

Pronouncements of Woe

📖 Matthew 11:20-24

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Last time Jesus gave John's Eulogy prior to his execution. In 11:7, two of John's disciples had received reassurance from Isa 35 and 61 that Jesus indeed was the Messiah and they turned to go in order to report to John. Jesus took this as an occasion to direct the crowd's attention to John's identity. What had they gone out into the wilderness to see? Was John like a reed shaken by the wind, so easily swayed by false doctrine? What then had they gone out to see? A man fitted in fine, effeminate clothing fit to stand in a king's court? No. But what had they gone out to see? A prophet? Yes. John was a prophet and yet one who was also more than a prophet. John was the forerunner of the king. The Scriptures prophesied in Mal 3:1, "I send My messenger ahead of You, Who will remove all hindrances before You." John was Elijah, if that generation would accept the Scriptures. In 11:11 Jesus says that among those born of women there had never arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist; not Abraham, not Moses, not David, not even Mary was greater than John. In what way was John greater? John was greater in privilege. As the forerunner he had a closeness and intimacy with the King that no other had. And yet Jesus adds that the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater in privilege than John. This is because to be in the Messiah's kingdom is to be in greater closeness and intimacy than John who was not in the kingdom. In 11:12 Jesus teaches that from the days of John the Baptist until that time, the kingdom of heaven had been forcefully opposed by the leadership of Israel. By their opposition they were snatching the kingdom away from the people. The explanation for their opposition to the kingdom is given in 11:13; they did not believe all the prophets and the Law had prophesied until John. 11:13 shows that if they had believed the Scriptures they would have received John as the prophetic forerunner and Jesus as the King, for the OT spoke of them. Yet 11:14 indicates there was still time to respond, "And if you are willing to accept" the Scriptures then "John himself is Elijah who is going to come." John could have been Elijah, but that identification hinged on their acceptance of the Scriptures. In 11:15 the one who has ears to hear is the one who is open to hear the Scripture. Since faith comes by hearing then let the ones open to hear hear the Scripture so they are convinced of the message of John and Jesus. In 11:16 He charges that generation with being spiritually immature, likening them to children sitting in the market while mommy shopped and talked playing marriage and funeral games. In 11:17, some of the children said to others, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' The point is that both kinds of music were designed to elicit an

appropriate response and they did not respond appropriately. Neither did that generation respond appropriately to John and Jesus. Their inappropriate response to John is stated in 11:18. "John" came neither eating nor drinking, just like a prophet of old, and especially like Elijah and they said, "He has a demon!" Their inappropriate response to Jesus is stated in 11:19. "The Son of Man came eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners," just like a wise king wanting to stay in touch with the needs of all his subjects. And yet that generation accused Him of being a gluttonous man and a drunk. That generation was not responding appropriately. Yet wisdom personified as John and Jesus would be rendered a favorable verdict from God because their ways of approaching the people were appropriate for their given offices of prophet and king. That generation missed the forerunner and the king because they didn't believe the Scriptures.

Tonight, in 11:20 Matthew communicates a decided shift in Jesus' ministry. **Then He began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent.** Take note that the word in verse 20 **denounce** is particularly strong. It denotes an indignant anger that is based on justifiable fault. In other words, Jesus was justifiably angry. **The cities** which saw the majority **of His miracles** had no legitimate excuse. They should have repented at the **miracles**. There are at least three words related to miracles in the NT; usually they fall together under the expression "signs, miracles and wonders." Each word has its own nuance. The word translated **miracles** here is *δυναμις*. It is the basis for our word "dynamite." Dynamite is an explosive kind of power; a sudden burst of power. Here His power miracles are chiefly in view. He had done the majority of His power miracles in certain cities and yet these cities did not repent.

Four things indicate that there is at this point a shift in the Lord's ministry. **First**, the word **began** is *ἤρξατο* and means "to initiate an action."¹ It is not superfluous in Matthew (cf 4:17; 16:21). It signals a shift in the Lord's ministry. In 4:17 it signaled the shift from Jesus' ministry in Judea to the Galilee. In 16:21 it will signal the shift from Jesus' ministry to prepare his disciples for the new age to His preparation for His death and resurrection. So the expression **Then He began** signals a shift in the Lord's ministry. **Second**, the Greek adverb **then** is *τοτε* and it too signals a change in movement. **Third**, the pronouncement of **Woe** upon cities in verse 21 is also something new. It signals that there the Lord's ministry is marked by a significant change in tone. Fourth, he states that His miracles in these cities **were done**. This means more than the simple fact that they were accomplished. Toussaint says, "The fact that Matthew uses the verb "to be done" (*εγρονοντο*) in verse twenty indicates that the work performed in Galilee was looked on as being completed."² Jesus' ministry in the Galilee had been completed. There was no use continuing. The rejection was already settled. Barnhouse said, "Those who really wish to know their Bibles should see that we are in new country from this verse forward. Draw a thick black line between the nineteenth and twentieth verses. There is a great divide here."³ From here forward it is apparent to the King that His Kingship and kingdom will be rejected. The wheels were already set in motion leading to the climax of His rejection in Matthew 12. Jesus was justifiably angry.

The reason stated for His anger is stated to be **because they did not repent**. To **repent** means to have “a change of mind.” They needed to have a change of mind about the religious system of the scribes and Pharisees. That religious system did not produce a righteousness that pleased God. They needed to return to the true intent of the Mosaic Law. Individual Jews did repent but what was needed when the kingdom was ‘at hand’ was a generation of Israel to repent. Only then would they receive the King and His kingdom would come. Jesus shows that the miracles were sufficient revelation to evoke this response from these cities but **they did not repent**. The implication is that nothing more could be done.

In 11:21 Jesus pronounces **Woe** on these cities. **Woe** is an “interjection denoting pain or displeasure.”⁴ Jesus is pronouncing the pains of judgment on two cities that saw the greatest number of His miracles. The first city is **Chorazin**. **Woe to you, Chorazin!** As you can see from your map the city of **Chorazin** was north of the Sea of Galilee, a couple of miles NW of Capernaum. We don’t read of any miracles being done in **Chorazin** but Jesus was in this region most of the time and no doubt He went there, preached the kingdom, taught the Torah and did many miracles. This city was now under judgment. The second city is **Bethsaida**. **Woe to you Bethsaida!** As you can see from the map there are two prospective sites of **Bethsaida**. Both were also on the north side of the Sea of Galilee and on the other side of the Jordan. One site was closer to the Sea of Galilee and the other was a little farther north. In either case, **Bethsaida** was the hometown of Andrew, Peter and Philip (John 1:44). We know from Mark 8:22 that Jesus had healed a blind man in **Bethsaida** among many other miracles. And yet neither **Chorazin** or **Bethsaida** repented. Consequently Jesus pronounced judgment upon them.

An interesting explanation of the severity of the judgment for these cities is then stated. **For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.** The cities of **Tyre and Sidon** were along the Phoenician coast, 35 and 60 miles, respectively, from the cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida.⁵ They were Gentile cities known among the Jews as centers of Baal worship. Yet Jesus states that **if the miracles had occurred** in these two Gentile cities **which occurred in** the two Jewish cities **they would have repented long ago**. This is stated as a 2nd class condition, which is somewhat rare. The 2nd class condition is the class of non-reality. In other words, these miracles did not occur in **Tyre and Sidon** but if they had **they would have repented**. Jesus is positing a scenario for consideration that is a non-real scenario. Note that they would not just **have repented** but **they would have repented long ago**. In other words, it would not have taken near as many miracles to convince them that Jesus was the King and His kingdom was ‘at hand.’ They would have put on **sackcloth and ashes**, the culturally appropriate attire for mourning,

There are several things this verse does for us theologically. **First**, how would a Jew likely respond to this statement? It would be extremely provoking. The graveness of this condemnation is probably not seen by most casual readers of the Bible. To a Jew the Gentiles were heathen idolaters. So to say that they had more spiritual sense than monotheistic Jews would be very provoking to say the least. **Second**, in order to make this statement what would Jesus have to know? Jesus would have to know the hearts of the people in Tyre and Sidon. How

could Jesus know the hearts of these people? Because Jesus is God. Jesus had all the attributes of God. Jesus did not set aside the attributes of God in the incarnation. He set aside the independent use of the attributes of God and subjected Himself to the Father. On this occasion we see that He had the attributes of God. What attribute of God does He show us here? Omniscience. What is omniscience? Basically the word means "to know all." For clarification purposes we say that God knows all things actual and possible, even the what-if's of history. We add the expression "even the what-if's of history" because of verses like this. This is a non-real scenario but Jesus did know the state of hardness of the hearts of the Gentiles in **Tyre** and **Sidon** relative to the Jews in **Chorazin** and **Bethsaida**. Pentecost says, "His words indicate that the hearts of the Jewish people were harder than the hearts of Gentiles, for if the miracles had been performed in Gentile territory, the Gentiles would have believed His message and turned in faith to Him."⁶ In other words, this observation leads to a **third** truth. Relative heart hardness is a factor in a person accepting or rejecting the work of God. Everyone is conceived with a hard heart. This is because everyone is born with a sin nature. Rom 8:7 teaches that the sin nature will not and cannot submit to God. Over time a person commits more and more personal sin and their hearts become harder and harder. As a result a proper response to the works of God becomes less and less likely. It seems to me that is a factor in why there are more children who come to Christ than older people. The children's hearts are hard but not as hard and therefore easier to penetrate. I would not say that the Holy Spirit cannot penetrate an older person's heart, but I would say that He does not do so as often. Why He does not is too complex overall for me to say, but the relative hardness of the heart seems to be a contributing factor. A fourth truth that comes out of this is a question to consider. Why, if the Gentiles of **Tyre and Sidon...would have repented long ago** if they saw the miracles, did Jesus not go there and do the miracles? This question can be answered in two ways. **First**, the mission was to Israel at the time and not to Gentiles. This is the dispensational answer; it recognizes distinct manners of God's working in different ages. Israel and the kingdom offer were on the table. Thus Jesus said in Matt 10:5-6, "Go not in the way of Gentiles and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 10:5-6). Only later does Jesus give the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19, "Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations..." and 2 Pet 3:9, "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." The idea that Jesus would go to Israel only at this time solves the problem. Only after Israel's rejection would Jesus give the Great Commission to go to all nations. So one answer is that Jesus did not go to Tyre and Sidon and do miracles, even though they would have repented, because the mission was to Israel only at that time. This is a dispensational answer. In my estimation, it is a good answer. A **second** answer is more general. It states that the distribution of special revelation is determined by God and is not equal at all times and places on the planet. Jesus' miracles are classified as special revelation. They occurred in a relatively small area of the world and were seen by a relatively small number of individuals. Clearly they were public but not everyone saw them. Chorazin and Bethsaida saw them but Tyre and Sidon did not see them, though they would have repented if they had seen them. This points up two important facts. **First**, ultimately God is sovereign over the distribution of special revelation and its impact. He decides where it goes and its effect upon the people (an additional factor is

the hardness of the people's hearts as mentioned earlier). Church History shows that there have been certain areas of the world where the Bible was having a large impact and other parts where there was no access to special revelation at all because their descendants from Noah had suppressed it! For example, at the time of the Reformation northern Europe was significantly impacted by special revelation while southern Europe remained interested in human rationalism. At the same time the Indians in North America didn't even have access to special revelation apart from any remnants left in their folklore. America basically grew out of the Reformation in northern Europe and we have had significant amount of special revelation and impact upon our country for over 300 years. Now that time is over and there is significant impact of special revelation in Iran and China and North Korea. It's like the Spirit of God is moving selectively over portions of the earth. The point is that God is sovereign over the distribution of special revelation and its impact on people groups. Second, there is also a human responsibility to take that special revelation to unreached peoples. What did Jesus say to pray in Matt 9:38? "Pray to the Lord of the harvest that He would send out workers into His harvest." Here both the sovereignty of God and the human responsibility are woven together. At the time it was to Israel only, but by application of the principle today, it is God's harvest and yet we have a responsibility to pray that He would send out workers into His harvest. The presupposition is that without prayer He won't send workers. The presupposition of no sent workers is that the people can't access special revelation. So both human prayer and missionaries are necessary. That's why I flinch over articles like Anne Coulter's that berated the missionary who acquired Ebola for going overseas into missions under the argument that we have plenty of people here to evangelize.⁷ She showed ignorance of clear biblical principles for Christians to go out into the mission field. That mission field may be in one's own country but it may also be to other countries. God is really the one who drives that, not narcissism. Even in the Book of Acts Peter and the apostles were reticent to go out of Jerusalem. It took the stoning of Stephen and Saul's rampage against the Church to blow them out of Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria and on to the remotest parts of the earth. There are still many language groups that don't have Bible's in their language today. What are we supposed to do with them Anne? It seems that the Holy Spirit is not using the Bible to impact people's lives in our country much. That is not the fault of those who minister it with excellence. God is the one who uses His word to bring either a positive response or negative. So this answer is also a good answer. The original question was why did Jesus not go to Tyre and Sidon and do the miracles, especially since they would have repented? The dispensational answer is that the mission was to Israel at that time and not to the Church. The general answer is that God determines the distribution of special revelation and its impact through human prayer and willingness to reach out to other people. I think both are true.

In 11:22 Jesus gives a corollary truth. **Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you.** In other words, they are still subject to punishment because they have a sin nature, but the degree of their punishment is related proportionally to the degree of special revelation they received. Since **Tyre and Sidon** had not seen the many miracles of Christ then their **judgment** would be **more tolerable** than that of Chorazin and Bethsaida. This refers to some future judgment. It is true that all unbelievers

will go to hell but it is not true that all will experience the same degree of punishment in hell. The adjective **more tolerable** seems to indicate that there are different degrees of punishment in hell relative to the amount of revelation they received. Constable says, "...when God judges, He will take into account the opportunity people have had. There are degrees of punishment in hell as there are degrees of felicity in heaven (v. 41; 23:13; Luke 12:47-48; Rom. 1:20-2:16)."⁸ This truth is a function of God's justice. God will not punish those with less opportunity to the same degree that He will punish those with greater opportunity. Thus we can also say that greater exposure to truth have a greater responsibility to respond positively to that truth.

In 11:23 Jesus turns to a third city. This city He singles out. **And you, Capernaum**, that's a way of talking to someone with anger, you just turn to them and say **And you!** He was really mad at Capernaum. So he says, **you will not be exalted to heaven, will you?** That's a question in the Greek that demands a negative answer, **you will not be exalted to heaven, You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day.** There are several things here. First of all, the city of **Capernaum** is on your map along the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. After Jesus was rejected in His hometown of Nazareth He moved His headquarters to Capernaum (Matt 4:13), presumably at the home of Peter and Andrew (Mark 1:29). What He's doing here is singling out **Capernaum** because He did the greatest amount of miracles in this town. Here, or nearby, we have recorded that He cleansed the leper (Matt 8:1-4), healed the paralytic (Matt 8:5-13), healed Peter's mother-in-law of the fever (Matt 8:14-17), healed another paralytic over whom He also pronounced forgiveness of sins (Matt 9:1-8), raised the daughter of the synagogue official (Matt 9:18-27), healed the woman suffering from a hemorrhage for twelve years (Matt 9:20-22), healed two blind men (Matt 9:27-31) and a mute, demon-possessed man (Matt 9:32-33). And surely this is just a subset of all the miracles done in this city. The list could go on and on. Talk about a privilege. These people had tremendous light. Now because of all that light they might think that they would **be exalted to heaven**. What does that mean? Well it contrasts with **descend to Hades**. You're not going to be **exalted to heaven** but you're going to **descend to Hades**. Now, it's not what you might think. The word **exalt** means to gain prestige, fame, honor. So what He's talking about is their reputation as a city. And He's saying your reputation as a city is not going to be a good reputation. Instead your reputation is going down into the depths. The word **descend** means "to suffer humiliation." **Hades**, just fundamentally, means "the depths." So all He's saying is all these miracles were done in your city and yet because you rejected your reputation as a city is not going to skyrocket, it's going down the tubes.

Then He compares **Capernaum** with **Sodom** and He says your worse than **Sodom**. That should cause everyone to pause. He says, **for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day.** Now Sodom was destroyed by a great conflagration, probably God used an earthquake to rain down fire and brimstone on that city. It was so destroyed it was never inhabited again! It just wasn't worth the time to rebuild it. And yet Capernaum was worth than them. Why? Jesus uses another 2nd class condition to say why. **For if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day.** Sodom

would have still been there. That's how gracious God is, that he would have kept it around as a city for another 2000 years. But the 2nd class condition is the condition of non-reality and so Jesus did not do those miracles in **Sodom** and so Sodom did not remain.

Now it might be important to say that when Sodom was destroyed the righteous were spared; Lot, his wife and two daughters, though his wife turned back and turned into a pillar of salt. But the point is that an individual could escape and the same was true of Capernaum, an individual could escape though it was only a matter of time before the city itself would be destroyed. Walvoord says, "Anyone who visits the ruins of Capernaum today and sees the pitiful remains of what was once a beautiful city, can realize the literalness with which this prophecy has been fulfilled. Significantly, Tiberias, not far away, was not condemned and is not in ruins."⁹ Those of you who go to Israel will see the ruins of Capernaum next week. And there's no one there, except tourists. Capernaum had great light, tremendous light and yet they rejected. It was an inappropriate response. They should have repented. Those of Sodom would have? So those of Sodom had hearts that were less hard than those of Capernaum. Put that one in the blender and mull it around. That's a scathing rebuke. You people, what's wrong with you! Well, you're not getting away with anything because your reputation is going down the tubes and your city is going to destruction!

In 11:24 Jesus virtually repeats verse 22 and says, that's not all, there's a future judgment awaiting at the great white throne for you. **Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you.** Again, those of **the land of Sodom** are still subject to punishment because they too had a sin nature and rejected God, but the degree of their punishment is related proportionally to the degree of special revelation they had. Since **Sodom** had not seen the many miracles of Christ then their judgment would **be more tolerable** than that of Capernaum. This judgment refers to the great white throne when they are assigned their place in the lake of fire. It is true that all unbelievers will go to the lake of fire but it is not true that all will experience the same degree of punishment in the lake of fire. The adjective **more tolerable** indicates that there are different degrees of punishment in the lake of fire relative to the amount of revelation they received. Pentecost says, "Degrees of punishment are determined by the amount of light which one has received and subsequently rejected. Because the people had had the light of both Christ's words and works, they were subject to greater judgment than the Gentiles who had not had that testimony."¹⁰ God will not punish those with less opportunity to the same degree that He will punish those with greater opportunity. Though the lake of fire is terrible, there are degrees of terrible. The degree of punishment seems more related to the amount of light received and subsequently rejected than to moral abominations. Many moral abominations are punished in time but rejection of light received is punished eternally. Thus we can also say that greater exposure to truth have a greater responsibility to respond positively to that truth.

¹ BDAG, p 140.

² Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 155.

³ Donald Grey Barnhouse quoted by Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 155.

⁴ BDAG, p 734.

⁵ Walvoord and Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Vol 2, p 44.

⁶ Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 200.

⁷ <http://www.anncoulter.com/columns/2014-08-06.html>

⁸ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 11:21.

⁹ John Walvoord, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p 83-4.

¹⁰ J Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 200.