



Taking Our Cities

For God

by
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Today over one-half of the world's population lives in urban centers. By the year 2010, three out of every four people on earth will live in cities. Many Christians think cities are by nature evil places. If they were asked, they would say the city is a curse, not a blessing. However, that is not God's view. After all, the human story begins in a garden and ends in a city!

A city is a human institution, and like all institutions it develops a "creaturehood" or personality that is greater than the sum of its parts. Each metropolis has unique characteristics when compared with other cities.

For example, New York City is a hub of trade and a center for world leadership. But it is more than that - it symbolizes a life-style dream. The dream of wealth and power draws people to New York, and they are seduced by the success-fantasy for which New York has become a giant metaphor.

Today ruthlessness and despair haunt Manhattan, and most Christians see only the negative influence of the city. But how does God see New York? Does He have a plan, a purpose for the city? Originally it was the gateway of hope to the land of liberty. These are strong and godly qualities that suggest God's redemptive purpose for this great urban center.

Think about the personality of your city. Any astute observer can see that certain cities seem to embody a central dream, and there is usually both a good and evil side to that dream. I believe God has participated in the creation of our cities both in forming their personalities and in stationing high-ranking guardian angels over each one.

For example, the angel Michael is referred to as the "great prince" standing watch over Israel (Dan. 12: 1) - and then there is the experience of Elisha's servant recorded in 2 Kings 6:16,17: *"So he answered, 'Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them. 'And Elisha prayed, and said, 'Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.' And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. "*

If our eyes were opened in like manner, what would we see? The Greek word *angelos* in the New Testament means "messenger." What message would an angel of the Lord bring concerning your city? Would God reveal a divine purpose? On the other hand, Satan will do anything in his power to accuse your city - to malign its redemptive gift.

Let me give you an example. A citizen of Amsterdam has a right to be proud of the centuries-old tradition of hospitality and tolerance that mark the culture of that city. Amsterdam is a genuine city of refuge, like world-famous Geneva or some of the cities of the Levites listed in the Old Testament.

Today, however, it's a city known for tolerating open drug sales and legal prostitution. This is plainly a perversion of a gift. Amsterdam needs a fresh picture of itself functioning in *righteousness*, an identity rooted in the prophetic vision of its Christian community. And God *has* begun to raise up dynamic ministries in Amsterdam - one of Europe's darkest cities.

The Purpose For Your City

Determining your city's redemptive gift is even more important than discerning the nature of evil principalities.

Principalities rule through perverting the gift of a city in the same way an individual's gift is turned to the enemy's use through sin. Satan is not a creator. He cannot originate anything. He can only turn created things and people to his own purposes.

When I am traveling and preaching, one of the first questions I ask upon arrival is, "Why is this town here?" I am often treated to a baffled look and a shrug of the shoulders.

There is always a reason, and that reason usually stems from the geography of the location, such as a mountain pass, rich soil, mineral wealth, or a river crossing. The earth has been lovingly crafted as a habitation for people. God anticipated the development of your city. He marked out a place for it.

When I look at my own city, Los Angeles, I have to hold two truths in tension: On one hand, it is a technological tower of Babel, polluting the world with its communications and entertainment industry.

On the other hand, it is a city with a *gift* in communications. Los Angeles is a city blessed by God with certain resources that can either be perverted - or converted. Even the name of the city speaks of its destiny: "Los Angeles" is Spanish for "The Angels." As we have already learned, *angelos* is Greek for "messenger." I believe God wants Los Angeles to be a messenger, communicating the good news in the midst of an end time harvest.

Indeed, this plan of God has already enjoyed success several times in history: In 1906 through the Azusa Street Revival; in 1949 through an evangelical renewal leading to the birth of such groups as Campus Crusade For Christ and the launching of the Billy Graham Crusades as a national ministry; and in 1972 with the beginning of the Jesus Movement.

Today the city is torn by violence, and it pumps pornography into the minds of millions. However, Los Angeles is also a city filled with dynamic Christian ministries reaching the whole world. The church here is not asleep. We are expecting God to demonstrate His mighty power in our city. Over one thousand pastors and leaders have begun to meet regularly in days of prayer called for by our senior churchmen.

Rebuilding The Walls

God is sovereignly rebuilding the walls of our city, starting with the leadership of His churches. I believe that as we continue to meet, God will pour out revelation concerning His redemptive plans for the city. It was to the Jews living in the wicked city of Babylon that God spoke these words, *"For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope."* (Jer. 29:11)

Over the years I have been part of many outreaches to cities all over the world. I remember going door to door in the tenements of Paris with a small team in 1971. With 1,200 others I witnessed on the streets of Munich in 1972. I have coordinated outreaches to small American towns and large Latin American cities, and I have pioneered inner-city ministries to runaways, refugees, and children. In all these endeavors I have learned the *central importance of prayer and spiritual warfare*.

Unless you understand Biblical warfare you will be frustrated, confused, and ineffective in your ministry to the city. You may be attempting to coordinate Christian concerts, pioneer a church, or reach businessmen, but the principle is still the same: We need to gain a place of authority over Satan before we will see the full fruit of our labors.

Binding The Strong Man

Jesus said, *"How can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house."* (Matt. 12.-29) Discerning the nature of principalities at work in your city can be as simple

as asking God to tell you what's going on. But God also wants us to use our minds in reasoning through the things He has already taught us and in applying them.

Ask yourself the question: *Why is this city here? Is it merely a product of geography and commerce, or does God have a redemptive purpose in mind for it?* Your city is God's city. The people are made in His image. Satan is an invader and a usurper operating in our territory. God did not give demons authority over your city. Demons have infested the earth's atmosphere since before the creation of mankind, but they can only extend their authority into a town or an institution when people sin.

When you look into the history of your city, you will find clues as to what is oppressing the people today. This is our planet, and the only authority Satan has is stolen human authority. He initially gains this authority when, at some point in history, human beings believe his lie, receive his accusation, and are seduced into an allegiance to his plan. An obvious example would be the spirit of greed which was let loose during the California gold rush and still dominates the culture of Los Angeles and San Francisco to this day.

No longer join Satan, the accuser of your city, but lift up your heart in thanksgiving as you declare by faith the effect that the gospel will have?

Whole countries are kept in darkness by satanic lies that have become cornerstones of a particular culture. Take, for example, the struggle with rejection and the fear of authority experienced by many Australians because their country originated as a penal colony. Entering through these cruel roots of Australian history, Satan has been able to create a general distrust of all authority figures, including the highest of all who is, of course, God Himself.

The truth is that Australia is *not* a nation founded on rejection and injustice, but a chosen people with as much dignity and potential as any people in history. They are a people greatly loved by a heavenly Father who is calling them to healing and purpose.

In Sydney in 1979 I witnessed an inter denominational gathering of 15,000 believers making a covenant with God on behalf of their nation. There was spiritual release when one leader led the crowd to extend forgiveness toward Britain for the injustice suffered by their forefathers in the establishment of Australia as a penal settlement.

Prophetic revelation about the purpose and destiny of the nation has been pouring into Australia through its national church ever since. Australian Christians have begun to discover many indicators of God at work even in the earliest days of their national history, and they are filled with faith concerning the future.

Just like those Australian Christians, we need to put today's battles in their historical context. A study of history can give us clues as to God's purpose for a city, and it can also reveal the points at which evil gained entrance.

What can we do about this today? What can we do now to correct evils that attended our city's birth? Scripture gives us an answer. Through repentance, reconciliation, and prayer, the present generation can work to repair the broken-down walls of the city.

Bringing Down Strongholds

"Those from among you shall build the old waste places; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; and you shall be called the Repairer of the Breach, the Restorer of Streets to Dwell In." (Is. 58:12) The strongholds that bind our urban populations have power, but *they are not invincible*. They're vulnerable, and, if we move wisely, we can overthrow them. I want to share with you a five-fold approach to bringing down our cities' strongholds:

1) Begin with worship and praise.

Everything born of God goes through a very natural process: worship, conception, gestation, travail, and birth. So always begin with worship. It's in the place of thanksgiving and praise that God conceives within us His mind and heart for our

city.

What is your attitude toward your city? Most Christians indulge in habitual complaining about traffic, air pollution, and other petty annoyances. They fail to realize that reacting to the environment in this way will darken their spirits and stifle the revelation that God wants to bring. Revelation only comes to the grateful because gratitude is evidence of humility.

I remember the first time I saw Los Angeles in 1971 - a vast cityscape smoldering in the summer heat. My soul yearned for the crisp, clean beauty of New Zealand, the land of my birth. The smog burned my eyes and the depersonalizing atmosphere of the city pushed down on my spirit.

I had an attitude problem toward the city. I took my first steps toward it only out of obedience to Jesus, but God soon changed my perspective. As I exercised the discipline of thanksgiving, I began to receive constant revelation about the blessings of urban living and the destiny that God had in mind for my city. Now I really love this city. The cultural diversity is stimulating, and the vast size of the city provides the opportunity for endless exploration, endless discovery of the new.

Having to leave Los Angeles now would be a great sacrifice. This is my town. Are you as excited about your city as I am about mine? Or are you just enduring in an environment that you despise? If you lack joy, repent for your murmuring and then exercise the discipline of thanksgiving. As gratitude conceives praise, you will be able to look up and see the eternal purposes of God for you, your family, and for the church in your city.

No longer join with Satan, the accuser of your city, but *lift up your heart in thanksgiving* as you declare by faith the effect that the gospel will have! Do you want revival in your city? Do you want to defeat the powers of darkness? The way to get rid of darkness is to turn on the light, to establish the Lord's presence in the midst of His people through praise!

2) Wait on the Lord for insight.

Don't rely on finite reasoning or human cunning. If we listen to God with childlike dependency, He will guide us into victory. Every six months my staff and I gather for three days of prayer. On the first day of one such gathering the leaders met for early morning prayer in my office. As soon as we bowed our heads the white light of God's spotlight seemed to flood our hearts with conviction of sin. Not that any of us were involved in scandalous behavior - we just saw ourselves in the light of God's true holiness. Our immediate response was to rid ourselves of every hindrance through open confession and repentance.

When we prayed with our staff later in the morning, the same spirit of repentance fell on us all, but God required that we as leaders go first in humbling ourselves through the confession of our faults. A spontaneous outburst of worship followed this time of repentance. Everybody was suddenly full of revelation - revelation about a season of awakening coming to our city. People's minds seemed to be filled with images of rain, which is a symbol of revival. Then there came a sober mood. Some received Scripture verses about the wickedness of our city and God's judgment. Others wept. We knew our city deserved judgment. We began to feel God's broken heart over injustice, child abuse, drug addiction, pornography, and abortion. The hours flew by. The hand of the Lord was heavy upon us.

Out of days of prayer came a clear picture of the principalities and powers attempting to govern Los Angeles. The Lord exposed tactics of the enemy and gave us strategies for his defeat. In united prayer we received God's vision for new ministries to the city. When we wait on the Lord and give Him room to move - He moves. This was an important factor during the Azusa Street Revival and is a characteristic of every divine visitation in history.

3) Identify with the sins of the city.

The great intercessors of the Bible all approached God with a sense of shame and embarrassment. Intercession is not an escape from reality. Our communication with God must be rooted in the truth - the eternal truth of His holy standards and the awful truth about our society as God sees it. The intercessor *experiences the* broken heart of God through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. The intercessor also *identifies* with the sin of the people, because the intercessor has personally contributed to God's grief.

In responding to the broken heart of God, we must identify with the sins of the city in personal and corporate repentance. When Nehemiah prayed for the restoration of Jerusalem, he did not pray for the city as if he were not part of it. He said, "*I and this people have sinned.*" (Neh. 1:6,7)

You may be a righteous person who is not involved in any direct way with the vices present in your city. But there is no temptation that is not common to humanity. We can all identify with the roots of any given sin. When we ask for God's mercy on others, we should never say, "How could they do such a thing?" We know exactly how they could do it, because the potential for the worst evil lies within each one of us, apart from God's saving grace and the life of Christ within us.

Through repentance, reconciliation, and prayer, the present generation can work to repair the broken-down walls of the city.

As you stand in the gap for your city, allow the Holy Spirit to shine the bright light of truth into the inner rooms of your soul. Run from the religious deceit that would seduce you into believing that you are superior to any person. It is only by the blood of the Lamb and the power of the Spirit that we stand free from the chains of guilt and the sentence of death.

It is only when God has cleansed our own wicked hearts that participation in the redeeming work of intercession becomes possible. It is then that the power to change history is released through prayer.

4) Overcome evil with good.

Is the enemy tempting us to be fearful and stingy? Let's come against greed with hilarious generosity! Overcome pride with humility, lust with purity, fear with faith, lethargy with diligence. Paul said, "*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*" (Phil. 4:13) Overcoming evil with good is not merely a spiritual technique, but represents a means of applying the victory Jesus already gained.

When we come against the enemy, we by faith manifest the aspect of Christ's character that is the opposite of the temptation facing us. Take, for instance, Jesus' statement regarding a particular evil spirit. "*However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.*" (Matt. 17:21) The admonition to abstain from food is probably because the disciples were dealing with a demon of appetite such as lust or gluttony. The power of God was hindered until they yielded themselves further to the control of the Holy Spirit through a particular step of obedience - a step involving the opposite spirit, an act of self-control.

5) Travail until birth.

Just as the contractions of a woman's uterus herald the beginning of labor, there are times when God's Spirit stirs our souls to seasons of intense travail. We must travail in prayer until God's purposes are birthed. That which is conceived of God will eventually come to birth. When the united Christians of a city are at this stage, it is an indicator of impending revival.

When you truly love somebody, you don't just mention that person before the Lord. You pray *until* that which is needed happens, until the answer comes, until breakthrough. Love settles for nothing less than victory.

If you are praying for a family member who is in bondage, you are not released from the burden until that person is saved, set free, and set in order. This is the way we should pray for our cities. "*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.*" (Matt. 7:7)

In the year prior to the Olympic Games Outreach, I would often find myself groaning and weeping with the compassion of Jesus for the people of my city. I drove the freeways with tears streaming down my face. Later that year, hundreds of pastors from over fifty denominations joined with me in times of intense prayer during outreach planning sessions. This was followed by an unprecedented harvest.

The level of a spiritual victory for your city is directly affected by two spiritual conditions: the intensity of your desire and the size of your faith. God wants to see if you want the minimum or the maximum. Do you want institutional survival - or citywide revival?

Will you and I be prepared to pay the price for victory over our cities? There is a high price to be paid in personal discipline, prayer, and obedience. Like you, I live on a dying planet, a dark place polluted with demons, but growing in my heart is a fierce joy. Jesus came to reveal the Father, to atone for us, and to teach us how to live. He also came to destroy the works of the devil, and He has commissioned us to do likewise.

I'm not suggesting that Christians take over the city in a governmental sense or even that Christian action *can* halt all the institutional and personal evil of those who have rejected Christ. I'm suggesting that the power of the resurrected Christ *is released* when God's people are united in citywide prayer.

Business as usual is not good enough. God has much more in mind. Are our expectations of God too low? Are we participating in the sin of unbelief when we entertain despair or indifference over the moral, environmental, social, and spiritual needs of our cities?

The power of the gospel has radically impacted the life of cities for nearly 2,000 years, but most importantly our cities must become places of harvest. In the early 70's we saw the youth of the counter-culture swept into the Kingdom, but that was a long time ago. There is a generation missing from our churches. Today's youth culture needs a revelation of Jesus.

Citywide prayer gatherings are springing up all over America. Tears of repentance are flowing. Don't miss the day of God's merciful visitation. God is definitely up to something. Let's get involved.

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