

# Abraham's City

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Abraham, that pioneer of faith and Israel's first patriarch, made his historic journey to Canaan by first setting out from his native city of Ur in ancient Chaldea. That region also was known as Babylonia, for Babylon, its capital. The city's name, in the Chaldean language, means nothing less than “gate of God.” In so naming their city, Babylon's founders seem to have laid claim to a lofty spiritual office, holding themselves out as keepers of the way to God himself.

In the Hebrew language, however, “Babylon” is synonymous with “*confusion*”. To anyone familiar with Israel's God, the Babylonians lived in confusion — about the person and nature of God, their own identities and the purpose and meaning of life itself. Abraham himself came from a family of Chaldean idol worshippers<sup>1</sup>.

Into just this confusion came God's voice to Abram (as he was first called). God said, “Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.”<sup>2</sup> He added,

*“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”*<sup>3</sup>

Abraham believed God, gathered his household, and set out for that promised land. Scripture testifies that when he departed, he did not know where he was going,<sup>4</sup> but his destination became clear as he kept on. Scripture records that “they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.”<sup>5</sup> God then promised, “To your offspring I will give this land.”<sup>6</sup> Seventy-five years old when he left Chaldea<sup>7</sup>, Abraham had no children.

God summoned the patriarch to survey the land from a height and to walk up and down through it, because he intended to make it all Abraham's possession.<sup>8</sup> Though he and his wife were both “as good as dead”<sup>9</sup> for childbearing, God nevertheless delighted them with their own son — born because they believed God's promise. Isaac became the living link to the fulfillment of the vast divine promises. Abraham died in faith, not having seen with his eyes the whole scope of their fulfillment. But through his faith in God's proven fidelity, he saw their complete fulfillment in the distance of time.<sup>10</sup>

Having received his own land, an heir to secure its possession, and the promise of blessing through him to all the families of the earth, what more could Abraham have wished? What else could his faith and imagination be stretched to grasp? Yet, God had still more in store for his friend. Scripture reports that God was urging Abraham towards an inheritance well beyond Canaan, beyond earth itself. And for this, Abraham yearned:

*By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*<sup>11</sup>

*All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, 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.*<sup>12</sup>

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God has prepared a city”. “Ah!” you say, “what a lovely figure of speech to describe heaven!” But no, this is no metaphor — this is a real, honest-to-God city, and it thrilled Abraham to look forward to it! John the Apostle was given a closer view of this same city, and we find his description near the end of the book of Revelation:

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”*<sup>13</sup>

*One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed*

*me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. The wall of the city had twelve foundations and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.*<sup>14</sup>

As John continues his description, the angel measures the city and reports her immense proportions: 1,400 miles square, and equally high.<sup>15</sup> A closer examination reveals still more majesty: “The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone,” including emeralds, sapphires and topaz.<sup>16</sup> “The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass.”<sup>17</sup> John continues:

*I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk in its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.*<sup>18</sup>

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It is no wonder that Abraham and the saints who followed him longed for this city! Nothing, anywhere, equals it; it is God's own dwelling—forever.

The angel calls the city “the bride, the wife of the Lamb.”<sup>19</sup> John observes her “prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband.”<sup>20</sup>

Paul referred to Christ and his church in similar language: “The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.”<sup>21</sup> And he exhorted, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.”<sup>22</sup> Here, one can readily picture Christ, the divine bridegroom, and the church, his radiant bride, side by side at a heavenly wedding. Writing of God's joining together of a husband and wife as “one flesh,” Paul observed, “This is a profound mystery — **but I am talking about Christ and the Church.**”<sup>23</sup>

He lived in tents...  
...but he looked for  
a City.

John the Baptist also likened Jesus to a bridegroom with his bride: “I am not the Christ, but am sent ahead of him. The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less.”<sup>24</sup>

Paul addressed the Ephesian assembly as “fellow citizens” (literally, natives of a city<sup>25</sup>):

*You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*<sup>26</sup>

God’s dwelling place, his eternal city, is his church — the bride betrothed to his Son. The city John described has foundations made of jewels and gates formed of single pearls. The city and its streets are made of transparent gold, and its wall is formed of precious stones. But the nature of these costly materials is well beyond that of the earthly metals and precious stones familiar to us.

In making a point about the support of ministers, Paul quotes the law of Moses: “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.”<sup>27</sup> But he asks, “Is it about *oxen* that God is concerned? Surely he says this for *us*, doesn’t he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest.”<sup>28</sup>

We may also ask, “Is it gold, jewels and pearls that God really wants?” Is this what he will commune with for an eternity? Surely not! If he wished such treasures, he could create ten universes of them for himself at any time. God’s beloved *people* are the costly, painfully-won treasures with whom he will surround himself forever.

Consider the city’s foundations; something is written on them: *Names!* The names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And on the pearl gates? More names! Those of the twelve tribes of Israel — the people through whom any person must enter this city.<sup>29</sup>

The superlative qualities of the materials employed to build the city reflect the qualities of the people of God who comprise it. To God, *they* are precious, transparent and pure; he makes of them a living temple in whom he will forever display his wisdom, artistry, and glory!

This city — this bride, dwelling, and church of God, cannot be fittingly captured in any single description. God paints several portraits of her to convey what she is. Today, she is Christ’s congregation or

church (in Greek, *ecclesia* — a “called-out assembly”<sup>30</sup>). She is his body,<sup>31</sup> his temple,<sup>32</sup> his bride in preparation. Later, she will be called the wife of the Lamb, and the eternal dwelling and city of God. Today, she is becoming what she will be then. Those who answer God’s call to take their part in her are developing, as they have through the ages, the qualities reflected in new Jerusalem’s splendor. Though unthinkable in the light of eternity, others weigh the cost and *decline* his invitation.

This is the city whose architect and builder is God.<sup>33</sup> Its design — and the design for his church — is his alone. Consider the work of a great architect: He brings to bear upon his creation an impressive array of skills and disciplines. He conceives, creates, calculates, tests, surveys, specifies, communicates. He considers function, strength, purity, and beauty in his materials; his design unites their variety into a balanced, functional whole. The master builder faithfully carries out the architect’s design, and enlists capable workmen in that enterprise.

How carefully then, should every Christian endeavor to understand and to take his part in God’s own plan for His church! Yet, many of us feel free to improvise other designs — both in our own lives and with our churches. Sadly, many remain uninstructed in the nature, ways and ministry of the New Testament church, though Scripture provides clear and accessible instruction about it. The spiritual edifices many believers live in today lack the power, the living faith, the spiritual nourishment that leap from the pages of Scripture describing the New Testament church. Nevertheless, God’s design for his church — and his invitation to it — stand wonderfully unchanged. If God’s people will return and “build it according to the pattern,”<sup>34</sup> God can and will reverse centuries of neglect and loss, restoring his church to its original vitality and testimony in a world starved for both.

What Christians build today God will — or will not — make a part of his holy city. If we insist upon executing our own designs, God may permit us to do so, but the result will be something other than *his* church, and he will not join us in pretending that it is otherwise. Christians too can build stately structures whose destiny is, alas, only to be *burned*.<sup>35</sup> Only what is built with the gold, silver and precious stones reflecting the quality of new Jerusalem can withstand God’s intense, final inspection.<sup>36</sup>

God is himself the *builder* of this eternal city. Jesus said, “...I will build my church...”<sup>37</sup> The Holy Spirit effects the joining together of its members: “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body...”<sup>38</sup> For a believer to be baptized into the body of Christ and thus joined to its other members, is a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. It is God’s sovereign act, not ours only; it is based upon God’s choices for us, not on our independent election as to the company we prefer to keep.

The fact of this joining is expressed in the ministry of members one to another: “...speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, ***grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.***”<sup>39</sup> Scripture abounds with practical instruction to foster this ministry among the members. A few examples:

*When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.*<sup>40</sup>

*There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another the ability to speak in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.*<sup>41</sup>

*Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.*<sup>42</sup>

Read these passages, if you can, ***believing*** that every word is as true for God’s church today as they were when their ink was still fresh on parchment!

Finally, let us return to Abraham! Like our father of faith, most of us look back to an origin in some spiritual Babylon. Like him, we have heard God beckon us to possess a new and unfamiliar land to which he has promised to lead us. We too do not know just where we are going, but we do know who has called us, and we consider him faithful. Those who hear God’s call to build his church as *he* has designed it may indeed feel without clear direction at first. But God, who led Abraham unerringly on his

course, knows how to join us to other members of the body and how to lead us together into our divinely crafted places.

In the closing verses of Revelation, we all find ourselves recipients of the following invitation:

*“The Spirit and the bride say ‘Come!’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come!’ Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.”*<sup>43</sup>

Everywhere, the Holy Spirit calls to the ear and the heart of the Christian, and of the non-Christian too, saying “Come!” The bride, Christ’s church, echoes the Spirit’s call in her own voice, which must be heard ever more clearly and widely: “Come!” Come freely to Jesus the Savior; come, too, to Jesus the Bridegroom. Leave the world’s confusion and come. Come to be joined to him and to his people. Come now to make your home forever in the city where Abraham lives!

*The foregoing is based on a message given by Jaan E. Vaino at a meeting of the New Testament Missionary Fellowship.*

#### REFERENCES

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26. Eph. 2:19-22. 27. I Cor. 9:9. 28. I Cor. 9:9-10. 29. John 4:22b. “...for salvation is from the Jews.” Jesus himself is a Jew, as were the writers of all of these texts.
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