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Isaiah 54:11-17

16th Message

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# THE BIRTH OF A NEW AGE: A NEW CITY

*SERIES: A NEW SERVANT, A NEW COVENANT, A NEW AGE*

One of my dreams as a young Christian was to visit Jerusalem. By God's grace I have had opportunity to fulfill my dream, and I count it one of the most memorable experiences in my life to have tasted the charm of Jerusalem.

A number of things enhance the splendor of this great Middle Eastern city: its long history of glorious relationships; its 4000-year history of thriving education; and its prophetic hope of a secure place where God would establish his rule. And, of course, Jerusalem was unmatched in its glory. It was the crown jewel set in God's hand, his choice for Zion, the temple and the Shekinah glory. Here, generations of fathers taught their sons the sacred texts. In fact, the famous Dead Sea Scrolls, dating from the time of Jesus, are housed in a museum in the city today. The very text which we will be studying, Isaiah 54, is unrolled and on display in a round room in the basement of the building.

During my visit, our tour guide was a government official and a scholar, a former military man who had fought in the Six Day War in 1967. He knew the details of all the battles and skirmishes, and his passion for Jerusalem was obvious. When we came into the city on the first evening, the sun was setting, casting yellow hues against the white stone buildings. It was a glorious sight. We found it hard to argue with our guide's assessment, "Here is the greatest city in the world." When we were settled in our hotel and we began to explore Jerusalem, however, that glory began to tarnish a little. The tension we felt on all sides overshadowed the relationships, security and zest for learning we had expected to encounter. Three-quarters of the city was off limits due to a strike by Arab workers, and several incidents of violence broke out. I visited the university, expecting to find students filled with a sense of life and knowledge of the Scriptures, but I was sorely disappointed. Where was the glorious Jerusalem the prophets wrote about? I wondered, the city of which the prophet Isaiah said,

**"A nation which knows you not will run to you,  
Because of the LORD your God, even the Holy One of Israel;  
For He has glorified you." (Isa 55:5)**

We have been studying the marvelous Servant Songs from the book of Isaiah, and we discovered that the prophet records in them a detailed description of the life of Jesus Christ, written 700 years before his incarnation. We have looked at his atoning death on the cross, and his glorious resurrection from the tomb. In Isaiah 54, we heard the shout of joy uttered at the new age which the Messiah would introduce: a new seed, a new land, and a New Covenant, whose glory far surpassed the old order. In our text today, the prophet speaks of a New City to demonstrate that what Jesus accomplished by his death and resurrection not only fulfilled the Old Covenant, but it far surpassed Israel's grandest dream. The splendor of this New City would be such that nations would run to her to be taught by the Messiah, and everyone would dwell in peace under his own fig tree, with none to make them afraid (Mic 4).

In our text, Isaiah sets out three qualities which will make this city great: its splendor, its love of learning, and its security.

## I. The future splendor of the New Jerusalem (54:11-12)

### A. The backdrop of its future splendor (54:11a)

**"O afflicted one, storm-tossed and not comforted,  
Behold, I will set your stones in antimony."**

Isaiah begins by contrasting the future glory of Zion and her people with her dark past, when she was battered relentlessly by the storm of God's raging wrath. Just as a jeweler displays a diamond against a black velvet background, so the prophet introduces his theme by comparing the city's future with her painful past. We catch a glimpse of that past in chapter 51:

**Rouse yourself! Rouse yourself! Arise O Jerusalem,  
You who have drunk from the LORD's hand the cup of His anger;  
The chalice of reeling you have drained to the dregs...  
Your sons have fainted,  
They lie helpless at the head of every street,  
Like an antelope in a net,  
Full of the wrath of the LORD,  
The rebuke of your God. (Isa 51:17, 20)**

Against that dark backdrop Isaiah says that God will lay precious stones in *antimony*. The Hebrew word translated antimony refers to a black mineral powder which was used by Middle Eastern women as a cosmetic to increase the brilliance of their eyes by darkening the eyelids. In this context, antimony refers to a dark mortar used to set off the brilliance of precious stones. In Romania last year as I was teaching this very text, I noticed that just behind where we were gathered stood a building constructed of white stones set in black mortar—a perfect illustration for my text. Perhaps the idea here in Isaiah is that the splendor of the city to come will not only be glorious in comparison to its dark past of 586 BC, when it was destroyed, but the New City will be glorious by contrast to the dark world in which it is newly constructed—so glorious in comparison to the dark world of death and idolatry, in fact, that nations will long to be part of its community.

### B. The new material of its splendor: Precious stones! (54:11b-12)

**"And I will lay your foundation in sapphires.  
Moreover, I will make your battlements of rubies,  
And your gates of crystal,  
And your entire wall of precious stones."**

This would be especially meaningful to the captives in Babylon, "where Nebuchadnezzar said he had erected such and such a building in precious stones; mention is often made in particular of the unknown stone, that is lapis lazuli or azure stone. In actual fact, of course, what came in question were perfectly ordinary bricks overlaid with blue glass paste" (Claus Westermann). Nebuchadnezzar used a paste to cover the clay bricks. Like the Babylonian religions, his beautiful buildings were phony! In contrast to idolatrous Babylon, the New Jerusalem will be constructed with authentic precious gems, eternal in value, and splendid in beauty in their ability to reflect light.

No expense will be spared in the New Jerusalem. In contrast to Old Jerusalem, where gems were used only in the temple area, these materials are used throughout the entire city to form the foundations, walls, towers and gates.

### C. What are these stones?

There is a hint in text as to what these stones are. Isaiah writes, "I will set your stones in antimony." This verb is not the normal word used for the work of a stone mason or a jeweler. Usually, this word is used of shepherds who cause their sheep to lie down to feed (Jer 33:12; Ps 23:2; Ezek 34:15). Thus, the stones referred to by Isaiah are a poetic description of

sheep! Here are two examples of how the word is used in the OT: “There shall again be in this place which is waste, without man or beast, and in all its cities, a habitation of shepherds who *cause* their flocks to rest” (Jer 33:12); “He *makes me lie down* in green pastures; He leads me beside waters of rest” (Ps 23:2).

The NT is even more explicit. There we discover that the New Jerusalem is a city built of “*living stones*” of which Christ himself in the cornerstone (Eph 2:20). The foundations of the New City are the twelve apostles, signifying that every life in the city is built upon the apostles’ teaching concerning Christ. On these foundations the city is constructed with a multitude of *living stones* (1 Pet 2:4-8) which includes both Jews and Gentiles. Picking up the same theme in Ephesians, the apostle Paul writes, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the *cornerstone*, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit” (Eph 2:19-22). And here is what the apostle Peter wrote concerning these living stones: “And coming to Him as to a *living stone*, rejected by men, but choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as *living stones*, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:4-5).

The final revelation of the splendor of this city is given in Revelation 21, when the completed city descends from heaven: “And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband...having the glory of God. Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper. It had a great and high wall, with twelve gates...and the wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb...And the nations shall walk by its light, and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it” (Rev 21:2, 11-12, 14, 24). The glory of this New City is not blue-glazed stones, nor is it diamonds or rubies; it is the glory of its people whose beauty reflects the life of the indwelling Christ. That is the New City whose glory shines brighter than the sun.

#### D. Implications for City-dwellers

The first implication of this text, I feel, is that Christians ought to be encouraged by having the right perspective. Though we live in a fallen, evil world we need to remind ourselves daily that God is building his New City in the midst of this world. The darker the backdrop, of course, the more beautiful his church appears. When we travel to places like Indonesia, Romania, the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico, etc., we discover that where the world has nothing to offer, the church is most glorious. A friend of mine looked rather glum a few days ago, so I asked him what was the matter. “Life is kind of tough when you are trying to change the world,” he said. I had to remind him that this world is a mere vapor and one day it will all fade away, but that God’s city endures forever. This perspective should take away our fear and timidity and make us bold, confident witnesses for his name.

Second, we should be focused. If God’s great work in this age is to build this city of living stones, this should also be our focus. Therefore, let us be like the first century disciples who did not invest in the earthly Jerusalem. How vain would such investments prove when the city was destroyed by the Roman legions in AD 70! The apostles invested instead in a city whose architect and builder is God. Our focus should always be on the lives of men and women, not on buildings, programs, budgets or other externals. I have appreciated the fact that the elders of PBC have always had this as their priority. A mere 8% of our budget goes into our buildings; the rest is invested in people. Even now as we wrestle with problems of Sunday School space, parking, etc., their primary concern is with the living stones who make up the congregation, not with peripheral matters.

Isaiah sees the glory of a New Jerusalem, set against the dark backdrop of Israel’s past suffering and the darkness of the evil world. The splendor of the city is highlighted by its new building materials—“*living precious stones*”—which reflect the brilliant light of the Savior forever.

Next, the prophet writes of its education.

## II. The future education in the new Jerusalem (54:13)

**“And all your sons [or builders] will be taught of the LORD:  
And the well-being [peace] of your sons will be great.”**

### A. All sons are personally tutored by the Lord

Our education system in California is in a state of crisis. Each year, 200,000 new students enter the system, thousands of whom come from other countries and other states. The whole state languishes under such heavy debt that some school systems, like Richmond on the other side of the Bay, have had to close down their operations due to lack of funds. Even those that are in full operation probably don’t rate more than a ‘D’ grade. The future looks bleak for our schools.

By contrast how does God accomplish the task of education in his new city? In OT times, God’s curriculum was accomplished through mediators, peculiar people—priests, prophets, and wise men, who had the Spirit upon them. Under the inspiration of the Spirit, these men then taught the masses how to walk in the ways of the Lord, passing down the traditions of the fathers and giving forth new revelations for their day. But, at best, the results were minimal; a mere remnant was affected. Thus, each Jew had to exhort his brother “Know the Lord!” Now, however, in the days following the coming of the Servant, the Spirit will be given to all, without measure (Acts 2:17); and, according to Jeremiah “they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them” (Jer 31:34). How very different from our method of educating our children! All who believe will be taught by the Father, personally and intimately, every day, just as the Servant himself was:

**The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of disciples,  
That I might know how to answer the weary one with a word.  
He awakens me morning by morning,  
He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple. (Isa 50:4)**

That same relationship is now made available to every son and daughter in the kingdom. The Spirit is given without measure to all believers, thereby guaranteeing the well-being of the city. No one has to rely on a secondhand education. The Spirit of God himself teaches us, as John wrote: “And as for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need for anyone to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide in Him” (1 John 2:27). What more can we ask for?

We see this point illustrated with the Samaritan woman (John 4) who had an intimate conversation with Jesus, and afterwards ran to her village to tell everyone she had met the Messiah. In response, the villagers went out to meet Jesus for themselves. Later, they said their impressions of him were no longer based on what the woman said, “for we have come to see and hear for ourselves that he is the Messiah.” There is no secondhand education in the New Covenant. If your experience of Jesus is secondhand, based on the testimony of others, don’t wait. Enter into this city, make Christ Lord of your life, and his Spirit will teach you and guide you. My father paid \$20,000 for my education at one of the best universities in the country, but I have to admit that I remember very little of what I learned during those four years. While I was in school, however, I was taught the Scriptures without charge through some godly teachers, and the Holy Spirit began to give me a heart of wisdom. And I remember everything I learned in that free education; it is forever etched in my memory!

### B. This guarantees their peace in the city

Because of the work of the Servant and the gift of the Spirit, all the workmen in the city enjoy a state of peace. The Hebrew concept of peace

(shalom) includes the ideas of well-being resulting from the victory of righteousness over evil. Paul refers to this in Galatians: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal 3:13-14). Righteousness having been established by the Servant, his New City endures in unshakable peace, harmony and well-being.

### C. Implications for City-dwellers

Since we all possess the gift of the Spirit in God’s New City we need to encourage all to be co-workers with Christ, each using his or her spiritual gifts to build this New City to the glory of God. Pastors and leaders must not dominate the flock; they must set the saints free to minister through dependence on the Lord. Paul instructs us that as we are incorporated into this New City with its new foundations, we become the new workers who build up the city. And second, we must be careful how we build in this city which is constructed of precious material. We are warned that we must be careful to build with “*gold, silver, precious stones,*” not with “*wood, hay and stubble,*” which shall not withstand the fire (1 Cor 3:10-15).

What a great day Isaiah sees! As a result of the Servant’s securing righteousness for all the inhabitants, the gift of the Spirit is given in full measure. Now all the sons in this city enjoy intimacy with the Lord, an intimacy that earlier was granted only to kings and prophets. And unlike Old Jerusalem, whose security could always be threatened if a king turned from God’s law, this New City will enjoy lasting peace.

Next, Isaiah addresses the security of this New City.

## III. The future security of the New Jerusalem (54:14-17)

### A. The basis of their security: Gifted righteousness (54:14a)

**“In righteousness you will be established;  
You will be far from oppression, for you will not fear.”**

Security has always been Jerusalem’s most pressing problem. Although the city is naturally fortified by three valleys, the northern approach has no natural defenses, and this has always been the point at which the city was invaded. At the time of Isaiah, Jerusalem faced the threat of the Assyrians. In response, Hezekiah increased taxes to build his defense structure and his famous tunnel (which you can still wade through if you visit the city). But, according to the OT, the security of Jerusalem depended not on fortifications, military might or foreign alliances, but solely on the righteousness of its King. Thus, in the very significant text of Deuteronomy 17:14-20, called the *Law of the King*, God instructs all future kings to put aside worldly security (in foreign alliances and trust in chariots) and seek the Lord by putting his word in their hearts: “Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or the left; in order that he and his sons may continue long in his kingdom in the midst of Israel” (Deut 17:18-20). With the coming of the Messiah, however, the city finally had a King who fulfilled God’s law with his whole heart. In his work on the cross, he imparted his righteousness to his people as a gift, and the city he builds stands secure.

**My Servant, will justify the many,  
As he will bear their iniquities. (Isa 53:11)**

### B. The result of their security: Freedom from fear (54:14b)

**“And from terror, for it will not come near you.”**

The New Jerusalem, built on the righteousness of the Servant, will be surrounded with walls of protection erected by the Lord himself. Thus,

Israel will no longer live in fear of terror (as from the Assyrians of the past), or oppression (as in the Babylonian exile). Jesus provided this protection for his disciples during his lifetime (John 17:12), then he promised that the Spirit would provide this same ministry for them when he himself departed (John 16:7). Nothing, not even death itself, could separate them from his glorious city (Rom 8:35-39).

### C. The new battles: Guaranteed victories (54:15-17a)

**If anyone fiercely assails you it will not be from Me,  
Whoever assails you will fall because of you. (54:15)**

Though the city is being rebuilt, and it remains secure, there are still battles to be fought, says Isaiah. The outcome is secure, for three reasons. First, there has been a dramatic change of relationship. Under the Old Covenant, security was based on Israel’s faithfulness. And when Israel refused to remain loyal to the covenant, God removed the sword of holy war from them and gave it to her enemies to execute judgment on his people. This was described by the prophet Amos as “The Day of the LORD” (Amos 5:18). It would be a day of terror, not triumph, since God would be fighting against his own people. Isaiah wrote,

**But they rebelled,  
And grieved His Holy Spirit;  
Therefore, He turned Himself to become their enemy,  
He fought against them. (Isa 63:10)**

But now, under the New Covenant, God says he will never again war against his people because through the cross of Christ there was created a new people who have the law of God written on their hearts (2 Cor 3:2-6). What good news! Think of this truth when your boss rips into you tomorrow at work; or a family member gives you a bad time; or when you receive a hate letter in the mail. You can say with assurance, “This is not from God. He is not behind this.” That is the New Covenant.

Second, our new security is based on the nature of holy war.

**“Behold, I Myself have created the smith, who blows the fire of  
coals,  
And brings out a weapon for its work;  
And I have created the destroyer to ruin.” (54:16)**

In the age to come, God is still the sovereign commander of all holy war. He creates the one who makes the weapons, and the one who wields the weapons—he controls the result, in other words. The outcome of holy war is under his sovereignty, therefore victory is guaranteed.

**“No weapon that is formed against you shall prosper;  
And every tongue that accuses you in judgment you will condemn.”  
(54:17a)**

God’s Servant was killed by slander and the sword, but the weapons could not prosper. Rather, the Servant prospered, and was highly exalted by being raised from the dead.

### D. The basis of their security: Gifted righteousness (54:17b)

**“This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD,  
And their vindication is from Me,” declares the LORD.**

The destiny of the Servant will be the legacy of all of God’s servants in the New Jerusalem. This is well illustrated in the life of Stephen, the first martyr of the church. While being stoned, “He gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God’” (Acts 7:55-56).

There we have the New City—glorious in its relationships, with a personal tutorial by the Holy Spirit for every inhabitant, and a security that outlives death. Rejoice, all you inhabitants of the New Jerusalem!

### E. Implications for City-dwellers

First, we should fight the right battles. We must always remember that God’s City stands secure, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. It is the devil’s strategy to cause us to feel so threatened that, drunk with anxiety, we fight our battles with the world’s weapons, doing more dam-

age than good as a result (John 18:10-11). Here, however, is Paul's descriptions of the weapons we should use: "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses" (2 Cor 10:3-4). And, "Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:10-12).

Second, we should have deep feelings of humility. I am overwhelmed with the sense of privilege of being part of this New City. I once dreamed of visiting Jerusalem, but now I am privileged to be part of the New Jerusalem, with its glorious relationships, being personally tutored by God, and having a sense of complete security. By stark contrast, how many Jews have given their blood for the earthly Jerusalem! Yet we Gentiles have been grafted into the New City. Words cannot express my sense of wonder and appreciation at what God has done in Christ.

I will close by reading a poem which I have dedicated to a friend of mine, Avron Isaac Canty, a Jew, born in Poland in 1911. As a young boy, he experienced the bitter pains of persecution and anti-Semitism. His life was spared because he was concealed under the floorboards of the basement in the synagogue he attended. Overhead, he heard the shouts of violence and anger directed at his people as the building was set on fire. He was sent to Montana, where he graduated at the top of his class. He was offered a scholarship to the university, but he refused it because there was no Jewish spiritual life there. Then, because there were not enough Jews in the area to warrant a rabbi and a synagogue, he became the rabbi. He remained faithful to the Torah and the readings all the days of his life. A few years ago, I met him through his son, Earle. Recently, even though he was in failing health, Avron still wanted to go to the synagogue, and I accompanied him. I watched him as he bound the Scriptures to his hands and to his head. I marveled at his prayers. And I wondered, too. Who am I that I should inherit his dream, while he endured the pain? He died last week, and I lost a friend. I wrote this poem, Avron's Dream, based on our text, to express my appreciation for being in this New City.

Avron's Dream  
Isaiah 55:11-17

O Avron, you were a Jew  
Of that chosen race, Israel's seed,  
Formed in the womb,  
To walk in Torah.

The prophets taught you to dream,  
Of Messiah, a restored land,  
A new city, Jerusalem,  
Where the wolf lies down with the lamb.

But life crushed the dream.  
Foolish fires fueled by hatred  
Flamed in the Polish countryside,  
And charred your synagogue with blood.

But the God of Abram  
Placed you under the rafters,  
Hid you in the shadow of His wings,  
While you quivered under the consuming flames.

God plucked you from the fire,  
Sent you to an unknown land.  
You spread out to the right and to the left  
But where were your people?

You took your tent and altar,  
And beloved Torah,  
And in that strange land  
You called upon the name of the Lord.

That Word you never forgot,  
And the pain,  
You never understood  
While you walked this earth.

I met you in the last days, through Isaac your son.  
I watched you read the sacred scrolls,  
I heard you speak of Israel's pain,  
I marvelled at your prayers.

O Avron, I loved you.  
Who am I, a goy,  
To be loved by your Messiah,  
And grafted in to your tree.

Who am I to know, your Isaac,  
The son you thought was dead,  
But came to life on Moriah,  
Your dead son, my brother?

Why should your Torah,  
Bound to your head and wrist,  
Be written on my heart,  
Through the blessing of Abraham, the Spirit?

Why should your city,  
Whose desolation etched your heart in grief,  
Be my dream, my delight, my security,  
My glory, all my days in every place?

Were you hardened,  
That I could see?  
Should you be cut off,  
That others be grafted in?

Should your pain, be my joy?  
May it never be!  
I am not worthy.  
And it says, "He is able to graft you in again."

O Avron, in the resurrection of the just,  
Would that God permit me  
I would lift your eyelids,  
And remove the veil.

I would take you to the New City,  
Not mine but yours,  
To see what you thought had died  
But lives in glory greater than any dream.

On that day, you will understand  
The pain, the blood, the fire;  
And it will not be a strange land,  
For you will be home.

O Avron, may you see your dream  
Next year in Jerusalem! Amen.

In Memory of Avron Isaac Canty  
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