

Looking for a City

Atheists love to mock Christianity by repeating the expression, “pie in the sky by an’ bye.” Christian religion, the slogan says, is bogus; it wants us to believe that we have something heavenly to look forward to after we die but that’s pure myth. It’s a false hope. We have only this life to live and when it’s over, we cease to exist.

Whether unwittingly or with Satanic understanding of spiritual realities, what atheists are doing is striking hatefully at the very core of Christianity. What Satan [fearfully] knows to be true, most Christians are oblivious to – or if they are aware of it, it is irrelevant to their lives. That’s why we need to understand what the author of Hebrews meant by writing that Abraham **“looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God”** (11:10). And a few verses later, **“they were longing for a better country, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them”** (v. 16). The Hebrews writer refers what he said about Abel, Enoch, Noah, Sarah and Abraham to *all* those discussed in that chapter, **“And these all, having received witness though faith, did not receive the promise [ie, the city], God having provided some better thing for us [ie, being in Christ] that they, together with us, should be made perfect”** (11:39-40). And a bit later, **“For here we have no enduring city, but we seek the one that is to come”** (13:14). What’s the city? Why is it so important?

“City” is a biblical metaphor. It stands for heaven. Heaven is actually a real place. The very first verse in the Bible refers to God creating a place for Himself to dwell, and then creating the world in which His creatures would dwell. “In the beginning [when God created time], God created the heavens [plural, because there are two heavens: the atmosphere and the vast space above earth that contains the sun, moon and stars, and the place that’s invisible to our eyes where God would dwell] and the earth [the land and the seas]”

The idea that a city should symbolize heaven probably comes from Psalm 87, in which Zion [Jerusalem] is the city of God. The tabernacle in the wilderness was patterned after and represented heaven, but later the city of David assumed that role. A city is not only a place, it’s also the people who live in it (see Mttw 8:34 and 21:10, for example). So in Hebrews, “city” is the heavenly Jerusalem, where resurrected believers in Christ will dwell. The Book of Revelation refers to this city 27 times, climaxing in Chapter 21 at the very end of the Bible. The invisible city will become visible, a physical place for embodied people who have experienced resurrection. The Bible therefore is all about how we humans can be changed from time-and-space limited, land-dwelling creatures under God’s purview, as God originally made us, to become transcendent beings who live intimately with God in a time-less existence.

What atheists mock with their “pie in the sky” slogan, and what Satan wants us to ignore, is the very purpose and goal of all history. It’s what life is for. It’s what this creation is for. Atheists and Satan want us to believe the lie that this life in the here and now is all that there is; there is nothing beyond it. There is no existence beyond death, there is no heavenly place, and there is no God with whom to dwell. Unbelievers live the lie. Sadly, tragically, so do way too many believers.

John’s warning, **“love not the world, neither the things that are in the world”** (1 John 2:15) thus takes on heightened meaning. It’s more than a misplaced affection, although it certainly is that too. It’s a repudiation of God’s creation purpose for us. We rationalize our love for the world by thinking something like, “Hey, God made the world so it must be good and for us to enjoy.” Wrong! God made the world a necessary component of a test of our will. The test in the Garden, whether that first couple would obey God by willingly denying themselves what God had proscribed, is being reproduced again and again in everyone’s life. Our love of the world and the things that are in the world is our doing what those in the Garden did, rejecting God’s good and perfect will for our own (pathetically) mundane pleasure. Those two wouldn’t allow God’s Word to control their minds, to determine how they would live. The same test is for us. We’re here on probation!

Our love of the world and the things that are in the world aligns us with Satan in his hideous rebellion against God. It says to God, “The here and now of life in this physical place surpasses anything You have to offer. It fills my life. It satisfies me as nothing else could.” Supposing that believing in Christ excuses our worldly delights, or that it guarantees that in the end we’ll still be in heaven regardless how we live, betrays a terrible ignorance of God. “Hey, we’re under grace!” some will say. But grace doesn’t grant us license to live apart from God’s will. We reject the love of the world and the things in the world because we’re obedient children of the living God, and we represent our heavenly Father here on earth in this life and do His good and perfect will. Why? Because God’s love and His revealed plan to bless us fill us with the desire to glorify God. Thus the greatest commandment there is for man, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul and with all thy might,” a commandment that summarizes or encapsulates the entire reason for our being.

Our love of this world reflects our failure to grasp the spiritual realities found only in God's Word. We can see this world with our eyes and other senses, and we can experience all that is occurring around us, so we easily allow them to control us, to delight us, to occupy our lives. What's in the Word, in contrast, is theoretical and abstract. The Scriptures convey concepts that we allow to speak to the mind, but we don't allow them to speak to the will. As a result we live not that differently than the atheists do, unconstrained by the promise of that city whose builder and maker is God.

Jesus said in Matthew, **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it"** (16:24-25), fulfill this understanding of Scripture. Having perfect awareness of creation's great purpose, Jesus spoke these words. He lived (and died) according to God's Word, knowing that He'd not only be vindicated by being raised, but would be raised to life to dwell forever in God's presence. He invites us to do the same. Someone carrying a cross, about to be in horrible agony in a few minutes and to be dead in a few hours, isn't interested in sports, or restaurants, or politics, or in *anything* of this world. His only interest would be, what's going to happen to me really soon, when I'm dead. His only thought would be – *should* be – did I live for God? Jesus is saying, we're to live our whole lives with this attitude, with this mindset controlling our thinking, controlling our wills. We're to live not for the ideas and values nor the toys and gadgets that are abundantly on offer in this physical world we now inhabit, nor for the thrills and delights of this present life, but for the values and blessings that attend a promised future existence in a city whose builder and maker is God.

In the letters to the churches in Chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation, it appears that not everyone in the churches receive all the blessings associated with salvation. Repeatedly, Christ says, "To him who overcomes..." So who is it that "overcomes"? Putting all the phrases together, it seems that "overcomers" are those who fulfill Jesus' words in Matthew 16:24-25. They are those who eschew worldliness and the lusts of the flesh and who, in intense loyalty, live according to the Word of God, even suffering martyrdom if need be.

By the way, why a "city"? Because in biblical times more than now, people strongly identified with their city. Thus Saul of Tarsus, the Philippian jailer, Philip of Macedonia, etc. Cities were lots of people living together in community with a common identity – their city. So believers in Christ similarly are city-dwellers, except that our city is heaven, where God dwells. In the progress of revelation, Eden and its garden (Genesis 2, 3) became a tabernacle, then an earthly city (Jerusalem), and now it has become a heavenly city. It was with this type of identity in mind that Jesus said, **"Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"** (Mttw 6:20-21).

Paul understood that, because of our union with the risen and exalted Christ who is now seated in that heavenly city, we too are heavenly-city-dwellers: **"Because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ...and God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus"** (Ephesians 2:4-5). Although the Old Testament believers in Hebrews Chapter 11 were looking for that city, in Christ we who trust in Christ have found the city and are in it.

The Jewish believers who were the intended readers of Hebrews were immature in their faith. They understood that Jesus was their promised Messiah and they believed in Him. But in the face of fierce persecution they wanted to retain their identity as Torah-observant, Jerusalem-dwelling Jews. That's why the author of Hebrews in chapter 12 pleaded with them to forsake an identity with Sinai and instead transfer their identity and loyalty to the city in heaven where Jesus the despised and rejected One dwells in glory. They were to understand themselves as "sojourners and aliens," but looking forward to receiving all that God has promised for the future. Faith is, after, all, believing all that God has said about the otherwise unknowable future, whether promises or prophecies, and acting on the basis of it. So the message of Hebrews for us all is, Live in view of our present citizenship and future dwelling place.

Now, it is painfully apparent to me that not all church-goers have grasped what it means to live today on the basis of God's promises regarding the future. For many who profess to be Christian, life is saturated with the present and the future is "pie in the sky." And it's understandable. We're necessarily confronted by reality. We have family problems, work problems, financial issues perhaps, and current events prey upon our minds. So, sure, we have good reason to be occupied by the present. But to the exclusion of all that God has promised? Something is wrong. I suspect that what's wrong is a failure to fulfill the purpose of our calling, which is to serve God in some biblical way. We are saved to serve (Ephesians 2:10, for example, and many other texts). Refusing to serve in God's will leaves us in the same situation as those first readers of Hebrews, immature and in danger of being judged or disciplined by God. Let us all be careful therefore to heed the voice of Him who speaks and live today based on, or in view of, our future dwelling place, the heavenly city.