

A New Understanding Of Sacred Scriptures, Part 4 - The Tower Of Babel.

What is undoubtedly one of man's most consistent tendencies is to try to reach heaven and to find enduring happiness by self made means which ignore and by pass the teaching of the Lord and the necessity of living according to the Ten Commandments. Morally, politically and spiritually, history has known - and we know today - of instances where systems have been brought forward which have precisely tried to do this; which have been hailed for their promises of Utopia and happiness, though they have ignored and disdained the fundamentally necessary things which in fact bring these things about.

As much as this is done on a large scale, and can be seen to be present in certain political, moral and even religious systems, so too does this tendency manifest itself at a personal level also. For the truth is, we also share the tendency of mankind as a whole; the tendency to think that we shall find and know enduring, long term and eternal happiness apart from the Lord, and that we can reach heaven apart from ordering our lives according to the teaching He has given us.

I speak of the tendency as something that is common to us all, for it is. And we are warned of it in a number of instances in Scripture, not least among them being the story of the Tower of Babel in the Book of Genesis, Chapter 11. As with the other stories this also is essentially a parable, the importance of which lies in the teaching it conveys and in the way in which it touches upon human experience in every age.

"Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth." (Genesis 11, verses 1-4). Then, reading on, "But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The Lord said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

Of the general significance of the story and application it has for man today I have spoken already. At the outset of my talk I spoke of the tendency we universally share, to think to find happiness and to reach heaven in our own way and according to man made systems of thought, bypassing the Lord's way and the importance and necessity of obeying the teaching He has given us. But it is the significance of the details of the story to which I now would like to turn.

The people journeyed from the east. And this in itself speaks of retrogression, for the east where the sun rises, symbolizes the Lord. To be in the east means to be in close communion with the Lord. But to journey from the east means to turn our backs on Him and to move away from Him. And this is what is pictured here. Those occasions when people allow themselves to be drawn away from the Lord and into the land of Shinar, or Babylon, the Biblical symbol of self love and self intelligence.

Having come into Babylon - or, as is meant, having reached a state of mind in which one is swayed and motivated by the love of self - the inevitable tendency is to substitute what is man made and humanly derived for what is Divinely given. To take bricks instead of stones and slime instead of mortar. To bring forward theories and reasonings in place of the teaching of the Lord.

What is spoken of here is one of man's most consistent tendencies. And this is what the story is designed to warn us about. Spurred on by self love and self-gratification we are so prone and so ready, to set aside the teaching that the Lord has given us and to substitute in its place theories and reasonings which are all of our own making. And at the same time we are confident that we shall find happiness and a kind of heaven.

A case in point is the advocacy in recent years of the new morality where we clearly see how the thinking of men has been introduced in place of the teaching of the Lord. Where bricks have been introduced in place of stone, and slime instead of mortar, and people have thought to find in such theories happiness and a kind of heaven.

So too does this tendency manifest itself at a personal level and within our own individual experience. For we too, swayed and influenced by the love of self, tend to put aside the teaching of the Lord and replace it with reasonings of our own making. When we have been hurt or offended, for example, our inclination is to put aside the teaching of the Lord concerning forbearance and forgiveness, and to replace it with such reasonings as would justify revenge and retribution.

We think to take matters into our own hands. We allow self to take over. And spiritually we find ourselves in the land of Shinar, or Babylon, erecting a system of thought and reasoning out of unregenerate attitudes which we foolishly believe are a solution to the problem.

The Tower of Babel represents man's effort to build his own heaven, his own destiny, his own faith. It pictures the attempts of man to devise his own systems and to fix his own standards, setting aside the teaching of the Lord. It speaks of the danger of those reasonings which come to us when we try to excuse or justify what is disorderly and evil. It warns of the foolishness of thinking to find heaven on the basis of what we think and feel rather than of what the Lord teaches and reveals.

As in the story, this cannot but end in disillusionment and failure. If we are going to leave it to men to set the standard of morality how can there be, in the end, anything other than confusion and bewilderment?

Different people speaking different languages, one advocating one thing and one another? At the commencement of the story 'the whole world had one language and a common speech', a statement which speaks of the harmony of thought and ideas when people are close to the Lord and willing to humble themselves to His teachings. But once they move away from Him and start journeying from the east; once they start substituting their theories and ideas, taking bricks instead of stones, fastening on falsities instead of truths, things become a shambles and no one knows where they stand.

So also is the case in our own lives and experience. Where people are close to the Lord there is a pulling together and unspoken harmony. But when they move away from Him and enter upon states dominated by the love of self and concern for self, there is confusion and misunderstanding. Harmony goes out of the window and we find ourselves speaking totally different languages. Wherever and whenever the love of self is active with people, if only with one individual, there is disharmony and unhappiness. The thing about the love of self is that it takes rather than gives. It hurts and lashes out. In its absence, the opposite applies. As Swedenborg wrote of it: "When the common good of all is regarded, one person never appropriates to himself another's delight, or destroys another's freedom, but in so far as he can he promotes and increases it. This is the reason why the heavenly societies are as one, and this solely through mutual love from the Lord." (*Arcana Caelestia* 1316).

The story of the Tower of Babel is included in our Bibles so through it the Lord might teach us of the dangers of arrogance and pride. And we can only be impressed by it. Human nature carries with it this tendency to resort to alternative systems and standards, the product of man's own intelligence. If, for example, we are let down by others or badly done by, the Lord clearly teaches us how we should respond. But no, we'll do it our way. And so we decide on a course of action which we think will settle the situation but only brings chaos and unhappiness.

We are all the time building our little towers of Babel. We're all the time trying to find our way through to heaven and peace of mind and happiness on the basis of what we feel should be done rather than on the basis of what the Lord teaches and reveals.

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