
HEBREWS | The City of God

Rob Rogers November 1, 2020

Today, we're going to pause in our Wisdom series. — with the election coming up this week, an enormous amount of uncertainty about the future, societal turmoil, real concerns about people's reactions depending on who wins the election, about what the next four years are going to look like, how that will impact our lives — *all very important and very real concerns*.

God wants to speak into it this morning from **Hebrews 13**.

Hebrews 13:11-16

¹¹ For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. ¹² So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through His own blood. ¹³ Therefore let us go to Him outside the camp and bear the reproach He endured. ¹⁴ For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. ¹⁵ Through Him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge His name. ¹⁶ Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

- book of Hebrews was written to a community who were dealing with serious tension and difficulties in life
- big question they were asking...
- “If God is so good, if He loves me so much, then why is life so difficult? Why is life so hard? Why isn't He intervening?”

The entire book of Hebrews is written to address that issue.

The author is trying to give the readers a deeper understanding of the power that's available to them.

- **not so** that they can *escape* the brutal realities of life
- **but so** that they would have the strength to *endure* — to *persevere* in the midst of the brutal realities of life.
 - And this is something that we desperately need right now.

OUR FUTURE CITY OUR EARTHLY STRUGGLE OUR HEAVENLY CITIZENSHIP

OUR FUTURE CITY

- the word *city* is used *multiple times*
- in ancient times, it was synonymous with the words *society, civilization, even country*
- only in a fortified city did you have the safety for community and culture to grow
- only in the city did you have the rule of law and commerce
- **earlier in Hebrews 11 it says that Abraham was seeking a city God is building**
- God is building a new human society, a new civilization, a new kind of culture
 - not based on power and pride, what the Bible calls the “earthly city, or the city of man”
 - but a city based on justice, and peace, service, and human flourishing –
- *this is the city of God*

Hebrews 13:14

For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.

Hebrews 13:14 is saying that we're looking forward to a future city that is COMING one day.

- In **Revelation 21-22** you see it coming down out of heaven.
- It's God's new human order.
- This is a new human civilization where all disease, all death, all poverty, all strife, all racism, all riots, all injustice, every kind of disorder, all suffering, and all poverty is wiped off the face of the earth, every wrong is made right, and every tear is wiped away forever.

But there's a problem. Every earthly society, and the true heavenly city are at war. There is conflict. There is a struggle that we're enduring right now.

OUR EARTHLY STRUGGLE

This city of God is a future city.

Hebrew 12:22

"you have come to the city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem."

That seems like a contradiction? It's a future city that isn't here yet, but we've already come into that city? Which is it? It's both.

When the people who have experienced the radical transformative grace of God get together and form a community, they band together as a family.

This means that *that* community, *that* society, is a very imperfect, but genuine foretaste of the Kingdom that is to come.

This is what the Church is supposed to be!

That's why the New Testament is filled with so many encouragements and exhortations on how we ought to treat one another, because the Church, is supposed to be the *appetizer before the main course*...

**We are citizens of one society, but we're residents of another one.
We're citizens of a heavenly Kingdom, but we're residents of an earthly one.**

That's why we never feel like we're truly at home here... and yet so many people... so many Christians... are frantically running around treating this earthly Kingdom like it's an eternal one.

CS Lewis writes about this "inconsolable longing" in the human heart for "we know not what." He writes about the best things we experience here.

*"For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found,
the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited."¹
~ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory**

In other words, every single earthly kingdom is a temporary one that only hints at the beauty of our heavenly one.

Hebrews 11:13

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were **strangers and exiles** on the earth.

- What this means is that **they, and we** as followers of Christ are "**Resident Aliens.**" And because of that, there is conflict, struggle. There is the tension.

¹ Lewis, C.S. *C.S. Lewis* (Chelsea House Publishers, 2006)

Hebrews 13:13

“For here we have no lasting city...”

- *What this means is that for every follower of Christ, is that we have no lasting society here on earth.* Doesn't matter if it's capitalism, socialism, eastern, western, traditional or individualistic, moral, immoral, religious, secular. Doesn't matter.
- *Any society that you live in here on earth... there will be a deep conflict and tension within you because you will be painfully at odds with culture within that culture.*
- Now, there might be *certain aspects of your values that you see in society and you'll feel affirmed...* but at some point the culture will look at some of the things that followers of Christ do and believe, and scoff!
- They'll look at you and say, *“I can't believe you've built your life on such archaic, bigoted, judgmental beliefs! It is a disgrace and I'm so offended, I can't believe you voted for that guy! Or I can't believe you voted for this guy...”*

There is no space or time in human history where Christians have been truly at home.

We're **resident aliens**, what does that mean?

- A **resident alien** is not someone who is just here for a time.
- It's not someone who is here to get an experience and then leaves.
- A resident alien is someone who says, *“This is where I'm going to live, permanently. And I'm not just going to be a consumer here.*
- *I'm going to actively work toward the benefit of all people, not just people that believe or behave like me!”*

What does it mean to be an exile? A resident alien? What does it mean live permanently in a home that isn't your home?

Vs. 13 and 14 tell us that we are to *...bear the reproach He endured. For here we have no lasting city*, and vs 16 tells us to *...not neglect to do good and to share what you have.*

- You are to love a society that will never love you back.
- You are to sacrifice for a community that will misunderstand you, marginalize you, and certainly at some point, outright reject you.
- You're supposed to understand others, knowing that you yourself may never be understood.
- You're supposed to give and give and give, though you may never be thanked or appreciated for it, and will likely consider you offensive, sinister, as someone will ulterior motives.
- That's what you're called to do and be.

We hear that and we think... “this is impossible. Who in the world can live this way?”

There are basically two types of groups within Christianity.

1. There are those, on one side, who view the world out there as, *“them — those people.”* In other words, *“you can't be a part of our community unless you believe all these things and behave in all these ways.* If you don't, you're out!” That's one side. We're **aliens**.
2. On the other side, we say, *“Eh, it doesn't really matter what you believe. We include everybody and we just tolerate and accept all beliefs and behaviors.”* We're **residents**.
 - One group says, “keep away from the world because we don't belong here, **we're aliens**”

- The other group says, “No. **We’re residents**, so get really involved. So involved that we look, behave, and act just like everyone else.”

In other words, most religious groups try to **resolve the tension of being resident aliens** by either becoming **only residents**, or **only aliens**. We isolate or we completely assimilate.

- **And if you do either of those two things, if you fall to either of those two categories, you’ve completely lost the power to change lives.**
- *The one group doesn’t change lives because it’s completely isolated itself from all the lives that need changed.*
- *The other group doesn’t change lives because they themselves are not transformed and have conformed to the image of the world.*

**God says, “Don’t resolve the tension.
Press into it. Live in it. Embrace it.
Love a world that will never love you back.”**

Do you see how difficult this is? Do you realize how rare this is? When in your life have you seen this done well? Or at least done well consistently? It’s rare, isn’t it? Because most of us are either residents, or aliens, and very few of us are both. This is exactly what it means to be a follower of Christ.

OUR HEAVENLY CITIZENSHIP

How do you get the power to be a citizen of the future city, the heavenly society, yet resident of our present one?

- What gives you the kind of strength that enables you to love people who will never understand you, who shame you, who mock you?
- We think... it’s impossible. And we’re right. It is.
- But yet we’re called to live this way!
- How do you get the power to not be naively inclusive, or harshly exclusive?
- It’s easy to say we just need to try harder to be more biblical
- To have more integrity than those who run away from society
- To say we also need to do better than just tolerate and accept everyone’s beliefs and behaviors in society...
- We are just going to try really hard to be better than both of these groups
- then we’ll be the perfect church.
- We’ll be the only really good church — the one that “Actually loves Jesus”

*The problem with the other two groups is their self-righteousness about their approach, which proves they don’t understand biblical righteousness. **And we’ve just proposed an approach that is also completely based on self-effort and self-righteousness.*** As soon as you say, “we’re going to try real hard and won’t be like those other failures”... you’re doing the same thing!!!

**The only way we’re ever going to be able to fulfill this calling
to be resident aliens is if the motivations
of our hearts are completely transformed by Jesus Christ.**

The Bible never says, “*be generous because that’s the good Christian thing to do.*” The Bible says, “**Be insanely generous, why? Because Jesus Christ has been insanely generous toward you!**” **2 Corinthians 8** Paul essentially says, “**If you’re not generous, you haven’t really encountered Jesus.**”

"If you're not bearing other people's burdens, then you don't really believe that Jesus Christ took your eternal burden upon Himself." If you're withholding forgiveness, then on some level, you don't fully understand what Christ has forgiven you of. **That's the message of the whole Bible.**

- *Do you want the power to root yourself so deeply in your heavenly citizenship that you have the power to love a people who hate you?*
- *Love your enemy?*
- *Love the people who are on the opposite end of the political spectrum than you?*
- *Love those that will never love you in return?*

What is the answer?

Hebrews 13:12 -14

So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.

- The Bible says, "Christian, get out there and sacrifice for your society, give yourself to it, love people that will totally reject you and mock you."
- And if you're honest, you hear that... and say, "I can't. I don't have what it takes."
- And the author of Hebrews says, "I know you can't, but there's one who did." See, Jesus loved a society that hated Him...

Luke 13:34

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Jesus loved them. He wept over them. He worked miracles in their midst. He blessed them.

Do you know what they did in return? They crucified him.

- He was rejected by the ones he came to save.
- He lost people he loved... but he lost something far worse.
- Because on the cross, He says, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me."
- Jesus not only lost the earthly society, but He lost the heavenly one too.
- Christ unjustly lost His heavenly citizenship, why?
- So that we could be elevated out of a temporary earthly citizenship and be given an eternal citizenship in an unshakeable Kingdom.

THIS is what gives us the power to be salt and light!

THIS is what gives us the power to not fear the outcome of an election in an earthly kingdom

How do you love and endure and bear the disgrace and rejection of your earthly Kingdom? You see that Jesus Christ bore the disgrace and rejection you deserved — so that you could become a citizen of the heavenly Kingdom that already is, and is still yet to come.

That's how much He loves you. **He considered the torture and suffering He endured absolutely nothing compared to what He would gain by gaining you.**

- He suffered outside the gates of the city that He loved.
- Therefore, because He did this for you and me, we can bear the same disgrace and still love the people who hate us.

- Love those that will always mock us, and ridicule us.

**We get rejected? We love anyway.
We get mocked? We love anyway, why?
Because while we rejected, mocked and crucified Jesus Christ —
He loved us anyway.
He loved us into our heavenly citizenship,
and sends us on a mission into an earthly one.**

And Church, no matter who is in the White House — Jesus is on the throne.

Discussion Questions

1. How should the Church be the foretaste of the heavenly kingdom to come?
2. What does it mean to be a “resident alien” on the earth?
3. Many religious groups try to resolve the tension of being resident aliens by either becoming only residents (isolate), or only aliens (completely assimilate). How do these groups lose the power to change lives?
4. What gives you the strength to love people who will never understand you, who shame and mock you?

NOTES