

The Judgment of the Jewish People
Matthew 23:34-39
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Matthew 23:34-39 concludes the seven specific condemnations that Jesus spoke upon the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:13-33. It not only completes the final woe that He spoke to them (23:29-33), but it brings this entire section to a climax. It extends the judgment of God upon the religious leaders to the Jewish people. The basis for this judgment upon the nation is that the people were culpable for following the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees and were about to reject Jesus as their Messiah.

The condemnation by Jesus (23:34-36)

Jesus will personally send “*prophets and wise men and scribes*” to the Jewish people. These terms are uniquely Jewish, making it clear that the nation will be sent people representing God in the manner that they had previously rejected. Obviously, these people were the apostles and prophets, who would become the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20), some of whom would be moved by God to write the New Testament (2 Peter 1:20-21).

Luke’s account of this condemnation makes it clear that Jesus was referring to the apostles that He would send out, “*For this reason also the wisdom of God said, ‘I will send to them prophets and apostles’*” (Luke 11:49). This corresponds with the New Testament apostles and prophets who founded the church. Luke records Jesus’ words as “*the wisdom of God*” sending prophets and apostles to them, rather than Jesus saying He was sending them. Of course, Jesus was the wisdom of God and therefore, He likely spoke of Himself as such, which Matthew simplified as meaning Jesus Himself.

Jesus would later tell His disciples that He would send them out to continue His ministry in the same way as the Father had sent Him, “*And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you’*” (John 20:20-21). His followers would continue with His message, and even with His works, done beyond Judea and to a greater number of people, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father*” (John 14:12).

Not only will they be sent out by Jesus to the nation and to the world (cf. Acts 1:8), they will also be rejected in the same way as Jesus, *“some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city.”* Jesus’ statement that the Jews would crucify those He would send them should be understood as causative, since the Romans did not allow the Jews to crucify. The Jews would lead the Romans to crucify the followers of Jesus in the same way that they would influence the Roman governor Pilate to crucify Jesus (Matthew 27:22).

Indeed, the historical record confirms this prophecy of Jesus. Acts 8:1-4 and 9:1-2 described Paul, when he was still a Pharisee prior to his conversion, as *“ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison”* (Acts 8:3). Paul, as an apostle, would be driven out of cities by the Jews, including Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13), Iconium (Acts 14), Lystra (Acts 14), Thessalonica (Acts 17), Berea (Acts 17), Corinth (Acts 18), Jerusalem (Acts 21) and Caesarea (Acts 24).

All of the disciples were persecuted in their ministry, as Jesus would tell them in the upper room the following night, *“If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also”* (John 15:18-20). Stephen would be stoned by the Jewish mob (Acts 7:2-53). James would be put to death with a sword by Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:1-2). Church history records the other apostles being martyred, including Peter and Andrew, who were crucified for their faith. Since *“A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master”* (Matthew 10:24), the disciples should rightly expect to be treated in the same manner as their teacher.

The Jewish opposition to those whom Jesus would send would result in their guilt, *“upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth.”* This of course does not absolve the guilt of those who participated in the shedding of righteous blood in the past, but the generation that Jesus spoke to would fill up the measure of the guilt of their fathers (Matthew 23:32). No previous generation had ever rejected more revelation from God than the Jews who experienced Jesus dwelling among them. Their rejection was the ultimate culmination of Israel’s rejection of God’s prophets. They would add the last measure of guilt that would bring the wrath of God upon the nation for their entire opposition in the past.

This last measure of guilt would include the totality of the murders of the righteous people from the past, beginning with Abel (Genesis 4:8) to Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, the last Old Testament martyr. This statement has nothing to do with the first letters of each name, since Zechariah's name does not begin with the last letter of either the Hebrew or the Greek alphabet. These letters are nothing more than simply an English coincidence. The point that Jesus made was that their guilt encompassed all the murders of the righteous throughout the entirety of Old Testament history.

One issue involves the identity of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah. The name "Zechariah" was a common name used to refer to many people, twenty-seven in the Old Testament alone. The obvious Zechariah would be the minor prophet of the book of Zechariah, who was the son of Berechiah (Zechariah 1:1, 7). However, there is no account of this prophet ever being martyred, much less the specific location of the martyrdom.

This has led to various other highly unlikely possibilities being offered. The early church considered this person to be Zecharias, the father of John the Baptist. However, there is likewise no evidence John's father was martyred. The historian Josephus wrote of a Zechariah, the son of Baris or Baruch or Bariscaeus, who lived at the time of Jesus. Yet not only does the ancestry differ but there is no evidence that this person was a prophet or a martyr. Some have even speculated that this must be a Zechariah that we have no knowledge of, yet Matthew recorded this as if the person was actually known.

The most common proposal in modern times has been that Jesus referred to Zechariah the son of Jehoiada who died around 800 B.C. This Zechariah is compelling because he was put to death in the temple. *"Then the Spirit of God came on Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest; and he stood above the people and said to them, 'Thus God has said, 'Why do you transgress the commandments of the LORD and do not prosper? Because you have forsaken the LORD, He has also forsaken you.' So they conspired against him and at the command of the king they stoned him to death in the court of the house of the LORD."* (2 Chronicles 24:20-21).

Some resolve this issue by claiming that Matthew used the name "Zechariah, the son of Berechiah" while Jesus only spoke of Zechariah. However, this would mean that even if Jesus was not mistaken in the naming of this prophet, the Scripture, as recorded by Matthew, would be in error. This would then undermine the inerrancy of the Scripture.

Others, seeking to be faithful to the biblical text have offered an alternative possibility. The words “the son of” can mean descendant, not only the actual father. In fact, Zechariah the minor prophet is called the son of Berechiah the son of Iddo in Zechariah 1:1 and is called the son of Iddo in Ezra 6:14. Under this solution, Jehoiada would be Zechariah’s grandfather in 2 Chronicles 24:20-22 and Jesus would be accurate. Adding to the strength of this view is to remember that 2 Chronicles was often placed at the end of the Hebrew Old Testament. Thus Jesus would be saying the guilt of everyone’s blood would be upon the scribes and Pharisees, from the beginning of the Old Testament, to the end of the Old Testament.

While this is a credible potential solution to this difficulty, it is equally possible to understand Zechariah the son of Berechiah as exactly the person so named, the minor prophet of the book of Zechariah. This view makes sense in that Abel would be chronologically the first martyr and Zechariah the son of Berechiah would be the last prophet to be martyred, after 480 B.C. The one problem with this view is that there is no evidence that Zechariah the son of Berechiah was martyred. However, it should not be surprising if this Zechariah were to perish in the temple like Zechariah the son of Jehoiada.

That this guilt is expanded to the Jewish people of Jesus’ day is clear from Matthew 23:36, *“Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.”* The Jewish people of the day ignored the warnings of Jesus to beware of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 16:12) and *“the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it”* (Matthew 21:43). They would lose the opportunity to, by faith, see the kingdom of God established by the Messiah. Instead of enjoying the joy of the kingdom of God, they would see their temple destroyed, their capital city in ruins, and their people scattered by the Romans in 70 AD. The entire nation suffered because the people willfully followed their religious blind guides by opposing the Messiah of Israel, Jesus Christ.

While the leaders of the Jews bore the responsibility for leading the Jewish people astray, and while each one was guilty of the condemnation that fell upon them for their failure to abandon these corrupt leaders, there was a remnant of Jews who repented in faith, as seen notably in the day of Pentecost when thousands received the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ in Acts 2. We all are accountable for who we listen to and follow, and by following Jesus, these Jews enjoy the promise of God to all who believe. Therefore, the judgment of Matthew 23:36 was general in nature.

The compassion of Jesus (23:37-39)

Matthew 23:37-39 is nearly identical to Luke 13:34-35, with the key difference being the context of where each is placed within their Gospel account. Both passages lament Jerusalem's rejection of their prophets, both feature Jesus' weeping over the city as well as His desire to gather her children as a hen gathers her brood. Both state that due to their unwillingness, the coming judgment to their house until a later time when they will say, "*Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.*"

While Matthew placed these words after Jesus has entered Jerusalem for the final time, two days before His crucifixion, Luke placed them much earlier, well before His arrival into Jerusalem (cf. Luke 19:41). While many conclude that either Matthew and Luke lifted these words from some other source, or one of them misplaced it in the chronology of their account, the more certain explanation is simply that Jesus spoke these words at two different instances. We know this is not the only time when Jesus lamented over the city of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44).

Therefore, Jesus' emotional concern for the people of the city was a theme of His ministry as Savior and Messiah. Jerusalem is used in a figure of speech, known as a synecdoche, to represent the nation as a whole. This is amplified by the repeated name "Jerusalem," which is often found when there is an emotional expression of anguish over behavior. Examples include "Martha, Martha" in Luke 10:41, "Saul, Saul" in Acts 9:4, and "Simon, Simon" in Luke 22:31.

Matthew 23:37 provides testimony to an important doctrine of the responsibility of man in light of the sovereignty of God. Most certainly, God is sovereign over all things, but the Scripture does not teach that it is the desire of God for people to perish. Jesus, who as the Son of God always expressed the will of God, made this clear when He said, "*How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.*" It was solely their unwillingness to submit to God that brought about their impending desolation.

God does not wish any to perish (2 Peter 3:9) but desires all men to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). Some who rightly believe in the doctrine of election will go beyond the teaching of the Bible and become fatalistic. This is known as Determinism, which is a theological belief that all events are pre-ordained and destined to occur. By considering all things as necessarily occurring, there is no freedom of choice on the part of man, or "unwillingness," as Jesus put it.

Some things God has specifically determined to occur and He intervenes in order to cause them to happen. God's sovereignty over all does not mean that He is the cause of sin. While many things He has determined, other things He has determined to allow. This willingness on God's behalf to allow man to sin does not mean He is culpable for choosing the sin itself to occur. With regard to the lost, God's role is described as actively judging them, but not in causing them to be lost.

The "house" that Jesus referred to in verse 38 was likely the temple, from where Jesus spoke these words, and which he had referred to as "*My house*" when He entered Jerusalem in Matthew 21:13. It is notable that Jesus no longer referred to the temple as His house, but "*your house*," since they turned the temple from a house of prayer into "*a robber's den*." It was why their house would be left desolate, both spiritually when the church would become the dwelling place of God, "*you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you*" (1 Corinthians 3:16), and in its physical destruction in 70 AD.

This desolation does not mean God is finished with Israel, as Jesus makes clear in Matthew 23:39 (cf. Romans 11:1). He postponed the earthly kingdom. He did not cancel it. The nation will see Him again in the second coming and will finally acknowledge Him. But now, Jesus would depart from the temple for the final time (Matthew 24:1), leaving their house to them as an spiritually empty temple.

His statement about His return is not conditional, it is a promise to them. Jesus quoted Psalm 118:26 when saying, "blessed in He who comes in the name of the Lord!" This is the very same verse that the crowds quoted when they welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem in Matthew 21:9, yet they expected a conquering hero coming to overthrow the Romans, not a suffering servant coming to die for their sin.

Jesus also made it clear that He was departing this earth, "*from now on you will not see Me*." These words include a double negative in Greek, emphasizing the definitive nature of their ability to see Him. There would be no further opportunity for the nation to receive Him until His second coming. The words "from now" are also used in Matthew 26:29 and 26:64 to refer to the second coming of Jesus, for when He returns, the nation will hail her Messiah by faith and exalt Him as their Lord. This return of Jesus will usher in the now postponed kingdom to Israel, according to the Old Testament promises of God. This turning of the work of God to the Gentiles is only for a time, "*Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!*" (Romans 11:12).

Conclusion

Because the Jews had rejected the former prophets, Jesus would send them additional prophets, wise men, and scribes. The Jews would also reject these people, filling up the measure of their guilt to the full (Matthew 23:32). As they rejected Jesus, so they will reject His messengers, for *“A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher”* (Luke 6:40).

This opposition to the Lord continues with His followers today. *“Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted”* (2 Timothy 3:12). Yet we can endure this with joy, *“Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you”* (Matthew 5:12). Our reward is secure into eternity and we ought to respond to the compassion of the Lord by seeking to reach the lost of this world for His sake (Matthew 9:36-38).

One day, the culmination of all things will arrive. Jesus said, *“It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority”* (Acts 1:7), but we do know that there will be a day when the chosen people of Israel will respond in faith to the Messiah that they crucified. In the words of the last prophet martyred before John the Baptist,

“I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn” (Zechariah 12:10)