

# Zion's Gates and the King's Highway - Part 1

by J.C. Philpot

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*The sermon explores the spiritual meaning of the city of God in its triumphant and militant states, and the role of the servants of Christ as leaders in preparing the way for God's people to enter the heavenly city.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 62:10, Matthew 7:13, John 14:6, Acts 14:27, 1 Corinthians 16:9, Ephesians 4:11, Revelation 21:2

**Topics:** "Church Triumph", "Spiritual Journey"

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## Description

J.C. Philpot preaches about the symbolic representation of the Church of God in its triumphant and militant states as depicted in the visions of John and Isaiah. He delves into the mystical nature of the heavenly city seen by John, contrasting it with the strong city described by Isaiah, symbolizing the Church in its glorious and suffering conditions. Philpot emphasizes the role of ministers as servants, stewards, labourers, and leaders in guiding believers through the gates of regeneration and faith, highlighting the spiritual journey and struggles faced in entering the heavenly city.

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## Transcript

Preached at North Street Chapel, Stamford, on Lord's Day Morning, 18th January, 1863.

"Go through, go through the gates; prepare ye the way of the people; cast up, cast up the highway; gather out the stones; lift up a standard for the people."- Isa 62:10.

JOHN, the beloved disciple, when he was in the Isle of Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ, was favoured with a glorious view in vision of "the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband". One of the seven angels, which had the seven vials full of the last seven plagues, carried him away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and there showed him that glorious sight, the Bride, the Lamb's wife Re 21:2,9. The description which John has given of this glorious city is rather too long for our time and attention this morning, but I will just read one or two verses, which will give you a sufficient idea of its beauty and glory: "And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal; and had a wall great and high, and had twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and names written thereon, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel" Re 21:10-12.

Now the question may probably arise in your mind, What was this city which John thus saw in vision? Did the Holy Ghost mean to declare thereby that at or after the consummation of all things, at or after the great judgment day, there would descend from God out of heaven a literal city, such as John saw in vision? Or was it intended as a mere mystical representation? I think if we consider for a few moments the description of the city, as given by the pen of John, we shall see that a literal fulfilment of the prophetic vision was not intended.

Look, first, at the size of the city. "And the city lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs; the length and the breadth and the height of it are equal." Twelve thousand furlongs are about 1,500 miles. Here, then, was a city 1,500 miles long, 1,500 miles broad, and, what is more strange still, 1,500 miles high; for its height was equal to its length and breadth. Could such a city exist upon the surface of the globe? Our highest mountains, such as the mighty Andes and lofty Himalayas, do not exceed five miles. But here is a city, a walled city, that reaches up to the heights of heaven, 1,500 miles! Look, again, at the materials of which the city was made. It was all of gold, and not common gold, gross and opaque, but clear and transparent, for it was "like unto clear glass". Now conceive the idea of a city, 1,500 miles long, 1,500 broad, and 1,500 in height, and all built of gold as clear as crystal. Could all the mines of the world furnish that precious material in sufficient abundance to construct a city of such magnitude?

So when we look at the foundations of the city, the same natural impossibilities meet us. They all were of precious stones, jasper, and sapphire, and emerald, and diamond, and so on. Whence could be found precious stones of a magnitude fit to be the foundations of a city whose walls were 1,500 miles high? for walls and foundations must be proportionate. And look at the gates. "The twelve gates were twelve pearls: every several gate was of one pearl." Where could a pearl be found to construct a gate at least a mile high? for the gates must bear some proportion to the walls.

I mention these things not to cast the slightest doubt on the mighty power of God to work even miracles like this, but to show you, by a comparison of circumstances, that the Holy Spirit never designed to show unto John a literal city. But like other symbols in the Revelation and other prophetic parts of the Scripture, it was intended as an emblem to convey to his mind and depict to the Church a representation of heavenly and spiritual things. Thus, as the "beasts" seen by Daniel in vision were not actual, literal beasts, but mystical representations of the four empires: and as "the woman clothed in scarlet", whom John saw in Revelation, was not an actual woman, but an emblem of the false church, so "the holy city" which the beloved disciple beheld coming down from God was not meant to prefigure a literal city, but was intended as a spiritual symbol.

Having shown you, then, that the city which John saw was but a mystical representation, what do we gather from his description to be the spiritual meaning of the symbol thus presented to his view? We gather, I think, from it that it was a representation of the Church of God in her triumphant state. And this seems plain to me from an expression that I have before quoted, in which John first brings the subject before us: "I, John, saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." What is the Church of God but "a bride", the bride of Jesus? And when is she "a bride adorned for her husband"? When she will be a full partaker of his heavenly glory. When the Lord shall appear in his glory and all his saints with him; when the dead shall be raised, and the living changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump; when all the elect of God, clothed with their new and glorified bodies, in union with their happy and perfectly sanctified souls, shall enter into the glory of their Lord, then will be spiritually fulfilled what John saw in vision; for this holy city, new Jerusalem,

which came down from God out of heaven, with its pure gold like unto clear glass, with its pearls and precious stones, can but faintly symbolise the immortal glories of the Church in her triumphant state as conformed to the glorified image of her all-glorious Head.

But besides this glorious city, as seen by John in vision, and representing, as I have pointed out, the Church of Christ in her triumphant state, the word of truth sets before our eyes another city—a city of a very different character. "We have", says the prophet, "a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks. Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in" Isa 26:1,2. Of this city we also read, "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of his holiness. Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King" Ps 48:1,2. Now, if we examine what is said of this city, we shall see it is of a different character from that which John saw descending from God out of heaven, for it varies from it in several striking particulars.

1. It is "a strong city", having walls and bulwarks, whereas John's city was a glorious one, and without bulwarks.

2. It differs from it, secondly, in that the gates of the celestial city are never closed, for we read, "And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day; for there shall be no night there." But the gates of Isaiah's strong city are kept shut; or to what purpose would serve the command, "Open ye the gates?"

3. It differs also in another point, that the gates of Isaiah's city do not lie, as in John's foursquare, three gates on each side, so as to admit, so to speak, all comers from all quarters, intimating thereby that the elect of God enter into their triumphant state fully and freely from north, south, east and west. Neither gates nor walls of the strong city resemble the gates and walls of the glorious city; for instead of there being one wall all round, there are "walls and bulwarks", that is, wall within wall and bulwark within bulwark, as in some of our mediaeval cities or fortified towns, all which walls and all which gates must be passed through successively before we can arrive at the dungeon keep, the inner fortress, the royal palace where the King sits and rules in all his grace and beauty, and where he manifests himself to his subjects whom he admits into his gracious presence.

4. There is also another distinction between the glorious city which John saw in vision and the strong city spoken of by Isaiah. The city which John saw had angels at the gates, those heavenly ministrants who "gather the elect from the four winds of heaven" Mt 24:31, and who keep watch and ward over the heavenly city that "there shall in no wise enter into it anything that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie" Re 21:27. But the city which Isaiah speaks of had ministers, the sent servants of God, men of like passions with ourselves, standing at the gates, who were to lead the people into it; for it is they, and not the angelic host, who are bidden to "open the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in".

5. If, too, we take into consideration the context, we shall see a striking difference between the two cities. The city which John saw is described in connection with "a new heaven and a new earth"; with that blessed and glorious time when God shall wipe away all tears from the eyes; when "there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away" Re 21:4. But the city which Isaiah saw is connected with "the song which is to be sung in the land of Judah"; nor have the new heaven and the new earth yet appeared; for the Lord speaks, "Come, my people, enter thou into thy chambers and shut thy doors about thee; for behold the Lord cometh out of his

place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity" Isa 26:1 Isa 26:21. Thus I think I have shown you that these two cities widely differ.

Now if we look closely at the words of the text, we shall see in it some allusion to that strong city of which I have just spoken, for we read in it, "Go through, go through the gates." And what are these gates but the gates of entrance into the city, the "strong city" spoken of by Isaiah in the chapter before quoted?

But the question may now arise, What does this "strong city" symbolically represent? I believe that as the city which John saw in vision was a symbol of the Church in her triumphant condition above; so the "strong city" spoken of by Isaiah as having walls and bulwarks represents the Church in her militant, suffering state here below.

Here, then, at once we have a clue to the spiritual meaning of these cities-that they both represent the Church of God, but in two different aspects; the one representing her in her state of ultimate glory, the other in her state of present grace; the one the Church triumphant, the other the Church militant. It is, then, of the Church in her militant, not her triumphant state, that the Lord speaks in the text, where he says, "Go through, go through the gates; prepare ye the way of the people; cast up, cast up the highway; gather out the stones; lift up a standard for the people."

In opening the spiritual meaning of these words, I shall, as the Lord may enable,

I. First, show you the persons to whom this message is addressed.

II. Secondly, unfold in their order the contents of the message.

I. It is evident, from the very language of the text, that a commission is given to certain persons, and that they are commanded by the Lord to do a certain work. We shall, therefore, do well to inquire who the persons are who are thus commissioned, for until we can settle that point the message given to them must be covered with much obscurity. The word of God must be our only guide in this investigation; and under its clear, shining light, if we are enabled to see what those bright beams manifest, we shall not be at a loss to ascertain who they are; for I think we shall soon find them to be the servants of the Lord, the ministers of Jesus Christ. Yes, it is to these highly favoured men of God this commission is given, and it is they who have authority and power from him to do the work thus set before them. It was spoken in prophecy of our blessed Lord, "Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive; thou hast received gifts for men; yea, for the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell among them" Ps 68:18. This prophecy Paul quotes and opens: "Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men" Eph 4:8. The gracious Lord bade his disciples "tarry in the city of Jerusalem until they were endued with power from on high" Lu 24:49; and also assured them that they should be baptised with the Holy Ghost not many days hence Ac 1:5. The gift, then, and promise of the Holy Spirit was that which he received, and which he poured out, as Peter declared Ac 2:33.

Now the apostle, explaining the nature of these spiritual gifts which the Lord gave unto men after his ascension, says, "And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" Eph 4:11,12. Apostles and prophets have ceased. They laid the foundation of the Church of Christ, and their ministration then closed. But evangelists, pastors, and teachers still remain for the benefit of the Church of God; for the gospel is still to be preached; the saints are still to be perfected or established in the truth; the work of the ministry is still to be carried on; the body of Christ is still to be

edified or built up, for it is not yet complete. Thus in the Church of Christ there still remain some as "evangelists", who simply preach the gospel, without having a settled ministry; some are "pastors", settled over churches, and able to feed and rule them; and others "teachers", to whom the Lord has especially given a gift of instruction to open the truth and establish the people of God in it.

This is their general description; but if we look a little more closely into their character and office, as described in the word of truth, we shall observe them called by several titles, which we shall find perhaps especially applicable to the commission given them in our text.

1. They are sometimes then called "servants of God", or "servants of Jesus Christ". The apostle thus describes himself: "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle" Ro 1:1. So, writing to Titus, he says, "Paul, a servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ" Tit 1:1. In the same way, in another epistle, he associates with himself his son Timothy: "Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ" Php 1:1. Nor would he allow this commission of his to be lightly esteemed: "Let a man", he says, that is, every man, "so account of us, as of the ministers [or servants] of Christ" 1Co 4:1. Thus a minister is a servant of Christ. He is not a servant of man, for this is expressly forbidden. "Ye are bought with a price; be not the servants of men" 1Co 7:23. He is a servant of the living God. And though a servant for all, he is not servant to all or indeed to any one, for he is the Lord's servant, and therefore bound to obey not the commands of men but those of his heavenly Master; for what he does and what he suffers he does and suffers for his honour and glory, and not for his own or any other man's. It would be well if the churches would bear this in mind. Too many treat the minister as if he were their servant, and some almost as if he were their slave, ordering him about and directing him as if he were to be only the instrument of their will or of their caprice. He is, then, I repeat it, not a servant to the church, but of the church; for his services are spiritual services, and undertaken at the command of, and in subordination to a Master who has called him to the work, who maintains him in it, and supplies him with wisdom and ability for it; and thus though he labours willingly in the service of God, it is with an eye to his heavenly Master and for the good of his people, and not in slavish obedience to the dictates of man.

2. But the ministers of Christ are spoken of also as stewards, and especially "stewards of the mysteries of God" 1Co 4:1. To them is committed the care and keeping of the mysteries of the Gospel. The steward is the highest officer in the household. To his care is committed the management of his master's property; he has a general oversight over the whole house; he keeps the key of cupboard, pantry, closet, and wardrobe; receives the rents and sees to the state of the farms. So, in a spiritual sense, the servant of Christ has an oversight of the Church of Christ, for the Holy Ghost has made him an overseer to feed the Church of God. This he does ministerially by bringing forth out of the treasury of his heavenly Master things new and old, and as "allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel" 1Th 2:4, and as having "that good thing committed unto him" 2Ti 1:14, his office is carefully to guard, vigilantly protect, and, as occasion serves, to bring out for the food and clothing of the household the deep mysteries of heavenly truth.

3. They are also called "labourers". Thus our Lord called them: "The harvest is plenteous, but the labourers are few" Mt 9:37. So the apostle speaks of himself and his fellow-ministers: "We are labourers together with God;" and bids the Corinthians "submit themselves to every one that helped and laboured with him". And well indeed may the faithful servants of God be called "labourers", for no work is like theirs for hardship and anxiety, and, blessed be God, for reward and profit. They labour in word and doctrine for the good of God's people; they break up the fallow ground, and plough and sow, in hope that the Lord may crown their labours with wished for success, in giving them an abundant crop of souls saved and

sanctified as the fruit of their ministry.

4. But in our text the servants of Christ are addressed as invested with a peculiar commission, which we may simply call that of leaders; for we cannot doubt that it is to his servants that the Lord here speaks, as he does in other parts of Scripture; as, for instance, where he bids them, "Strengthen ye the weak hands and confirm the feeble knees" Isa 35:3; and again, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God." And this appears especially plain in the case of our text, for we read in a preceding verse, "I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night" Isa 62:6. Watchmen are evidently ministers, for they watch for the souls of God's people Heb 13:17. They are, then, represented in the text as going before God's people, leading the way, showing them the path in which they should walk, clearing away the difficulties which lie in the road, and opening the gates one after another, that the saints of the Most High following in their train, may successively go through each gate, and so entering into the heavenly city, there find rest and peace.

II. But this brings us to our second point, which is the message given them, the commission put into their hands, and the work which they have, with God's help and blessing, to perform. I shall, therefore, treat of these various parts of their heavenly commission severally, and open one by one what they have to do in the name and by the Spirit of the Lord.

Their first work is to "go through the gates"; and this is expressed in a very emphatic manner. The Lord doubles the command. He does not say merely, "Go through the gates," but, "Go through, go through;" as though he would charge this divine commission more warmly and impressively upon their conscience; as though he would give them more urgent and special directions, and lay more powerfully upon them the solemn duty and privilege of going through the gates that the people might follow as they lead, and enter with them into this blessed city. The servant of God, then, must himself first pass through each gate, and as he passes through, he throws it, so to speak, open, that the people of God may follow him as he goes before them and walk in the path in which he leads and points out.

1. Now what is the first gate that he and they must pass through? I have before shown you that the walls and gates of this strong city below are not like the walls and gates of the glorious city above, for the wall of that is foursquare and the gates are open night and day, free admission being given to the glorified saints to pass in. But this city is built upon a different plan. The walls are concentric, that is, circle within circle, wall within wall, and gate within gate: so that each gate in succession must be passed through before you can reach the other.

2. What, then, is the first gate which the servant of God has to lay open? The strait gate, that of which the Lord himself declares, "Strait is the gate"-that narrow gate which leads to life eternal, the gate of regeneration. Now there is no climbing over the wall, or creeping under it, or passing through it, except through the gate. He that climbs over is a thief and a robber; he that crawls under will be rejected as stealing into the city by a forbidden way, "digging through in the dark", like Job's adulterer Job 24:16; and the wall is too strong, too thick, too massive for any to break through.

There is only one way, then, into the city which is the strait and narrow gate of regeneration-a gate so strait that no man can pass through it with his clothes upon his back and with sin held fast in his arms. Sin must be laid down in its practice and power outside the walls, with every idol, however loved or hugged to the bosom, yea, and his own righteousness, too, must be stripped off, and he must enter naked, so to speak, for there is no room in this narrow portal for sin and self. Bunyan, in his immortal work, "Grace

Abounding," which I have sometimes said deserves to be written in letters of gold, gives us a striking account of a kind of vision which he had when his soul was passing through deep distress. He speaks of seeing the sunny side of a high mountain on which the saints of God were "refreshing themselves with the pleasant beams of the sun", whilst he was "shivering and shrinking in the cold, afflicted with frost, snow, and dark clouds". But on looking a little closer, he saw that there was a wall round this mountain through which he must pass before he could sun himself with those blessed denizens of the warm mountain side. So prayerfully and carefully he goes round this wall again and again to find an entrance, but sees none. At last he sees a very narrow gap, like a little doorway in the wall, through which he tries to pass; but he finds it so very narrow that all his attempts were vain to force his way in. But at length, with great striving, at first he got in his head, and after that "by a sideling striving", to use his own forcible expression, he got in his shoulders, and then his whole body, till at length he reached the warm mountain side, where he was comforted with the light and heat of their sun.

Now from this vision and the exceeding narrowness of the passage, he drew this conclusion, "That none could enter into life but those who were in downright earnest, and unless they left the wicked world behind them, for that here was only room for body and soul, but not for body and soul and sin." It is, indeed, a strait and narrow gate which none can see but those who have spiritual eyes, none feel for but those who have spiritual hands, and none pass through but those who have spiritual feet. This outer wall separates the city from the world, from sin, from error, from evil. All these, therefore, must be left behind, or we cannot pass through the first gate, the gate of regeneration, without going through which there is neither seeing nor entering into the kingdom of heaven.

2. What is the second gate? for our text says, "Go through, go through the gates." Why, the gate of faith. Do we not read of "God opening the door of faith to the Gentiles?" Ac 14:27. And when was this? When the apostles preached to them the word of life, and God by his Spirit and grace opened their hearts, as he opened the heart of Lydia, to receive it. Thus the apostle speaks of his preaching at Ephesus: "For a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries" 1Co 16:9; and again when he came to Troas to preach Christ's gospel he says, "A door was opened unto me of the Lord".

This door then, or gate, is the next to which we come when we have passed through the narrow gate of regeneration. And I may also add that we can only pass through the first gate by a light shining through the second: for as we are struggling in the very entry, a ray of heavenly light shines from the king, who sits enthroned in the midst of the city, in the very heart of it where his palace is, through each gate, as they are successively opened. Now just see the effect of this beam of heavenly light. Here is the soul, with much ado, much striving and exertion, sticking as it were in the very entrance of the city, half but not wholly through the first gate-the gate of regeneration, which is the gate of life. See the child of grace exercised with unbelief, feeling how strait and narrow the gate is through which he is striving to pass, doubting and fearing, yet longing to believe in the name of the only begotten Son of God, and to receive the end of his faith, even the salvation of his soul. Before him stands another gate, the gate of faith, but he cannot pass through it; for it seems shut in his face. Thus he is half in the first gate, and the second is still closed.

But now hear the commission given to the servants of the Lord, "Go through, go through the gates." He himself then must first have passed through; to him must the door of faith have been opened. He must be a believer himself in the only begotten Son of God, and as a believer, he goes through the gate. Now, standing as if in this very gate which he opens with his hand, he holds up the Son of God as the object of faith, preaching the Gospel with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven, and the Lord the Spirit blesses the testimony with unction and power to the heart of this struggling one in the strait and narrow gate. Faith

is raised up in his soul; the door of it is opened in his heart; he receives the testimony; the gospel comes not in word only, but also in power; love comes to his aid, for "faith worketh by love"; and, drawn by its gentle cords, he passes through the gate by believing in the only begotten Son of God, and receiving him into his heart as "the way, the truth, and the life".

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