

Buzz King

buzz@BuzzKing.com

BuzzKing.com

303 437 7419

Acts 1:8-9, edited for readability, **English Standard Version**.

⁸You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”⁹And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

Jerusalem: A Walk with God.

This is going to be a bit different of a message. I want to draw a picture today – of Jerusalem and its history. So please sit back and relax and listen. To motivate us, or at least to motivate me, as a boy growing up in a strongly Christian environment, I used to wonder about Jerusalem as if it were some fanciful place up in Heaven or in another galaxy. When I finally went to Jerusalem as an adult, it was indeed both a deeply spiritual and a very magical experience. I was where Jesus taught in the Temple as a boy. Wow!

Ancient Jerusalem, the ruins of which are still there, was located atop a watershed between the Judean hills to the west and the Judean desert to the east. It's at an elevation of about 2,600 feet. On the eastern edge of the city is the Kidron Valley, which separates it from the Mount of Olives. On the western edge of the city is the Hinnom Valley. The walls and massive gates of what is called the Old City date to the Ottoman (or Turkish) period of domination during the sixteenth century. The Old City is

divided into four quarters, the Muslim, the Christian, the Armenian, and the Jewish. The Old City is home to important sites, including the Temple Mount, which was the site of the two ancient Israelite and Jewish temples, the Western Wall where Jews still come to pray to this day, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which many believe to be the site where Jesus was crucified, and the Muslim shrine called the Dome of the Rock. The Dome of the Rock is built on the ancient Temple Mount, where the two great Temples once existed. Much of Jerusalem is built from a gleaming whitish stone that is still available as an inexpensive building material, and when you stand on a hillside to the east and look down at it, the view is unbelievably stunning.

Jerusalem has a very long history. Stepping back in time, archeological evidence suggests that the area that is now Jerusalem was inhabited as far back as 4000 B.C., but some scholars put the date at 6000 B.C. There is a great debate about its most ancient name. Many believe that Jerusalem has always had a name that is suggestive of its current name. There is a city that might have been Jerusalem that is referenced in an ancient Egyptian document; that city is called Rushalimum. The first reference that people are confident refers to the city gives Jerusalem the name Ursalim. But other scholars put the oldest known name as Jebusite, a city inhabited most likely by Canannites. Later the Philistines arrived.

But ignoring names, clearly what is now Jerusalem was certainly settled by the early Bronze age, about 3000 B.C. By 1800 B.C., the settlement had fortifications and a system for maintaining fresh water. When Israelites arrived in Canaan, Jerusalem

was very, very small. During and after King David's reign, the city began to expand. Solomon, David's son, built the first Temple. In the 8th century B.C., the city expanded significantly. After the Assyrians were unable to take the city in 701 B.C., the Babylonians succeeded in conquering it – and destroying much of it – in 586 B.C. They took a good portion of the inhabitants into exile, but the king of Persia allowed them to return in 538 B.C. The Persians rebuilt much of the city. True political stability didn't come until about 301 B.C. when the successors of Alexander the Great dramatically grew the population. It was then that Jerusalem began to become a major urban center. King Herod, the older Herod, who was a Jew, from about 37 to 4 B.C., rebuilt Jerusalem as a Greco-Roman city. He had the Temple and its massive surrounding complex rebuilt, using Jewish, near Eastern, Greek, and Roman architectural techniques. Jerusalem then became arguably the most beautiful city in the greater eastern Mediterranean area, and it had perhaps eight giant gates. Herod built a massive royal palace. A large Roman garrison was constructed in Jerusalem.

At the time of Jesus, the population was over 80,000, perhaps as much as 120,000, and during festival times when Jews made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the population could swell to 200,000. It was a huge city in its day. And, at the time of Jesus, it was still under the domain of the vast Roman Empire, which at its height stretched from what is now Great Britain to north Africa. The Temple in Jerusalem was visited by hundreds of thousands of pilgrims every year. Much of the reason why Jerusalem was a famous

international city was the result of the religious fervor of millions of Jews who lived throughout the Roman Empire. It was their holy city. The dominant languages in Jerusalem were Aramaic, which Jesus spoke, Hebrew, the religious language of the Jews, and Greek, which was spoken by about 15% of the population, generally the most highly educated people. The famous Roman scientist Pliny the Elder called Jerusalem *“the most famous city in the East”*. The primary source of pride and prestige for the city was the Second Temple, the only place where Jews could offer animal sacrifice. Religious visitors, who came to celebrate Passover and other Jewish holidays, were charged a Temple tax, and this influx of cash, along with money from commerce that was carried on in the city, allowed numerous giant residences and public buildings to be constructed. Archeological excavations have uncovered frescoed walls, mosaic floors, imported pots and dishes, and numerous other luxury goods from around the Roman Empire - and from outside the Roman Empire. Jerusalem was famous across the entire Empire.

Let’s look at a passage from the Hebrew Scriptures, Psalm 122, verses 1 to 7:

¹ *I was glad when they said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the LORD!”*
² *Our feet have been standing within
your gates, O Jerusalem!*
³ *Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together,*
⁴ *to which the tribes go up,
the tribes of the LORD,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the LORD.*

⁵ *There thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David.*

⁶ *Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!*

“May they be secure who love you!

⁷ *Peace be within your walls and security within your towers!”*

Psalm 122 is one of fifteen Psalms that are subtitled Psalms of “Ascent”; these fifteen appear to be prayers offered by pilgrims headed toward Jerusalem. The theme of 122 is that Jerusalem is the site of the House of the Lord. It praises the safety and security that Jerusalem offers - and the central role it has in the lives of believers.

Now, let’s look at the New Testament, the Gospel of Luke, 2:41-52:

⁴¹ *Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover.*

⁴² *And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. ⁴³ And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, ⁴⁴ but supposing him to be in the group they went a day’s journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, ⁴⁵ and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, “Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress.” ⁴⁹ And he said to them, “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart. ⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.*

Mary and Joseph have made the trip to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. It’s a pilgrimage that they made every year – which showed the depth of their devotion to God. The celebration would last seven days. But after three days, they realize that they’ve lost track of their kid, Jesus. This isn’t as ridiculous as it sounds, and it doesn’t mean

that they were crappy parents. A pilgrimage was a highly spiritual and social experience. If for no other reason than safety from robbers, people made the trip in large caravans, and adults regularly looked after each other's children for days on end, and they assumed that Jesus was with someone else. When they confront their boy, he says to them: *"Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"* Jesus is saying hey, I'm here in Jerusalem, the home of our faith, the home of God, and so, of course, I couldn't pass up being in the Temple. Later in the passage we are told that because of this experience, *"Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man."* We see that Jesus' ministry starts when he is a boy. And it starts in Jerusalem, the gleaming city that is the home of God.

Here's one last Bible passage, from Acts, 1:8-9. I edited this a bit for readability:

⁸You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."⁹ And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

Jesus has been crucified and has been resurrected. He has spent forty days training the Apostles to carry on without him and visiting with other people. Jesus is about to ascend into Heaven, leaving the Apostles with the task of spreading the new faith. They will bring the teachings of Jesus to almost the farthest reaches of the known civilized world. Jesus says to them: *"you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of*

the earth.” Notice that although they will spread out in all directions, their center of focus is and will remain Jerusalem – the home of their faith. The movement of Christianity across civilization starts in Jerusalem.

As a boy, I imagined myself walking in the footsteps of Jesus, of the Apostles, of Paul the evangelist. Everything began in Jerusalem, and wherever they went, I went. Whatever they saw, I saw, and whomever they spoke to, I could speak to them, as well. Because of them, because of where I was, I could speak to God loudly and clearly, and God would answer back. Remember that the Jews of that time had a strong sense of God being present, not so much within them, like we believe, but within the walls of the great Temple. But most of all, when I saw myself in Jerusalem, I was right where it all started, where the faith that formed my core was first formed itself.

Imagine those pilgrims who poured into Jerusalem each year for Passover and the six other great festivals. The travelers, as they entered the area, would make a long, difficult ascent from Jericho to the Holy City of Jerusalem. It ended near the Mount of Olives, and then they were presented with a vista that was totally amazing. Across the Kidron Valley was Jerusalem. Many would stand on the Mount of Olives, staring down at the gleaming stone city, dominated by the bright gold-embellished Temple. The Temple stood high above the Old City, at the center of a gigantic white stone platform. It was in the most holy spot in the Jewish world.

Once people got into the city, they would find a maze of dusty streets. The place

was packed with people. There were open-air shops, filled with potters, bakers, tailors, carpenters, and metal workers. People sold fruits, vegetables, fish, jewelry. You could buy local wine to drink. During the time of Jesus, there were about 500 synagogues in the city. Most of the city was crowded and noisy, the streets lined with one-and-two-story houses. There were also broad avenues outside the poorer parts of the city, with elaborate Roman style markets. This is where people could buy luxury goods of perfumes, silk, gold, silver, ivory, incense. Many of the merchants of luxury goods were quite wealthy. For one thing, they would supply the Temple with priestly vestments, incense, special wood for altar fires, and sacred ornaments. They would also ship their wares all over the Empire.

Visitors in town for Passover would find lodging in an inn or in a private home. But many would stay in tents outside the city or in homes in nearby villages like Bethany. This is where Jesus and his Apostles stayed during the tail end of his ministry on Earth. But here we are, right now, in Jerusalem. All of our Scripture, Old and New, is centered there. The place still exists and is now a highly modern city with the ancient Old City in its core. It's been partly destroyed and rebuilt, over and over, conquered and reconquered since before the time of Christ, and many times after the life of Christ. It was a land occupied largely by Muslims for quite some time. The new city of Jerusalem has exploded in size since World War II. The Old City is at the base of the foothills, stunning in its age and beauty. It's difficult for us as Americans to imagine a place that has been

continuously occupied, and held high as a holy place, for several millennia.

As a boy, I saw myself there. My faith was a very real, tangible thing to me. It wasn't just that I believed. My very core was my belief in God, in Jesus, in the knowledge that I must serve God and others, that love was the most important thing that humans have to offer to other humans, that there was never a reason to worry, that we need to turn to God when somehow, we can't keep worry away, that we must uphold what is good and fight what is evil, but that in the end it is God who judges, that I must tell the truth and keep my word, that when I give to the church and to other people, I do it in secret and not so that others will think a lot of me, that I should affirm others and always try to speak well of others, that I can do so much more as a person if I have faith, and that whatever gifts God gives me, I must use them in his name. And most of all, at my core was the belief that God forgives, and that we can renew ourselves at any time, and that we must also forgive. I could believe all of this all the more strongly as I saw myself standing in the center of God's city, of Jerusalem.

This sanctuary is our little Jerusalem, our holy city, the place where we come each Sunday morning to talk to God. To the Jews, Jerusalem was the home of God, and later, to the followers of Christ, it was the symbolic home of God, a place where they could make pilgrimages and greet God. It was an extremely expensive trip, and some Jews could only do it once in their lifetimes. But we are free to come here every week. Of course,

God is everywhere, and not just here in this church. In the form of the Holy Spirit, God lives within each of us. In truth, the ancient Jews knew that God wasn't only in Jerusalem, that God ruled the entire world, and we know that God is within us no matter how far we stray from this church. But when we are here, we can stand where Jesus, the Apostles, Paul the evangelist, and the first followers of Christ stood. We can be present for the birth of our faith any time we want. Imagine yourself moving outward, in the footsteps of those first evangelists. Let your life be a walk with God. Amen.