

# The City of God

Revelation 21:1-4, 9-11, 22-27

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“I’m gonna walk in Jerusalem!  
I’m gonna talk in Jerusalem!  
Sing in Jerusalem! Be in Jerusalem!  
High up – in Jerusalem when I die!  
I’m gonna swing in Jerusalem!  
Shout in Jerusalem! Pray in Jerusalem!  
High up – in Jerusalem when I die!”

Leon Uris says, “The unabashed exultation of this (African American) spiritual, likening Jerusalem to heaven, has been echoed by humankind for over 3,000 years, as befitting the most venerated spot on earth.” (Jerusalem, Song of Songs)

“I left my Heart in San Francisco,” or “Do you know the way the San Jose?,” or “My kind of town, Chicago is...”, or “Meet me in St. Louie,” or “I’m going to Kansas City, Kansas City Here I Come!” We know these songs about our American cities by heart. But what other city could be the focus of such a spiritual? Jerusalem may be the only city that not only has an illustrious past and present, but also a metaphorical future. It’s immediate future is probably more in doubt than any other city on earth— where else do two nations have legitimate claim to the same city as their capital? The division between the Palestinians and the Israeli’s seems greater than ever before. But the hopes and dreams of humanity are also symbolized in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is more than a city: it is an idea. It is the only place on earth which the three great monotheistic religions call “holy.” The book of Revelation says, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God...” (21:1-2) Many Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox traditions fix eyes upon Jerusalem as they anticipate the Second Coming of Christ or in God’s cataclysmic end history as we know it. Jerusalem is the epicenter.

The Jews wait for God’s promised coming in Jerusalem. There are even ultra-orthodox Jews in Jerusalem who do not recognize the modern state of Israel because it was not founded by God’s anointed Messiah.

The Dome of the Rock, towering over Jerusalem today, marks the place where Muslims believe that Mohammed ascended to heaven. Nowhere else on earth has this sense of religious

expectancy. Jerusalem isn't just a city! It's a "Holy Metaphor." It captures an eschatological vision.

Leon Uris continues, "Everything about Jerusalem is subject to sublime glorification, her air, her wails, her valleys, those paths trod by the sandals of prophets and saints, those places of agony, her sacred mount, even the necropolis, her city of the dead... Jerusalem has known the hosts of 36 wars. She has been reduced to ashes 17 times. She has risen 18 times. She has been sanctified by blood and martyrdom... She has seen more passion and love and more human savagery than any place on earth.

"Her location, off the commercial beat, difficult for agriculture, in a constant search for sufficient water, without natural wealth, tells us that she should not be among those cities considered as great. But Jerusalem...alone has achieved immortality...

"She rises and rests on hot windy crests of omnipresent stone of which she is made. Stone has given her a constant look of thousands of years. Sun and stone are companions putting on a changing light show from the blinding midday glare to muted golds and purples of sunrise, sunset and moon glow.

"The Old City is entered today through seven magic gates leading into a vortex of holy fires, of smells of ancient spices and a cobblestone labyrinth that eventually finds the heart of hearts, the Temple Mount. From Jerusalem, David, Jesus and Mohammed all are stated to have made their ascensions to their celestial temples." (p. 10-22, Uris)

"Jerusalem is a city of three Sabbaths – Friday (Muslim), Saturday (Jewish) and Sunday (Christian). Stores and businesses in modern Jerusalem may be closed on any of these three days." (Bible Dictionary) It is a city that has learned how to "keep the Sabbath" on whatever day it falls.

"It is a city of diversity; even today the Old City is divided into the Armenian Quarter, the Muslim Quarter, the Jewish Quarter and the Christian Quarter. The city is a mosaic of strangers speaking different languages, with different alphabets and alien to one another in culture and religion..." (Uris, p. 13)

In the heart of the Old City, there is a Greek Orthodox Monastery, a Roman Catholic Monastery, a Coptic Monastery, an Ethiopian Monastery, a Maronite Monastery, a Russian Cathedral, a Scottish Church, the Mosque of Omar, and what is reputed to be one of the two most beautiful Islamic structures in the world, The Dome of the Rock. There is the Jewish Wailing Wall, the Italian Synagogue, a Gethsemane Church of All Nations, an Islamic orphanage, the Shrine of the Rock and a Biblical zoo! There is a Greek Catholic Patriarchate, as well as a Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, as well as Armenian, Latin and Coptic Patriarchates. And there's tombs, memorials, mosques, churches, cathedrals and synagogues, more places of holy veneration per inch than any other city on earth!

One time Menachem Begin, President of Israel, was meeting with Jimmy Carter in the Oval Office. He noticed the three phones historically on the President's desk. One was platinum, one was red, and one was gold. Begin joked, "What are those phones really for?"

Carter replied, "Well, the platinum phone connects me to my brother Billy living back in Plains. As you've heard, I have to keep a close watch on him. The red phone is a direct line to Russia, and the gold phone is my personal hot line to God."

Begin laughed, "How much does it cost to call God?"

Carter responded, "\$10,000 – and its worth every penny."

Time passed and Carter visited Israel, and noticed three phones in Begin's office. Carter couldn't resist, "What are your phones for?"

Begin replied, "One is my direct line to Parliament. As you know, I have to keep a close watch on them. And one is my direct line to Egypt And the last one is a line to God."

Carter asked, "How much does it cost to call God?"

Begin replied without pausing a beat, "Ten cents. Over here – it's a local call."

Even the name of Jerusalem means "City of Shalom." The word, "salem" is the basis of the Aramic greeting, "Salam" and of course the Jewish greeting, "Shalom." Both mean, "Peace be with you." "In the Old Testament, Jerusalem is called the city of Jehovah (Is 60:14)... God refers to Jerusalem and to no other place as "my city" (Is. 45:13) or more often, "my holy mountain" (Is 11:9; 57:13; 65:11, 25; 66:20)." (p. 418 Zondervan Bible Dictionary) "The greatest group of titles for Jerusalem are those which identify it as the city of God." (p. 418, *ibid.*)

We read in Psalms, "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God." (46:4) "Great is the Lord, and most worthy of praise, in the city of our God." (48:1) "Glorious things are said of you, O City of God." (87:3) And in the New Testament, the book of Hebrews, "Come unto Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God." (12:22)

So what is this idea of the CITY of God, anyway?

A garden, an orchard, a spring ---these are places suggesting harmony, tranquility and our interdependence with nature. Who can deny the reality of God walking through a forest, standing at the edge of the ocean, or looking upon the grandeur of a snow-capped mountain?

But, a city? The city is a human habitat, hardly reminding us of God. In ancient times, cities had walls around them marking parameters for security. Today, the wall around the city of Jerusalem is its most ancient structure. Through urbanization, the city stands in opposition to forest, farm and green spaces as it sprawls and consumes natural habitats. Look at the far reaches of Johnson County or Kansas City North where farmland is being cultivated into sprawling new housing developments.

The city was created by human beings for human hospice. Yet, the city often is the most inhumane place. We survive by ignoring one another.

A woman had gone shopping on the Plaza and was laden with packages. She wanted to find a place to rest. She found a little deli which had one empty table. She dashed in, bought a

little package of cookies, a cup of coffee and sat down. With a sigh of relief, she began to drink her coffee and relax. But just then, a man who looked homeless came in and took the chair on the other side of her table. She tried to appear unruffled. She calmly reached out and opened the package of cookies in the middle of the table and ate one. To her astonishment, the man helped himself to one of the cookies.

In indignation, she pulled the cookies closer, opening her newspaper like a kind of fortress. She took a second cookie for herself. Soon, a dirty hand reached under her paper and took a second cookie. Now the woman's anxiety turned to anger. She put down her paper and glared at the man. But as she did this, he took the last cookie, broke it in two and offered her half.

That was the last straw! She was so upset that she stormed out of the deli, ran to her car and drove off. She couldn't get over the audacity of this rude, filthy stranger. How dare he? She felt so offended that tears formed in her eyes. At the next stop light, she reached into her purse for a tissue and there found her package of cookies. The one she had bought at the deli. She suddenly realized that the man wasn't eating her cookies. She had been eating his! She later confessed, "That was a life-changing encounter. I've always heard that you can't tell a book by its cover, but it took me 46 years to realize that you can't ignore the people you meet on the streets of the city. You must look into the heart. That gracious man was sharing with me all he had, perhaps, his only meal, and I was offended."

We meet so many people in the city that we are forced to respond to our stereotypes. Few people starve to death on a farm. City poverty is often dead-end poverty. I have walked through the frightening poverty in Nairobi's Mahari Valley, where a huge valley stretches as far as the eye can see, a cardboard city of makeshift huts, and each time the hard rains fall, many of the homes slide down the hillside.

Just recently, those of us who went to Tijuana walked along the basin for the Tijuana River that leads across the US Border. Most of the time, the River is just a small trickle of water, and on both sides of the immense concrete basin, deportees have carved out temporary huts where some have lived longer than a decade hoping to be reunited with their families on our side of the border.

I have walked in the slums of Manila, the wretched shanty-towns along the water-front. I have seen filth and frustration in a Bangkok slum. I have walked through a refugee settlement of Zacamil in San Salvador, a depressing project of open, smelly sewers, with children of swollen bellies, blank stares and nostrils so filled with sores that the flies and mosquitoes seem permanently attached. I have traveled through the Natal Province in South Africa, rattled at the time by civil war, littered with squatters, with neighborhoods torched by warring factions. I remember feeling so guilty when our delegation stayed in a four-star destination hotel in Durban, South Africa. Just behind the hotel was a block of cardboard houses including many abandoned children living on the asphalt.

The city can be an inhumane place. If there be any place in need of God's Redemption, surely, it is the city. When they first built the Renaissance Center in downtown Detroit, the

architects deliberately built large berms and walls and turned the Center away from the city toward Canada and the Detroit River – to separate it from urban blight.

A.E. Harvey has written, “The world was not as God intended it to be; nor would it become so merely by human efforts. What was needed was a new act of creation... The ideal of human life—God dwelling among us—had for centuries been symbolized by the city of Jerusalem.” (Companion to the New English Bible)

Yet Jesus was killed in Old Jerusalem. He was buried in the city’s burial ground. He also arose from a Jerusalem tomb. When the Resurrected Lord appeared, it was in the city, the stirrings of New Jerusalem.

The resurrection community, the early church, was to be the New Jerusalem. We are a resurrection community, called ourselves to be citizens of God’s Resurrected City. Jerusalem, the metaphor for resurrection, can descend upon us – right where we are!

Mary was in the garden, mourning the fact that Jesus’ body was missing from the tomb and she did not know where they had taken it. And then, she encountered the Risen Rabbi. As Mary turned to run, hers were the first steps in the New Jerusalem! No wonder the Revelation of John proclaims, “Now at last God has a dwelling in the city! God shall make a home among all people; and the people of the earth shall be the people of God!” (Rev. 21:3b-c) Mary first walked the streets of the city of God!

It is so easy to become disillusioned with the city. But the city is also a metaphor of God’s promise for the future. And so we live in creative tension between the city as we know it and the city of hope. Mary turned from the cemetery of the dead to the metaphor of promise, the Empty Tomb, as she raced through the streets of the city with the good news of Resurrection.

We live with the same tension: which will it be for us: city of despair or city of resurrection? City of death or city of rebirth? Christianity hangs in the balance. No one can deny that our city has plenty of problems, and so many obstacles in the path to a more humane city with open doors of opportunity for everyone.

It is Mary who stands in her city of despair, the city that has just crucified her Lord, and becomes our example as she turns from death, transforming the city’s stone streets from paths of death to paths of resurrection!

Are you filled with fear and negativity? Or do you have good news of resurrection to share? Do you have words of despair or words of hope? Are you a critic, or an agent of change?

One of the saints of the church I served in Michigan, Alice Brubaker, gave me her Jerusalem travel journal just two weeks before she unexpectedly died. And in the last page of the journal, her final entry, I found two questions: “Why did I come to Jerusalem? Did I find what I was looking for?”

<b>Can this become our Easter Credo?</b>
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I believe in resurrection.  
I believe that life can be reborn.  
I believe that God is at work in the city introducing rebirth.  
I believe in the City of God.  
I believe that nothing, not heights, not depths, not despair, not suffering and not even death can separate us from the power of Jesus' Easter Resurrection!

Surely, in Kansas City, on this resurrection morning, we can proclaim:

"I'm gonna walk in Jerusalem!  
I'm gonna talk in Jerusalem!  
Sing in Jerusalem! Pray in Jerusalem!  
High Up – In Jerusalem when I die!"

Amen.