

Choosing a City to Live In

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We're peering into the apocalyptic imagination of Zechariah, a book with otherworldly images meant to break ingrained patterns of thinking to awaken us to a transcendent message. The book reveals a massive plan for history which includes: *God* judging the nations, saving a *people*, and establishing a *metacity* where his glory dwells. The first three visions successively intensify around these themes. In fact, the design for this series depicts a similar thematic progression from fiery presence of *God* who judges and saves, into the creation of a new *people*, to live in the snow white *city* of God. This third vision touches on all these with a particular focus on the city. Actually, three cities: Jerusalem, Babylon, and Zion. As we look in each one, ask yourself which city do I live in, prefer?

Living in Jerusalem - weary and measuring

Where we live says a lot about who we are. If you meet someone from Dallas, you might assume they're *materialistic*. If you meet someone from Austin, you may think *creative*. San Francisco, *liberal*; Portland, *where young people go to retire*. Where we live says a lot about who we are. What was it like to be from Jerusalem in 520 BC? [chart/map of return] After 70 years of captivity in Babylon, Darius King of the Persian Empire, sent Israel back to Jerusalem. But the return from exile was not one swift movement. Exiles returned in waves. In Zechariah, we encounter the first wave of exiles. They now live in a city of ruins. Reconstruction of the temple has stalled out. There are no walls. Pitiably housing and a pathetic economy. It's nothing like the good old days, when the temple was strong, the king was great, and the fields were plenty. There is so much work to be done. If you are from Jerusalem, you are *weary, maybe even disillusioned*. Can you identify? Do you feel like you're living in Jerusalem? Tired at work, frustrated with community, maybe even disillusioned with God and church? Perhaps instead of rebuilding, you've begun erecting walls in relationships? Behind a thick comfortable distance, you hurl silent judgments: they don't ask me over, they only care about themselves, they are ____.

We make bad judgments when we are tired. As a parent, I'll let my kids take in too much media. As a pastor, I'll begin to see people as problems to put up with not persons to care for. **When fatigue sets in, we'll even romanticize the past.** Israel did with the temple, with Babylon, and Egypt. Do you feel like your best days are behind you? When you were sharper, faster, and more appreciated? Do you find yourself thinking: "Why can't my *job, marriage, community* be like it was in college, at my other church, in another city?" To snap Israel out of it, Zechariah is given the image of a man with the measuring line, probably a city official, preparing for city reconstruction (2). But before he can measure, the official is accosted an angel: "**Run, say to that young man (the official), Jerusalem shall be inhabited as villages without walls, because of the multitude of people and livestock in it**" (4). He challenges the measurement. Why? **What we measure makes us.** What do you measure? Your waistline, your salary, your influence, your number of friends, likes, hits? **Whatever we measure most remakes in its image.** Israel is measuring the glory days but God wants them to have a better measurement, to have a city inhabited as "villages without walls." Why is it better? This phrase means an un-walled settlement and refers to a demographic pattern that emerged in 6th century, not as economic center, surrounded by a wall, with satellite cities contributing to it. It is now a wide open city, stretching for miles, and instead of walling off

villages, it includes them, even other nations. This defies Jewish expectation. *The promised measurement of the city includes a multitude of people and cattle so great that walls cannot contain it.* Plenty of cattle to go round for the population of the metacity. **The new Jerusalem defies measurement.** It includes people you don't expect, opportunity you can't comprehend, and **God will be a wall of fire and the glory in her midst**" (5). What does this mean? If you trace fire imagery in the Bible, it will take you back to the pillar of fire that led Israel out of Egyptian exile; further to the presence of God in unconsumed burning bush, and if you keep tracing it, back to the garden of Eden, where an angel stands with a flaming sword guarding every entrance to the mountain garden-temple. **Where there is fire, there is presence of God and his Spirit.** Why the wall? As with the other fiery images, the wall of fire is less about protection and more about purity—the pure and holy presence of the Lord. In essence the Spirit is saying, "I will take you pass the flaming sword, through the wall of fire, back up the mountain and put you in the very presence of God, where all your strength and life and joy comes from. To live in an immeasurable city with immeasurable plenty. **On one condition. Give up your measurements.** Give up your romanticized past and your idealized present. [Bonhoeffer] Allow this visionary reality to break into the present. How? I used to measure converts, then church size, then church plants; now I measure books sold. But when I let the Spirit take me by the hand, and guide me to the place of God's fiery presence; when I'm living in Zion, I count on Christ not books as the glory in my midst. When my torch is lit at the flame of Christ, all other measurements blow away like charred paper bits. And I see people as persons to be loved not problems to be solved. How are you viewing others in the city? Where are you living? Jerusalem or Zion? Come back to Zion, light your faith at the lamp of Christ, let him be the glory in your midst.

Living in Babylon - comfort and convenience

That's Jerusalem. What about Babylon, where the other, larger group of Israelites are still living, in exile. Although they exist under pagan rule, surrounded by foreign gods, they have economic opportunity and live in relative ease. To them he says, **"Up! Up! Flee from the land of the north, declares the Lord. For I have spread you abroad as the four winds of the heavens, declares the Lord. Up! Escape to Zion, you who dwell with the daughter of Babylon"** (6-7). In Babylon, their king is great, the fields are plenty, and returning to Jerusalem seems like a drag, an inconvenience. If Jerusalem is stuck in the past, Babylon is in an overrealized future. Utopian pipedream. In Austin we bath in endless opportunity, so many interesting social and cultural activities: festivals, films, shows, new restaurants. Many good. Some not so good. **When we imbibe in Babylon we lose the taste for Zion.** Zion is the people of God gathered around the person of Christ. When you're used to gathering around cultural goods, a select group of friends, or just hunkering down with your family, you aren't as likely to spend time with people who are different from you (CG) church begins to seem like a drag. You prefer the artisanal, the organic, the well crafted community. **Babylon we exchanges the people of God for the gods of the people.** We want to be served rather than serve. We prefer convenience over sacrifice. Entertainment over mission. Why leave? **The joys of Babylon are short-lived and shallow.** **For thus said the Lord of hosts, after his glory sent me to the nations who plundered you, for he who touches you touches the apple of his eye: "Behold, I will shake my hand over them, and they shall become plunder for those who served them."** Historically, Babylon took the best of its conquered cities. Deporting the craftsmen, artists, city planners. It plundered Zion. **When**

we choose to live in Babylon, we insist on the fruit of Zion without the root of faith. Its goods are stolen from Zion. But it's stolen fruit. It will not last. YHWH will shake his hand over Babylon, like a powerful gesture from Gandalf, wiping its gods of comfort, convenience, and wealth, restoring it to Zion at the end of time. **And those who have lived as the people of God gathered around the person of Christ will inherit great reward.** But those who insist on the great reward in the place of the person of Christ, will receive nothing. Some will only by the skin of their teeth, and others not past the wall of fire. If you are living in Babylon, God is saying to you, "**Up, Up flee from the land of the north and escape to the city of Zion.**" It is a double imperative: flee Babylon, and return to Zion. Fleeing alone doesn't do. That's asceticism. Denying yourself to prove yourself. Claiming Zion without fleeing Babylon doesn't work. It's called hypocrisy, the fruit without the faith. What Lord wants is identity in Zion and faithfulness in Babylon. Daughters of Zion living distinctly in Babylon, close to the fire, his glory in your midst.

Living in Zion – Sing, Send, Silence

So how do you live in Zion? "**Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for behold, I come and I will dwell in your midst, declares the Lord. And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people. And I will dwell in your midst, and you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you**" (10-11). We live in Zion by worshipping our way out of Babylon. *We forsake our measurements for the immeasurable City. We drop the gods of convenience for the King of creation.* Why? Because he **dwells** with us. Four times he says it. Zechariah is saying there will be a day when **the fire of God won't just be a wall around us but a fire within us.** In Acts, the fire reappears over the disciples and enters into them. John says of Jesus there is one who will baptize by water and *by fire.* The *Holy Flame* has come to dwell in you. Wherever you go, the fire goes. And when all the little flames come together, we burn bright. City groups punch holes in the darkness. Sundays we shout and we sing to the Lord of the Fire. Give up your measurements. He **sends** us to the nations to share the light, give give away the flame. Will you join him? Where will you live? Let's give up our petty measurements for the immeasurable city of God. Finally, **silence: Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.** The image is of the Lord descending his mountain temple, roused to judge and save, as he tromps down the steps of his cosmic temple, eyes filled with light, come to rule and reign over his people in city of God. When he returns, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess, by faith or by force, that Jesus Christ is Lord, Lord of the city, Lord of the earth. To some a consuming fire, to others a never-ending light, the glory in their midst. Which will it be for you? Which will it be for your friends? May it be the never-ending light of the King of Glory cause you to sing, sending you to the nations, and bring holy silence