

Lamenting Judgment

Matthew 23:37 - 24:2

The Olivet Discourse, which we come to this afternoon, is perhaps the greatest example of a passage of Scripture that has been variously and most differently interpreted by Christians who believe the Bible to be true. In other words, there are a lot of different interpretations of these words of Jesus, differences among Bible-believing Christians. For that reason, perhaps, this discourse by Jesus remains for some, even many, rather mysterious and difficult to understand. Perhaps some have given up trying to understand, content to live and walk faithfully with God without having to explain all that Jesus means here.

For some, those differences may affect other rather significant theological issues, including a broad sense of understanding and applying much of what we read in the Old Testament. The differences of understanding also rather clearly have to do with eschatology, or the study of the last things, impacting upon our understanding of the book of Revelation as well. In that context, those differences also have to do with a proper understanding of the place and role of the modern day nation of Israel in the world today, rightly understood according to biblical teaching. That is, of course, a very practical issue in the context of current events, with the ongoing war between Israel and the Palestinians.

I say all of that to introduce this great passage with a sense of its importance as well as the ongoing debate regarding these verses. I certainly hope to answer some of those questions with faithful explanation and exposition in the weeks to come, and I've included the last three verses of chapter 23 with this introduction to the Olivet Discourse today because I want to keep the personal focus upon Jesus.

In Matthew's gospel, we have just concluded a lengthy section of Jesus teaching his disciples during the last week of his life and ministry on earth. Matthew devotes 8 whole chapters to that final week, beginning with chapter 21. He is, for the most part, answering objections and questions that have arisen in the course of his ministry, criticizing and silencing those who would not believe in him nor submit to him—especially the Sadducees and Pharisees, those who come to him with trick questions intending to engage him in divisive debates. We studied at some length his condemnation of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees especially, in chapter 23. And now Jesus moves back to his disciples as the focus of his teaching, equipping them for all that lies ahead—namely his death and resurrection.

v.1

We'll begin today with the previous verses, ending chapter 23, in which Jesus is so personally revealed, where he so personally expresses the burden and distress of his heart with regard to those who continue to reject him.

v.37

Those words are a lament, a grieving, a mourning, because, as a whole, the nation of Israel, represented by the reference to the capital city of Jerusalem, has rejected him. And he is fully aware, they will have him put to death in just three days, assuming this discourse was given on Tuesday of that last week of his life on earth. The word should rightly be spoken with emotion, with deep feeling in order to express the burdens of the heart. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem..." The burden is this, that the judgment of God is coming, but rather than some sort of celebration, Jesus expresses lament.

I. THE COMPASSION OF LAMENT.

The announcement of judgment comes with an expression of

his own grief and sorrow, grieving that judgment has become necessary because of the sinful rebellion of the nation of Israel. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...” The repetition of the word emphasized this point. We hear a similar lament regarding the coming of God’s judgment in the book of Revelation, a grief expressed in the context of a just judgment pronounced,

Rev. 18:10 “Alas, alas, that great city Babylon, that mighty city! For in one hour your judgment has come...16 ‘Alas, alas, that great city that was clothed in fine linen, purple, and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls! 17 For in one hour such great riches came to nothing.’ Every shipmaster, all who travel by ship, sailors, and as many as trade on the sea, stood at a distance 18 and cried out when they saw the smoke of her burning, saying, What is like this great city?’ 19 “They threw dust on their heads and cried out, weeping and wailing, and saying, ‘Alas, alas, that great city, in which all who had ships on the sea became rich by her wealth! For in one hour she is made desolate.’”

We know that judgment to come is just and right, even as that prophecy in Revelation continues,

Rev. 18:20 “Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you holy apostles and prophets, for God has avenged you on her!”

Yet even with the declaration of the glory of God in the exercise of his avenging judgment, we see Jesus expressing his compassion.

v.37

A. Jesus is full of compassion despite the sinfulness of his people.

The image is so profound, so easy to understand. This is the eternal son of God speaking, through whom the world was made. This is he who will return in triumph and glory at the end of the

age when the whole world will be judged. And his words are of lamentation and grief. “How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.”

It’s a maternal instinct, a mother protecting her own offspring, her chicks, her babies as we would say today with reference to that same maternal instinct. Jesus expresses the compassion of a mother with her baby, his desire to protect and preserve those babies. And, in a certain sense speaking very carefully, he is unable to do so, because of their sin.

It is in this context that this verse makes sense, from,

1 Peter 2:9 “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.”

Those words express the Lord’s compassion, as do the words of the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 33:11 “Say to them: ‘As I live,’ says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?”

Likewise,

Ezek. 18:21 “But if a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. 22 None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness which he has done, he shall live. 23 Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?” says the Lord GOD, “and not that he should turn from his ways and live?”

Thus the prophet continues,

Ezek. 18:30 “Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways,” says the Lord GOD. “Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. 31 Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? 32 For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord GOD. “Therefore turn and live!”

Jesus is expressing that same compassion here in his own words, and because of that compassion, it is fair to say that,

B. Jesus is broken-hearted because of the sinfulness of his people.

I am, of course, using language of our humanity to describe Jesus, but the scripture does that often, using words of our humanity in order to help us know and understand Jesus. And here, of course, he is speaking in his humanity as well. I believe broken-hearted is an accurate description, not unlike any parent who has to experience so form of sinful rebellion or rejection by their own beloved child. It is the broken-heartedness of a love rejected, the broken-heartedness of a love despised.

And what breaks his heart, if I can continue to use that language carefully, what breaks his heart is our sin. What breaks Jesus heart in these verses is the sinful rebellion of his people Israel.

v.37

“You were not willing...”. That is where the problem lies. The unwillingness of the people of Israel to receive the Messiah who was sent to them!

Thus we see,

II. THE JUSTICE OF JESUS.

v.38

There is a limit to Jesus’ compassion. There is a limit to the forbearance of God. And the judgment will come. Going back to,

2 Peter 3:8 “But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. 9 The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.”

Thus we see compassion, the compassion of God. Jesus expresses that same compassion in our text. But compassion doesn’t mean there will be no accountability, no judgment. And for Israel, that meant the destruction of the whole nation, “your house is left to you desolate.” But what must be emphasized is that,

A. The responsibility for sin is always ours.

In other words, when we speak of God’s love and compassion, we must then immediately speak about the fault of our sin. It is not that God is at fault in bringing judgment, but the fault is ours such that we deserve that judgment. It is as simple as that.

v.37 “How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”

Or, going back to Ezekiel,

Ezek. 18:20 “The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son.

The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.”

The responsibility is ours, always ours. And the right understanding of God’s sovereignty and eternal election doesn’t contradict that most basic principle. “The soul who sins shall die.” “The wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.”

Thus Ezekiel continues,

Ezek. 18:21 “But if a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. 22 None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness which he has done, he shall live. 23 Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?” says the Lord GOD, “and not that he should turn from his ways and live?”

The Bible speaks often of God’s eternal purpose and sovereign decrees, and I, accordingly, emphasize that much in my preaching and teaching. But however that subject is taught and understood, the Bible cannot contradict itself. And so this emphasis must be made clear, as Jesus makes it. The responsibility for sin is always ours. And thus, we read of the consequence of sin in terms of judgment.

B. The consequence of sin is expressed by Jesus’ rejection.

That’s why the compassionate Jesus is broken-hearted, because he will bring his judgment upon those who deserve it. He will reject them, he will reject, even destroy, the nation of Israel.

v.38

Then he defines that desolation, by his own absence.

v.39 “...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!”

“You shall see Me no more.” That is the consequence of sin. They will be banished from the very presence of God. Ultimately, that is the very nature of hell itself, the absence of the presence of God. The inhabitants of hell are banished, eternally separated from God...because of their sin.

Interesting quote in verse 39 from Psalm 118...

v.39

That Psalm is a psalm of salvation, a psalm of deliverance.

Psalm 118:19 “Open to me the gates of righteousness; I will go through them, And I will praise the LORD. 20 This is the gate of the LORD, Through which the righteous shall enter. 21 I will praise You, For You have answered me, And have become my salvation.”

Then also,

Psalm 118:25 “Save now, I pray, O LORD; O LORD, I pray, send now prosperity. 26 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We have blessed you from the house of the LORD. 27 God is the LORD, And He has given us light; Bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar. 28 You are my God, and I will praise You; You are my God, I will exalt You. 29 Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever.”

But you should note the verses in-between, I believe the reason why Jesus makes this reference. The people of Israel will be rejected by Jesus, banished. Because they have rejected him!

Psalm 118:22 “The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. 23 This was the LORD’s doing; It

is marvelous in our eyes. 24 This is the day the LORD has made; We will rejoice and be glad in it.”

Those who are banished to hell shall never have that joy, the joy of the presence of Jesus. Thus we have studied before with the parable of the vineyard,

Mat. 42 “Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD’s doing, And it is marvelous in our eyes’? 43 “Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. 44 And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder.”

All of that is an introduction to the prediction of judgement in the Olivet Discourse,
v.1-2

Make no mistake about it, the clarity of this verse is abundantly evident. It is,

III. THE PREDICTION OF JUDGMENT.

As he so often does, Jesus employs an easily understood image to make his point—the temple. The building, the physical building. It will be destroyed. Luke gives a little more explanation in,

Luke 19:41 “Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, 42 saying, “If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. 43 For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, 44 and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of

your visitation.”

This isn’t a new prophecy either, as the prophets of the Old Testament warned against this very thing. For example,

Micah 3:12 “Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed like a field, Jerusalem shall become heaps of ruins, And the mountain of the temple Like the bare hills of the forest.”

Or even when the temple was originally being built under Solomon, we read,

1 King 9:6 “But if you or your sons at all turn from following Me, and do not keep My commandments and My statutes which I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, 7 then I will cut off Israel from the land which I have given them; and this house which I have consecrated for My name I will cast out of My sight. Israel will be a proverb and a byword among all peoples. 8 And as for this house, which is exalted, everyone who passes by it will be astonished and will hiss, and say, Why has the LORD done thus to this land and to this house?’ 9 Then they will answer, ‘Because they forsook the LORD their God, who brought their fathers out of the land of Egypt, and have embraced other gods, and worshiped them and served them; therefore the LORD has brought all this calamity on them.”

So now Jesus says with certainty, that calamity will come. It will be catastrophic. It will be a total annihilation. “Not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down.” And that means this,

A. The nation of Israel as the nation of God’s people will be ended.

It isn’t just building that would be destroyed, but rather it will be the kingdom represented by that building, the kingdom of Israel as the kingdom of God’s people. Israel as a nation will

cease to exist, that nation of God's people. Israel as a religion will cease to exist. No longer will that nation of God's covenant people be identified with an earthly kingdom.

You should know that this physical destruction actually did come, in history, with the destruction of the temple, and of all Israel, in AD 70, a devastation brought about by the Roman armies under the leadership of Titus. Nothing was left, literally. Physically. Not one stone was left upon another.

The importance of that is obvious today, with reference to the nation now named Israel, the nation carved out of the middle east after World War II. That nation is our ally, an important ally in terms of politics, and an ally of democracy. There are a lot of political implications with reference to that earthly alliance that are front and center in the current events of the world this past month. But my point here isn't to make any comment upon those current events other than to say this, that nation of Israel today is not the nation of God's people. Israel of the Old Testament was that nation, and the king of Israel sat upon the throne of God. To be a member of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament you had to be a citizen of the nation of Israel. That is how God established the identity of his covenant people on earth—through Israel. But that nation would be destroyed according to Jesus, and so it was according to history. And with it, the underlying theological significance of that is that with the destruction of Israel, with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem,

B. The whole of the Old Covenant will be ended.

That's what Jesus is prophesying here. Not simply the end of a nation, but the ending of the Old Covenant. To be precise, I should say that the old administration of the Covenant of Grace is ending, inaugurating the new administration of the Covenant of Grace. It is the same covenant which God established with his

people to be our God, but the administration of that covenant is changed.

To use a current illustration very carefully, what we have seen the last month is a new presidential administration in our national politics, a new administration casting different from the previous administration is so many, many ways. But the presidency wasn't abolished—it just underwent a transformation. And that contrast is certain more evident and tangible than at any other time my lifetime.

The point is, what is ending with the judgment upon Israel is the Old Covenant administration. The shadows and types of the old are done away with, so that now, in Christ, the church is called the Israel of God. And that transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant has a distinct historical marker, the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, which Jesus is predicting here in this great discourse.

That transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant is the subject of the whole book of Hebrews. To give some explanation, we read,

Heb. 9:1 "Then indeed, even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary. 2 For a tabernacle was prepared: the first part, in which was the lampstand, the table, and the showbread, which is called the sanctuary; 3 and behind the second veil, the part of the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of All, 4 which had the golden censer and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which were the golden pot that had the manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; 5 and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail. 6 Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priests always went into

the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. 7 But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people's sins committed in ignorance; 8 the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing. 9 It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience— 10 concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation.”

With Jesus, that time of reformation has come, and that is what he is declaring to his disciples here in Matthew 24, which we will be studying in the weeks to come. Jesus himself inaugurates the new covenant, as we read again in,

Heb. 9:11 “But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. 12 Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, 14 how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? 15 And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.”

That is what Jesus is declaring to us, and it is nothing less than the gospel itself. And when the earthly temple is destroyed, when the earthly nation of Israel is ended, then it is clear that

“Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.”

The disciples have many questions, and we will be studying them along with Jesus' answers in the weeks to come. For today, let me end with this glorious declaration not simply of judgment upon Israel, but what that means for us as the covenant people of God today. As God's covenant people today, we have an enduring priest, one who will never die. His name is Jesus. And so we read,

Heb. 7:23 “Also there were many priests, because they were prevented by death from continuing. 24 But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. 25 Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. 26 For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; 27 who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. 28 For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever. 8:1 Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, 2 a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man.”

So the earthly temple will be destroyed, “not one stone shall be left here upon another.” But the resurrected Jesus is now “a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the

Lord erected,” the temple of the New Covenant which is in heaven itself. And we no longer need the stipulations of the Old Covenant, for we have Jesus. We no longer need the blood of the Old Covenant, for we know have Jesus, who says that his blood is the blood of the new covenant.

So let us enter that heavenly sanctuary, by faith, even here, even now, as we proclaim Jesus as he is presented to us with this sacrament of communion that is before us.