

*When God Dwells*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on September 20, 2020.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.' Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. But he answered them, 'You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down' (Matthew 23:37-24:1-2).

Unphased by the animosity of Israel's leaders, Jesus warns the crowds of the insidious hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. Having issued his warning, he then turns to the Pharisaical perpetrators. Rather than casting metaphorical stones, Jesus builds a seven-point case against them, one woe at a time, concluding with a pronouncement of imminent judgment upon "this generation."

Throughout his teaching at the temple, Jesus has employed a variety of techniques. From hyperbole to metaphor or simile, Jesus has taught in a way that engaged the listeners' hearts and minds. Here, the Master Teacher uses the example of Jerusalem to both prophesy imminent, specific events but also to confront the sin, of a nation. (This is not dissimilar to how Americans will sometimes reference our national government by the name of our capitol city, Washington). "Jerusalem" means more than just a city.

It is a national representation as the city of the Davidic throne and the holy temple. But it's neither church nor state that Jesus remembers; it is Israel's sins against God's prophets. He is remembering the last recorded murder in the Hebrew canon, the stoning of the Prophet Zechariah, who was murdered literally at the temple in Jerusalem.

In the history of kings enthroned in Jerusalem there were many who did what was wrong in the eyes of the Lord. There were few who did what was right. Joash was one of the few, at least while Jehoiada, the priest, was alive. But after the priest's death, even a king who did right proved he could do wrong. Joash was led astray from faithful worship into idolatry, taking the people with him.

Yet, God in his mercy and love for his people "sent prophets among them to bring them back to the LORD" (2 Chron. 24:19). And one of those prophets was Zechariah, who would not bow to political pressure or acquiesce to the king's debauchery. He confronted the king's sins and the sins of the people, proclaiming the truth of God's Word from the temple mound in Jerusalem. And then Joash, he who once did what was right in the eyes of the Lord did the unthinkable: he commanded his supporters to stone God's prophet, using the very stones of the temple (2 Chron. 24:21).

Yet, before he breathed his last breath, dying under the rubble, Zechariah petitioned, "May the LORD see and avenge" (2 Chron. 24:22). And God did see, as the "eyes of the LORD are in

every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good” (Prov. 15:3). And he did avenge, as King Joash was assassinated in his bed in justice for the murder of Zechariah.

But God’s vengeance did not rest with Joash’s death, for the sins of the kings did not cease nor the sins of their citizens. Even after the Babylonian captivity, once the people repopulated Jerusalem and the temple was restored, Israel’s leaders continued to lead the people astray, rejecting the prophetic Word of God. Therefore, hearkening back to the martyrdom of Zechariah, Jesus laments, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” It is as much a statement of historical truth as it is a lamentation of perpetual sin. Despite God’s favor upon his people, Jerusalem embodies the evidence of the fallen human condition: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Rom. 3:10-18).

### **When God Desires**

Jesus’ lamentation is not a nostalgic ode to Jerusalem. It is telling, both of identity and desire. Listen carefully to what he says and how he says it: “How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers a brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” There are four things that I want us to consider here: *who* would have gathered, *how* and *why* he would have gathered, and the *response* of those who were to be gathered.

First, if someone ever says to you that Jesus never referred to himself as God, know that they are not a careful reader. Jesus does not say, “How often would *he* have gathered,” but “How often would *I* have gathered.” It is a lamentation of the second Person of the Godhead. As we profess in the Nicene Creed, the Lord Jesus Christ is “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God.” He is the one who told the Jews, “before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58). He is the one who said to Philip, “whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). He is the one who declared at the temple, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). And, he is the one who personally laments Jerusalem’s doom.

Second, note the simile that Jesus employs: “as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.” You can picture it in your imagination, can’t you? It is an image of nurturing and protection. And it is not the only time that the simile is used in Scripture. For example, the psalmist says to those who seek God as their refuge, “He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge” (Ps. 91:4). We are meant to visualize that God is indeed a refuge.

This imagery helps us better see the third and fourth things I want you to consider, specifically God’s desire and Israel’s response. The historical narratives of the Old Testament reveal what Jesus summarizes here. It is not that God did not desire to protect Israel; it is that they were not willing to be gathered under his wings. As God spoke to Israel, generations before through Isaiah, “‘In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.’ But you were unwilling, and you said, ‘No! We will flee upon horses;’ therefore you shall flee

away” (Isa. 30:15-16). Rather than returning and resting in quietness and trust of God’s provision, Israel would rather run from their God. And so, he let them run all the way to their ruin. May the same not be said of you.

Just as God would have gathered Israel together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, so God “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). Such truth is in Christ alone, whose yoke is easy and burden light” (Matt. 11:30). In Christ, you will find an eternal refuge, under his wings. So, do not flee from him to the fleeting pleasures of this present darkness, lest God give you up in the lusts of your heart and a debased mind (Rom. 1:24-32). Do not run from him, for he desires that you know that he “so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). And he desires that you know that “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9).

Sadly, Jerusalem embodied a people who would not confess nor believe. Just as they had persecuted and killed the prophets, so they would murder their Messiah, the Son of God, Savior of the world. Rather than find their refuge and rest in God’s perfect provision, they fled from him. Therefore, Jesus reveals the evidence of their judgment: “See, your house is left to you desolate.”

### **When God Departs**

In the Old Testament, the temple is referred to as God’s “house,” and for good reason: the temple was the dwelling place of God among his people. But note that Jesus does not say “God’s house” or “my house” but “your house.” It is a grand house of worship, but the presence of God has departed. Jesus says, “*your* house is left to *you* desolate.” The word translated “desolate” may better be translated “uninhabited.” He has departed and is not there.

Jesus’ startling words fulfill Jeremiah’s prophecy, when God said to Israel, “I have forsaken my house; I have abandoned my heritage; I have given the beloved of my soul into the hands of her enemies” (Jer. 12:7). Then, in a physical depiction of the spiritual reality, the physical presence of God in-person, Jesus, says, “For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” It is *not* a prophecy but a conditional statement: If you do this, then you will see me. But they will not. They will not repent. They will not believe. They will not rejoice. They will not worship the Lord. And so, Jesus departs the temple, depicting in reality the final departure of the presence of God from Jerusalem’s temple.

Sadly, it is not only God’s departure that is terrifying, but Jesus reveals to his disciples the temple’s imminent destruction. The disciples, clearly missing the significance of Jesus’s words, continue to marvel at the grand structures on the temple mound. It is an admiration of worldly superficiality, like polishing the brass railing on the Titanic. But Jesus responds with sobriety, “Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

Jesus died, resurrected from the dead, and ascended into heaven sometime between A.D. 30 and 33, depending upon the dating method used. And after his departure, temple worship continued

in Jerusalem. The Jewish leaders had seemingly averted a coup, and Jewish life would continue presumably tomorrow as it had yesterday. Of course, there were the Christians who continued to advance Jesus' cause, claiming he was alive. (Which indeed he is!) But the temple, the symbol of Israel's identity, remained.

That is, until A.D. 70, when the Roman emperor's son, Titus, entered Jerusalem with his army, plundering the city and its citizens and torching what remained, including the temple. What remained of the temple was its stones which were torn down in search of melted gold. As Jesus had prophesied, there was not left one stone upon another. Yet more importantly, the house of the Lord, where his presence once dwelled, no longer existed.

### **When God Dwells**

What then are we to make of God's promise to Israel in Leviticus, "I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Lev. 26:11-12)? Has God forsaken his promise? Does he not desire to dwell among his people? Has his presence departed forever?

In short, no, as the Apostle Paul explains, "For all the promises of God find their Yes in [Christ]" (2 Cor. 1:20). God did in fact dwell among his people, first in the tabernacle and then in the temple. And in the fullness of time, God did walk among his people in the person of Jesus Christ. But, God's presence is not limited to one building or one moment in time, as Solomon confessed, "Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). God's presence is not in a place but among his people. The Spirit of God dwells in his people by God's grace alone through faith in Christ alone to the glory of God alone.

Through faith in Christ, Jew and Gentile alike are united into one holy temple, built living stone upon living stone. And it is in Christ alone that we are "built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph. 2:14-22). Therefore, the presence of God continues to reside among his people, as we are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that [we] may proclaim the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

As it is for all who are in Christ, so it will be for eternity: "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God" (Rev. 21:3). Amen.