

CITIES: OF MEN AND OF GOD

We have all doubtless often been struck by the remarkable coincidental relationship between the various parts of a day's daily readings, revealing the marvelous interweavings of the harmony and unity of God's Word.

Such is the case when we find ourselves, by the "Companion," reading Isa. 52 and Rev. 14 together. Therein we have a parallel picture of history's two great symbolic cities, with their ultimate destinies—*Jerusalem and Babylon*.

Isa. 52:1—"*Awake, awake; put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments O Jerusalem, the Holy City; for henceforth there shall no more come into thee the uncircumcised and the unclean.*"

And Rev. 14:8—"*Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city, because she made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.*"

The *Holy City*, the city of life and hope and light—and the *Unholy City*, the city of death and confusion and evil. The city of future eternal joy—and the city of present, passing pleasure.

Both these chapters carry us forward to the time when the wisdom of the true choice will be manifested for the blindest to see—Zion exalted and Babylon destroyed. No exhortation or persuasion will be needed then to point out the advantages of the more excellent way. It will be convincingly clear to all, but the books will have been closed and the decree will have gone forth:

"He that is unjust, LET HIM BE UNJUST STILL" (Rev. 22:11).

Too late then to seek oil in panic-stricken confusion. There was plenty of time once, and constant pleadings, but now it is too late.

This picture of two cities, two rival commonwealths, is woven all through the Scriptures. This pictorial and allegorical form of teaching greatly helps the memory and impresses the imagination.

The seed of the Serpent and the seed of the Woman run parallel right from the beginning. From the time Cain hated and slew Abel because he was annoyed and condemned by Abel's more faithful and fuller life, the two cities have existed. Cain went, we are told, and *built himself a city* (Gen. 4:17)—an establishment, a center, an organization, a foundation of power. *Abel already HAD a city*. He was satisfied and secure. So Cain hated him in the misery of his own misdirected and unsatisfied desires.

The sons of God, in the long years that followed, tired of the Zionward journey. The vision of their distant city grew dim. The glittering cities of the children of men drew them aside and the result was the greatest catastrophe that has yet befallen the race.

Out of the wreckage, only eight were saved, and even among those eight, *all was not well*.

And when men began to multiply again, they said (Gen. 11:4):

"Go to, let us BUILD US A CITY."

Give us a city, give us a king, give us something we can see and handle, something social and exciting. This *spiritual* City, this *divine* King, this "joy of the Spirit" and "treasure in heaven" are rather thin fare for the natural appetite. *"Our soul loatheth this light bread"*—this divinely-provided manna from heaven.

But there was one among them who could see through the emptiness of the present. Abraham set forth seeking *"a city that had foundations"* (Heb. 11:10). He was obsessed with a desire for something *real and lasting*. He knew that (Psa. 127:1)—

"Except the Lord build, they labor in vain that build it."

So *he* sought for a city—

"Whose Builder and Maker is God" (Heb. 11:10).

By God's guidance he found the *City of Peace* with the *King of Righteousness* reigning in it (Gen. 14:18), set high upon a mountain in the *Land of Promise*. And Abraham was satisfied, for he saw afar off the glory of this city, and he believed these things, and embraced them, and confessed that he was a stranger and a pilgrim separated from the cities of the children of men and waiting in faith for the City of God.

Not far from this mountain, in the attractive green valleys below, there was a city of the children of men. And God said to Lot:

"Get you out of THIS place...escape to the MOUNTAINS...lest thou be consumed in the iniquity of THIS CITY."

And so another chapter in the lessons of God was written, and Sodom, the city of corruption, added its name and example to Babel, the city of confusion.

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Isaiah says, in this 52nd chapter, verse 4,

"My people went down aforetime into Egypt."

See how marvelously the hand of God worked in this! And as we read, let us be impressed with the inexorable workings of God's justice—slow, invisible, often disguised, but *terribly sure and strikingly fitting*. Rebekah misled Jacob, very well-meaning but misguided; Jacob deceived Isaac, still well-meaning but still deception; Laban deceived Jacob, not quite so well-meaning; Jacob's sons deceived Jacob and sold Joseph into slavery into Egypt, ill-meaning and vicious; and finally the Egyptians betrayed and enslaved the Israelites and killed *their* children as *they* had thought to do to Joseph. *What a gradually broadening chain of evil and sorrow!*

And what did the Israelites have to do in Egypt? Exo. 1:11—

"They built for Pharaoh treasure cities, Pithom and Raamses."

What irony! The sons of God sunk to ignorant slavery and forced to build cities for earthly treasures of the children of men!

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The next typical unholy city was Jericho. This was an important place, a strong fortress, the gateway to the conquest of the land of promise. It was the first city confronting the Israelites as they set out to occupy their inheritance; its defeat was miraculous and symbolic, and its destruction was complete.

It is several times called "the city of palm trees." Now palms throughout the Scriptures represent triumph and joy—victory after faithful struggle. Palms so appear in the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:40), at Christ's royal entry into Jerusalem (John 12: 13), and in the hands of the victorious host before the throne (Rev. 7:9). In Psalms (92:12) and the Song of Solomon (7:7), the righteous are likened to the straight, erect beauty of the palm tree.

How then is Jericho, the *unholy* city, a "city of palm trees"? Because Jericho is a *counterfeit* copy of the true. The palm trees indicate that Jericho is not just the cities of men generally, but the false *ecclesiastical* city. There is one reference to palm trees that gives us a hint of this meaning. Speaking of the heathen idols, Jeremiah says (10:5)—

"They are upright as the palm tree, BUT SPEAK NOT" (10:5).

They have a dead form of godliness, but lack the living power. Trees without fruit, twice dead (Jude 12). In this light, the Roman system is pre-eminently a "city of palm trees," for their dead idols are legion.

As the destruction of the hosts of Sihon and Og typify the defeat of Gog, so the subduing of Canaan with its *seven* (or completeness of) nations typifies the subduing of the earth. And Jericho came first. At the seventh trumpet-sounding on the seventh day, Jericho fell. So will great Babylon, the unholy city.

Jericho had to be utterly destroyed. The other cities of the land they took over and used—but *not Jericho*. As the fourth beast (Dan. 7:11), a curse of perpetual destruction was put upon it. It was never to be rebuilt (Josh. 6:26).

But what happened? Someone in the host of Israel did not realize the terrible reality and power of the One Who was in their midst and led them, and great trouble came upon the whole camp as a result until they had put away the covetous one from among them. God had promised them abundance in His good time, but *here was something they could not have*.

But Achan was out of harmony with the purpose. He could not wait for God. *"Is it a time to receive money and to receive garments?"* said Elisha to Gehazi (2 Kgs. 5:26). First things first, and all things in God's order. *"Verily they HAVE their reward."* Achan said (Josh. 7:21),

"I SAW...I COVETED...I TOOK...and I HID."

He *THOUGHT* he hid. What a pitiful delusion! He dug a hole and hid it away from God! Is it possible that *we* sometimes are as foolish as that?

And what was it? *"A goodly Babylonian garment."* What a snare those goodly Babylonish garments have been to the children of God all through the ages! It was a "goodly" one—doubtless one of Babylon's best, and the *very latest model*. But was it worth the price he paid for it?

John saw the unholy city in a goodly Babylonish garment:

"And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet color, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls" (Rev. 17:4).

Her gold and precious stones and pearls are counterfeit, as are her palm trees. Her ostentatious parading of these apparently genuine symbols of righteousness and truth deceives the world and in a subtler way may deceive the very elect. Believers are in little danger of deception by the bare Church of Rome itself, or her many ecclesiastical daughters; but her institutions, customs and thinkings permeate the world. The fourth empire still exists in universal diffusion. It is still a Roman world. And each year, on Dec. 25, this Roman world pays more or less conscious homage to the scarlet woman on the seven hills.

"By her sorceries were all nations deceived" (Rev. 18:23).

But Isaiah in this 52nd chapter, verse 1, tells us of better garments than the flashy tinsel of Rome:

"Put on THY beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city."

Here is a refreshing and satisfying change of scene. Here is the beauty of holiness, which so delighted the heart of the Psalmist:

"Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness" (Psa. 29:2).

What is this holiness, without which *none shall see the Lord* (Heb. 12:14)? It is nothing strange or mysterious. The word simply means "separateness." Worship the Lord in the beauty of separateness—separateness from anything that is displeasing to God or out of harmony with His ways. We can see immediately that the result must necessarily be *perfect beauty*.

It is not necessary to point out the desirability of beauty, but it *is* necessary to learn what, in God's sight, constitutes beauty, and what mars it. Solomon says (Eccl. 3:11-14)—

"He hath made everything beautiful in its time: also He hath set eternity in their heart...Whatsoever God doeth, it shall be forever: nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it: and God doeth it that men should fear before Him."

He hath made everything beautiful in its time. All *God's* work, and everything associated with *Him*, is beautiful. Apart from God, *nothing* is. Of natural attractiveness, unassociated with God, Solomon says again—

"Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain" (Prov. 31:30-RSV).

And further (Prov. 11:22)—

"Beauty without spiritual understanding is like a jewel in a swine's snout."

Wisdom will always perceive and be repelled by the snout behind the jewel. So beauty is purely a matter of spiritual education and discernment. It is inward, and not outward—

"Whose adorning let it NOT be that OUTWARD adorning (like the scarlet woman), but the HIDDEN man of the heart, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit" (1 Pet. 3:3-4).

There *is* one item of outward glory and beauty that God *has* expressed delight in; one that He Himself has expressly created for glory. While of great beauty and dignity in itself, its chief beauty in God's eyes lies in its evidence of wisdom and discernment and humble acceptance of, and obedience to, God's will. Its importance rests in its symbolism of harmonious, God-appointed relationship. In God's love and wisdom He has made this a token of blessing and honor, and the marring of it a matter of sorrow and shame. *God's mind is expressed in 1 Cor. 11:6, 15.*

The world's fashions in beauty vary with every age and every nation. What is beauty to one nation appears quite hideous to another. But God never changes. Are we wearing *His* holy garments—appointed "for glory and for beauty"—or the *world's*? When we are called to the judgment seat, we shall have to go as we are. The importance of some of the desires God has expressed may strike us a little more forcibly *then* than now.

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*"Put on **thy** beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the **holy** city. From henceforth there shall no more come into thee the uncircumcised and the unclean."*

As custodians of the holy city, believers have the solemn responsibility of maintaining its standards and laws. Bro. Roberts says on this point:

"If the knowledge of the Truth fail to beget the new man in the heart of the sinner, the baptism following his knowledge is not a birth. It is a mere performance of no benefit to him, but rather to his condemnation..."

"It ought, therefore, to be seriously considered by all who contemplate that step, and **by all who are called upon to assist them**, whether there is EVIDENCE of death to sin before arrangements are made for burial. The burial of a living man is cruelty. It were better for the sinner to leave God's covenant alone than to make a mockery of it."—Further Seasons, pg. 13.

It is no kindness to either the city or the individual to bring in the uncircumcised in heart. The issues are too serious. The Holy City—*God's city*—has been in degradation and misery for 25 centuries. *Why?* Because the custodians of its holiness neglected to keep it holy. What an unforgettable lesson!

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Vs. 3: *"Ye have sold yourselves for nought..."*

We are often reminded that the Jews are God's witnesses. What a sad witness they are to this eternal truth! What have they gained by putting aside the loving guidance and restraints of God's arrangements, and seeking their own pleasure and benefit?

"Unto them were committed the oracles of God...To whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the Law, the service of God, and the promises."

What great blessings this people had! What great responsibilities these blessings entailed! What terrible punishments because they had been allowed to approach so close to God, and *yet* had failed to discern His mind or be transformed by His love!

"...and ye shall be redeemed without money."

God's purpose will not fail. Regardless of man's failure, injustice or unkindness, we have the divine and eternal assurance that certain things are sure and guaranteed. And Israel's long night is not purposeless. The nation will rise out of it purged and white.

What does He mean, "redeemed *without money*"? Surely this refers to the "*stone cut out of the mountain without hands*."

"Not by power, nor by might, but by MY spirit, saith the Lord."

When all natural strength and resources are spent and cast aside, *then* will redemption come. The proud and militant Jews of Palestine have a sad and bitter lesson to learn before that day. And so it is with spiritual Israel (2 Cor. 12:9)—

"MY strength (saith God) is made perfect in weakness."

The proud, able, self-reliant—all such are no value to God.

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"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings of peace and salvation" (v. 7).

Here is real and divine and eternal beauty. The Spirit through Solomon speaks of these beautiful feet in the Song of Songs (7:1)—

*"How beautiful are thy feet **with shoes**, O prince's daughter!"*

The divinely-appointed shoes whereby they walk in the ways of God, and run to do His bidding.

John sees these feet as flaming pillars of the fires of *war*, purging the dross and ugliness of the earth, preparing it for eternal beauty (Rev. 10:1). Paul sees them shod with the preparation of the gospel of *peace* (Eph. 6:15).

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V. 8: *"They shall SEE EYE TO EYE when the Lord shall bring again Zion."*

Why is it necessary to say that? The sad history of Israel, both natural and spiritual, show how real and necessary this blessing will be. Consider the Jews—at the greatest moment of their history for the past 2000 years, faced naturally speaking with their supreme crisis—yet torn by bitter factions among themselves. And we remember the words of Joseph, as he sent forth his brethren with a message of life and hope for the perishing, *"See that ye fall not out by the way"* (Gen. 45:24).

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V. 11: *"Depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing. Go ye out of the midst of her."*

That same warning again. That same picture of the two cities—come *out* of one and enter the other. Paul quotes these words of the Spirit through Isaiah when he says (2 Cor. 6:14-17)—

*"Come **out** from among them and be **separate** and touch not the unclean, and I will receive you and be a Father unto you."*

On this condition alone will God accept us as children.

(Taken from "Be Ye Transformed" Volume 3 pages 306-313 by Bro. G. Growcott)