

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Lessons from the mountains of Israel: The Mount of Olives

I well remember several years ago climbing the Wrekin, a small hill that stands out from the flat Shropshire plain. It seemed from the top that you could see for miles and miles: to the West into Wales; to the North as far as the Cheshire plain' beyond Birmingham to the East; and to the Malverns in the South. It was such a quiet, clear day that everything seemed to be visible. That view was in sharp contrast to what we saw last time we visited Manchester by train. Leaving the station we walked past a series of mirrors! I saw myself first as short and fat – definitely something wrong there! – then tall and thin – that's better – and then all wibbly wobbly! What a distorted picture we got, although we had a good laugh about it as we walked past.

This morning as we conclude our look at the lessons from the mountains of Israel, it will hopefully be the former clear view that we will get from the lofty heights of the Mount of Olives. So far we have seen Mount Sinai and our inability to live up to the standards that God has given. We have journeyed to Mount Zion and seen the wonderful deliverance that is in Christ. Last week we climbed the Mount of transfiguration and saw the glory of the Son of God. This morning we return to the area around Jerusalem to journey through time to the Mount of Olives. This mountain, also referred to as Olivet in the Bible, was the highest peak in a mile long range of limestone hills about a kilometre to the East of Jerusalem. It rose some 70 metres above Mount Zion and 100 metres above Mount Moriah – the place where Abraham had been told to sacrifice Isaac, and where God had revealed to him that God Himself would provide the sacrificial lamb that would take away the sins of the whole world. At about 900 metres high it was comparable in height with many of the higher peaks in the Lake District, though not quite as high as the very highest. As such, it would be visible throughout much of the land of Israel. The lower slopes were covered by fine groves of olive trees, as well as figs and other valuable arable crops. The olive tree, which can live for hundreds of years, provides welcome shade from the heat of the Middle Eastern sun, as well as food and oil. During Old Testament times the Mount of Olives really was a beautiful place. During the times of the Roman Emperor Titus, however, it was largely denuded as a symbol of the authority of Rome and the national subjugation of Israel. It has probably never quite regained its glory.

The first definite mention of a place or word in the Bible is often instructive. It is perhaps a little surprising then, though instructive nonetheless, that such an important mountain is not mentioned until 2 Samuel 15. Perhaps you will remember the time when Absalom, King David's wayward son rebelled against him. So we read in verses 30-32: "So David went up by the ascent of the Mount of Olives, and wept as he went up; and he had his head covered and went barefoot. And all the people who were with him covered their heads and went up, weeping as they went up. Then someone told David saying, "Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom." And David said, "O LORD, I pray, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness!" Now it happened when David had come to the top of the mountain, where he worshipped God – there was Hushai the Archite, coming to meet him with his robe torn and dust on his head." What a sorry state the people of Israel had fallen to! When God gave Moses the law and all His commandments, with the promise of a king, I believe that David had always been the man He had in mind. Of course, the people had first demanded Saul, looking only on the external qualities that so influence human decision making. In His wisdom, God had allowed this, if only to show the shortcomings of their choice. Now David had brought peace and prosperity to the nation, and yet through personal failure, found himself on the run from Jerusalem. It was natural to escape eastwards over the Mount of Olives. What shame for a king who knew that this was a problem that stemmed from his own sin! As a king in rejection, David is a picture for us of the greater King, the Lord Jesus, who is still in rejection. Of course, Jesus was not rejected because of any sin of His own. Nevertheless, we get a sense of the awful shame of His rejection in the Gospel of John 1:10-11: "He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him." Today, we still live in a world that rejects Him. Though He made the world, He is rejected as the Creator. What must He think when the combined wisdom of this world joins to deny His existence? He is rejected as the Saviour. We would rather have many or none at all. He is rejected as king. One need only read the front page of any newspaper, every day, to see how far mankind has rejected the morality that God demands. This morning, if we can see how wrong it was that David was usurped by his own son, how much more we need to feel the wrongness of the usurpation of Jesus from His rightful place!

And yet! And yet David was not alone. There on the mountain top where he worshipped God, he was met by Hushai, David's friend and adviser. That aged man had climbed the mountain just to be with David. What aching limbs he must have had! And yet what a comfort to David he must have been. He was not the only one either. Ittai the Philistine had climbed the mountain with David. In full view of Jerusalem, so that all could hear and so that there would be no going

back, he had declared "Surely in whatever place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also your servant will be." How deluded Ittai must have seemed. Fancy believing in David's kingship, when now it was obviously past history! How very old fashioned! Time would tell it was those who remained in Jerusalem that were the deluded ones. So today we have the opportunity of bringing balm to the heart of the rejected King. What joy there must be for Him when, in simple obedience, we gather together to remember Him. How much it must encourage His heart as He sees one of us faithfully just getting on with a service He has given us to do. So the first lesson we learn upon the Mount of Olives is that the King is rejected, but that, rather than this being a cause for defeatism, it rather gives an opportunity to share with Him in His rejection and to meet with Him there.

The next time we read of the Mount of Olives is morally linked with this episode. In 1 Kings 11:7, we read "Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, on the hill that is east of Jerusalem, and for Molech the abomination of the people of Ammon." We have already seen that the Mount of Olives lies east of Jerusalem, and it is likely that this is the mountain referred to here. Rejection of what is true is not long after followed by a replacement with what is false. So in full view of all Israel, Solomon builds altars to the false gods of his many foreign wives. All of this can be justified by a human reasoning. Wasn't it good to cement alliances with Israel's neighbours by marriage? Wasn't it good to please his wives and family so that he wouldn't suffer the same fate as his father? Strange isn't it how human logic can lead to such wrong results. And yet this is exactly what has happened the world over. Man, in his ignorance and pride, has rejected the true King, and has instead filled His place with all sorts of falsehoods. Sadly, the church has not been immune from this human reasoning. How much has been done in the name of equality, or modernity, or order, often for the best of motives, that has, nevertheless, ended up in direct contradiction to the inspired word of God? When Jesus alone has His rightful place as the only Head of the church and when His word has the sole authority upon the actions of all believers, then we shall see true equality, modernity and order. Rather than the false gods of Chemosh and Molech, today we have the equally false gods of science and money and power. Instead of science pointing us to the perfection of the Creator, as itself evidently must, we have chosen to worship it itself. Instead of using money to liberate others from poverty, we have chosen to worship it, and its acquisition, and so have become enslaved to materialism. Instead of occupying any position of power, as stewards for God, we use it to gain fame and celebrity. We are as idolatrous today as they were in Solomon's time! The names may have changed but the rejection of God has not.

So it is as we move on through time upon the Mount of Olives, that we come to its saddest moment yet. We read in Ezekiel 11:23-25: "And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain, which is on the east side of the city. Then the Spirit took me up and brought me in a vision by the Spirit of God into Chaldea, to those in captivity. And the vision that I had seen went up from me. So I spoke to those in captivity of all the things the LORD had shown me." Because of the rejection of the King and His authority on earth, because of the dreadful idolatry that had replaced Him in the affections of the hearts of Israel, the Israelites had been taken into captivity into Chaldea, or Babylonia. Here Ezekiel is given a vision of the Glory of the LORD departing from the temple and returning to Heaven, by way of the Mount of Olives. God would no longer have His theocratic kingdom on earth, and His Glory would no longer fill the temple. What a sad day that was! How had things come to this from the day when David had first sought to build God a house in Jerusalem? How was it that the message to the church at Ephesus contained the solemn warning that the lampstand was to be removed from them – unless they repented? The cause is the same. They had left their first love. Christ alone was not enough. From the shady slopes of Olivet the question remains for us in the twenty first century. Is Christ alone enough for us? As individuals, and as part of a local group of believers, am I satisfied with Him alone? Too often we want more. A better position, a better lifestyle, a better religion; and so we add something that displaces Him. In doing so we lose the intimacy of His presence with us, although we can never lose our eternal security.

As we read through the Gospels, we quickly realise that the Mount of Olives must have been one of Jesus' favourite places. It is from there that Jesus would have seen the light from the four giant candelabras associated with the celebration of the feast of tabernacles, that would lead Him to present Himself as the light of the world (John 8:1-12). How much that light is still needed today!

Then there are three incidents closely linked with Jesus' last hours that occurred upon the Mount of Olives. Firstly, it was here, perhaps in the shade of the mighty boughs of the olive trees that the disciples would come to Jesus with the question, "When will these things be?" (Matthew 24, Luke 13). There is not time this morning to go into the answer that Jesus gave, although a study of what the Bible says about the future is certainly time well spent. The lesson we need to learn is that the disciples did the right thing. When we have questions, as we inevitably do, concerning His will, our first "port of call" should be Jesus Himself. Too often we try to sort things out ourselves, and then seek the advice of others before trying God as a last hope. This is back to front. Jesus needs to be our first source of help. We need to develop the habit of seeking His help in all the circumstances of our lives, and to learn to recognise His voice above all the competing voices we hear today. He has declared to us the whole counsel of God through His word – the Bible. If the disciples had questioned one another, or gone to the local library to read a few books, then they would never have got the wonderful answer they did, and would have remained in the dark.

Secondly, it was from the Mount of Olives that Jesus sent two of His disciples to prepare the upper room for the final celebration of the Passover, and the institution of the Lord's Supper (Matthew 21, Mark 11 and Luke 19). Jesus, as an obedient man, recognised that there was the necessity to leave the most pleasant surroundings that He was in, to make time for what God had said should be done, in the celebration of the Passover. For us too, there will be times when we must leave behind pleasing circumstances to give to God what is rightfully His. We might like to have a lie in on a Sunday morning but our presence will be missed by Him. We might be tired after a hard day at work but our attendance at a prayer meeting is required by Him. And what a wonderful thing for us it is that they left that lovely spot, for had they not done so, then we should never have had the pattern for the Lord's Supper. That most precious remembrance of Him, that ought to be the first duty of any believer, would have never been given to us.

Thirdly, it was on the Mount of Olives that the Son of God learnt the awful cost of obedience as the perfect Servant, as He suffered in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22). It is interesting that the name Gethsemane means "place of the oil press". Here in the sweetest of surroundings, we cannot begin to imagine the horrors that raked the heart of the Lord Jesus. Knowing that His sacrificial death at Calvary as our sin bearer was the only means of salvation, and knowing that this was the path of obedience His Father would have Him tread, Jesus humbly places Himself in the will of God. He was made sin on our account, yet it was in the pleasant surroundings of Gethsemane that the terrible cost of this bore down upon Him. And what were the disciples doing? They were asleep! No doubt we would have been too! So often when things are outwardly easy we find ourselves spiritually asleep rather than alert for danger. Naturally, we crave an easy life. Often, it is at just such times that we fail Him the most.

Had the disciples only realised how little time they really had left with their Master then perhaps they would have remained awake. If we only realised how fleeting is the time we have to serve Him, before His return, or before our call to be with Him through death, then perhaps we would not spend so much time on things that have no eternal value. In our day, we are back as it were with the rejected King. It is for us to take our place alongside Hushai and Ittai and associate ourselves with Him in His rejection. And if we are ready to reject the world and all it has to offer, are we brave enough to be rejected by this world, and to suffer loss in this lifetime? It was in the garden of Gethsemane, on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, that the Lord Jesus faced the prospect of true rejection. Not only would He be rejected by man, but He would be abandoned by God, experiencing an aloneness that we shall never know.

It seems strange that this place that God made so beautiful should have so much sadness associated with it. It is fitting then that God has reserved His best for the last scene to be enacted on the Mount of Olives. On the very highest spot so that all may see, the Glory will return. Let us read two verses from the Old Testament that speak about the wonderful future for this mountain. Firstly, in Ezekiel 43:2-4: "And behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east. His voice was like the sound of many waters; and the earth shone with His glory. It was like the appearance of the vision which I saw – like the vision which I saw when I came to destroy the city ... And the glory of the LORD came into the temple by way of the gate which faces toward the east." Secondly, we read in the prophecy of Zechariah 14:4: "And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east. And the Mount of Olives shall be split in two, from east to west, making a very large valley; half of the mountain shall move toward the north and half of it toward the south."

What a wonderful time these scriptures speak about. It was from the Mount of Olives that Jesus had ascended to His Father, still rejected by the world. It is to the Mount of Olives that He shall return to be accepted universally. On the highest peak, for all to see, Jesus shall return! The glory that departed from the temple so many years before shall return in the bodily form of the Lord Jesus Christ and He shall reign over all the earth to universal acclaim. Can we begin to imagine the effect of the earth shining because of His glory? All that is seedy and underhand, all that is done in secret against the general good will become a thing of the past as His righteousness is on full display. Those who deny His existence now, those who deliberately disobey Him now will then have no choice but to acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. As David fled for his life from Jerusalem, it must have seemed an unlikely dream that he would ever return. Those who were supposedly wise would have joined themselves to the cause of Absalom. Except that they had not reckoned on the working and will of God. But here, we have something greater still. Today, men still reckon without the will of God, but He will act in His time and it shall be perfect. In a future day, God will again adopt the nation of Israel as His vehicle on earth to display His glory. The Bible speaks of a time of severe trouble for Israel as the nations of the earth seek to wipe her from existence, and in removing Israel they seek to remove God. But God will act and be Israel's great deliverance. When all seems lost, He shall return and defeat all those who would seek to overthrow Israel. The theocratic kingdom of Israel will be the centre of His worldwide role for the blessing of all the nations. We live in a world today where some nations make their boasts about wiping Israel off the face of the earth, and where sentiment increasingly sees Israel's actions as a major barrier to peace. For sure some of her actions are wrong. More would be gained by faith and obedience. By the action of God, working through human governments, Israel became a nation with its own land in the last century. Until He returns they will be kept, though sorely tested, until they return in faith to God. I love the symmetry of God's actions. Where He has been rejected, God will ensure that He is accepted. In a similar way, it is in the realm of the Devil, the air, that Jesus will come and take all those to be with Him at the rapture. In his own territory, the Devil will be seen to be powerless to stop God doing just as He wills to do.

Today, as believers, we may seem to be an increasingly persecuted minority. In all likelihood, the ability to live for Christ in an open and honest way will become increasingly difficult. The media and the establishment may become increasingly hostile to simple Bible believing Christianity, wanting a more inclusive any size fits all religion. But let us never forget that it is the accepted Son of God in whom we trust. And it is this same Jesus, who was last seen by His own disciples leaving the Mount of Olives who shall return and be glorified in all the earth, and who shall reign as King of kings and Lord of lords. As we allow this wonderful truth to fill our minds and hearts, then we shall be kept from anger against those who reject Him now, or from trying to assert our rights in petty matters. There ought to be a quiet dignity about us as we wait for His return. And we should be content to wait for the time when He asserts His rights over all the earth, rather than seeking to do so now. Above all, we shall be kept from a sense of pointless defeatism as we, like Ittai, can declare with a bold confidence, "As the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, surely in whatever place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also your servant will be."

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