

Heavenly Features in the Heavenly Jerusalem, the Church

by T. Austin-Sparks

The heavenly Jerusalem, the Church, is a concentrated expression of Christ, and is intended to be heavenly, with features of spirituality, elevation, and faith.

Topics: "Heavenly City", "Spiritual Ascension"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks delves into the heavenly concept of the New Jerusalem as depicted in Revelation, emphasizing the spiritual significance of the heavenly city and its connection to the Church. He explores the heavenly nature of the Church, symbolized by the heavenly Jerusalem, and the importance of being spiritually elevated and heavenly-minded. Drawing from Psalms 87, he contrasts the heavenly attributes of Zion with earthly representations like Egypt, Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, and Ethiopia, highlighting the need for spiritual ascendancy, faith, and a heavenly perspective in the life of believers. The sermon underscores the tragic consequences of the Church descending from a heavenly position to worldly pursuits, as seen in historical events like the Moslem invasion of Syria.

Transcript

Rev. 21:9-11. In this passage we see the Apostle was carried away in the Spirit into a mountain great and high, and shown the New Jerusalem "coming down out of heaven...."

Rev. 3:12. "I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God...."

Heb. 11:16. "...he hath prepared for them a city."

You will recognise the tense and the position of that last statement. While it is referring to those martyrs of the faith of the old dispensation of Old Testament times, the word here "he hath prepared for them a city" - not, He prepared for them a city, as though they inherited it in Jerusalem on this earth, but He hath prepared for them a city - shows that they have not yet entered into it. It awaits their entrance. I believe that the city there, referring as it does to the Church, would be very closely touched upon by that inclusive declaration of the Apostle in that same chapter, that "These all died in faith, not having received the promises... God having provided some better thing concerning us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect" (Heb. 11:13,39,40). So that the words "hath prepared for them a city" really mean that they

are coming into this heavenly Jerusalem, the Church.

In chapter 12 of the Hebrew letter, verse 22, there is this word: "...ye are come... unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem..." In chapter 13 verse 14, there is this word: "...we seek after the city which is to come." Then back in the letter to the Galatians, chapter 4, verses 25 and 26, we have these words: "the Jerusalem that is above is free, which is our mother." The letter to the Galatians stands over against the Jewish order of things, was intended so to do, and Jerusalem was always regarded by Israel as their mother. She was looked upon as the mother of all the Israelites. Now over against the earthly Jerusalem, and that earthly conception of Jerusalem, the Apostle here says: "the Jerusalem which is above is free, which is our mother": and in Philippians 3:20 we find these words: "our citizenship is in heaven."

You can see from these various passages that the thought of heavenliness is very strongly related to the Church, which is the heavenly Jerusalem, of which God is the Builder and Maker. God is building His heavenly Jerusalem now, and He is building it with heavenly material, that is, the constitution and the construction of the Church must all be heavenly, and that which is employed (or, to put it another way, the saints) must partake of a heavenly nature, in order to become the heavenly City. The Great Architect and Builder is, therefore, engaged with the saints in seeking to make them heavenly in their whole constitution.

We have to see a little further what heavenliness means, and we can do this by way of illustration from the Old Testament again, by turning to Psalm 87. The first thing which comes out in that Psalm is the jealousy of God over Jerusalem. "The Lord loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob." "Zion" is a word which came to embrace the whole city. It was not always so, but it came in the course of time to represent Jerusalem, and is very often, in the prophecies especially, synonymous with Jerusalem. "The Lord loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob. There is a partiality of God, a jealousy of God for Jerusalem. When you ask why the Lord is jealous in this way, as to what is behind this Divine partiality, the answer can be given in the word which we are using, "heavenliness." The Divine thought about Jerusalem concerns her heavenliness, and that feature comes out, as you notice, with the very first sentence: "His foundation is in the holy mountains." Mountains are always features or types of spiritual elevation, and if you want that borne out, you can turn to another Psalm and read this literal translation: "Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised, in the city of our God, in his holy mountain. Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion" (Psalm 48:1). Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth! You see this is a matter of elevation. It is a matter of a high position, a conspicuous place. It is heavenliness, spiritual ascendancy.

We will speak about that more from the spiritual standpoint presently, but we will just go through this Psalm 87 step by step to see that there is bound up with that initial statement about the Lord's jealousy and partiality a contrast between Zion and other cities, and the contrast is based upon the spiritual features which they represent.

The Contrast between Zion and Egypt.

First of all you have Egypt. "Rahab" is the word used here, but you may know that "Rahab" refers to Egypt. We remember that when Abraham, the father of the city, entered into the land of Canaan, the land of promise, his faith was instantly met with a very severe test, for he found the whole country given up to idolatry. He also found a state of severe famine in the land. His faith wavered, and some kind of question evidently crept into his heart, which led him eventually to conclude either that he had made a mistake, had been misled, or else he was altogether out of his time. So turning from the land he went down to Egypt,

and Egypt, therefore, became the place that typifies the opposite of faith. What is the opposite of faith? If God, and God alone, is the object of faith, then if faith breaks down it means that God is set aside, and you look for something else to take the place of God. So that Egypt is clearly seen to represent resources of the earth, natural resources, to which men turn when they lose faith in God. We know what happened to Abraham, that his lapse of faith and his turning to Egypt led to disaster, brought him into compromise, into entanglement, into shame; and that is ever the result of turning from God, as our one and only resource, to other resources which are of men. Very early, you see, in the history of the Church you have those elements which have repeatedly all the way through been its danger, and too often those to which it has succumbed. The history of the Church is one sad story of repeated lapses from God to human resources, natural means, natural methods, the results of which have always been the same - compromise, entanglement, shame.

What Abraham did as the father of the race, Israel also did in the days of spiritual declension; for when Israel's spiritual life waned, and God therefore became distant and remote to faith, Israel turned to Egypt for help in the day of trouble. Egypt, therefore, always stands to represent those resources which men employ when God appears distant from them owing to the weakness of their own faith. You can see how clearly this is a coming down to earth, and therein is the contrast: "The Lord loveth the gates of Zion," "His foundation is in the holy mountains" (Psa. 87), "the city of our God," "in his holy mountain," "beautiful in elevation," "the joy of the whole earth..." (Psa. 48:1). There is a great contrast to Egypt. Egypt is down below, Zion up above, which is why the Lord loves Zion. The Lord has a special partiality for heavenliness about His people.

The Contrast between Zion and Babylon.

Passing that point of contrast, we come to Babylon. We know what Babylon represents. Babylon was the product of human effort and human glory. The city was built not far from the Tower of Babel, and the Tower of Babel was built with the object of making a name for man. It was human effort for human glory. That tower for ever speaks of the super-man, the glory of fallen man, and the Devil's object has always been to try to get fallen man to reach unto heaven. Just as they sought to make that tower to reach unto heaven, so Satan has always sought to make man a super-man by his own effort, and in his own glory. Babylon always speaks of that, "Let us build us a city, and a tower... and let us make us a name..." (Gen. 11:4). Many years afterward the great king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, uttered these words: "Is not this great Babylon, that I have builded..." (Dan. 4:30).

How clearly, then, Babylon speaks of man's power, man's effort, man's glory, seeking to reach unto the very clouds. Babylon stands for the glory of human power, but, of course, in a religious way; for Babylon was very religious, strongly religious. The idea here is of something glorious in this world, with man's name upon it. When we recognise that, how impressive are the words: "I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God-" (Rev. 3:12). Man's design is to have something glorious in the way of a city with his own name upon it. God's thought is to have a glorious thing of a heavenly order, with His Name upon it, and this He will have. The Church has God's Name on it, because it will be an expression of God's glory and God's power and God's effort, and it will be glorious indeed. But here is the difference between Zion, spiritual elevation in heavenliness, and Babylon, that which stands in the glory of man. No wonder God is jealous over Zion.

The Contrast between Zion and Philistia.

Next we come to the contrast between Zion and Philistia. Philistia, we are well aware, speaks of the natural mind intruding into Divine things. We know the Philistines were always impinging upon Divine things. Closely associated all the time geographically with Israel, they were a most persistent foe, yet repeatedly seen as peering into the things of God, as, for example, into the Ark. Here then is uncircumcised, or if you like, uncrucified flesh taking hold of Divine things, and manipulating them. It is, in a sense, the rationalistic line of things, which does not recognise that the things of the Spirit of God are only known by the spiritual, and will seek by purely human means of intellect and reason to arrive at Divine ends. That cannot be done. Philistia represents that. Babylon in natural effort, Philistia is natural reason, and all is down there on the earth still, standing in contrast to Zion, because Zion is the expression, not of any kind of human effort of mind or body, but of the revelation of the Spirit of God.

The Contrast between Zion and Tyre.

Tyre stands for the business or commercial world. There were tremendous activities in Tyre as a sea port. The one thing which Tyre represented, and which the whole atmosphere of Tyre expressed, was commerce, expansion, business, the affairs of this world. We hardly need dwell upon that as over against Zion. We know this, at any rate, that the enemy is all too eager to get people so tied up in business affairs as to have no time or strength for contemplating heavenly things. Any business man will tell you that, and I suppose anybody, except those people who really have nothing whatever to do in business of any kind, will tell you that responsibilities are so pressed home, that it is a matter of supreme effort to get time for heavenly things. Tyre is always a challenge to Zion. In spiritual principle we are up against Tyre every day. Oh, how the enemy through this world's affairs seeks to make inroads upon our time for the things of the Lord. The Lord is very jealous for the heavenly side of things, and His partiality is to the detriment of Tyre.

The Contrast between Zion and Ethiopia.

Finally, Ethiopia. Let us recall the incident in chapter 8 of the book of the Acts, of an Ethiopian who had been up to Jerusalem at the time of the Feast, and was evidently deeply exercised about spiritual matters, being in a state of inquiry, yet not having found an answer to his question, and his heart need. He was still in the shadows, still in the dark, and the Lord recognised that need, that search, not satisfied in the place where it ought to have been satisfied, the official headquarters, and sent Philip from Samaria to join his chariot in the wilderness, to open his eyes, to lead him out of his darkness. So that Ethiopia becomes there, and elsewhere in the Scriptures, a type of the darkened understanding, the understanding needing enlightenment, natural darkness; a type also of that which is true of us all. The word of Philip to the eunuch was "Understandest thou?" and his answer "How can I..." How true that is of all men by nature.

The Ethiopian here in Psalm 87 is taken as an expression of the state of all men by nature, having the understanding darkened, and needing someone to teach. Over against that, Zion speaks of the eyes of the heart being enlightened, the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him. It says the citizens of Zion are those who have had their eyes opened, and the Lord loves that which expresses His mighty eye-opening work, His work of illumination, of enlightenment, of quickened understanding. The Lord delights in the light, and in that which walks in the light, while He does not delight in darkness.

So we see in this five-fold contrast Zion is supreme, because of this main feature of heavenliness. Jerusalem is the concentration of the features of the whole land of Syria. In the same way the Church is the concentration of the features of Christ. Christ is our land of promise. The Church is a concentrated expression of Christ, or is intended to be, and it is not difficult to see that this feature of Christ -

heavenliness - is a very marked one. You touch it wherever you touch the Lord Jesus. How constantly He speaks of Himself as having come out from heaven, of being in heaven, and of everything in His life being heavenly. The great governing feature of Christ is heavenliness, and you see from the Revelation that the New Jerusalem, the Church which is the concentrated expression of Christ, can be seen only from the vantage ground of elevation: "And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem..." (Rev. 21:10). If you look into the context you will see that Babylon was also shown, but no mountain was needed to view Babylon; Babylon could be seen in the plain. If you are going to see heavenly things you need to be in the heavenlies. "He carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem..." To see Christ, and to express Christ, necessitates a heavenly union with Christ in the Spirit.

The Constituents of Heavenliness.

We will break up this feature into its constituents. What are the constituents of heavenliness?

1. Spirituality.

The first is spirituality. You cannot understand or enjoy heavenly things unless you are a spiritual man or a spiritual woman. A spiritual state is necessary for comprehending spiritual things. Paul declared that when he said: "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit..." (1 Cor. 2:9). The natural man cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God, he cannot know them, the spiritual judge all things. A spiritual state is, of course, in the first instance by new birth - born of the Spirit; and then there is a progressive spiritual life. Spiritual growth is the only way, but it is the sure way of grasping, knowing, understanding, comprehending heavenly things. John's Gospel is the Gospel of spirituality, and everything in "John" is heavenly. You find it full of people in difficulties. Nicodemus is in difficulty, he cannot understand spiritual things at all and there is one great question mark which holds him in complete bondage: How? The Lord makes perfectly clear to him that he has to become a spiritual man, to be spiritually born, before he can understand spiritual things. The woman of Sychar is in just the same case, in as big a fog as was Nicodemus. The Lord makes it clear to her that what she needs is the Spirit dwelling within, when she will understand the meaning of life. And so you go through that Gospel, finding a large number of people in the dark, and the Lord in relation to every one of them touches upon the one principle. What is necessary is spiritual illumination! The man born blind needs the Lord to open his eyes, and on their being opened, he sees better than all the religious authorities around him, who are then quite manifestly in the dark. It is the Gospel of spirituality, which means that to comprehend heavenly things you must be spiritual in your essential being, born of the Spirit, indwelt and governed by the Spirit.

2. Elevation.

That is spiritual ascendancy. Anyone who really does seek to walk with the Lord, to have his life maintained in the Spirit, understands quite well, apart from the technical words used, what spiritual elevation or ascendancy means. You know what it is to have to battle constantly to maintain your position spiritually above. You know what it is to have almost everything brought upon you to press you down and to get you under. Once your spirit is under, to circumstances, to feelings, to appearances, to sensations, or to anything else, you are beaten, you are broken, you are useless, your testimony has gone. That the Church is called to be in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus is only another way of saying that this life must be in spiritual elevation, spiritual ascendancy. The Lord, the Architect, is seeking to teach us every day how to

take and maintain ascendancy. Many opportunities are afforded each day of learning that lesson. Many times in a day you and I could go under to something if we let go. It is very easy to drop down, but the Lord calls upon us day by day, again and again, to refuse to go under. He urges us to take a strong hold upon Him, upon His Spirit, to be strengthened with might into the inward man, that we may not go under, but maintain our spiritual ascendancy. That is the elevation of Zion, that is the elevation of the Church in all its members.

3. Faith.

That is made very clear by the father of the city, Abraham. If that city is eventually to be reached, then Abraham must, as its father (so to speak), be essentially a man of faith, and we know that to be the particular factor for which Abraham has stood all through history. "By faith Abraham..." And when all has been said about faith that can be said, it comes at last to this, believing in God's faithfulness. It is standing solidly with God on His faithfulness. Sometimes you can do no more than that. All the other aspects of faith, or faith's expression, may be impossible, and you simply have to stand back on that one final thing, Well, God is faithful! Eventually it will be proved! Once through the present perplexity, problem, and we shall find that God is faithful. It may look now as though He has let us go, as though He has failed us, as though He has not answered, as though our expectation is disappointed; but when we get through we shall find that God had not forsaken, God had not abandoned us, and God had not contradicted, but has been faithful. You and I will steadily learn that. We do not learn that lesson all at once. We are not incapable of asking questions as to the Lord, and we sometimes have to put up a fight against the suggestion of a doubt as to the Lord's faithfulness; but God is faithful. That is the final refuge of faith: but it is a mighty thing to stand there, and Abraham came to that position.

Heavenliness is a tremendous factor in the life of the Lord's people. Heavenliness, which is spirituality, which is ascendancy, or elevation, and which is faith, is a tremendous factor. All that is gathered up in Jerusalem. It means being on other ground than on the ground of this world, the ground of the natural man. Oh, that the Church had maintained that position all the way through! What terrible tragedies have resulted from coming down to lower ground!

We said that we would give an illustration of the tragedy of coming down from a heavenly position on the part of the Church. I found this, written by Sir George Adam Smith. Speaking of the Moslem invasion of Syria, by which Syria became swept and dominated by Islam, he writes -

"The Christianity of Syria fell before Islam because it was corrupt, and it deserved to fall."

And again:

"In attempting by purely human means to regain her birthplace, the Church was beaten back by Islam because she was selfish and worldly."

"In neither of these cases was it a true Christianity that was overthrown, though the true Christianity bears to this day the reproach, and the burden of the results. The irony of the Divine judgment is clearly seen in this, that it was on the very land where a spiritual monotheism first appeared that the Church was first punished for idolatry and materialism; that it was in sight of the scenes where Christ taught and healed, and went about doing good with His band of pure devoted disciples, that the envious, treacherous, truculent hosts of the Cross were put to sword and fire. They who in His Name sought a kingdom of this world by worldly means could not hope to succeed on the very fields where He had put such a temptation

from Him. The victory of Islam over Christianity is no more a problem than the victory of Babylon over Israel."

That is a tremendous statement. What history there is in a statement like that! Perhaps the greatest problem today of Christianity, of the mission field, is Islam. I do not think there is a greater problem than Islam for the Church. Why? Well, Sir George Adam Smith puts his finger right on the cause when he says the power of Islam is due to the corruption of the Church at a given point in history; divided, selfish, and worldly. Islam gained the mastery because of that.

How, then, would Islam be overthrown? How would the mischief be undone? Surely by a heavenly Church, by that which has been wholly separated from this world in all means and methods, and united in one spirit as a great spiritual force, under the government of the Holy Spirit. That, and that alone, will overthrow the forces which have gained their position by reason of the unspirituality and unheavenliness of the Church.

If that applies to the whole, it applies to us individually, that spiritual power over any ground of the enemy demands detachment spiritually from the world, a close walk with God, and a heavenly life, a life which is above with Christ. The Lord lay upon our hearts the tremendous importance of this heavenly fellowship with Him from day to day, for the sake of spiritual power and His glory.

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