

LESSON 223

BABEL VS. ZION

Related Scripture: Psalm 125

KEY VERSE: "But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all."—Galatians 4:26.

Lesson Scripture: Genesis 11:1-9;
Zechariah 8:3-5; John 17:13-18

Introduction:

Conflict between God and Satan, between good and evil, between heaven and hell, the conflict which has been well called the conflict of the ages, is exemplified and epitomized in the history and prophecy of two great cities: Babylon, built around the tower of Babel on the plain of Shinar, and Jerusalem, built on and around Mount Zion.

Babel was an attempt by men to build their own way to heaven; the elevation of Zion was of divine creation. So they may serve as symbols of the two kinds of religion in the world: those that trust in human efforts to glorify man, and those that trust in divine grace to glorify God.

Scripture selections for this lesson give us just a few glimpses of the ancient conflict that still goes on. We may outline the lesson as follows:

1. Conspiracy, Genesis 11:1-4
 - a. Dispersion required, 1, 2
 - b. Dispersion resisted, 3, 4
2. Confusion, Genesis 11:5-9
 - a. Dispersion abandoned, 5, 6
 - b. Dispersion accomplished, 7-9
3. Comfort, Zechariah 8:3-5
 - a. God's presence, 3
 - b. God's people, 4, 5
4. Commission, John 17:13-18
 - a. Status unlike the world, 13
 - b. Scorned by the world, 14
 - c. Saved in the world, 15
 - d. Separate from the world, 16
 - e. Sanctified despite the world, 17
 - f. Sent into the world, 18

Notes on the Printed Text:

Conspiracy, Genesis 11:1-4.

From Genesis 10:8-12 it appears that Nimrod headed the conspiracy to defy God in the building of Babel and other cities. From the mythology of certain false religions it appears that Nimrod may have been the first great earthly king to try to make himself a god, or to be defied by his followers.

Whether these speculations about Nimrod are correct or not, the attempt by men to exalt themselves to heaven is a story often repeated in history. Men share with Satan the prideful ambition to usurp the place of their Creator (Isa. 14:14); if God permitted it, they would join hands to cast Him from His throne in fact as they do in fancy.

Dispersion Required, 1, 2.

After the flood, God's command to Noah and his descendants was, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth." (Gen. 9:1.) They were required, therefore, to scatter out and fill the earth again with people. All spoke the same language, and so could have had no difficulty in knowing that this was the declared will of God. The fertile plain watered by the Euphrates river was no excuse to neglect the dispersion required by God.

Dispersion Resisted, 3, 4.

"Go to" is equivalent to our modern English idiom, "Come on," or "Let's go!" The people exhorted and encouraged one another in their determination to resist the dispersion that God had commanded. Lacking stones, they made bricks, hoping to build a city and a tower "whose top may reach unto heaven," and so to make a great name for themselves, "lest we be scattered."

Confusion, Genesis 11:5-9.

When men will not agree to obey God, they cannot be permitted to agree too much in their disobedience, as this would only hasten their destruction. Confused wickedness is bad enough, but united wickedness is ripe for judgment.

Dispersion Abandoned, 5, 6.

Using human terms, "the Lord came down to see." What He saw was that men were united in willful abandonment of divine purpose, in willful promotion of human ambition. Unless God intervened, they would not disperse; the idolatrous city and tower were a notable beginning in the exhibition of the power of false religion; "and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do."

Dispersion Accomplished, 7-9.

But God did intervene; His purpose of dispersion was accomplished; and men "left off to build the city." Men are mere creatures of God, and creatures have no powers or means of rebellion except those that the Creator has supplied and is able to take away at His own will.

Men were able to rebel and conspire against God only because God had given them a common intelligence and speech. They had abused their privilege; it was a simple matter for God to "confound their language." Poor mortals who had imagined that they could outsmart God suddenly found that they could not understand one another.

Babylonian confusion is scattered "upon the face of all the earth" because men refused to scatter in harmony with the will of God. It remains true that when men will not agree with God they cannot long agree with one another.

Comfort, Zechariah 8:3-5.

As Babylon was the city of wickedness, so was Jerusalem the city of holiness. As Babel was the center of false religion, so was Zion the center of worship of the true and living God. But Satanic corruption had brought the wrath of God even upon His chosen nation, so that city and temple had been destroyed.

Yet through the prophets God comforted His people with promises of renewed blessings, promises of restoration and rebuilding. These promises have been partly fulfilled in history and will be further fulfilled in the future.

God's Presence, 3.

To those who know Him, the greatest blessing that God can give us is the realization of His presence. Because of the sinful rebellion of His people, He had withdrawn the manifestation of Himself and of His loving care and protection from Jerusalem; but His chosen people were still the object of His love in purpose; He would again be known as dwelling in Jerusalem. It was only the manifest presence of God that made Jerusalem the city of truth and Zion the holy mountain.

God's People, 4, 5.

With the return of divine blessings and protection to Jerusalem, God's people would again dwell there in safety. Even the very old shall dwell in peace and the very young shall play safely when God is there to guide and protect them.

Commission, John 17:13-18.

Earthly material cities, however, are but tokens of eternal things. The Son of God, unchanging King of unending ages, gives to a condemned world a message of hope in an everlasting spiritual salvation, and redeemed souls are commissioned to spread the good news.

Status Unlike the World, 13.

Unlike the people of this world, who are dependent on outward circumstances for their fleshly pleasures, disciples of the Lord Jesus have the joy of the Lord fulfilled in themselves as they meditate in the word which He has spoken.

Scorned by the World, 14.

Because God's people are different from the people of the world, the world hates them as it hates their Master. Nominal Christians may continue to be "of the world," but genuine Christians cannot. So the world can endure counterfeit Christians, but those who truly love and obey Him will be scorned by the same world that crucified their Savior and Lord.

Saved in the World, 15.

There is a present tense salvation too much neglected in popular Christianity. It is all right to be prepared to leave this world, but Jesus' prayer and the Father's purpose is that His people be saved from the power of sin while they remain here.

Separate from the World, 16.

If this sounds like repetition, it is. For emphasis, Jesus again states a fact about true disciples. It is no mere wish or obligation, but a fact. If the statement of fact does not fit some who call themselves disciples, it must be because they are not true disciples of the true Christ.

Sanctified Despite the World, 17.

Sanctification is opposed by the world, but accomplished by the word—the word of truth, the word of God. Pilate rather lightly asked a question which he and many other men deemed to be unanswerable: "What is truth?" (Jo. 18:38.) But Jesus has already given us the answer: God's word is truth.

Sent Into the World, 18.

Christ came from heaven to earth on a mission from the Father to seek and to save that which was lost. Even missionaries around the world do not have as far to travel for Christ as He traveled for the Father. But He has given us a mission. Faithfulness and obedience to Him will lead us into all the world with the message of saving grace.

Key Verse:

"But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all."—Galatians 4:26.

God's people are strangers and pilgrims on earth; our eternal citizenship is in heaven. (Philip. 3:20.) The earthly Jerusalem is still in bondage with her children (Gal. 4:25); our freedom is not of earth but of heaven, not of the flesh but of the spirit. As children of the heavenly city, we are assured of eternal victory over all the enemies of our souls and an eternal inheritance with the King of glory. The confusion of Babel will have no place in the world that is to be; the glory of Zion will rejoice our hearts forever.