

No continuing city

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[0 : 00] Hebrews chapter 13, reading at verse 14. For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

Hebrews 13 and verse 14. Here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come. Now, one effect of coming back to the island at fairly frequent intervals is that one is made very conscious of the past.

There is so much around us that brings that past home to us.

There are familiar scenes. There are well-known faces. Behind them, other faces of those who long since gone.

[1 : 19] There are places with hallowed memories. There are places with recollections of past experience.

In all those ways, the past is very powerfully present. One can recall it.

One can imagine it. One can, in a way, recreate it. One can imagine it. One can imagine it. One can imagine it. One can imagine it.

One is also very conscious that that past is lost. In a way, it's very powerfully absent.

It's lost beyond recall. We may regret it. We may wish that things were the same.

[2 : 26] But things aren't the same. And the world that was is no longer with us. Of course, that is a very familiar truth.

It is a fact of a very, very simple experience. And yet, here is God's word making exactly the same point.

Reminding us that here, we have no continuing city. I'm doing so because that very, very simple principle is one that makes great spiritual demands.

And I want tonight to explore this theme with you. This fact of the change, the decay, the transience of all we see around us.

And yet, looking at that transience always in the context of the affirmation that follows. Here, indeed, we have no continuing city.

[3 : 52] But, on the other hand, we seek one to come. And those two things hung so closely and so tightly together.

Let me take, first of all, this fact that here, we have no continuing city.

It's true, for example, in the realm of culture. Over the last century, many forces have beaten upon our highlands and islands.

There have been the great clearances. Years of widespread famine.

Decades of economic hardship. Two great world wars. An alien educational system.

[5 : 01] And all of these have brought with them great changes. At one level, the Highlands have lost their language.

But they've lost more than simply a language. They've lost much that went with the language.

They've lost much of their own music and song and literature. They've lost much of their own music and song and song and song and song.

To birth and death. To a neighbour and community. To land and sea. And to the elements. Some of you have lived through that change.

We find ourselves in a world of locked doors. A world of canned entertainment.

[6 : 13] A world of the individual. A world of the pursuit of privacy and anonymity.

Above all, a world of galloping materialism. And I make the point not simply because the language itself was precious, which it was.

Or because the culture was even more so because it was. But I make the point because a hundred years ago indeed even sixty years ago that all we have life it seemed so secure it seemed destined to last forever.

I make the point because we sat so careless to our own heritage because we let it slip.

Because in one generation we have seen it threatened and seen it well nigh extinguished. And the world in which we live even in our highlands even in our island the language we speak the leisure pursuits in which we engage the assumptions we make the work we pursue all of these things so different from those of our forebears of responsibility in large measure our own because we assumed that here we had our continuing city and if we are uncared for even those freedoms which remain even our civil liberties our political privileges these things which we also take for granted we may one day learn to accost that there again this principle applies that here we have no continuing city.

[8 : 48] It is true also of course on the religious level that here again we have no continuing city. 150 years ago there was a powerful spiritual life covering the whole of the Scottish Highlands our churches were full there was family worship in every home there was a firm grasp of the great doctrines and principles of our faith in the hearts and minds of ordinary men and women the spirit and principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ controlled community life in its trade and commerce in its every public and private aspect today we can go to some parts of those same highlands where the gospel was once so flourishing and find only spiritual deserts churches built to accommodate thousands accommodating maybe thirty or forty in a tiny huddle the spirit of the gospel banished from the whole life of the community

I know that I speak to a very different situation what a century ago men and women assumed that in terms of the things of God's spirit we had a continuing city and we assumed that that great situation was durable and was bound to last and yet so quickly it was swept away and that story is but a story we have seen too often in the life of the church of God sins of great spiritual movements in the past which in the course of a single century have become fortresses of the enemy and sins of an alien faith some of us stood three weeks ago in the heart of the old city of Jerusalem on the temple mound and that place where Abraham sacrificed his son where Solomon built his temple where God sacrificed his son where God poured forth his spirit at Pentecost that was the sin of the worship of the early

Christians a sin of great spiritual power there God's church grew and God's church flourished and what we find there today we find on this side a mosque we find on the other side a mosque you go to those great cities of the ancient church to Alexandria Constantinople and Carthage in those cities there were once great theologians there were once full and flourishing churches in those cities men and women flocked to the worship of Jesus Christ as today they flock to football churches and what we find there today the same power of Islam mosque after mosque after mosque as the people waking every morning to the call of the minaret why because here we have no continuing city it has been said you know that the price of freedom is eternal vigilance and that is the price certainly of our own spiritual privileges that we exercise constant vigilance over what we have we have to remind ourselves that there is no built in permanence in any spiritual moment remind ourselves that the church of God can stand only by advancing can survive only by evangelizing can maintain itself only by diligent missionary activity let me say to myself even this way for 150 years and more wave after wave of the power of the spirit of God has beaten over this island it is to that that we owe all her distinctiveness and out every spiritual privilege but I ask are we now living at the tail end of that spiritual moment and you realize that unless we maintain and retain the presence of the spirit of God then there is nothing left to us but the shell of a religion and that shell has no constancy it has no viability it has no stamina it will not last and as I look at so much of the rest of this land and come back and see what's left in my native island I do not simply look and observe with gratitude at what is left but I ask where are we going and where are we facing and I'm asking are we feeling the need is our whole land feeling the need is the whole of our church feeling the need for something more than orthodoxy and truth for something more than religious form do we feel the need for that which gave us what we have and which for twenty years we have scarcely known in any significant measure this outpouring of the spirit of

God because unless that spirit comes by the grace of God then we shall find that even in the things of God's spirit we have no continuing city there is no durability and religious forms by themselves but it's true also of course at the personal level it's true for each one of us that here we have no

continuing city of course as we plan and work and dream we assume all the time that our world is permanent and that we ourselves are durable and yet the truth is that we are so vulnerable and our grasp of life so tenuous and so fragile as we labour to amass our own fortunes to establish ourselves and secure ourselves against every vicissitude as we bind ourselves emotionally around this treasure and that treasure as we erect our own idols and build our own temples and worship our own gods we're assuming all the time that it's all going to last and yet

[18:37] God is saying to us that here we have no continuing city and of course we feel it not so much at the point of things at the point of commodities and pleasures but at the point of relationships where we bind ourselves around other human beings we have our social circles our family circles our friends our loved ones our wives our children and there we are you see wrapped and involved and loving and so vulnerable because there where life is closest to real dignity and to real worth there too this terrible principle applies that here we have no continuing city and as I said it's a lesson of experience it's a fact of ordinary observation and God is simply underlining it and saying look pay attention to it don't live as if this were a continuing city as you build your barns as you build your own life and plan your own life then build into it

God is saying to us this great fact this truth it doesn't last we have here no continuing city and then you turn to me and say what a gloomy message and what a thing to come with before men and women to remind them simply of the transient and the impermanence of all that is and that strange man told us that the culture was going or had gone that religion itself was vulnerable their lies were fleeting shadows poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing he told us that and they said well you say we went for the gospel for the good news we went for something to inspire and to encourage us and that man told us simply of this that here there is no continuing city oh yes but then you see this you see this great but this great but in the middle of this verse here have we no continuing city if we live 50 more years we will see enormous cultural change we will see mayhaps great religious change we will see change and decay in all around us all that is truth and all that is so sombre and all that is so deeply discouraging answer fills our souls with glue until we turn to this great fact but but we seek one to come in fact it isn't simply that but we seek the one to come the one because there is only one city to come that city who is building and making as

God and here is this man you see standing in the midst of all this change and all this decay and all this demolition going on around and all those things that are so precious changes too I'm seeing them all changing but there is grasping this great fact there is something to come and it's something eternal it's something with foundations it's something that's going to last and I'm pausing to ask you a very very simple question you agree with me that all around us we have this great principle that here we have no continuing city but I'm asking you see what do you have that's going to last there you are with your immortal soul with your undying soul and I'm asking you what have you tied and with what do you expect to satisfy is there anything that matches the durability and the permanence of your own soul can you add this great extra but we are seeking the one to come this man stands within the community of faith he stands in the faith of the people of God and he tells us that there is something to come there is something which is going to have continuance and going to have permanence and this man tells us that he is seeking it he is aware that all around him is going to change it's all going to decay but he is seeking this great permanent reality this thing which is going to continue well if we take that down tonight to our own situation what does it mean what are we as God's people what are we seeking we are so so very conscious that nothing in this world lasts if we have detached ourselves from it then what is it that we are actually seeking well for myself first of all this we are seeking to be closer to

Jesus the lamb us rather for to minded us the lamb is all the glory of Emmanuel's land and that is the great problem with a Christian's position on earth that he is so far from Christ we have him maybe in our hearts we meet him in his word in his sacraments in the gatherings of his people but there is this great longing to see him as he is the moment the believing mind turns to heaven the moment it contemplates the seeking of a city that has foundations that very moment it thinks of closeness to

Christ and time and again that's the way that God's word puts it we shall see him as he is father I will that they whom thou hast given me be with me for I am he wants us to be with him for years and he wants us to see his glory that they may behold my glory which thou hast given me and even wants us to share his glory the glory which thou gavest me I have given to them and that surely is

the great impulse behind Christian faith that faith that begins with the longing sorrow we would see [27 : 46] Jesus and by God's grace we see him with the eye of faith and yet even in that faith this great fact of discontent because we see him through a glass darkly we see him as an enigma you know sometimes you try to focus on your blink try to sharpen try to clarify and still you know you not seeing reality not seeing him as he is here we have no continuing city but we are seeking this place where we see him as he is we see him a face to face we are seeking that place again are we not but all

God's people are together our city which has foundations and which God gathers the whole of us all ransomed people and of course it's through at once but the longing to be with the beloved dead is not and cannot be the primary motive of a belief our heaven is being with Christ and yet if God has bound us in brotherly love to other members of the body then it is indeed God's will for us that one day he will reunite us and we shall be together with Lord and we ask or hear us often why will we know each other surely that is not a real question the question is of course shall we be ourselves and it surely it's in that fact the continuance of personal identity that we shall be ourselves and we shall be together with those who have gone before together with those who follow after a few short years of evil past we reach that happy shore where death divided friends at last shall meet to part no more it is not simply that we shall be together with the

Lord but we shall be with the Lord together and I don't think that we ought to be ashamed of the strength of that impulse and that affection that longs for the reestablishment of fellowship with those whose love was precious on the side of the grave and that's part of this city it's not simply you see a cell for one individual it isn't a house for one family in my father's house there are many rooms it's a great city you see of many many families and that's part of the whole glory of God's provision that we shall be with the Lord together so here there is nothing permanent but we are seeking that being with

Christ from which nothing can ever separate we are seeking that being together which again nothing can bring to an end and we are seeking to enjoy the close attention of God the Father I say again the close attention of God the Father I say especially because in our devotion for so long the church of God has done so little justice to the role of God the Father the Bible so much emphasizes his love and his sacrifice of his son this father calls us his father keeps us his father sanctifies us this father glorifies us and then that marvelous picture in revelation 7 where the perfected glorified churches portrayed to us in those terms

God shall wipe away all the tears from our eyes today there are certain impulses in theology that want to feminize God want to accommodate theology to the dictates of feminism want to call God she and so on in many ways it's so sad because in the Bible it's own portrait of God there is so much emphasis on such beautiful concern not only with the pattern but with the matter not only with the fatherly but with the motherly how often would I have gathered as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and then this

[34 : 10] God wiping away the tears that's the great mother image you see all the tears every tear this this solicitude as God says to us it's all right it's going to be all right on this man standing here against this great background of change knowing that so many of his own contemporary thought that what they had was permanent that their Jewish institutions above all their temple was going to last and he knowing that it wouldn't last knowing how shadowy and how transient and passing into ephemeral it all was but saying look there is something worth longing for if you have a living relationship with

Jesus Christ that will last if you have a living relationship with the people of God that will last if you have a living relationship with God the father then that's going to last he says and he's asking you look what have you got that's going to last have you any treasures that will last have you any relationships that will last have you anyone who cares so much a love that will never let you go have you that that's what this man is seeking you see a place where forever he'll be with the savior and where forever he'll be with the people of God and where forever he'll be close to God his father and he's looking for more he's looking for rest the remainder for rest to the people of

God you see these early Christians they had so many problems they had so much pain and so much suffering and so much tribulation they spent their lives in a great crucible under constant pressure and constant harassment but if there was one thing they long for it was rest and this man was looking for a city where at last he could say this is the end of my journey and the end of my pilgrimage this is my rest here still I stay do we know anything of that do we know what it is at one

level to be at peace with God and yet at another level to be longing for the consummation of that peace and to know that at last we have arrived and we have reached we have reached we have attained our quest we have secured our objective we have gotten to this great city and we're going to stay and rest here that's that's what this man and these people long for they long for rest they long for rest from the burdens they were carrying burdens which taxed them to the very limit of their resources they long for rest from temptation because day after day and night after night there was this adversary this great rolling lion and every day there were the wires of the devil and every day you had to be on guard and it is so difficult you know so dreadfully dreadfully dreadfully difficult to be on guard all the time not able to relax for a moment a great strain of that and they longed for the city with its great great walls that no temptation and no serpent could penetrate they longed for that to be able to relax their vigilance their vigilance to be there where they felt so utterly and totally secure they longed for rest from their burdens and they longed for rest from temptation and they longed for rest from pain many of them knew pain most of us haven't known pain these people longed for rest from pain and they longed for rest from conflict maybe that above all because God's grace had done this terrible thing to them you see it had set them at war with themselves their souls their hearts and minds were great battlefields between the flesh and the spirit and every day and every moment that terrible conflict went down within this divided self the flesh lost against the flesh day after day and they longed for rest it was so difficult for them do you know what this is it was such a tremendous strain this attempt to control and master their own temperaments and they longed for that struggle to be over so they longed you see for rest they longed for this city because it meant being with Jesus they longed for it because it meant being with the people of God they longed for it because it meant being close to their father and they longed for it because it meant rest and I think to the longed for it for this reason because it would offer the chance of real creativity and real achievement you see that we are made in the image of God of God the great maker and God the great creator we're in his image and we try to make things we try to create things because that impulse is implanted so deeply within us whatever the material or the medium there is the drive you see this image of

God the image of the great maker and all the frustrations of her bodily limitations and the frustrations of her mental limitations we want to do something for God something beautiful for God something commensurate with what he did for us on the cross of Calvary not its equal you see because it is not something we can't equal but there is other sin in our heart of something which we would like to be our response to the love of God some expression of her dead something that is beautiful that is extravagant that is loving spontaneous creative imaginative something beautiful for God we find here you see all righteousness is as filthy rags the best it's not my worst that's the problem it's my best that's the problem just cannot get it right you see even the concept in the mind inadequate thought is can't transform that into reality can't make it stand there can't make it be the way

[43 : 01] God said let it be and it was and then we long you see for this city for this place where with glorified bodies and glorified minds we shall be able to achieve something for God now I tell you there is this great glory in our current Christian lives you see that God loves what his children do those feeble attempts that we made to write him some kind of poem to offer him some kind of gift some kind of service we know how inadequate they are but you see there is this great fact acceptable to God through Jesus Christ and that's a great thing you see and yet we long for this ability for this hand that would do what the mind and the love and the mind wanted to do we want to be able to express that gratitude for the cross to do something we cannot do it here we long to be quit of the sin that defiles the disability that inhibits we long for this place where there is some prospect of our doing something beautiful for God do you not know something of that so of course here there is no continuing city here the precious elements in the culture we have known and loved always under threat here our beloved churches constantly under threat here our lives our relationships our treasures so terribly terribly mind bogglingly fragile but then you see there is something to come not a cell not a house not a village but a great city with a multitude which no man can number and these people are longing for it because there they'll be close to their savior there they'll be close to his people there they're close to their father there they're at rest and there they have this great possibility of new creativity wildly what does this man want us to do what does this man want you to do this man wants you to do two things he wants you first of all to seek it really we see it want to come it's quite extraordinary the difference between this man's attitude to what comes after death and our attitude to what comes after death the best we can rise to is to be willing

to depart that's the best but this man he longed for the city he wasn't simply weary of this world wasn't that but he so loved what God had promised him or shall I put it this way he so loved his saviour and he so loved his heavenly father that he just wanted to be with him because to faith that was home he was an exile he was a toddler he was a sojourner passing through you see wherever he was it wasn't home I was in some nice places you see along the road and he had some happy times along the road but he never felt at home he was never at home you know those of us who are on the road we have many moments of precious hospitality but that's not home and this is great problem with God's children you see very strange thing they don't seem to want to go home it must be a great grief to their father you know he says my children seldom want to come home well this man wasn't like that you see this man sought it this man sought the heavenly city there was a longing for it there was a seeking of it there was a preparing of himself for it it mattered too as she moved on day after day that's what he kept on saying to himself here in this body pen absent from home

I roam yet nightly pitched my moving tent a day's march near her home she was standing night in the midst of her own weakness her own fragility maybe terrified of the future and we say that's another day past can I get to the point where I'm saying from the very bottom of my heart that's a day's march near her home please in my father's house there are many mansions then are they glad because at rest and quiet now they be and so to the haven he then brings which they desired to see again please home I believe is it not possible that the reason why we're offering no earthly use is because we are so bound to this world so reluctant to go home this man longed for it really I'm sure this man had many privileges great friends and great family and great blessings and maybe all they seemed to do to him was to make him long all the more for the city that had foundations to build and make it was God he sought it really sought it can we get close to that it would do so much to put our pains our sorrows our temptations our conflicts our unpopularity and every pressure we are under to put all those into perspective could we stand here and say we seek we don't simply say that we're biding God's time or willing to go whatever no he says we're seeking it I have a desire to depart that's what this man this man was saying he wanted it he longed for it he prepared himself for it did you notice this too

I said there were two things we are to seek it but then there is this let us go forth outside the club obeying his reproach what's it saying to us you see we're in this city and it isn't going to last we're bound up in this world and bound up with this world we belong so thoroughly to it we share its prejudices its aspirations its ethics its principles its priorities we're in this city well this man says look get out of it because it isn't going to last it's doomed to destruction it's going to pass away you see it happened quite literally for these Jews they were so bound to their own Jewish faith and their own Jewish institutions and above all to their own temple and they wouldn't leave their temple they wouldn't leave their great beloved

[51 : 56] Jerusalem and God kept on saying to them it isn't going to last until one day a Roman army rased it to the ground terrible thing you see insiders can't be saved only outsiders can be saved there's more than that and of course you don't simply go outside the camp but you go out to him and he is outside the camp God's people have great difficulty I find coping with unpopularity they forget that by definition they're outsiders because Christ is outside you can't be with

Christ and inside there is a breach this city says please my brothers and sisters it's not going to last it really is not going to last I beg if you believe it's not going to last get out let us go forth to him they were trying to be Jews and Christians to belong to the old order and to the new to the temple and to the church to the law and to the gospel they would take Christ if Christ would come inside but Christ was outside reproached and despised and he wanted them outside can't see how God's church can ever be inside God's church belonged where Christ belonged on a green hill outside the city wall where the

Lord was crucified that's who would belong you see I'm asking have you gone out I'm asking if you become an outsider or are you still a citizen of this city doomed to destruction next Lord's day God willing the congregation will divide some will sit at the Lord's table and some will not I'm asking what is the symbolism of that saying to you will the fact of your not being at that table indicate that you have not gone outside that you are not with Christ that you are still inside this city doomed to destruction it's the truth of common sense here have we no continuing city it's the affirmation of faith we seek one to come can

I ask tonight that the primary energies of your souls be directed towards this one great objective I want that city that has foundations who spilled and make it as God some of us may not have much time left some some of us have been in both camps for many years in many ways you've got to you've really got to get outside there is no hope inside this city it is not going to continue but we seek the one to come the only one raise may God's power accompany his word let us pray Lord in whose presence we stand to whom we are transparent and open to whom we shall one day give account whom we shall one day we trust to see face to face send thy light forth with thy truth and send days of the spirit of the most high the return of power that power without which we are nothing and mean nothing
Lord pluck us all of us out of the city of destruction and make all of us outsiders bearing the reproach of Christ for thy glory sake amen