

## DROPPING OFF GOD'S MAP MATTHEW 23:37-39; 24:1-2

On May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018, something very consequential *and* controversial happened in Israel that would barely have raised eyebrows had it happened in any other country of the world. On May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018, the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the birth of the modern State of Israel, the United States announced that it was moving its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, an announcement that made international headlines, sparked worldwide protests, and fueled existing tensions between Jews and Palestinians.

While this move infuriated Palestinians, the global Jewish community celebrated, because they viewed it as the U.S.' support and sanction of their long-held belief that Jerusalem, not Tel Aviv, is the legitimate capital of the State of Israel—indeed, that Jerusalem rightfully *belongs* to the Jews.

You do not have to dig very deep to discover the origins of this belief. Jerusalem has been the holiest city in Judaism and the ancestral and spiritual homeland of the Jewish people since the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC. In classical antiquity, Jews considered Jerusalem the center of the world. It was destination of their pilgrimages, the site of their festivals, the seat of their government, the birthplace of their kings, the home of their prophets, the hub of their religion, and, most importantly, the location of their beloved Temple, where God Himself resided.

For Jews all throughout history, Jerusalem is an inseparable part of their identity. It is their collective home—even if they have never lived there. This explains why the psalmist, writing from exile in Babylon, lamented, *<sup>5</sup> If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! <sup>6</sup> Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy! (137:5-6).*

For the past three thousand years you would be hard-pressed to find any Jew who feels neutral about Jerusalem. Even Jesus, even though He had been accustomed to heaven's splendor and glory, was passionate about this holy city. In the passage we are looking at this morning, we are introduced to some of His passions and perceptions about this place whose name means, "City of Peace."

After several contentious conversations with the scribes and Pharisees, the last of which included Jesus' seven scathing statements regarding their pride, pretense, and presumption, Jesus is preparing to leave the temple and head back to the Mount of Olives. Knowing that this would be the last time that He would set foot on the temple grounds, He cried out, *<sup>37</sup> "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!"*

These are poignant, powerful words, and though Matthew gives us no indication about how Jesus felt when He said them, we are told in Luke's Gospel that Jesus was weeping as He was speaking (19:41f.), which suggests that this city had a special place in His heart. Jesus loved Jerusalem. He appreciated its historical and spiritual significance. He cared very much about its wellbeing. And He was brokenhearted as He contemplated its tragic fate in the days ahead.

Please understand that when Jesus speaks about Jerusalem, He is not referring to its geography, its skyline, its architecture, or any other physical feature of the city. He is referring to its people. In this verse He is referring to way its inhabitants reacted to the prophets and messengers God sent to warn and woo them. With intentional irony, Jesus speaks of how

Jerusalem betrayed its name. The “City of Peace” had become the “City of Violence.”

But even though Jerusalem deserved condemn-nation for killing and stoning God’s messengers, and even though they would incur even more guilt for what they were about to do with God’s ultimate Messenger—His Son, Jesus speaks compassionately of her as He likens His desire to protect and care for the city’s inhabitants to that of a hen gathering her chicks under her wings for protection. It is a picture of tenderness and affection and intimate concern. He longed for the people of Jerusalem to experience the peace and security and blessing that only He could provide—to come to Him and find rest for their souls.

But they would not do it. The words “you were not willing” are some of the saddest words in all of Scripture. They consciously and deliberately rejected Jesus as their Savior and King, proving that when they joined the Galilean pilgrims in welcoming Jesus at the triumphal entry, it was no more than passing enthusiasm. Ultimately, they were unresponsive and resistant to His invitations and overtures.

Which tells us something about the way God deals with people. He loves, He woos, and He waits with open arms for people to respond to His invitation to be friends and to have abundant life. But He never imposes His love by overriding human will. He created us with a free will so that we could *choose* to love Him back, because true love cannot be demanded or coerced—it must be a choice.

However, there is a consequence for spurning God’s love, and the consequence for the people of Jerusalem rejecting Jesus as their Savior and King is found in **verse 38**. <sup>38</sup> *See, your house is left to you desolate.*

The word, “desolate” means *uninhabited* or *deserted*. It describes what we would call a “ghost town.” But Jesus was not referring to *people* deserting the city. As Jesus leaves the temple for the last time, God Himself is abandoning Jerusalem. He is withdrawing from Jerusalem as His city of residence, and as the place where His people come to Him to find forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, and blessing. The desolate house, then, refers to a deserted Temple.

Do you realize how consequential this statement is? It changes everything, not just for Jerusalem, but for the Jews, for mankind in general, and for the way God relates to mankind! It anticipates the inauguration of the new covenant at Jesus’ death in which the temple will no longer play a role in God’s redemptive plans and purposes. Temple sacrifices will become obsolete, temple rituals will become hollow and meaningless, and the temple itself will become just an empty building, void of the power and presence of God. From this time forward, the temple will have no more significance than any other place on earth, including a pig sty or a prison cell, for God will be present and accessible wherever “two or three come together” in Christ’s name (Matt. 18:20).

And so, this is a turning point for Jerusalem. Because the city has rejected Jesus, its Savior and King, it has forfeited its featured role and status in God’s kingdom and (as we shall see later) is doomed to complete and utter destruction.

Look at **verse 39**. <sup>39</sup> *For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.’”*

“*You will not see me again*” marks the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry. The inhabitants of Jerusalem had had their last opportunity to acknowledge Jesus as God’s appointed Messenger and anointed Messiah, and to embrace Him as their Savior and King. There would not be another chance for quite some time, until a day when they would utter the words of Psalm 118:26, “*Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.*”

Jesus is apparently referring to a time in the future when the inhabitants of Jerusalem

will see Him and acknowledge that He is, indeed, God's Messiah, Savior, and King. If so, there is a glimmer of hope for Israel in this statement. There may be a hint here of Paul's prophecy in Romans 11, which describes an outpouring of faith in Jesus among Jews at the end of the church age (11:25-27).

But when will this happen? Jesus will go on in chapter 24 to reveal some things that will give us clues as to the timing of these future events. Suffice it to say, it is almost certain that this future blessing will occur on or around the time of Jesus' Second Coming, when He will come in glory and His kingdom will be a literal, physical kingdom on earth. We will explore this more fully in the next few weeks.

Let us look now at the first couple of verses of chapter 24. **Verse 1.** *<sup>1</sup> Jesus left the temple and was going away, when His disciples came to point out to Him the buildings of the temple.*

As Jesus leaves the temple for the last time, His disciples draw attention to the great stones in the building. Jesus had just commented on the spiritual demise of the Temple—that the presence and glory of God would be departing. Perhaps they were grieving about the temple's sad fate. Perhaps they were contemplating Jesus' predictions of the temple becoming a desolate house in light of the magnificent structure that seemed to be built to last.

Indeed, the construction of Herod's temple was impressive. The historian, Josephus, says that some of the stones used in the construction measured thirty-eight feet long, twelve feet high, and eighteen feet wide (*Ant.* 15.392). I have personally seen some of these stones two thousand years after they were put in place, and they are certainly remarkable enough to merit a comment.

**Verse 2,** *<sup>2</sup> But [Jesus] 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."*

Instead of affirming His disciples' exclamation about how impressive the temple stones were, Jesus comments on their tragic fate. He predicts what may have seemed inconceivable at the time—that the greatest architectural wonder in the Middle East will one day be entirely razed (Blomberg). And, indeed, forty years later, in AD 70, this happened exactly as Jesus said. The Romans completely destroyed the temple, leaving it in a pile of ruins, which remains to this day.

Jesus is reinforcing His earlier comment that the temple has lost its featured status and role in God's redemptive plans and purposes. And so, though the destruction of the Temple would be sad and traumatic, it would in no way affect God's plans and purposes to reconcile the world to Himself. For in just a couple of days, Jesus' death would establish the *new covenant*. God would be reconciling the world through Jesus, not through temple sacrifices and rituals. Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross would make temple sacrifices obsolete, temple rituals hollow and meaningless, and the temple itself an empty building, void of the power and presence of God.

Jesus' words in this passage were not only important for Jews living in the first century; they are extremely consequential for how we view Jerusalem, the Temple, and Judaism. Of course, nothing will ever diminish the immense historical and spiritual significance of Jerusalem, the Temple, and Judaism in God's story. But how should we think about these things now, or in the future?

As most of you know, a portion of the temple wall still stands today. It is known as the Western Wall, or the Wailing Wall. It is at the base of this wall that worshipers gather to fervently pray that God would hasten the day when the Jews will once again occupy the

Temple Mount, on which the Al-Aqsa Mosque is located (otherwise known as “The Dome of the Rock,” the second holiest site in Islam), so that the Jews can rebuild the Temple.

Orthodox Jews believe the Temple Mount belongs to them, and that one day they will possess it again, and rebuild the temple as their rightful place of worship. The rebuilding of this “Third” Temple, they believe, is paramount to their future security and blessing, and it will usher in what they call “The Messianic Age,” where the promised Messiah will appear and reign in Jerusalem. Three times a day they pray, “May the Holy Temple be rebuilt speedily and in our day.” Many write the prayer on paper, and then stuff it in the cracks of the wall.

Today, many of the preparations for the Third Temple have already been completed, including the sacred worship vessels and priestly garments to be worn by the Levites in Temple services. Furthermore, over 500 young Jewish men, descended from the tribe of Levi, have been trained as Temple Priests to fulfill their duties of worship and sacrifice in the Temple. What is more, efforts are currently under way to breed a certain kind of cow—a red heifer—that they believe is central to God’s plans for rebuilding the Temple. Historically, this pure red, young female cow, that has never been pregnant or milked or yoked, was brought to the priests as a sacrifice according to the Torah, and its ashes were used for ritual purification. In recent years, the Temple Institute in Jerusalem began the “Raise a Red Heifer Program” in order to breed this perfectly red cow by importing and implanting frozen embryos of red angus cows into traditional Israeli domestic cows.

What do you think about all these things? They are fascinating, to say the least. But is this *God’s* plan and *God’s* will, or just an effort from religious zealots who sincerely believe that God intends to reestablish the sacrificial system in the Temple?

Many of us have grown up in churches or have been influenced by Bible teachers who have embraced the view that God intends to rebuild the Temple on the Temple Mount and that it is significant in the future Messianic Kingdom. But how does that view line up with Jesus’ words here in Matthew, and other Scriptures like Hebrews 9-10 which describe the Levitical sacrificial system as obsolete?

These are *eschatological* questions. Eschatology is the theological word that has reference to future things, specifically the last days or end times. Eschatological views, as most of you know, vary widely in Christian circles. Many of those views are taken from the Books of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation, which are called Apocalyptic literature, the most difficult genre of Scripture to interpret, and the genre of Scripture about which we ought to be the *least* dogmatic in our interpretations.

So, let me share a couple of principles that are foundational in determining our eschatological beliefs regarding the Temple.

First, *clear and objective statements in Scripture related to future things must inform and clarify ambiguous statements*. Since apocalyptic literature is comprised of fanciful metaphors and allegories and bizarre imagery, it is by nature ambiguous, and so we must be careful about being dogmatic when we try to interpret it. On the other hand, narrative passages like the one we studied this morning, or didactic passages like Hebrews 9-10, are much clearer, so we can be much more certain of our interpretations. As we build our eschatology, we need to give more weight to the Scriptures that are clear and objective, rather than the ones that are speculative or that tend toward a subjective interpretation.

Second, there are not any clear and objective statements in Scripture that predict a rebuilding of the Temple after its destruction in AD 70. That is significant, but it is not the least bit surprising. Jesus’ death, according to Hebrews, was the once and for all sacrifice

for sins. Listen to these words: <sup>12</sup> *[Jesus] entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of His own blood, thus securing an **eternal** redemption.* <sup>13</sup> *For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh,* <sup>14</sup> *how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.*

<sup>24</sup> *For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.* <sup>25</sup> *Nor was it to offer Himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not His own,* <sup>26</sup> *for then He would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.* <sup>27</sup> *And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,* <sup>28</sup> *so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for Him.*

The writer of Hebrews says that the temple served its purposes for the Old Covenant, but that it was never intended to be a permanent solution to man's sin problem. It was only a copy of the true solution, who is Jesus. So, there is no need for a temple any longer. The Jews may rebuild it on the Temple Mount one day, but if they did, I do not believe God would either sanction it, inhabit it, or be pleased with it. It would just be a building.

Third, there is not a separate and different plan for the salvation of the Jewish people. Jesus is God's one and only Messiah, because He is God's one and only Son. So, anyone who rejects Jesus, rejects God's sole provision for their salvation. We ought to love the Jewish people, we ought to pray for the salvation of the Jewish people, we ought to be deeply indebted to and grateful for the Jewish people as our spiritual ancestors, but any Jew (past, present and future) who rejects Jesus as God's Messiah will not be a part of God's Kingdom.

That is one of the major themes of Matthew's Gospel. Jesus also said, *"I am the way, the truth, and the Life, no one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6). And Peter, speaking to Jews, said, *"There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"* (Acts 4:12).

I began this message by talking about the significance of the U.S. moving its embassy to Jerusalem. I also talked about the significance of Jerusalem to the Jewish community. But we have learned in this passage that the guilt Jerusalem incurred by rejecting and then executing the Son of God is a stain that lasts until this day. I love Jerusalem. It is one of my favorite cities to visit because of its historical and spiritual significance. But Jerusalem is still cursed, because it rejected Jesus, its Savior and King. Jerusalem, "The City of Peace" may just as well be called, Ichabod, "The glory has departed."

In no way is this a deficit for the people of Israel. It is actually for their benefit. One of the things that happened when Jesus died on the cross is that the veil in the temple, located in the Holy of holies, was torn in two from top to bottom by God Himself, signifying that through Jesus' death on the cross God has made Himself accessible to every single person, not just the high priest once a year on the Day of Atonement. And that privilege is given to anyone who puts their faith and trust in Jesus as God's provision for forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, and blessing.

## **Doomed to Destruction** **Matthew 23:37-39; 24:1-2**

**Main Idea:** *Because Jerusalem has rejected Jesus, its Savior and King, it has forfeited its featured role and status in God's kingdom and is doomed for complete and utter destruction*

Jesus laments the doom of Jerusalem (37-39)

The meaning and significance of "Jerusalem"  
It has betrayed its name

It has spurned Jesus' love

It has rejected its Savior and King

The fate of Jerusalem (38-39)

Destined to be a ghost town (38)  
No longer the habitation of God

No longer the center of God's purposes

Disconnected from Jesus (39)

Jesus predicts the Temple's complete demise (1-2)

Disciples: Enamored by the Temple's construction (1)

Jesus: Grieved by the Temple's future destruction (2)