

LOOKING FOR A CITY (Preached on Sunday after 9-11-2011)
HEBREWS 13:14

INTRODUCTION:

While this week has been filled with tragedy and great pain, it may prove to be very helpful for many of us. The events that shook our nation on Tuesday morning can be a source of real profit for all of us. God wants to use everything that happens in life to benefit His people—and this event is no exception.

As I have thought upon the tragedy in New York and Washington, my heart has been drawn afresh to a statement found in the book of Hebrews. It is a statement in which the writer is giving a helpful insight to those first century pilgrims. Hebrew Christians were struggling. Their commitment to Jesus had brought to them great pain and persecution. Some of them were tempted to despair or even to turn back from their commitment to Jesus. This letter was written to them to encourage them to keep on keeping on. In this context of encouragement the writer says to them, “Let us then go to Him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace He bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.” In this statement the writer brings into contrast what we have now with what we anticipate having. This is the benefit we can receive from this past week. The events of the week have painfully reminded us of what we have now. Hopefully the events of this week will encourage us to seek the city, which is to come.

Those early Christians were encouraged by this unknown writer to keep on looking for a city. Earlier in this letter, in the great faith chapter, the writer had held Abraham up as an example of a

person who was looking for a city. He left his settled home in Ur in search of a city whose builder and maker is God. He lived all of his days without finding that city, but he died with the full expectation that the city was still ahead. Though none of us have found that city, it doesn't mean there isn't one. Indeed, we have the comfort and the assurance of the promises of God that there is a city to come.

In view of the darkness of this past week, let's look at this text together.

I. BECAUSE OF THE LIMITS OF THE CITIES OF THIS WORLD

The writer encompasses all of the cities of all kinds in his statement, "For here we do not have an enduring city." We may have thought on occasion that we had an enduring city, but in the end we discover that we do not have any enduring city. What are to understand by this statement?

1. This world provides no secure city.

The pain of this past week has been at this point — we are not secure as we thought we were. This world is constantly creating an illusion of security. We have watched on our evening news cities being blown up by terrorist in different parts of the world or being devastated by destructive bombs, but we never imagined that two of our great cities would be shaken by such a tragic event. It never dawned on us that terrorist could slip through our sophisticated security systems and could blow up the very symbol of our economic system. It never occurred to us that a handful of terrorist could put together a plan that would enable them to destroy a portion of the military center of this country. But then it **HAPPENED!** We too have not found an enduring or secure city.

This is not new. It is as old as the family of man. Since the Garden of Eden there has not been a secure place on this planet. Whenever man has sought to build a city that would be secure, in time it fell. The cities of our own country will be no exception. We need this kind of reminder from time to time that there are limits on the cities that the human family builds.

2. This world provides no satisfying city.

It is the nature of cities that they promise much. Many a poor soul has left his rural setting to move to a city in expectation of finding satisfaction in the city. They knew it had to be better in the city than it was in their rural home. But for many of them, it becomes the ultimate disappointment. There is not any place in this world that can ever provide satisfaction for the deepest hungers of the human heart. It always leaves man empty and disappointed.

G. K. Chesterton wrote of his own experience, “The modern philosopher has told me again and again that I was in the right place, and I had still felt depressed even in acquiescence.” But then he went on to declare, “When I heard that I was in the wrong place — my soul sang for joy, like a bird in Spring. I knew now — why I could feel homesick at home.” This is an insight that we need to understand. For the people of God this world was never meant to be home. This is the reason that you can feel “homesick” at home.” It is the very nature of the cities of this world that they isolate and create lonely people. You can live in a city like New York with its millions and feel so isolated and alone. There is nothing in that city by itself that can satisfy the deepest longing of the human heart. Malcolm Muggeridge declared, “The only ultimate tragedy we can

experience on earth is to feel at home here.” Human kind was created for something that this world can never provide. This week has been a reminder of this dark reality.

3. This world provides no permanent city.

Nothing in this world is permanent. **Nothing!** Who would have thought this time last week that those two giant skyscrapers in New York City that symbolized the commercial activity of that city would be lying in ruins, a heap of smoking ruins, on this Lord’s Day? But those two giant towers and their experience is a parable of this whole world. There is nothing that man has built that is permanent. Every thing that man has built after a while will return to the dust from which it is was made.

The Bible assures us in this same Hebrew letter that before God is finished with this world everything that can be shaken will be shaken. The writer declares, “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 removal of what can be shaken – that is, created things — so that what can not be shaken may remain.” Man has never built anything that cannot be shaken. Everything he has built after a while will be shaken and returned to the dust.

Have you considered the great cities of history and how many of them are sites where archeologists dig today? The great cities of Egypt — Thebes and Memphis, the great cities of Nineveh and Babylon! They are archeological sites today. Why should we not expect that New York and Los Angeles will be archeological sites some day, if the Lord Jesus tarries His coming? This old world is in the process even now of passing away.

In light of this statement concerning the nature of the cities of this world, it is a foolish thing to put your hopes and expectations in the cities of this world. If you have focused your attention on this world, you are destined to a moment of profound loss and disappointment.

But this is just half of the writer's statement. The second part of the statement gives the alternative — "But we are looking for the city that is to come."

II. BECAUSE OF THE PROMISE OF THE CITY TO COME.

The word translated "looking" is actually the Greek word for seeking. It means that our full attention is focused upon the city that is to come. We are anxiously and constantly looking for the city. I guess we would have to be honest and confess that most of us would have to admit that we are not so looking for the city. But we would also admit that we ought to be. The writer of Hebrews gives us so many helpful insights into the city that is to come.

1. The city to come is a work of God.

I have already made reference to Abraham and his looking for the city. Let's look at Abraham a little more carefully. The write of Hebrews reports, "For he was looking forward to the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God." Abraham never lived in a city. He spent all of his days living in tents. This stands in contrast to his nephew Lot who preferred city life. It was Lot who abandoned Abraham in the hills and mountains of Canaan to make a home in the city of Sodom. But it soon became obvious that Lot had made a tragic choice. God visited Lot's hometown and when he left it was a pile of rubble like the twin towers in New York, but only

worse. Abraham never found the city that measured up to his expectation. He wanted and looked for a city whose architect and builder was God.

Is this not an intriguing thought? The sovereign Creator, who created everything our eyes see, has set Himself with the task of planning, doing the work of an architect, a city in which His people will live. Since God did such a wonderful job in creating a beautiful universe, what will the city He plans for His people be like? It will be heaven for sure! But He is not only the architect of this city; He is also the builder of the city. John saw the vision of this city in the close of the New Testament. He saw the city coming down from God out of heaven prepared like a bride for her bridegroom. Jesus Himself said before He left His disciples, “And I go to prepare a place for you.” Does this not stir something within you when you begin to consider the possibility that there is a city that God Himself has planned and prepared for His people!

2. The city to come is the home of the people of God.

Home is the critical word here. In the writer’s discussion of Abraham’s faith, he has these words: “And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things know that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.” What Abraham confessing is simple — he never found any place that felt like home. That is the reason he kept living in a tent. There was never any place that felt like home to him. I’ve already quoted those memorable words from Chesterton and from Muggeridge about their own experience. C. S. Lewis has a whole chapter in which he explores this idea. This

sensitive English Christian confessed that we are too prone to place our expectations upon the things of this world. They never quite live up to what we were expecting. They never quite become home. But God has prepared a country — a homeland — for his people. It is the home of the people of God.

Composer Don Wyrzten's song "Finally Home" says it so well: "Just think of stepping on shore and finding it heaven! Touching a hand finding it God's! Of breathing new air and finding it celestial! Of waking up in Glory and finding it home!"

We are not there yet. We have not arrived — but we are still looking for the city that God has promised.

3. The city to come gives satisfaction to the deepest desires of the people of God.

It is the nature of human life that the experience of this world leaves us still thirsting for something more. As I approach retirement it has given me opportunity to look back and to reflect upon my life. By any worldly standard, I have had a good life. I grew up in a good and blessed Christian home. My childhood and youth were lived under the protection of good Christian parents. But even then there were a still gnawing awareness down deep inside that there must be something more.

I then had the opportunity to get an education beyond high school. I was blessed by two institutions of higher learning and then was blessed by getting an advanced degree from a good Baptist seminary. I am so appreciative of those years and for the good people who contributed so

much to my life in those years. But when I came to graduation from seminary in 1962 I knew there was something more. There was a hunger that education had not been able to satisfy.

Then the goodness of the Lord gave me the opportunity to share my life with a wonderful Christian lady. Alice and I have had forty-three wonderful years together. All of those years have been spent in the service of our King. Out of our walk together God has produced four sons with wonderful families. I don't know of anyone who is more blessed than I have been blessed as a husband and a father. But as I reflect on my relationship with my family, there is still that gnawing awareness that there must be something more. Unfortunately others have felt that same awareness and have assumed that they could find it in this world. But it is a gnawing awareness that will never be satisfied in this world.

Now I have completed forty-seven years of ministry. These have been wonderful years but as I come to the end of these forty-seven years, I still have that gnawing awareness that there is something more. Some have told me that I will find it in retirement, but I know better. I am trusting God to give to Alice and to me some blessed years in retirement. But I know there is a gnawing hunger in me that retirement will never satisfy. Retirement will not be a continuing city. The hunger that is within me will remain as it is, unsatisfied, until I come to the city of God. It is a hunger for God! A hunger to know God more deeply than it is possible to know Him in this world. Then in that day, that deepest desire will be satisfied. Then I will know that I found the city that God has prepared.

Augustine described this eternal blessedness as a perpetual Sabbath rest. He wrote, “There we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise. That is what shall be in the end without end.” It will be that Shalom for which every human heart has longed.

When S. H. (Sam) James, long-time black pastor in San Antonio, died. His three preacher brothers conducted his funeral service. One of them told this story of a little black girl in Alabama, who rode the bus to school every day. Hers was the last house on the bus route, and she was always the last one off. In the wintertime it was already dark by the time the bus reached her house. As the bus approached her house one dark winter evening she said to the driver, “If you would like, you can let me off here on the main road and I will walk across the field to my house. That way you won’t have to drive all the way down the lane. I see the lights are on and I know my parents are home.”

The driver said, “I don’t mind making the drive, honey. If I let you out here, you will have to walk through the cemetery to get home.” She said, “I don’t mind walking through the cemetery because the lights are on and I know everyone is home.”

Dear friend, when you are walking through a week like we have just been through, or taking your walk through the cemetery, it will be all right if you know and can see the lights of the Father’s house in the distance. You will be able to walk through the threatening darkness of the present because you are aware of the city that is to come.

So, this has been a good week! Any week that reminds us of the nature of this old world, and reminds us that we are just here as aliens and strangers and pilgrims, it helps us refocus our attention on the city that is to come, has been a good week. I must confess to you this morning that the city that is to come has never looked more inviting. I'm looking forward to being home. Aren't you?

If you are not sure that you have a place in the Eternal City, you can be. Entrance to that city is based upon your relationship to the Lord of that city—the Lord Jesus Christ. There is a place in that city for those who have trusted Him as Savior, and acknowledged Him as the Lord of their lives. You can settle this issue today. I urge you to do it this very morning.