



## Seeking The City To Come

Hebrews 13:7-19

Grace Church | 4.2.23

There are only two times recorded for us in Scripture where Jesus weeps. Not cries, as in pain, or in emotional outburst, but *weeps*, as in overcome by the weight of sadness, as in the language of lament. But Jesus never weeps for himself. The first time Jesus weeps it is for the death of Lazarus, his friend. He weeps because he feels the pain and sting of death in his mortal body. The second time is on Palm Sunday, that day we commemorate today, the beginning of Holy Week, the march towards the agony of the cross and the awe of the empty tomb.

Jesus has been welcomed into the city of Kings, Jerusalem, like a king. He rides a donkey, the symbol of a victorious king of peace, and he is greeted with happy people attributing to him the legacy of David, the idyllic king. On the heels of these praises, he stops to catch a view of the city that is meant to be the dwelling place of God on earth, and he weeps. He weeps for one reason: because the city is blind. Although some hail him with welcome now, he knows that in a few short days they will reject him, lead him away, out of the city to the hill of death, not with joy and branches, but with shame and pain, mocking his kingship and treating him as a criminal. The true king is coming into the city, but the people of the city do not recognize him—so he weeps, because his concern is for them.

Jesus is just a week away from his victorious resurrection. In a little over a month he will ascend to heaven, back home to the heavenly city, the true Jerusalem, where he will be truly welcomed and crowned like a king returning from battle. He knows all of this. And yet, he still weeps for the city of man. Why?

Because Jesus is teaching us something. He is showing us what it is like to be rejected by the earthly city, to be thrown out of the city gates like a criminal, to be misunderstood and mocked and shamed, to know that our home is with God, and yet still show compassion for the earthly city. He is showing us what it looks like to act as citizens of God's kingdom.

Remember that the book of Hebrews is written to a group of people, maybe a small house church, who are tempted to leave Jesus behind when the going gets tough. Going back to Judaism and all its religious rituals would be easier for them socially. So the whole book has been laboring to convince them, and us: Jesus is better. You could break it down like this: in the first section of Hebrews we learned that Jesus is the better prophet, who gives us a better rest from God. In the second section, we learned that Jesus is the better priest, who gives us a better access to God. And



for the last chapters we have learned that Jesus is the better king, who gives us a better kingdom, a place with God.

In chapter 11 we also got a picture of this—in verses 13-16.

13 These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. 14 For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had the opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

So, like Abraham and Sarah and Noah and others we are called to imitate—we are promised a city, a new kingdom, a better country. Which means that we are strangers and exiles here—the term used is “resident alien”, meaning that we live here in the city, but our true home is in the one to come. That kingdom, that homeland, we learned two weeks ago, is unshakable. It’s eternal, it’s full of God’s welcome—not a fear of judgment—and even we saw that we *have* (present tense) come to it, meaning we get to experience a picture and a taste of that kingdom, that heavenly city, as we follow God with his people now in the church.

And yet, while we experience it now, and it is so guaranteed to us that we can say that is *has come*, we are still, **verse 14**, seeking it. So we live in this tension, sort of like Jesus did in his last days. The kingdom has come—because the king was come to earth to inaugurate it—but his kingdom is not of this world, and so it is still coming. Jesus rides triumphantly into Jerusalem to model for us that where the king is, the kingdom is come, but then weeps over Jerusalem because although the king is there, they don’t yet all recognize him. Heaven has invaded earth, but hasn’t yet made all things new yet.

How then, do we live in that tension? That is Hebrews 13. As Dave covered in **verses 1-6**, as we live in this tension, we do so with familial love for those in our community, and hospitality to those outside of it. We care for the oppressed, we remain holy, we keep ourselves from lesser loves like money, and we trust God. All of those markers are saying something: that as citizens of the new city, we look different than those whose ultimate home is here on earth. So let’s continue that theme today, by considering three ways we “seek the city that is to come”: 1) Honor Leaders Past and Present; 2) Follow Jesus Into Reproach; 3) Live Generously Before All.

## **We Seek The City that is to Come by... Honoring Leaders Past and Present (7-9, 17-19)**

I once had a mentor who used to encourage everyone that one of the keys to being a faithful Christian was to “fall in love with a deceased faithful saint”. This man was a good Baptist and



Protestant, so he did not have in mind veneration or praying to ancient Christians. What he has in mind was a simple *remembrance* and *modeling*. His point was that every serious Christian could at least have one good example of a man or woman, who history has cemented with a faithful legacy, to remember and to follow in their example. This is the exhortation of **verse 7**. The word “leader” there is generic, but the author has in mind church leaders, that is, leaders in the faith. These are leaders who “spoke the word of God”, that is, taught the church how to follow Jesus. Because the word “remember” is used, and because it is not used when referring to the “leaders” in **verse 17**, I believe the author has in mind those who have died and passed into their reward. Besides, they already have committed a whole chapter to remembering faithful examples in the past.

What is uniquely Christian about remembering those who came before us? We are shown in **verse 18**. When we model our life after the example of the past, we are acknowledging that the same Jesus that they follow does not change, but is the same Jesus we follow. In other words, although culture and circumstance have been bent by history, following Jesus has always remained the same, since Jesus is the same. All of this centralizes with **verse 9**. I’m not sure what strange teachings they were being tempted by, but it’s likely the rituals of Judaism they are tempted to fall back into—which is why the author reminds them that their strength comes not from what foods they don’t eat or eat, but by God’s grace. This is the teaching that has been passed down to them by their leaders: a reliance on Jesus, his new covenant, and God’s grace above any religious ritual. Just because something is diverse or new or flashy doesn’t make it true.

The late J.I. Packer described our world as a place where: “the newer is the truer, only what is recent is decent, every shift of ground is a step forward, and every latest word must be hailed as the last word on its subject.”<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis called this “Chronological Snobbery”, where we look down on the past as if we are the enlightened ones. But if Jesus is the final word of reality, he isn’t getting better, but neither does he ever grow stale, he is already best. This means in his kingdom, there is no “enlightened age”. Every time-period has blind spots, and every time-period has access to Jesus..

So hear this simple exhortation: find old, long gone saints to remember and imitate. Remember the church and her leaders, who have passed down to you the word of God. No one is perfect, but look for those whose life is worth imitating, not just whose writing is thought-provoking. Let me just give you two quick examples for my life recently. **John Newton** the pastor and hymn writer has taught me how to love Jesus and live wholly dependent on him for grace. I come back to his hymns and his personal letters nearly weekly. Also, I recently read a short biography of **Macrina the Younger**, who is the older sister of two important church fathers, and she has taught me compassion and humility as I marvel at how everyone honored her for her selflessness. Maybe for you it’s not someone anyone wrote a book about—but it’s your grandmother, your father, your old mentor who is now with Jesus: the ones who taught you the faith. Don’t forget them, and follow their example, because the Jesus they followed is the same Jesus you follow.

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<sup>1</sup> Couldn’t find the original, but I trust Justin Taylor isn’t making this up.  
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/chronological-snobbery-and-the-spirit-of-our-age/>



In God's kingdom though, it's not just past leaders we honor. We also honor those who presently teach us and lead us, see **verse 17**. This applies generally to anyone who spiritually "keeps watch over your souls", whether that be pastors/elders, current mentors or fathers/mothers in the faith who have committed to you, or if you are young enough, your own parents. If chronological snobbery is prevalent in our time and in the earthly city, dishonor for present authority might be even more prevalent. But this is not a call to blind submission to leaders just because they are leaders—it is because they must give an account. We submit to those God places in spiritual leadership over us, knowing that God has our back. Sadly, spiritual leadership or authority is easily abused—and it is in those contexts that you are not called to submit, but to call on God to bring an account to such leaders. But for all those leaders in your life who faithfully help keep a watch over your soul, including your pastors in this church, there is a two-fold advantage to humbling allowing them to lead and shepherd you: first, it makes it easier on them, and gives them joy, and secondly, in doing so it makes it easier for them to shepherd you, and you gain even more from their leadership.

Let me level with you: spiritual leadership can be a great joy, and a great burden. Be discerning—follow God, not man, don't place your leaders on a pedestal—but I want you to know that I speak for your pastors in saying that we love you deeply. We are for you. We are not perfect, but we are for your good and your flourishing. This is the charge from God—he is our judge. Do not neglect to hold us accountable to that, we welcome it! But it is better for you, and more beneficial to you, if in trusting Jesus you are able to trust those in leadership over you. For some, trust has been broken in the past, and it's very difficult for you. I'm so sorry if that is you—there is patience here. It may take a while. No leader can guarantee to not let you down. But you will only flourish in God's kingdom if you can learn to counter-culturally honor those God has appointed to lead and shepherd you.

Lastly, **verse 18-19**, pray for your leaders. Pray they can have a good conscience, and a healthy partnership can be made wherein they can do what God has called them to do in your life, and you can trust them. To do this is to seek the city that is to come: where we will all have clear consciences and be free of sin, living in total honor for one another.

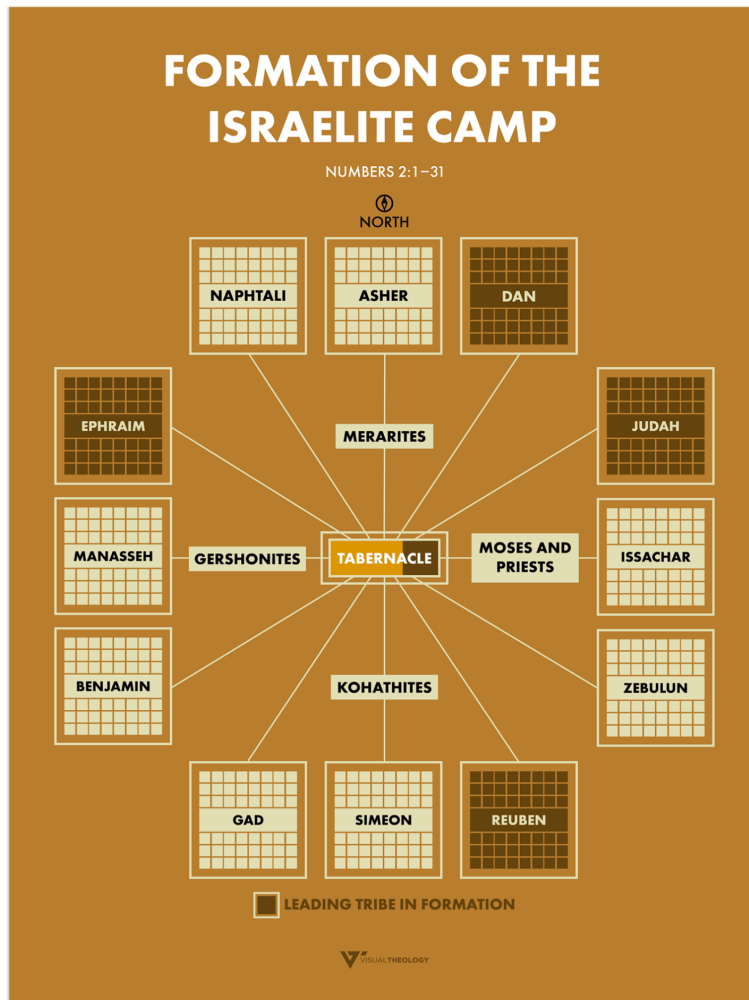
## **We Seek The City that is to Come by... Following Jesus Into Disgrace (10-14)**

It may seem like the author is a little disjointed in **verse 10**, but he is just using a contrast—that rhetorical figure he loves to use so much. As citizens of God's heavenly kingdom, we have a different altar than before. The altar of the earthly kingdom is presided over by priests, and only those priests would have the right to take a portion of any food sacrificed there for themselves—none of us normal people can eat from it. But now, the opposite is true. Anyone whose real home is in the earthly kingdom has no right to eat from the heavenly. Our new altar is not physical, but spiritual—it's an altar used once, since in Jesus we have a once-for-all sacrifice.



Our altar then, is the cross, where Jesus died for us. It's in coming to the cross, and to Jesus our sacrifice and our great high priest, where we "eat", that is receive, the provision of God.

This is further explained in **verse 11-12**. It's a really vivid picture here, if you know your Biblical context. When the Israelites traveled in the wilderness, their camp was set up like this, with the tabernacle in the middle.



Basically, anything "in the camp", close to the tabernacle, was holy ground. But if you went outside the camp, you were no longer in relation to the tabernacle, so that was considered an defiled place, an unholy place, the place where you dump your dead animals or trash or you sent criminals or lepers or the ceremonially unclean. This is why in **verse 11** the practice is mentioned of burning animals—their blood is brought in, but their bodies are dumped. But there is this scene in Exodus 33, where after Moses comes down from Sinai and finds everyone worshipping the golden calf, he is so angry with the people that he has the tabernacle erected *outside* the camp. They can't even be close to it, but in order to sacrifice and be right with God, they have to go outside of the boundaries, into the unholy place.



And the author of Hebrews is telling us that something similar happened when Jesus came. Because Israel's sin was so great—the sin Jesus wept over on Palm Sunday—God erected a new temple *outside* the city gates, in the place where criminals and trash and dead animals are sent. That new temple, new altar, is the cross of Christ, where Jesus, **verse 12**, suffered outside the city gates. He was cast out from the people because they despised him, just as the presence of God was cast out from the people of Israel when they despised God by worshiping a golden image.

So what the author is asking them to do in **verse 13** is to follow Jesus outside the camp, abandoning empty Jewish rituals, abandoning sacrifices and their historic faith and temple, to follow Jesus. Remember, what was Jesus ultimately killed for? Why did they mock him and hate him? Because in claiming to be God, to forgive sins, he was threatening to replace the temple, to end sacrifices, to overturn the Jews very world. So they shunned him, handed him over to Rome like a common criminal, and cast him out of the city to suffer.

So what is our call as Christians? That although we may be mocked or persecuted, that although it means laying down our old way of life, we must be willing to follow Jesus outside of the camp and bear what he endured, because, **verse 14**, we have a lasting city. Jesus does not promise it will be easy to follow him. Although we are not operating in a first century Jewish or Roman culture, there will always be parts about following Jesus that every culture we see as disgraceful. Perhaps right now it is our sexual ethic—that to believe God created two embodied genders, meant for sexual activity only in exclusive marriage between a husband and wife—how out of date! How oppressive, how disgraceful! Or maybe it's our understanding of truth—that we don't have the ability to decide what is right or true for ourselves, but that comes from God—how restrictive, how prideful, how disgraceful! Really, it doesn't matter where you turn—to the political right or left, to the 21st century or the 17th century—there has never been a society or a culture or a city here on earth that doesn't disdain *something* about the way of Jesus. You have no lasting city here.

And Jesus, weeping Jesus, riding into the city knowing that he will be cast out of the city in a few short days, this week of Holy Week, says... follow me there. Don't be ashamed. I go before you, I am the perfecter of your faith. When you follow Jesus, no matter the social cost, you show that you are seeking the city that is to come.

## **We Seek The City that is to Come by... Living Generously Before All (15-16)**

When we consider the reality that seeking the city to come will invariably bring us shame from the city of man, one question that may begin to boil up in us might be: "why not just withdraw"? Why not retreat out of the city of man, if we don't really belong to it? But I don't think the Bible has a category for that. See, it calls us resident aliens, not just aliens. Already in chapter 13 we have been called to *show hospitality to strangers*, literally inviting the world into our living rooms, not shutting them out!



To go even further, **verse 15-16** are telling us that to both acknowledge the name of God before others *and* to live generously with what we have before others, is the way to please God. In other words, we have to be a people who are not ashamed to represent Christ to those who don't know him and may potentially hate us for it, and at the same time share all we have with those same people who may resent us for our commitment to Jesus. And so what it means to seek the city to come is to live in the tension of having to welcome and love a city, a people, a culture, that does not welcome or love you. If we no longer offer sacrifice for guilt or to atone for our sin, this is our new sacrifice—to live openly and generously before all with our affirmation of Christ and our good works to everyone.

You could put it this way, like Paul does in 2 Corinthians: we are *ministers of the new covenant*. The ministers of the old covenant offered animals and blood, we offer unashamed praise to God and unashamed good before men. In fact, these two things have always gone together in God's economy. True worship, says the prophet Micah, is not to offer sacrifices of bulls and goats, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Or we can notice how James puts it: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world."

In the heavenly kingdom of God, there will be no need and no poor. There will be no hoarding and no bank accounts. There will be no extortion and no taxes. So how do we live like we seek that city? We open up our hands—we are ready to give what others need. We share what we have. To seek the city to come is to love the city you are in.

Which brings us back to Jesus. Jesus, who was not so busy as to fail to love children, to notice blind beggars, to stop for needy men and women in the street. Jesus, who was the resident alien who lived with us and took on our flesh even though his home was in heaven. Jesus, the same yesterday, today, and forever, who was taught to us by our mothers and fathers in the faith and their mothers and fathers, and who shepherds us now through his church and her leaders. Jesus, the one who wept over the city of man, who weeps over and for us, and whose opening of his veins and sharing of his righteousness was the ultimate act of pleasing praise and worship ever given to the Triune God. Jesus, the true king of the unshakable kingdom, the true light of the true city, the very heaven of heaven<sup>2</sup>, the one who suffered all shame and disgrace outside the camp for us, and even there bore separation from God, all so that we can be the citizens and inheritors of an everlasting city to come

That Jesus is calling right now and this Holy week: seek my city, and seek me. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.<sup>3</sup> Let's do so.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Sibbes.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 29:13

