

The Nature of the City

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the nature of the heavenly Jerusalem and the transformative journey of believers towards becoming a city built by God.

Scripture: Hebrews 11:9

Topics: "Spiritual Preparation", "Heavenly Jerusalem"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of the new Jerusalem as a divine city built by God, contrasting it with earthly cities that fail to satisfy God's nature. He reflects on Abraham's faith in seeking a city whose builder is God, highlighting the spiritual journey of believers who are part of this heavenly city. Sparks warns of the urgency of preparing for the imminent changes in the world, suggesting that God is actively building His Son into believers, shaping them for eternity. He encourages the understanding that the heavenly Jerusalem represents a people conformed to Christ's image rather than a physical location. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a recognition of the spiritual reality of God's work in believers' lives as they are being prepared for eternal glory.

Transcript

We are engaged upon a consideration of the last chapters of the book of the Revelation, especially with those parts that deal with the new Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven. In that connection will you look at three verses of Scripture in the Letter to the Hebrews:

"By faith he (Abraham) became a sojourner in the land of promise, as in a land not his own, dwelling in tents, with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: for he looked for the city which hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (11:9,10).

"But ye are come unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (12:22).

"For we have not here an abiding city, but we seek after the city which is to come" (13:14).

Before we continue with our consideration of this city I do want to say a very serious word about the purpose of these meditations. I want to say to you that this is not just a subject for a conference, nor just some Bible study for a series of meetings. My own strong conviction is that this is a word from God in this serious time in which we are living, and we are living in the most serious time in the history of this world. If we knew what was happening in the nations of this whole world today, one question would fill our minds:

How much longer can it go on? Things are happening which make it very possible that many alive today will see the great change in this whole world. We are not exaggerating if we say that it is quite possible that within the next twenty or twenty-five years the end of this present world order could come. That would mean that this could happen in the lifetime of the middle-aged people, and certainly of younger people. It is not my desire to be an alarmist, but what I have just said is very possible, and so many things are happening in the world as to make the time very short.

I am not prophesying, so no one will be able to say that I was a false prophet if it does not happen! I am only saying that it is very possible, and if this is true, then we might expect that God would send a message to His people to prepare them. So I repeat: this is not just some bit of Bible teaching for a week. This could be a message from the Lord to prepare us for what is coming very soon.

Now I must take you back to the main thing which we said earlier, because that is the thing which is right at the centre of everything else. It is that the thing which governs everything in the history of this world is the nature of God. When God created this world He created it to be an expression of His own nature, so that wherever you looked you could see what God is like. When God created man He intended him to be an expression of Himself. He, said: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Genesis 1:26), which just means that when man is as God meant him to be, we should see what God is like. When He finished that creation He said "it was very good" (Genesis 1:31), and when you think of what God is like, for Him to be able to say 'It is very good' of anything, it means that it really must satisfy His nature.

Then everything went away from God and became displeasing to Him. When He looked out in the world He could not see His nature being expressed, so He put a curse upon everything. In effect, He said: 'That no longer satisfies My nature. I do not want it.' From that time onward God was always seeking to find something that would satisfy His nature. That is the story of the Old Testament - it is just the story of that which does satisfy God and that which does not satisfy God. And God accepts or rejects just according to how far His nature is satisfied. It is a long story; but running through that long history was one golden line, like a golden thread in a black fabric.

ABRAHAM'S QUEST

It is a long history. It reaches right back to the beginning, and then it was taken up by Abraham, who, it says, "by faith... looked for a city" - now note - "whose builder and maker is GOD". Not a city built by sinful man. However wonderful such a city might be, it would never satisfy God. It had to be a city which satisfied the nature of its Maker, God. That vision was put into the heart of Abraham, and he could say: 'Somehow I have come to understand that God wants a city, and if He wants anything, it will have to be like Him, and be made by Him. It is a "city whose builder and maker is God".' So we have read that Abraham went up and down the land, and as he did so he saw some cities. He saw the city of Sodom, and said: 'No, that is not it. That could never satisfy God.' Then he saw the city of Gomorrah. 'No.' said he, 'that is not the one.' And then he saw the city of Salem, the original Jerusalem. 'Now this is very much better than Sodom and Gomorrah,' but the Spirit said to Abraham: 'No, not even that one.' So he went on moving up and down the land, and this Divine conception of the city never materialized. Seventy years, eighty years, ninety years... and then he died, and he never found the city! This Letter to the Hebrews says: "These all died in faith, not having received the promises... God having provided some better thing for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect" (11:13,40).

THE END OF THE QUEST

And then this same Letter says: "But ye ARE come... unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem." It has been a very long spiritual pilgrimage, but it is at an end now. Abraham has got it now. He is a co-inheritor with us.

Yet once more we have to change our ideas. There is a long, long story of Jerusalem in the Old Testament, but that Jerusalem, even in its best days, never finally satisfied God's nature. Everybody who knows his or her New Testament knows this. Have you read Peter, Paul, John and Stephen? They very largely make up the New Testament, and everybody knows from them that the things in the Old Testament were only patterns of some spiritual thing in the New Testament. Read Peter's Letters again, and there you will find that he is speaking of God's new Israel, and the NEW House of God in Israel. He calls it "God's spiritual house", and speaks of the offering of "SPIRITUAL sacrifices". This is the new Israel. Read Paul again, and you will find him writing to the Galatians: "Now this Hagar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to the Jerusalem that now is: for she is in bondage with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, which is our mother" (4:25,26). And then he will say in his Letter to the Philippians: "Our citizenship is in heaven; from whence also we wait for a Saviour" (3:20). That is the transition from the earthly to the heavenly, from the temporal to the spiritual.

You know, John builds his Gospel around Jerusalem; that is, the Gospel by John is centred in and circles around the Jerusalem which is below, but when you move on to the book of the Revelation, written by the same man, the centre is the heavenly Jerusalem. He is walking around her, noting her walls. In these two great writings John has moved from the earthly to the heavenly. And then this wonderful Letter to the Hebrews says that we, the believers of this dispensation, "are come unto mount Zion... the heavenly Jerusalem".

But, you see, this is all spiritual language. It is that of a spiritual character which God is seeking to possess.

Well, let us say it again, very strongly: This is only symbolism. What does it really mean? It just means what all the Bible is about: God is going to find His full satisfaction in His Son, and in a people conformed to the image of His Son. It is not a thing, nor a place - it is the Son of God and the sons whom He is bringing to glory.

THE PRESENT PREPARATION

Let us bring that city right here. Dear friends, if you are really a born again child of God, you are a part of the city which God is now building. God is now building something, and this building is going on inside of us - or it ought to be! God is, by His Spirit, building His Son into us. Christ is being built up in us, and we are being built up into Christ.

This is a tremendous business! When we are born again the Holy Spirit gets hold of these pieces of rough stone - and what poor bits of humanity we are! What poor pieces of material we are for a heavenly city! We have a lot of corners, like a piece of stone, and the Holy Spirit says: 'We will knock off some of those corners,' and so our spiritual experience is one of having the corners knocked off. You know what I mean by 'corners'! If you don't think that you have any corners, you know that other people have! We are very awkward people and do not fit in anywhere, so we have to be made to fit into this heavenly city. You see, this heavenly city is very practical. It is all very well to sing about 'Jerusalem the golden', but when the Holy Spirit is knocking off the corners, that is not what we mean when we sing. The symbolism may be very wonderful, but the actuality is through suffering. But when the work is finished we will say: 'God has done a

wonderful thing in me. What a difficult person I was! How difficult it was for me to fit in with others! Indeed, I often wanted to run right away from everyone because I did not fit in, but God has done His work faithfully. All the awkward corners have gone and Jerusalem is a city that is "compact together". Do you remember those words from Psalm 122? "Jerusalem, that art builded as a city that is compact together" (verse 3). and Peter says: "Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:5). Yes, God is building His city.

Not only are we people with corners: we are people with a very rough surface, and when we rub up against one another there is a lot of friction. You know what I mean! We just do not get on smoothly together, and then the Holy Spirit takes the sandpaper to smooth us down. But, oh no, He does not take a piece of paper and rub us smooth - He puts us up against someone else who is not smooth, or He puts us in a situation in life which is not smooth. We want to get away from that person because he, or she, rubs us up the wrong way, and we want to get away from that situation because it does rub us up the wrong way so much. We want to have a smooth time, but the Holy Spirit does not let us have it. We shall never have a smooth time until we are smooth - and do you know what it is that makes us smooth? It is the grace of God in suffering. We have to say a lot about that when we further consider the city.

Now you have got away from symbolism, have you not? We have come to spiritual reality! And this city is just the embodiment of these spiritual principles.

BUILDING FOR ETERNITY

When you are talking about the heavenly Jerusalem you are talking about something eternal, and that is something of which we are very conscious now. Here again we have come into the realm of what is spiritual and not temporal. The point is this: What God is doing in the small fragment of time in our lives is going to be revealed to His glory for all eternity. To use the words of the Apostle Paul: "Our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory" (2 Corinthians 4:17). God is doing in these little lives that which will correspond to the city "coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God".

I do trust that you are already beginning to see what God is working at, and what He is now building for all eternity. So we cease to think of the city as a place, and think of it as a people conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. "Partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4).

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