

The King's Lament Over Jerusalem

📖 Matthew 23:29-39

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Last time in Matt 23 we went through the seven woes Jesus directed against the scribes and Pharisees. A woe signifies pain both temporal and eternal. Pain was going to come on them both temporally, in the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome, and eternally, in their being cast into the lake of fire. The six-fold reference to them as hypocrites signifies the heart of the trouble; externally they appeared to be religious but internally they were wicked. The structure shows that the heart of the problem was false teaching. They read and quoted from the Bible but they had distorted the intent and thereby created a system of false religion like Roman Catholicism or Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormonism. First, in 23:13 He pronounces woe upon them over the issue of kingdom entrance. The scribes and Pharisees shut off kingdom entrance to people by not entering in themselves in order to show the way. 23:14 is not in the original but was interposed by a scribe from Mk 12:40 or Luke 20:47. The scribes and Pharisees devoured widows houses by encouraging them to bequeath their estates to them upon death and they made long, animated prayers both in synagogue and on the street corners. Second, in 23:15 He pronounces woe on them over the issue of proselytism. They were very energetic in their attempts to make converts but when they made one he was twice as much a son of hell than them because they had converted from a pagan religion to another false religion which they thought was the correct one. Third, in 23:16-22 He pronounces woe on them over the issue of oaths and refers to them as blind guides. They were spiritually blind and the people who followed them were also spiritually blind. As far as oaths were concerned it was not a simple yes, yes, or no, no, but they used agreed-upon-formulas that made it appear that they were obligated when it was really nothing. For example, in verse 16, "Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated... Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold?" Since the temple sanctified the gold then to swear by the temple was to swear by the gold. These kinds of linguistic distinctions were nothing more than sinful games used to manipulate people. Vv 18-22 shows that they had a series of these formulas in order to dupe the uninitiated. Fourth, in 23:23 He pronounces woe on them over the issue of tithing. They were obligated to tithe but they were meticulous about requiring tithe on herbs such as mint, dill and cumin while they neglected the weightier provisions of the law such as justice, mercy and faithfulness. The imagery in 23:24 is memorable, as they went through the Law they strained out a gnat and in the process swallowed a camel. Fifth, in 23:25 He pronounces woe on them over the issue of

purifications. He speaks figuratively of the Pharisees themselves when He says they cleaned the outside of cups and dishes, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. Externally they appeared clean but internally they were evil. Sixth, in 23:27 He pronounces woe on them over the issue of whitewashing tombs. Again He speaks figuratively of the Pharisees likening them to the newly plastered tombs near the time of Passover. As beautiful as they were on the outside, inside they were full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Inside the Pharisees were unclean and not fit for kingdom entrance.

In 23:29 we come to the seventh woe and a different comparison with tombs is employed at this point. **Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell? Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.** In verse 29 the **woe** is pronounced relative to the point that they treated the **prophets** differently than their **fathers** had and that they would never do what their fathers had. Their **fathers** murdered the prophets but they had built the tombs of the prophets and adorned the monuments of the righteous. The word **build** can mean to build a new structure or it can mean to build it up by improving it. They probably did both for **the prophets**. The word **adorn** is *κοσμεω*, from which we get "cosmetics." They would make cosmetic adornments of the monuments of the righteous in their honor. By doing this they were saying in verse 30, **If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.** However, in actuality, they were plotting to shed the blood of Jesus who was the prophet like unto Moses. More than that He was also the priest after the order of Melchizedek and the king of the line of David. In 23:31 Jesus says, **So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.** Jesus knew that they were planning to kill him. He said in John 8:37, "I know that you are Abraham's descendants; yet you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you." In Matt 21:38, the parable of the landowner, He said, "...when the vine-growers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.'" A few verses later it says the chief priests and Pharisees "understood that He was speaking about them but when they sought to seize Him they feared the people because they considered Him to be a prophet." Their purposes were clear. They wanted to kill the prophet like unto Moses. As such they testified against themselves and evidenced they were in fact the sons of those who murdered the very prophets of the tombs they built and adorned. In truth they were not physical descendants **of those who murdered** them but they were their spiritual descendants.

In 23:32 He goes on to say, **Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers.** This means to go ahead and do what you are planning to do. It is what they planned to do and it is what they would do. By doing so they would **Fill up...the measure of the guilt of their fathers.** The idea behind **filling up a measure of guilt** in the OT is that God will only put up with so much sin and then He will act in judgment. Grace always precedes judgment and God had been very gracious through the OT. He had sent them prophet after prophet and they had killed prophet after prophet. The amount of Israel's sins was filling up. When they killed Jesus and afterward His disciples as predicted in v 34, the cup of their guilt would be full and God's wrath would come upon them. This is the same as the parable of the landowner where he planted a vineyard and provided everything for its productivity, renting it out to the vine-growers. When harvest time came he sent his slaves to receive the produce and they beat one, killed one and stoned one. He then sent more slaves and they did the same thing to them. Finally, he sent his son, the heir and they said, this is the heir, let us kill him and seize his inheritance. This is also the same as the parable of the wedding feast where a king sent out an invitation to come to honor his son. When the time grew near he sent out his slaves to remind them but they were unwilling to come. When everything was prepared he sent out more slaves but some paid no attention, others seized the slaves and killed them. As a consequence, the king sent his armies and destroyed them and set their city on fire. In the same way here, this generation would go on and fill up the measure of the guilt of their fathers and the judgment stated in v 38 is that their house would be left desolate. This probably speaks of the Temple and coupling with the other prophecies both Jerusalem and the Temple would be destroyed.

In 23:33 He says much what John the Baptist said earlier. **You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?** They were **serpents** in their inner character. Who are we reminded of when He refers to them as **serpents**? Satan who masqueraded as a serpent and deceived Eve, leading her astray. Pentecost says, "Eve was deceived by Satan, who came in the form of a snake (Gen. 3:1). Without doubt the snake that approached Eve was beautiful to look upon externally; nevertheless, it was the vehicle through which Eve was deceived. Christ appropriately called the Pharisees snakes, for while their externalism may have been attractive to people, the system that they proclaimed deceived people and kept them from Christ." How then could they hope to **escape the sentence of hell**? For a second time He indicates they would spend eternity in hell. The Greek word translated **hell** is *γέεννα* and does rightly refer to hell or the lake of fire and not merely to Sheol which is a temporary place of confinement and punishment until the final judgment when they are cast in the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the final place of torment for all the unsaved and these religious leaders assigned themselves to this place by rejecting the Messiah. In it they will be in torment forever and ever. The duration of the torment is not limited as annihilationist's argue. Rev 14:11 says "The smoke of their torment goes up forever." Matt 25:46, "These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Both punishment and life are described as eternal. While we may not like to think of punishment being eternal or our sensitivities may think that is an unjust punishment, the God who is just will assign them to eternal, never-

ending punishment in the lake of fire. So the seven woes coming upon the scribes and Pharisees begins to transition to the judgment coming upon that entire generation.

In 23:34 Jesus predicts that they will persecute and kill the prophets and apostles He will send them in the Book of Acts in order to fill up the full measure of the cup of God's wrath. **Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city.** These things happened in the Book of Acts. In Acts 4 Peter and John were imprisoned. In Acts 5 all the apostles were imprisoned and scourged. In Acts 7 Stephen was arrested and when giving his defense they rushed at him with one impulse and stoned him. In Acts 8 Saul persecuted the disciples **from city to city** until he was saved and then they tried to put him to death. In Acts 12 James the brother of John was put to death with the sword. Peter was arrested but freed by the angel. In Acts 13, 14, 16, et. al. Paul was increasingly opposed by the Jews who finally tried to kill him in the Temple courtyard. The point is Jesus predicted they would do this to all He sent them, classified as **prophets, wise men and scribes**, they were the true experts of the word of God.

23:35 gives the purpose for His sending them. **So that upon you may fall *the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.* Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.** This **generation** would face the judgment that was due to every generation of Israel that rejected. Note that the words *the guilt of* are in italics. These words are not in the original but were added by the translation team. If included it would seem to indicate that the scribes and Pharisees were being held guilty for the sins of past generations. However, Ezek 18 clearly teaches that God does not hold people or generations of people responsible for the sins of others. Instead He holds each person and generation responsible for their own sins. The point is that each generation of Israel had shed the blood of God's righteous servants. Every generation was guilty and every generation was due judgment but God had spared each generation the judgment that was due. But that generation would not be spared. They had been sent John the Baptizer, the forerunner of the King. They had been sent Jesus, the King Himself and Messiah. He would later send Peter, John, Stephen, Paul, and the rest of the apostles. Yet that generation would persecute, kill and crucify them too. That generation saw the greatest revelation of God and rejected and therefore upon them would fall the judgment for **all the righteous blood shed on earth**. Constable explains, "Jesus was not saying that the Jews who rejected Him were responsible for the deaths of all the righteous martyrs throughout biblical history. They simply were the ones who would add the last measure of guilt that would result in the outpouring of God's wrath for all those murders."¹ The cup of His wrath was full.

This expression in v 35 about shedding righteous blood, all the blood **from** righteous **Abel** to the **blood of** righteous **Berechiah** somehow refers to all the **righteous blood shed** in the OT period. It's been explained two different ways. First, Jesus may be referring to the first and last murder in the Jewish canon. The Jewish canon

begins with Genesis and ends with 2 Chronicles, unlike our OT canon which ends with Malachi. Abel was murdered in Genesis 4, the first murder in the Jewish canon, and a Zechariah, is murdered in 2 Chron 24, the last murder in the Jewish canon. That may be possible except some object that this is not true because the **Zechariah** in 2 Chron 24 is not **the son of Berechiah** but the son of Jehoida. But Walvoord answers this objection by saying, "Zacharias, mentioned as the son of Jehoida in 2 Chronicles 24:20, probably was the grandson of the priest and Barachias was his actual father."² However, some are not pleased with this explanation and so offer another. Second, Jesus may be referring to the first and last murder in OT chronology. Abel is the first recorded murder in OT chronology and the prophet Zechariah, who wrote the book of Zechariah, was the son of Berechiah and was murdered about 518BC, near the end of OT history. Either way, the point is the same, the judgment that was due had been put off for many generations and now the cup of God's wrath would be filled up by the crucifixion of Jesus and the persecution and killing of His followers in the Book of Acts.

Therefore, in 23:36, **Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. This generation of Israel had committed the unpardonable sin and would face judgment.** The judgment in context is the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the Temple which came in AD70.

We come now to 23:37-39 where we find the King's lament over Jerusalem. Walvoord said, "Probably no words of Jesus in His public ministry are more eloquent than the words recorded in Matthew of Christ's lament over Jerusalem. Here is revealed the breaking heart of God over a people whom God loved, and yet a people who spurned that love and killed those whom God sent to them."³ Alva McClain said, "In this brief and moving lament our Lord presents in summary the entire history of Israel, past and future, in relation to the Mediatorial Kingdom of God on earth."⁴ The mediatorial kingdom being God's rule on earth through Moses, Joshua, the judges and the Kings until the exile and re-offered by John, Jesus and the apostles.

In 23:37 Jesus says, **Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.** Jerusalem is used here as a figure of speech to represent the whole nation.⁵ Jerusalem itself did not kill the prophets but the people of Jerusalem did. Jerusalem was considered by all Israelites to be their city. It is repeated to express the deep sorrow of the Lord's love for Israel.⁶ McClain says, "It is no longer only the Pharisees and scribes, but "*Jerusalem*" and her "children," which are the objects of His concern. This hallowed name not only pointed to the center of the ancient Theocratic Kingdom in the highest flower of its historic glory, but was a symbol of the total nation; for, as Lange observes, "All Israelites were children of Jerusalem."⁷

Jesus' deep emotional sorrow is a result of the following phrase. **How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.** The interplay between God's sovereignty and human responsibility here is an important consideration in formulating the doctrine. Some say that God's sovereignty means that if God wills it it will be. However, this is not a biblical formulation of God's sovereignty. God will not gather Israel into the kingdom against their will. The verb "I

wanted" and "you were unwilling" are two forms of the same verb. What Christ as God wanted and what Israel wanted were two different things; Christ wanted to gather them into the kingdom, they did not want to be gathered by Him. We saw a good example of the picture as described in this verse as a hen gathering her chicks under her wings. On two occasions we allowed broody hens to raise chicks just to understand this verse. On one occasion five baby chicks hatched and they followed the momma wherever she went, hopping on her back and playing with her in the day and cuddling underneath her wings at night. She protected those chicks against all the other chickens. That is a wonderful picture of Christ and Israel in the kingdom. On another occasion we introduced chicks that were already a week old to a broody hen. There were twenty-six chicks. That is a lot of baby chicks for one momma hen. The hen wanted the chicks to come to her but they would not. It took three or four days for the baby chicks to warm up and come to her. Eventually they did. That is a picture of Israel's response to Messiah at the first coming and their response to Him at a later time at the second coming. Walvoord said of the first coming, "It was God's desire to save them, but it was their will to turn away."⁸ The coming of the kingdom is contingent on Israel's response. This contingency is from the human point of view but points up the genuineness of the offer. The nation Israel must accept the offer for the kingdom to come. It is important to note that their rejection could block the kingdom from coming at that time but it cannot block the kingdom from coming in the future. It is a part of the plan of God for the kingdom to come upon the earth. The great kingdom theologian Alva McClain said, "Although such decisions do not ultimately control the stream of history, they are nevertheless *genuine* and constitute a part of the stream. Our Lord clearly recognized the reality of human decision and its possible tragic consequences, when He wept over the city of Jerusalem..."⁹ In verse 39 the word "until" implies a future repentant nation of Israel. Zech 12 explains that they will be repentant because God will pour out His Spirit upon them... Thus, human decisions are significant in the flow of history but they do not ultimately control the direction the flow history takes. In the end the kingdom will come.

In 23:38 Jesus pronounces judgment, **Behold, your house is being left desolate!** But just what is the **house**? Some commentators say the **house** is the city of Jerusalem just mentioned in verse 37. Thus the city of Jerusalem would be destroyed. Others say it is the Davidic dynasty since a dynasty is referred to as a **house**. Still others say that it refers to the nation of Israel. However, the best view seems to be that it refers to the temple.¹⁰ McClain said, "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate," must refer primarily to the *temple*..."¹¹ Malachi 3 predicted that the Messiah would come with judgment and cleanse the temple so that the offerings presented there would be pleasing to the Lord. Earlier in the week Jesus had indeed come to the Temple and cleansed it, claiming it to be His Father's house. But since they had rejected Him and turned it into a den of thieves He now disclaims it, referring to it as **your house**.

The **temple** would be **left to** them **desolate**. The word **desolate** means "deserted, uninhabited." In other words, a ceasing of sacrifice is meant due to the destruction of the temple. This was fulfilled in AD70 when some of Titus' soldiers accidentally set fire to the Temple and it burned to the ground. The desolations of the temple are a sign that Israel is under divine discipline. They cannot come to Him by any of the Mosaic sacrifices. The reason is

because there is just one sacrifice through which they can come to Him, the sacrifice of the Messiah. Until they accept Him they will remain under discipline.

23:39 explains, **For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!"** The solemnity of this statement is highlighted in the Greek by the double negative, "you will in no way see me..." His departure is certain. If there is a kingdom now as almost every school of theology proclaims, then there is no king now who is ruling it! This is one of the great fallacies of kingdom now theology. It is much better to say that the King came and offered the kingdom but it was rejected by that generation and so postponed until a future generation accepts Him. The real issue is not acceptance of the kingdom offer but the acceptance of the King Himself. Toussaint says, "It is extremely important for one to note that Christ's rejection of Israel is not an eternal one. The word 'until' (*eos*) of verse thirty-nine together with the following statement affirms the fact that Christ will come again to a repentant nation to establish the promised millennial kingdom."¹² Until that time Israel will remain under divine discipline. The Church is not a replacement of Israel and her kingdom program. This verse alone is a total refutation of that fallacious idea. Instead the Church is a preparatory stage for the restoration of Israel and the kingdom. Only when the Church is seen as distinct from the kingdom, yet preparatory for it, is it able to come into its own right and fulfill its purpose. The Church is not preeminently here to reform this world but to live in the midst of it for the glory of God and spread the gospel call to Jews and Gentiles who are saved out of it as heirs of the kingdom to come. Israel as a nation is presently cast aside but they will never be cast away (Rom 11:1; 25-27). McClain said, "But between the Lord's historic abandonment of Israel's "house" and the glad day of His return, there will be an *interval* of time. Two conditions will characterize this interval: first, the Messianic King will be absent—"Ye shall not see me"; and, second, the desolations of Israel will continue without relief—"your house is left unto you desolate."...the length of the interval is left wholly indeterminate. But there is no intimation that the end might not come within the lifetime of the generation to which He spoke."¹³ This was left open, as the apostles asked in Acts 1:6, "Is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel? He said to them, "It is not for you to know..." It remains for the nation Israel to say the end of verse 39, **"Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!"** This is a quote from the OT. Where does it come from? Ps 118:26. This is the Psalm that had been quoted all week beginning at the Triumphal Entry when they quoted Ps 118:22-23, "The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief corner stone. This is the LORD's doing; It is marvelous in our eyes." A small band of followers uttered these exact words on the day of the Triumphal Entry in Matt 21:9. But the nation would not say them. They had rejected the Messiah and here He says you will not see me until you say, **"Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!"** This is the condition for the Second Coming. The nation will not see Him, no eye will see Him until the nation Israel welcomes Him as the one coming in the name of YHWH. The verse has become known as the Messianic greeting. They are on earth welcoming Him and pronouncing blessing on Him. The nation Israel must welcome and bless Jesus as the one who comes in the name of YHWH. It is welcoming Jesus who came in the name of YHWH. Until that time, the times of the Gentiles will persist. Even now as Israel is returning to the land

and been re-established as a State it is at the decision of the United Nations. Jerusalem will again be trampled by the Gentiles. Only when the nation Israel responds to their Messiah will He gather them as a hen gathers it's chicks and give them true relief and protection. As Paul says in Romans, "then all Israel will be saved." In a very real sense not only is Israel presently suffering but the entire world is under oppression of Gentiles because Israel has not made this pronouncement. But when they do Paul says in Romans 11:12, 15, 23, 25-27, "If their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be... For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead... And... if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again... I do not want you to be uninformed of this mystery—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and so all Israel will be saved... THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB. THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS."

The entire world will enter a time of refreshment rivaled only by resurrection. All nature will be revitalized as Paul explains in Romans 8:21, "the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God." And Hosea 2:18, "In that day I will also make a covenant for them With the beasts of the field, The birds of the sky And the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword and war from the land, And will make them lie down in safety." And which Peter confirmed in Acts 3:19, 21 will not come until Jesus returns when he said to Israel, "Repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord... whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time." All that the prophets spoke must come to pass just as God spoke. There is a great and glorious kingdom coming but the whole world awaits the catastrophic things described in Matt 24-25 before it will come...

In summary, what have we seen? Jesus has moved from pronouncing woe on the scribes and Pharisees to pronouncing judgment on that whole generation. In 23:29-30 they said they would not have done what their fathers had done in murdering the prophets but in 23:31 they were already planning to murder Jesus and later His followers. In 23:32, that generation would fill the cup of God's wrath. In 23:33 their rejection would assign them to the lake of fire forever. In 23:34-36 the judgment for all the righteous blood shed on earth from the beginning of the OT period to the end would fall upon that generation. In a highly emotional lament the King's final words to the nation in 23:37ff, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling." In 23:38, He had come to His temple but they rejected and so He abandoned their temple and let it for desolation. In 23:39 Jesus strongly says, for on no uncertain terms will you see me until, the word until is critical, until you, that is Israel, until a generation of Israel says Ps 118:26, the Messianic greeting,

"Blessed is HE who comes in the name of the Lord!" At that time Messiah will come and establish His kingdom in the earth. The precursors of which are described in Matt 24 and 25.

¹ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 23:35.

² John Walvoord, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p 174.

³ John Walvoord, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p 174-5.

⁴ Alva McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 359.

⁵ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 23:37.

⁶ Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 265.

⁷ Alva McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 360.

⁸ John Walvoord, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p 175.

⁹ Alva McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 267-8.

¹⁰ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003).

¹¹ Alva McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 361.

¹² Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 265-6.

¹³ Alva McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 362.