

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem”

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“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not” (Lk. 13:34).

How do you help someone who does not want to be helped?

When I was a new pastor, one of the first marriages I did was also one of the most difficult. The bride and her parents were members, but never came to church. Getting the couple to sit down for premarital counseling was like pulling teeth, one excuse after another until I informed them, I just don't do weddings without premarital counseling. When we did finally sit down all kinds of red flags were going up. I knew enough to know I was in water over my head. I recommended professional counseling, but there was zero interest. They didn't think they needed it. And whatever concerns I had they brushed off like pesky flies. For example, one of the questions I always ask in premarital counseling is how much money are you willing to spend without the knowledge or consent of your fiancée? Write it down on a slip. She wrote down about \$20. He wrote down \$500. They didn't see a potential problem. They thought it was funny. They were . . . self-confident.

The wedding came and went, and that would be the last time I saw them. Within in a year the marriage was in trouble. I reached out to them, wanted to help them, wanted to sit down with them, wanted to walk with them, and offer the church's help – Stephen Ministry, confession and absolution, life in Christ. They responded with indifference and distance. As a pastor, I was unable to help them.

Not just pastors, many of you know this heartache. How do you help your student who refuses extra support after school? How do you help your patient who refuses to make any of the necessary lifestyle changes? How do you help an elderly parent who refuses to even consider assisted living, though she has been falling and can no longer manage the house, the bills, the cooking? How do you help the man who trusts no authority: certainly not the government, but also not the doctor, the financial advisor, the pastor, the attorney . . . no one? How do you help someone who doesn't want to be helped? Many of us know this heartache.

Jesus knows this heartache too. “How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing” (Lk. 13:34). Jesus was all in. But “you were not willing”. He was talking to the Jews, to God's chosen people. The people God had delivered out of Egypt for Himself. The people God fed in the wilderness with manna and quail and water from the rock. The people God protected and fought for and welcomed into the promised land.

Jesus wanted to help them, but they didn't want His help. Nor did they want the prophets whom the Father sent before Him, the prophets who called them to repentance, but also proclaimed God's goodness and mercy. But they would not be helped. In fact, they persecuted those God sent to help. Jesus doesn't often use irony, but he uses it here. “Surely no prophet can die outside of Jerusalem!” (v. 33).

So, what does Jesus do? First, He laments. He grieves. He mourns their sin and rebellion and refusal to be gathered and helped. He knows they're in a world of trouble. He knows it's only going to get worse and the path they are on leads to destruction. So, Jesus laments. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem.” There's no thunder and lightning in the repetition. It's just grief. It reminds me of the grief of David, “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Sam. 18:33). Jesus laments their sin and rebellion and the near and long-term devastation they will needlessly suffer.

Last week in the newspaper there was a photograph of a father and his son in Ukraine. They're in a maternity hospital in Mariupol, which had been converted into a medical ward. The lifeless body of the teenage boy is covered by a blood-soaked hospital blanket. The father is sitting in a chair at head of the gurney, cradling his son's head, sobbing. That's the same grief Jesus feels for the people of Jerusalem. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on His people. Therefore, 2,000 years ago, Jesus grieved over His people. They were refusing His help.

How about you? Do you ever refuse the Lord's help? Though we are God's baptized children, we are also sinners. As sinners, we need His help but are we always open to receive His help? Are there some things you are keeping from God's gracious intervention?

Perhaps it is the refusal to forgive someone who violated your trust. True, he or she hurt you deeply and without much contrition. And it still hurts. But remember, God has forgiven you of so much, and expects you to share that forgiveness with others. Are you working toward it? Are you asking His help? Are you studying the passages on forgiveness and why it's so important for us to forgive others? Or are you just harboring the anger and resentment and letting things unfold as they will?

How are you refusing the Lord's help? How are you "unwilling"? Maybe it's a sinful habit, one that in former times you tried to correct and regain control of, but you have since given up the struggle and given yourself over to it. Repetition has quieted your conscience. The Lord could help you. He could send others to help. But you're not asking Him. You are unwilling. You've grown complacent in your sin, maybe even smug in sin.

How are you refusing the Lord's help? Maybe you don't pray much anymore. You don't ask God for help because you forget to or you're too busy or you tried it a couple of times and it didn't change anything. But the truth is we suffer unnecessarily for our refusal to pray. Of course, the Lord will sometimes say "No" to us. We give Him that freedom and we know it's for our good. But at other times the answer would be, "Why yes, of course! I was hoping you would ask, waiting for you to ask!" But He doesn't get to say that because you are unwilling.

How are you refusing the Lord's help? Maybe you're mostly indifferent to God's Word. Want changes in your life? Start doing individual devotions accompanied with prayer. That'll stir things up. But in snubbing the Word, we snub an important way God helps us.

Remember how Jesus responded to His people who refused His help? He lamented. He grieved. He grieves today when we refuse His help in forgiving others, because that's a serious business and can lead to forfeiting God's own forgiveness for you.

Jesus laments today the sinful habits we're unwilling to purge from our lives. It's no good being at the mercy of forces or urges we cannot control. And yet we refuse to ask Him for help. Sometimes all He needs from us is the green light, but it never comes. We are unwilling.

And I know He laments it when we refuse to gather for worship, because His impulse is always to gather. Like a hen gathers her chicks or like a shepherd gathers his sheep. To have either one of those isolated in the wilderness is not His will.

In our text, Jesus laments the people's reluctance to gather to receive God's help. But He doesn't just stall out in lamentation. He moves forward. In fact, nothing's going to stop Him, not even Herod's murderous threats. Go tell that fox, "Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for surely no prophet can die outside of Jerusalem." He must finish His course. He must go on His way . . . because there's a cross in Jerusalem for Him to die on. He's not just going to weep for His people. He's going there to die for them and for us. They're not asking for the Lord's help, but He's going to bleed for them anyway. Even that fox Herod has a role. The clever, old tyrant isn't asking for it, but even he will serve unwittingly in God's plan of salvation.

Our Lord Jesus helps us even when we don't ask for it. Did you ask Him to die for you to redeem you? Of course not. He already did that for you 2000 years ago without your asking. As an infant, did you ask to be baptized? No, He did that for you, long before you would ever get around to asking anything of anyone. Did you ask Him to institute the Lord's Supper for you? Does He provide food for you, even when you don't ask Him for it or thank Him for it? Does He do the same with shelter, with first responders, with people who defend our land and our freedoms? Our Lord helps us even when we don't ask for it.

Our God wants to help, offers to help, grieves when we refuse His help, but that does not stop Him. "I must finish my course." And there's still more for the Lord will do. Paul writes, "I am *sure* of this, that he who began a good work among you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). When Jesus completed His work of redemption on the cross, He said "It is finished." Here Paul assures us God will also complete the work of redemption in our lives. We will be ready for the day of Jesus Christ. He will make us ready. It is God who initiates salvation, God who continues it and God who will one day bring it to completion. Jesus will finish His course. He will finish His work of salvation. Nothing will stop Him.

How do you help someone who doesn't want to be helped? For us, that's hard, often impossible. But "Our help is from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth" (Ps. 121:2). Nothing is impossible for Him. Thanks be to God. Amen.