

## Desolation

### Background

The word “desolation” is not an uncommon word in the Bible. It is used to describe areas that are deserted due to natural causes or because of God’s intervention. A place that is desolate has very few or no people. An area can also be called desolate if no animals live there. Bible translators also use words like “wilderness” or “desert” synonymously. Isaiah 64:10-11 gives us a good picture of what the word means.

*Your holy cities are a **wilderness**, Zion is a wilderness, Jerusalem a **desolation**. Our holy and beautiful temple, where our fathers praised You, is **burned up with fire**; and all our pleasant things are **laid waste**. (NKJV)*

With this passage we clearly understand the most common meaning of the word “desolation.” When an area is laid waste not much is left, no people live there and it will soon become a wilderness.

### Second Understanding

The Word of God is profound. We can often find a deeper understanding with further study. There is a verse in the Bible where “desolation” has a very different meaning. The second book of Samuel tells a tragic story about King David’s children. Absalom’s brother Amnon “fell in love” with his half-sister Tamar and raped her – and then he deserted her. When the story became public, Absalom did something admirable to help his sister, 2 Samuel 13:20:

*Her brother Absalom said to her, “Has that Amnon, your brother, been with you? Be quiet now, my sister; he is your brother. Don't take this thing to heart.” And Tamar lived in her brother Absalom's house, a **desolate woman**. (NIV)*

Let us look beyond the tragic rape itself. Socially Tamar was in a pitiable situation and needed someone to care for her. Amnon should have – but didn’t want to take care of his half-sister. According to the culture Tamar was not allowed to marry. Legally she was married to Amnon but he rejected her totally. She was outside the social network and needed someone to support her financially. It was Absalom who stepped in and did this.

The consequence was that she lived “alone” for the rest of her life. Not in a literal sense since Absalom and his household surrounded her, but the Bible tells us that Tamar remained “desolate,” that is “unmarried,” “forsaken” or “divorced” (from Amnon) for the rest of her life. She knew no husband and lived as a single woman. A recent Swedish Bible translation correctly uses the word “unmarried” instead of desolate in the passage quoted above.

### Old Testament

I have found that when the Bible speaks about a person or a group of individuals the word “desolate” should rather have been translated to “unmarried,” “divorced” or “forsaken.” There are other texts in the Old Testament where this particular meaning of the Hebrew word for “desolation” is found. I quote the Amplified Bible in the passage below since it includes translations of the two names, Hephzibah and Beulah. Most versions do not. One can understand the text even without the translations in brackets but it becomes very clear with them there. Isaiah 62:4-5:

*You [Judah] shall no more be termed **Forsaken**, nor shall your land be called **Desolate** any more. But you shall be called Hephzibah [**My delight is in her**], and your land be called Beulah [**married**]; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married [owned and protected by the Lord]. For as a young man marries a virgin [O Jerusalem], so shall your sons marry you; and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. (AMP)*

There is no doubt here that “desolate” means “unmarried” or “forsaken,” just as in the story about Tamar. In the passage above “forsaken” is contrasted to “my delight is in her” and “desolate” to “married.” Thus, the land is *not* considered “forsaken” if it is “married” to the Lord. Hosea and other prophets use the symbol of marriage to describe

the love-relationship between the Lord and His people. Here is another text that sheds more light on this topic. Isaiah 54:1:

*SING, O barren one, you who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who did not travail with child! For the [spiritual] children of the **desolate** one will be more than the children of the **married** wife, says the Lord. (AMP)*

Here two groups of children from two women are described and the word “desolate” is again contrasted to “married.” One group comes from the “unmarried” woman and one group from the “married” woman. The “married” woman refers to the Old Covenant people who brought forth a child, namely Jesus Christ. This text is parallel to Revelation 12:1-6 where a woman is pregnant and gives birth to a Male Child, the Messiah. According to this text the number of children, i.e. believers, will be fewer from the “married” woman.

The “desolate” woman has never and will never give birth to a child. She will never be in labor with children. She is barren. Still the number of children from her will exceed the number of children from the “married” woman. How can this be? In the New Covenant, children are not *born* into the family but *adopted*. God’s grace through the righteousness of Christ is the way into this relationship with Him. Contrast this to the first Covenant where you were counted as family only if you were *born* into it. In Hosea God speaks about how He would extend His grace further. This is a prophecy saying that He one day would extend His grace to the Gentiles, to us! Hosea 2:23:

*I will plant her for myself in the land; I will show my love to the one I called “Not my loved one.” I will say to those called “Not my people,” “You are my people”; and they will say, “You are my God.” (NIV)*

Jeremiah 3:1 gives the reason why adoption is a necessity. If a woman leaves her husband and the man becomes divorced from her, he cannot marry her again. If so, the land would be completely defiled, according to the Lord. When the Old Covenant people divorced God the law would not allow Him to “marry” any other woman either. This might sound strange but I believe that God follows the laws He has instituted. Therefore, adoption is the only solution and a picture of God’s grace. More about this in a later newsletter!

### **New Testament**

We have seen that this understanding finds support in the Old Testament, but how about the New Testament? The good news is that Jesus used this concept to explain to the Israelites what was about to happen. He warned them several times about the change in status that would soon take place. But to make sure no one misunderstands, the following must be said. Jesus came to fulfill and not to take away. This is clearly spelled out early in the gospels, Matthew 5:17:

*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. (NIV)*

It is interesting and important that Jesus includes both the Law and the Prophets. Let us direct our interest to the “Prophets.” I propose that with His statement in Matthew 5:17 Jesus says that He had come to fulfill for example Daniel 9:24. That verse states that 70 weeks are decreed for Daniel’s people to finish rebellion, put an end to sin and atone for their wickedness. This time of probation ended as a judgment because the Israelites persisted in rebellion. Instead of repenting and turning from their sin they handed over Jesus, their Messiah, to be crucified.

### **Divorce**

According to the Bible there are only two situations when divorce is approved. One is when there has been adultery and the other is the death of one of the partners. From God’s perspective His “wife” (His people) was adulterous over and over again. For hundreds of years they continued to rebel against Him. He had the legal right at any time to terminate the Covenant with them. But He did not! God’s mercy is amazing and wonderful!

A divorce would also take place when one of the partners died (Romans 7:2). When Jesus died on the cross the separation was a fact. But according to His promise He would take care of His people, until the end of the 490 years. This time prophecy ended 3 ½ years after His death. That is when “the time of the Gentiles” began, in A.D. 34. But legally the divorce from His Covenant People happened when He died on the cross.

A New Testament passage that supports this interpretation is Matt.3:10 where John the Baptist said that “the ax is already at the root of the trees.” The trees are here a symbol of the Israelites and the ax being at the root of the trees says that the event is close at hand. This was a warning to the people that judgment was imminent and that everyone needed to repent. Jesus was also announcing the fact that Israel as a nation was about to be divorced from God and that the kingdom would be given to a people who would produce its fruit, Matthew 21:43:

*Therefore I tell you that **the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.** (NIV)*

This was a message from the Lord! He spoke to the chief priests, the elders and the teachers of the Law when they questioned Him about His authority to do miracles. He told the Parable of the Tenants, which clearly exposed their sin. Then He made the statement we read above which indicated that a change was about to take place. I don't think this was God's original wish and plan, but it eventually was the outcome. Jesus further explains the tragic situation in Matthew 23:37-38:

*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill 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, but you were not willing. Look, **your house is left to you desolate.** (NIV)*

This is a cry from the heart of Jesus to His Old Covenant people. God's intent is clearly spelled out. He had “longed” to take care of His children but this love was ignored and rejected. Like rebellious children they were not interested. At the end of the 490 years prophecy, the consequence of this rejection was eventually fulfilled and the House of Israel was left “desolate.”

### **Summary**

- Common synonyms to “desolation” are “wilderness” and “desert.” These three words describe sparsely populated or non-inhabited areas and can be used for land, cities, buildings, etc.
- A second meaning of the word “desolate” is “unmarried,” “forsaken,” or “divorced.” These words can be used when referring to an individual or a group of people.
- When used spiritually, the word “desolate” paints the picture of what happened to the Israelites when they crucified Christ. At that moment they as a people, God's bride, divorced themselves and were no longer “married” to Him.

In the next newsletter we will study what the word “abomination” means and eventually put together “desolation” and “abomination” in a meaningful way.

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