

VIEWING THE HOLY CITY

“Marching to Zion?”, or Living in Zion?

From his vantage point atop Mount Pisgah, Moses was enabled to see the expanse of the promised land (Dt. 34:1f). No doubt, he could see the mountains where Salem, the city of Melchizedek had long stood. Centuries would pass before David would capture this city from the Jebusites about 1000 B.C. and make it his capital. It was named “Jerusalem” and also called “the city of David” and “Zion” (1 Kings 8:1).

In time, the Ark of the Covenant was brought there and the temple was built on Mount Moriah. So Jerusalem was also referred to as “the holy city” (Neh. 11:1; Rev. 21:10) and “the throne of the Lord” for he put his name there (Jer. 3:17; 1Kings 14:21).

We will make no effort here to review the checkered history of this beloved city which came to represent God’s chosen people. We will skip to Isaiah, the “Messianic Prophet,” who lived in Judah after the northern kingdom, Israel, was destroyed by the Assyrians. The same corruption and desertion of God that brought the fall of the northern kingdom was prevalent in the southern kingdom of Judah also. This was the burden of Isaiah.

Looking centuries ahead prophetically, Isaiah saw the total rejection of Israel as God’s chosen people. He viewed the spiritual order to be initiated by the Messiah and the new Jerusalem to be established by the Messiah which Isaiah described in imagery of a mountain with its temple, or house, as the dwelling place of God.

So Isaiah wrote: *“The word which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say; ‘Come,*

let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” (Isa. 2:1-4).

The term “latter days” used by Isaiah referred to the time of the Messiah. In that time John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed the nearness of the kingdom of heaven. The last days were completed and fulfilled when Jesus returned in vengeance against physical Israel and their capital and fully inaugurated the spiritual order which included believers of all nations. The words above pointed to Pentecost. Then and there the word of the Lord concerning the spiritual reign of Christ the King went forth from Jerusalem, along with the invitation to all nations to flow into it. The new temple, the believers in whom his spirit would dwell, would be the holy city, the new Jerusalem. There the acceptance of all nations would break down all distinctions and create unity of all mankind. The spiritual peace of mankind would have no physical armies to promote and defend it. It would be a new order that favored no nation above another, but in itself would be above all earthly rulers and nations. We, the called out, God’s congregation, fulfill all of the imagery in Isaiah’s view of the holy city..

This includes further imagery of new heavens and a new earth, symbolic terms used in Hebrew literature depicting social or political orders with their rulers and dignitaries portrayed as the sun, moon, and stars. In this effort we cannot look at each reference or view that Isaiah presents, but we will skip to his last chapters.

“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. But be glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and be glad in my people; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping

and the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the child shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the Lord, and their children with them. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord.” (Isa. 65:17-25). Such poetic expressions continue in Chapter 66 as Isaiah describes our relationship with God in the spiritual Zion.

Recognizing that Joel's "last days" prophecies identified the happenings occurring on Pentecost, Peter quoted Joel's apocalyptic language denoting the upheaval and replacement of the current system of national Israel. *“And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.... . And I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth beneath, blood and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and manifest day.” (Acts 2:15-21). The word of the Lord was going forth, for “in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb. 1:2), and Spirit-filled men would continue to reveal his message for about forty years of the transition period.*

Toward the end of that period, Israel was urged, *“See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. His voice then shook the earth; but now he has promised, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.’ This phrase, ‘Yet once more,’ indicates the removal of what is shaken, as of what has been made, in order that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to*

God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:25-29). The replacement of the old physical system by the new spiritual kingdom was very nearly completed (perfected, fulfilled) when Hebrews was written.

Peter makes use of this hyperbolic, apocalyptic language in his epistle in dealing with those who were questioning the imminent coming of the Lord. *“They deliberately ignore this fact, that by the word of God heavens existed long ago, and an earth formed out of water and by means of water, through which the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist have been stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. ... But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be kindled and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire! But according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells”* (2 Peter 3). The “new heavens and new earth” of Isaiah were near fulfillment. Peter’s readers were waiting for this to transpire (v. 14). Thus Peter ends his message for all time.

John, however, gives us another view of the spiritual counterpart to the earthly in beautiful and symbolic language. *“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away”*” (Rev. 21:1-4; The description continues through 22:5).

Commonly, we think of this as a description of the after-life in heaven; however, John told his readers that these things “*must soon take place*” (22:6), and he assured them that three times in this setting Jesus declared, “*I am coming soon*” (22:7, 12, 20). Upon Peter’s confession in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus promised to build his church and to give Peter the keys of the kingdom (Matt. 16:13-19). In that setting (16:27-28) Jesus assured them, “*For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.*” In his Olivet discourse recorded in Matthew 24, Jesus informs them of his coming in judgment against the holy city. “*Then the end will come*” (v. 14). No longer the “last days,” but the end. Using the cataclysmic expressions of Isaiah and Joel, he declared that the sun and the moon would be darkened and the stars would fall from heaven. That was not a prediction of events thousands of years in the future, but in the lifetime of some of his listeners. “*So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away*” (v.29-35).

His words were demonstrated to be true. The old Jerusalem with its earthly system was to give way to the spiritual kingdom associated with the new heavens and new earth. “*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling of God is with man, etc.’*” (Rev.21 & 22).

God came to dwell with us. We are the temple of his Spirit. We are the “rooms in the Father’s house” (“mansions?” of John 14) that Jesus prepared. This is a picture of restoration of Edenic paradise with man being brought back into forgiven fellowship with God. Any fear of another fall bringing death is dispelled by the gift of life through Christ

who took away the cause of death. Jesus amazed and challenged Martha (and us!) with “*whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?*” (John 11:26). Those in Christ have eternal life, not of body but of spirit. Eventually the spirit will leave the limiting body of flesh behind and put on immortality to exist forever with God who is Spirit.

Rather than laboriously “marching to Zion”, let us treasure living in the Holy City of restored life in Christ. (1-1-2001) []

