

The City of Light

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Date: 20 December 2015

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[0 : 0 0] The house that I grew up in for most of my childhood was down the road from a park called Tanglewood.

And this park, their sort of famous attraction that they were most known for was the Festival of Lights. It happens every year around this time. It runs from Thanksgiving through around New Year's.

It's their biggest income generator. And the reason is because it's the only thing of its kind around. And so every year from about Thanksgiving on, just outside our neighborhood, beginning in the kind of late afternoon hours, traffic would start to stack up.

And you basically know that if you live in our neighborhood, you have no hope of getting out of the neighborhood any time between Thanksgiving and New Year's.

And so you stock up on all of your food and make sure that you have what you need because you're essentially trapped. And the reason is because people come from far and wide. They stream in from all the surrounding counties and they all come to see the lights.

[1 : 0 5] And we always used to marvel. They're pretty, but really? People would drive hours. And they would load their families up and they would bring food and supplies to come see the lights.

It was amazing. And so we would marvel at that and wonder how could that possibly be. And it struck me, the parallel, when I was reading Isaiah chapter 60. Only what we see in Isaiah chapter 60, it's similar, but it's on an infinitely larger scale.

It's an amazing chapter at the end of the book of Isaiah. And what it's really talking about is the future of the church. At this point in Isaiah's prophecy, he's a prophet.

He's laying out visions and words that he receives from the Lord for God's people. And he's essentially saying this is the future of God's people in the world. And it's this incredible image, what the church will one day become.

And what we really see is that the church will one day become like a great city. It'll become like a great city. And the hope of the Christian faith is that one day all of humanity will be united in this great city.

[2 : 1 9] That's the Christian hope. You know, people say, well, isn't it to go to heaven? Actually, no. The great promise of the Christian faith, of the gospel, is that one day all of humanity will be united in this great city.

And it's literally a city of light. It's a city that no longer needs a sun or a moon. It no longer needs lanterns.

It no longer needs any kind of artificial illumination because the source of light, God, is at the very center of it. And so the gates of this city are always open because it says that continually there are people streaming in from all the nations.

From all over the earth, people are continually coming in. And there's the same image in Revelation chapter 21 at the very end of the Bible.

It's the very same image. And so passages like this and Revelation 21, they give us this similar image. And this image is very important for us to reflect on.

[3 : 23] If you're here and you're not a Christian, this is an important thing for you to understand as you're considering what Christianity is all about. And if there's anything here that might be relevant to you, this is really a way of understanding what makes Christianity unique among the world's religions.

What sort of sets it apart. And for those of us who are Christians who are part of the church, this is extremely relevant. Because when we understand God's vision for his people, when we understand the vision for what we are to become, it orients us.

And helps us figure out what it means to be God's people here and now. We're oriented by this future vision. And so this is the hope for tonight that these things would happen through our understanding of this passage.

And we're going to see three things about this city of light. We're going to see that it's the home that we long for. We're going to see that it's a place where we find the healing that we hope for.

And then lastly, that it is the family that we were made for. So home, healing, family. All to be found in this city. Let's pray for the Lord to lead us. Heavenly Father, we know that there are many of us here who, when we hear words like home or family, that those are emotionally charged words.

[4 : 44] That some of us have good memories and associations. And for some of us, these are places of profound hurt and brokenness and suffering and sorrow. Some of us look forward to seeing our families this week.

Some of us have no one we will see. Some of us dread people we might see. And Lord, in all of this confusion, all of these very real struggles, we pray that you would give us, through your word, a vision of home and family that captivates our hearts.

And we pray that you would do it through your word and for your glory, Lord. In your son's name, amen. So first of all, this city of light that Isaiah talks about, he says, one day this is going to be the reality.

As we read his passage on this, we began to realize this is the home that we long for. And I want to explain what I mean by that. One of the most amazing things about this passage is the kind of global nature of it.

People are literally coming from everywhere. If you look at the names of the places where people are coming from, you have Midian, which, if you look at a map, was sort of south of where they are.

[5 : 53] You have Ephraim, which is to the east of the Persian Gulf. You have Kedar and Nebaioth, which are kind of to the northeast in the northern Arabian desert.

And when you read about Tarshish, you're really reading about Spain. And so if you look at a map, you see that this is a representative sample that's meant to convey this. The whole world is converging on this city.

People from the north, the south, the east, and the west, from the far side of the sea, the whole world is converging on this city of light. So it begs the question, why would people uproot?

Why would people leave their perfectly good homes and perfectly good cultures and cities and societies? And why would there be this massive relocation, right?

People talk about how D.C. is one of the fastest growing areas. We have several thousand people a month moving here. That's nothing compared to this. This is a global migration. So the question is why?

[6 : 57] What could possibly be worth leaving your home and relocating halfway around the world? And verses 8 and 9 give us a clue to the answer.

It says, who are these that fly like a cloud and like doves to their windows? When it says doves to their windows, that's actually a kind of poetic reference to the nests that doves would build in the lattice of the windows.

And so this is really saying, why are these people coming like birds to their nests? Like doves to their nests? And then it says, for the coastlands shall hope for me.

So let me ask you again, what is drawing these people? What is compelling them to come? And it's this. It's homesickness. It's homesickness.

These people are homesick. And you say, well, what is it? Weren't they at home and aren't they leaving their homes? Well, what we realize is these people, people all over the world are coming home because they realize that the homes that they've been living in are not in fact their home.

[8 : 07] And so Isaiah 60 is really about a global homecoming. They're not going to a foreign city. They're leaving a place that they've looked at and realized somewhere along the way, this is not my home.

It's been my home for a while, but it's not where I was designed to be. And they've begun to long for their true home. So this is a homecoming. And you know, philosophers like Novalis and Heidegger talk about homesickness in this way.

And actually Heidegger sort of borrows from Novalis a little bit. And when he quotes this in his book on metaphysics, he says this. He's reflecting on the nature of philosophy and human nature.

And he says, philosophy, metaphysics is a homesickness. It's a homesickness. It's an urge to be at home everywhere. See, the whole religious, philosophical, metaphysical project is sort of driven by a kind of existential homesickness.

He talks about alienation. This sense that as human beings, as we're trying to be in the world, we're not fully comfortable. We're not fully at home.

[9 : 17] There's a sense of being alienated. There's a sense of disconnection. That even when we're home, we're not home. And somewhere deep down, we know it. We sense it. So you may not have thought about this.

You may not have read Heidegger on this. But I guarantee you, for those of you who go home, maybe after this service, maybe tomorrow, for those of you who are going back maybe to your childhood home and you're going to be with your family and you're going to celebrate Christmas, the hopes are always up here.

If your family's anything like mine, we're really good at having high expectations. And they build and they build and they build and they build and they build. And every year we think, this is going to be the best Christmas ever.

I can't wait. It's going to be amazing. And we're forging these. We're taking memories and hopes and dreams and we're sort of building these expectations. And then what invariably happens?

Sometimes, somehow, the experience falls short. Sometimes, way short. But even the best homecoming experiences are never what we hope they will be.

[10 : 17] It never lives up to the hype. Why is that? And you tell yourself, well, next year, next year we'll have more realistic expectations. Next year, the same thing happens. Why is that? You know, when you're away and you're away from your family, maybe on a trip for work, and you come back and you idealize walking in the door and you idealize, for those of you who have kids, you know, the kids running up and being so happy to see you and being embraced and, oh, I'm back.

It never happens that way. It never happens. You know, sometimes it's like, hello, is anybody? Do you remember me? But even the best homecoming experiences, even when you do get that embrace and the hugs and the kisses, it's never what you hope it was.

Why not? In other words, why do we have such an expectation of coming home of being around our family if it never lives up to the hype?

Why would we long for that? It's because of this sense of ontological, existential homesickness that no home in this world can meet.

It's the reason that you can have a great marriage with great kids and still feel lonely, surrounded by your family. Why? So deep down, there's this homesickness that no earthly home can satisfy.

[11 : 39] And all of our religious striving, all of our philosophical inquiring, all of these impulses are driven by a longing to figure that out. What is our home?

So what makes Zion the ultimate home then? You know, it says all the coastlands, everybody, all of the cultures, they're all hoping for me, God says. What makes Zion the ultimate home is that this longing isn't simply for a geographic place, it's for a person, it's for a being.

That our home is actually the Lord himself. That we were made to be with in the Lord. Jesus prays that we would be in him as he and the Father are in one another.

There's a sense of a place there that we can't find geographically, we have to find it spiritually. And so when we see this passage in Isaiah 60, it's saying that this city, this Zion, is actually the place of the dwelling of the Lord who illuminates it.

And so all of these people are coming home to be in and with the Lord. And so the implication, you know, there's a lot of implications for this, but just to consider one, if Isaiah 60 is about the future reality of the church, what that means is that this community and all church communities around the world, we're meant to be a kind of living preview of this reality.

[13 : 10] We're meant to be a kind of foretaste. That's the purpose of the Christian community here and now, is to sort of be a foretaste of this. And so if we look at this, what is it that draws people to Zion?

It's the presence of the Lord. It's not the great schools. It's not the job opportunities. It's not the low cost of housing. It's the presence of the Lord.

And so ultimately, as we think about what it means to cultivate this in our church, it means simply this, that in everything we do, in all of our prayer, in all of our striving, in all of our thinking about what it means to be a community, we should always remember that our primary purpose is to be the kind of community where people are able to come and experience the presence of God.

And that's something, friends, that we need to pray for. We need to ask God for. You know, I talk to people who visit Advent, and they say, I just felt a sense of God's spirit here.

And there's a lot of things that you can manufacture, a lot of things that you can strategize about a church, but that's not one of them. There's no amount of strategy. There's no amount of, you know, lights and slides and decor that can accomplish that.

[14 : 26] It has to be God himself and his presence. And so that's something that we believe that we have and that we should pray that as people are coming into our community, as we are a part of this community, that this is the thing that we are seeking to experience in our daily lives.

This is what makes home, home. So first of all, Isaiah 60 shows us this, that this city is a picture of the home that we long for.

And in some senses, we get a taste of this now, but we will never feel fully at home until we arrive there. And so you know what? Your homesickness is good. It reminds you that there's more.

The next thing that I want to take a look at here is that this ultimate home is more than just a home, that it's actually a place of restoration and of renewal and of the healing for the world.

So it's a place where we find the healing that we hope for. Let me just read to you verses 17 and 18. Listen to this poetry here. He says, In Zion, in the city of light, instead of bronze, I will bring gold.

[15 : 33] Instead of iron, I will bring silver. Instead of wood, bronze. Instead of stones, iron. I will make your overseers peace. Overseers means slave masters. That's an allusion to slavery in Egypt.

And your taskmasters, righteousness. Violence shall no more be heard in your land, devastation or destruction within your borders. You shall call your walls salvation and your gates praise.

See, all of these metaphors are poetically saying the same thing. That in the city of light, there is ongoing profound upward transformation. Upward transformation.

Wood becomes bronze. Bronze becomes gold. And this is an amazing image. It's a picture of total holistic transformation. Even the worst things in their memory.

Even the taskmasters and the overseers from their days of slavery. There will be such a profound upward transformation that even these things will be beautified. That they will be transformed into something lovely.

[16 : 37] So it's this ultimate transformation that happens in the city of light. And we're not just talking about changing bronze into gold. Verses 19 and 21 show us that this is really about the transformation of human beings.

Verse 21 says that this is about changing people who are helpless in sin. People who are incapable of acting in righteousness. Changing those people who are utterly helpless on their own.

Into righteous people. And he says that when this happens in verse 19. That as these people experience this upward spiritual transformation.

They will have in themselves a brightness. That outshines the sun and the moon. That there will be an inner brightness that shines through these people. Because of this transformation.

So I want to see here what God is saying. God desires to transform us. Not simply so that we can live happier, more fulfilled, more satisfied, comfortable lives.

[17 : 42] A lot of times I think that we are very tempted to think of transformation and change as a means for me individually to attain a more comfortable, more satisfied life.

Accept Jesus and he will satisfy the longings of your heart. But that's not really what's being said here. What's being said here is that God's desire to transform us.

Is not necessarily so that we will be happier or more fulfilled. That may happen. It may not. It's not guaranteed. This side of Zion. But what is made clear is that God's desire is to transform us so that he can shine through us.

So that we become the vehicle, the means, the lens through which the light of God shines. That the church is the lens. We're the prism through which God's light is refracted into the world.

So 1 Peter 2 chapter 12 says the same thing. He says essentially this. You live in a culture that persecutes you. He says live in such a way with such character, virtue, honor, faithfulness.

[18 : 52] That even if people persecute you and slander you and call you an evildoer. That they will be so compelled by your life. That they will one day come to worship God.

Even if they say I cannot stand that person and what they believe. I cannot stand what they represent. I cannot stand everything about them. They can't argue with your life. They can't argue with the character that they see.

And it's so compelling that it eventually brings them to the Lord. There was a fascinating article in GQ. A journalist was doing an article on this kind of big mega hipster church in a major city.

And this journalist kind of has a Jewish background. And she makes it very clear that she totally disagrees. Totally disagrees with the beliefs that are held by this Christian church.

Totally. She says it's against everything that's important to me. Right? And then she openly mocks and derides all of their attempts to be cool. You know the skinny jeans.

[19 : 56] She rips on the skinny jeans. She rips on this hat that everybody in the church wears. It's kind of a fashion thing. And she rips on, you know, she just sort of rips on the whole culture of cool and kind of makes fun of it. And, you know, and just, you know, says it's all kind of ridiculous.

And yet, she recognizes that these are people beneath all the coolness, beneath all the trying hard and trying, you know, they are people who take their faith very seriously.

And here's what she says at the very end of the article. She says, And that Sunday, I did not go back to church because my story was done. And instead, I went to soccer games with my children and ordered a pizza.

And at the end of the evening, I cleaned the kitchen and I bent down to place dinner plates into the dishwasher. And then it says she starts humming one of their worship songs to herself. And then I straightened up suddenly and I looked out the window into the dark nothing.

And I realized that I missed them all very much. Fascinating. Fascinating. And she purposefully writes the article in a way that conveys a kind of indescribable longing that she experienced being around this community.

[21 : 09] She's a total skeptic, but she's drawn to something. And it's clear that it's not intellectual arguments. You know, it's not the intellectual apologetics.

It's not the skinny jeans. It's not the great music. All those are part of it, but it's not really any of those things. She's not really able to identify what exactly she's missing.

But I would say that Isaiah chapter 60 tells us. That unbeknownst to her, there was a light shining through those people into her life. And it began to warm her and it began to illuminate and it began to draw her.

And even though she wasn't looking for it, whether she knows it or not, I believe that she was being compelled by that light of the presence of God in that community. So again, as we consider implications for us as a church, if this is a picture of the church as it will one day be, then this should orient us for the here and now.

And I want to say this, and I hope this doesn't discourage you. I hope that it inspires you. When people around you who are not Christians, when they find out that you're a Christian, they watch you.

[22 : 19] They watch your life. They want to see what you're like. They're very interested to know if there's anything tangible, substantial, true, relevant, real behind your faith claims.

They want to know if there's something there. Everybody does. Even at this stage of life, even in the culture that we're in now, there's so much disillusionment and demystification out there.

And yet I believe for most people, there is a tiny part of us that is still holding out that magic is real. That heroes are real. That happy endings are real.

That divine rescue is real. That there's something out there more than this. And people are longing for this. Why do you think franchises like Star Wars are so ridiculously popular?

It's not just the lightsabers. It's not just the cool effects. It's because there's a sense of something more, of a greater story, of a greater purpose and meaning.

[23 : 25] And people long to know that that's true. And they want to look at your life and they want to see, is there anything in here? I'll tell you this. The person that the Lord eventually used to bring me to Christ, as a very hostile skeptic, when I was 21, 22, the only reason I was willing to talk to that person, this guy, is because I had had three years to see that his life and his character were altogether different from any of the other guys in our group of friends.

I'd known him since freshman year. And even though I disagreed with everything that he believed, even though I thought that he was naive, even though I thought that his faith was full of contradictions, I couldn't argue with who he was as a person.

And I'm not saying that he was perfect. In fact, he was far from it. That had nothing to do with it. It wasn't that he was more righteous than I was or anything like that. It's that he was an incredibly humble person. He was incredibly open about his brokenness and his shortcomings.

He would freely admit them. He was an incredibly serving, loving person. Was always the first to say yes if somebody needed help moving. And over the years, I began to recognize there's something distinct and different about this guy.

And that's what opened me up to being willing to have a conversation with him about Jesus. And it took three years. Because I sensed that there was something there, and it was something that I wanted.

[24 : 51] It was the light. So this city is the home that we long for because the Lord's at the center. And it's also a place of healing where God is transforming his people so that they could be prisms through which his light shines into the world and draws other ends.

And the last thing I want us to see in this chapter is this. That one day, this church and all churches, one day all of humanity will be united as this one great family.

And it's the family that we were made to be a part of. God's intention from the start, and you see it with Adam and Eve, was that all of humanity would be one great family that fills the earth.

Multiply and fill the earth. Be one great family. That was the intention for humanity. But what this doesn't mean is that everyone is the same. Right? It doesn't mean homogeneity. And what's fascinating about this, in Isaiah 60, there's tremendous diversity.

It's tremendously diverse. You have people from every tribe, every culture, every place, all converging and bringing with them all of the treasures of their societies, all the treasures of their cultures.

[26 : 02] So there could be a whole separate thing that we talk about here with regard to our work and our culture. Because this is a picture not of the great treasures and achievements of the various cultures of the world being scrapped.

You know, all that is kind of burned into dust, and now God's going to just kind of start over, creation 2.0. That's not what happens. The gates are open because the people are streaming in, and they're bringing their treasure.

They're bringing, and this is not just money. This is all of the great treasures of the various societies and cultures. It's all of the art, all of the innovation, all of the accomplishments. It's all of the cultural goods, all of the things that have been produced from various cultures that have contributed to the beautification and the improving and the enhancing of this world.

And all of that is being brought in. Why? Because every culture has something different to contribute to Zion. They're literally bringing this in and placing it at the feet of the Lord, so to speak.

So that it will become a part of the cultural life of the City of Light. Do you see how amazing that is? And that connects directly back to what we're doing every day of our week.

[27 : 21] And so there's this contribution from all around the world. And what we see is this isn't an American community. It's not a Chinese community. It's not an African community.

It's a truly global community. So this isn't a picture of people leaving and abandoning their cultures. That's not what this is about. It's a great merging of all of the cultures.

And it's recognizing the unique contributions and the unique beauty inherent to each. And so this is, I know, hard for us to imagine because we look at the world and we see people who are so divided along every line imaginable.

And it's hard to imagine that this would ever be possible. But the key is looking at verse 9. Why are people coming from all over the earth with their kings and their treasures? And verse 9 tells us, For the name of the Lord your God and for the Holy One of Israel.

What unites all of these people? It's worship. It's worship. It's worship of the Holy One of Israel. So why do we have division, right?

[28 : 27] Books and books and books have been written about this. And some of you have written PhD dissertations on this. And the root causes of racism and tribalism and all of these things. There are lots of great reasons and theories.

But at the core, what the Bible would say is what divides us is what we worship. Is that we all worship something different. And individuals have their idols and cultures have their idols.

In some cultures it's family. In some cultures it's honor. In some cultures it's authenticity. But we all have cultural idols. And those are the things that divide us.

The fact that we all worship something different. What the Bible makes clear throughout is that the only way to find peace with one another is first to find peace with Him.

And it's like the difference between being in a dance hall. Imagine being in a dance hall where everybody has their iPhone earbuds in. And everybody is listening to different music and dancing to different music.

[29 : 29] Versus everyone listening to the same music and following along. Or imagine the universe or a solar system where every planet is orbiting around something different.

And you would have planets colliding and crashing into each other and you would have chaos. And in a little while you wouldn't have a solar system. You would just have a giant asteroid field. Versus the kind of elegant synchronized beauty of a solar system where everything orbits around the sun.

In perfect synchronicity. So the implication is this. Christianity has the potential. I believe Christianity today has the potential to be the most inclusive.

The most radically inclusive. The most diverse community on the planet. And the reason is this. How is that possible? Well, I think in Isaiah's day people wouldn't have known.

But then Jesus came along and Jesus Christ says this in John chapter 12. He says this. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

[30 : 39] You say, well how does this major influx happen? How is this catalyzed? What brings everybody to Zion? Jesus gives us the answer. When I'm lifted up. That will be the thing that ultimately draws all people into the city of light.

People were confused by this obviously when Jesus first said it. It didn't make sense when he said it. But it all began to make sense when they saw the cross. Because you see, Christianity is the only religion there is that's not based on anything that we do for God.

It's based entirely on the cross. It's based on what God has done for us through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. And you see, that makes a profound difference when you're wanting an inclusive, diverse community.

Because you see, if you're in a culture that values family and your religion revolves around family, then you better hope you're born into the right family. Otherwise, you have no hope.

If you're in a culture that believes and values intellect and your spirituality is all about having the right knowledge and knowing the right stuff, then you better hope you're smart. If your culture values spiritual discipline, things like meditation and spiritual bodily practices, then you better hope that you're good at that.

[31 : 54] You better hope that you can do all that is required of you. If you live in a culture that values moral excellence, and there's a very clearly laid out, maybe even legislated morality, then you better hope that you're a morally upright person.

If you're in a culture that values authentic, personal, spiritual experience, then you better hope you have that experience. Because if you don't, if you're not smart enough or disciplined enough or dedicated enough or moral enough, what hope is there for you?

Sorry, there's no room for you in this community. But if it's not based on you, but it's based on something that is done for you, it means everybody's welcome.

It means everybody, even the smallest child, can understand that something has been done for them. And the moment they accept it, they're in.

That's a truly diverse, inclusive community. And so in this way, the gospel is transcultural. Because it's simply an announcement of what God has already done for us.

[32 : 56] So anyone can receive it and anyone can accept it. So this is the vision that we're given in Isaiah 60. It's the vision of the future of the church, the future of God's people in the world.

And really, it's a future that impacts everybody in the world. One day, the church is going to become like a great city of light, illuminated by the presence of the Lord himself.

And, you know, for the sake of time, I won't belabor the implications. There are many. And this is something that we come back to again and again and again. For the sake of tonight, I just want to focus on one main implication to close this out.

The thing that's been on my heart for weeks now. If there's anyone in this world who very desperately needs a home, needs a place of healing, needs a family, it's the refugees.

Both here and abroad. Both in our city and neighborhoods and across the oceans. And I actually believe that the church is uniquely equipped, like no one else on this planet, to be the kind of home, to be the kind of place where healing can begin, and to be the kind of family that so many people around the world need.

[34 : 12] And I think that this is where we began as a community to figure out what Isaiah 60 has to say to us as Church of the Advent. Let's pray. Our Father, we recognize that this is a vision.

This is something that goes beyond our imagination. It's something that, in many ways, stretches us to the limit. And yet we know that it's not too big for you or too great for you. And we know that this isn't just a possible future, that it's a guaranteed future.

And so we're left to wonder what this says to us, and how we might orient ourselves toward and by this future vision, Lord. And we pray that it would infuse us and inspire us to be all that you've called us to be in this world, for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ.

In his name we pray. Amen.