

LIVE IN REVERENCE BEFORE JESUS CHRIST
(SUNDAY, MARCH 27, 2011)

SCRIPTURE READING: 2 CHRON. 24:15-22; MATTHEW 23:31-39

INTRODUCTION

One of the doctrines that is especially despised today is the wrath of God. This rejection of God's wrath affects other doctrines including the doctrine of the cross and also the doctrine of hell. Rob Bell's new book, *Love Wins*, states hell is not eternal. "Hell is what we make of heaven when we cannot accept the good news of God's forgiveness and mercy."¹

A former student at CLA in the 1980's has a website entitled, "Love Jesus Not Religion." The main heading of this website states, "Contrary to what you've heard, God isn't sending anyone to a literal "hell" or Lake of literal Fire... and no, God isn't pissed off [angry] at mankind."²

Man-created religion often sounds much kinder and gentler than the truth of God's Word. "Love Wins," sounds good and even somewhat true. Heresy, generally speaking, is very inviting and interesting. Going back to the Garden of Eden, the issue has always been will you live in the world as defined by God or will you seek to create your own reality, which in essence is the reality offered by Satan.

In our sin we are sometimes tempted to doubt the truth of God's Word. We are tempted to think that maybe there is really nothing special about the message of the gospel. Why should we be so narrow-minded and not look for truth in other religions and practices? Maybe it is possible to take some parts of the Christian message and blend them with other practices and religions. But repeatedly in the book of Matthew we find strong warnings against any such ideas. Our text today again reminds us that we are dealing with eternal consequences - eternal life and blessing versus eternal punishment and destruction. The stakes are way too high to try to come up with your own ideas about life and what will happen after you die.

We are looking today at the final words of Jesus spoken in His public ministry of preaching and teaching, at least as recorded in Matthew's gospel. The strong words found in Matthew 23 perhaps were spoken on the Tuesday before Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. The very bold and strong words spoken by Jesus at the end of Matthew 23 are a fitting conclusion to the beginning of His public ministry in Galilee as found in Matthew 4.

How did Matthew summarize the start of Jesus' public ministry? We read in **Matt. 4:17**

From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

¹ <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/03/14/rob-bell-love-wins-review/>

² <http://www.lovejesusnotreligion.org/search/label/%22Hell%22>

Throughout Matthew 23 we see the boldness and strength of our Lord Jesus. He had no fear to expose and speak against the sins of the powerful and influential. The final verses of the chapter also show again the very real compassion of our Lord. There is no conflict between His strength and His love, between His words of judgment and His words of invitation and salvation. It is not love that wins but rather it is Jesus Christ who triumphs.

In summary, I would state that the call of this passage is that you **live in reverence before Jesus Christ**. You are to live in light of His power to bring judgment. You are to live in light of His compelling love.

I will cover this passage in two main parts, vv. 31-36 and vv. 37-39 before concluding with further reflection and application.

1. LIVE IN LIGHT OF HIS JUDGMENT, vv. 31-36

This is our third week in Matthew 23. We first looked at verses 1-12. I stressed from these verses the warning, Beware of man-centered religion. Last week we then gave attention to the 7 or perhaps 8 woes found in verses 13-30. From these verses I stressed the warning, Make sure you are not a danger to other people.

Some commentators would include with the woes verses 31-33 or 31-36. The NKJV has a new paragraph beginning with verse 31 and for that reason and simply because of the limitations of time we stopped our last study at verse 30. Verses 31-36 can either be understood as the last part of the last woe or even perhaps an appendix to the final woe.³

In the last woe which starts in verse 29, Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees for building and decorating the tombs of the prophets and other famous OT saints and for also declaring, if we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been part of the murder of the prophets. Starting with verse 31 up through verse 36, I see two main points that Jesus made in response to this final woe. First, from verses 31-33, Jesus judged them for not being any different from their fathers. Second, in verses 34-36, Jesus spoke of the culmination of their rebellion, which would lead to the greatest of judgments. Let us consider more these two main points.

Almost every generation of people wants to blame the previous generation for current problems. In Ezekiel 18 we read of a proverb or saying that was common among the children of Israel.

The fathers have eaten sour grapes, And the children's teeth are set on edge?

This is not a proverb that is common today but it was common among the exiles in Babylon. The language of the proverb is a bit difficult to translate, but the point of the proverb is not difficult. The proverb is about blame. Because the fathers have eaten sour grapes, they have caused the children to not be able to use their teeth properly. The children's teeth have become numb from the sour taste of the grapes their fathers have

³ Hagner entitles vv. 34-36 as an appendix to the 7th woe.

eaten. **Picture eating something very sour and then trying to take a big bite of a piece of steak.** That is close to the meaning of the Proverb. But the key is that the blame is being placed on what the fathers have done. It is their fault, according to the proverb, that the children are suffering and being judged.⁴

In contrast to blaming sins on the past, you have in Daniel 9, the great prayer of confession that Daniel prayed. In that prayer he confessed the current sins of his people.

Dan. 9:8 “O Lord, to us *belongs* shame of face, to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, because we have sinned against You. **9** To the Lord our God *belong* mercy and forgiveness, though we have rebelled against Him.

The scribes and Pharisees and many others in Israel did not follow the example of Daniel but rather the example found in Ezekiel. Jesus then rightfully stated of them, “you witness against yourselves that you are the sons of those who murdered the prophets.” By calling them ‘sons’ Jesus was not just speaking in terms of biology but rather in terms of guilt and responsibility.

Now had these scribes and Pharisees actually murdered some of the prophets? There is no evidence that they had literally committed this sin. But what had they done that was as equally horrific? They had rejected the true prophets that God had sent. The scribes and Pharisees first rejected John the Baptist. Even worse then they rejected Jesus the Messiah. This was the same sin of which their fathers were guilty. Truly then they were the sons of those who murdered the prophets.

In verse 32, Jesus told them fill up the measure of your father’s. This is a somewhat difficult expression and so the NKJV adds at the end of the verse the word **guilt**. Another versions adds the word **sins**.

Scripture in various places speaks of sin or rebellion reaching a maximum level. For example listen to Genesis 15:6 where the LORD was speaking to Abraham about the Promised Land and the eventual return of Abraham’s descendants to it.

Gen. 15:16 But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites *is* not yet complete.”

Speaking in the language of the prophets, Jesus told the scribes and Pharisees that they should complete the rebellion or sins of their fathers.

F. F. Bruce puts it, “Fill up the measure of your fathers; crown their misdeeds by killing the prophet God has sent to you. Do at last what has long been in your hearts. The hour is come.”⁵

Jesus followed this by issuing the very strong words of verse 33. **Serpents, you brood or offspring of vipers, how can you escape being sentenced to hell or being**

⁴ Taken from my sermon on Ezekiel 18 – April 26, 2009.

⁵ Cited by A. T. Robertson, s.v. Matthew 23:32.

judged to go to hell? The expected answer here is not positive. Now we know, as I mentioned before, there were Pharisees who became true followers of Jesus Christ. The most famous Pharisee is the Apostle Paul who God in His sovereign grace turned from his sin and rebellion. But sadly, it would seem that most of the scribes and Pharisees continued in their rebellion against Jesus Christ.

The language of this verse should remind you of the very similar words spoken by John the Baptist in Matthew 3. John also spoke of the religious leaders using the expression brood of vipers. He also asked them, “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

The word hell found here in Matthew 23:33 is the Greek word, “Gehenna.” This Greek word means valley of Hinnom. The valley of Hinnom was a deep ravine south of Jerusalem.⁶

It was in this ravine or valley that child sacrifice took place. Children were offered in sacrifice to Moloch. It was King Josiah who abolished these sacrifices and turned this valley into a place for garbage, where it was not just allowed to decay but rather burned. Those who deny the truth of Scripture often point out this same background but then say that hell is simply a metaphor, not a real place of eternal, conscious suffering. But Jesus’ words cannot be stripped of their horror. Jesus did speak in the imagery of His day, but this doesn’t mean that this imagery is no longer relevant 2000 years later. Yes, hell is not literally a garbage dump outside of Jerusalem, but this is one of the pictures of judgment found in Scripture. Hell is not just an invention of the Roman Catholic Church, as some say, simply used in order to scare people. It is Jesus who used this imagery speaking to those who refuse to accept Him as He reveals Himself.

In verses 34-36, Jesus spoke of the culmination of their rebellion. Notice the tense of the verb **send** in verse 34. I send you or I am sending you prophets, wise men, and scribes.⁷ What was Jesus here describing? Jesus must have been speaking of the work of His disciples and others after His triumphant ascension. The incredible guilt of those who rejected Jesus was not simply their crucifixion of Jesus but also their continued rejection of the messengers that Jesus sent to them.

Jesus used language that generally we associate more with the OT than the NT in speaking of prophets, wise men, and scribes. I don’t think we are to see these as three offices found in the NT age as much as we are to understand a connection between God’s work in the past and His work in the present.

What would happen to these that Jesus sent? Some would be killed and crucified. Others would be beaten in synagogues and chased from city to city. The book of Acts records these punishments save for crucifixion.

And then look at the language of verse 35. The result of their treatment of those sent by Jesus would bring upon them the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on the earth – from

⁶ BDAG, s.v. “γέεννα,” 191.

⁷ There is emphasis in the Greek with the pronoun **I** used before the verb.

Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, who was murdered in the temple courtyard.

We know the story of Abel found in Genesis 4. We are not as familiar with the story of Zechariah that we read from 2 Chronicles 24. Zechariah is not the last martyr of the OT. But the story of Zechariah is found in the last book of the OT.

Now if you were really paying attention to our reading from 2 Chron. 24, you should have noted that in that chapter Zechariah is identified as being the son of Jehoiada the priest. Why did Jesus call him the son of Berechiah? There are many proposed solutions to this question. Some of them are ridiculous. Others are much more likely reasons. In summary, it is possible that Berechiah⁸ was his actual father and Jehoiada his more famous grandfather. Or Jesus may have intentionally joined this Zechariah with the Zechariah who is the author of the 2nd to last OT book in our ordering of the OT.⁹

Of all the rebellion found in the account of God's people, the greatest rebellion was on the part of those who rejected Jesus and then later rejected those whom Jesus sent. They would be guilty of all the blood shed on the earth because their sin and rebellion was greater than all previous generations.

Verse 36 concludes this part with a certain word that this judgment would come. All these things would come upon **this generation**, the generation that was alive during the days of Jesus. The words **this generation** appear also in Matthew 24:34.

Matt. 24:34 Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.

2. LIVE IN LIGHT OF HIS COMPELLING LOVE, VV. 37-39

Verses 37-39 are also found in a different context in Luke 13. It is very possible that Jesus spoke these words on more than one occasion. Appropriately we find them at the end of this long chapter of rebuke and judgment.

Jesus did not show His love in superficial and saccharine ways, by going around and telling everyone, I love you so much. Jesus showed His love through His words certainly. He showed His compelling love through His years of tireless sacrifice, His teaching, His miracles. Never was such true compassion demonstrated as Jesus showed in His public ministry.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke describe in detail only the final journey of Jesus to Jerusalem, but we know from the book of John that Jesus made a number of visits to Jerusalem throughout His public ministry.

⁸ NET Bible note: Spelling of this name (*Βαραχίου*, Barachiou) varies among the English versions: "Barachiah" (RSV, NRSV); "Berechiah" (NASB); "Berachiah" (NIV).

⁹ The first solution was suggested by Lenski and perhaps others. The second solution is noted by France, 881.

The lament of verse 37 is similar to other laments found in Scripture. What laments come to mind? What comes to my mind is David's lament over the death of his son Absalom. And the end of 2 Samuel 18 we read

2Sam. 18:33 Then the king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept. And as he went, he said thus: "O my son **Absalom**—my son, my son **Absalom**—if only I had died in your place! O **Absalom** my son, my son!"

There is, of course, no contradiction or tension between this lament and the sovereignty of God in salvation. Jesus' sorrow over the rebellion of Jerusalem and the people of Israel was not faked.

There is in the lament the presence still of rebuke. Jerusalem is not called here the city of God as it often is identified in the OT but as the one who murders the prophets and stones the ones sent to her. John Calvin stated, "There never certainly was a city in the world on which God bestowed such magnificent titles, or such distinguished honor; and yet we see how deeply it was sunk by its ingratitude."

The words of Jesus should be compared with similar language found in the OT.

Boaz spoke kindly to Ruth saying:

Ruth 2:12 The LORD repay your work, and a full reward be given you by the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge."

Psalms 36:7 How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God! Therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Your wings.

The city of Jerusalem and many throughout Israel witnessed most clearly all that Jesus did and what He preached and taught and they rejected it in favor of their own ideas about what would bring salvation. **You were not willing.**

Listen to the familiar words from John 1 which describe the rebellion of many in Israel to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

John 1:10 He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. **11** He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. **12** But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: **13** who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

In verse 38 Jesus spoke of the terrible consequences of Israel's rebellion. **Behold, your house is left to you desolate.** What is the house of this verse? Where was Jesus when He spoke these words? He spoke these words in the courts of the temple. In Matthew 21 when Jesus cleansed the temple, what did He say? Quoting Scripture He declared, "It is

written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you have made it a ‘den of thieves.’”

Your house, that is the temple, is left to you desolate or deserted. These words don’t sound all that shocking on the surface, but these are some of the greatest words of judgment found in Scripture. Much of the story of the OT can be summarized in terms of the presence and glory of God with His people. When Adam and Eve were thrown out of the Garden of Eden, the judgment wasn’t merely that they would miss eating some of the delicious fruit found in Garden. No, the greatest blessing of the Garden was it was the place where God’s special presence was made known. Remember the greatest event in the book of Exodus is not that the children of Israel left Egypt but that God’s special presence was made known to His people. The glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle, we read in Exodus 40, the last chapter of the book.

Not so well known, is the account in Ezekiel 10, where in a vision, Ezekiel witnessed the glory of God departing from the temple.

Often we think of the destruction of Jerusalem in the events around A.D. 70 as being the terrible judgment brought upon the nation. We will focus more on this as we look at Matthew 24. But the greater judgment than the temple’s destruction is described here in verse 38. Your house is left desolate. The glory of God has departed from the temple and the people of Israel. The literal house would stand for another 40 years but it would essentially be an empty house even though the ceremonies and rituals of the temple continued.

Verse 39 concludes the chapter with somewhat difficult words. For I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD.”

These are the words of Psalm 118 which frequently were sung by God’s people. These were the words which were sung in praise by the crowds from Galilee as Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph riding on a donkey.

When Jesus spoke of Jerusalem not seeing him, He could not have been talking about seeing Him simply in a physical manner. Within a few days, many in Israel were gathered outside Pilate’s palace where they shouted, “Crucify Him,” and “His blood be on us and on our children.”¹⁰

The words of verse 39 are best understood not as a prediction but as a condition.¹¹ The people of Israel would remain under judgment as long as they continued to reject their Messiah.

3. FINAL APPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

¹⁰ France, 884.

¹¹ France, 884.

Live in reverence before Jesus Christ. You are live in light of His power to bring judgment. You are to live in light of His compelling love.

2Cor. 5:9 Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. **10** For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things *done* in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. **11 Knowing, therefore, the terror [φόβον] of the Lord, we persuade men;** but we are well known to God, and I also trust are well known in your consciences.

Rom. 8:37 Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. **38** For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, **39** nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Closing Hymn: 294

Benediction – Ephesians 3:20-21

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.