

The Failure of Christ

By Paris Reidhead*

Our Text this morning will be found in Matthew 23. This is one of two messages. I thought perhaps it might be possible to have them at the same time, but such is not the case. And, therefore, today (I trust you will understand the spirit in which it is given.) I shall speak on the Failure of Christ, and next Lord's Day on The Triumph of Christ. And thus our text found in Matthew 23 will give to us the foundational Scripture for the message.

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord” (Mat. 23:37-39).

Now Jerusalem was the place of God's dwelling. He chose a place where He would be able to reveal Himself. And that place that He chose was Jerusalem. The first occasion when this little piece of property became significant was when Abraham was commanded by the Lord to take his son, Isaac, to Mount Moriah. There he was told that he should sacrifice his son. And it is a coincidence, more than a coincidence. It is undoubtedly in the sovereign outworking of God's purpose that the place where Abraham took Isaac should be as near as Geographers can tell us the place where the Roman legions took our Lord Jesus.

Now there is some possibility, and we have been told by those who feel very strongly on the subject that where the Temple was located was actually the very spot where Isaac was offered by Abraham. And that therefore it was necessary to go to another little hill, or rise in the ground, called by us, Mount Calvary. But it is to this place, this is the first occasion when it had significance and importance to us the heirs of salvation.

I believe that we need to understand Jerusalem in the light of this. We need to recognize that God, through the sacrifice of the greater Isaac, the Lord Jesus, wanted to get for Himself a testimony, and so He chose this place where faith and obedience should meet. It was there that Isaac fulfilled this last of the great major tests wherein God could say that He had proven him, when he spared not his only son, and with resurrection faith took him to the Mount. For you remember when the servant spoke, he said, We will come again. And Abraham actually believed that when Isaac was slain, and burned, that God would raise him from the dead. For he said— for it had been said, “In Isaac shall thy seed be called” (Gen. 21:12b). And God therefore was duty bound to bring Isaac back to life and back with Abraham. Now this is the faith and the confidence of Abraham. And this is the reason why he is called, The father of the faithful.

Jerusalem literally means the habitation of peace. The place where peace meets those who come seeking it. And you will understand that it was therefore the proper place for the Lord Jesus Christ to die, for God's wrath and His justice demanded that man pay the penalty of escape. “The soul that sinneth it shall die” (Eze. 18:20). This, therefore was pictured and typified by Abraham taking Isaac. And this then became the place of peace, the place where God's wrath and His love met together and the innocent died for the guilty. Yes, Isaac was spared from death, and a ram caught in the thicket died, but centuries later when our Lord Jesus Christ had ridden in, for this occurred here the Matthew account-during the week after Palm Sunday, our Lord had ridden into Jerusalem with the populace crying, “Hosanna, Hosanna to Him who cometh in the name of the Lord” (Mat. 21:9). And our Lord said if they did not exclaim and praise, the very stones would cry out in worship of Him. It is in this very place that our Lord Jesus is to present Himself, He is to teach, He is to minister, and then from this place He is to go just a short distance outside the walls, there the great Son, (Not the son of Abraham, but the Son of God.) to die, not to be spared, not to be delivered for He was the One pictured both by Isaac, the son of promise and by the ram that was slain. And thus it was that God made peace at a place. There is a point in the universe where God's justice and His mercy met, and this point was there at that little spot outside the walls called Calvary.

There the Lord Jesus Christ died, the just for the unjust, that He might make Jerusalem truly a place of peace. Furthermore you will understand that in the Old Testament Jerusalem stood for the presence of God's people in fellowship with Him. It was there that God determined that the temple should be built. And this temple itself is a wonderful picture of God's grace, for not

to the same degree, but certainly in measure, it is a reflection of the grandeur, the wonder of the purity of God's Son, the Lord Jesus. And so if you can do with the temple made of stone, cedar and gold and brass, see it as a type of Christ, even as the Tabernacle in the wilderness was a much clearer and better understood type of Christ, then you will understand that there at the temple where the ark of the covenant was, and the angelic cherubim with their wings overspreading the Mercy Seat, stayed in the presence of God where once a year the High Priest brought the blood and sprinkled it upon the Mercy Seat, testifying by the very temple as it was erected by Solomon, that this was God's message, God's servant to humanity, that here was a place where sacrifice met wrath and where substitution provided protection for those who came in faith.

And so it was at Jerusalem that the temple was built, picturing Christ as people gathered around. We find throughout the Old Testament innumerable instances when the Lord seems to exhaust language, to describe Jerusalem. For it speaks of His people meeting with His Son and sharing in the blessing that heaven has wrenched itself to bring. It is called the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth, the throne of the Lord, the holy mountain, the holy city, the city of solemnity, the city of truth, and beautiful is the situation of Jerusalem.

God seems to take delight in the fact that here is a city that speaks to all who would come of the fact that God is prepared to meet repentant, believing sinner, fold and cleanse them within and without, and cause them to be gathered to Himself that there might be there a place where He can show what He will do for those who trust Him.

Now such was Jerusalem's past, such was its purpose; such was the perfect plan that God had for this little piece of geography, inconsequential, without any value, except as that value is established in the eyes of God. There are hundreds of areas of the earth within just a short distance, a few hundreds of miles of Jerusalem, far more productive from an agricultural point of view, far more beautiful from the standpoint of scenery. Oh, no end of comparisons might be made. But this is the place that God chose to reveal how holy He is, how horrible sin is, and that righteousness and mercy can only be where the law of penalty is fulfilled. And so, Jerusalem is all of this. It speaks of God's grace, it speaks of His people, it speaks of His purpose in grace for His people, and thus when our Lord Jesus comes this night to which we refer, this time (and I believe actually that there are two instances, the one recorded in Luke, and the one recorded in Matthew. Edersheim would like to have us think that this was in the evening.) He has returned again on His way back to Bethany, and as He stops on the road which rises up the side of the Mount of Olives He turns and looks back and sees the glory which comes from innumerable fires and courtyards, and open windows with their reflection, casting even then a little halo of light over the city. And He would think of it as the prophets saw it, and think of it as He had seen it throughout the times of history past, and in His heart from eternity past, and then yearning and longing for this people, for all that His purpose had been, we find these words bursting out of the already breaking heart of the Son of God, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thee, gathered thy children together" (Mat. 23:37 & Luk. 13:34). And then straining for some analogy, straining for some way to express the pathetic love and yearning and longing of His heart, our Lord used one of the simplest, most pathetic, most beautiful illustrations that we can find anywhere: "Even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings." This is our Lord's thought for Jerusalem, for His people, for the place of His name, of His honor, and of His blessing. He wanted this people.

Now His purpose was, therefore, to cleanse them from all that had tormented them in the past, all of the burning anguish of a conscience that had not been cleansed. His purpose was to relieve the fear of the avenging justice of God. He wanted to do that. This is pictured by the altar. This is pictured by Abraham's altar. This is pictured to us by the Cross. So when we view Jerusalem we must think of it first as dealing with that greatest of problems, this mountain of guilt that has estranged us and separated us from God. And so, if you are here today, and you do not know peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ then I think you can hear the Lord Jesus as He speaks to you, for here is something more than address to a piece of ground with buildings on it. Here is an appeal to the hearts of men, for gathering includes that He has to take us the way He finds us. You see this is what He implies; I am willing to take you just the way I find you. And this is what we have got to understand. There is something in the minds and hearts of men that makes them feel that if they can just do something, it will make them a little more acceptable to God. And how many times people have been saying, "Well, yes I plan someday to become a Christian, some day to repent, some day to believe, but you see I am too bad now." No, no one is too bad. He has put no measure of our goodness or our badness on us. He said when he said, "How oft I would have gathered you," I was prepared to take you just as

you were (Mat. 23:37 & Luk. 13:34). I was not asking you to do a lot of genuflections or spiritual acrobatics; I was not asking you to strain by pulling yourself by your boot straps in self-reformation; I just asked you to come. That is all. Just to come. I was willing to gather you just as you were there, with all of your rebellion, with all of your uncleanness, with all of your sin, my arms were outstretched. We hear it in Revelation where this same One says, "The Spirit and the Bride say Come, and let him that heareth say Come. Whosoever will, let him come" (Rev. 22:17). The only thing then is coming.

And so to the sinner it is Jerusalem, to this place where mercy and justice met, that you come, and you have to come as you are. You cannot do anything to make you more worthy. The only thing you have to do is to forsake your thought, and your unrighteousness, and change your mind about your crimes, and come a self-confessed sinner in need of help. You bring your need, and God furnishes everything else. This is the invitation of His love. "Oh, how oft I would have gathered you." And so He speaks to the sinner friend, He speaks to the person that carries this cancer of a guilty conscience and a heart that is eating with the perhaps even unexpressed remorse.

And sometimes when I find people blasphemous, speaking in a derogatory manner of God, I find it covers a heart filled with great concern, and so with this concerned to be covered they resort to the only means that they know which is blasphemy and arrogance and pride, and haughtiness of spirit. But if that should be in you in any sense or anyone you know you can leave this room and go to the worst person you know and say to that one that the One who stood that night over the — on the Mount of Olives, and looked over Jerusalem, saw completely past Jerusalem and saw clear out into the heart of this iniquitous city to the most burdened of sinners in it and said, "How oft I would have gathered you." And there is no one beyond the outreach of those arms, and no one beyond the pale of that invitation. And oh dear friend today do not ever let your heart loose sight of the fact that when our Lord stood there and said, "How oft I would have gathered you," He had reference to the least, the last, and the lowliest of sinners. There is no one excluded. And no one is beyond the embrace, the outreach, and the entreaty of this One who stands about to let these very arms that now extend in involuntary expresser of longing, will finally be extended with a voluntary commitment of life to the cross in order that that longing can have meaning.

Our Lord did not long in a vain and empty way. His yearning for Jerusalem and His longing for sinners was carried to that place of final test when He was willing to be made sin for us. And now we see Him as He reaches out. And thus we would have to say this; There is only one reason in all the world why a sinner will have to go to Hell. Only one, and that is because he would not. Everything has been provided. Everything has been offered. Everything has been extended. The table is set, the banquet feast is prepared, and the only reason that any sinner perishes that has ever heard this name above all names is because he would not.

Now I do not believe that the people, the multitudes that are dying, today whose funerals will be held tomorrow and Tuesday, that have died in New York City without Christ, actually for the most part made up their minds that they would not hear Christ, would not receive Christ. At least a good many of them said, "Not today." Some more convenient season. Some other time. But to postpone response to truth is to refuse to respond to truth. And for a person to know that Jesus Christ died that sinners might live and refuse to receive Him and the life that He provides by His death is to refuse Him, and it is to refuse Him in every way a fatal sense, until that refusal is reversed. And each time that that refusal is expressed, and that franchise is employed, it becomes more difficult to reverse it. And so there is only one reason as far as God is concerned why sinners perish and that is because they would not. You hear that most pathetic of entreaties through Ezekiel, "As I live, saith the Lord, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked but that the wicked turn and live" (Eze. 33:11a). The same breaking heart of the Son of God is revealed through the Prophet as Ezekiel stretches out his hands and cries, "Turn ye turn ye, for why will ye die" (Eze. 33:11b). And so the sinners would not. The only thing that keeps anyone from grace, anyone from peace, anyone from forgiveness, and pardon, always prepared, always ready, there is only one citadel yet to be breached, and one wall to be broken down. It is the wall of will in the heart of the sinner. For sin is such a monstrous crime, and sinners such horrible criminals, that if it weren't for the breaking, breaching, assaulting work of God by His Spirit, no sinner would ever repent. Today the appeal goes out from the Son of God, "How oft would I have gathered you." What is He gathering from? He is gathering to peace, for this is Jerusalem, the city of peace, place of peace where God's dear Son died. We not only must see it in the personal sense, we must see it in terms of nations. For nations have characters, those characters perhaps being the composite of their people and their leadership. And we have heard it said that sin is a reproach to any people and righteousness exalteth a nation. And

nations have been dealt with by God on the basis of the response of their leaders, as we see so frequently in the Old Testament, and on the basis of the response of their people.

And so it was to Israel, to Judah, to Benjamin, as they were there in Jerusalem that His arms went out. In no sense was this a repudiation; in no sense was this a revocation of His interest. For we find that after His resurrection it was in the very center of this city that He came by His people and with the Spirit, and upon this 120 or the larger company, if such it was, the Spirit of God was poured out, and the appeal went out again, Repent and believe and be baptized that you may receive forgiveness of sins and the fullness of the Spirit. And so it was back to this very city that He came. And the church stayed there for months on end. And we find that subsequently some months later 5 thousand were gathered when the lame man was healed. Oh, He never lost interest in Jerusalem. He never lost interest in the nation. He never lost interest in the people of Israel. These are still loved by Him. And oh, how our hearts ought to yearn, we who know and love Christ when we realize that there are far more Jewish people here in the city of New York by far than there are in Israel, the nation now. And how greatly concerned every Christian, and everyone that loves Christ ought to seek an opportunity in warmth and real affection and friendship and openness of mind and heart to make known to someone that is living within the walls of unbelief and blindness that the Lord Jesus Christ still stands with outstretched arms and says to Jewish people everywhere, "How oft I would have gathered you." He has not changed. And to that one that comes, what, great joy there is. But it not only to the individual sinner and to the nation, it is to the church.

For we find now that Jerusalem speaks of the place of His dwelling, and the place of His dwelling now is not a temple in the city; the place of His dwelling now is that company He calls the church. And it is there where we find Him standing outside the church in the Book of Revelation; and the dew of the night is upon Him, and His locks are filled with the coldness of the night. He has been standing there waiting. He has knocked on the door of this church that is content without Him. And so I hear Him as He echoes it from the Book of Revelation, saying, "Repent, or I will remove your candlestick. Repent, or I will take away your name. Repent" (Rev. 2:5). And we find thus that it comes down to nations, then and now. It comes to sinners, then and now. And I believe it comes to the church then and now. And I believe the Lord Jesus is standing today outside the door of churches, of movements, of societies, of denominations, of groups, wherever there are those that meet in His name, there you can see in the shadow beyond the Lord Jesus saying, "How oft I would have gathered you." What patience! What loving tender patience! Long after we would give up and say, Hopeless. There is the Lord Jesus' extended arms. I would have gathered you. Oh, how long it is before He says, "Salt without savour. Cast out and trodden under foot of men" (Mat. 5:13).

But you know there is something extremely damaging about truth not walked in. John Wesley¹, in his book, A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, says the greatest tragedy in human experience is to love someone who is either unable or incapable of returning that love. And so for the Lord Jesus to love sinners and to be unloved by them is the greatest tragedy and failure. For the Lord Jesus to love nations and to be unloved by those nations is failure in the sense of God's glorious first purpose. For the Lord Jesus to love churches and yearn after those that were His, and for Him, and to be repulsed by them and love them with unrequited, unresponded love, Oh, this is the tragedy and failure.

And I bring it down to my heart, and I trust you do to yours, for with every need, there is the Lord with outstretched arms, I'll gather you. Every failure, I'll gather you. Every defeat, I'll gather you. Every hunger, I'll gather you. For all that we need, and all that we ought to have is in Him. But oh there is something strange about truth if we do not walk in it. If we do not walk in it it is so soon that our ears are dulled. There is something strange about light, if we do not obey it; it becomes darkness. And then we hear that faint voice, How oft, how oft, how oft, how oft, and ye would not.

My dear, may God preserve me and preserve you from doing despite to the Spirit of Grace by failing to walk in light and life and truth until we hear no longer that appealing voice. He said, My Spirit will not always strive with man. How oft? How oft? Walk today right into those outstretched arms where He has made provision for every need. How oft I would have brought you

¹ John Wesley (1703-1791) Anglican cleric, Christian theologian, and founding the Methodist movement.

and your failure, you in your hunger, you in your need, and ye would not. This is the only thing that will ever keep me or you from blessing. We would not.

Let us pray.

Our Father, the failure with sinners will mean that Heaven will be robbed of glory. Failure with nations will mean that they go down in ignominy and defeat. Failure with churches will mean that they will be cast out and trodden under foot and disappear. But the greatest failure is with our hearts, when truth has come and we have heard the appeal and the gathering love, and somehow we have said, More convenient season to know the cross and its slaying edge, a more convenient season to know the Spirit and His filling presence, a more convenient season to study the Word; a more convenient season to pray; a more convenient season to seek God. Oh, grant Lord that we shall not be as foolish, foolish Jerusalem that knew not the day of its visitation. Grant to us today the deep insatiable hunger to enter in under those wings, for He said, "Under the wings you shall abide" (Psa. 91:4). And there find sustenance and supply, comfort and wisdom and strength and power, and every needed grace. Instead of our saying I will not, let us say, O Lord Jesus, We'll come. We come. Out of my bondage and sorrow and night, Jesus I come. Into Thy glorious power and light, Jesus I come. I would, I will, I do. May the failure that He must experience not be from us and from fewer day by day.

Let us stand for the Benediction. "Now unto Him who is able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Savior, be glory and honor, dominion and majesty, now and forever. Amen" (Jud. 1:24-25).

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