



## **“A House Left Desolate”**

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The temple was the center of Jewish life and religion. Although the temple standing in Jesus’ day was not the original one built by Solomon hundreds of years before, the temple that then stood was still considered by the Jews to be God’s house and His dwelling among them. You might imagine their reaction when in **Matthew 23:38** Jesus uttered this sobering prediction:

**Matthew 23:38 “Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.”**

Why would Jesus predict the demise of what was considered the house of His Father? There is an important spiritual lesson in this statement, both for them and for us and I want to consider that in today’s study.

Ancient Israel had the unique privilege of interacting with God in a direct and personal way. First, His Shekinah glory was among them in the pillar of the cloud and the pillar of fire that led them away from Egypt and toward the Promised Land. God then took up His residence between the two cherubim on the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant. This was in the holy of holies in the tabernacle that Moses had constructed. As time passed, David eventually became the king and he wanted to build God a house or *permanent dwelling*, according to **II Samuel 7**. The task fell to David’s son because David was a man of war. Solomon, when he became the king, constructed a magnificent temple.

When the new temple was dedicated, God’s presence entered and filled the place, and it literally became the house of God. It was God’s dwelling amongst the Israelites. This holy place became sacred and hallowed to the nation, and their national and religious life revolved around it. **Psalm 122:1** captures the thrill of that place when the psalmist says, **“I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the LORD.”**

But that temple had a long and varied history throughout the life of the nation. The glory days of the Davidic and Solomonic empire did not last. Sin and idolatry entered the picture and the nation went astray. When Solomon died, the kingdom—under the leadership of his incompetent and haughty son, Rehoboam—was divided. In a matter of time, the temple was destroyed and the Jews were carried off to Babylon as slaves. They were finally allowed to return and they attempted to rebuild their beloved temple, but it really was a meager effort.

The next several hundred years marked the total loss of Israel's independence and their being occupied by different world powers, ending with the Romans by the time of the first century. The political and religious state of Israel was in a sorry state when Jesus was born. Their political misfortunes had changed their hopes of a messiah to be nothing more than a political revolutionary of some kind who would solve their problems through political and social means. Consequently, their religion was corrupted by politics and materialism until by this point their worship was merely a formality, and it was an empty shell of ritualism. God simply was not in it. The temple no longer represented what it once had because God's glory had departed long ago.

You may recall that early in His ministry, Jesus ran the moneychangers out of the temple, accusing them of making His Father's house into nothing more than a house of merchandise (**John 2:16**). Three years later, the situation was no better and Jesus a second time entered the temple and He threw out the unscrupulous and greedy moneychangers, overthrowing their tables and quoting the scriptures to them.

**Matthew 21:12-13** "And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves, And said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves."

Meanwhile, the Jewish leaders had already been plotting to kill Jesus. Listen carefully to what they said among themselves:

**John 11:48** "If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation."

Later, as Jesus looked at Jerusalem--once the city of God, and the temple--once the house of God, He said this in our text:

**Matthew 23:38** "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate."

Jesus prophesied the city and the temple's destruction. To His own disciples, He said just three verses later, "**There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down**" (**Matthew 24:2**). Indeed, within forty years, during the Jewish war, Titus and his Roman forces decimated the temple and the city. In AD 70, Jerusalem was laid waste and the center of their Jewish life and worship was forever gone.

But did you notice the change of expression in regard to the temple? Notice that Jesus called it "God's house." The Old Testament scriptures identified it as "God's house." But the Jews called it "our house." Then, Jesus finally says "...your house is left unto you desolate." What that means is, what once was a holy place where God dwelt and reigned had become by this time a profane place used for their own purposes. Their religion was empty, hollow, and ineffectual. By this time, they really looked upon the

temple as their own possession—at least they treated it that way—to do with as they pleased. Their religion was no longer about pleasing God and obeying Him; instead, it was for their own personal agendas, ambitions, and self-aggrandizement. No longer did the law of God regulate their worship and the practices of the temple. Rather, the traditions of their fathers ruled the day. So, it had ceased to be God’s house and now they viewed it as their house. Jesus, who was the ultimate manifestation of God in their midst, stood in the way of their purposes. Therefore, in their minds, He must be eliminated. Jesus simply says, *so be it*. This was no longer God’s house because God had left it, and since He was no longer there, it was marked for destruction.

There are some lessons in all of that for us. First, God has a house today in which He dwells, and that house is the church. Not a physical structure, not a building somewhere, but the congregation of His people. Paul reminded the Corinthians:

**I Corinthians 3:16-17** “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God (that is, again, the church), him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.”

Paul also once told Timothy this concerning the assembly of the church:

**I Timothy 3:14-15** “These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly: But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.”

You see, Paul says *the house of God is the church of the living God*. That being the case, we would do well to remember that the church is the house of God and it is not our house. It is Christ’s church; it doesn’t belong to us. Therefore, it is not our prerogative to operate it however we wish and to do within it whatever we please. Yet, we hear many today talk of my church, your church, this church, or that church, but not the Lord’s church. First of all, since the Lord has a house, it is His house.

**Psalms 127:1** “Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it...”

You and I don’t have a right to build a spiritual house; that authority belongs to Christ and Him alone. During His earthly ministry, Jesus promised His disciples, “...**upon this rock I will build my church...**” (**Matthew 16:18**). He said nothing about building many churches. He didn’t give authority to those men to build their own churches, neither did He grant that power to any who would come later. For example, Martin Luther was not given any authority to build a church. Neither was John Calvin or John Knox. King Henry VIII didn’t have God’s permission to build a church. John Wesley, John Smith, nor any other religious leader was ever given the right by God to build a church. Jesus alone was given that power, and that’s all He did build: one. And it is His.

Today, religious people are divided into a seemingly innumerable myriad of religious bodies and organizations, holding to different doctrines and worshipping according to their own creeds and traditions, wearing all manner of unscriptural and unbiblical names, and practicing all kinds of things that are simply not authorized in the New Testament. Friend, all of that is NOT of God. He never said anything about building 1,001 churches and He never made any allowance for women and men to take it upon themselves to do so either. The Lord has one house. He built one house, and still today He has one house. Not only did He build His own house, but He is its ruler and its head. Again, it is His house.

**Colossians 1:18 “And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.”**

Now, if Jesus is the head of the church and it is His house, shouldn't it follow His word in all things? Shouldn't He have the say for what goes on within it and not us? Doesn't He have the ultimate authority? You see, when Jesus established the church, he placed within it what He desired. He didn't leave it incomplete and He didn't leave it up to you and me to furnish it however we please. He placed within it the things He desired, and only He had the right, the power, and the authority to do that. Even the apostles only spoke and directed the church as they were guided by Christ to do so.

**I Corinthians 11:1 “Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.”**

You see, they could only follow Paul inasmuch as Paul followed Christ. Continuing on in that passage:

**I Corinthians 11:2 “Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you.”**

Paul said that we are not at liberty to do as we please. But we are ordered to do what Christ commanded us to do in the way that He commanded us to do it. That is why we so strongly insist on following the commands and examples of the New Testament. That's why we refuse to accept the unending parade of innovations that people have introduced into religion down through the centuries. That's why our worship is simple and primitive, because Christ is its author and the church is His house. You might ask, *Why don't you people worship with an instrument?* If you've ever visited an assembly of the Church of Christ, you probably very well noticed that we do not worship with mechanical instruments of music and sometimes people wonder why that is. Is it just to be different? No, it's because the church that Jesus built didn't do so. It was absent for six hundred years from the time of the church's establishment.

You say, *Well, why don't you have Sunday schools? Why don't you get up with the times in how you serve the Lord's Supper? Don't you see that you're on the wrong side of history, not allowing women to be preachers and elders and so forth?* My friend, those aren't our decisions to make. The word of God already spoke about those matters, and you see, it's His house and it is not ours.

By Jesus' day, the commands of God and even the ceremonies of Moses were largely forgotten in the temple. They were certainly corrupted, long since supplemented or even replaced by the traditions of the Jews that had evolved through the centuries since the law came through Moses. That is why Jesus said this:

**Matthew 15:8-9 “This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.”**

Was it simply the fact that their worship was insincere? Is that what Jesus means when He says, *their heart is far from me*? No, there's more to it than that. Their hearts were far from Christ because they were giving preference to their own desires, traditions, and their own will instead of following the law of God, the word of God. The same can be said of religion today. The so-called Christian world is covered over with doctrines and practices that are totally foreign to the church revealed in scripture. Have you really stopped to think how true that is? Have you ever stopped to investigate where all of these things that are so prevalent in religion today came from?

Some months back, we had a series on *Innovations in Religion*. I hope you'll go online and look that up. Watch those lessons because we deal with a lot of that in great detail. Many people have never really stopped to think about the origins of these things. The fact is, they didn't come from God. They came from man after Jesus built His church. Can that be said of the church with which you assemble to worship? Have the traditions of men replaced the traditions of the Lord? We are to keep the traditions or ordinances that were originally authored by the Lord and given through the apostles, and we are to do so in the way that they were given. Not adding to, taking from, changing, or rearranging. We are to do it as the Bible says to do it. That's a command of the scriptures.

Not only the church's practices, but the teachings of the church. What does it say about our mentality, for example, concerning the house of God when we hear of churches and religious bodies voting on theological and doctrinal matters? Sometimes you hear of denominations that come together in a convention or some annual meeting and they take some social issue or doctrinal issue and weigh it and come to a vote as to whether that denomination is going to accept, recognize, preach, or enforce that doctrine, or to recognize these marriages or those, whether to include this or that teaching. Friends, the church of Christ is *the pillar and ground of the truth (I Timothy 3:15)*. That means there is no voting on the truth. We either accept, preach, and practice the truth or we reject the truth. Now, it's as simple as that. The truth itself never changes, and it's not up to us to determine whether it's truth or not; it's up to us to either follow it or reject it. If we reject it, then sadly, we are not followers of Christ. You see, the supposed church has become our house in many cases, instead of God's house.

Our attitude about the house of God cannot only be seen by what goes on within it, but by what it's called. Doesn't it stand to reason that if Christ built His house, and He is the head of His house, and He even died and shed His blood to purchase the house as Paul affirmed in **Acts 20:28**, that it should be called His house? That it should be referred to as His house? We've already pointed out that we get in the habit of talking about my church or your church, but what about the Lord's church? There is a prophecy about the church in **Isaiah 62**. There, God said that He would call the Gentiles and would establish a new name within the earth. Read how Isaiah speaks of this new Israel in Christ:

**Isaiah 62:2 "And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory: and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the LORD shall name."**

You see, the name by which His kingdom would be called (and that's talking about the dispensation in which we live) would be given by Him, not by us. First of all, His house has a name. That name is given by the Lord. That name is Christ. After the gospel was preached to the Gentiles starting with Cornelius, the Bible says in **Acts 11:26**, **"...And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch."** The disciples were called something but not just anything. They were called *Christians*, meaning *followers, disciples of Christ*. They wore His name.

You hear people today say, *Names don't matter. It doesn't matter what you call the church or how you refer to the church. It's still the church.* But if it's the Lord's church, why don't we call it the Lord's church? Why isn't it Christ's church? The church was identified with Christ from the very beginning. It was and it IS His church. Is it strange then that Paul simply referred to congregations of God's people by saying, **"...The churches of Christ salute you" (Romans 16:16)**? You see, that's not merely a sign over the door. It's not a manmade name or designation. It is a divine description of the church, of the house of God. Paul said, *The churches of Christ* because they are united under the headship and lordship of Christ and Christ alone. Why would we want to call the church by a name belonging to one besides Christ?

A we noted earlier, Martin Luther didn't build the church, nor did any other man or woman. Jesus did. Why would we call the church by some name that accentuates division? When we refer to the church by some doctrine that it puts emphasis upon in contradistinction to others, isn't that just highlighting and sanctioning the division that exists in today's world? The church is Christ's body. It is His house. Every true and faithful congregation of His church is united under His headship, under the authority of His teaching and His word. So, why refer to it as something else or as though it belongs to or pertains to somebody or something else? It is the Lord's house. Or has it become our house?

You know, God had nothing to do with the temple by the end of Jesus' ministry. His Shekinah glory had departed. Their sacrifices were ineffectual. Their prayers were unheard. Their gifts were useless, their piety was pointless, and their worship was a waste because they were not worshipping in God's house. They had made it their own. It was therefore their house and not God's house. Oh, they talked about God and claimed to worship and serve God but God was not there. Could it be that the many conflicting religions in our world today are Christ-less religions, having rejected His authority and His way for our own?

In closing, I would remind you of the words of Jesus:

**Luke 6:46 "And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?"**

**Matthew 15:13 "Every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up."**

Let us honor God's house. May it always be God's house in word, in deed, and in practice.

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