

# The Eternal City of God

Hebrews 13:14-17

*Halifax: 21 July 2024*

## Introduction:

We have been looking at the concluding exhortations of Hebrews.

- Chapters 12 and 13 speak to us as pilgrims who are going to the city of God in glory, the house of our gracious heavenly Father and of our Lord Jesus Christ, the husband of the whole church.
- We have seen that we make this journey through the world by looking unto Jesus.
  - It is only by Him that we can reach our destiny.
  - The first ten chapters of Hebrews was devoted to showing us about the work He did as our High Priest for our eternal redemption.
  - It emphasised how there are none who are comparable to Him.
- Many of these Hebrew Christians needed to hear this exhortation because they were under so much persecution from their families and nation who had rejected Christ.
  - Much of the exhortation about how to conduct themselves on their pilgrimage has to do with their situation.
  - But that doesn't mean it has no significance to us. We get discouraged and slack in following Christ too, so these exhortations are very helpful for us today.

Today we are focussing on Hebrews 13:14.

- In this verse, we have the exhortation to keep our eyes on the eternal city of God rather than looking to find our rest here in this present world.
- This is something that is very difficult for us today.
  - In history there have been those who have gone to ungodly extremes in denying themselves of the things God has appointed and even commanded in this world; but that is not our tendency today.
  - Our weakness is to overindulge in the riches and pleasures of this world and to look to lay up our treasures in this world rather than in heaven.

This exhortation should be good for us.

- I will read it along with a few surrounding verses that I will be touching on.
- We will begin in Hebrews 13:10 and read to verse 17.
  - This is the eternal word of God:

**Hebrews 13:10-17: We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. <sup>11</sup> For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. <sup>12</sup> Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. <sup>13</sup> Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. <sup>14</sup> For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one**

**to come. <sup>15</sup> Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of *our* lips, giving thanks to His name. <sup>16</sup> But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. <sup>17</sup> Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.**

May the LORD add His blessing to His Word as we consider what it says to us.

Last time, we looked at v. 13.

- It is directly tied to verse 14 which we are looking at today.
- Verse 13 says we must bear the reproach (the shame and disrespect) that Jesus had to bear if we follow Him, but verse 14 reminds us that our rest and reward is not found in this present world but in heaven.
  - **“Here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one that is to come.”**

Jesus constantly tried to get this idea across to His disciples.

- Until He went to the cross, they continued to expect to find their reward in this world.
- He kept telling them, essentially,
  - “Don’t expect your reward in this world. Expect to suffer. We have no continuing city here, but we seek the one to come.”
- Let’s consider what this means and how it applies to us.

### **I. “We have no continuing city.”**

A. In the New Testament, as we have seen, there is no earthly altar and no earthly temple, but a heavenly one.

1. Interestingly, Jesus did indeed take on a true human body and He truly was sacrificed, but He was not offered in the temple on earth.
  - He was received at the tabernacle that is made without hands in heaven.
  - The earthly one is a copy of the true one which is not material.
2. Jesus taught us that worship was now to be done in spirit and truth, not at an altar in Jerusalem or some other place.

B. This is a huge change from the Old Testament. Let me explain:

1. Don’t misunderstand—they also were taught to live for eternity and not to set their hopes in this present world.
  - We saw in Hebrews 11 how Abraham was commended for never receiving an inheritance of the promised land and how he was looking for a city whose builder and maker is God, eternal in the heavens.
  - And we saw how Moses was commended for forsaking the passing pleasures of sin as a prince in Egypt and choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God.
  - Don’t ever let anyone tell you that the people of the OT lived only for this present world. It is manifestly not true.
2. But it is also mistaken to miss the fact that there was much more of an earthly focus for them than there is for Christians.
  - a. They had a city, a specific city or place that God had appointed on earth for them to worship.
    - It was a city that had an altar and a tabernacle or temple that was made with human hands according to God’s instructions.
    - And here they had priests and ceremonial washings and daily sacrifices. There was a table with bread and special lights.
    - It was appointed that the men, representing their families, go to this earthly city which had the only acceptable altar for sacrifices, three times per year.

- b. Not only that, but they had special promises pertaining to the land where they were to dwell.
    - God promised to give it to them, to defend them from enemies, and to richly provide for them in that land if they would follow and obey Him,
      - But He told them that He would chasten them if they did not continue in obedience by raising up enemies, sending famines, and such things.
    - This is how He preserved them as His people.
      - They were like the other nations, but they continued with the LORD because as soon as they went astray, He would send prophets to call them to repentance and to tell them what trouble would come if they kept on in their rebellion.
        - Eventually they would come back—at least those that survived His sometimes very severe judgments.
        - But again, the focus of these judgments and rewards were immediate and earthly... it was part of the system.
          - Those who truly believed, looked for eternal reward, but the nation as a whole was preserved by temporal rewards and punishments and all of them were commanded to engage in this earthly worship and these earthly expectations along with heavenly ones.
  - C. And make no mistake, this system with its continuing city served its purpose—which of course was *God's* purpose.
    1. It was through these people that God maintained a testimony to Himself in the world as the only true God who receives sinners by grace alone.
      - It was by this nation that He promised to bring forth a Son who would provide salvation for the whole world.
      - It was through His dealing with this nation that He revealed His holiness and His power in judging them as well as judging their enemies.
    2. It was also the privilege of these people to welcome Christ and to introduce and proclaim Him to the world as witnesses of His saving work.
      - They did that.
      - Even though the majority of them did not acknowledge Him, and their leaders officially excommunicated Him and insisted that He be crucified,
        - there were a sufficient number who received Him, who were appointed to proclaim Him and to give us the scriptures concerning Him, and to carry His message into the whole world.
      - Those who did this were the rejected remnant of Israel who bore Christ's reproach.
        - God accomplished His purposes marvellously through this nation.
- And so I would summarize, *God accomplished His purposes through this nation, and He did it through worship that was centred around an earthly city with an earthly altar with priests performing earthly ceremonies. In the NT, we have no continuing city like this here on earth.*

**II. Our text, after saying that we have no continuing city goes on to say, “but we seek the one to come.”**

- A. This city is called “a city that is to come” because we are not there yet.
1. We are seeking it as the one that is to come.
    - We have not entered it yet.
    - We have not entered our final rest, our final destination, yet.
    - We are absent from the LORD as long as we are in these bodies—until we either die or these bodies are transformed by the resurrection.
  2. This city that we seek is the same city that Abraham sought—a city that has foundations whose builder and maker is God, eternal in the heavens.
    - It is not a city that we will find somewhere on the earth—at Jerusalem or the Vatican in Italy.
    - It was a huge mistake to look for some kind of headquarters for the church on earth because our headquarters is where our head, Jesus Christ, is.
      - It is in heaven.
      - As Paul says, our citizenship is in heaven.
- B. It is of great benefit to us to have heaven as the central place of worship.
1. It means that through the mediation of Christ our priest, our worship is received before God’s eternal throne in glory.
    - We have direct access to God as those who have been cleansed by the blood of Christ.
    - It does not mean that we are in His immediate presence yet, but that we have been cleansed from our sin and stand in Christ’s righteousness so that we are fully accepted by our gracious heavenly Father.
  2. This also means that we no longer have to go to some central sanctuary on earth.
    - That was a burden for the people of Israel, but how much more would it be a burden for us now that the church has spread into all the world.
    - Now we have access to the very throne of God in every place.
      - *Every place* is a technical phrase for wherever we assemble to worship God as His people in the name of Jesus.
- C. What we do in worship is also radically transformed.
1. No longer do we have to offer sacrifices for our cleansing and go through washings and such. No longer do we need priests busy slaughtering animals for us.
    - The accepted sacrifice was offered by Jesus 2000 years ago.
    - Nothing like that is required of us now.
      - This radically changes our worship—radically simplifies it.
  2. Verses 15-16 tell us of the sacrifices we now bring, which are of an entirely different nature.
    - a. **V. 15: Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of *our* lips, giving thanks to His name.**
      - We simply praise God with thanksgiving for what Jesus has done.

- We don't have to do the sacrifices; we just give thanks for His all-sufficient sacrifice.
  - The preacher proclaims the gospel to us (the good news of Jesus' finished work), and we praise God for this, we praise Jesus for this, we rest in this.
- b. V. 16 tells of another kind of sacrifice we are to do: **But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.**
- This is how we show our devotion to God—how we serve Him.
  - We join ourselves to a local assembly and we love one another. We look out for each other and we do good to each other.
  - The whole law is fulfilled now, not by doing sacrifices at some altar somewhere in the world, but by loving our neighbour.
    - This chapter began with the words “Let brotherly love continue” and then told us to reach out to strangers, to remember those in prison, to hold marriage in honour, and to refrain from covetousness because God has given us Himself. This is our focus.
- c. And verse 17 tells us that we are to live in harmony with the assembly that we are part of.
- Just as harmony is maintained in the home by children honouring their parents and wives respecting and obeying their husbands,
    - So harmony is maintained in the church by the members submitting to the elders that God has appointed to watch for their souls.
  - The words are: **Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.**

TRANS> You see from all of this how much difference it makes to have no continuing city as the people did under the old covenant.

### **III. Jesus and His apostles call us to maintain a more heavenly focus *overall* as those whose worship is now centred in heaven.**

- A. Jesus and His apostles call us to this simplicity in worship, and we must hear and obey this call.
1. I grant that it can be uncomfortable to come directly to God.
    - Because it is uncomfortable, we often do not really lean in to the reality that we are before Him.
    - We zone out because we don't want the responsibility that goes with coming before God's face.
  2. And as churches, we often want to complicate the simple worship to make it more engaging for us.
    - We want it to be more engaging and entertaining and complex because that makes it even easier to avoid the reality of coming before God.
    - We can then actually hide in the worship and keep ourselves at a more comfortable distance—at a distance that we are more comfortable with.
  3. But I tell you that it is good for you. It is good for you to come before God in this more spiritual way. It is what the Lord has appointed for you.

- It enables you to know Him better, to see His wisdom and power and goodness, His wrath and judgment, His holiness and perfections, His beauty, His grace and mercy.
- B. This call to a heaven-centred focus also speaks to an overall spiritual mindedness.
- Heavenly mindedness is not fashionable in the modern church, but here are some examples of what I am talking about.
1. Col 3:1-4: **If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. <sup>3</sup> For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ *who is our life* appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.**”
    - In other words, you are called to spend a lot of time thinking about heaven.
    - You are to consider how you can please the one who redeemed you and you are meditate on His glory and on what He has done for you.
    - We need to spend time in the word, to pay attention at church, and to meditate on the word all through the day.
  2. Jesus told us specifically not to focus on earthly treasures, but heavenly ones.
    - In Matthew 6:19-21, He said: **“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; <sup>20</sup> but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”**
      - You see how this is a call to be more heavenly or spiritually minded—we have no continuing city here.
      - Paul called us to have an eternal perspective in 2 Cor 4:18: **while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen *are* temporary, but the things which are not seen *are* eternal.**
        - Do what will improve your situation in a thousand years—a million years!
  3. And of course there is the direct application in Hebrews 13—that since our expectation is not for an earthly city, but an eternal heavenly one, we should be fine with bearing reproach on account of our relationship to Jesus.
    - Paul made it a practice to remind all the churches that he established that **“We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.”** (see Acts 14).
      - Have no delusions.
      - Paradise is not here.
      - Learn to glory in tribulations that produce patience, character, hope, and a tremendous sense of God’s love.

TRANS> Yes indeed, our citizenship is in heaven.

- We have no continuing city in this world.
- We are going to our Father’s house in glory—what a dear welcoming gracious Father He is—He and Jesus delighting in every step of progress we make, singing over us with joy.

C. But this business of being heavenly minded can be hard to navigate. We must avoid two extremes.

1. There is a danger of neglecting our calling here in this world.
  - We are commanded to fulfil our earthly callings for the glory of God.
    - We are to glorify God by enjoying the good things of this life which we are to receive with thanksgiving from His hand.
  - There have been and are those who neglect marriage, laughter, good food and drink, work, art, music, political involvement, all in the name of being heavenly minded.
    - There are lazy men and women who do not work hard in the name of not being concerned about the things in the world—when in fact God calls us to labour that we may provide for ourselves and our family, and have something to give—and He calls us to serve each other in practical ways.
      - It is stealing for you to receive EI or disability benefits when you are capable of working.
      - You are taking from those who are unable to work. We are to be contributors, not takers.
    - Young men ought especially to engage in a calling that they might free up their wives to look after the home, to engage in hospitality, and to focus on bringing up the children in the Lord.
    - This negligence can also affect worship—those who see the free access we have to Jesus to mean that we do not need to have organised churches with elders and members and specific worship services where we eat the Lord's Supper and hear the word preached by a minister of the gospel.
      - But verse 17 makes it clear that we are to have organised churches with ruling elders that we submit to.
      - And the whole NT frequently speaks of the assembly of God's people, of preaching to them from ordained men, and of gathering on the Lord's day for the breaking of the bread (the Lord's Supper) and preaching.
    - Spiritual mindedness does not mean that you neglect what God has appointed for us in this life!
- But the opposite extreme is the more common one in our day.
2. We must guard against seeking a city in this world.
  - Many hope to find a political utopia in this world.
    - They devote their efforts and set their sights on establishing a continuing city here.
    - We should seek to establish cities under God, but keep your ultimate focus on the city that is to come!
  - Some people preach a prosperity gospel.
    - They teach people to expect a problem free life with riches and success in this world.
    - They say that God has promised this to His people, but we have seen that Paul told everyone to expect tribulation in this world. Look at all that he endured.

- But the greater way this second error gets into us is simply from overindulging ourselves.
  - Neglecting the pursuit of Christ. Neglecting worship privately and publicly, and being lazy when you do it. Neglecting obedience when it is hard or uncomfortable. Neglecting our witness to the lost. Giving in to your passions and desires—even sinful passions and desires.

**Conclusion:** The solution is to run the race that is set before us with diligence, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.

- We look to Him for forgiveness, for wisdom, and for the strength to go on to the city of God in glory—to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.