

The Building as a City

“Therefore you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but you are citizens together with the saints and householders of God” (Ephesians 2:19).

“For he looked expectantly for the city which has foundations, whose Designer and Producer is God” (Hebrews 11:10) (Authors translation).

The believers have been identified throughout Scripture in many different types and symbols and analogies. In previous issues we have been looking at the family of God in terms of a body and a building and a temple. Now we will see them as a city—“the City of God.”

It is vital for us to understand the Greek concept of “city” as defined in the word *πολις* (*polis*). This is the word from which we get all of our nouns and adjectives having to do with citizenship—politics, political, metropolitan, cosmopolitan, megalopolis, and even police. But to the Greeks, it was much more important than structures and organizations and law codes. It was a cohesion of persons with a common base of unity. The Greek word *πατρία* (*patria*), usually translated by the word “country,” was actually used interchangeably by the Greeks with the word *polis*. Thus in Hebrews 11—“*They who say such things declare plainly that they seek a country . . . wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared for them a city*” (14,16). So country and city are here used interchangeably. And that, of course, is in keeping with the Greek concept. In fact, the Greek cities in early Greece were called “city-states.” They were independent political unities, complete within themselves. They were then something of a country. In the so-called Peloponnesian Wars (c. 400 b.c.), Sparta and Athens fought each other as separate countries. So *polis* in the Greek mind was something of an abstraction—a concept of collective living arrangements and agreements. Hence, *πολιτες* (*polites*) meant “citizenship,” which was a commitment to participate in such a society.

In terms of the analogy, the City of God evolves out of the Temple of God and the Building of God and the Body of God. Each has its particular emphasis. We are accustomed to thinking of the City of God in material terms as some sort of glorious “Disneyesque” (for want of a better image) residence in the sky, where we will enjoy in abundance all the things that we considered fleshly desires on the earth. Without wishing to diminish any of the glories of our eternal home, it must be pointed out that the constant theme of Christ and the Apostles and the Prophets was to get our focus on the realities of the Spirit and to account the material elements of this world as transient and illusory. As was pointed out in the last issue, even the so-called “mansions” of John 14 are really dwelling places of God in the Spirit—our mutual abode with Him. So what will heaven be like? It is beyond the human mind to imagine, but Peter gives an inkling in his first Epistle. “*Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has begotten us again unto a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead unto an inheritance uncorruptible and unspotted and unfading, kept [treasured] in heaven for you who are guarded by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed at the last time*” (I Peter 2:3-5) (Author’s translation). The descriptions of heaven are

largely symbolic, but here we have the most essential factors in our inheritance—eternal, flawless, and not subject to fleshly corruption. Material substance, so tenaciously clung to by humans is, in reality, a prison house of the true energies and potentials of the spirit realm. But it is all part of the “ox cart” religion that causes believers to demand from God continually fleshly manifestations of His presence and His benevolence. Paul recognized this problem when he said, *“Though once I knew Christ in the flesh, yet now I know Him no longer [in the flesh]”* (II Corinthians 5:16). He further said, *“For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal”* (II Corinthians 4:16-18).

One of the themes that runs continuously through Paul’s letters is the insistence on the focus on the Spirit in the midst of a world that is often troublesome and undependable. He constantly warns the believers not to seek satisfaction in their life in this world, but rather in their citizenship with Christ in the spirit realm. This was not intended to be seen as a condition of their salvation, nor of their approval by God, but rather as instruction for coping with life on the earth. Further, Paul made a distinction between religious exercises (as per the Pharisees) and true spirituality which was a recognition of our citizenship in the “City of God.” Again, he never urged the believers to ignore their earthly responsibilities in favor of occupying themselves with “heavenly” matters. In fact, on the contrary, he warned against being too occupied with religious things to the point of neglecting earthly necessities—*“Let him that stole steal no more, but rather let him labor, working with his hands, that he may have to give to him that needeth”* (Ephesians 4:28). This is quite contrary to large numbers of people who gather in societies of “religious” contemplation to the point of abandoning the practical affairs of this world. Both to the Romans (14) and the Colossians (2), Paul declared that religious exercises have been replaced by the Spirit and energy of Christ within us as the key to our interaction with Him. The true manifestation of the presence of the Spirit within is the ability to go about our earthly life with the confidence that the presence of Christ is with us in a ceaseless communion of our spirit and His. The effort to “get closer to God” with religious exercise is futile, since He could not possibly get closer than occupying our spirits.

Abraham looked for the City (not a city) *“which has foundations, whose Designer and Producer is God.”* In Revelation 21 there is a description of the city with twelve foundations. These foundations were of precious stones. Any effort to depict such a city in material ways (as in the construction of a model) is awkward. However, if we look at the precious stones as descriptions of the pure color of the spectrum, we find that we are dealing with light energy. The spectrum is based upon varying wave lengths of energy. There could be a literal city in view in some respects, but in the absence of the human ability to really capture the realm of God’s Spirit it is well to assume that there is far more in this description than an earthly type of city.

The process of God’s energy was at work in Abraham, long before the revelation of God’s interaction with the family of Jacob or Israel. How did he know these things? The city of Ur of the Chaldees whence he came was a pagan city, given

to idolatry. In fact, his father was an idolater. We conclude then that in one way or another God revealed to Abraham something beyond the material world—even beyond the “land of promise” (Palestine) where he lived in tents. Thus, he did not set out from Ur, looking for a material city, but saw beyond it to a city of Divine origin and substance. Abraham had acquired great wealth and certainly could have begun to build a great city, as did Enoch, son of Cain (Genesis 4:17) one of his forebears. Nor would it have been rational to believe that he must look to God for such a city. Thus, his sights were obviously set upon the realm of the Kingdom of God. The text in Hebrews 11 indicates that Abraham set forth in his pursuit, “by faith.” If we understand faith as an energy process from God, it would mean that God had energized Abraham beyond his human capacities, to accomplish His purposes. And so throughout Scripture, God moved upon the people of earth to accomplish His will in the process of redemption. It has been true down through the ages and it is true today. Unfortunately it has also been true that down through the ages religionists have sought to find God and identify with Him through human capacities. This, of course, has led to an infinite variety of misconceptions. It is also true today, even in the Church, where fleshly religious effort has been relied upon instead of the energy of God.

The city which Abraham sought was not found in Palestine, where he was content to dwell in tents. It was rather to be found in the promise of God to him that through him “*all nations of the earth would be blessed.*” This has hardly been fulfilled in material ways. It is obvious that God meant to touch the people of earth in a special way. Paul interprets this in Romans 4 as the promise of redemption through faith. In Hebrews 11 he sees it as the search for “the City of God.”

The essence of our salvation is the presence of the Spirit of Christ within. The effective impact of that presence is the very energy of God within us. That energy becomes a limitless source of eternal life and of the strength to cope with the material world of which we are a part. On the earth we are constantly subject to afflictions. Paul says that these afflictions are light—not too heavy to bear—and temporary. They belong to the cocoon which is the “house” of our spirits. There are no guarantees that we will not have them. The kind of teaching that suggests that all afflictions will be “whisked away” if we only have faith, misses the point. The focus has been so much on the earthly benefits of Christianity that the believers have lost sight of the reality that we belong to another world—we are citizens of the City of God. Paul’s life was a constant saga of affliction and distress. His “thorn in the flesh”—“messenger of Satan”—was so continuous that he begged God to remove it. It was at this point that God revealed that His grace was sufficient for him. God’s response to Paul’s plea was that he would not remove the “thorn in the flesh” but that His grace would carry him in spite of it and that his strength was made perfect in weakness. Paul then realized the vital truth—“*When I am weak then am I strong.*” It is totally out of keeping with this truth to say that all of our afflictions can be removed “if we only have enough faith.” The history of the people of God—both Old and New Testaments—is awash with the blood of those who suffered affliction “*not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection*” (Hebrews 11:35). The grace and power of God is not manifested in deliverance from earthly trials but in the inner strength to cope with them and to remain true to Christ. That is not to say that the Lord will not

help us in our earthly needs, but rather that we should not put our reliance on such deliverance as the manifestation of His presence with us.

The essence of our salvation then is the presence of Christ within us, providing the energy to identify with God for eternity. This energy carries us through all earthly afflictions and we remain true to Him, in spite of human feelings which are a natural part of our flesh. The grace of Christ holds us steadfast in the afflictions, but does not always alleviate negative feelings. We can be confident of the presence and power of Christ within us in spite of these human feelings. Possessing the energy of Christ within us, we become His “Body.” Christ is the Head—the Nerve Center—and we are the myriads of neurons that flow from Him, affecting His communication with the earth. As each nerve has its separate function, so the believers each have their function as directed by God.

In another figure we are His building, with each believer providing that piece which makes up the whole. But as a building, we are also a temple—individually, providing a worship center within and collectively, reflecting the glory of God by that very presence.

The ultimate extension of the building is the City—the City of God. The City of God is made up of the citizens of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is endless and everlasting. It is spirit in essence and thus timeless and spaceless. Jesus said to the Pharisees, “*The Kingdom of God does not come with the most intent watchfulness . . . it is within you*” (Luke 17:20,21). So the City of God is made up of the citizens who are a part of God’s Universal Kingdom.

To grasp these truths is to be delivered from the prison house of time and space—from reliance on the material and fleshly world for one’s inner peace and well-being. The earth has its tragedies and catastrophes and calamities, from which the believers are not always preserved, nor does God seem to stay the hand of destruction wrought by Satan on a world over which he has a large measure of control (Ephesians 2:2). Whereas there are no guarantees relative to the earthly habitation of the believers, there is an absolute guarantee in terms of the complete and eternal preservation of our spirits. As citizens of the City of God we are under His constant care and need not be anxious in any way over our eternal destiny, nor of the fulfillment of God’s purpose for us individually on the earth, as we take our place in that City and become part of God’s eternal purposes for man and the universe.

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