



# WHY GOD MADE CITIES

TIMOTHY  
KELLER

*Then they said,  
“Come, let us build ourselves a city,  
with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so  
that we may make a name for ourselves;  
otherwise we will be scattered over the  
face of the whole earth.”*

—GENESIS 11:4

In April 1993, beloved New York senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan spoke before the Association for a Better New York. I don't know what his purpose was, but he created an enormous flap, because what he said put in a nutshell the problems of the city.

He pointed out that in 1944, when he graduated from high school in Harlem, 150,000 more people had lived in New York. However in that year there had been only 44 homicides with a gun in the city. In 1992 there were 1,500. He also pointed out that in 1944 there were about 73,000 people on the welfare rolls, while in the early 1990's there were a million.

He was pointing out the deterioration of New York City. Why the decline? What was going on? Everyone had different reasons. The liberals said, "Racism has doomed the city." The conservatives said, "Big government and taxes have doomed the city." Many Christians, I must admit, said, "God has doomed the city for its wickedness. Go ahead. Let it suffer the consequences."

New York City has experienced a well-documented renaissance in the two decades since Moynihan's speech. That resurgence—if you believe the counter-narrative—is ushering in a

new age of urban promise. Yet the problems of the city still seem intractable. So the spectrum of narratives about New York City, or about cities in general, is certainly a wide one.

I must say that what the Bible teaches about the city is far more optimistic *and* far more pessimistic than anything you'll read in the newspapers, on either end of that spectrum. It's both more hopeful and yet more realistic than either the defenders or the detractors of the modern city. So what does it say?

## GOD INVENTED THE CITY

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We're told in the book of Hebrews that all throughout the Old Testament, the great patriarchs like Moses, David and Abraham himself had a goal during the time of their wandering through the desert. According to Hebrews 11:10, "For [Abraham] was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

We're also told in Revelation 21 and 22, when God finally gets the world to its ultimate goal—when he finally develops the new heavens and the new earth, when he puts the world in the shape it ought to be in—that it's going to be a city. It talks about the streets of the city, the center square of the city, the dimensions of the city. All the inhabitants of the kingdom of God will be urbanites.

One writer put it this way: "The world to come, Scripture teaches, will be an urban world. The redemption drama that began in a garden will end in a city, the new Jerusalem. Heaven's citizens will be urbanites. Drawn by bonds of grace from all races, nations, and language groups, new-city citizens will live together in perfect harmony as God's redeemed people, his new covenant community."<sup>1</sup>

Now let me offer an analogy. Most people who read the Bible know that God invented the family. It's not a human creation. God invented it, because God reveals himself as a father, and he tells us we're children.

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as it's twisted the family, and God  
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Therefore, though sin has taken the family and often turned it into a place of abuse and pain, we don't abandon the family as an institution. We are called to redeem and rebuild the family. Do you see the pattern? The human family is a pattern given by God. Therefore, we believe it was good once and will be good again. We know the future of humanity is, in some respects, a family.

God is also building a city. He is a city architect, an urban planner, and we are citizens of that city. (While I would not put the city on the same footing as the family as a universal human social structure, it is obvious that the development of the city is part of the providence, design, and will of God.) If sin has twisted the city as it's twisted the family, and turned it into a place of pain and suffering just as it's done to the family, that doesn't mean we get rid of the city. We don't scoff at it or take pleasure in its troubles. We as Christians are called to redeem and rebuild the city.

Do you see the logic? God invented the city, so we don't abandon it—we build it.

Let me go one step further. The Bible affirms that not everybody is called to be married. Yet to shrug at the deterioration of the family would be as foolish as it is unkind, because if the family goes away, so does society.

In the same way, not everybody is called to live in a city. You can't say all Christians are to live in cities any more you can say all Christians are supposed to marry. But no matter where you live, you should be seeking to help restore and rebuild cities. That's biblical. Are you a city builder, as God is?

God invented the city, so we should be for the city.

Now, *why* did God invent the city? If we study the Bible, we will see many different purposes, but let me give you three. All of these purposes are still in effect today, though they have been harmed and twisted by sin. But without seeing them, you won't understand what the city does

and why. God designed the city *to release human potential, to shelter the weak, and to compel spiritual searching*. Let's look at each one.

## THE CITY RELEASES OUR GREATEST POTENTIAL

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Take a look at Genesis 11:4. It tells us the people on the plain of Shinar got together and said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.” Now what does this show us?

First of all, the city releases human potential. If you read the Old Testament, you will see that when God created Adam and Eve, when he created human beings, he made them creative. He is the Creator, and he made us in his image.

So we are creative and productive. We need to build, to enhance, to elaborate, to develop, to cultivate. In Genesis, as soon as human beings are cast out of the garden, they immediately begin to create cities. Cain builds a city, and his descendants build cities. And it's in the cities, we're told in Genesis 4, that the first music was composed. It's in the cities where the first metallurgy and metal craftsmanship began to advance. Why? It's just common sense. It's in population centers where our creative potential is released.

If you're the only merchant or craftsperson or musician where you live, you can do a certain range of things, but where are you going to find your field advancing beyond where it's ever been before? In the cities, of course. It's the mentoring and the training and the networking and the teaming and the stimulation—and even the competition—that advance the world's capabilities. So if you take a look at Genesis 4 and 5, you see that the arts, manufacturing, craftsmanship, science, and architecture begin to flourish in the cities, because God built the city to be a place where our creative human potential is released.

Now before you say, “Well, that’s kind of interesting, but if I don’t live in a city, what does that have to do with me?” The answer is—a great deal! The very word “civilization” comes from the Latin word for cities (*civitas*). Most of our entertainment, our learning, our politics, and our business are forged in cities, as they have always been. Today you have only to look at the movies and fashion produced in Los Angeles or New York to see how influential cities are, particularly among the young, and particularly in a globalized world.

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But cities don’t just export cultural products; they export their idols and worldviews too. So no matter where you live, you are likely feeling one of the effects of city living—a tremendous pressure to produce. That’s a positive sign, because it makes you reach deep down and find your potential. It spurs you on to excellence. That’s why so many ambitious people come to the city.

At the same time, that impulse to achieve has a dark side. Remember that every one of the purposes of the city has been distorted by sin. Therefore, look at the motivation behind the ambition in Genesis 11. The people say they are going to build a tower, “so that we may make



a name for ourselves...” In other words, “If we’re going to be the best, to achieve the most, we have to build a city.”

The Bible teaches that God’s first divine purpose for the city, which is the city’s power to release and magnify human potential, is now driven by a desire for self-glorification. Yes, the city spurs its residents on to excellence, and it releases more of our potential, but now life is exhausting rather than ennobling. It burns us out. Why? Because that’s the nature of the city under sin. The city attracts people who want to make a name for themselves. And it propagates that idolatry throughout the whole land.

Ah, the city. How wonderful. How terrible. The Bible, as usual, has us pegged.

## THE CITY IS A PLACE OF REFUGE

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All of the Hebrew words for *city* used in the Old Testament mean an enclosed place. The cities were originally places that were *safe*. You see it in Genesis 11 when the people say, “Let’s build a city that we might not be scattered.” If you’re scattered, you’re vulnerable. So if you want to be strong, you have to gather. Cities were always places where scattered people and weak people could come together and be safe.

The first cities God told the Israelites to build were called *cities of refuge*. Why? Because God had a purpose for the city. God knew that when a person was accused of a crime, someone could hunt them down and kill them. A city of refuge was a place to which you could flee and get a fair trial because the cities were the places of civilization. The law of the jungle didn’t hold. They were the places where justice would first develop.

Again you may ask, “What does that have to do with us today?” Well, even today the city is a refuge for people without power. If you are a middle-class Anglo family, you may not

like the city. It's a hard place to live. But if you're anybody else, the city is often a more merciful place to live.

If you're single, the city is a place where there are lots of people just like you. Instead of being one of five singles sitting in your church, you come to New York so you don't feel abnormal. Or consider immigrants. Do you know how unbelievably hard it is for someone from one culture to come into a new culture without a city? Can you imagine somebody coming from Vietnam and being plunked down in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania? I've seen that happen. It's pretty hard.

Cities are merciful places, because people who would normally be scattered come together, and you can interact with the majority culture while at the same time being in an enclave of your old culture. That's why immigrants come to the cities. That's why artists come to the cities. If you have a lifestyle that deviates from Anglo middle-class morality, cities are the safest place to come because they are where scattered people come together.

Can you imagine being a homeless person and surviving in the suburbs? It's especially difficult. Cities have always been merciful places for people who don't have power. In many ways they still are, and yet under the influence of sin, we know that cities today can also be places of violence, places without safety.

If you want to see this in the starkest possible way, go back to Genesis 4. We've already mentioned that the first music was composed in the city, but the first songs that were composed were war songs. Genesis 4 tells us that Lamech, one of the descendants of Cain, composed one of the first songs. Do you know what the lyrics were? "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me."

Again, do you see? The cities on the one hand are a refuge, and yet they're places of violence. They draw out the potential in you, and yet they exhaust you. The city is so

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## THE CITY COMPELS US TO SPIRITUAL SEARCHING

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What was this tower they were building in Genesis 11? Do you know what it was for? Let me put it to you this way. If you read the Old Testament you can see every ancient city, most of the Canaanite cities, were named after a god. Baal-meon. Baal-peor. Most of the cities of the ancient world were built around the tallest building, and that tallest building was always the temple of the god the whole city worshiped.

Cities were places you went to meet that god. And cities are still places that will not let you sit back and be indifferent, comfortable, and blind to temptation. Cities drive you to sell your soul to something. They always create spiritual turmoil. People are always spiritually searching in cities.

That's exactly what's happening in Genesis 11. In the Near East, those temples were called *ziggurats*. They knew if they wanted to build a city, they had to build their tallest building, a *ziggurat*, to some god in the Near Eastern pantheon.

Again you may ask, "What does that have to do with us today? Today cities aren't religious. They're very secular." Don't kid yourself. The tallest buildings in any city always are temples to the god that city worships, to the god that compels you to seek it.

What were the tallest buildings on the skyline of New York or Philadelphia 150 years ago? Have you ever seen the old lithographs? They were churches. Today the tallest buildings are temples to money, the god of today's big cities. The city was originally invented by God to be a place where we met him. Cities, therefore, are inveterately and relentlessly religious. People are stirred up in cities to seek spiritually.

Or look at the New Testament. Historical research shows that the early Christian missionaries in the Roman Empire did not go to the countryside. They did not go to the small towns. Paul was the best example of this. They went into the cities and *only* the cities to preach the gospel. Why? Because they knew that the small towns and the countryside are places where people are more conservative. They're not as likely to adopt new religions. They're not as open to new ideas.

## *Why are people more open to new ideas in the city?*

Why are people more open to new ideas in the city? Well, remember the first two purposes. The city is the place of greatest creativity, turmoil, and stimulation. In cities, people are always asking questions about the meaning of life. It's the nature of the city. When I come away from the city (which my family and I love to do), I find it easy to slip under a kind of veil of illusion. In those idyllic towns and suburbs, it can be easier to hide from the rawness of existence, from the wickedness of the heart, from the transience of life.

You see, many of those places don't change much, and they have zoning laws and cultural norms in place to make sure things don't change. Why? Because we all desperately want to believe life can be predictable and under control. That's natural. Yet what does the Bible say? It says time is fleeting. Life is transient. We're all capable of wickedness. Trouble is everywhere.

We recognize this biblical picture of reality in the city. Paul preached in the cities because they were places where people were forced to admit that life is tough; that things are always in crisis; and that time is rushing on. In cities there's not only more humanity per square inch, there's more brokenness per square inch. You can't pretend it's not there. You can't pretend you're immune from it.

Because of all this, being in the city opens you to spiritual issues like nothing else does. I've talked to so many people in New York who had previously lived in other places where they were not at all open to spiritual issues. It was not until they came here that they began to feel disoriented and realized they needed a spiritual center. They began to see things in their own heart, and in other people, that pulled the wool off of their eyes as to what the world was really like. They began to say, "I need something deep, something profound, something spiritual." That's the nature of the city. It's arguably the best place to understand your need for the gospel.

Yet while the city opens us up spiritually, at the same time it shows us how we are in the grip of an incredible array of false gods and heresies and idols, in a way that you'd never see anywhere else. Ah, the city! So wonderful, so terrible. The Bible has us pegged.

Now if all this is true, if God invented the city, and he invented it with these wonderful purposes, and yet they're twisted, what is our response as Christians, as the church? What does God call us to do?

## GOD SENDS US INTO THE CITY

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We know we can't ignore the city because it is God's invention. He had an original plan, and we've done our best to ruin that plan. Now he desires to redeem it. He calls us into the city to love, to preach, to identify, and to bless.

First, to *love*. When Jonah was told to go to Nineveh, the great city of its day, he went and preached like a good prophet should, but he despised the city. He ministered to people, but he didn't love them. When God said, "I'm not going to destroy Nineveh," Jonah got extremely angry. Why? Because he hated those brutal Ninevites.

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(By the way, a lot of people don't like the city, and one reason is that it's full of so many people who are different from you—politically, culturally, racially and economically. No matter who you are, that's true. That's what a city is. You're not in a city if you look around and everybody looks like you.)

So God comes to Jonah, and he says, "Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left?" Now the word *concern* God uses there is the word *to weep*. He says, "Jonah, look at what I weep over. I weep over the masses. I weep over the city. When you see so many people, why don't you weep over them? Why doesn't compassion spring up? Jonah, I saved you by grace. I reached into the belly of the fish and saved you."

Your attitude toward the city is one index of whether or not you know you're a sinner saved by grace. If you know you're a sinner saved by grace, you can no longer feel paternalistic towards people who don't believe or live like you do. You won't be so absorbed in your own comforts, in all of the things that keep you from loving the city. God says to Jonah, "Look. I don't think you have my heart, because if you understood my grace and if you understood my nature, when you look at a city, you would love it instead of hating it. A hundred and twenty thousand people!"

My good friend Bill Krispin used to say that the country is the place where there are more plants than people, and the city is the place where there are more people than plants. Since God loves people far more than he loves plants, he loves the city far more than he loves the country.

When God sees the city, he feels love. When he sees the diversity, when he sees the numbers, when he sees the lostness, he says, "I weep over that. Jonah, do you?" Let me put it to you this way. Jonah came to Nineveh to advance his career as a prophet. It was his biggest stage. But he didn't love the people he was preaching to. He came to use the city, not to love the city, not to build it up.



How many people have come to New York and the cities of the world to make a name for themselves? How many of them come to use the city all the while loathing the place, and not staying there to build it? Are you like Jonah? God looks and says, “Are you weeping over the city? Does your heart go out to it? Do you love the place? If not, do you remember what I’ve done for you? Do you have any understanding of the grace of God at all?” We’re called to love the city.

Secondly, we’re called to *preach* to the city. Jonah went in and preached, and even though he wasn’t preaching in love, many of the people believed. As I mentioned, Paul and those early missionaries were able to turn the Roman Empire around even though they were nowhere near the elite classes. Do you know how they got hold of the Roman Empire? One factor is that they did all of their work in the cities.

By the third century, most of the urban centers of the Roman Empire were Christian. The countryside was pagan, but it didn’t matter because, you see, the cities are the places where the media and education and scholarship and science and the arts and business are all based. So as the city goes, that’s how the society goes. If you win the countryside and you ignore the cities, you’ve lost the culture. But if you win the city and you ignore the countryside, you’ve won the culture. That’s the reason why we need to preach the gospel and to live a Christian life in the city. So you’re supposed to love the city. You’re supposed to preach to the city.

Thirdly, you’re supposed to *identify* with the city and serve it. Jeremiah 29:4–7 is an amazing passage, because here the Israelites are in exile, conquered by this wicked, terrible nation called Babylon. What does he say to them? He says, “Identify with the prosperity of that city.” He does not say, “Go into the streets and preach to the city. Hand out tracts in the city. Then, get out.” He says, “Settle down. Build houses. Have children. Identify with the city. Identify with the people of the city, with the well-being of the city. Weave yourselves into the city in a way that weaves wholeness and health into the city.”

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Loving and preaching the gospel without doing something about the fact that the schools are underperforming, that there's so little affordable housing, that the streets are unsafe... If you don't do something about it, you haven't really done what God wants you to do. He calls Christians to stay in the city and to identify with the city.

To be clear, I'm not saying God is calling every Christian to live inside the city. But everyone can help rebuild the city in some way.

If you are in a city or a community that is broken, where people are burned out or spiritually lost, where there is violence—stay as long as you can. Identify as much as you can. You have to work this out with your conscience, but Jeremiah 29 says don't just have loving feelings. Don't just preach. Identify. Serve. Pray for the peace of the city.

Lastly, we have to *bless* the city. Proverbs 11:10–11 says, “Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted.” Do you know what it means to bless somebody? It means we’re not cynical about the city. To bless someone means to have hope for them. To bless someone is to encourage them. What does it mean for our church to bless this city? Of course, it means to love, and to preach, and to serve and live here. To bless, though, goes beyond that. It means we get rid of our cynicism about the city because we know this city will someday be part of the city of our God. That’s what the Bible says!

Therefore, we have a hope nobody else can claim. Dorothy Sayers put it this way. She said the sin of sloth “calls itself Tolerance; but in hell it is called Despair... It is the sin which believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for.”<sup>2</sup>

The sin that was once called “sloth” is more than laziness—essentially, it is cynicism. It is saying, “I have nothing bigger to live for than my pocketbook and my stomach and my career.” No one can ever bless the city from that posture. They can have no hope for it, no confidence for it. But Christians cannot say that. They see that the city of man will someday be part of the city of God. It will someday be healed.

What does it mean to bless the city? Here’s what it means. Follow Jesus. We’re told in Revelation 21 that Jesus will live on the center square of the city of God. He is going to live downtown. Did you know that? The Lamb will be on the main street that leads to the throne of God. Jesus has built this new city for us to live in.

How did he do it? He went to an earthly city, and he wept over it.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” he said, “you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under

her wings, and you were not willing” (Luke 13:34). He is saying, if only you knew the things that pertained to your peace, but now they’re hidden from you. He wept over that city. He identified with its people. He preached the gospel in that city, and he sacrificed himself for it. In doing that, he has built for us a city with foundations whose builder and architect is God. Do you see it?

Jesus built a heavenly city by coming and dying in an earthly city. You too can be part of Jesus’ city-building program by going into an earthly city, weeping over it, identifying with it, preaching to it, and making the sacrifices that inevitably happen there.

Are you ready to join Jesus’ work in the cities of the world?

## SCRIPTURE

Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle.

—PSALM 107:6-7

When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices; when the wicked perish, there are shouts of joy. Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is destroyed.

—PROVERBS 11:10-11

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”

—JEREMIAH 29:4-7

“And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

—JONAH 4:11

## ENDNOTES

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- 1 Roger Greenway and Timothy M. Monsma, *Cities: Missions' New Frontier* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2000), 27.
  - 2 Dorothy Sayers, "The Other Six Deadly Sins," Address given to the Public Morality Council at Caxton Hall, Westminster, October 23rd, 1941. Accessed at <http://www.lectionarycentral.com/trinity07/Sayers.html>.
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This ebook is adapted from the sermon "The Problem of the City" by Timothy Keller, presented as part of the series "Modern Problems; Ancient Solutions" at Redeemer Presbyterian Church on November 7, 1993.

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