

# The City of God—The Hope of His Calling

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Southern Baptists were jolted this spring by news that baptisms had declined ten percent over the previous year. We are people so committed to evangelism and to missions that such news reached right to the heart of our sense of who we are. Since then, there has been an abundance of analysis suggesting what went wrong. Leadership has been questioned, new programs called for, spiritual insufficiencies cited, and theological presuppositions questioned. Older heads in our midst point out that such declines have come before and have often served as the catalyst for new waves of witnessing fervor.

Frankly, I am more concerned by a statistic that is not available and yet lurks ominously beneath the numbers we do have. It is that statistic which would total the numbers in our midst who don't letter out, don't die, don't change denominations, but who simply don't show.

Recently on NBC's "Today" show one of the founders of Youth for Christ was featured in a shocking interview. The man has renounced Jesus Christ, has become an evangelist of apostasy. Domsdayers are not surprised, calling this a sign of the last days. But others tremble when such influential people take the floor against what we hold so dear. I think such anxiety is wasted on apostates. The bigger problem is the negative influence of the "don't show" crowd.

These people don't have to say a thing. The way they live and the impotence of their faith on every aspect of their lives lodge a powerful testimony against the good news that Jesus commanded we should preach everywhere. It is the kind of impassive evil that Jesus denounced so scathingly in the parable of the talents.

Because of the hosts of such people in our midst, it is my conviction that our crisis is not in evangelism but in discipleship. Evangelism is a by-product of discipleship, not the other way around.

Analyze the Great Commission. The verbs in order are: reach, teach, baptize, teach. What we dropped is the key verb—the failure to teach those things that help a new child of God understand what his new life is all about.

In Ephesians 1:18 and following, Paul prays a beautiful prayer for the Christians in that embattled church. At the heart of his prayer is his plea that "the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of

his inheritance in the saints. . . ." I believe our discipleship crisis is caused by a failure to understand the hope of our calling. Too many baby Christians know they belong to Jesus Christ but they don't know what happens next. They have been told to wait for His coming, but they don't understand the meaning of the inbetween time.

Perhaps it is time that we declared an open book test. Do you remember those tests where the teacher decided to give you the benefit of every doubt and let you have the book before you and even give you access to the answers at the back to see if you could work the problem? God has given us the book. Too few of us open it much less open it at the back to find out what the answers might be.

Now if you are flipping through your Bible wondering where the answers are, try Revelation 21.

Why Revelation 21? Because in the 21st chapter of Revelation that for which Paul has prayed that the eyes of our understanding might behold—the hope of our calling—is revealed in the vision of the Holy City of God. Let me read portions of that chapter for you.

## Revelation 21: 1-3, 9-10, 22-26

1 And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.

2 And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

3 And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

9 And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife.

10 And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God.

22 And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it.

23 And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.

24 And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it.

25 And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there.

26 And they shall bring the glory and honour of the nations into it.

Remember the problem. It is a lack of a sense of discipleship—of a clear-eyed understanding of the hope of our calling. Now what are the answers we find here in the back of the book?

### **We Are Pilgrims Seeking That City**

Answer number one emerges as we see the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming out of heaven. It sends us back to the very beginning of the book to a man called Abraham whose spiritual children we have become in Jesus Christ. In Genesis we are reminded that Abraham was a man who went out under the leadership of God seeking "a city whose builder and maker was God."

One of the first difficulties we face as young Christians is our unwillingness to be pilgrims. Yet if we are seeking to know and follow the leadership of God, we must be pilgrims. He will not leave us where He found us. He will lead us to higher ground. The scripture says ye shall be my witnesses. This is not an option; it is a fact. But then He tells us to "go ye," and we have been dragging our heels at this point. If we catch the notion of pilgrimage then the notion of going follows.

When I was a younger minister I had a good friend named Bill Long, a man whom God had already taken further down the road than He had me, even though Bill was younger than I. Bill told me a story one day that someone had shared with him in his early years. The story was of two men: one a devout believer and the other a highly principled agnostic. The latter said to the former, "What is the difference between us? I practice the same ethical standards you practice with the same fervor. What difference does your belief make?"

The first man replied, "Let me put it this way. If you were awakened by a voice during the night that you became assured was the voice of God and He told you to wake your family, to get in your car, and to leave everything you owned, and to go to a place that He would show you, would you do it?"

"Of course not," the high principled agnostic replied. "It would not be rational."

"Well, I would," the devout believer countered, "and that's the difference."

Pilgrims must be willing to go.

Being a pilgrim means we are willing to leave the place where Christ found us. That may mean leaving habits, patterns of speech, business practices, immoralities, insincerities, and many other things that our unwillingness to leave has left our witness so compromised.

When did you last leave something? When did you last decide that something was childish and you could put it away now and step to more mature ground? When did you last leave some self-indulgent habit or when did you last let go of some material security blanket?

Pilgrims are not only a people leaving something; they are also people going somewhere. When I was seeking God's leadership regarding the post that I now hold and facing the dread thought of having to leave the exciting church where I both loved and was loved as I never thought I could do or be, I came across a quote from Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln was struggling over the Emancipation Proclamation. Certain ministers had come to him and told him that it was the will of God that he sign it. Other ministers had told him that it was the will of God that he not sign it. Lincoln mused, "It seems to me in a matter in which I am so deeply

involved God would show me what His will is." Then Lincoln added, "If I could know what it is, I would surely do it."

In my search for God's leadership I said to God, "If I can know what your will is, I will surely do it." As pilgrims we are a people who must be committed to knowing what the will of God for our lives is and just as committed to doing it.

But there is another truth that emerges in this first answer. Being a pilgrim means that we must not settle in the wrong places. Lot was the classic example of a man who settled for a Sodom and Gomorrah instead of seeking a city whose builder and maker was God. Too many Christians wonder where the zing went, wonder where the joy is, wonder where the power is; and all the time they fail to examine the Sodom and Gomorrah in which they have settled in the valley of secularism instead of following the laboring figure of Abraham struggling up the heights, seeking something grander.

As John saw the Holy City of Jerusalem coming down out of heaven, God revealed to him and to us that we can settle for nothing less. We are pilgrims, "seeking a city whose builder and maker is God."

### **The Church Is The Forerunner Of That City**

Answer number two is that we are not left with only a vision, but God has given us a present down payment on that future reality. In verse two of this 21st chapter the Holy City is referred to as coming out of heaven "prepared as a bride for her husband" and again in verse 9 the angel says to John, "I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife." The New Testament is perfectly clear about the bride of Jesus Christ. It is the church. Now the city of God is represented as the bride. Why? Because the church is even now the forerunner of the city of God. God has allowed us to be baptized into a body of believers and bonded into a fellowship of spirit-gifted people as a foretaste of the glory to come. And this answer may be more of a problem to you than is the problem. Why?

For one thing it is hard for us to identify cities with heaven despite Christ's reference in the Gospel of John to a place with many mansions being prepared for us. We live in a day and time in which cities all around us represent not strength, not joy, not well being, but corruption, danger, darkness, violence, decadence.

Some believe the city of God is meant to speak to our cities, that we should draw inspiration from the ultimate blueprint to reform the present reality. The only trouble is it's not our cities that constitute the present down payment—it is our churches.

This may be your second problem. Your church is hardly a place where you would want to spend eternity. I didn't say it was complete; I didn't say it was finished; I just said it was a forerunner.

But at this point perhaps your two problems can help each other. First of all the nature of the city is that it provides a matrix of mutual support and ecology of well-being. The city is supposed to provide protection and fellowship as well as nurture. That our cities don't provide these things represents the impact of sin and the reality of the powers and principalities of this world.

But the church is supposed to be a different matter. The church is supposed to represent in its fellowship a place where we can be mutually nurtured in Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 2:19-22 we are called "fellow citizens with the saints of the household of God." In the church we are to have a mutually nurturing citizenship. Jesus Christ is to be the cornerstone, the very heart of our relationship together. In verses 21 and 22 we find that we are actually being joined

together in such a way that God can supply all of us with our spiritual needs.

The reason so many of our people are starved into a lethargy and impotence that denies the very reality of the gospel is that they have let themselves become separated from the body, or let's accept some of the responsibility—the body has let some of its members become separated from it.

Our sin is regarding our churches as corporations of some kind that must show a bigger profit this year than they did the year before. We have even defined the profits in terms of the crassest kinds of statistics. Brethren, the church is a spiritual entity empowered by the presence of God Himself.

Look to verse 22 in Revelation 21. There is no temple there "for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it." Look in verse 23, "for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof." Did He not promise that "where two or three of you are gathered together in my name, there am I in your midst?" When we gather and worship with our fellow believers, let it be in the holy awe that recognizes the presence of God. Let us regard our brothers and realize that we are fellow citizens, and we will one day be joint heirs with Christ.

### **God Is Preparing Us To Live In That City**

But answer number three may be the true key to the problem of our powerless witness, our milling confusion, our failure to have the "eyes of our understanding enlightened by the hope of our calling." God is even now preparing us to live in that city.

Salvation does not mean that we simply receive title to a future inheritance that we file away until that time comes. Being born again means commencing a new life, and growth is inherent in commencing new life. God is about the business of changing us through growth.

What is He changing us to? It is not just a matter of changing our habits or reforming our lives. He is, in fact, changing us into the image of His Son.

We have been reading a lot about human cloning of late. One man has written a book in which he claims that a clone of a wealthy man has been reproduced and is alive and well and approximately a year and a half old. Don't be surprised by this, brethren. Satan has tried to counterfeit everything God has ever done. In Jesus Christ a spiritual kind of cloning has been going on. We are being conformed in the image of His Son. He is to be the first born among many brethren. But don't mistake this kind of cloning. We are being made over from carnal to spiritual beings. It doesn't reproduce the kind of worldly rubber stamp that soon multiplies of corruption replacing single instances. God's cloning reveals that each of us has a unique pattern that can only come into full bloom when we are in the spiritual image of Christ. That is the reason His individual plan for our lives is so important. That is the reason His particular purpose for us and the unique gifts that He has given any one of us is so significant.

Sometimes we resent those that He brings into our churches and those with whom He calls us to live. Let us remember that each one provides an important lesson. We are being prepared to live together in that city. If we can't learn to live with one another in our churches, brethren, we are not yet ready to reign with Him in the city of God. And that is precisely what we are to do—reign. The scripture promises us that this life is to train us to reign with Him.

We have clutched Romans 8:28 to our breast as a kind of a spiritual teddy bear. Yet we have overlooked the real meaning of that great passage. That meaning is found in Romans 8:29. The reason all things work together for good for those

who love God and are called according to His purpose is that God is buying up every experience, every event, yes, even every failure in our lives, every wrong turn in our lives. He will not be defeated by our resistance. He will continue to conform us to the image of His Son. The excitement of the Christian life and the dignity of the Christian life is that every single event yields meaning. The reason so many Christians have wandered off to the sideline without any sense of direction is that they don't understand that God is at work in their lives.

One of the sweetest kids that ever became a part of the church at Knoxville was struggling with an "alley cat" background that was hard to believe. But she was struggling, and God was performing a miracle in her life. She had a way of smiling and saying from time to time, "Be patient with me. God is not through yet." Let's be patient with each other, brethren. God is not through with us yet.

During the early months of my pastorate at Knoxville, I was asked to visit one of the old saints of the church, a retired schoolteacher in her late 80's who lived in an apartment near the church. There members of the church often took her meals and cared for her in a variety of ways. Then the inevitable happened. She fell, broke her hip, and was sent to a nursing home.

I remember visiting there several weeks after she had been confined to the nursing home. Her eyesight was failing, her hearing was failing. She couldn't move about. She had outlived all of her relatives. So many of the church people who had had a habit of caring for her when she was nearby in the apartment found it less convenient to visit her in the nursing home. I found her deeply depressed.

I had to draw my chair up close to her to hear her. But what she said to me went something like this. "Preacher, why does God leave me here? I am no earthly use to Him anymore. When I was in the apartment and friends could see me, at least I could talk to them about the word of God and what I had learned. But now, nothing. I can't get out of this bed. I can't see people. I can't read. I am no more use to God. Why does He leave me here?"

And some of you pastors with more experience would have a ready answer. But at that point I didn't, and it bothered me. And I struggled with her question. In fact, I agonized over it because I believed all of life had meaning and that God deals with us purposefully. What could He be doing with this gentle soul? What should I say to her?

Then one day I was jogging early in the morning. It had become an important time for me not just for my health maintenance, which was the reason I took it up, but because it had become one of the most effective prayer times in my life. As I jogged along I realized that it was such a precious prayer time because everything else was shut out. Moving along quietly in the early morning with nobody else around, God and I were able to get together on terms that I desperately needed. And suddenly it occurred to me that my shut-in friend had a chance to get together with God on very special terms. He had allowed all else to be closed out, but He wasn't through with her yet. He was still preparing her to live in that Holy City; and in the intense confines where nothing else was allowed in, He was there. Later in the day I rushed to the nursing home. I pulled my chair up to the frail bed-ridden figure, and I had to shout in her ear. But it went something like this, "Dear friend, God hasn't made a mistake. You are still here because He is not through with you yet. He is still working with you, and He will finish the task. The one who is the author of your faith is the finisher of it. Let Him work with your inner being."

The answers are there, brethren, in the back of the book.

### **Evangelism And The Hope Of Our Calling**

But I began by citing a crisis in evangelism that I suggested was in reality a crisis in discipleship. How will these discipleship answers effect evangelism?

For one thing, pilgrims are natural witnesses. When people see people on a journey, they want to know where they are going. More, pilgrimage is a contagious thing, especially for people milling about without purpose.

For another thing, the forerunner of the Christian pilgrim's destination, the city of God, the church of Jesus Christ is

also a powerful witness. Where a local church's fellowship provides nurture, support and spirit-gifted ministry, it's an almost irresistible witness to millions of people waiting to come in from out of the cold.

But the most effective aspect of such discipleship is the power of a changed life.

"What's happened to you?" has been the opening line of soul-winning dialogue throughout the centuries.

So let us renew our pilgrimage toward that city "whose builder and maker is God."