



The King on Mission Pt 3: Denouncements and Woes

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HOLY TEXT: MATTHEW 11:20-24

- After our LORD finishes His kind and convicting teachings concerning John the Baptist, He begins “upbraiding” or denouncing cities in which He previously ministered.
- This speech is essentially a continuation of the same sentiment He had just finished explaining via metaphor:

Matthew 11:16-17 (KJV) But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows, 17 And saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented.

- In other words, “this generation” had been impossible to please, and here are some examples!

CHORAZIN, BETHSAIDA, AND CAPERNAUM

According to the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, **Chorazin** is “a city whose name appears only in the woe pronounced against it by Christ ([Mat 11:21](#); [Luk 10:13](#)). Its appearance there, however, shows that it must have been a place of some importance, and highly privileged by the ministry of Jesus. It was already deserted in the time of Eusebius, who places it 2 miles from Capernaum”

Fausset’s Bible Dictionary defines **Bethsaida** as a “house of fish”. It is “a city of Galilee, W. of and close to the sea of Tiberias, in the land of Gennesareth ([Mar 6:45-53](#); [Joh 6:16-17](#); [Joh 1:44](#); [Joh 12:21](#)). Andrew, Peter, and Philip belonged to it ([Mat 11:21](#); [Luk 10:13](#)). When Jesus fed the 5,000 on the N.E. of the lake, they entered into a boat to cross to Bethsaida ([Mar 6:45](#)), while John says “they went over the sea toward Capernaum.” Being driven out of their course, Jesus came to them walking on the sea; they landed in Gennesaret and went to Capernaum; so that Bethsaida must have been near Capernaum.”

Easton’s Bible dictionary says that **Capernaum** is “a Galilean city frequently mentioned in the history of our Lord. It is not mentioned in the Old Testament. After our Lord’s expulsion from Nazareth ([Mat 4:13-16](#); [Luke 4:16-31](#)), Capernaum became his “own city.” It was the scene of many acts and incidents of his life ([Mat 8:5](#), [Mat 8:14](#), [Mat 8:15](#); [Mat 9:2-6](#), [Mat 9:10-17](#); [15:1-20](#); [Mar 1:32-34](#), etc.). The impenitence and unbelief of its inhabitants after the many evidences our Lord gave among them of the truth of his mission, brought down upon them a heavy denunciation of judgement ([Mat 11:23](#)). It stood on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. The “land of Gennesaret,” near, if not in, which it was situated, was one of the most prosperous and crowded districts of Palestine.

The bottom line: these were cities very close together in which our LORD preached and performed powerful miracles.

MacDonald writes:

Great privilege brings great responsibility. No cities were ever more privileged than Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. The incarnate Son of God had walked their dusty lanes, taught their favored people, and performed most of His mighty works within their walls. In the face of this overwhelming evidence, they had stubbornly refused to repent. Little wonder, then, that the Lord should pronounce the most solemn doom upon them.

WHAT DOES “WOE” MEAN?

Woe means “calamity, affliction, or misfortune.” The use of *woe* in our text is as an interjection (expresses emotion); it is an exclamation of grief. (Thayer)

WOES, WOES, WOES, IN THE BIBLE

In Scripture, *Woes* are almost always associated with prophetic judgments and/or pending disasters. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel use the word extensively:

Isaiah 5:20-24 (KJV) Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! 21 Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight! 22 Woe unto them that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink: 23 Which justify the wicked for reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him! 24 Therefore as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: because they have cast away the law of the LORD of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.

Jeremiah 13:23-27 (KJV) Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil. 24 Therefore will I scatter them as the stubble that passeth away by the wind of the wilderness. 25 This is thy lot, the portion of thy measures from me, saith the LORD; because thou hast forgotten me, and trusted in falsehood. 26 Therefore will I discover thy skirts upon thy face, that thy shame may appear. 27 I have seen thine adulteries, and thy neighings, the lewdness of thy whoredom, and thine abominations on the hills in the fields. Woe unto thee, O Jerusalem! wilt thou not be made clean? when shall it once be?

Ezekiel 13:2-5 (KJV) Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel that prophesy, and say thou unto them that prophesy out of their own hearts, Hear ye the word of the LORD; 3 Thus saith the Lord GOD; Woe unto the foolish prophets, that follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing! 4 O Israel, thy prophets are like the foxes in the deserts. 5 Ye have not gone up into the gaps, neither made up the hedge for the house of Israel to stand in the battle in the day of the LORD.

Our LORD Jesus uses the word eight times in Matthew 23 against the scribes and Pharisees. He called them hypocrites, blind guides, and whitewashed tombs full of people’s bones! His prophetic words are a blistering indictment of their religious false virtue, calumny (slander and false statements) and ardent unwillingness to believe in Him.

When you hear “woe,” watch out! :)

WHAT DOES OUR TEXT MEAN?

1. First, we see our LORD express displeasure at the lack of repentance of those cities in which He wrought mighty works. (v20)
 - The word “upbraid” in the KJV means “to defame, to rail at, to reproach or revile.” (Strong’s, Thayer)
 - This is a very emotional denunciation by Jesus. He was apparently either very sad, very angry, or both, that so many mighty works were done in them and they still did not repent.
 - May we remember that our LORD loves to soothe and bless His people, but those attributes are not the ONLY part of His holy character. He is also a Judge:

2 Corinthians 5:10 (KJV) For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.

- One point we learn here is that the presence of miracles, in and of themselves, do not mean men's hearts will change.
- Recall the damage the angels were doing in Revelation, and still men did not repent!

Revelation 16:8-11 (KJV) And the fourth angel poured out his vial upon the sun; and power was given unto him to scorch men with fire. 9 And men were scorched with great heat, and blasphemed the name of God, which hath power over these plagues: and they repented not to give him glory. 10 And the fifth angel poured out his vial upon the seat of the beast; and his kingdom was full of darkness; and they gnawed their tongues for pain, 11 And blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and repented not of their deeds.

- This is why simple prayer and preaching is so important. Scripture declares:

Romans 10:14-17 (KJV) How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? 15 And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things! 16 But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Esaias saith, Lord, who hath believed our report? 17 So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

APPLICATION:

We tend to think of Jesus in terms we like: kind, serving, gracious, and tender. Praise Him that He is all these things and more! Let us balance out our view of our LORD with the careful understanding that He possesses all the attributes of God, including wrath and justice. He IS coming again in judgement. Let us therefore call men to repent!

2. We also read that our LORD compares the faithlessness of Chorazin and Bethsaida to Tyre and Sidon. (v21) Interestingly, He compares them to cities who had troubles in their own right.

- Matthew Henry said, "Tyre and Sidon (were) two maritime cities we read much of in the Old Testament, that had been brought to ruin, but began to flourish again; these cities bordered upon Galilee, but were in ill name among the Jews for idolatry and other wickedness."
- Jesus is essentially saying that even though Tyre and Sidon were wicked, they would have enough sense to repent had I ministered there.
- Matthew Henry states, "that Tyre and Sidon would not have been so bad as Chorazin and Bethsaida. If they had had the same word preached, and the same miracles wrought among them, *they would have repented*, and that *long ago*, as Nineveh did, in *sackcloth and ashes*."
- Both these cities have rich histories, and both had prophets prophesy against them (Eze 26-28).
- Understand that in the time of Christ they were mostly pagan. And this is the point: pagan cities would have received the LORD and His message better than Jewish cities!

APPLICATION:

It is possible that those who do not know the LORD or those without a "church" background might receive the Word of the LORD before those of us who do. Let us remain teachable and humble!

3. Our LORD taught levels of judgment. (v22) He said that it would be “more tolerable” or “more bearable” for Tyre and Sidon than for Chorazin and Bethsaida on the day of judgment. This implies levels of sin.

- To be clear, all sin is evil. However some sins are considered worse (more abhorrent) than others by our LORD.
- These truths are laid out in some of the old catechisms. Here is the Westminster Larger:

Q. 150. Are all transgressions of the law of God equally heinous in themselves, and in the sight of God?

A. All transgressions of the law of God are not equally heinous, but some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others.

Q. 152. What doth every sin deserve at the hands of God?

A. Every sin, even the least, being against the sovereignty, goodness, and holiness of God, and against his righteous law, deserveth his wrath and curse, both in this life, and that which is to come; and cannot be expiated but by the blood of Christ.

- Matt Slick, founder of carm.org, wrote:

Jesus clearly taught that there is a difference in the level of sins that we can commit. So, we can conclude there are sins that are worse than others by nature. We could easily say, for example, that stealing a paperclip is not as bad as murdering a group of people.

However, it also seems to be the case that knowledge affects the severity of sin as well:

"For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. 21 For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them," (2 Pet. 2:20-21).

Peter says that awareness of sin and intent are factors that affect whether or not sin is greater or lesser. This is supported by the Scripture that says, "Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin," (James 4:17).

- As bad as that day will be for those outside Christ, it is frightening to think that for some, in some way we do not totally understand, it will be worse!

APPLICATION:

Flee the wrath to come and tell others to do the same! Preach the Gospel!

4. Our LORD continues His denunciations, singling out Capernaum and calling it worse than Sodom! (v23-24)

- Worse than Sodom! *Genesis 13:13 (KJV) But the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the LORD exceedingly.*
- Worse than Sodom...the city that was so bad the LORD went to see Himself!

Genesis 18:20-21 (KJV) And the LORD said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; 21 I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know.

- Worse than Sodom...the city that Abraham pleaded for, bargaining with the LORD and asking that if there were 10 righteous people there that the LORD not destroy it. He started with 50 (Gen 18).

- Worse than Sodom...the city that was so bold in its evil that mobs gathered to assault strangers who were actually angels (Gen 19).
- Worse than Sodom...the city that was destroyed by fire and brimstone from heaven for its acceptance and promotion of perversity and debauchery.

Genesis 19:24-25 (KJV) Then the LORD rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven; 25 And he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground.

- Oh how great was the sin of Capernaum! Like Jerusalem, she knew not the time of her visitation! (Lk 19:44)
- Matthew Henry said, “Capernaum's means would have saved Sodom. If these miracles had been done among the Sodomites, as bad as they were, they would have repented, and *their city would have remained unto this day* a monument of sparing mercy, as now it is of destroying justice.”
- Capernaum was exalted into heaven in the sense that Christ walked and ministered among them. Sadly, Capernaum “shalt be brought down to hell” because she rejected the LORD.

APPLICATION:

There is mercy in the Gospel of Jesus for the most wretched of sinners! However, given our LORD’s denouncements of cities by essentially this principle: “To whom much is given, much will be required,” (Lk 12:48) let us all be lovingly warned...

“We that have now the written word in our hands, the gospel preached, and the gospel ordinances administered to us, and live under the dispensation of the Spirit, have advantages not inferior to those of Chorazin, and Bethsaida, and Capernaum, and the account in the great day will be accordingly. It has therefore been justly said, that the professors of this age, whether they go to heaven or hell, will be the greatest debtors in either of these places; if to heaven, the greatest debtors to divine mercy for those rich means that brought them thither; if to hell, the greatest debtors to divine justice, for those rich means that would have kept them from thence.” — Matthew Henry

Amen!