

## Introduction:

Sadly, when many think of “church,” they think of something to go to. They think of it like a club. It has officers who try to guide the group. It has dues we beg for weekly. It has minimum attendance requirements. It seeks volunteers to accomplish various goals. Granted, most see it a little differently than that. After all, this club is the doorway to heaven. They want to go to heaven (or for some they just don’t want to go to hell) so they want to do just what it takes to maintain “membership in good standing” so they can get that ultimate goal of eternal bliss. Of course, no one here has such a low view of Christ’s church, but I’m not sure we, myself included, have the full picture of what God has invited us to be part of in this church He has established. I’d like for us to see the great story God has graciously invited us into by inviting us into His church. It is the story of God, His people, His sanctuaries, His mountain, His city. We will only be able to hit some highlights, but I hope we will be able to see the amazing opportunity and goal we have as part of His church and part of this congregation. Further, I hope we will be able to see some practical applications for our involvement in it right now.

## Discussion:

### I. The Great Story of the City of God.

- A. *The Garden of Eden—The First City*: If we truly want to see the fantastic story of God’s city, we have to go back to the beginning. In **Genesis 2:7-8**, when God had created the world, He planted a garden. And he placed the man he had created in the midst of that garden. Certainly, this does not appear to be any kind of city we are familiar with. But notice what Eden is called in **Ezekiel 28:13, 14, 16**. As God through Ezekiel gives a prophecy against the king of Tyre by relating him to Adam in the Garden, He says the garden was “the mountain of God.” Further, He says the king of Tyre/Adam defiled “your sanctuaries.” These statements call to mind the Jerusalem temple on Mt. Zion. Eden was God’s first sanctuary, that is, the first holy meeting place between God and man. Though it is a different kind of city than we are used to, it is still the first city of God (see **Psalms 46:4; 87:3**). In **Genesis 1:28; 2:15**, we see God’s goal for this garden city and man’s job in the city. Adam was to work and keep it, at the same time multiplying, subduing the earth, and filling the earth with this garden city. Do you see what Adam’s job was? It was to build the city of God, to spread its borders throughout the earth. There was no city wall because Adam was its guardian and protector (**Genesis 2:15**; as we’ve learned in another lesson the word translated “keep” means “to guard,” see **Genesis 3:24**—this is the same word used for the cherubim with flaming sword to “guard” the way to the tree of life). Sadly, Adam failed in his duty to guard and serve the garden city of God. He allowed the serpent to enter and tempt, he allowed his wife to defile, and instead of serving the Creator, he served the creature. God’s garden city was defiled and man was cast out. Ultimately, instead of this garden spreading to fill the earth, Adam’s sin spread and had dominion over the earth and so God destroyed it with the flood of **Genesis 6-8**.
- B. *The City and Tower of Babel—The Exception to the Rule*: In **Genesis 9:1**, when the flood subsided and Noah left the Ark, God did not ask him to build a city. Instead, He asked Noah and his sons to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (ESV). However, Noah’s descendants did not heed this instruction. In **Genesis 11:1-9**, instead of spreading out, many of them gathered in the plain of Shinar and said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves...” (ESV). We often talk about the building of the Tower of Babel, but do you see that this is also the building of the City of Babel? In **vs. 5**, the Lord came down not only to see the tower, but also the city. Further, when God confused their languages and scattered the people, notice the text doesn’t say they left off building the tower, but “they left off building the city” (**vs. 8**, ESV). This city is the exception to the rule. That is, there is no doubt, God wants a city. There is no doubt, God’s story includes a city where His name is caused to dwell and His people are gathered to meet Him. Ultimately, He plans to build such a city and use men and women to build it. But this was not the city He asked for. Notice, the goal of these men was not to honor God, but to make a name for themselves and to purposefully counter God’s will of filling the earth. This was a man-made city. It was, if you will, the anti-city, and the tower was the anti-temple. God defeated it.
- C. *The City of David—A City Provided by God*: In time, God separated out a man named Abraham and called his family and descendants into covenant with Him. They took refuge in Egypt, grew into a large but enslaved

nation. God delivered them with mighty hand, miraculous signs, and great wonders. And, despite their sins, eventually brought them into the Promised Land. While the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness and beginning the conquest of the land, God let them know within the land, there was going to be a place where He was going to make His name to dwell, it would be the meeting place between man and God (see **Deuteronomy 12:10-14**). While initially that was Shiloh (**Joshua 18:1; Jeremiah 7:12**), ultimately Mt. Zion, Jerusalem, the city of David was that place. Here is the really powerful thing. In **Deuteronomy 6:10**, God explained that in the Promised Land, God was giving them a land filled with cities they did not build. While we recognize, of course, materially speaking these were cities built by other men, God's point is they were cities provided to God's people by God Himself. Therefore, in **II Samuel 5:7; I Chronicles 11:5**, when David took the stronghold of Zion, the city of David, he was given a city by God. Yet, notice what he did in **II Samuel 5:9** and **I Chronicles 11:8**. He built up the city around that stronghold provided by God. Like Adam, David's job was to build God's city. David brought the Ark of the Covenant into the city and eventually Solomon built the House of God in that city. But ultimately, what happened to that city? The kings of Judah made it a city of idols and God destroyed it (**II Chronicles 36:19**). God's city, God's sanctuary, the place where God met with His people and made His name to dwell was destroyed because God's people ceased to build up God's city but made it a city of idols.

- D. *The City of Manasseh—An Object Lesson*: Interestingly, if we back up just a little before the first destruction of Jerusalem. We meet a king named Manasseh. He was one of the wicked kings. In fact, it was because of his sins in which he led Judah that ultimately she was destroyed (see **II Kings 24:3**), because his descendants kept coming back to those sins. However, in **II Chronicles 33:10-13**, God had Manasseh taken to Babylon by the Assyrian king and placed in captivity. While in captivity, Manasseh humbled himself greatly before God, entreated God, and knew that the Lord was God. So God restored him to his throne in Jerusalem. But notice what Manasseh did in **II Chronicles 33:14-16**. He built up the city of God and restored the sanctuary of God. This was an object lesson for the Jews taken captive to Babylon. What were they to do when they humbled themselves, entreated God, and were delivered from Babylon? They were to restore God's sanctuary and rebuild God's city. It was God's plan to have a city for His people, for His sanctuary, for His name to dwell. What was Manasseh's job? What was the people's job? To build God's city.
- E. *The City of Nehemiah—Rebuilding God's City*: In **Nehemiah 1:1-3**, almost a century after Cyrus had allowed the Jews to return to the Promised Land, a Jewish cupbearer to King Artaxerxes received terrible news. His brother informed him the city of God was still in ruins. The wall was broken and unrepaired. The place where God was to make His name to dwell was unfinished and it was a shame to God and His people. Despite the object lesson of Manasseh, the Israelites had not rebuilt God's city. If I'm correct about my understanding of the timeline, there had been an attempt to rebuild the walls earlier during Artaxerxes's reign, but it failed (cf. **Ezra 4:7-23**). Nehemiah sought the favor of God and the king to rebuild the city and he received favor from both (**Nehemiah 1:4-2:8**). He returned to Jerusalem. And despite opposition from without and discord within, Nehemiah and the Israelites rebuilt the wall in 52 days (**Nehemiah 6:15**). **Nehemiah 6:16** demonstrates that the enemies of God's people were afraid because it was obvious God was working with them. The problem, of course, Jerusalem did not recognize her visitation when Jesus came into her (**Luke 19:41-44**) and therefore, in 70 AD, God shook out His city and destroyed it at the hands of the Romans (cf. **Hebrews 12:25-29**).
- F. *The New Jerusalem—The Ultimate City of God*: Back up in that passage in **Hebrews**. In **Hebrews 12:18-24**, God explains that the destruction of Jerusalem was not the end of His city, His sanctuary, His mountain. Instead, it was an indication of a replacement. God had established the city on His mountain that was actually the ultimate fulfillment of His plan. Notice especially what it says in **Hebrews 12:22**. We "have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (ESV). When have we done that? When we come to "the assembly (church) of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" (ESV). I know this has been a long way to get here, but do you see what this means? When we come into Christ's church, we are not joining a club with regular meetings. We are entering the city of God. If that is the case, what do you think is our role? It is the same as Adam's, as David's, as Manasseh's, as Nehemiah's. Our role is to build this city, not on rock and roll, but on Jesus Christ. We are not to be like the builders of that anti-city and anti-temple, the men of Babel. We must not build to make a name for ourselves. We must build to bring honor and glory to God. We must be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth with God's city. That is what we are invited to be part of. Isn't that amazing?

## II. A Building Project under Attack.

- A. It is all well and good to realize what an amazing history we are invited to participate in. However, if we leave it there we might have an unnecessarily rosy picture of what is going on. We might think we can simply keep showing up on Sundays and we are fully fulfilling our role. Let's back up and notice what happened in Nehemiah's day as a parallel to where we are. Like us, they were building the city of God by His power.
- B. In **Nehemiah 4**, the enemies of God opposed the building of the city. As I said earlier, if I understand the timeline properly and my assessment of the letter in **Ezra 4:7-23** is right, then these same enemies (or their predecessors) had been able to stop the building of the city less than 20 years earlier.
1. In **Nehemiah 4:1-3**, these enemies mocked and ridiculed the Hebrews and their work. They belittled them and tried to discourage them, questioning their ability and their work. But in **Nehemiah 4:6**, the Hebrews kept working and they built the wall to half its height because the people had a mind to work.
  2. When these enemies realized their taunts didn't work, they stepped up their game and decided to physically attack the builders (**Nehemiah 4:7-8**). Instead of fainting because of discouragement about the amount of work and these enemies (**Nehemiah 4:10**), the Israelites prayed to God and set a guard (**Nehemiah 4:9**). Nehemiah divided them up by their clans, and stationed them around the only half constructed wall and charged them not to be afraid but to fight for their brothers, sons, daughters, wives, and homes (**Nehemiah 4:14**).
  3. In **Nehemiah 4:15**, the enemies learned that their plans were thwarted and the builders got back to work. However, the threat of attack was imminent. In **Nehemiah 4:15-20**, they kept working but they stayed prepared for attack. Half worked on construction. Half were ready for the fight. However, even those who were building, labored with one hand, but kept their sword in the other. They had watchmen and a plan to run to the trumpet sound if someone attacked.
- C. That is the situation we are in. We are in the midst of an amazing building project. We are, by God's grace and power, building the city of God. But we are in a building project that is under attack. We have an enemy that is striving to discourage, belittle, mock, and stop us. He will stop at nothing to hinder our efforts to build. His army is frightening and powerful as seen in **Ephesians 6:11-12**. Granted, this warfare we are talking about is not a physical one. It is not going to be waged by practicing concealed carry in our assemblies. We are talking about a spiritual attack (cf. **II Corinthians 10:4-5**). But this attack is going on as surely as if someone had sent a threat to walk into this assembly and gun us down one by one. Let's think about the attacks.
1. *Satan is attacking us through a focus on self.* Everywhere around us, we are pummeled with a message of personal rights, self-esteem, self-image, self-confidence. Christians who are selfish may still show up "at church," but come to see what they can get out of it, not how they can serve. Satan tries to get us focused on what we are accomplishing, making a name for ourselves in business, education, sometimes even in church. But it is still a focus on self and it is an attack that is killing us. Then there is the simple individualistic mindset that wages war against being a real, working part of a congregation. It is this attack via self, selfishness, and self-centeredness that leads to almost every other sin. It leads to immorality as I try to get pleasure for self. It leads to rage as I lash out against anyone who interferes with self. It leads to covetousness as I want to gain more and more for self. And on the list goes. When we fall to this, we aren't building God's city, we are rebuilding Babel in our own hearts.
  2. *Satan is attacking us through the internet and social media.* How many attacks are coming through that? There are many blessings that can come through the World Wide Web. However, the attacks are intense and many of us are falling to them without even realizing it. There are the obvious attacks of the ease of internet porn. We rarely talk about it, but just as dangerous is online gambling. There is the attack on our time as most social media and online gaming sucks us into a time vortex that simply keeps us from building. No doubt, these attacks destroy parts of God's city. Then there are the not so obvious attacks. In social media, the pull to be our very own celebrity with our very own following is a powerful lure as we compete with one another for "likes," "shares," and "retweets." Then there is the repeated social media boasting despite Jesus telling us not to let our left hand know what our right hand is doing when we are doing good deeds (**Matthew 6:3**). Christians constantly and continually "sharing what God is doing through me" on Facebook and Twitter, posting pictures of good-deed-involvement on Instagram. Then there is the divisive arguing over every topic under the sun, whether the Confederate flag, the presidential election, Syrian refugees, climate change, and on and on the list goes as Satan chips away at the city of God through our endless online arguing. Again, when this happens, we aren't building God's city, but are rebuilding Babel.

3. *Satan is attacking us through the postmodern worldview.* Sadly, even Christians are buying into the “that’s just your interpretation” mindset that acts like as long as someone kind-of loves Jesus, how they interpret Scripture really doesn’t matter. Even if we don’t actually believe that, we often practice it, not wanting to offend anyone by challenging them to surrender their lives to Christ and Christ alone, and bring glory to Him by following His Word. We must keep in mind that in the New Jerusalem, the heavenly temple, the people are not only the builders, we are the building material. When we cave to this postmodernism of live and let live because who are we to tell someone they might be wrong and need to change, we have put down our tools and ceased to build.
4. *Satan is attacking us through unnamed doubts.* In any system based on faith, doubt is going to be an ever present enemy. Let’s face it. We all have doubts of various kinds. What Satan does is convince us we aren’t ever allowed to talk about our doubts or convinces us that if someone ever raises a doubt, instead of helping them work through it we shut them down. This develops a culture that doesn’t allow communication, openness, and honesty. What happens again and again is someone’s unnamed doubts grows silently and quietly until it is overwhelming, and they drop out. Harkening back to the internet and social media, it doesn’t help that any person with doubts can find a community of fellow doubters online who will feed the destructive doubt. This is the exact opposite of building the city, it is the decay of the city.
5. *Satan is attacking us with error.* This is probably the one thing we all think of when we think of attacks on Christ’s church. Perversion of Scripture abounds in our world. Further, ease of access to error and false-teaching is at an all-time high. It is piped into our cars via radio, our homes via television, our phones via the internet. Gone are the days of being able to shelter our children from error. Gone are the days of being able to protect a congregation from hearing false teaching. It is everywhere and easily accessible. Further, Satan, who can pose as an angel of light, is a master at twisting just enough to make the teaching vain and useless, but not enough to make it obviously so. The sad part about this attack is many who succumb to it don’t even know they’ve been attacked because Satan makes it look so positive. But if we succumb to error, we will build and build and build and in the end find out we built the wrong city.
6. *Satan is attacking us with misdirection.* Akin to the error above, Satan is attacking us with seemingly good works that actually distract us from the work of spreading the gospel. More and more, the social gospel is holding sway, especially with the younger generation. There was a time when Christians understood that we could feed someone, clothe someone, house someone, give someone a drink but if we didn’t share the gospel with them, we didn’t do them any good and did not show them true love. Sadly, now many believe we can teach someone the gospel, but if we don’t give them a meal we haven’t loved them and haven’t done them any good. This is a hard concept to grasp because it so prevalent in our present culture, but social and benevolence ministries are not the purpose of the gospel. Yes, Christians are to be full of good works, but Satan is destroying the true effectiveness of Christ’s churches as more and more get distracted from the saving gospel by the social gospel. We must remember Jesus came to save sinners, not society. If we are not careful, we will find we are building man’s cities and not God’s.
7. *Satan is attacking with moralizing.* I know this will seem odd to most of us. Certainly, we as Christians are to be moral people. But Jesus didn’t die on the cross simply to make moral people. He died on the cross to save us from the fact that we have all been immoral people. In fact, do you realize that you don’t have to be a Christian to be a pretty moral person? Most Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists are pretty moral. The fact is many atheists are pretty moral. In fact, some are more moral than many professing to be Christians. Relatively few people of any religious persuasion ever kill or steal. Most of all religious persuasions believe it is wrong to lie and cheat on your spouse. Sadly, when we make Christianity nothing more than being more moral, we are actually denying the gospel. When we reduce the preaching of Jesus to moralizing and advice for better living, we’ve lost the gospel and ceased building God’s city.
8. *Satan is attacking with religious therapy and spiritual self-help.* Too many Christians are turning Christianity into little more than religious therapy and spiritual self-help. The gospel is seen as the means to fix my marriage, help me raise my kids, get a good job, have a nice retirement, be successful in business, develop a better self-esteem. Do you realize that you do not need Jesus for any of these things? There are folks with good marriages, great kids, good jobs, business success, healthy retirements, and great self-esteem who don’t even believe in God. Don’t misunderstand, I’m not saying God doesn’t often bless His people with great things like these because they follow His good direction. And certainly, when you follow God’s good directions for your life, many of those things will happen as a natural by-product. What I am saying is that isn’t why God’s city is being built. Jesus died to save us from the wrath of God, not from

financial ruin, homelessness, unhappiness, or even divorce. When we allow this to happen, we have abandoned the true gospel for a mediocre substitute. We have abandoned the foundation of a great city for a weak foundation that will fall under the enemy's attacks.

9. *Satan is attacking every one of us and he is attacking everywhere.* Please understand, with these attacks and many more, Satan is attacking you. He is attacking your spouse. He is attacking your children. He is attacking your parents. He is attacking your siblings. He is attacking friends. He is attacking the person sitting next to you in the pew. He is attacking everywhere. He is attacking in our schools, on our jobs, in our homes, and even in our congregations. We wonder why most churches aren't growing. We wonder why so many leave Christ's church for error or even for atheism. We wonder why so few young people stick with Christ once they leave home. Brothers and sisters, it is not accident. It is because we have an enemy who is attacking and taking every opportunity to destroy the city of God. Every person you can think of who has left Christ and gone to error that is a place where the enemy attacked and we didn't overcome.

### III. Building and Fighting Together

- A. Brothers and sisters, this is why it is so important for us to realize that being part of this church is so much more than being part of a club with dues, meeting requirements, and volunteer requests. We are a building army. We are an army corp of engineers, if you will. We are like those Hebrews under Nehemiah. And with that in mind, I'd like us to see one more thing before we are through.
- B. Look again at how Nehemiah and Israel built the wall and faced the attacks.
  1. Notice in **Nehemiah 3** how the wall was being built. Do you see that no one was trying to build the whole city by himself? Rather, various groups worked together to build up certain sections of the walls. In **3:1**, the priests built a section. In **3:2**, the men of Jericho built a section. Various individuals are mentioned in **3:2-4**, but I doubt we are to see a single individual working alone there but rather to see a leader of a group of builders. But then in **3:5**, we see the Tekoites building. In **3:6**, we see a group of men working on a gate. We could go through the whole chapter like this, but do you get the point? No one did it all, and no one worked alone. Groups gathered together to build.
  2. Notice what they did in **Nehemiah 4** when there was opposition and attack. First, they prayed (**Nehemiah 4:4-5, 9**). They knew there was no victory apart from God. But then notice what they did to set a guard. In **Nehemiah 4:13**, Nehemiah stationed the people by clans. Again, no one was doing all the fighting, and no one was expected to fight alone. They were stationed in groups. I imagine that many of them were stationed by the section of wall their group was building, some of which was right in front of some of their homes.
- C. What about us?
  1. Brothers and sisters, we must not be satisfied thinking that floating through life trying to avoid some really egregious sin (or for some trying to avoid being caught for the egregious sin you've already been committing) is all we are called to do. God has not brought us into His church or into this congregation to float, simply attending while our lives are focused on education, entertainment, recreation, career, finances, or making it to retirement. God has brought us into this church to build His city. But this city is under attack.
  2. What do we need to do? We need to pray. We need to stand watch. We need to prepare to defend. Again, this isn't about physical warfare. So I'm not talking about taking a martial arts class or getting your concealed carry license. We're talking about banding together with other brethren to build and defend this city. We're talking about developing relationships with other Christians in order to build a gate here and a section of wall there. We are talking about standing shoulder to shoulder with a "clan" of our brothers and sisters ready to defend the city. We're talking about having a mind to run to where we here the trumpet's cry of attack against our brethren and ready to lift up the attacked, wounded, and fallen.
  3. As a congregation, the Christians that meet on Livingston Avenue must take seriously this goal to build the city of God, defend the city of God, and spread the borders of the city of God to fill the world. At the risk of trivializing this great story by making a pitch for involvement in one of our processes. The shepherds want me to tell you that we have established our H2H meetings because we take seriously this need to band together to build and defend God's city. We are growing them as quickly as we can develop and appoint new leaders for them. In our last session, we had about 48% involvement. We'd like to increase that to at least 55%. We've been able to add another meeting to accommodate that.
  4. Please understand what these groups are. They are not just another program vying for your time. They are an integral part to building the city of God. They are taking this example from Nehemiah seriously.

They are recognizing we are under attack and we need these serving, loving, challenging relationships to defend our part of the wall. I'd like to encourage you as Nehemiah did his builders. "Do not be afraid of the enemy. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sisters, your sons, your daughters, your husbands, your wives, and your homes." Please don't say, "Oh it's hard to make to another weekly meeting." Please don't say, "Oh, those questions in the program are too challenging." Please don't say, "Oh, I don't need this deeper relationship with any of my brethren." Please don't say, "Oh, my kids are already involved in too much stuff." You, your family, your kids are under attack and there isn't anything else you can get your family involved in that is going to help them overcome these attacks like grouping up with a "clan" in this congregation, strengthening and encouraging one another. Okay, I know I'm about to get in trouble here. But, please don't say, "Oh, I'm an FC student. I get all of that in the college sponsored studies, etc." I know those of you who are students at FC are getting a great deal of spirituality and spiritual training there. But you aren't getting training in how to be an active and effective part of a congregation there. In a couple of years, dorm life will be over, but I hope congregational life will continue for you, whether here or in another congregation. And as much as many of us here love that school, we must remember it is not the city of God, Christ's church is. And this congregation is a microcosmic representation of that city and we want to help build you up as part of that city of God and we need your help in building us up as part of that city of God. Please take part as much as you can in what we are doing to build that city.

5. A new session of our H2H meetings will be starting in just a month, the week of February 21. We are opening our sign-ups for those meetings today. As soon as this assembly is over, you will be free to sign up for any openings in those meetings. Be aware that folks who participated in the last session and asked to continue in the same meeting were automatically signed up for the same meeting. Don't be upset when you see names typed into the sign-up sheet as if they are getting special treatment. However, I will say to those who indicated they wanted to stay in the same group, I'm human and mistakes happen. You will definitely want to go make sure your name made it on the appropriate list.

#### Conclusion:

See what this city looks like when completed. Read **Revelation 21:1-4; 21:10-22:5**. The question is not whether or not the city will be completed. By the grace and power of God, like its great material counterpart of old, the New Jerusalem will be completed. However, unlike its material counterpart of old, it will never be destroyed, but will endure forever. The question is whether or not you will really be part of the building? Are you involved in the construction of this city or are you just along for the ride? Are you picking up a trowel and carrying your sword? Are you standing side by side with your brethren? Are you laboring alongside some group of fellow-builders? Are you listening for the trumpet sound that calls you to the side of your brethren that need support, defense, and strength? Or are you just "going to church"? If everyone in this congregation were building just like you are, what kind of city wall would it be? Please don't misunderstand, I'm not trying to suggest that if you don't sign up for a H2H group you aren't building. I know that isn't true. That issue is far more complex than just one aspect of our congregational work. I simply wanted to use this lesson to express what an important part of our city-building work is being accomplished by our H2H meetings. And I want to encourage you that if at all possible, you make the necessary sacrifices to help us build in this way. Praise the Lord, God is working with and through those who step up with a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other. When we work on building this city wall, our enemies and opponents will fear because they will only be able to attribute our success in building to God (cf. **Nehemiah 6:16**). You may not think your work can amount to much, but with God working with us, we will succeed. So the question is, will you build?