

John 4:21 (Nicolas Simon) 138671

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Jerusalem and the Church (4:21)

Though the ancient city of Jerusalem was the dwelling place of kings, in God's sight she was far more than that. Jerusalem was unique within Israel for it was there, and there only, that God had chosen to place His name. The temple within that city was viewed as God's dwelling place in the midst of His people. "Will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth? ... Have respect therefore to the prayer of Thy servant ... that Thine eyes may be open upon this house day and night, upon the place whereof Thou hast said that Thou wouldest put Thy name there" (2 Chron. 6:18-20).

With the coming of Christianity, Jerusalem ceased to be the center of worship: "the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father" (John 4:21). Christ is now our center of worship, and that, in complete distinction to Judaism: "We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle Let us go forth therefore unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach" (Heb. 13:10,13).

There is no longer a physical location designated for worship, but rather, "where two or three are gathered together unto My name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20 JND). In this regard, however, the Old Testament principle remains the same; the children of Israel were not to offer their sacrifices in a place of their choosing, but only where God had chosen to place His name (Deut. 12:13-14). We too gather unto His name to offer our sacrifices — sacrifices of praise. It is not simply a gathering of saints — if that were so, then any place of our choosing would do. The Spirit of God alone gathers the saints together unto the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul refers to such a gathering of the assembly when he addresses the Corinthians. Defilement had been permitted in the assembly, and they need to clear themselves of the matter. The assembly's authority to act in such cases derives solely from the presence of the Lord in the midst: "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 5:4).

These parallels between Jerusalem and the assembly do not end with this. It should be noted that it is not a question of spiritualizing what we find in the Old Testament, or of making the church the new Israel, but rather, of recognizing those principles upon which God has always acted. In the book of Revelation, Christendom is likened not only to a woman but also to a city. Apostate Christendom is viewed as a harlot and the great city, Babylon (Rev. 17:5). In contrast, the true church of God is described as the bride of Christ and the holy, heavenly city Jerusalem (Rev. 21:9-10). Though the true church is ever viewed by God as the bride without spot or blemish, outwardly this is not the present testimony borne by Christendom.

The church, instead of being the house of God (1 Tim. 3:15), has become a great house (2 Tim. 2:20). The saints of God are scattered and divided. They no longer form a collective testimony to the unity of the Body of Christ. It is evident on every hand that things are in ruin. The heavenly calling of the church has been forgotten, and she has embraced that which is dishonoring to the Lord (Rev. 2:20-22). Any thought of separation from this world has largely been abandoned.

The assembly does not act in matters of discipline because it is our house, but rather, because it is not! "Christ is faithful as Son over His own house; whose house are we" (Heb. 3:6 JND). For this reason there should be great carefulness as to what is permitted to enter into the house. The wall of a city protects its occupants from that which is without, thereby permitting the inhabitants to dwell safely under its administrative authority within. The assembly, likewise, has a responsibility to guard against that which is without, and on the other hand, to nurture those that are within. As has already been remarked upon, the heavenly, holy city of Jerusalem, the church, has "a wall great and high, and had twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels" (Rev. 21:12). In her holy perfection she is regarded as being perfect in separation from that which is without and perfect in administration with respect to those within. There is no temple there, "for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it" (Rev. 21:22).