

*"In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Romans 11:5)*

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## The Problem of the Fallen Stones

**How the rubble of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem helps us to understand God's plan for humanity**

by Galen Peterson

**W**hen it comes to the history of civilization, it often involves a pile of rocks of some sort. In the Ancient Near East it was common for a city to succumb to an invasion, resulting in its destruction. When the next group of people came along, they typically didn't clear away the rubble, and instead, they just built a new city on top of the fallen stones of the previous one. Often, that cycle was repeated until a mound called a *tel* was created. There are many *tels* in Israel, each one containing great piles of fallen stones covered over by dirt.

There is an even more

significant pile of stones located in the city of Jerusalem that is not a *tel*, but is exposed for all to see. These are the stones that were part of the greater structure of the second temple that were sent to the ground by the Romans when they destroyed the temple and the city in 70 A.D.

So when visiting Jerusalem today, you can see these fallen stones that are resting on a street next to the Western Wall plaza, which dates back to second temple times. A wall can be seen above the stones, but it only dates back to the time of the Ottoman Empire in the 1500s

### **The problem of the stones for Judaism**

These particular stones stand as a reminder of the sacrificial system mandated in the Torah, which was carried out for one thousand years in the two temples of Jerusalem. The stones are just one element of an abundance of physical evidence that the two temples stood exactly as the Bible describes.

Why was that sacrificial system necessary? Among many verses in Scripture, Ezekiel 18:20 tells us that "The person who sins will die." Since everyone sins, that

means everyone dies. And that is not just a physical death but a spiritual one in the sense of everlasting separation from God. It is all about the unavoidable fatal consequences of sin.

But thanks to the mercy of God, He established a way for a substitute to die in the place of people who sin. There is still a death, according to the consequence of sin. But another living being would bear the consequence in the place of the guilty person. The rationale behind that determination is described in this manner:

***“For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement” (Lev 17:11).***

That is a principle that has never been annulled or revoked by God. No amount of man-made precepts since the destruction of the temple, like coupling good deeds with repentance and going through the motions of religious observances will ever satisfy God’s requirement for sacrificial atonement. So without a substitute that dies in your place, you will die in a sinful state, and thus will not be able to be in God’s presence throughout eternity.

The fallen stones of the temple, then, represent Judaism’s great spiritual problem of not being able to comply with its own mandate for sacrificial atonement, as recorded in the Torah. For that reason, there is a yearning for rebuilding the temple within some parts of Judaism, especially among the Orthodox, as reflected in their prayers in which they petition three times a day: “May it be Thy will that the Temple be speedily rebuilt in our days.”

Moreover, there are groups that are pursuing the restoration of temple worship like the Temple Institute in Jerusalem, which has crafted the necessary furnishings, including those used for sacrifices.

If and when another temple structure is ever built is a matter of much debate. But the inability to carry out substitutionary sacrifice is a real problem according to Scripture. Gentiles share in this problem, as well, because all people are descendants of Adam who introduced sin to all humanity (Romans 5:12). God still requires justice because of sin, and He has decreed that a life must be given for justice to be met.

Without a temple, there can be no Levitical sacrifice. And without the shedding of blood, there can be no atonement, and thus the consequences of sin remain unresolved and eternally fatal. That is a real problem. And it is symbolized by the pile of former temple stones.

### **The stones as a sign of God’s solution to the problem**

The prophet Isaiah foretold a better way of sacrifice, one that never would need to be repeated, like temple sacrifice:

***“He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed.”***

***“As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities.” (Isaiah 53:5,11).***

This is the foretelling of the sacrificial death of the Messiah. Let it be said that there is only one

truly Righteous One, only one true Servant of God, and that is Yeshua (Jesus). So when you read Isaiah 53 about God’s Servant bearing the sins of people and the Lord’s acceptance of that act of atonement as providing the necessary justice, you are reading about Yeshua 700 years before He was born.

There is no other person in history in who comes close to fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy. Nor can there ever be anyone who could match all of the other characteristics of the Messiah according to the Hebrew Scriptures. In fact, some of the Messianic prophecies are time-dependent, like Genesis 49:10 and Daniel 9:26, which pinpoint the arrival of the Messiah, and those times passed long ago and can never be repeated. But they did correspond precisely to the time of Yeshua.

### **The stones as a confirmation of Yeshua’s perfect sacrifice**

When Yeshua gave His life in our place, and His death met the high standard of substitutionary atonement mandated in Leviticus 17:11. Moreover, everything about Yeshua was perfect—His divine nature, His life that was lived without sin, and the way that His redemptive act on the cross was carried out according to God’s plan. There could never be a more perfect sacrifice. That, too, is symbolized in the fallen stones of the temple.

Once you have a perfect sacrifice, there could never be a need for any further sacrifice to take place. The New Covenant writers made that very clear. Paul writes about Yeshua: “He died to sin *once for all*” (Rom 6:10). The writer to the Hebrews describes Yeshua’s death in this way: “we

have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Messiah Yeshua *once for all*" (Heb 10:10). Peter echoes the same finality by saying: "For Messiah also died for sins *once for all*" (1 Pet 3:18).

As a result, all who believe in Yeshua receive God's gift of salvation and the promise of everlasting life in the world to come. Unlike the never-ending nature of temple sacrifices, "once" means it never has to be repeated. And "for all" means you don't have to be at a physical temple in order to receive the blessing. God can grant the gift of salvation to anyone, anywhere.

It is a matter of declaring words to the effect, "I believe that Yeshua died for Me. I ask you, Lord, to forgive my sins on the basis of the justice that was accomplished when Yeshua gave His life as my atonement." No matter where you are, no matter who you are, that is the meaning of "once for all."

### **The destruction of the temple as part of God's plan**

There is another implication to the phrase, "once for all." With no more need for sacrifice, that meant there was no more need for the temple itself. So in 70 A.D. God allowed the Romans to destroy it. Yeshua told His disciples in advance what would happen to the second temple:

***"As for these things which you are looking at, the days will come in which there will not be left one stone upon another which will not be torn down" (Luke 21:5-6).***

Yeshua knew that the temple would no longer be God's place of atonement after His death. In fact, doing away with the temple would actually eliminate any confusion

over the need for continuing sacrifices. It had served its purpose until the fulfillment came through Yeshua. But after His perfect sacrifice, it became obsolete. So God allowed the Romans to bring it to an end.

The story itself, as told by the Jewish historian Josephus, is rather tragic, but also very informative. Three decades after Yeshua died, Jewish zealots began a revolt against Rome in 66 A.D. The Romans responded by sending in multiple legions of soldiers. First, they routed the zealots in the Galilee area, and then they sent their forces south to Judea in preparation for a siege of Jerusalem.

Early in the year 68, Vespasian, commander of the Roman army, established garrisons of soldiers from multiple legions in many of the cities on all sides of Jerusalem. At this point in time, it was not a siege, but Jerusalem had become surrounded by Roman armies.

During that same year of 68 A.D., the emperor Nero died in Rome. So Vespasian put his plans on hold regarding the zealots, and the following year he was named emperor of Rome. Command of the Roman army was then turned over to his son Titus.

In the spring of the year 70, Jewish worshippers were permitted to enter Jerusalem in order to observe Passover at the temple. Once the people had settled in the city for the feast, Titus turned the situation into a trap by initiating a full siege of the walled city, sealing it off with 70,000 soldiers. Over the next four months, no one was allowed out of the city, which put strains on the food supplies and between the zealots and other factions of the Jewish people.

Then, after four weeks of

using battering rams, the Romans breached the walls of the city. Titus called upon the zealots to surrender and pledged not to destroy the temple if they gave up. But the zealots declared that the city belonged to God and it could not be captured, so they retreated to the temple courts and vowed to defend it with their lives.

The Romans began setting fires to the porticos surrounding the outer courts of the temple. Titus called for the preservation of the Temple at all costs, because its beauty could be preserved as a possession of Rome. He ordered that only the zealots were to be harmed and the surrounding buildings could be destroyed, not the temple itself.

As they closed in on the inner courts of the temple, the Romans routed the zealots who were defending it from within. So it appeared that the conflict would end just as Titus had ordered. But then, as Josephus writes:

*"One of the soldiers, without obeying any orders, and without concern or dread upon him at so great an undertaking, and being moved by a certain divine fury, snatched something out of the materials that were on fire, and being lifted by another soldier, he set fire to a golden window, through which there was a passage to the rooms that were round about the holy house, on the north side of it" (Josephus, Wars of the Jews 6:4:5).*

When Titus received word that the temple itself was now burning, he rushed to the site and attempted to get his soldiers to stand down. But they had become obsessed with finishing the job, so they looted the temple of its treasures and they let the building completely burn to the ground.

Then they resumed fighting against the remaining zealots, until there were none left to resist the might of Rome. Along the way, according to Josephus, 1.1 million Jews perished.

At that point, with the city in ashes, Titus ordered that the stone walls were to be demolished. And so, all of the stones of the temple itself were overturned, so that not one stone of the temple building was left upon another, just as Yeshua had foretold. The massive retaining walls around the temple mount were also sent to the ground, including those that can be seen today.

Titus did make one exception, however. After the victory, he sent the majority of his army away to other places, but he wanted a garrison of soldiers to stay behind in case they were needed for residual problems in the area. So he ordered that the retaining wall on the west side of the temple mount was to be left intact so that the soldiers could camp there without having to deal with scrambling over rubble. That section is known today as the Western Wall or the Wailing Wall. In other words, the reason that the Jewish people have a token place of worship in connection with the former temples is because the Romans needed a flat campsite.

Looking back, we can see

how the zealots, from their perspective, had good intentions about preserving the temple. The same is true for the Roman general Titus. He wanted to preserve it for the glory of Rome. But God had already moved on from using the temple as His focal point for accomplishing things of a spiritual nature. Every aspect of redemption was now centrally focused on Yeshua alone.

As the narrative shows, Josephus describes the chaotic end of Jerusalem as the result of human madness. But from God's perspective, Josephus got that point wrong. Ultimately it was not human madness, but God's perfect wisdom that brought the stones

down. He just used mad human beings to do it.

The lesson from the destruction of the temple, depicted in the fallen stones that can be seen today, is that we can easily miss the point of what happened when we try to figure things out from our human perspective. But when we try to view history from God's perspective, we can see that He has carried out a plan for this world by providing a better way for the sins of humanity to be covered—not by human priests in a building that could not endure, but by Himself in a final sacrifice that endures forever. That is the ultimate message of the fallen stones of the temple in Jerusalem.



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