

Living in the Heavenly City

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Hebrews 12:18-29 NIV

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned." The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken--that is, created things--so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire."

The recent passing of several beloved members of our congregation has turned our thoughts toward the question of *our* eternal destiny. There is great comfort in knowing that, when we "shuffle off this mortal coil" (to use Shakespeare's phrase), it will be only to enter into glory in the presence of Christ. We have the assurance of God's Word about this; as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:1, "We know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." In my will I have directed that my tombstone will be engraved with Psalm 73:24: "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory."

So, as Christians, we are interested in heaven and what it's like. A few years ago I was asked to help compile a book of readings on heaven, which is supposed to come out next year. There are already several books available. One that's been around for a while is *Probing Heaven* by John Gilmore, a C.C.C.C. minister in Ohio.

When Christians think of heaven, or sing of heaven, or write about heaven, we often picture it as the heavenly Jerusalem of Revelation, chapters 21 and 22 — a city with gates of pearl, streets of gold, and radiant light. One poet, John Henry Hopkins, put it in verse:

*Jerusalem, my Home,
I see thy walls arise;
Their jasper clear and sardine stone
Flash radiance through the skies.
In clouds of heaven descending,
With angel train attending,
Thy gates of glistening pearl unfold
On streets of glassy gold.
No sun is there, no day or night;
But of seven-fold splendors bright,
Thy Temple is the LIGHT OF LIGHT,
Jerusalem, my Home.*

We long for this heavenly city, and it's where we want to *go* when our days here have run their course.

What's very interesting to me, however, is how the Bible has another "take" on this heavenly city, the Jerusalem from above. Listen carefully to what the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says in our reading for today, the twelfth Sunday after Pentecost. He's contrasting the Christian's destination with that of the Israelites, who came to Mount Sinai to meet with God and receive his covenant. That mountain was a particular geographic place, a spot on the map, "a mountain that can be touched." But, says the writer, for the Christian it's different:

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant (12:22-24).

"You *have come*," he says, not "you *will go*." I don't see any other way to take these words than to see them as a picture of our life in Christ *now*, as well as in eternity. We *have come* to the heavenly Jerusalem, "to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven." Living in the heavenly city isn't only a future hope, it's a present reality: the church of Jesus Christ.

I think the final chapters of the Bible are telling us the same thing, for in his vision John isn't taken up to heaven to see the new Jerusalem; instead, he sees the new Jerusalem *coming down out of heaven*. The last chapters of Revelation are a wonderful picture of the worshiping church renewing its covenant with the Lord. It's not a picture of us going to God, but of *God coming to us*. The voice John hears declares, "Behold, the dwelling of God is *with men*. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them." That says to me that the heavenly city isn't something we have to wait for. It's here already, in the presence of the Lord God and the Lamb. It's here now, and we live in it.

You see, we have a kind of *dual citizenship*. You know what dual citizenship is; some people, by reason of birth or whatever, are citizens of two countries at the same time. [I learned recently, for example, that a relative of Evelyn Kinton has both Canadian and United States citizenship.] Now it's not that we're both citizens of *the world* and citizens of *heaven*; in the spiritual sense, we're not citizens of the world at all! Jesus made this clear when he prayed about his disciples: "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (John 17:16). No, we are dual citizens of *heaven* itself — God's eternal presence — and of *the heavenly city*, the city coming down out of heaven to earth, in which we live out *here* what it means to be a people with an *eternal* destiny.

Think about cities, if you will. We define them in various ways. In Illinois we define a city legally by its government; if it has a mayor and council, it's a city no matter how small. Arlington Heights, where I lived for 18 years, has 75,000 people but it's a *village*. But usually we think of a city as a really large collection of buildings and streets. And to us the city can be a scary place, filled with congestion and crime and feverish activity. Perhaps we treasure the peace and safety of the quiet countryside and the small town or suburb. We long to escape the city.

That isn't how cities were regarded in the ancient world. In those days it was the countryside that was dangerous — filled with wild animals, or bands of thieves, or the searing heat of the sun. People didn't live in the open country. They lived in the cities. They went out to work their fields by day, but at night they came back within the walls of the city. For the city was a fortress, surrounded by walls and towers — just as it's pictured in the Revelation to John, and other places in the Bible. The city was a symbol of God's protection and peace. "We have a strong city," said the prophet Isaiah. "He sets up salvation as walls and bulwarks. Open the gates, that the righteous nation which keeps faith may enter in. Thou dost keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee, because he trusts in thee" (Isaiah 26:1-3).

And so it's no wonder that the New Testament portrays the Christian life as citizenship in "the heavenly Jerusalem." Hebrews and the Revelation aren't the only places where this happens. In Galatians, Paul contrasts the old bondage with the new freedom in Christ by comparing them to the earthly and heavenly Jerusalems. The old way, he says, "corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother" (Galatians 4:25-26). Paul is borrowing here from Psalm 87, so let me read it:

*On the holy mount stands the city he founded;
The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.
Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God. Selah
Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon; behold, Philistia and Tyre, with
Ethiopia — "This one was born there," they say.
And of Zion it shall be said, "This one and that one were born in her"; for the Most High himself
will establish her.
The Lord records as he registers the peoples, "This one was born there." Selah
Singers and dancers alike say, "All my springs are in you" (Psalm 87:1-7).*

As you can see, Psalm 87 is the origin of our hymn *Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken*. Paul uses it to picture our heavenly city, "the Jerusalem above," which "is our mother," where we were *born* as the Psalm says. That's another way of saying we're citizens of the heavenly city, the church of Jesus Christ. As the Reformer John Calvin said, "The church is the mother of those who have God for a Father."

But, of course, the heavenly city is greater than the church, for it stands for all of God's kingdom and his administration of his creation. Sometimes we make the mistake of dividing our lives into the religious and non-religious areas, or thinking that God has no interest in the parts of our life that aren't spiritual. But if God has made all things, and has a purpose for all things, then there's no aspect of our lives that isn't part of the heavenly city in which we live. If the Lord God and the Lamb dwell with us, they are the mayor of our city — or better, they are the King (for ancient cities were ruled by kings). And our King has a plan for governing how we live in our city, and has our welfare and best interests at heart.

Now this has been a heavy dose of biblical theology, but like everything the Bible says about our relationship with God it has its practical implications. To get at these we go back to our text from Hebrews 12. "You have come to Mount Zion," the writer says, "to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. . . . to the church of the firstborn You have come to God, the judge of all men . . . to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant . . ." And then he issues a warning: Just as the voice of God spoke to the Israelites from Mount Sinai, in the same way his voice now speaks from heaven declaring that things on earth are going to be shaken up. Citizenship in the world, in other words, is a shaky foundation. Only citizenship in the heavenly Jerusalem provides a solid and enduring basis for life.

"*Therefore . . .*" he says. Whenever we hear that word *therefore* in the Bible we know we need to pay attention because we're going to hear something important, something we need to do. "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, *let us be thankful*, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire'" (12:28-29).

"Therefore . . . let us be thankful." Here's our response as citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem. I mentioned before that "giving thanks," in the Bible, is more than gratitude; it's acknowledging that God's in charge, it's *taking the pledge of allegiance* to his kingdom. To live in the heavenly city is to give thanks across the whole spectrum of life — as Paul says, "always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father" (Ephesians 5:20).

So, therefore, *be thankful*. As Christians, we're used to giving thanks in certain situations, often as a response to answered prayer. It goes without saying that we give thanks for those things that sustain our life — for food and shelter and health. We are very big in this church about praying for those kinds of needs for ourselves and for others, because we understand that God is our provider and our healer. But living in the heavenly city we learn to give thanks in some other areas as well.

When you turn the ignition key of your car, *be thankful*. Give thanks to God who created the earth with its raw materials out of which your vehicle was fashioned. Give thanks that inventors and engineers used the minds God gave them to come up with the design for your car and the means to produce it. Give thanks that God ordered the elements of the universe in such a way that, under just the right conditions, fuel and oxygen would combine to produce energy. It didn't have to be that way, but God made it so. Give thanks that somebody sat in a meeting somewhere to decide to build the street you're driving on, that somebody else drew up the blueprint for the highway, that somebody else ran the grader and the paver and the roller so you could drive on smooth asphalt — and all because God gave people intelligence and skill to do these things. Be thankful you live in the heavenly city.

When you enter the voting booth, *be thankful*. Give thanks for the Word of God which establishes the difference between right and wrong, and helps you make decisions about important matters affecting our community and nation. Give thanks for the vision of our nation's founders, who believed that our Creator has endowed us with certain unalienable rights, including the liberties we enjoy. Be thankful you live in the heavenly city.

When you contemplate your children, or share tender moments with your spouse, or enjoy the excitement of a youthful romance, *be thankful*. Give thanks that God made us in his image *male and female*, the basis for the family and all human communities. There are some who want to deny the importance of this dual image, and promote intimacy between members of the same sex. That's a slap in the face of our Creator who made us male and female. It's no wonder that Paul, writing about this in Romans chapter 1, says "they did not honor him as God or *give thanks* to him," but instead "they exchanged the truth about God for a lie." Give thanks for God's truth about human life. Be thankful you live in the heavenly city.

When you boot up your computer or use your digital camera, *be thankful*. Give thanks that, when God created the world, he said "Let there be light" and then divided the light from the darkness. Give thanks for the principle of *information*, which is the difference between one thing and another, that *digital difference* between "off" and "on." If everything were *sameness* there would be no "off" or "on," there would be no computers and no information for them to process. But God *divided* the light from the darkness. Be thankful you live in the heavenly city.

You see, in every facet of our lives we detect the work of God's governing hand, ruling over this new Jerusalem of his. The heavenly city is here because God is here, working out his purpose for us in all these things and calling us into his living presence to worship him through Jesus his Son.

*Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God!
He, Whose Word cannot be broken,
Formed thee for His own abode.*