

A God's Eye View of You: Pt. 10

The City of the LORD

Isaiah 60: 1-3; 14b; 17b; Hebrews 12: 18, 22-23

**First Presbyterian Church
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Gerrit Scott Dawson**

Today and next week we'll be concluding our series called A God's Eye View: Of You! We've been noticing the shining new names the LORD promised to his people who were in exile in Babylon. God made huge promises to his broken and disgraced people. One of the most beautiful new names was promised to the people as a whole: you, together, will be called The City of the LORD. The nations will stream to your holy city. The world will come to hear the news of your God and see the way you flourish as you live for him. You will show the world the community of restored, forgiven, alive people. The vision of a City of God continues all the way through the last book of the Bible, where Revelation describes this city much the way Isaiah does. This is the place where the LORD dwells with his people, where all is ordered and prospering, governed by peace and harmony. The City is a vision of all we were created to be. It has not yet come to be fully in this world. Yet, we live to show a glimpse of it to the world.

So Paul would write to the Philippians, "But our citizenship is in heaven, from which we eagerly await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:20). Our hometown, Paul says, is Jesus himself in community with his saints. We're from his Father's house. Our fatherland now is heaven. Not an airy-fairy, bloodless heaven, but the robust, gleaming, bustling, productive City of God. Jesus is the founder of the City of the LORD. The crucified Jesus is the stone that the builders rejected. The resurrected Jesus has now become the cornerstone. The City of the LORD is the place where heaven becomes earth. This vision creates the longing of our hearts to live in joyful, prosperous, vital community with God and one another. In these crazy days where anarchy and violence run through our streets even as a virus runs through our homes and isolates us from each other, I long more than ever for this holy City to be a reality. One day, when Jesus returns, this holy city will descend to earth—that's a picture of the kingdom of God transforming everything.

Right now, though, we live in this rebel world. It's more like Babylon than Jerusalem. Disorder, cruelty, betrayal, falsehood, deception seem more common than harmony, peace, truth, kindness and love. This world does not acknowledge Christ's lordship. It entices us to believe that all we want and need can be found

here, in the glittering pursuits of this world's values. Many of us have tried that—living for the more, more, more of experiences or possessions or power over others. We know it's a hollow, yet still shiny world. When we come to know Christ Jesus, our citizenship gets transferred. From earth to heaven. Yet we are not taken out of the world. Rather we are sent into this world as resident strangers. As foreigners who are bringing the customs of our true homeland into the ways of the present age. This often makes us feel like, well, like aliens. It makes us feel like we don't fit. Today, we're going to take a look back into history and discover that this feeling of being resident strangers is normal. It is usual for Christians, and gives us, if we let it, a greater sense of our mission and purpose.

All the way back in AD 130, a Christian named Mathetes wrote to a new believer describing the paradox of being citizens of heaven who yet live in this world. I want to read you a bit of this:

For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity.... following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners... They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all... They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonored, and yet in their very dishonor are glorified... they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honor; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.¹

Do you ever feel this way? Being citizens of heaven does not change much of life on the surface. We may well look like ordinary citizens of the world. For Christians live in homes, pay taxes, wear clothes not too out of fashion, walk dogs in the park, and drop children off for school. We work on factory lines and in

airplanes; we help maintain roads and run companies. We contribute to the commonwealth of the societies in which we live, quite often with a higher degree of citizenship and sacrifice than others.

All the while, however, we know that we are not really home here. We are fish out of water when our neighbors think the real meaning of life is actually accumulating the most wealth. We do not repudiate material prosperity; we simply hold it but lightly. We can speak the common language of finance or law in the marketplace, yet we know that the language of our homeland--the words of worship, the story of God's redemption, the precious Scriptures—may well sound like gibberish to our neighbors. We may well live in the same home for decades but we never feel truly home there, for this world is but a stop on the way to the heavenly country. Though we Christians may not react quite so charitably to insult as Mathetes suggests, we at least know there is a higher way than revenge, a more excellent path than the constant jockeying for respect found in the world. We live under the law of love.

In the late 300's, a bishop named Augustine created his masterwork, *The City of God*. Augustine pictured two cities. The human race has always been divided along the lines of loyalty to one or another. Some have served the City of God, putting their allegiance to God above all else. Some have served the City of the world, of Satan, placing their faith in themselves. At first glance, this division of every person into one city or another may seem too simple. But Augustine knew to take it deeper.

On earth, the two cities are always mixed. Citizens of God and citizens of Satan exist side by side not only in the marketplace but in the church as well. It is only at the Last Judgement that the two will appear plainly revealed. Then all will see the City of God: Jerusalem, and the City of the World: Babylon. Interestingly, the very name Babylon means confusion, and the citizens of Babylon were those who had confused their true identity with the things of this world.

The citizens of the City of God, of the spiritual Jerusalem, live in this world with the sighs and longings for another country, a heavenly city, in their hearts. Augustine writes, "Let us pine for the City where we are citizens. By pining, we are already there; we have already cast our hope, like an anchor, on that coast. I sing of somewhere else, not of here: for I sing with my heart, not my flesh. The citizens of Babylon hear the sound of the flesh; the Founder of Jerusalem hears the tune of our heart." We endure our existence on earth always sighing for heaven.

We are resident strangers. We live here; we work here; we serve here. But our true home is elsewhere.²

In recognizing our distinctive identity as Christians, though, Augustine did not fall into the error of withdrawal from the world. He was a man of the world, as sophisticated as any aristocrat, as educated as any scholar, as connected as any politician of his time. He understood that our life here on earth is always mixed. We long for the shores of heaven. But we live here on the earth knowing we have an economy to which we contribute and from which we benefit. We have a commonwealth of government and service to which we contribute and from which we benefit. We are here to improve the lot of others, to accept with thanks God's good gifts, to be salt and light in the world, not to withdraw from it. Augustine did not say Christians ought to separate themselves and head for the hills. Just the opposite.

The difference is that while we conduct "our business within this common mortal life," we have an otherworldly longing, a heavenly perspective. God's people live in the world, work in it, love it, care for it but "refuse to be engulfed" in thinking this is all there is. We strive to maintain our core identity as citizens of heaven even as we interact with the City of Babylon that sets itself up as independent of God.

Augustine understood the allure and beauty of this world. He knew how easy it is to love the world too much. He preached to his congregation, "I do not blame you; I do not criticize you, even if this life is what you love...You can love this life all you want, as long as you know what to choose. Let us therefore be able to choose our life, if we are capable of loving it." The Christian does not withdraw, but strives to maintain a balance in our loves, a clear priority to God in the midst of temptations.

The key for Augustine was remembering that God is the giver of all good gifts. He lavishes his kindnesses upon us, even amidst a world torn by sin and wracked with floods and accidents. The citizens of Babylon strive to grasp these things as theirs by right and deserving. The citizens of the City of God recognize the Giver. We give thanks. Augustine compares us to a bride with a beautiful ring. We gaze upon this gift with pleasure but we do not for a minute forget the husband who gave it. It is only a token, a symbol. If the gift is this lovely, then how great is the One who loves us.

So Augustine could pray:

These things are Yours, O God. They are good
Because you are in them.
None of our evil is in them. The evil is ours if we love them
At the expense of Yourself—these things that reflect your design.

Interaction with the world, even enjoyment of its good, is not what undoes us as Christ's people. Our over-identification with the world is not simply because we have common cause with the affairs of the world. Rather our failure to lift up our hearts, to see Christ in heaven and give thanks is what undoes our mission and compromises our witness. The error of Lucifer was "he wished no other source of goodness than himself." He tried to be his own source, and so he fell. This basic denial of dependence is what ruins us. Then we make the world and all that is in it an end in itself. But as citizens of the City of God, we may participate in the life of the world, striving with it, thankful for it, bruised by it, hoping for it, knowing that this is not our truest home. Again, we touch these things but lightly. We do not possess anything and so we possess everything. For we belong to Christ and all things are his (I Cor .3: 22-3).

As citizens of the City of God, we receive our mission from Christ, enacting a priestly life in the power of our High Priest who is interceding for us and sending us the Spirit to empower our service. We live from above. So with the worship of our hearts reaching to him in heaven, we lay down our lives for the lost here on earth. We take up any human suffering and misery as falling within our care, and lift it as well to the ascended Lord. When the church thus keeps fixed on Jesus for our identity and purpose, "there is no human want or weakness stranger to her. It is her part to heal every wound and to wipe away every tear."³ Such a sense of mission frees us from the world's game and empowers our mission to have an integrity the world cannot resist.

In a God's eye view of you, he sees you, dear church, as the ambassadors of the City Christ has founded. You are resident strangers sent to bless the world by living out the customs of the great City that has begun to be built but is still on the way. You know now that this world is not all there is. By your words, and even more by your life, you show forth the glory of your homeland for the glory of our Savior Jesus.

¹ Mathetes, *The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, American ed., A Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark and Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 5.

² Augustine quotes from Peter Brown, Augustine, in Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, pp. 315-326.

³ William Milligan, *The Ascension of our Lord*, (London: MacMillan and Sons, 18) p. 288

Portions of this sermon were developed and expanded in Chp. 7 of my book *Jesus Ascended: The Meaning of Christ's Continuing Incarnation* (London: T& T Clark, 2004).