Outside the Gate

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On Hebrews 11–13, the City That Cain Built, the City That Abraham Looked For, and the Three Figures Who Prayed for Cities They Loved From Outside the Walls

The Spirits of Our Cities

I have spent a substantial portion of this year traveling to American cities for work. Miami. Charlotte. San Diego. Las Vegas. Boise. A Google conference in San Francisco. Plus the in-between airports and short stops that the calendar required. And one of the things you cannot avoid noticing, when you go from city to city across this country, is that each city has a particular spirit.

San Francisco and Silicon Valley pulse with the spirit of the human mind. The wealthiest people on the planet have emerged from this region because of the human capacity to conceive an idea, articulate a concept, build the engineering scaffolding underneath it, and convert it into a multi-billion-dollar enterprise. The architecture, the cultural energy, the pace of the conversations, all express the elevation of human cognition. It is impressive, and underneath the impressive surface, you cannot avoid seeing the surrounding pain. The streets of San Francisco hold a substantial population of people gripped by drug addiction, particularly the contemporary synthetic compounds that produce something close to a zombie-like effect, leaving people unable to even move at times. The mind that built the city has not been able to address the brokenness within it.

San Diego pulses with a different spirit. Everyone there appears to be physically fit. Whether the proximity to the Navy and Marine bases shapes the local culture, or whether the climate produces a particular outdoor-activity orientation, the city's energy is organized around the human body. And alongside the physical-fitness culture there is, as the geography also reveals, a substantial strip-club industry, the same emphasis on the body deployed in a less wholesome register. Body-centered spirit, in both its disciplined and its exploitative forms.

Nashville pulses with the spirit of the human voice. The creative-poetic spark that makes a city a recording-capital is everywhere: the songwriting culture, the studios, the way ordinary conversations carry musical cadences that you do not encounter elsewhere. The voice that imagines and articulates and sings is the dominant gift in the surrounding atmosphere.

And as I traveled through these cities, I have to confess something. I did not pray for them. The whole time, watching the brokenness of San Francisco, watching the body-centered culture of San Diego, watching the soul-emptiness underneath the impressive surface of every place I visited; I did not pray. I did not think to pray. The suffering of humanity around me did not grip me in the way that, in hindsight, it should have.

There but for the Grace of God

And underneath my failure to pray was an interior reflex I want to disown directly here. The reflex was the phrase, "there but for the grace of God go I." As if God's grace was available for me but not for them. As if the line between my situation and theirs were a line that the grace of God respected as a permanent boundary.

I am trying to remove that phrase from my vocabulary. It places the wrong emphasis. It treats grace as a resource that has been allocated to my particular tribe and withheld from theirs. The Apostle Paul's framework in Romans 5, which we will return to at the end of this chapter, is

exactly the opposite. “Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more” (Romans 5:20). Grace is not a resource God has rationed out to my side of the line. Grace is the actual operating mode of God’s engagement with the entire surrounding human race. And the question is not whether the people I encountered in those cities have access to grace. The question is whether anyone in their proximity will pray it down on them.

The Hands and the Voice

And I have been thinking, in connection with all this, about what specifically distinguishes humanity from the rest of the animal creation.

A brother recently presented to me a thought about Genesis 27 that I want to develop here briefly. When Jacob went in to steal the blessing from his brother Esau, he covered his arms with goat-hair to mimic Esau’s hairiness. Isaac, blind and discerning by touch and sound, felt the hairy arms and was reassured. But Isaac also heard the voice, and the voice, despite the disguised hands, gave away the substitution:

> So he came near to him, and he kissed him; and Isaac smelled the smell of his clothing, and blessed him, and said: “Surely, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field which the Lord has blessed.” Then Isaac said, “Come near now and kiss me, my son.” And he came near and kissed him; and he smelled the smell of his clothing . . . And Jacob came near to Isaac his father; and he felt him and said, “The voice is Jacob’s voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau.” (Genesis 27:27, 22, in part)

The voice is Jacob’s voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau. Isaac names the two distinguishing markers of human identity in the same sentence. The voice and the hands. The two capacities that mark out the human creature within the wider order of created life.

Hands. Our ability to perform fine motor work. To build, to construct, to manipulate materials with precision, to produce objects of beauty and utility. The animal creation possesses some functional analogues to hands, but nothing in the animal kingdom approaches the dexterity and constructive capacity of the human hand.

Voice. Our ability to speak, to articulate, to imagine something and then bring it into existence by naming it. The voice carries the creative-poetic spark that makes us, in this respect specifically, image-bearers of the God whose own creative act in Genesis 1 was performed by speech. Animals communicate, but no animal genuinely speaks. The voice that names and creates is the divine echo within us.

And the identical-twin diagnostic helps make the point. At my workplace I have known a pair of identical twins, Kenny and Benny, for over twenty years. Almost no one in the office can tell them apart. They are visually indistinguishable. But I can identify them instantly by voice. Phone calls, distant conversations, mumbled greetings in passing, the voice carries the identity in a way the appearance does not. Even with identical twins, the voice is the unique-identifier. Isaac, blind and operating only by touch and sound, would have caught the deception immediately if Jacob had not been counting on Isaac's failing senses to overlook the voice's distinctiveness.

The cities I was traveling through this year are the products of human hands and human voices. San Francisco was built by the hands and voices that imagine technology. San Diego is built around the disciplined human body. Nashville is built around the human voice's musical capacity. Every city is the externalized projection of what its builders' hands and voices could produce.

And the point of acknowledging the marvel of human construction is precisely to identify what the marvel cannot deliver. As impressive as our cities are, they cannot be the city God is building. The cities of human construction can only reflect the partial character of their builders. They cannot reflect the full character of the One who originally gave us the hands and the voices.

Faith Is the Substance

And it is with this acknowledgment that the writer of Hebrews opens his great eleventh chapter:

> Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good testimony. By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible. (Hebrews 11:1–3)

Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. The visible world we are walking through is not the entirety of the actual world. There is a substantive but invisible reality alongside the visible, and faith is the apparatus by which we engage that reality.

When we look around and see chaos, faith sees a future world that God has ordained, where there is order, where everything that has been lost in our life is recovered. When we look at ourselves and see brokenness and failure, faith sees what God has begun to construct within us. The faith-vision is not a denial of the visible. The faith-vision is a perception of the larger substantive structure within which the visible is sitting.

And by faith, the writer continues, we understand that the universe was framed by the word of God, that what is seen was not made from things visible. Even contemporary cosmology gestures at something similar. The cosmic background radiation, the postulated Big Bang, the matter that emerged from what looks, by physical standards, like almost nothing, all of it bears

the philosophical signature of invisible structure preceding visible manifestation. The Hebrews text is making a theological version of the same observation. The visible is downstream from the invisible. The visible is the manifest projection of what was first articulated in the divine speech.

Cain's Sacrifice and Abel's Sacrifice

And then the chapter begins to name specific witnesses. *And the first witness named is Abel*:

"By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks" (Hebrews 11:4).

By faith Abel offered a more excellent sacrifice than Cain. Two brothers. Two sacrifices. Two different responses from God. And it is worth pausing here, because the sacrifice-difference is not principally about the materials involved.

God is not particularly concerned about fruits and vegetables. Hebrews 13:15 closes the same letter by saying: "Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name." The sacrifice that pleases God is, at the conclusion of Hebrews, the sacrifice of praise expressed through the human voice. Not the agricultural produce. The vocal offering of thanksgiving.

So what made Abel's sacrifice more excellent than Cain's?

Look carefully at the two offerings. Cain was a tiller of the ground (Genesis 4:2). He brought of the fruit of the ground as an offering (Genesis 4:3). His sacrifice was the product of his own labor: what he had built up by the sweat of his brow, by the work of his hands. It was the visible, tangible product of human industry. It was, in a real sense, Cain's offering of himself, a presentation of what he had been able to produce.

Abel was a keeper of sheep. He brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat (Genesis 4:4). His offering required the shedding of blood. And here is the structural difference. Abel did not produce the life of the sheep. He had protected it, kept it, watched over it, but the life of the sheep was not the product of his own labor. The life was a gift he had been given to steward. And when he offered it, he was offering something that he himself had not made.

Abel's offering was, in this sense, an offering of faith. Cain's offering was an offering of works, the works of his own hands. And the difference between the two offerings prefigures the entire later distinction between works-righteousness and faith-righteousness that the New Testament will develop at length.

The First City

And there is a striking detail that follows the sacrifice-rejection. Cain becomes furious, kills his brother, and is banished by God to wander as a fugitive on the earth (Genesis 4:8-14). And what is the very first thing Cain does after the banishment?

> Then Cain went out from the presence of the Lord and dwelt in the land of Nod on the east of Eden. And Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. And he built a city, and called the name of the city after the name of his son: Enoch. (Genesis 4:16–17)

He built a city. Let that settle for a moment. The first city in the biblical narrative is built by the first murderer, immediately after his banishment from the presence of God. The city is the cultural form Cain reaches for to compensate for the loss of the divine presence. He has been exiled from God's face; he constructs a settlement to substitute for what he can no longer access.

And the city-building impulse, from Genesis 4 forward, carries this dimension within it. The city represents human ingenuity organized against the experience of exile. It is the

construction project that says: “I have been displaced from the original garden, so I will build a substitute that meets my needs without requiring the divine presence I have lost access to.”

Now hold this against the picture of Abraham that appears in Hebrews 11. Listen:

> By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. (Hebrews 11:8–10)

Abraham dwelt in tents. He had access to the land of promise, he was living inside it, and yet he chose to remain a tent-dweller rather than a city-builder. Why? “For he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” Abraham refused to invest in city-building because the city he was actually looking for was not one he could construct with his hands. The city he was waiting for would be built by God, not by him. And he refused to settle for a Cain-style city, a human substitute for divine presence, when the actual city, whose architect and builder was God, was still in construction.

Three generations of tent-dwelling (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) all heirs of the same promise, all refusing the city-building shortcut, all waiting for the city God himself was constructing. And the writer of Hebrews holds Abraham up as the prototype of the faith-life specifically because of this refusal. Abraham knew what every faithful person eventually knows, that the city we build with our own hands cannot deliver what only the city God builds can deliver.

Mount Sinai and Mount Zion

And then the twelfth chapter of Hebrews develops the contrast more explicitly:

> For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore. (For they could not endure what was commanded: “And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow.” And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.”) But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel. (Hebrews 12:18–24)

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched. That is the contrast. Sinai was visible, tangible, terrifyingly physical. The voice of God thundered out of audible storm-clouds. The people at the base of the mountain begged that no more words be spoken to them, because they could not bear the auditory weight of what they were hearing. Sinai was the visible, tangible, hands-on Mount of the old covenant. And it could not deliver what the new covenant offers.

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. This is the city Abraham had been waiting for. And the architecture of the heavenly Jerusalem includes “the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven.” The Greek word translated “church of the firstborn” picks up the priestly category from Leviticus, where the firstborn, represented historically by the tribe of Levi, were designated as the priestly class. When you come into the kingdom of God, you become part of the priesthood of all

believers. And the priest's job, by the Old Testament pattern, was two-fold. The priest entered the holy place to pray for the people on their behalf, advocating before God for their forgiveness. And the priest also faced God in communion, mediating the divine presence to the people.

The intermediary role belongs to us now. Not to a separate professional priestly class, but to every member of the church of the firstborn. And we have come to that role through the blood of sprinkling, "which speaks better things than that of Abel."

Blood That Speaks Better Things

Hold this phrase carefully. "The blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel." Abel's blood spoke. It cried out from the ground after Cain's act of violence (Genesis 4:10). And what Abel's blood cried was the cry of injustice: the cry for vindication, the cry for divine attention to what had been done to him.

Jesus's blood also speaks. And it speaks better things.

Let me try to articulate what "better" means here. Abel's sacrifice was a sacrifice for himself. Abel offered the firstborn of his flock to address his own standing before God. And Abel's blood, after Cain killed him, cried for vindication of his own injustice. Cain's sacrifice was also a sacrifice for himself, the offering of his own labor to establish his own standing.

Both brothers, in their different modes, were operating in a sacrifice-for-self register. And it is worth pausing here to ask, what would have happened if Abel's sacrifice had been a sacrifice for his brother rather than only for himself?

I am going to leave that hanging, because the chapter cannot fully answer it. But the question casts the rest of the narrative in a different light. If Abel had offered his sacrifice on behalf of Cain, interceding for his brother who had brought the lesser offering, perhaps the entire

trajectory of fratricide and city-building exile would have looked different. We do not know. But the question is worth holding.

And what Jesus's blood says better than Abel's is exactly this. Jesus's blood was shed not for himself but for others. "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9). The blood that was shed was redemptive in a direction Abel's blood was not. Abel's blood cried for vindication. Jesus's blood cried for forgiveness. Abel's blood addressed the injustice done to him. Jesus's blood addressed the injustice he himself was absorbing on behalf of his killers.

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). That is the speech of the better-than-Abel blood. And that is the speech we are called into as members of the church of the firstborn. Not the cry for vindication, though that cry is legitimate. The cry for forgiveness on behalf of the surrounding world that still does not know its right hand from its left.

Outside the Gate

And the thirteenth chapter of Hebrews names the structural location from which the church of the firstborn does its priestly work:

> For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come. Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. (Hebrews 13:11–16)

Jesus suffered outside the gate. Therefore let us go forth to him, outside the camp, bearing his reproach. That is the structural location of the church of the firstborn. Not inside the gate of the surrounding city, where the cultural privileges accumulate. Outside the gate, where the sacrifices were burned, where the unclean were sent, where the city-builders did not want their visible economy interrupted by the smell of slaughter.

We are called to that outside-the-gate position. And the work we are called to from that position is the work of priestly intercession for the cities we have just left. We are not called to retreat from the cities into private separation. We are called to go outside the gate of each city precisely so that we can pray for the city from outside it. The intercession requires the geographic location. The priestly advocacy requires standing at a distance from the city's surrounding ideology while still loving the city's surrounding population.

And the writer of Hebrews names the two sacrifices we are to offer from outside the gate. The sacrifice of praise, expressed by the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. And the sacrifice of doing good and sharing with others. The vocal sacrifice and the active sacrifice. The two ways the priestly work of the church of the firstborn shows up in the surrounding world.

And one of the gravest condemnations of the contemporary church is that it has spent most of its energy accusing the people outside its walls of their wrongdoing. Railing against them. Boycotting them. Constructing the cathartic emotional satisfaction of being on the right side of an enforced moral boundary. We forget that we were once the same people we are now railing against. We forget that the blood of Jesus had to cover us in our own ways of being. And the cathartic emotional satisfaction of accusation is, on inspection, a substitute for the actual priestly work we have been commissioned to do.

Three Praying Men Outside the City

Now let me show you three figures from Scripture who modeled the outside-the-gate work of priestly advocacy for cities they loved. Three men. Three cities. Three patterns of intercession.

Abraham Outside of Sodom

The first is Abraham. When Lot had pitched his tent toward Sodom and eventually become a citizen of it (Genesis 13:12, 19:1), Abraham remained outside, a tent-dwelling stranger in the land of promise. And when God revealed to Abraham that the cry of Sodom's wickedness had reached him and that judgment was coming, Abraham did exactly what an outside-the-gate priest is commissioned to do:

> And Abraham came near and said, "Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there were fifty righteous within the city; would You also destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous that were in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:23–25)

Abraham advocated for Sodom from outside its walls. He did not condemn. He did not point fingers. He did not pray that the vials of judgment be poured out more swiftly. He interceded. "What if there are fifty righteous? What about forty-five? Forty? Thirty? Twenty? Ten?" And each time, God said, for the sake of the small remaining righteous, I will not destroy the city.

The Jewish tradition reads this passage carefully and notices something. By the time you get to Genesis 19, Lot is identified as having sons-in-law plural: implying at least two married

daughters with their husbands, four people. He has at least two sons, that brings the count to six. He has two unmarried daughters (Genesis 19:8), eight. Plus Lot and his wife, ten. Ten people. The exact threshold Abraham had bargained God down to. And in Jewish synagogue tradition, ten is the quorum required to constitute a worshiping community. If Lot had been able to preserve his own family, the ten people who would have constituted the minimum righteous community in Sodom, the entire city could have been spared.

Lot could not save his family. The compromises that had moved him from pitching toward Sodom to dwelling in Sodom to sitting at Sodom's gate had eroded his moral authority within his own household. When the angels arrived and Lot tried to warn his sons-in-law, "he seemed to be joking to them" (Genesis 19:14). The sons-in-law did not take him seriously. They stayed in the city and were destroyed with it.

But the priestly advocacy belonged to Abraham, the outside-the-gate stranger, not to Lot, the compromised insider. Abraham could pray for the city Lot could not save. Abraham's foreignness, his refusal of city-citizenship, was what gave him the moral location from which to intercede. The lesson is uncomfortable for the contemporary church. Insiders cannot save the city they have assimilated into. Outsiders, with the priestly authority of refused-citizenship, can pray for the cities that insiders cannot save.

And remember earlier in Genesis 14, when the four kings from the east had taken Sodom captive along with Lot, Abraham mounted a rescue operation, pursued the invading army, recovered everything, and refused to take any spoils from the king of Sodom:

> I have raised my hand to the Lord, God Most High, the Possessor of heaven and earth, that I will take nothing, from a thread to a sandal strap, and that I will not take anything that is yours, lest you should say, 'I have made Abram rich.' (Genesis 14:22–23)

Abraham knew Sodom was wicked when he rescued it. He did not condition the rescue on Sodom's righteousness. He did not refuse to deliver them because they did not deserve deliverance. He blessed them, rescued them, and then refused to derive any wealth from them, because his wealth would come from the God who had called him, not from the cities he had refused to be assimilated into. The outside-the-gate priest blesses the city he prays for without becoming financially dependent on it.

Jonah Outside of Nineveh

The second figure is Jonah. And Jonah is the cautionary tale within the chapter, the figure who occupies the right structural location (outside the city) but with the wrong interior disposition.

Jonah was sent to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, which had been brutalizing Jonah's own nation. His vocational instruction was to proclaim judgment, that the surrounding city might repent. His own personal preference was that they not repent, because he hated them, and he wanted them destroyed.

The story narrates his attempt to flee the assignment. He went down to Joppa, down into a ship, down into the hold of the ship, down into a sleep deep enough that he did not wake when the storm broke loose. And eventually, after the sailors threw him overboard, he went down further still, into the belly of a great fish, into the depths of the sea, into the lowest point a human being can be physically located. The repeated direction is down. And the down was the geographic expression of his interior unwillingness to do the priestly work he had been assigned to do.

Eventually, after the fish vomited him onto dry land, Jonah went to Nineveh. And his preaching was, by any standard, the most reluctant evangelistic effort in the entire biblical canon:

“And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day’s walk. Then he cried out and said, ‘Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’” (Jonah 3:4).

Seven words in English. Five words in the underlying Hebrew. That was the entire sermon. No mercy clause. No call to repentance. No “who knows, perhaps God may relent.” Just the announcement of impending doom delivered with such evident lack of pastoral interest that the city should have ignored it entirely.

And yet:

“So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them” (Jonah 3:5).

The whole city repented. The king came down from his throne, removed his royal robe, put on sackcloth, and let me pause on that for a moment, because I once spent some time loading burlap sacks of alfalfa pellets at a feed-and-grain operation, and after a few hours of dragging those sacks across your arms, the skin underneath is genuinely raw. Sackcloth is not a comfortable garment. It is itchy, abrasive, deliberately uncomfortable. It is the visible expression that the wearer has stopped pretending that comfort is the central organizing principle of life. The king of Nineveh put on sackcloth, sat in ashes, and issued a decree that every person and every animal in the city would fast and call out earnestly to God:

> Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish? (Jonah 3:7–9)

"Who can tell?" That phrase is what was missing from Jonah's original sermon. Jonah said: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." The king of Nineveh, with no help from the prophet, supplied the missing pastoral clause himself: "Who can tell? God may relent." The hopeful possibility had to come from the surrounding pagan king, because the prophet sent to announce the message could not bring himself to add it.

And how many people in our surrounding world are having to figure out the hopeful possibility on their own because of the distasteful behavior of the surrounding Christian witness? This is an in-house grief. Christian witness has sometimes been so soaked in judgment without mercy, so eager to announce condemnation without the corresponding clause about divine relenting, that the people we have been sent to have had to do the pastoral work for themselves. Jonah-style preaching is not the priestly intercession the church of the firstborn has been commissioned to perform.

And then watch what Jonah does next. He goes outside the city to a hillside east of Nineveh and sits down to watch what God would do. He is in the right geographical position, outside the gate, but with the wrong interior disposition. He is waiting to see judgment, not waiting to see mercy. He is hoping God will still destroy the city even though the city has repented.

"Then Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city. There he made himself a shelter and sat under it in the shade, till he might see what would become of the city" (Jonah 4:5).

And God, in his pastoral handling of Jonah, gives him a teaching moment. A plant grows up overnight to shade Jonah from the sun. Jonah is grateful for the plant. The next morning, God

appoints a worm to attack the plant; the plant withers. The sun beats down on Jonah's head, and Jonah wants to die:

> Then God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "It is right for me to be angry, even to death!" But the Lord said, "You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left, and much livestock?" (Jonah 4:9–11)

Should I not pity Nineveh? That is the closing rhetorical question of the entire book, and the book ends without an answer from Jonah. The reader is left to supply the answer. And the answer the priestly community of the firstborn is called to give is yes. God should pity the city. God does pity the city. And our work, from outside the gate, is to align our prayers with the divine pity rather than with the human resentment.

My Own Cold Heart

And here is where I have to confess my own Jonah-shaped interior.

Over the past several years, when disasters have struck populations that I do not identify with (floods, earthquakes, pestilence, famine, mass casualty events in countries whose religious traditions are not mine) I have not shed tears. I have not broken interior heart over them. I have not interceded for them. They have been, to my actual operating disposition, the other, the ones who do not have anything to do with me.

And I have to put that interior reflex into honest words to recognize how ugly it is. The reflex is something like: "Well, those were Muslims who drowned. That is just a few less people we will have to deal with." I never say that out loud. I would never tolerate someone else saying

it out loud in my hearing. I consider myself a reasonably compassionate person, and I think those who know me would describe me as compassionate.

But my actual prayer-life reveals what my public speech conceals. The fact that I did not break my heart for the people who drowned, that I did not rip my garments for the children who died in the earthquake, that I did not weep when whole populations of people I do not know suffered violence and disease and famine, the absence of grief reveals what the present grief would have evidenced about my interior orientation. I am, by the actual prayer-life diagnostic, Jonah on the hillside watching from outside the city of Nineveh, hoping the worm gets to the plant before any pity gets to me.

And the chapter cannot land its actual point without my naming this directly. The contemporary American Christian witness has sometimes been so identified with the comfort of the people inside one particular city's gate that it has lost the interior capacity to weep for the people inside other cities' gates. The Sodom outside our particular wall, the Nineveh outside our particular hillside, has not received the interior weeping it deserves from us. And I am, by my own honest admission, one of the people who has failed at exactly this priestly work.

Jesus Outside Jerusalem

And the third figure who prayed for a city from outside it is, finally, Jesus himself. Listen to how he speaks over Jerusalem:

> O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! (Matthew 23:37)

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem. Hear the brokenness in the voice. The grieving repetition of the city's name. The image of the hen who would have gathered her chicks against the coming

storm. Jesus had prayed for Jerusalem from outside her walls: He had wept over her from the Mount of Olives (Luke 19:41-44), he had warned her of the coming Roman destruction, he had repeatedly extended the gathering-under-the-wings he wanted to provide. And the city had refused.

And then, after they had rejected him, they took him outside the city to the place called the Skull and crucified him there. Outside the gate. The location the writer of Hebrews names as the structural-typological location of the sacrifice. And as he hung dying on the cross (outside the gate, bleeding out the blood that would speak better things than Abel's) he prayed:

"Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do'" (Luke 23:34).

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. The same phrase Jonah's God had used about Nineveh, they do not know their right hand from their left, Jesus now applies to the very people who are killing him. They do not know what they do. The cosmic ignorance of the surrounding population is the structural reality underneath the visible violence. And the priestly intercession from outside the gate is the prayer that the ignorance be addressed by divine forgiveness rather than by retaliatory judgment.

This is the model. Abraham praying for Sodom outside its walls, and being heard. Jonah praying reluctantly for Nineveh outside its walls, and the city being spared anyway. Jesus praying for Jerusalem from outside its walls, and the blood of his prayer reaching every nation under heaven. Three figures. Three cities. One pastoral pattern. And the pattern is the pattern the church of the firstborn has been called into.

Sing Over the City

And the appropriate response to all of this is, by Hebrews 13:15's diagnostic, the sacrifice of praise. The fruit of our lips that confesses his name.

Revelation 5 captures the song the church of the firstborn sings over the cities of this world:

> Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth." (Revelation 5:8–10)

Each elder holds a harp. That is the voice given to the redeemed. The capacity to sing. The fruit of our lips that confesses his name.

And each elder holds a golden bowl full of incense, "which are the prayers of the saints." The prayers, rising as incense before the throne. The intercession of the church of the firstborn, ascending continuously to the One who sits on the throne.

And the song they sing is the song of the multinational redemption. "You have redeemed us by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation." Not just one nation. Every nation. The cities I traveled through this year (Miami, Charlotte, San Diego, Las Vegas, Boise, San Francisco) and the cities I have never visited and never will visit, are all included in the scope of this song. Every population that has ever existed is being prayed over by the church of the firstborn through the song of Revelation 5. And our part in that song is simply to keep

singing it, from outside the gate of every city, on behalf of every population we have been placed in proximity to.

Words That Outlast Us

And the words we speak over the cities of this world have effects that outlast the moment of speaking.

I had a conversation just this weekend with someone whose life had been touched, ten, eleven, twelve, fifteen years ago, by words spoken into them by a brother in our assembly who had himself emerged from a long season of profound spiritual darkness. I had grown up with this brother. We had been in school together. He had been the popular one back then; I had not been. And he had eventually gone into very dark places: addictions, brokenness, the loss of substantial portions of his life across years of self-destruction.

And then God put him back together. Block by block. Synapse by synapse. Restoring what the locust and the cankerworm and the palmerworm had eaten (Joel 2:25). And from the restored mind and the restored life and the restored voice came words that were spoken into other lives, words this brother has long since forgotten he ever said. Words that were continuing to resonate fifteen years later in the people who had heard them.

The words we speak can enter into other lives and become restorative. They can build up. They can carry weight long after we have forgotten the moment of speaking. Do not shrink back from the work of speaking blessing over the people in your proximity. If you think for a minute that God cannot use your hands and your voice in ways that exceed what you can presently imagine, you have underestimated what God does with hands and voices that have been surrendered to him.

You can pray for the peace of Jerusalem, as Psalm 122:6 commands. You can pray for the peace of every city you have ever traveled through. You can pray for the peace of cities you will never see, populations you will never meet, brokenness you will never personally witness. The outside-the-gate priestly work does not require physical access to the city you are praying for. It requires only the surrendered voice that the indwelling Spirit can carry across whatever geographical distance separates you from the city in question.

Where Sin Abounded

And let me close with the Romans 5 framework that has reoriented my reading of all of this.

A brother in our assembly presented me, years ago, with the structural argument of Romans 5 in a way that genuinely reoriented my own reading. Listen to the conclusion of the chapter:

> Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous. Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more. (Romans 5:18–20)

Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more. That is the divine accounting in its final form. Wherever sin has reached its furthest extent, grace has reached even further. The math is not balanced. The math is asymmetric in favor of grace. And the implication for our outside-the-gate priestly work is direct.

You think God is going to fail to get out of this whole mess of humanity? You think the brokenness, the suffering, the destruction, the spirit of this present age, are going to outlast the grace that is presently being poured out? Watch. Watch what God does with the surrounding situation we are currently looking at. Watch what God does with the cities I traveled through this year. Watch what God does with the populations that look, on present observation, to be beyond redemption.

If you think you are beyond redemption, God is able to deliver you. If you think your loved ones are beyond redemption, God is able to deliver them. If you think your city is beyond redemption, God is able to deliver it. Whatever we think the present situation is, the spirit of this age will be broken, and the presence of God will be made visible across the surrounding world. And the more we push toward what we think God wants in this world, the more God will surprise us by doing more than what we have been pushing toward.

Let us not construct the kingdom from the past. Let us not construct it from whatever has been or whatever is now. Let us walk in the unfolding light of God and watch what kind of city the One whose builder and maker is God will build through the priestly work of the church of the firstborn. We are stones in the eternal city he is constructing. And our job is to go outside the gate of each surrounding city and find more lively stones for the city he is building.

Sometimes the greatest sinners, the ones who have gone into the darkest places, are the ones the present age has counted out who are about to be brought in. And the words we speak over them, from outside the gate, with the harps in our hands and the bowls of incense ascending from our prayers, are exactly the words God will use to construct the next phase of the city he is bringing down from heaven.

Sing over the city. Pray over the city. Pour out blessing. Tear your garments for the people who are suffering. And watch what God will do at the end of this big story that we are part of. Amen.