

# The Nature of God

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*T. Austin-Sparks explores the nature of God and its implications for understanding the heavenly Jerusalem and the Christian experience amidst challenges.*

**Scripture:** Revelation 21:9

**Topics:** "Spiritual Reality", "The Nature of God"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks explores the profound nature of God as revealed in the concept of the heavenly Jerusalem, emphasizing that believers have already come to this spiritual reality despite its future implications. He highlights the context of persecution and spiritual decline faced by early Christians, drawing parallels to contemporary challenges within the church. Sparks asserts that understanding the nature of God is key to comprehending the significance of the heavenly Jerusalem, which symbolizes a spiritual reality rather than a literal city. He encourages believers to recognize that God's work in their lives is based on His divine nature, ultimately leading to a collective expression of that nature among His people. The sermon calls for a deeper understanding of what it means to be partakers of the divine nature and how this shapes the Christian experience.

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## Transcript

"And there came one of the seven angels... and he spake with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the wife of the Lamb. And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and shewed me the holy city Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" (Revelation 21:9,10).

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

"But the Jerusalem that is above is free, which is our mother" (Galatians 4:26).

We are going to occupy the first part of our time with trying to see where we are, and those passages do tell us quite precisely where we are. The Word says: "Ye are come unto... the heavenly Jerusalem", and that "the Jerusalem that is above" (that is, the heavenly Jerusalem) "is our mother". Well, that says where we are, but it does not explain, and this week we are going to be occupied with that to which we have come.

Now when you read these last chapters of the book of the Revelation you are inclined to think that it is all in the future. "The holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" - surely that belongs to some future time? Well, it may have a future aspect, but these Scriptures say that we have come there already. I know that that sounds rather mysterious, but in these hours which we spend together I think we shall be seeing exactly what it means. At the beginning, then, we must lay the foundation for our studies.

#### WHY WERE THESE CHAPTERS WRITTEN?

First of all, we must understand why it was, and when it was, that the Apostle John wrote all this about the new Jerusalem. This was written at a time when Christians were undergoing very severe persecution. The great wave of persecution of the Christians was proceeding, and Christianity was being subjected to very strong opposition from this world, so that Christians were finding that it was a matter of very great cost to be faithful to the Lord Jesus. As you know, the Apostle John himself, who wrote this, was in exile on the isle of Patmos for the testimony of Jesus.

That very first thing makes these chapters very contemporary. A new wave of persecution of Christianity has already begun on this earth, and it is spreading from the east to the west. While we are here in this place quite a number of the Lord's servants are in prison for the testimony of Jesus. So this book does not just relate to something which happened centuries ago, nor to the future, but we are going to see that it has a very real application to our own time.

The second thing about the writing of this vision of the heavenly Jerusalem was that it was written in a time when the churches were losing their first love. A change was coming over them, and the first chapters of this book show us what that change was. The first love, the first life, the first glory were being lost. Surely we all realize how true that is in many places in our own time! The great cry today is: 'Let us get back to the things of the beginning!'

The third thing that led to the writing of these chapters was this: It was a time when many false prophets and teachers were bringing confusion into Christianity, and the faith which was 'once for all delivered unto the saints' was losing its purity. One Apostle, who wrote a very short letter, said he was constrained to write in order "to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). Is that not another condition in which we are living today? Many false teachers are bringing the people of God into confusion so that they hardly know what to believe.

Perhaps there is no book in the Bible which is more confused than this book of the Revelation. Many Christians have given up reading it, saying: 'I don't know what to think about it. This Bible teacher gives this interpretation, while that one gives another.' If I tried to do so, I could not tell you how many different interpretations of the book of the Revelation there are!

Well, that is how it was in the time when John wrote. You know that in his Letter he said that many false Christs had arisen (1 John 2:18). We must remember that this revelation of the heavenly Jerusalem was given because of all these conditions.

But let us note one more thing. This book was written at a time when judgment upon this world was beginning. You have only to read through it to see the judgments that were coming upon the world, and they began at the earthly Jerusalem. I think there is nothing in literature so terrible as the account of the destruction of Jerusalem given by the historian Josephus! But when the earthly Jerusalem is destroyed and removed, the heavenly one comes into view.

The judgment upon this world began at Jerusalem, and then it came upon the Roman Empire, and upon Rome itself. The time was not far ahead when great and wonderful imperial Rome would be devastated. From all its wealth, its luxury and its plenty it was reduced to famine and pestilence, and the economic situation became so bad that the most wealthy people were begging for food. And so you read in this book of these pestilences, famines and wars, and all these conditions which were coming upon the world. The judgments of God upon this world were beginning - and who shall say that those judgments are not beginning in our world today? We leave that for the present.

So we have here conditions of suffering and corruption and loss of glory, the decline of the Lord's people from their first love, a state of falsehood and spiritual weakness - and when things were like that, and are like that, the heavenly Jerusalem is presented and is the answer to all those conditions. It is just exactly the opposite of all those things.

Now we leave that for the moment and move nearer to the heart of these last chapters in the book of the Revelation.

#### WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

We want to know what is the meaning of this holy city, and I think that before we get very much further many of your ideas are going to be thoroughly upset! We are going to spoil many of the hymns that you sing, but we are going to have something better, and I hope that you will be singing a new song before we have finished.

The Christian who takes his, or her, Christian life seriously is always seeking for something which will explain his experience. Such Christians may not be actually searching for this, but in their hearts they are asking for something which will explain everything. In our Christian lives we are asking: What does it all mean? What is it leading to? Men in the world are asking the question: What does it all mean? When I was in hospital some years ago there was a man who had both his legs amputated, and I heard him groaning in his bed almost every day: 'What does it all mean?' You remember that in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans the Apostle Paul speaks about the groaning creation - "the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together" (verse 22) - and if you put your ear to the groaning creation, what do you hear? I feel sure you would hear this: What does it all mean? And then the Apostle Paul goes on to say: "We ourselves groan within ourselves" (verse 23). We have a deep question in our hearts: What does it all mean? What does all this difficulty, trial and suffering in the Christian life mean? What is it all leading to?

Now, of course, it is the business of the Christian teacher to provide the answer to that question and so to help God's people to understand what it means. So we have to ask this question: Is there an explanation which can be found in the Bible which will provide us with light upon the way?

#### THE KEY TO EVERYTHING

I want to say that there is an explanation, and I think these last chapters of the Bible are the best explanation in the Bible. If only we understood these two last chapters a great light would break upon our hearts, and we would say: 'And now I see. I have the key to everything.' Now that is making a great claim for two chapters - the key to everything!

I am not just using words. I have dwelt upon this for many days and weeks, so that these are not just empty words. What is the explanation of everything? There is one thing which governs everything in the

Bible, and it is that which comes out in fullness in the last chapters. What is that key to everything? When I put it into a short phrase, of course, you will not grasp what it means, but the more you think about it the more you will see that it is true. The thing which governs everything in the Bible from beginning to end is the nature of God. Have you got that phrase? The nature of God governs everything, and by 'the nature of God' we mean the very constitution of God Himself. We say about people: 'Well, he, or she, is constituted that way. That is how he thinks, how he feels and how he speaks, and because he is made like that, he speaks and thinks like that. That is just his constitution.' It does not matter what you do, you cannot get away from your own constitution. It is your constitution that makes you behave as you do.

That is what we mean by 'the nature of God'. If I may put it in this way: It is just how God, because He is what He is, looks at everything.

Well now, one of the real lessons of our Christian life is that we learn that God looks at everything quite differently from ourselves. He looks at things from the eyes of His own nature. If anything satisfies the nature of God His eyes fill with life, and He says: "In whom I am well pleased", but if anything does not satisfy the nature of God and He does not accept it, His eyes become dark. God judges everything according to His own nature, and He decides everything according to His own nature. The value of anything is always decided by God as to how it answers to His nature. God determines destiny for eternity on the standard of His own nature. Is that too difficult for you to grasp? You will never understand this city until you understand that, and you will never understand why Jesus Christ came into the world until you understand that. God is deciding the destiny of this world from the standpoint of His own nature, and His Son Jesus Christ is His standard of decision.

There is one question which stands over everything, and that is: Does it satisfy the nature of God? The Bible begins with the FACT of God and ends with the NATURE of God in perfect expression, and this perfect expression of God's mind and nature is presented to us in the symbolism of a city and a garden. Do you notice the word that I have used? The SYMBOLISM of a city and a garden - and this is where we upset your hymns and you have to have an absolute revolution in your mentality. Have you the idea that you are going to the heavenly Jerusalem as to some thing and some place? I am sorry to tell you that you are wrong! When you sing:

"Jerusalem the golden!

With milk and honey blest,"

What do you mean? When you sing:

"We're marching upward to Zion"

What do you mean? When you sing:

"We shall tread the streets of gold"

What do you mean? When you speak about "drinking at the river" and "taking of the fruit of life", what do you mean?

If I did not see the real meaning I should be very sorry to spoil all your lovely pictures! There is no such thing as a literal new Jerusalem and there is no such thing as a literal heavenly city answering to John's vision, but there is something very much better, and that is what we have to consider more fully.

## WHY THIS SYMBOLISM?

I will just close by telling you why all this book of the Revelation, especially the last chapters, was written in symbolic terms. This book throughout is almost entirely symbolism. Why? Because so much of it was not only prophetic as to a more distant future but had to do with the history of those times. Supposing that, instead of speaking about a great dragon or a terrible beast coming up out of the sea, John had said: 'Caesar is an awful dragon and wild beast. Caesar is like THAT.' Well, you know what would have happened! So these historic truths were presented in symbols, and the Christians understood. You know that Peter called Rome 'Babylon'. Well, the Romans, in reading that, would have said: 'Oh, he is talking about Babylon. Where is Babylon?', but the Christians understood that Peter's Babylon was Rome. So it was all written in symbols and the Christians were the only ones who understood, and that is true of the holy city. It is not something literal; it is something which represents something spiritual, and it is for Christians to understand that this is not some imagination but some SPIRITUAL reality. The Lord Jesus said to His disciples: "Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to the rest in parables" (Luke 8:10). That is: You understand, they don't. So these chapters are for spiritual understanding. This city, this heavenly Jerusalem, is that which fully answers to the nature of God. Every detail about it represents something of the Divine nature, so the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says to Christians: "Ye are come unto... the HEAVENLY Jerusalem."

Now that introduction was very necessary. It might not be very inspiring at the moment, but we must understand what it is that we are having to deal with, and why this has such an important message for our own lives and our own times. If you forget all that I have said this morning, try to remember one thing and take it away with you, think about it and keep on thinking about it: All God's work in our lives is on the basis of His own nature. We are called to be "partakers of the Divine nature", and when God has finished with us - if we let Him have His way - we shall be a full expression of the nature of God. Then, when you have a great multitude of people like THAT, a full, living expression of God's heart, then you have the heavenly Jerusalem.

Now you can sing again, if you like, "We are marching to Zion", but be sure of what you mean!

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Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/t-austin-sparks/the-nature-of-god/>

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