

Joining God for the City

Series: Joining God for the City
Brad Bailey – February 22, 2015

Intro

Why do you live in this city?

Your answer might involve **circumstances** – born here...got job here...have some family here? Or maybe the reason you live here has been more rooted in a personal **choice** – perhaps because of the weather (...have you seen Boston lately)... or the vibe...or to just get out from what felt confining...as many still ‘go west’ as pioneers... to explore?

> **God has something greater to grasp as to why we are living in this city.**

There’s something beyond mere circumstances...and choices.

Circumstances...and choices may **locate you**...but they **don’t lead you**.

They may direct the **place** you live...but **not the purpose**.

They may provide a **mailbox**...but they **don’t provide meaning**...that comes from God.

We see a place...but God sees a purpose.

God Invented the City

God has a design and desire for the city

We’re told in the book of Hebrews that all throughout the Old Testament, the great patriarchs like Moses, David and Abraham himself had a goal during the time of their wandering through the desert. According to

Hebrews 11:10 (ESV)

He (Abraham) was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

He knew that what he hadn’t reached what God had in store...but what God was leading towards...was not a garden....but a city.

We’re also told in **Revelation 21 and 22**, when God finally gets the world to its **ultimate goal**—when he finally develops **the new heavens and the new earth**, when he puts the world in the shape it ought to be in—that **it’s going to be a city**. It talks about the **streets of the city**, the **center square** of the city, the **dimensions** of the city.

It may surprise us to realize that God began human formation in a Garden, but he will end it in a city.

One pair of writers put it this way:

“The world to come, Scripture teaches, will be an urban world. The redemption drama that began in a garden will end in a city, the new Jerusalem. Heaven’s citizens will be urbanites. Drawn by bonds of grace from all races, nations, and language groups, new-city citizens will live together in perfect harmony as God’s redeemed people, his new covenant community.”

- Roger Greenway and Timothy Monsma [1]

The whole phenomena of urbanization...of living in cities...is such a sociological phenomenon that we don't of God's purpose in it.

It's increasing growth has been a major phenomenon in our world.

For **much of its early existence**, the human race **spread out**. But now humanity is marked more by concentration than by spread.

In 2007, one-half of the world's population became **officially urban**. (In 1950, 30 per cent of the world's population was urban, in 2014...54%...and by 2050, 66 per cent of the world's population is projected to be urban.) One-third of Americans inhabit just 16 large metropolitan areas, which collectively use only a tiny fraction of the country's land mass.

In February **2009**, President **Obama established** the first White House **Office of Urban Affairs**, which has been told to develop a "policy agenda for urban America."

> **Life is being shaped by the nature of the city.**

The city is God's invention, it is not "only" a sociological phenomenon or invention of humankind.

The city has been that which **both draws and compels**.... And I believe it reflects that cities reflect **God's good purposes being corrupted**.

God invented cities...with a purpose. Let me describe three divine purposes for cities that appear clear.

First of all,

The City Releases Human Potential

If you read the Old Testament, you will see that when God created Adam and Eve, when he created human beings, he made them creative. He is the Creator, and he made us in his image.

So we are creative and productive.

We need to create... to build, to develop, to enhance. In Genesis, as soon as human beings are cast out of the garden, they immediately begin to create cities. **Cain builds a city**, and his **descendants build cities**. And it's in the cities, we're told in Genesis 4, that the **first music was composed**. It's in the cities where the first metallurgy and **metal craftsmanship** began to advance. Why? It's just common sense. It's in population centers where our creative potential is released. *The very word "civilization" comes from the Latin word for cities (civitas).*

When you draw together the needs and resources ...our creative nature rises.

"Humanity is a social species and our greatest gift is our ability to learn from one another. Cities thrive by enabling that learning, and they have become only more important as knowledge has become more valuable." - Edward Glaeser - economics professor at Harvard. [2]

At the same time, that **impulse to achieve has a dark side**. Remember that every one of the purposes of the city has been distorted by sin. Therefore, look at the motivation behind the ambition in **Genesis 11**. The people say they are going to **build a tower**, "*so that we may make a name for ourselves...*" In other words, "If we're going to be the best, to achieve the most, we have to build a city."

The Bible teaches that God's first divine purpose for the city, which is the city's power to release and magnify human potential, is **now driven by a desire for self-glorification**.

Some may want to curse the city as vain...but it is not the city in itself...but it's simply a good potential... corrupted... that needs to be restored.

In the **same way that human family can be corrupted by dysfunction** and failure to be what it is supposed to be... so with the city. And while we may want to dismiss the need for family... we know that it is the very core of life...and is life giving. It's not a human creation. God invented it. So it is with the city. We might want to curse the city...but it is God who placed in our human nature...the desire to civilize.

Second,

The City is a Place of Refuge...Bearing the Hope of Justice and Unity

All of the Hebrew words for *city* used in the Old Testament mean an enclosed place. The cities were originally places that were *safe*. You see it in Genesis 11 when the people say, ***“Let’s build a city that we might not be scattered.”*** If you’re scattered, you’re vulnerable. So if you want to be strong, you have to gather. Cities were always places where scattered people and weak people could come together and be safe.

The first cities God told the Israelites to build were called *cities of refuge*. Why? Because God had a purpose for the city. God knew that when a person was accused of a crime, someone could hunt them down and kill them. A city of refuge was a place to which you could flee and get a fair trial because the cities were the places of civilization. The law of the jungle didn’t hold. They were the places where justice would first develop.

Where diversity is drawn together... it can provide a safer place.

It’s opportunity...and it’s tension.

It’s full of so many people who are different from you—politically, culturally, racially and economically. No matter who you are, that’s true. That’s what a city is. You’re not in a city if you look around and everybody looks like you.

It is where people who are different most likely go... from slaves seeking better hope for emancipation and justice...through ever wave of immigrants....to countless lives who feel they may not be accepted elsewhere.

And it is there in the city that the issue of justice and diversity **bears it’s highest potential and highest problems.**

It is here that we must face our prejudices. (We are going to consider that more deeper in the weeks ahead)

Thirdly,

The City Compels Worship

That may not strike you as true. We usually think of cities as less spiritually inclined...as more secular. But you may recall that the root of worship...is about giving worth. The very word worship comes from an old English word...”worthship”...to give worth.

It’s in this sense that the city intensifies the spiritual forces of worth-ship (What we give worth too)

Throughout the ancient world.. you can see every ancient city, most of the, were named after a god. Most of the cities of the ancient world were **built around the tallest building**, and that tallest building was **always the temple of the god the whole city worshiped.**

Cities **drive you to sell your soul to something.** They always create spiritual turmoil. People are always spiritually searching in cities.

It's never changed. Today we assume that cities aren't religious. They're very secular.

> Don't kid yourself. The **tallest buildings in any city** always are temples to the god that city worships, to the god that compels you to seek it.

What were the tallest buildings on the skyline of New York or Philadelphia 150 years ago? Have you ever seen the old lithographs? They were churches. Today the tallest buildings are temples to money, the god of today's big cities. **The city was originally invented by God to be a place where we met him.** Cities, therefore, are relentlessly religious. People are stirred up in cities to seek spiritually.

I am not saying that smaller towns don't have all the same issues to some degree...but they tend to be steadied by their roots and the social expectations that come with them. (And I would add that many "towns" today...are increasing city sized...and urban.) The point is that the city offers more to pursue...and to give oneself to.

It is that which creates **openness** to God...and **idolatry**.

So God has purposes for the city... as we embrace these ... we can begin to not see a place...but a purpose.

You may think...I'm **just not that into** Los Angeles...sort of **disconnected**.... Probably a city **worthy to be cursed**...

I am to carry God's purposes for the city I live in

The Listen to the prophet Jeremiah...people of Israel...had been attacked and thousands taken as slaves to Babylon. Talk about reasons to be disconnected...to curse...to think more about leaving !

Jeremiah 29:4-7 (NIV)

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. ⁷ Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

Notice how God casts the reason that they are there is **because "he carried them there."**

They had **lost sight of God's sovereignty**... and could only imagine that they were there because the Babylonians had taken them away. But God claims his purposes are for every city...through his people...so that **regardless of where we are**....we have an equally **divine purpose** for however long we are there.

Do you hear the call to actually LIVE there... to fully enter into life?

God says, join life... BUILD ... SETTLE ... PLANT ... EAT MARRYINCREASE IN NUMBER.

I believe those are **important words for us**...because Los Angeles is **a city that many never feel settled in**. The Westside is especially given to being a place to come have **fun for a while**....but **never really call "home."**

I believe this can have real **spiritual consequences**. For I believe that there are forces set against this city which have more right to residency than many of us.

I'm not suggesting that there aren't great reasons to move some day...but for however long God has you here...live here...make it your city.

Sometimes we've been guilty of thinking, "**God..... put me in a place that I love.**"

BUT NO..... WHAT IF WE PRAYED, "*Lord, help me to love the place that you've put me in.*"

His call is for them to be **distinct but not separate**... to settle down as **full-fledged neighbors...but redemptive neighbors**... to be **in the world but not of it**.

As Tim Keller describes, we are to live in such a way that **avoids both assimilation and tribalism** in favor of selfless service. Keller defines "**assimilation**" as using the city **for your personal benefit** and "**tribalism**" as using the city for the **benefit of your group**. Both approaches fall short of God's command in Jeremiah, where the Israelites are instructed to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

Seek the peace and prosperity of the city

The word translated here as "peace," translating a Hebrew word that you may have heard before. The underlying word here is shalom. Depending on context and shade of meaning, it can mean peace, well-being, completeness, wholeness, blessing, or as translated here, welfare. The use of shalom here stands in marked contrast to what the Jewish Exiles seem to have lost. Taken from home, they felt lost, broken, incomplete, and cursed – anything but shalom. Yet God calls them to pray on behalf of the city of Babylon for the very thing that they feel is missing.

"In the city's welfare you will have welfare."

> A simple idea...but not a simple reality to embrace.

On a **personal** level ...we have to face our **selfishness**.

On a **spiritual level** we have to face our separatism...the religious **separation** of "we" and "them."

Seek and pray for those who need what you need, and in connecting with the need you share in.

The life of peace that I long for... is not found in the place I came from, nor where I think I might go, but in in the Lord...who is here.

"Seek it" - get up, move, do, listen, pray, follow, obey, and connect with your city...your neighborhood, with your neighbors.

God wants to cast each of us in the role of redeeming the city.

I am to bear God's blessings for the city I live in

We are to bless the city.

Proverbs 11:11 (NIV)

Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted...

Do you know what it means to bless somebody? It means we're not cynical about the city. To bless someone means to have hope for them. To bless someone is to encourage them. It means we get rid

of our cynicism about the city because we know this city will someday be part of the city of our God. That's what the Bible says!
Therefore, we have a hope nobody else can claim.

And he says....

It begins in prayer.

Jeremiah 29:4, 7 (NIV)

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ...⁷ seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. **Pray to the LORD for it**, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

We tend to think of prayer as simply adding another duty to life.
Prayer is more about aligning all duties in life.

That is why we are setting apart these 40 days....to align our lives with God's purposes.

Lent recognizes that Christ spent 40 days in the wilderness...in prayer and fasting... which prepared him to fulfill his purpose.

God in the heavenly realm had just declared this to be the son...

> Spirit led him (there was a purpose...an ultimately positive purpose....essential purpose...to such a time.)

> There he faced his demons.... Very real spiritual forces whose very goal is to redirect us from God.

There he denounced the forces that sought his allegiance... and determined that God would rule.

In is in prayer.... Drawing before God...that we can face the powers that are trying to control us...attachments that can control us.

> (More about 40 days of prayer)

Today we are going to begin a new series...that will explore and engage those purposes.

We will explore the heart of what this Lenten season can do in us. For these 40 days are an **invitation into purpose**... an invitation from God....

> Let's begin...with a few minutes of prayer for our city...in small groups of 3 to 5.

Resources: Tim Keller, Why God Made Cities (sermon turned e-book), The City (a sermon)
(http://static1.squarespace.com/static/5315f2e5e4b04a00bc148f24/t/53556fb2e4b0b8b008774203/1398108082122/Why_God_Made_Cities_by_Tim_Keller.1.pdf)

Notes:

1. Roger Greenway and Timothy M. Monsma, Cities: Missions' New Frontier (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2000), 27.

2. Why Humanity Loves, and Needs, Cities By Edward L. Glaeser (April 13, 2010)

NY Times, *Edward L. Glaeser is an economics professor at Harvard.*

http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/04/13/why-humanity-loves-and-needs-cities/?_r=0

[World Urbanization Prospects 2014 - UN Population Division](#)

The key facts of the "World Urbanization Prospect 2014" released today by the UN Population Division are the following:

Interesting...

Zion is a fictional city in [The Matrix](#) films. It is the last human city on the planet Earth after a cataclysmic nuclear war between mankind and sentient Machines, which resulted in artificial lifeforms dominating the world.

Following the [United Nations](#) attack upon the newly established machine civilization of Zero One, a global nuclear war between both factions began for control of the Earth. After several desperate plans to halt the seemingly never-ending waves of robot-soldiers, the human leaders realized that the Machines had a good chance of winning. The human leaders began the construction of an entirely underground city, called Zion, that was built for the purpose of preserving the human species.