhere it went.

It was a progressive thing. At first, he was in it up to his ankles, but there was more. Then he was in it up to his knees, but there was more yet. He was in it up to his thighs, but there was more, until he was in it over his head. It was too wide to cross, too deep to stand in. He abandoned himself to the flow of the river. Only at that moment did he see on the banks of the river the tree of life. Not when he was paddling, not when he was wading, but only when he was out of his depth did he see this. We have got to learn to let ourselves get out of our depth in the flow of God’s purpose, because that is when the tree of life appears on the banks of the river.

John looked and saw this crystal clear river, and it was running down the middle of the street—an unusual place for a river to be. On either side there were trees of life. It is interesting that

when Israel came in to claim the land, to possess that land flowing with milk and honey and to be a radiance of God as a testimony to the ends of the earth, they settled both sides of the River Jordan. Now on both sides of the river there is a tree of life, for food and for the healing of the nations, and it flows crystal clear from the throne. It is all issuing from the authority of Heaven. As God establishes His throne in your life and mine, so rivers of living water will flow from us and heal a world that is a desert and a land that is full of famine. This city truly is the joy of all the earth. This city truly is the hope of every nation. This city surely is the place where we delight to be. We long to flow in the Spirit, even as the waters flowed out of the garden to the four corners of the earth, that the tree of life might be exported to the remotest corners of our world.

This city is coming and has already come. Jesus said,

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:14-16).

At the beginning of His earthly ministry, Jesus introduced many of the ideas and images that the Book of Revelation expounds—city, hill, lamp stand. He told His disciples that there were prophets who came before them (see Matt. 5:12), implying that they now have the prophetic mantle to continue the purposes of God—and to endure the same persecution as their predecessors. He revealed to them that the lamp enlightens all in the house—a Church full of understanding and truth—and that from the fullness of the house will flow

streams of light through words and works so that all men will give glory to God. Our task is to conform our lives to God's Word and reform our congregations into the true city of God that comes down out of Heaven so that we might transform our world to the glory of God. God has purposed that His glory will fill the earth, even as the waters cover the sea. What God has purposed, God will fulfill because His river flows down the middle of the street and God's street is a straight and direct route to His presence. God never built a cul-de-sac. He built a highway with a destination, and the destination is that all of the ends of the earth will see His glory. So let it be. Amen.