

The City Which Hath Foundations

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the centrality and heavenliness of Jerusalem, and the importance of separation from the world to maintain spiritual value.

Scripture: Ezekiel 5:5, John 12:31, John 14:30, John 16:33, Acts 7:2, Galatians 4:26, Philippians 3:20, Hebrews 11:10, Revelation 21:13, Revelation 21:24

Topics: "Heavenly Citizenship", "Spiritual Significance of Jerusalem"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the spiritual significance of Jerusalem, illustrating how it is central to God's divine plan and serves as a reflection of the heavenly city. He discusses the historical and geographical importance of Syria and Jerusalem, noting that their true value lies in their spiritual essence, which transcends earthly existence. Sparks draws parallels between the earthly Jerusalem and the New Jerusalem, highlighting the need for the Church to embody heavenly principles and maintain separation from worldly influences. He urges believers to recognize their heavenly citizenship and the importance of living as pilgrims and strangers in this world, ultimately pointing to the Church's role in God's eternal purpose.

Transcript

READING: Hebrews 11:10; Ezekiel 5:5.

Our object is to see that because Jerusalem is so closely related to God, indeed has been brought into being by Him, her values must be pre-eminently spiritual and divine. Back of her history there lie those elements which are not of this world, nor are they merely of time, but are heavenly and eternal.

The Land of Syria.

Before we can consider the city particularly we must view the land as a whole, because very largely the city is the concentration of the features of the land. We note that in Hebrews 11 the city which hath foundations is closely related to the heavenly country (verses 10, 16), so that the city is but the concentration of the country. That is an important thing to bear in mind as we go on.

We will note several of the relationships of the land.

Firstly, the relationship of the land to the rest of the world. Syria has been of greater significance to mankind, both spiritually and materially, than any other single country in the world.

We observe at once its centrality. It stands between Asia and Africa, between the two primeval homes of man, the valleys of the Euphrates and the Nile; also between the two great centres of empire, Western Asia and Egypt. One side represents the eastern and ancient world, the other side the Mediterranean as the gateway to the western and modern world.

Secondly, we note the connection between Syria and Arabia. Syria is at the northern end of the Arabian world. Arabia was the cradle of the Semites. The Semites went out in four directions: (1) to Ethiopia (2) to Egypt via the isthmus of Suez (3) to Mesopotamia through the Arabian Desert (4) to Western Syria via the Jordan. More than in any other direction these Semites have gravitated toward Syria, and we know of their coming into that land in two special ways, in the case of Abraham from Mesopotamia, and Israel (the Hebrews) from Egypt.

Thirdly, the relationship of the land to Asia, Africa and Europe. We note that the oldest road in the world, from the Euphrates to the Nile, which is still used (although the old camel caravan has given place to motor transport) runs through Damascus, through Galilee, the Plain of Esdraelon, down the maritime Plain of Palestine, through Gaza to Egypt.

Fourthly, the nations and peoples of the earth who have had to do with Syria. There is a tremendous catalogue of these. This land has been either the objective, or the actual dwelling-place, or the battle-field, of all these nations; mostly the dwelling-place. The Hittites came South from Asia Minor, and the Ethiopians came North from the conquest of the Nile. Here is the list of invaders: the Hittites, the Ethiopians, the Scythians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Moslem invasion, the Turks, the Mongols, the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, the Crusaders, Napoleon, and finally the Allies of the Great War. All these have had special interest in this little country, so that it is quite clear that Syria has occupied a very important place in the history of this world.

Then we note one or two details as to the land itself. The length of the land is about four hundred miles in all, with a width varying from eighty to one hundred miles, bounded by the sea on the West, Mount Taurus on the North, and by the desert on the East and South. The name "Syria" is short for "Assyria." The name was originally applied by the Greeks to the whole of the Assyrian Empire from the Caucasus to the Levant. Then that Empire shrank to this side of the Euphrates, and finally to the present limits which we have noted. Palestine is only a part of Syria, defined by the Greeks the Southern part of Syria, including Judea.

The country is broken by mountain ranges, so much so as never to have been brought together under one government. There is the triple barrier against the desert; firstly the Jordan Valley, secondly the Western Range, and thirdly the Eastern Range; and four lines can be drawn down the land marking distinct features; firstly there is the sea plain, secondly the Western Range, thirdly the Jordan and the Jordan Valley, fourthly the Eastern Range.

We now turn to note the spiritual instruction which comes to us from the historic.

1. The Centrality of Jerusalem.

That which we have just noted shows how central that land, and Jerusalem the city, are geographically, historically, and - as we shall yet see more fully - spiritually. If you want to be impressed with the centrality of the land and of the city geographically, all you have to do is to take a map of the world, and put your pencil upon Syria (Mercator's projection).

The centrality of this country is tremendously impressive, and when you add to the geographical centrality the historic centrality, and see how all the way through history the nations of the world have been attracted toward that point, have been interested in it, have in some way or other been related to Syria, that again is an impressive thing. But when you add to the geographical and the historical the religious, or rather, the spiritual, and see that, in the main, it is because God in some way is related to that central point, then the significance goes much further, and becomes very much more impressive. Surely this is not just a natural thing; this is not normal; there is something about this which speaks of wider issues than merely a few miles of Syrian soil, a fragment of this earth as something in itself! It is like the arena of a great amphitheatre where God has been working out in history a drama with spiritual significance, showing to the world things which are not merely of time nor of the earth, but of eternity and of heaven. So that Jerusalem, in the very first place, speaks of centrality.

The Anti-Type - The New Jerusalem.

Turning from the historic Jerusalem, the type, to the anti-type, the spiritual Jerusalem of the Book of the Revelation and elsewhere, we know that feature is revealed to be the first thing about the heavenly Jerusalem, which is the Church. Take two things, for instance, which are said about the New Jerusalem.

Firstly, that the nations shall walk in the light thereof, and shall bring their glory into it (Revelation 21:24 and 26). If we bear in mind that the New Jerusalem is not a mere geographical thing, but the Church, then the Church is seen ultimately to be in a central place to all the rest of the world. It occupies that point with all the nations round about related thereto. Just as the historic Jerusalem occupies that central place geographically and historically, so in a spiritual way the Church ultimately will be at the centre of God's universe, and everything will be toward it and as from it. It will be central, the nations and the kings all moving to and from it, all the kingdoms of this world recognising the Church as the universal metropolis.

Secondly, it is said that the New Jerusalem has on its four sides three gates (Revelation 21:13), and "the city lieth foursquare" (verse 16). "Four" is the number of creation, the whole creation. The whole creation is represented by the City. On each of the four sides of the City there are three gates. That means there is equality in all directions. If the City were represented as being to one side of the world, it would not need three gates on the back side. Its gates would be in the other three directions, but if three gates are equally on every side it surely means that what lies before those gates is equal. Everything speaks of centrality in the Church.

All that means has yet to be seen and worked out, but we want in the first place to get the City set, we want to see what the place and position of the Church is intended to be, and when that is recognised we can understand the many-sided activity of the enemy to destroy the Church, we can understand that aspect of Jerusalem's history which is so fraught with contest, conflict, dispute, siege, assault. What a tremendous history Jerusalem has had! Well might the Psalmist urge that we should pray for the peace of Jerusalem. There has been good reason to pray thus for Jerusalem, for she has known tribulation beyond any other on this earth.

That is suggestive and significant, and carries its own spiritual meaning. What a history the Church has! What a history of conflict the true spiritual people of God have! Well might the Lord have said to His own true ones "In the world ye shall have tribulation..." (John 16:33). To come really into a living relationship with Christ as a vital part of His Church means to come into the conflict of all the ages, to the realm of ceaseless conflict. But there is a reason, and the best of reasons, for when once Jerusalem is set, comes

down from God out of heaven, and is set in her place at the centre of the universe, no other power will be able to lift itself against her. That Church is destined to occupy the place of centrality and supremacy in Christ throughout all the ages yet to be. Not least of the many-sided activities of the enemy has been his effort to set up a false church, an imitation church, a counterfeit church.

More will be said about that as we go on, but we have laid down our first principle and seen the first feature of the "Jerusalem which is above" as to God's thought for her.

We pass to the second feature:

2. The Heaviness of Jerusalem.

We go back to the first movements of which we know in the relationship of God to Jerusalem. These movements began with Abraham. There is a sense in which we could say that Abraham was the father of the City of God. The Word says of him that "he looked for a city." Somehow (it is not recorded how) he came to look for a city related to God. There is nothing which tells us that God spoke to him about the city, but here is the statement clearly made that "he looked for a city... whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:10). Somehow he came into the quest for a city related to God, of which God was the Architect (for that is the literal word) and Maker. That surely means that the City would take its form and character from God. If God is the Architect and Maker, then the thing made, designed, would take its character from Him. Thus Abraham looked for something which was an expression of the thought and will of God, which was the result of Divine activity, a City.

What was the first step toward that City? We are told by a man who is said to have been full of the Holy Ghost, Stephen: "The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham" (Acts 7:2). That was the first step in relation to the City which was to be the expression of God's thought. From that point the Divine association with Jerusalem has always been as with what is in the world, and yet outside of it. The God of glory has not attached Himself wholly to anything of this earth since the fall. He took up something and made it an illustration of something else which was not of this earth at all, and from the point when the God of glory appeared unto Abraham God's association with Jerusalem was always, has always been, as with that which, while being in the world is yet outside of it. We emphasise this, that God's association with it has been on that wise. We mean that God associated Himself with Jerusalem only so long as she stood true to His thought of something in the world and yet outside of it. When Jerusalem failed to maintain that principle and became associated with the world, God forsook it. God's association was only on the ground that it was outside of the world while in it. This is made very clear, both positively and negatively; positively, as Jerusalem expressed the Divine thought of a Heavenly City and maintained separation from the world, God associated Himself with Jerusalem; negatively, whenever Jerusalem failed or ceased to express that Divine thought, God withdrew. So that we have it, by contrast, showing what God's mind was, that the dark history of Jerusalem, destruction, suffering, and being forsaken, is a very strong proof and evidence that God will not associate Himself with anything which does not express His thought as being entirely heavenly although here on this earth; such a thing He will not uphold nor maintain. That is a very important thing in our consideration.

Features in the Life of Abraham.

Turning again to Abraham we shall see that Abraham was the inclusive type of the City. In order to follow that out we take this principle of heaviness and trace the heavenly features in the life of Abraham. If Abraham is being spiritually constituted according to God's thought for the City because he is the father of

the City, then you expect to see the features of the City running right through Abraham's life, and this feature of heavenliness is not difficult to trace in the life of Abraham. We will trace it in eight respects.

1. Heavenly Vision.

"The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham" (Acts 7:2). That is heavenly vision. In the New Testament we should call it Divine revelation, God revealing Himself. What is the Church? It is the place in which God is revealed, the place of heavenly vision. The Church is the embodiment of the revelation of God in Christ. The Church has to be the sphere in which men and women come to a knowledge of God, an ever-growing knowledge of God. The Church is not just something to carry out a set order of things, maintain a form. The Church is the place in which there abides the living unveiling of God, and just as soon as something claiming to be the Church ceases to be the place in which there is any living unveiling of God it ceases to be what God calls "the Church," and when it fails in these Divine features God withdraws. It may go on, but God withdraws. When Jerusalem ceased to be the place of the revelation of God to the nations then God withdrew. The purpose of the Church in God's mind is that it should be the sphere of the abiding and continuous unveiling of God, the God of glory appearing. (See the first three chapters of Revelation.)

It is a grand thing to belong to that Church, and to know that Church. Do we know what it is to be where God is showing Himself, making Himself known, where constantly, again and again, the God of glory is appearing? Are you able to say that from week to week in the local assembly to which you belong the God of glory is appearing? So often our hearts have warmed in the realisation that the Lord is showing Himself to us. That feature which was foundational to the life of Abraham is also foundational to Jerusalem, both earthly and heavenly. It is a governing law of the Church.

2. Separation from Earth.

Because of the revelation from heaven there is the consequent and essential separation from earth. "The God of glory appeared to Abraham when he was in Ur of the Chaldees." What was the result? "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred..." (Genesis 12:1). And he went out. Whence? From his world, his native world, his old world, all the world of nature, the world of natural birth, the world of natural relationship, the world of natural interests. He went out, and everything had to be new. It was separation.

That was hammered out through long centuries for Jerusalem. Go through the Word with "Jerusalem" again, and see how God continuously appeals for Jerusalem to be clean, to be separate, to be holy, to have no relationships with the countries round about, to stand as for God in the midst of the nations; and Jerusalem's terrible tragedy - the tragedy which is told in the sobs of one prophet after another - is the tragedy of lost separation.

That is the tragedy of the Church. We see God's thought by the very tragedy of the Church's history. You cannot violate God's thoughts for His people and have anything but a tragic history. What the Church needs to realise so much is its heavenly relationship, calling for an utter separation from the world, in order that God may wholeheartedly associate Himself with it.

3. Heavenly Citizenship.

"For he looked for the city which hath the foundations, whose builder (Architect) and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:10). Where did he find it? He never found it on this earth at all! When we turn to Hebrews 11

we find that Abraham did see something a long, long way off, and hailed it. The Lord Jesus said "...Abraham rejoiced to see my day..." (John 8:56). He saw by faith. "By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed... and he went out..." (Hebrews 11:8). "These all died in faith, not having received..." (verse 13). His citizenship was not a citizenship of this earth at all, it was a heavenly citizenship. The New Testament makes that perfectly clear. The true seed of Abraham are the believers (not the Jewish nation) who are linked with the Jerusalem which is above, "which is the mother of us all" (Galatians 4:26). That is how Paul puts it. So the Apostle also says: "For our citizenship is in heaven; from whence also we wait for a Saviour" (Philippians 3:20).

4. A Pilgrim and a Stranger.

As running closely with that, and corresponding with it, we are told that Abraham in the land was as a pilgrim and a stranger, dwelling in tents, having no part in the land, being in the land a stranger. Is not that a feature of heavenliness? Pilgrims and strangers here. But where, then, do we belong? Peter in writing his letter says: "Beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims..." (1 Peter 2:11), belonging to the heavenly country, with the heavenly citizenship.

5. No Earthly Patronage or Rewards.

No patronage or rewards from this world were for Abraham. Though he may have done service in the interests of certain righteous principles, and in so doing his service may have been of value to those in this world (and who shall say that the spiritual service of the Lord's people on this earth has not meant some value to this world, even to this ungodly world? the Lord alone knows what the world would be without His people in it), Abraham said, No, to those of this world, of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, who had derived some benefit from his activity, when they would offer him some reward and would patronise him. Abraham still stands outside.

That has been one of those deeply laid snares of the Devil, to make something of the service of the people of God on this earth, to confer upon them recognition, titles, position, to make them something here on this earth amongst men. You will notice that so often when these preferments take place, and these gifts are made, and this recognition is granted, and these positions are given, there is a farewell to the deep spiritual note, there is an end of the real spiritual value of that life. The tragedy of many a really valuable servant of God, who was used mightily of God in a spiritual way and finished up life without that note, having lost that spiritual value, was upon this very thing, that in some way they became recognised and accepted, they received recognition, preference, awards from this world. To maintain heavenliness, separation is essential to the maintenance of spiritual value.

6. No Natural Resources or Energies.

Abraham had to learn that lesson in a very hard school. His life was marred by a terrible mark and scar, when he broke down and tried by natural means and methods and courses to realise Divine ends. The world today holds that scar in a most terrible way. Look at Islam, look at Ishmael, and you have the full growth of that fatal mistake of Abraham when he tried to realise a Divine purpose along natural lines. Heavenly people may not do that. A heavenly Church may not do that. The Church has tried to do that. It has tried to accomplish its Divine mission by worldly means, by natural resources and energies. Its tragedy is clear. Its weakness is manifest to all. For the heavenly thing no resources or energies of nature are permissible.

7. No merely Earthly Fruit for God.

I am thinking of Isaac. Isaac came eventually, and came through Sarah. There is an earthly link in Isaac, though he be born by Divine intervention, through heavenly power. But God will sever that earthly link, God will cut clean in between what is of heaven and of earth, and take Isaac to death. And who can raise the dead but God? Seeing then that only God can raise the dead, what is raised from the dead is all of God. So God will have no link with earth, even in what may be for Him.

Very often God causes some of His heavenly purpose to be born in a human heart, a purpose of God born in the heart of a man or a woman. In the course of time that man or woman takes that heavenly vision and in some way it becomes their vision: for God, yes, but theirs! It is a terrible thing to interfere with somebody who has a heavenly vision from the Lord which they hold. So often they become the most spiky people that you have to deal with. Yes, they have a vision from the Lord, they have a sense of call from the Lord, and they are holding that thing for the Lord. That is quite good, but they are holding it, and they have got it, and it is theirs, and God often has to take that thing which had its origin in Himself clean away to death; it has to go, and it is as though they never had a vision. Worse than that, they are in confusion, utterly confounded. God gave a vision, and now it has all been smashed and broken. God gave a call and a purpose, and now everything contradicts that, it has all gone. God will not have even that which is of Himself held by man, laid hold of by man.

Perhaps Abraham's peril was, even though he had got Isaac by a miracle, to make Isaac his, dear to his own heart, to make Isaac his own; and God said, in effect, No, Abraham, no earth ties, even in Divine things! This thing is utterly of Me, and not of you! It is so easy to bring God's great purpose within the compass of some human instrumentality, to be very concerned maybe for world evangelisation, but it must be through our Mission! That is taking hold of God's purposes and making them private property. God will not have that if the thing is going to realise His full end, if He is wholly to commit Himself to it.

8. No Place in the Heavenly for the Hand of Man.

Nothing of man must have any place, hold or prerogative in that which is of heaven. I am thinking of the tomb at Machpelah. You remember that Sarah died, and Abraham, who had good standing in the country, sought a place of burial for his wife, for himself and his seed, and the cave of Machpelah was proved to be the very place. He offered to buy it, but the men who owned it offered it to him free, they well nigh besought him to accept it as a present. But he would not have it cheaply, he would have the full price weighed and purchase it outright, so that no one should be able to say: You got it cheaply, you really owe us something, you really are in our debt, we really have a claim over you! No! to the last farthing he will buy it outright. No hand of man shall be able to have a claim, never shall it be possible for anybody of this world to suggest that Abraham and his descendents are under an obligation to them.

Do you see the working of the principle? No hand of man, no rights as of this world in the Church! Jerusalem which is above is free, is free! This world has no claims there. There is no other power which has any rights there. The Church stands free in God; but, oh, look at the complications today, look at the obligations, look how the Church has sold itself to the world, and how the world has a hold upon it. It is saying, and has a perfect right to say: You are under obligations to us! That is not the Church according to His thought.

All these are aspects of the one great truth of heavenliness.

The necessity for our time is for the Lord's people to come to a spiritual understanding of what heavenliness means. Only so can the Church, the Lord's people, know power. I am certain that the whole question of spiritual power is bound up with heavenliness. The Lord Jesus, Who is the land and Who is to be in all the essential elements of His being, gathered up in the Church represented by the City, said: "The prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me" (John 14:30). What a place of power! What a place of victory! What a place of ascendancy! Imagine it! "The prince of this world" - with all that he has (and he has a tremendous amount in his hands, tremendous power), - "cometh, and hath nothing in Me" (John 14:30). "Now shall the prince of this world be cast out" (John 12:31). Those two things go together, and it is because the Lord's people do not stand in that position that they cannot cast out the prince of this world, they cannot overcome him. He has so much power in the midst of the Lord's people because he has ground, and the ground is this world. No ground, therefore no rights! That is tremendous. Oh, that God might get a people there.

Listen to this. "The Jerusalem that is above is free, which is the mother of us all" (Galatians 4:26). "And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet... and behold a great red dragon... and the dragon stood before the woman... to devour her child..." (Revelation 12:1-4). Jerusalem is our mother. The Church above is our mother. But there is a man-child being born out from the Church, out from the mother, a man-child, and a great red dragon waiting to devour, and that manchild is caught up to the Throne. What is that? That is something out of the general Church which is specific in its overcoming power. That goes to the Throne.

The Lord is seeking to have at least out from the whole Church a company of an entirely and utterly heavenly nature, to govern, to rule, so that the enemy is cast down and has no more place in heaven.

Let us ask the Lord to teach us the meaning of heavenliness. It is a tremendous thing in the realisation of His end.

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