

NOON BIBLE STUDY: MATTHEW 23 (PART 3)

In our last study, we began looking at Jesus' "woes", his direct confrontations and denunciations of the scribes, Pharisees, and religious leaders of Israel. This is Jesus' final public teaching, and it stands in sharp contrast to his first, the Sermon on the Mount. These woes expose hypocrisy while also carrying the weight of prophetic judgment, something we will see most clearly in the closing verses of Matthew 23. As God's Messiah, Jesus did not come only to heal and comfort; he also came to confront injustice and corruption among those who claimed to lead God's people on his behalf.

As we read these words, we're also looking at ourselves and our modern need to embrace humility and reject hypocrisy.

Matthew 23:29-32 - Woe 8

This is such a confronting statement. The leaders of Jesus' day honor the prophets and faithful of generations past, and also acknowledge that the people who quarrelled with the great prophets of old were resisting God's word. So many of the Biblical prophets like Jeremiah who spoke God's message to their generation and its leaders were ignored, mocked and persecuted. The people they spoke to, including the leaders of the nation, did not want to hear what God had to say, especially when it was a hard word which confronted their sin and corruption. Here are some examples of this:

Amos 7:7-17 (NLT) - Then he showed me another vision. I saw the Lord standing beside a wall that had been built using a plumb line. He was using a plumb line to see if it was still straight. 8 And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" I answered, "A plumb line." And the Lord replied, "I will test my people with this plumb line. I will no longer ignore all their sins."

(A plumb line is used like a level to determine whether or not something is straight. In this case it is used in a prophetic sense to judge whether or not God's people are "in line" with His ways)

9 The pagan shrines of your ancestors will be ruined, and the temples of Israel will be destroyed; I will bring the dynasty of King Jeroboam to a sudden end." 10 Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent a message to Jeroboam, king of Israel: "Amos is hatching a plot against you right here on your very doorstep! What he is saying is intolerable. 11 He is saying, 'Jeroboam will soon be killed, and the people of Israel will be sent away into exile.'"

12 Then Amaziah sent orders to Amos: "Get out of here, you prophet! Go on back to the land of Judah, and earn your living by prophesying there! 13 Don't bother us with your prophecies here in Bethel. This is the king's sanctuary and the national place of worship!"

14 But Amos replied, "I'm not a professional prophet, and I was never trained to be one. I'm just a shepherd, and I take care of sycamore-fig trees. 15 But the LORD called me away from my flock and told me, 'Go and prophesy to my people in Israel.' 16 Now then, listen to this message from the LORD: "You say, 'Don't prophesy against Israel. Stop preaching against my people.'"

17 But this is what the LORD says: 'Your wife will become a prostitute in this city, and your sons and daughters will be killed. Your land will be divided up, and you yourself will die in a foreign land. And the people of Israel will certainly become captives in exile, far from their homeland.'"

Sadly, when the previous generations rejected the prophets of their day, they would often be so determined to silence their voices that they would imprison, abuse & even murder the prophets.

One such story is recorded in 2 Chronicles 24, which begins with an accounting of the deeds of Joash, a righteous king who followed the ways of Yahweh in partnership with a faithful high priest named Jehoiada. During their partnership, they repaired the temple and restored worship of Yahweh in Jerusalem. However, when Jehoiada the priest died, things changed in the kingdom:

2 Chronicles 24:15-19 (NLT) - Jehoiada lived to a very old age, finally dying at 130. 16 He was buried among the kings in the City of David, because he had done so much good in Israel for God and his Temple. 17 But after Jehoiada's death, the leaders of Judah came and bowed before King Joash and persuaded him to listen to their advice. 18 They decided to abandon the Temple of the LORD, the God of their ancestors, and they worshiped Asherah poles and idols instead! Because of this sin, divine anger fell on Judah and Jerusalem. 19 Yet the LORD sent prophets to bring them back to him. The prophets warned them, but still the people would not listen.

One of those prophets was Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada (cp Matthew 23:35 "son of Berechiah")

2 Chronicles 24:20-24 (NLT) - Then the Spirit of God came upon Zechariah son of Jehoiada the priest. He stood before the people and said, "This is what God says: Why do you disobey the LORD's commands and keep yourselves from prospering? You have abandoned the LORD, and now he has abandoned you!"

21 Then the leaders plotted to kill Zechariah, and King Joash ordered that they stone him to death in the courtyard of the LORD's Temple. 22 That was how King Joash repaid Jehoiada for his loyalty - by killing his son. Zechariah's last words as he died were, "May the LORD see what they are doing and avenge my death!"

23 In the spring of the year the Aramean army marched against Joash. They invaded Judah and Jerusalem and killed all the leaders of the nation. Then they sent all the plunder back to their king in Damascus. 24 Although the Arameans attacked with only a small army, the LORD helped them conquer the much larger army of Judah. The people of Judah had abandoned the LORD, the God of their ancestors, so judgment was carried out against Joash.

As Israel looked back at their history, they should have been ashamed of their response to the true prophets of Yahweh. Here Jesus is affirming that the current generation of leaders like to proclaim that they wouldn't have rejected the true words of God back in those days, "like our fathers did." But there are two ironies here.

First, they are confessing that they are the descendants of the people who killed the prophets. And Second, they are currently committing a similar, yet greater sin in the same way their fathers did -

rejecting the Messiah himself! And so Jesus finished this final woe by essentially saying “*Go ahead and finish what your ancestors started.*” (**Matthew 23:32, NLT**)

Matthew 23:33-36 - From Woes To Warnings

Jesus has finished his woes and now he is giving warnings. Jesus says that this cycle of rejecting God, His word, and His prophets will continue. It has already played out in Matthew’s Gospel through John the Baptist and Jesus himself, and it will continue into the life of the early church. As in the OT, persistent rejection doesn’t remain without consequence; judgment will come upon the nation.

The consistent pattern of God’s people from the very beginning has been something like this:

- receive grace and rescue
 - get comfortable in God’s blessing
 - become arrogant and self-sufficient
 - ignore God and his word
 - God sends warning and offers a change to repent
 - God’s people ignore the warning
 - God sends additional warnings which include clear consequences for continued rebellion (and sometimes reminders of the blessings that come with obedience).

Usually directly related to what kind of leaders are in place, the people respond in two ways. When there are good leaders (like Hezekiah or Josiah) the nation repents and God rescues the people from the impending doom. When there are bad leaders (Ahab, Zedekiah, etc), the prophets are again rejected and the nation is judged.

When Jesus says that “all these things will come upon this generation,” He is not exaggerating or speaking out of anger. He is describing the tragic outcome of long-term resistance to God. Just as judgment followed the rejection and murder of God’s prophets in earlier generations, so it would come again, fulfilled within a generation in the destruction of Jerusalem.

That warning became historical reality in A.D. 70, when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman army under General Titus. After a brutal siege marked by famine and internal violence, the city fell and the temple, the center of Jewish worship, was burned and dismantled, fulfilling Jesus’ words that not one stone would be left upon another. This event was devastating and not merely a political tragedy, but the culmination of decades of rejecting God’s warnings through His prophets, John the Baptist, and ultimately Jesus himself.

The warning is sobering: rejecting God’s word is never neutral, and silencing God’s messengers has consequences. The question Jesus leaves hanging is not only about past generations, but about whether those listening now, and we today, will finally hear and respond.

Matthew 23:37-39 - Lament Over Jerusalem

God’s heart is *for* his people and *for* his chosen city (*Jerusalem*) - that is made clear here by Jesus once again. The LORD does not want destruction for His people - he loves them! *But* they are in a

covenant relationship with Him and seem to be bent on breaking that covenant again and again. It's heartbreaking to read Jesus say that he wants to gather them together like a loving mother protecting her vulnerable chicks, but "you were unwilling". (cp. Isaiah 30:15). Time is running out. Judgement is coming.

v. 39 - Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD - a quote from Psalm 118:26 which was shouted by the crowds during Jesus' triumphal entry to Jerusalem (Matthew 21:9). At that time it was proclaimed with great joy as the "son of David" was coming into the city. But now it seems that Jesus uses it in a slightly different way.

The next time these leaders will see him will be when he comes again as exalted king, presumably after (or on) judgement day when he saves the humble and humbles the proud. On that day, no longer "humble, and mounted on a donkey" (21:5), but exalted, glorious and on a warrior horse.

The judgement upon that generation has come and will come in a final and eternal way at the second advent of king Jesus. But our generation, and we ourselves must hear this warning from Messiah Jesus. We cannot waste time in heeding his words. We must prayerfully discern any areas where we have hypocrisy or have settled into empty religious devotion without a heart fueled by and distributing love.

We are in a position unlike the original audience of Jesus' day. We know that Jesus is the Messiah and that he has been raised from the dead and exalted to the right hand of God. We know that the gospel has power and that God continues His work in the world today through his chosen people, those who have confessed Jesus as Lord. We're on the other side of the cross and the empty grave, we're filled with the power of God.

And so we must not wait or waste our lives. We need God's help, but we must be resolved to hear the words of Jesus Christ and obey them.

Jesus' lament over Jerusalem forces us to confront a sobering truth: deep familiarity with Scripture, tradition, and religious life does not automatically mean we are responsive to God. The people of Jerusalem had the Scriptures, their sacred history, centuries of tradition, and even the Messiah standing in their midst, and still, they were unwilling.

That same danger exists for us today. We can sit under faithful teaching, speak the right language, and confess Jesus as Lord, while quietly resisting his authority in specific areas of our lives. Matthew 23 leaves us with an uncomfortable but necessary question: where are we still unwilling? Where have we grown accustomed to hearing Jesus' words without actually submitting to them? Judgment does not come because God withholds mercy, but because mercy is persistently refused. God honors human freedom, even when that freedom is used to reject Him.

And so the call before us is urgent. Do not confuse familiarity with Jesus for faithfulness to him. Today is the day to listen, to repent, and to step fully under the care of the king who still longs to gather his people to himself.