

# Jerusalem, Jerusalem

Matthew 23:29-24:2

In His eighth and final woe, Jesus condemns the scribes and Pharisees for building the tombs of the prophets while being just like their fathers who murdered them. His imminent death will prove Him right, but He makes an even bigger point. We live in a broken world where innocent blood is often shed. Just days ago Russia attacked Ukraine, including civilian targets, and thousands have already died. Jesus reveals that God isn't far away, ignorant, indifferent, or unwilling to do something about it. He confronts violent and murderous peoples and gives His life to transform the world.

## Father Hatred

It might seem like a strange thing for someone to adorn and celebrate people who are dead and gone, when if they were alive today, they would want them dead. Rene Girard identified the historical pattern of scapegoating. There's a plague in Thebes where a myriad of conflicts rage. Ultimately, Oedipus is identified as the problem and the reason for the plague, and by scapegoating him the city can return from chaos to order and peace. Once he is gone, the people embrace him as a father and hero, and the cycle repeats. Everyone is supposed to go along with this, but then comes Job who, when his whole life falls apart, maintains his innocence. What's more, he's right (Job 1:22). Regardless of his wife and friends insisting he is guilty and cursed by God, he won't play along and thus the truth, justice, and goodness of God breaks the cycle. These leaders in Israel believe they would not have murdered the prophets the way their fathers did had they been there, but Jesus points out that by saying this they are witnesses against themselves that they are the sons of those murderers (vv. 30-31). Why would they be any different? How many people have you heard swear they'll never do what their parents did, but then end up doing the exact same things, sometimes despairingly aware that it's happening? This occurs because not liking what your parents did is not the same as repenting of your sins and turning your heart to God. You can't keep the fifth commandment without keeping the first, and you can't turn your heart to your children or your father without turning to God's mercy and grace (cf. Mal. 4:6; Lk. 1:17). The scribes and Pharisees insist they won't do what their fathers did, but if they don't turn to God and plead for His grace, they will be given over to their sins *just like their fathers did*. You must honor your parents without whitewashing their sins. This is also the only way to honor the prophets who were sinners used by God, not saviors. Jesus Christ was the ultimate victim who refused to be categorized as one, who maintained His innocence without sinning, but died anyway for His people. This is how He overcame the Satan (the accuser), His works and effects. He honored His Father.

## Slow to Anger

"Fill up, then", Jesus says, "the measure of your fathers' guilt" (v. 32). This harkens back to God's word to Abraham that he couldn't inherit the land yet because "the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full" (Gen. 15:16). God would not drive the Amorites from the land until they richly deserved it, when their iniquity was full: "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation" (Ex. 34:6-7). It's not that God will never get angry, but it takes a long and judicious time. Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees snakes and brood of vipers, which is to say they're like that great fallen serpent, the Devil (v. 33; cf. Rev. 20:2). They accuse, lie, slander, and murder like him, so how can they escape the condemnation of hell? Jesus is the consummate prophet and so He knows what they'll do, not necessarily because He is peering down the corridors of time, but because He understands who they are. This is how R.L. Dabney could say in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century that because the state controlled education, "All

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prayers, catechisms, and Bibles will ultimately be driven out of the schools.” Biblical thinking understands what principles are at play and what consequences will follow. Jesus will send (a wonderful claim to divinity) prophets, wise men, and scribes, and some will be killed and crucified, and some scourged in synagogues and chased from city to city (v. 34). This is fulfilled throughout the book of Acts (13:45, 50; 14:2, 19; 17:5, 13; 18:12; 20:3; 21:27; 24:1-9). They will fill up the sins of their fathers so that the blood of the prophets from righteous Abel to Zechariah will come upon that generation (vv. 35-36). Abel is the first martyr in Scripture whose blood cries out to God from the ground (Gen. 4:10). Jesus’ Old Testament ended with 2 Chronicles where Zechariah was the last martyr (2 Chron. 24:22). From Aleph to Tav, A to Z, the blood of the righteous would come on that generation. How does this make sense of God’s justice for the sins of past generations to fall on this one? First, they witness that they would have murdered with their fathers, and second they prove it by the murders they are about to commit. John the Baptizer was murdered, Jesus is next, then Stephen followed by James and others. God incarnate—truth, justice, righteousness, wisdom, mercy and every good thing—stands before them and they will execute Him on a Roman cross. Israel was a priestly nation, called to lead the world to the love and mercy of God. Even when they rejected Jesus, He gave them an entire generation before tearing down the temple. Here Jesus is pleading with them again to repent, but they won’t. The real question we ought to ask is why does God delay His justice at all? Why don’t Adam and Eve die physically on the day eat from the tree? Why does God put up with all of the pride, hatred, violence, selfishness, unkindness, *ad infinitum* that sinners continue to walk in day after day? How would you like to read one day’s account of your sin, including thoughts, motivations, things done and things left undone? Though all things are naked and open to God (Heb. 4:13), in His great mercy and kindness, He delays His justice. He sends prophets to teach and warn us, even though we ignore, belittle, and sometimes execute them. Those who don’t understand sin or God’s holiness, naïvely respond to prophets like this with “It’s not that bad.” No, not yet, which is why the prophet is talking. Once your life is shattered, the money is gone, the relationship trashed, the nation beyond repair, he doesn’t need to predict anything. Soft words spoken by soft men create hard hearts. But Jesus loves, and so He speaks the truth. Have ears to hear.

## Under His Wings

Jesus loves His people, city, and nation. Even as His crucifixion looms, He weeps and laments that the children of Jerusalem would not gather though He tried to shelter them under His wing like a hen does her chicks (v. 37). Jerusalem’s house would be left barren and she’d no longer see Him until saying “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!” (v. 38; Ps. 118:26). This quotation of Psalm 118:26a refers to the salvation Yahweh sends. Israel blesses Him from the temple: “We have blessed you from the house of the LORD” (v. 26b). The high priest Caiaphas wants to scapegoat Jesus: “You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish” (Jn. 11:50). But Jesus won’t be a scapegoat like that, another cog in the machine of violence. His death will reconcile men to God and launch His reign of peace (cf. Is. 2:4). He will topple houses of violence—the temple, the Aztec Empire, the former Soviet Union, and countless others—in order to bring peace and blessing upon the world through the true temple, His body, the church. John Stott said, “Before we can begin to see the cross as something done for us, we have to see it as something done by us.” So we must come under His wings, and call our people, like He did, to come under as well.