

God of this City; Lord of this Nation

“Then spake the Lord to Paul in the night by a vision, Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city. And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them” (Acts 18:9-11).

God and the City

Human history, as we see in the Bible, starts in a garden and ends in a city. I read recently that 174 million people live in the world's twelve largest cities. 94% of North Americans, 74% of South Americans and 73% of Europeans now live in cities. For the first time in history, the world is more urban than rural. Over half of the people in the world presently live in cities. By 2050 there will be 6.4 billion people living in cities. The urban population in Africa will double between 2000 and 2030 and will grow to 742 million. The population is growing at an alarming speed. More than fifty percent of Africans will live in cities in the next twenty years.

The Apostle Paul, in his evangelistic outreach and strategy, selected cities along major trade routes. This was likely done to expedite the spread of the Gospel. Not only does the population, education, finances usually abound in cities, sin and wickedness also flourish.

If asked to describe your city in one to three words, what would quickly come to mind? Swarming streets, tedious traffic, soiled slums, soaring skyscrapers, boulevard beggars and constant commotion begin the list. Then there is polluted air, sleepless, exciting nightlife, trade centers, unorganized, mindless, energetic, enormous, sprawling, materialistic, industrious,

historic, noisy, primitive, advanced, modern, interesting, smoky, breathtaking, magnificent, hot, humid and on and on. Surely, a list of good and bad, negative and positive would speedily be generated. There is: lost, unreached, dark, hopeless, desperate, unpromising, worldly, and wicked to add. Did I mention sinful? Doesn't it cause your heart to sink, feel sick and sad? But, there is hope.

Bluetree, a music group, comes from Belfast, Ireland. One year they were invited to sing at a praise event in Pattaya, Thailand. This beautiful city is tarnished by sexual slavery and prostitution. Girls are bought from their parents for a price; sold into the sex industry at ages as young as five years old. Is it possible for God to show His light in such a dark place?

The group sang for over two hours and started feeling God's heart for this city. They began spontaneously singing, unrehearsed, the lyrics to the song "God of this City." The words were not just for Pattaya. They are for every city. They are for your city and mine.

God seemingly gives a prophetic voice over nearly any city in any nation: "You're the God of this City...You're the Lord of this nation....For greater things have yet to come and greater things are still to be done in this city."

Tale of Three Cities

Jericho

“And the second day they compassed the city once, and returned into the camp: so they did six days. And it came to pass on the seventh day, that they rose early about the dawning of the day, and compassed the city after the same manner seven times: only on that day they compassed the city seven times. And it came to pass at the seventh time, when the priests blew with the trumpets, Joshua said unto the people,

Shout; for the Lord hath given you the city (Joshua 6:14-16). Strange instructions, but I do like, “the Lord hath given you the city.”

In Jericho, wickedness flourished. There was idolatry, burning of children, widespread prostitution forcing God’s mercy to give way to His judgment. Jericho was invincible, or so they thought. It was considered protected by the god of the Canaanites. The city of Jericho had fortified walls over twenty-five feet high and twenty feet thick. Soldiers on top of the wall could see for miles. Jericho was an icon of military power and was considered indestructible. Attacking and defeating Jericho would send fear tremors throughout all of Canaan. The Canaanites had heard about the God of the Israelites. They knew He was the God of nature because of how He parted the Jordan River. They also knew him as the God of war. They hoped that He was not the God of the wall; the fortress God. Unfortunately for them, God proved He was superior to all of the gods of the Canaanites.

To capture Jericho was pivotal to Joshua’s war plan. It demonstrated that his God was superior to all others. The city was taken because of obedience to God’s seemingly strange plan, to His Word, and relentless, reckless faith in God’s power.

The Bible Exposition Commentary: Old Testament says, “The fall of Jericho is an encouragement to God’s people to trust the Lord’s promises and obey His instructions, no matter how impossible the situation may appear to be.”

I mention Jericho here, not because it was reached with God’s mercy and compassion, but to show that nothing in a city can stop the move of our mighty God. He is a conqueror!

Nineveh

“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city...” (Jonah 1:2).

Nineveh is described as “that great city.” It was considered to be the most important city in the Assyrian empire. It was a rising power and within fifty years it would become the capital. Today we would have called it, “Sin City.” It was wicked. God had enough and it was about to be destroyed. It was on a one way street to God’s wrath and His destruction. A surprising change of events took place which tells much of God’s mercy and justice. Jonah’s message of coming judgment brought change, reformation, and immediate, genuine repentance. Nineveh’s king (Jonah 3:9) knew more about the mercy and compassion of God than Jonah. Jonah focused on wrath and condemnation. That was Jonah’s faith—or lack of it—for the city. When Jonah looked at Nineveh, he saw its wickedness, and a city that deserved God’s punishment. But, when God saw Nineveh, he saw much more than that. He saw people groping in darkness, in ignorance, and in need of salvation. An online article entitled “When God Cancels an Appointment” said, “God didn’t see a city worthy of destruction; He saw individuals in need of salvation.”

One of the points of the Book of Jonah is to make clear to us how God thinks about our cities. Jonah expressed much of God’s heart for our cities and nations when he said, “So he complained to the Lord about it: “Didn't I say before I left home that you would do this, Lord? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people. Just kill me now, Lord! I'd rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen.”...Then Jonah went out to the east side of the city and made a shelter to sit under as he waited to see what would happen to the city” (Jonah 4:2-5, NLT).

Jonah knew that God was gracious, compassionate, longsuffering, and rich in love. He had forgotten the words to his own song from the whale's belly, "Salvation comes from the Lord!" (Jonah 2:9).

The little book of evangelism in the Old Testament closes with a question, "Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city...?" (Jonah 4:11, NKJV).

Corinth

Paul labored with little success and great opposition in this city known for its idolatry, sensuality, and being a center of commerce. Some rejected the truth. Some stirred up trouble. Should Paul leave or stay? Looking at this city, it would have been easy to give up hope. But, God saw much people there. God's plan was to save many. He promised Paul success in his labor.

"One night the Master spoke to Paul in a dream: 'Keep it up, and don't let anyone intimidate or silence you. No matter what happens, I'm with you and no one is going to be able to hurt you. You have no idea how many people I have on my side in this city.' That was all he needed to stick it out. He stayed another year and a half, faithfully teaching the Word of God to the Corinthians" (Acts 18:9-11, MSG).

The essence of these words is similar to the promise of Isaiah 41:10. "Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand" (NKJV).

"To walk by faith means to see opportunities even in the midst of opposition. A pessimist sees only the problems; an optimist sees only the potential; but a realist sees the potential in the problems. Paul did not close his eyes to the many dangers and difficulties in the situation at

Corinth, but he did look at them from the divine point of view. Faith simply means obeying God's will in spite of feelings, circumstances, or consequences. There never was an easy place to serve God; and if there is an easy place, it is possible that something is wrong. Paul reminded Timothy, "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12, NKJV). "Prosperity is the blessing of the Old Testament" wrote Francis Bacon; "adversity is the blessing of the New." Paul did not allow adversity to keep him from serving God" (*The Bible Exposition Commentary*).

- God gives Paul the same promise that endorsed and authorized the Great Commission, "I am with you always" (Mathew 28:20, ESV).
- God still gives men a vision for a city, nation, or even multiple nations. We cannot and will not be disobedient to the heavenly vision (Acts 26:19). "I'm sending you off to open the eyes of the outsiders so they can see the difference between dark and light, and choose light, see the difference between Satan and God, and choose God. I'm sending you off to present my offer of sins forgiven, and a place in the family, inviting them into the company of those who begin real living by believing in me'" (Acts 26:17-18, MSG).
 - We must speak out against the sins of the city (Jonah 1:2; Acts 15:7; Ephesians 6:19), yet also proclaim God's compassion and love (Ephesians 4:15). Truth must be preached in the streets of our cities (John 17:17; 3 John 4).
 - God is with us as we proclaim His Word. Isaiah 59:19 popularly reads, "When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him." Some scholars suggest that the comma has been

misplaced here and should read, "When the enemy shall come in, like a flood the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him." See the difference? This change is consistent with other translations of the verse that tell us that the Lord comes like a fast-flowing, raging flood. Even if one keeps the comma as placed in the King James Version that is not a problem. In that case, not only does the Lord raise a standard against the enemy, He sits on the flood and remains King forever (Psalms 29:10). Either way, we win; Satan loses!

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, Nor shall the flame scorch you. For I am the Lord your God, The Holy One of Israel, your Savior" (Isaiah 43:1-3, NKJV).

- He knows the end result of our faithful labors in His harvest field (John 4:35). The harvest is great. God has never had a problem finding a harvest, only in finding willing workers to bring in the crop (Matthew 9:37). We do not walk by sight. We are not moved by circumstances. We walk by faith (2 Corinthians 5:7). Things thought impossible are more than possible to God (Luke 1:37; 18:27). Faith is still the substance of what we are hoping for and the evidence of things not yet seen (Hebrews 11:1). It hasn't entered into our hearts the things that God has prepared (1 Corinthians 2:9).

The valid response when things get tough is to continue (Acts 2:42; 18:11; Philippians 3:14). "Farmers who wait for perfect weather never plant. If they watch every cloud, they never harvest. Just as you cannot understand the path of the wind or the mystery of a tiny baby growing in its mother's womb, so you cannot understand the activity of God, who does all things. Plant your seed in the morning and keep busy all afternoon, for you don't know if

profit will come from one activity or another—or maybe both" (Ecclesiastes 11:4-6, NLT). Keep moving on! Tough times come, but we are tougher. We can make it. Jesus is with us; right at our side (2 Timothy 4:17). With Him, we are "more than conquerors" (Romans 8:37). "Overwhelming victory is ours" (Romans 8:37, NLT). Nothing stops us! The Book of Acts ends with Paul in the huge city of Rome. In human eyes he was in trouble, in prison, and bound for certain death. Through spiritual spectacle, he was "preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him" (Acts 28:31). The history book outlining the early blaze of fires of truth, as it spread throughout the known world, ends with the final word being "unstoppable." The Gospel was (and is) still being preached. The original Greek means that the Gospel was unhindered, without hindrance, and is a term often found in legal documents. It implies restraining, withstanding, and withholding. You get the picture? We have a restraining order against the devil. We can go into the enemy's camp and take back what belongs to us. We can possess the land. (I would give you a scriptural reference for that, but there are too many to mention). It was the Lord's constant command and battle cry, "Possess the land! Possess the land!" Why should we possess it? Because the Lord has given it to us! Nick Sisco adds, "Many are not willing to fight. Some think possession is a promise without problems. Of course this is not so, possession comes through persevering with purpose. Because of His promise, His presence precedes His people." God gives the promise of possession and promises to be with us. The question is, "Why are you taking so long to possess the land?"

- Teach and preach the Word of God (2 Timothy 4:2). It will accomplish its purpose (Isaiah 55:11). Jesus commanded. "Teach all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Reach a city; reach a nation. What better place is there to start?

- Stay as long as God tells you to stay. Leave only when He tells you to leave. He will be there throughout the journey. Until then, touch lives, transmit truth, and see God transform your city and nation.

The ancient voyager, Christopher Columbus, had an unquenchable passion to explore. He encountered unfathomable difficulties. There was mutiny on board his ship. He wrote, "We sailed westward today!" He didn't know what to do. "But, we sailed westward today." Food was gone, "We sailed westward today." No matter the circumstance, "Sail on! Sail on!" Paul was another man undaunted by the situations of life and ministry. He said, "This one thing I do" (Philippians 3:13) and moved forward with a passion to fulfill his God-given vision. It is always too soon to quit. Winston Churchill in a famous speech said, "Never give in. Never give in. Never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in, except to convictions of honor and good sense. Never yield to force. Never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy." Never give up! It is always too soon to quit!

Wiersbe's *Expository Outlines on the Old Testament* mentions, "As you read the Book of Acts, you see how God's "spiritual army" conquered one city after another by faith. Even the mighty city of Rome fell before the power of the Gospel! Today, God's people again need to learn how to capture cities."

Warren W. Wiersbe in *With the Word Bible Commentary* wrote this concerning Paul, "He was not one to run away from either the battlefield or the harvestfield." Can the same be said about you?

From the City to the Farm

Joshua Olmsted in his November 2009, *Pentecostal Herald* article, "What is Faith?" told the story of three farmers that met daily in the

field during a dreadful drought. Every single day, they fell to their knees, and prayed that God would open the heavens and pour down abundance of rain. The heavens remained silent, and the farmers became discouraged.

One day a stranger came by and asked what they were doing. They answered, "We are praying for rain."

The stranger shook his head and disagreed.

One of the farmers retorted, "We have not had rain for more than a year and we are praying for rain."

The stranger told them that their efforts were futile and would never work.

Another farmer said, "We must have the rain, not only for ourselves but our farms and livestock."

The stranger responded, "You are wasting your time."

The third farmer annoyingly said, "What would you do if you were in our place?"

The stranger queried, "Do you really want to know?"

The three farmers answered, "Yes! We want to know!"

The stranger said, "I would have brought an umbrella." That took faith!

I want to have that type of faith when I look over the hopelessness, darkness, and wickedness of my city. I'll pass on the umbrella and just pull out the light of God's Word. God boldly proclaims, "Let there be light in the darkness" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Often the situation looks bleak. "The wicked shall be turned into hell, And all the nations that forget God" (Psalms 9:17, NKJV). But judgment and punishment rendezvous with mercy and compassion (Romans 5:20). Truth and mercy meet in the streets of our cities. This happens when, "repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47). It is the divine plan that "All nations whom thou hast made shall come and worship before thee, O Lord; and shall glorify thy name" (Psalms 86:9). But first, the Gospel must be proclaimed as a witness to all nations (Matthew 24:14); and published among all nations (Mark 13:10). Although every soul counts and is eternally valuable in God's sight, the Gospel is not to be confined to a few obscure villages, hidden from massive cities. "The Message has to be preached all across the world" (Mark 13:10, MSG). People will flock to the "house of prayer for all nations" (Mark 11:17).

"Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out" (Matthew 25:32, MSG). When all the nations are gathered, and He begins to sort the people out, my heart's desire and ceaseless prayer is, "Let there be 'much people' from my city. God, let there be multiplied thousands from my nations. Yes, Lord, and multiplied millions from my continent and world. I enduringly pledge to that end. "After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9, NLT).