

“DESOLATION”

**I. Introduction**

- A. One of the things that makes it challenging to preach through the prophetic books is the fact that they contain a lot of unpleasant material.
- B. While there certainly are sections that offer great comfort and hope, a significant portion of the prophetic writings convey messages of judgment and woe.
- C. We might be inclined to skip over the material that is so negative and uncomfortable, but it would be a mistake for us to do so.
- D. God obviously has a purpose in giving us this material.
- E. He knows that we need to understand the extent of our desolation before we are able to receive the salvation that he offers us in Jesus Christ.
- F. John Calvin put it well when he wrote, “For we will never have enough confidence in [Christ] unless we become deeply distrustful of ourselves; we will never lift up our hearts enough in him unless they be previously cast down in us; we will never have consolation enough in him unless we have already experienced desolation in ourselves.” [*Institutes*, 3.12.8]

**II. An Image of Destruction (1-4)**

- A. Our text begins with the Lord commanding Ezekiel to perform another sign-act.
  - 1. This time, the prophet is told to take a sharp sword and use it to shave off his hair and his beard.
  - 2. Today, we don’t see it as out of the ordinary for a man to shave his head.

3. Some of us actually find this to be the best way of dealing with the sparseness of the hair on our heads.
  4. But in Ezekiel's culture, shaving your head was much less common.
  5. It was sometimes done in association with mourning.
  6. It was done in cases involving skin diseases that rendered a person ceremonially unclean.
  7. And other times it was done forcibly to someone as a mark of dishonor.
  8. This makes it clear that this sign-act is a symbol of the devastation and humiliation that is about to befall the people who were still living in Jerusalem.
  9. It brings to mind what God said to his people one hundred and fifty years before Ezekiel's time, when he issued this warning through the prophet Isaiah: "In that day the Lord will shave with a razor that is hired beyond the River — with the king of Assyria — the head and the hair of the feet, and it will sweep away the beard also." (Isa. 7:20)
  10. Assyria struck a devastating blow upon Judah in Isaiah's day.
  11. Now the time has come for another sword to be hired, and this one will bring an end to Jerusalem.
- B. After shaving off his hair, Ezekiel is instructed to divide it into three parts and dispose of it in three different ways.
1. Notice that the division is made by carefully weighing the hair.
  2. This shows that God metes out his judgments in a deliberate and carefully measured manner.

3. The first third of the hair is to be burned up, signifying those within the city who were destroyed at the end of the siege.
  4. The second third is to be cut up with a sword, symbolic of the violent death that came upon those who escaped the city when it was invaded.
  5. And the final third is to be scattered to the wind, representing the dispersion of the remainder of Jerusalem's population after the Babylonians destroy the city.
- C. In the midst of this picture of desolation, the Lord also gives a small glimmer of hope.
1. He tells Ezekiel to take some of the hairs that were apportioned to be scattered to the wind and tuck them inside his robe.
  2. This represents the remnant that the Lord was going to preserve in exile.
  3. Yet not all of those who survived in exile would survive spiritually, as the Lord makes clear by instructing Ezekiel to cast some of the preserved hair into the fire.
  4. This served as a warning to the exiles not to be presumptuous.
  5. The mere fact that they had survived was no guarantee of their spiritual safety.
  6. This is something that we should consider very carefully.
  7. As members of a Bible-believing church, we are a part of the remnant of today.
  8. There are many in the world around us who identify as Christians but have abandoned the true faith.

9. The fact that we are numbered among those who profess the true religion should not make us feel self-satisfied or proud.
10. As most of us know from bitter experience, there are people whom we thought were true Christians who ended up falling away.
11. This reminds us of how important it is for us to continue clinging to the Lord in humble faith.

### III. Rebellion and Its Consequences (5-12)

- A. We turn now to the paragraph that begins in verse 5, where Israel's rebellion is described, along with its disastrous consequences.
  1. God begins by pointing out how he had specially chosen Jerusalem to be the dwelling place for his name.
  2. He says that he set Jerusalem in the center of the nations.
  3. This was not only true in a spiritual sense but even in a geographical sense.
  4. Jerusalem is situated on a land-bridge that connects the three most populated continents of the ancient world: Europe, Asia, and Africa.
  5. If an ancient person was traveling between these regions on land, he would go through the land of Israel and the city of Jerusalem.
  6. God set up Jerusalem as his holy city so that it might be a light to the nations.
  7. But the people of Israel rebelled against his rules and went their own way.
  8. In the words of commentator Daniel Block, "Instead of being a light to the world, by failing to live in the light of God's revelation, his chosen city had become the world's darkest blot." [199]

9. As a result, Jerusalem's privileged status was being forfeited and God was going to set himself against the city.
- B. As the Lord issues his indictment against his people, he says that their wickedness is greater than that of the pagan nations around them.
1. This was a shocking thing for God to say, but we have to remember that Israel had received far more revelation than other nations.
  2. In the Old Testament era, the Gentiles only had access to God's general revelation in nature, in the human conscience, and in the providential ordering of history.
  3. But the people of Israel had God's special revelation, the revelation that he had given them in his Word.
  4. Here we see that God holds people accountable for the amount of revelation that has been given to them.
  5. While general revelation is sufficient to render all people without excuse before God, those who receive God's special revelation and rebel against it are guilty of even greater wickedness.
- C. God also says that his people have not even acted according to the rules of the nations around them.
1. They were not only wicked in God's sight, but even in the sight of their pagan neighbors.
  2. This brings to mind the instance in the book of Genesis when Abraham said that Sarah was his sister rather than his wife, leading Abimelech to confront him by saying, "You have done to me things that ought not to be done." (Gen. 20:9)
  3. In that situation, a pagan king was more upright than the father of God's covenant people.

4. Abraham's behavior went against ethical standards that Abimelech had access to through general revelation.
  5. It is sad to say, but it is most certainly true that there are plenty of other examples of this sort of thing.
  6. There are times when those who profess to be believers do things that are recognized as immoral even by those who are apart from Christ.
  7. This is why it is so important for us to live in light of our identity as those who have been delivered from the domain of darkness and transformed into children of light.
  8. As Peter exhorts in his first epistle, "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation." (1 Pet. 2:12)
- D. The announcement of judgment that the Lord makes in this chapter is largely drawn from Leviticus 26, where the curses for covenant-breaking were set forth.
1. Even the description in verse 10 of cannibalism, which was one of the horrors that took place when cities were under siege, is taken from that chapter in Leviticus.
  2. This makes it clear why this dreadful fate was going to fall upon the people of Israel.
  3. They had broken the covenant and brought its curses upon themselves.
  4. They were getting exactly what God had warned them of, exactly what they deserved.
  5. Because they defiled God's sanctuary with their idolatry and their liturgical innovations, the Lord who had previously caused his

presence to dwell in their midst was about to withdraw from them.

#### IV. The Anger of a Jealous God (13-17)

- A. As we come to the final paragraph in the chapter, which begins in verse 13, we see that the focus here is upon God's disposition toward Jerusalem.
1. Notice that God says that when he vents his fury upon his people, then they will know that he is the LORD.
  2. This tells us that God's judgments reveal his nature.
  3. If we are going to know God, we need to understand what makes him angry.
  4. This points to the error that so many people make when it comes to how they think about God.
  5. Many people today have no time for any consideration of the just wrath of God towards sinners.
  6. They only want to hear about God's goodness and love.
  7. The problem with this is that a god who does not get angry at evil cannot be a god of love.
  8. If we want to know the true and living God, and not just a god of our own imagining, we need to reckon with the reality of divine wrath.
- B. When we hear God speaking of his fury being vented and of his anger being spent, it is important to keep in mind that God's anger differs from human anger.
1. Unlike our anger, God's anger is always completely pure and holy.
  2. His anger is not arbitrary.

3. It is not a sign of instability or a lack of self-control.
  4. Instead, God's anger is the response of his holy justice to evil.
  5. Likewise, God's jealousy is always completely pure, stemming from the covenant love that he has for his people.
  6. He is entirely justified in demanding our exclusive allegiance, and he has every right to be angry when we are unfaithful.
- C. In our text, God speaks of spending his anger and fury on Jerusalem and of satisfying the demands of his justice.
1. It is important for us to understand that this only took place with respect to Jerusalem in a typological sense.
  2. Jerusalem's fall to Babylon was a temporal judgment, and as such it served as a picture of God's decisive spiritual judgment against evildoers.
  3. In the fullest sense, the venting of God's just wrath takes place either at the cross of Christ or at the final judgment.
  4. For those who place their faith in Christ, the demands of God's justice have been fully met by Christ's finished work.
  5. But for those who remain apart from Christ, the venting of God's wrath requires an eternity spent in hell.

## V. Conclusion

- A. It is not easy to find much hope in a chapter like this.
1. We have seen that there are a few clues, but the overall tone is pretty bleak.
  2. We need to interpret this chapter in light of the larger context of the entire book and of the entire Bible to see how it fits in with God's

gracious purposes for his people.

- B. Having said that, we should not overlook the small glimmers of hope that are present here.
1. One of these glimmers is seen in an implicit way through the references to the covenant curses that are set forth in Leviticus 26.
  2. While the bulk of Leviticus 26 contains warnings of what would befall the people if they disobeyed, there is also a wonderful promise near the end of that chapter.
  3. The Lord says, “Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them, neither will I abhor them so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with them, for I am the LORD their God. But I will for their sake remember the covenant with their forefathers, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am the LORD.” (Lev 26:44–45 ESV)
  4. The fact that the covenant curses ended on this gracious note tells us that the Israelites were not entirely without hope, even though the covenant curses were coming upon them.
  5. If they responded to the exile by crying out to the Lord in repentance and faith, the Lord would not spurn them.
  6. And in the same way, as various crises arise in the world today and affect the church, those who persevere in faith can take comfort in knowing that our God will not spurn us either.