

A Message of Desolation

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[0:00] There are few things more desolate than an empty house. If you've ever moved, you know the feeling. A house without people or furniture is empty of the things that give it meaning and purpose.

! It feels cold, it feels unwelcoming, it feels a little bit sad. And that's because a house is more than just brick and stone. It's a physical placeholder of memories and relationships.

Where friends and family gather and laugh and cry and do life together. And from where children can launch successfully into life.

At least that's what a house should be. And that's when it becomes a home. But when those things are missing, there's something deeply wrong. And that is what Jesus is picking up in our passage today.

Something has gone deeply wrong with the house of Israel. So much so that judgment is all but certain.

[1:02] This house is so broken, it's actually going to get demolished. The root problem is Israel's persistent rejection of God's messengers.

But that rejection itself reveals a deeper issue. An unwillingness to even listen to God. And because of that, the judgment long threatened in the Old Testament and repeatedly warned about by Jesus is about to fall on the people of Israel.

It will arrive a few decades later in the year AD 70 when the Romans leave Jerusalem in ruins. But for now, Jesus gives one final and stark warning.

And it's a warning that we must take seriously in our lives if we escape the same kind of desolation that's coming for the people of Israel. And so the first thing we're looking at is the rejection of God's messengers.

One of the biggest problems that kept tripping up God's people was their persistent spurning of the messages that he sent them, the messengers. Time and again in the Old Testament, they rejected the prophets that God sent them.

[2:19] And this deadly pattern continues into the New Testament when they reject God's final and greatest messenger, Jesus. And it is this more than any other sin that gets them condemned to hell and desolation.

So if you've got Matthew 23, look what Jesus says as he starts this passage. He says this, You snakes, you brood of vipers, how will you escape being condemned to hell?

He's kind of summarizing the whole previous chapter about the woes and the hypocrites and the leaders. What must you do to escape from hell? Look what's coming. He says this, Therefore I'm sending you prophets and sages and teachers, some of them you will kill and crucify, others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town.

And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.

This is heavy stuff. The blood of the righteous from Abel to Zechariah in verse 35 is a kind of A to Z of all the messengers that Israelites persecuted in the Old Testament.

[3:37] Jesus' verdict on the entire Old Testament storyline is that Israel has persistently refused to listen to God.

And not only that, they've killed everyone that God has sent them. And it's payback time. The prophets, the wise men and the teachers in verse 34 point forward to the apostles and the disciples that Jesus will send to his people in the book of Acts.

And if you've been going through it with us in our daily devotions, you'll see that it sadly shows their continued opposition and violent persecution. But that also points forward to Christians in our day. So if you're a Christian, the odds are that you became one because someone preached the gospel to you. It's very, it's on the odd occasion that someone just picks up their Bible or just decides to go to church on their own.

You've had someone be a messenger of God to you and you've responded. But being a messenger can be hard. We may not face the same violence the prophets did of old.

[4:54] But Jesus is here preparing us that we will face opposition. And so no matter how loving and kind you are, and you need to be loving and kind when you take this message out, people will take exception to you and they will take exception to your message.

It's an expected and normal part of gospel work. But that doesn't mean you must be unloving or forceful when you speak about Jesus. So be careful of thinking that you're being persecuted for the gospel when you're just being disliked for being a jerk.

Okay, so just make a note of that. But there is a price to pay to be a messenger of Jesus. Jesus tells us in John chapter 14, he's talking to his disciples.

He says, Remember what I told you. A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. And so as Christians we need to persevere in prayer.

We need to persevere in gospel work, in telling people about Jesus. We mustn't take our rejection personally. And the question facing us is, how willing are you to face opposition and to keep going?

[6:03] But if you're not yet a Christian, this message is a stark and serious warning.

You need to stop persistently pushing back against God and against the people that he sends to speak to you. You may think you're safe from God's judgment because you've never persecuted anyone, let alone killed a Christian, for telling you about Jesus.

But there's something deeper which Jesus points out that is even more deadly than that. And that's the mere attitude of not even being willing to listen.

Have a look at verse 37. Jesus cries out, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who killed the prophets and stone those sent you, how often I've longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.

You might think, well, you know, I'm not a Christian, but I don't kill people. I'm polite. Yeah, I've just said, you know what, thank you, but no thank you.

[7:20] It's like choosing between mild lemon and peri-peri. You like mild, I like spicy. I mean, surely Jesus can't be upset with that. But actually, it's that cold-hearted indifference, and it's actually a pretend politeness that gets into God's nostrils.

And the reason it gets God so mad is that having Jesus as your king is not an invitation between lifestyle options. You're actually in mortal danger and in need of rescue.

And so what God does, he sends a rescuer to rescue you, and that rescue cost him his life, and you politely refuse because you think you can manage your life on your own.

And it's that indifference, no matter how polite, that will leave you under the same judgment as if you had murdered every single Christian that God had sent to you. The thing is, people don't often realize the danger they're in when they reject God's call in their life.

They just go on with their life as if it's that lifestyle choice. But the warning in the passage today is if you persist in that refusal, you will experience the same utter desolation in life that Jesus warns about here.

[8:47] And so, we've looked at rejecting his messengers, and we're going to see the resulting desolation that comes when we do that. The threat that Jesus delivers is one of utter devastation to the city of Jerusalem and the people of Israel.

Verse 36, he says this, Truly I tell you, all these things will come upon this generation. What that means is that the blood that was spilled in the Old Testament, all the blood that was spilled by all the people of Israel in the Old Testament is going to be spilled. It's going to be spilled by the people that Jesus is talking to.

In verse 38, he says, I wanted to gather you under my wings, but you were not willing.

And so he concludes in verse 38, See, your house is left to you desolate. And this means the same thing as it did in the Old Testament.

It means a foreign power is going to walk into Jerusalem and utterly destroy the city and the temple and anyone living in it at the time.

[10:13] This language of desolation is from the Old Testament where God leaves the temple in response to generations of his people's sins. And that's before it gets destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, the passage we read in 2 Chronicles 36.

Before that, God says, You know what? I'm out of here. There's this amazing vision in Ezekiel 10 where God leaves the temple and he leaves it desolate before it gets destroyed.

And a temple without God's presence is just a part of bricks. It's not a living place where communion with God happens. It's a shell of a place that looks alive but is actually dead inside. And the same is true in our lives if we don't listen to God or have his presence in our lives. We become as desolate and empty like that temple before it was destroyed.

And you know this is true of your life. Even if you've got everything that you want, if you don't have Jesus, you know it by that emptiness inside of you that no amount of stuff can fill.

[11:24] Some people try and fill it with drugs and alcohol and then you can see the desolation. When I worked at U-turn we helped people on the streets sort of stuck in drugs. The nickname we would call them is stickidum because they stick figures.

They're so unhealthy. Their life is completely ruined by the stuff they've tried to fill it in except with Jesus. And what's interesting is when they come right, they go to rehab and they become Christian again.

They start fattening out and they say to each other, oh you're looking nice and fat today. It's a compliment if you've been on drugs. You know your life is empty by the emptiness you feel inside. Rejecting Jesus in your life starts this process of desolation here and now. But it continues into eternity. And I think it's because these stakes are so high that God makes sure that he gives plenty of warnings to us.

Our Old Testament reading was from 2 Chronicles 36. It's the end of the Jewish Old Testament. It's kind of in the middle of our Bibles but chronologically well not even chronologically never mind.

[12:40] The point is 2 Chronicles 36 is at the end of the Jewish Bible. And that's the last word. It's okay.

You guys didn't listen to me? Well, I'm leaving you. And I'm leaving you desolate. And I'm leaving you in the hands of a foreign power. 2 Chronicles 36 describes the devastation that came on Jerusalem in about the year 600 BC.

So 600 years before Jesus spoke. But what happened in Chronicles is a result of the covenant warnings that was given through Moses in Leviticus 26 about a thousand years before that.

We've done Leviticus recently. We didn't get to the end parts of Leviticus which I'm going to show you now. So a thousand years before we get the record of 2 Chronicles 36 we've got these words from Moses.

He says this. I'm going to read from Leviticus 26 from verse 27. It won't be on the screen. If you're quick with your fingers you're welcome to turn there. Leviticus 26 You can just listen if you want.

[13:55] God says if in spite of all these things my warnings that I've sent you and you still do not listen to me but continue to be hostile towards me then in my anger I will be hostile towards you and I myself will punish you for your sins seven times over.

You will eat the flesh of your sons and the flesh of your daughters. I will destroy your high places. I will cut down your incense altars and I will pile your dead bodies on the lifeless forms of your idols and I will abhor you.

I will turn your cities into ruins and lay waste your sanctuaries. I will scatter you among the nations and will draw out my sword and pursue you your land will be laid waste and your cities will lie in ruins.

Well these curses will indeed fall on Jerusalem in the year AD 70 just a few decades after Jesus spoke the words we've got in Matthew 23.

But it's not just a warning for the Jews of the Old Testament or the Jews of Jesus time. It's a warning about us and what God will do to those who don't listen to him.

[15:29] It tells us that God will do what he says he will do. He will carry out his threat of judgment.

If he says judgment will come because people don't listen to him then you can be sure that judgment will come because people don't listen to him. It may take time but it will happen.

I think the danger is we can easily fool ourselves into thinking that if it doesn't happen immediately it might not happen at all. You know many people go through a health scare and suddenly they're facing their own mortality.

Everything is hunky-dory in their life and then boom out of the blue. Massive health scare. Suddenly all the stuff they've done in their life has caught up with them and they are really scared and they should be.

And they make all kinds of promises to change. I'll go to church. Do all that bargaining with God. Then the scare goes away.

[16:40] The doctors fix them up. And they fall back into their old patterns again. They tell themselves, I was being a bit dramatic. Everything is actually fine.

I'll be okay. And they don't realize judgment is coming. The Bible says in Hebrews chapter 9 that people are destined to die once and after that to face judgment.

And the thing is, if you're not a Christian, the same indifference that you showed to Jesus in this life will be shown back to you on judgment day. You're going to be begging for mercy.

But at that point, Jesus, who you didn't want to bother listening to in this life, is going to be sitting on the throne and then he's not going to bother listening to you. With a dismissive wave of his hand, you'll be sent away to meet your fate in the lake of fire.

And so we need to take these, those near misses, those health scares, take them as warnings in your life. As we've seen in our service, the time to come to God is now, while you're still alive.

[18:05] That's what Psalm 95 says. Don't harden your hearts. Listen to God today, while you've got the chance. God has unlimited time to do what he wants.

You don't. And so run to him for help, before it's too late, and your life comes to ruin. So, it does teach us about, this passage does obviously teach us about the judgment of God, but there's another thing.

It teaches us about the patience of God. His amazing patience. And that's because it takes hundreds of years before God's patience runs out.

And if God doesn't easily give up on his people, then neither must we. We all have family or friends that have continually rejected him, even continually rejected what we've told them about Jesus, and you could feel like giving up on them, especially when they ridicule or attack you.

But here's the thing, if God didn't give up on you, then neither must you give up on them. So we're to keep showing mercy and love, keep speaking the truth.

[19:28] When my mom became a Christian later on in her life, she had realized that there had been a long line of people that God had put in her path that had each in their own way spoken to her about Jesus.

And that last one seemed to just bring everything together, and her life changed, and then our lives changed. Maybe you may be that last person that brings it all together for someone's journey, or maybe you're a stepping stone that will ultimately lead to Jesus.

Either way, don't give up praying and looking for opportunities to speak about Jesus. But lastly, if you're not a Christian, or if you're feeling the weight of God's judgment in your life, you're feeling that desolation, what you need to know is that Jesus is still holding out his arms, waiting for you to respond to him.

Listen again to the heart cry of Jesus as he laments over his people in verse 37. So back to Matthew 23, verse 37, he says this, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who killed the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you're not willing.

Jesus was holding out hope for his people then, he's still holding out hope for people today. You know, we don't often use a person's name twice like Jesus does here.

[21:19] You only do that under extreme feeling. In the Old Testament, David calls out his son's name when he's heard that he's died.

Absalom, Absalom. He wants him to come back to life. Jesus is calling out your name in the same way.

John, John, don't die. Come to me and live. Matt, Matt, listen to me.

Mary, Mary, leave what is destroying you and come to me and find life with me.

It's never too late to receive the life of Jesus, to receive his protection, to receive his mercy. If you've got breath coming in and out of your lungs and your brain is working, no matter how desolate your life is right now, the same God who threatens complete desolation is waiting, he is wanting, he is promising to give you flourishing and blessing and peace and life if you turn to him.

[22:46] Let me pray for us. Lord Jesus, you stand as our Lord and as our judge.

We don't really take that as seriously as we should. Lord, for that we ask your forgiveness. But we do know with you there is fullness of life and blessing and all good things. And so we ask, Lord, that you will accept us into your arms and help us to warn others about the coming judgment. In Jesus' name, Amen.