

A tale of two cities

The battle that rages between good and evil, God and the devil, has long held people fascinated. This great spiritual conflict has inspired many an epic writer to tales of heroism and adventure, and people have used all kinds of imagery to depict the continuing struggle.

The Bible has its own ways of illustrating the war between the spiritual and the carnal, the righteous and the unrighteous, but one in particular stands out. From Genesis to Revelation it speaks of the historic conflict of two great cities: Zion, the holy city of God, and Babylon, the godless city of man.

The first hint of Babylon, in Genesis 11, shows the carnal nature of this man-centred place. The inhabitants of the post-flood world, unwilling to learn the lessons of the past, determined to build for themselves 'a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven' and, by so doing, make a name for themselves (Genesis 11:4 NASB). They laboured hard, manufacturing bricks in an arrogant attempt to reach up to the heights of heaven by the achievement of their own hands.

By contrast, the same chapter also provides us with the first hint of Zion, the city of God.

Here we find Abraham (still known as Abram) and his family setting out on a pilgrimage 'from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan' (Genesis 11:31). The Lord had appeared to Abraham before the journey began (Acts 7:2) and, commanding him to leave his country and his people for a land he would show him, motivated him by a vision of the holy city (Hebrews 11:10).

Unlike Babel, the city Abraham looked for had eternal foundations. It had been designed and built by God himself. In utter contrast to the unsuccessful attempt of the Babel builders to elevate themselves from the earth to the heavens, Zion, the holy city, the heavenly Jerusalem, is 'coming down out of heaven from God' (Revelation 21:10).

The two cities are totally incompatible. They are built on different foundations, to a different construction and by a different motivation. And they are continually at enmity. Babylon prides itself in the pursuit of humanistic philosophy, where men and women are the authors of their own salvation. Full of the carnality of the world, there is no room for God. She is a harlot city reserved for ultimate destruction (see Revelation 18).

Zion, on the other hand, the bride of Christ and totally God-centred, shines 'with the glory of God' and is destined for eternal blessing (Revelation 21:11).

Which city are you building?

Every man or woman who ever lived participates in the construction of one or other of these cities. Either they are building the kingdom of God and are destined for that holy city, or they are busy placing futile stone upon futile stone of that man-made edifice that is so taken up with the world that it has no room for God.

In case you think I'm being dogmatic in insisting that everyone is building in either of these two places, let me remind you that Jesus said: 'He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters' (Matthew 12:30). If we

are not building the kingdom of God then, unwittingly or not and whether we like it or not, we are serving the devil's purposes.

Here is the great subtlety and deception of the devil: although, spiritually, the virgin bride and the vulgar harlot are worlds apart, superficially they are similar. The devil isn't stupid. He knows that the counterfeit only has the ability to succeed because of its likeness to the original, and he has gone to great lengths to provide some very convincing counterfeits.

Ferocious wolves, seeking to destroy the flock of God, first adorn themselves with sheepskins. The false prophet in the book of Revelation might speak like a dragon, but he looks like a lamb. And many, with much enthusiasm and little knowledge, have happily accepted the counterfeit, mistaking it for the real.

Katrina, not having read the warning in Deuteronomy 18:10-12, was not aware that in attending a spiritualist 'church' she was settling herself on the devil's territory. She was involved with it for a whole year before realising that what went on there was not of God but devil-inspired. Three years on, now born again and baptised in the Holy Spirit, she sees the situation clearly:

'They claimed to be Christians,' she remembered. 'They sang hymns, said the Lord's Prayer, had Bible readings. And I even saw them exercise gifts similar to those given by the Holy Spirit and listed in 1 Corinthians 12.

'On the surface everything looked right, but in reality everything was wrong. There was no genuine love in that place. They didn't know Jesus personally – though some claimed to. God was just a far-off, untouchable being to them, and no lasting comfort came from their devil-inspired, so-called messages from the dead.

'The whole place stank of death. It's just that, at first, not having experienced the reality of Jesus for myself, I was deceived, and couldn't sense it.'

It's easy to fall into the trap. The devil knows how to counterfeit the real and we must be on the alert. Not just people

in Katrina's situation – which you may argue is an extreme case – but every one of us could be fooled. Right now, many of God's genuine people who are working hard in what they would call 'proper' churches, believing themselves to be building the kingdom of God, are in fact resident in a Babylon they have either built with their own hands or have allowed to be built up around them.

Babylon, you see, isn't just some weird cult or obviously demonic religious set-up. It is *everything that is not of the kingdom of God*. It is *everything that is at variance with what God has said in his Word* – whether it be someone trying to contact the dead through a medium or someone wanting to walk in the ways of God but unwilling to embrace some part of God's Word which makes him feel uncomfortable.

If we try to exclude God in any way, we are no longer looking for the holy city. As we revert to trying to build in our own way (like our original do-it-yourself man), Babylon's bricks are already in our hand.

We can call it Babel, Sodom, Egypt or even 'the present city of Jerusalem' and we would still be talking about the same thing (Galatians 4:25). It is man-made effort that contrasts with the God-given access into the heavens (see Genesis 28:10-17; John 1:51). Remember, 'our God is a consuming fire' and what we have spent our lives building will be tested by the fire of God himself (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

According to the writer to the Hebrews, there is a great shaking coming, one destined to remove everything that can be shaken so that, ultimately, only the unshakable kingdom of God will remain.

As Christians we have come to Mount Zion, he tells us, 'to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God'. And he warns those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life, yet are still fellowshipping with spiritual death in Babylon, not to refuse God but to give heed to the warning from heaven (Hebrews 12:22-29).

The call from the Lord is clear: 'Come out of her, my people,

so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues; for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes' (Revelation 18:4-5).

Help or hindrance?

It is time for God's unshakable kingdom to become evident. It is time for the real church to emerge, built faithfully to scriptural patterns, moving steadily on in God's purposes and consisting exclusively of people born again by the Spirit of God.

The hastening or hindering of its emergence is very largely in our hands. We have a hand in eternal affairs.

Not only are we to 'look forward' to the day of Jesus' return but, by the determined action of lives lived by faith in the light of God's ultimate intention, we can even 'speed its coming' (2 Peter 3:10-12). It is to this that we are called.

But just as faithfulness and obedience will bring us into the fulness of God's purposes, unbelief and disobedience will disqualify us from them.

When Abraham began his journey from Ur it was in the company of his father Terah. Together they headed for Canaan, but when they arrived in Haran they stayed there until Terah died, after which the call of God came to Abraham again. The call was the same. God's purpose was unchanged. But one generation had missed its opportunity.

Abraham's nephew, Lot, at first moved on with his uncle. But he was motivated more by desire than destiny. Lifting up his eyes and seeing the well-watered valley of the Jordan, like the garden of the Lord and like Egypt, he chose to go that way. God commanded Abraham, however, to lift up his eyes and look north, south, east and west and behold the land of his inheritance (Genesis 13:10-18).

Lot saw his immediate comfort, but Abraham received his ultimate call.

It isn't surprising, then, that we soon discover Lot living in corrupt Sodom. And although his righteous soul was tormented

day after day by the lawless deeds of its inhabitants, he made no attempt to remove himself from among them. God's judgment, however, had already been passed on Sodom, a city lacking even ten righteous citizens, and the angels of the Lord were sent to rescue Lot by warning him of the coming wrath and commanding him to flee to the mountains. To remain would be fatal, for by remaining he would be participating in her sins and, as a result, would 'receive of her plagues'.

Despite such desperate urgency, Lot hesitated until the angels had to physically pull him out of the city. And even then he continued to argue and seek a compromise so as not to have to go all the way to the mountains! But God, in his loving patience and mercy, not being willing for any innocent person to suffer, held back his judgment until Lot and his family were out of the condemned city (Genesis 19).

How many Lots are there today, I wonder, who are holding back the righteous judgments of the Lord – judgments that further the purposes of God and reveal his holiness – simply because they refuse to obey his voice and dissociate themselves from his enemies? How many creaking and mixturised denominations litter Christendom today because God's redeemed people within them refuse to budge? Only when they make their exits can God's righteous judgments clear the scene to make room for something better – a church worth the name.

Or how many who purport to be building the kingdom of God and hastening the day of the Lord's coming are, in reality, a hindrance to his work?

Looking back over the testimonies in this book, it's easy to conclude that it's not a small number. But don't despair. We may not be able to do anything about them but we can do something about ourselves.

Make your time count for eternity

Lot's rescue was undertaken because the Lord 'remembered Abraham' (Genesis 19:29). It was on the same grounds that

he was later moved to deliver Israel from Egypt (Exodus 2:24-25). He remembered his covenant with Abraham and so brought the children of Abraham out of the land of pressure into the land of promise.

During their journey through the desert he taught them that 'man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord' (Deuteronomy 8:3). But the message they heard was of no value to them because those who heard it did not combine it with faith. Those who had had the good news preached to them failed to enter the promised land because of their disobedience (Hebrews 4:2, 6).

An entire generation perished in the wilderness, having witnessed at first hand the *works* of God, but remaining ignorant of his *ways* (Psalm 103:7).

Today it is we Christians, the body of Christ, who are the children of Abraham and the inheritors of the promise (Romans 4). Like our predecessors, we have a destiny to fulfil and an inheritance to claim.

So let's get on with it. We can't afford to waste another generation. For, however many generations are to come, one thing is sure: we won't get another shot at the target. This is the final generation *for us*.

There is a church to build, a world to save and a kingdom to usher in. It is for this that we were redeemed, for this that we have become responsible – and for this that we will be rewarded. So let's not delay. Dare to believe it. Dare to act on it.

Make your time count for eternity!