

# The Seven Woes

📖 Matthew 23:13-36

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We are within the Final Week of Jesus in Matthew 23. It was Wednesday, He was in the Temple, He had just silenced the Herodians, the Sadducees and the Pharisees. Mark reports that many in the crowds enjoyed listening to Jesus silence them so in 23:1 He turned to the crowds and he warned them against following the practices of the scribes and Pharisees. In 23:2 the scribes and Pharisees had taken it upon themselves to assume the chair of Moses and the accompanying official interpretation of the Law. They were the religious elite, those who proclaimed dogmatically their interpretations and demanded compliance. In 23:3 He says "all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds." In other words, do and observe what they read to you from the Law of Moses in synagogue, but do not do according to their traditions which go beyond the Law and invalidate the Law. The explanation "for they say and do not do" means they saw the Law of Moses in synagogue but they do not put it into practice. In 23:4 what they do is tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to help the people carry them. They helped themselves but they wouldn't help others. In 23:5 "they do all their" traditions "to be seen by men." They were not done to please God. They were men pleasers. Six things are listed that they did to please men. First, they broadened their phylacteries. These were small leather boxes containing four OT Scriptures and strapped to the forehead and wrist. By broadening them they were either making them very large or they were wearing them all the time rather than during the appointed morning prayer. Second, they lengthened their tassels. The tassels were biblical but they lengthened them to impress men with their piety. Third, in 23:6, they loved to recline from the place of honor at feasts where they could oversee the entire room. Fourth, they loved to sit in the chief seats at synagogue, near the scrolls of the law. Fifth, in 23:7, they loved to receive respectful greetings in the market places, the most public places. Sixth, they loved being called Rabbi by men. Wearing phylacteries and tassels, sitting in places of honor and being called Rabbi were not intrinsically wrong, what was wrong was loving these things and doing them to be seen by men. The issue was they were following the lusts of their sin nature. As such, the crowds who followed the scribes and Pharisees were not to follow these practices but to simply follow the Law of Moses.

In 23:8 the “you” is emphatic signaling that Jesus is turning to His disciples in the audience to teach them how to lead since they will now replace the scribes and Pharisees as the official leadership of the believing remnant of Israel. He says, “Do not love to be called Rabbi.” That is the sense, it is not wrong to be called Rabbi, but it is wrong to love to be called Rabbi. The reason is two-fold; first, “for you have One Rabbi.” Either Jesus or the Holy Spirit is meant. Jesus was their teacher on earth and He sent the Spirit to be the teacher on the Day of Pentecost. So this title really belongs to Him. Second, “you are all brothers” and therefore on equal spiritual footing. In 23:9, “Do not call anyone on earth your father; because you have One Father in heaven.” To call one father implied he was the begetter of life but only the Father in heaven is the begetter of life. The title really belongs to Him. In 23:10 “Do not love to be called leaders.” That is the sense again. The word “leader” is a term for a priestly instructor. They should not love to be called this because rightly this title belongs to “One leader, Messiah.” The scribes and Pharisees were usurping these titles from those whom they rightly belonged and so the disciples should not be like them. In 23:11 their ministries should be radically different. They should conduct their ministry as true servant leaders. In this model of leading the greatest among you is your servant. Servant leadership is the model. In 23:12, self-exaltation now leads to being least in the kingdom whereas self-humiliation now leads to being great in the kingdom. So as far as ministry is concerned Jesus’ disciples were to be true servant leaders. This involves humbling oneself, having a right assessment of one’s worth and abilities and responsibly administering them among God’s people. You simply cannot be all things to all men but you can function over a limited sphere for the glory of God.

Today we come to 23:13. There are seven or eight woes, depending on whether you count verse 14. Verse 14 is not in the earliest manuscripts. If you have an NIV this verse is excluded and you see a note at the end of verse 13 that says some manuscripts include a verse 14 here that has words similar to Mk 12:40 or Lk 20:47. If you have an NASB this verse is included but in parentheses with a note that it is not in the earliest manuscripts. Probably it should not be included. As Metzger says, “That ver. 14 is an interpolation derived from the parallel in Mk 12:40 or Lk 20:47 is clear (a) from its absence in the earliest and best authorities of the Alexandrian and the Western types of text, and (b) from the fact that the witnesses that include the passage have it in different places, either after ver. 13 (so the Textus Receptus) or before ver. 13.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is most likely not original, though its presence in Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47 show that it is biblical and so we will comment on it briefly. But ultimately there are seven woes and not eight. These woes are recorded only by Matthew and find no parallel in Mark and Luke.

Several observations before we look at the woes. First, the seven woes are pronounced against the scribes and the Pharisees. Walvoord said, “No passage in the Bible is more biting, more pointed, and more severe than this pronouncement of Christ upon the Pharisees. It is significant that He singled them out, as opposed to the Sadducees, who were more liberal, and the Herodians, who were the politicians. The Pharisees, while attempting to honor the Word of God and manifesting an extreme form of religious observance, were actually the farthest from God.”<sup>2</sup> Second, the organization of the woes shows that this is a condemnation of the false religion of the scribes and Pharisees. Toussaint said, “The first three announcements of woe are given because of the doctrine

of the scribes and Pharisees, the last three because of their character. The middle one is transitional dealing with both.”<sup>3</sup> Constable showed that this organization is actually a chiasm and the heart of the chiasm shows the main problem was a failure to understand Scripture.

- A** Rejection of the kingdom v. 13
- B** Effects on others being more harm than good v. 15
- C** Misguided use of Scripture affecting conduct vv. 16–22
- D** Failure to understand Scripture vv. 23–24
- C'** Misguided use of Scripture affecting character vv. 25–26
- B'** Effects on others frustrating the desired result vv. 27–28
- A'** Rejection of the kingdom’s heralds vv. 29–36<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, the organization confirms that the main teaching of the passage is a condemnation of the false religion of the scribes and Pharisees. Walvoord said, “These woes...denounce false religion as utterly abhorrent to God and worthy of severe condemnation.”<sup>5</sup> The scribes and Pharisees used the Scriptures but they did not understand the Scriptures. Religions that pay lip service to the Scriptures are the most dangerous of all false religions. Third, the language used to condemn false religion is devastating. Jesus pronounced “woe” on the false religious leaders seven times, called them “hypocrites” six times, “blind” five times and assigned them to “Hell” two times. He was unsparing in His condemnation, though not vindictive. The seven woes are set forth as legal accusations in a court of law demanding the verdict of guilty. Fourth, the word **woe** signifies intense pain or displeasure coming upon one for extreme abuses. Figart says, “By using the word “woe” Jesus was implying more than the temporal calamity which would befall the nation in A.D. 70; connected with these woes are severe words of eternal judgment as well.”<sup>6</sup> What was coming upon the scribes and Pharisees for their failure to understand Scripture, rejecting their King and misleading the people was a temporal judgment by the Roman armies and eternal judgment in the lake of fire.

In 23:13 we have the first woe. It deals with kingdom entrance. **But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.** The word **woe** is *ouai*. It is a pronouncement of pain. This pain is to be experienced by the **scribes and Pharisees**. The **scribes** were a small group of experts in the Law within the larger Pharisaic group. Woe is pronounced upon all of them. For the first of six times they are called **hypocrites**. The word **hypocrites** in the Greek is *υποκριτης* and refers to “a play actor,” “a pretender,” and emphasizes their true identity as being hidden just beneath the surface of their outward appearance. A. T. Robertson said, “This is the hardest word that Jesus has for any class of people and he employs it for these pious

pretenders who pose as perfect.”<sup>7</sup> The whole passage may be viewed as a hypocritical contrast between their outward appearance and the inward reality. They appeared religious in the true sense of the word, as the fig tree showed outward promise, but there was no inward reality, no true spiritual fruit. Their religion was nothing more than a thin veneer over an empty vessel. The stated reason for the coming pain is **because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people**. The word **shut off** means “to prevent passage at an opening, *shut, lock, bar*.” They barred entry to **the kingdom of heaven**. The words at the end of verse 13 are an explanation. **For you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in**. Some think the present tense must mean that the kingdom was already present. However, the kingdom of heaven consistently refers to Messiah reigning on the Davidic throne. This was not a present reality. Even the King’s presence does not mean the kingdom is present. However, one may qualify to enter this coming kingdom at any time in history through simple faith in the Messiah. Yet the kingdom itself is still future. The scribes and Pharisees were not believing so as to qualify to enter, **nor** were they allowing the people who were thinking about believing to qualify. Constable says, “They kept people from entering the kingdom by not preparing to enter it themselves and by discouraging others from doing so (cf. 18:6–7; 22:41–46).”<sup>8</sup> False religious leaders always deny people entrance into the kingdom by directing them away from the true understanding of Scripture which is always presumed to be clear and forthright.

In 23:14 the NASB cites another woe. **Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation**. This is not in the earliest manuscripts but was introduced by a scribe from Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47. Because it is biblical we will comment briefly on it here, though it is not here in the original. They are called **hypocrites** for two reasons; first, **because you devour widows’ houses**. Widows in Israel, like orphans, were supposed to be provided and cared for. However, what the scribes and Pharisees did was take advantage of them by encouraging them to bequeath their estates to them in their wills. This is still a common practice in Christianity today. If someone wants to do that of their own accord that is their decision. But it should not be done under duress and the consequences of willing an estate to a church over one’s children should be considered. It may turn them away from Christ and the Church. Second, **because...for a pretense you make long prayers**. They stood on the street corners and prayed theatrically to draw attention. In the synagogue Figart says, “There were eighteen eulogies formulated and repeated in the synagogues; the first three and the last three (which cover several printed pages) were the earliest, and were used in our Lord’s time, “other petitions being inserted between them. There was thus room for the endless repetitions and ‘long prayers’ which the Saviour condemned.”<sup>9</sup> This was all done to impress men. Because of it Christ condemned them. Again, this is not in the original here but it is elsewhere.

In 23:15 the second woe deals with proselytism. **Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves**. The word **woe** again is a pronouncement of pain upon the **scribes and**

**Pharisees.** For a second time they are called **hypocrites** which means they were “play actors,” “pretenders.” The reason stated is **because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte.** The expression **travel around on sea and land** is probably hyperbole, an overemphasis in order to get the point across. The point is they were extremely energetic in their proselytizing, like Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses. They went to great lengths to get converts. In the NT, Gentiles who converted to Judaism were either “God-fearers” or “proselytes.” God-fearers were Gentile converts who believed in the one true God but were not circumcised. They were therefore on the fringe of Judaism. Cornelius the centurion is an example of a God-fearer (Acts 10:1-2). Proselytes were Gentile converts who believed in the one true God and were circumcised. They enjoyed more privileges in Judaism. In this verse the **scribes and Pharisees** were zealous to **make proselytes,** Gentile converts who were circumcised. The Book of Galatians indicates that they desired the foreskins of Gentiles in order to make a good show before men of their religious activity. The problem was that when they made a proselyte the new convert was still not one step closer to entering the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is not entered into by circumcision but by faith. As such Jesus says, **you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.** They did not have faith and their converts did not have faith. But the converts were twice as much sons of hell because they were under the pretext that they did qualify to enter the kingdom. But in reality they had only converted from one pagan religion to a false religion. It is the same today when people convert from Mormonism to Roman Catholicism. They are merely trading one false religious system for another. As such they are not one step closer to the kingdom of God. But they are under the pretext that they are.

In 23:16-22 we come to the third woe. This one is more extensive. It deals with oaths. The scribes and Pharisees thought that by changing terminology they could make oaths they were not bound to keep and in that way pull one over on the uninitiated. **“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.’<sup>17</sup>“You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold?<sup>18</sup>“And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.’<sup>19</sup>“You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering?<sup>20</sup>“Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it.<sup>21</sup>“And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it.<sup>22</sup>“And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.** You can see the general tenor of this thing. It was all word games. Note in verse 16 that Jesus pronounced **pain** on them and referred to them as **blind guides** for this kind of nonsense. If you haven’t noticed it’s not good for one who **guides** others to be **blind.** In 15:14 Jesus said of the Pharisees, “Let them alone, they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit.” He was warning His disciples there to stay away from the teaching of the Pharisees because it was rotten and would destroy their ability to live by faith. The kinds of games the scribes and Pharisees played with words indicated they were blind guides. They would say things like verse 16, **Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.** These distinctions were nothing

more than tricks that enabled them to lie and get away with it. In 23:17 Jesus pronounces them to be "... **fools and blind men!** He then asks, "**Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold?**" Since **the temple** made **the gold** holy then one could not swear on **the temple** without swearing on **the gold of the temple**. Therefore, for them to make such distinctions was nothing more than a game of linguistic charades. In 23:18 they had other similar formulas. **And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.'** "**You blind men,**" This is the second time He has referred to them as **blind** in this woe. Then He asks a similar question, "**which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering?**" Again, the **altar** sanctified **the offering**, so how could one **swear by the altar** and not swear by **the offering** as well. These distinctions were futile language games. As Jesus points out in 23:20, "**Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it.**"<sup>21</sup> "**And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it.**"<sup>22</sup> "**And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.** They had all kinds of formulas to make oaths that they never intended on keeping. But Jesus says they were bound to keep them because they were playing nothing more than word games. Pentecost said, "They would distinguish between swearing by the temple and by the gold of the temple, or between swearing by the altar and a gift on the altar, or between swearing by God's throne and the God who sits on the throne. By making such distinctions the Pharisees were able to take an oath, but then absolve themselves of responsibility for fulfilling the oath. The one uninitiated in the distinctions would accept the oath of the Pharisee, not knowing that the oath had been couched in such phraseology that the Pharisee did not consider himself bound by it." But Jesus was the lawgiver at Sinai. He knew the original intent of the Law as it related to truthfulness. Matt 5:37, "let your statement be, 'Yes, yes,' or No, no'; anything beyond these is of the evil one." By going beyond this they evidenced they were of their father the devil. Thus Jesus pronounced pain upon them.

In 23:23 we find the fourth woe. This one deals with tithing. The word "tithe" means a tenth. In the OT Israelites were obligated to pay three tithes or tenths; one tenth of your total income annually, which was normally generated by agricultural produce, was given to support the Levites; another tenth of your total income annually was to be used for a big party in Jerusalem fomenting national fervor; and another tenth of your total income was required every third year to provide for strangers and those unable to hold title to land. The three tithes averaged out to 23 1/3% annually. But look what the scribes and Pharisees had done in verse 23. **For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.** They tithed on the **mint, dill and cummin?** What are **mint, dill and cummin?** Herbs. They were what you might grow in a small herb garden outside your kitchen window. The point is they were inconsequential to your annual produce. Yet they made a big deal out of tithing them. Taking a leaf of mint for every ten mint leaves. I mean give me a break. Can you be any more scrupulous than that? Jesus wasn't saying tithing was wrong. Tithing was the law, it was obligatory. But the lengths to which they went to tithe **mint and dill and cummin** and at the same time **neglect**

**the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness**, was inexcusable. There were **weightier** things in **the law**. Here are three of them; **justice, mercy and faithfulness**. Those are pretty important things. **Mint, dill and cummin**, not so much. They made mountains out of molehills and molehills out of mountains. It's making a crusade out of saving beached whales and doing nothing about the abortion epidemic in this country. Does the word **blind** ring a bell?

That's why Jesus in 23:24 pronounced once more that they were **blind guides**. By not being able to distinguish which provisions were weightier than others they revealed their blindness. This was inexcusable. Pentecost said, "The Pharisees' followers thought they were being led into life without knowing that they were being led by spiritually blind guides."<sup>10</sup> The entire nation suffered from an extreme case of glaucoma. The following picture of what they had done is memorable: You **strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!** Talk about missing the boat. The **gnat** was one of the smallest unclean creatures in the Law and the **camel** was the largest unclean creature. In great irony they went to the Law and **strained out** the smallest letter of the Law and in the process ended up **swallowing an entire camel**. "Blind guides, indeed." No wonder, in verse 23 He pronounced pain on them and again referred to them as **hypocrites**. It is significant that Jesus does not have such hard words for murderers, prostitutes and adulterers. He reserves these words for false religious leaders. In other words, Jesus viewed false religious leaders as worse than murderers.

In 23:25 we find the fifth woe. This one deals with cleanliness. He says, **Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.** This really gets to the overall issue. They were concerned with the outside, externals, but not with the inside, the internals. As far as the external ceremonial issues they were into all the minutia. They **cleaned the outside of the cup and of the dish** to rid them of all impurities. In the Mishnah, which is the written form of the oral law, Figart says, "...the subject of purification alone contains 126 chapters. Even when this is narrowed down to purification of vessels, as Edersheim has noted: "The first tractate in this 'Order of Purifications'...contains no fewer than thirty chapters" Edersheim, *Life and Times* 1:357, fn 1)."<sup>11</sup> They were obsessed with external cleanliness. But Jesus says, **inside they are full of robbery and self indulgence**. They cleaned the cups and dishes with great care but then they filled them with costly wine and luxurious food that they had acquired via **robbery** and **selfish** excess. Because of this Jesus again proclaims them to be **blind**. The order of the day was to **first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish**, meaning come to faith so that they had a heart inclined to true obedience. Then the externals would actually mean something.

In 23:27 the sixth woe. **Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.** This **woe** continues the emphasis on their concern with the externals but not the internals. It was a custom to apply fresh plaster to **tombs** in order to give them a beautiful appearance so people would not touch them and

accidentally become unclean and unfit to participate in the Passover festivities. Numbers 19:16 said "Anyone who...touches...a grave, shall be unclean for seven days." However, the real source of uncleanness was the scribes and Pharisees themselves. They are likened here to what was in the tombs, **dead men's bones and all uncleanness**. With all their concern for external cleanliness, they were the real source of uncleanness. Constable notes, "Both appeared attractive, but both also contaminated people who contacted them. Pharisaic contamination precluded participation in the blessings that Passover anticipated, namely kingdom blessings."<sup>12</sup> When Christ looked at the scribes and the Pharisees He saw through the thin veil of external beauty to the dead men's bones and filth that contaminated them.

In 23:28 Jesus states the point of **hypocrisy** for which He pronounced pain coming upon them. **So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness**. Pentecost said, "...the whitewash was deceptive, for it only thinly covered the outside. Pharisaism was a system of external observances that made men appear outwardly to be righteous. Those observances covered over the hypocrisy and wickedness that were within."<sup>13</sup> Because of this Jesus pronounced pain coming upon them.

In 23:29 the seventh woe and a different comparison with tombs is employed. **Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell? Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.** In verse 29 the **woe** is pronounced relative to the point that they treated the **prophets** differently than their **fathers** had and that they would never do what their fathers had. Their **fathers** murdered the prophets but they had built the tombs of the prophets and adorned the monuments of the righteous. The word **build** can mean to build a new structure or it can mean to build it up by improving it. They probably did both for **the prophets**. The word **adorn** is *κοσμεω*, from which we get "cosmetics." They would make cosmetic adornments of the monuments of the righteous in their honor. By doing this they were saying in verse 30, **If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets**. However, in actuality, they were plotting to shed the blood of Jesus who was the prophet like unto Moses. More than that He was also the priest after the order of Melchizedek and the king of the line of David. In 23:31 Jesus says, **So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets**. Jesus knew that they were planning to kill him. He said in John 8:37, "I know that you are Abraham's descendants; yet you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you." In Matt 21:38, the parable of the landowner, He said, "...when the vine-growers saw



the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' A few verses later it says the chief priests and Pharisees "understood that He was speaking about them but when they sought to seize Him they feared the people because they considered Him to be a prophet." Their purposes were clear. They wanted to kill the prophet like unto Moses. As such they testified against themselves and evidenced they were in fact the sons of those who murdered the very prophets of the tombs they built and adorned. In truth they were not physical descendants **of those who murdered** them but they were their spiritual descendants.

In 23:32 He goes on to say, **Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers.** This means to go ahead and do what you are planning to do. It is what they planned to do and it is what they would do. By doing so they would **Fill up...the measure of the guilt of their fathers.** The idea behind **filling up a measure of guilt** in the OT is that God will only put up with some much sin and then He will act in judgment. Grace always precedes judgment and God had been very gracious through the OT. He had sent them prophet after prophet and they had killed prophet after prophet. The amount of Israel's sins was filling up. When they killed Jesus and afterward His disciples as predicted in v 34, the cup of their guilt would be full and God's wrath would come upon them. This is the same as the parable of the landowner where he planted a vineyard and provided everything for its productivity, renting it out to the vine-growers. When harvest time came he sent his slaves to receive the produce and they beat one, killed one and stoned one. He then sent more slaves and they did the same thing to them. Finally, he sent his son, the heir and they said, this is the heir, let us kill him and seize his inheritance. This is also the same as the parable of the wedding feast where a king sent out an invitation to come to honor his son. When the time grew near he sent out his slaves to remind them but they were unwilling to come. When everything was prepared he sent out more slaves but some paid no attention, others seized the slaves and killed them. As a consequence, the king sent his armies and destroyed them and set their city on fire. In the same way here, this generation would go on and fill up the measure of the guilt of their fathers and the judgment stated in v 38 is that their house would be left desolate. This probably speaks of the Temple and coupling with the other prophecies both Jerusalem and the Temple would be destroyed.

In 23:33 He says much of what John the Baptist said earlier. **You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?** They were **serpents** in their inner character. By referring to them as **serpents** we are reminded of Satan who masqueraded as a serpent and deceived Eve, leading her astray. Pentecost says, "Eve was deceived by Satan, who came in the form of a snake (Gen. 3:1). Without doubt the snake that approached Eve was beautiful to look upon externally; nevertheless, it was the vehicle through which Eve was deceived. Christ appropriately called the Pharisees snakes, for while their externalism may have been attractive to people, the system that they proclaimed deceived people and kept them from Christ." For their own rejection and their deception of others, how could they hope to **escape the sentence of hell?** This is the second time He has indicated they would spend eternity in hell. The Greek word translated **hell** is *γέεννα* and does rightly refer to hell or the lake of fire and not merely sheol, a temporary place of confinement until the final judgment. Gehenna is

the final place of torment for all the unsaved and these religious leaders assigned themselves to this judgment by rejecting the Messiah. Their torment will be forever and ever. It is not limited. We do not believe in annihilationism. Rev 14:11 says "The smoke of their torment goes up forever." As mentioned before, the seven woes emphasize both temporal judgment, which came in AD70 destruction of Jerusalem, and eternal judgment, which comes after the millennium in the casting of unbelievers into the lake of fire.

In 23:34 is predicted the persecution and destruction of prophets and apostles in the Book of Acts. **Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city.** Verse 35 gives the purpose for sending them. **So that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.** This **generation** saw the greatest things in the history of the world. The people of Israel said it themselves, Matt 9:33, "After the demon was cast out, the mute man spoke; and the crowds were amazed, and were saying, "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel." This was truly unique revelation. In Matt 12:22 a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute was brought to Jesus and He healed him, so that the mute man spoke and saw. All the crowds were amazed, and were saying, "This man cannot be the Son of David, can he?" They knew nobody else could do these miracles. And yet the Pharisees said, "This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons." There had never been anything like it and there has never been anything like it since and they said no. All this was building up to a great judgment. They would crucify Him but some think that because Jesus prayed on the cross, "Forgive them Father, they know not what they do," that the judgment was delayed and so verse 34, they would kill and even crucify some of the prophets, wise men and scribes during the Book of Acts and scourge others, and we know to think of Stephen and James and Paul and Peter and all those whom the Jews persecuted, scourged and killed during that time. The purpose in verse 35, **So that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.** Note that the words *the guilt of* are in italics and so are not original. If included it would seem that the scribes and Pharisees were being held guilty for the sins of past generations. That would be contrary to Ezek 18. God holds each person responsible for his own sins. He also holds groups responsible for group sins. What would **fall** upon that generation was judgment that had graciously been withheld from past generations. Constable explains, "Jesus was not saying that the Jews who rejected Him were responsible for the deaths of all the righteous martyrs throughout biblical history. They simply were the ones who would add the last measure of guilt that would result in the outpouring of God's wrath for all those murders."<sup>14</sup>

As such the cup of wrath had been filling from the spilling of the **blood of** righteous **Abel** to **blood of** righteous **Berechiah**. In some way this refers to all the **blood shed** in the OT period. Just how has been given a couple of explanations. First, Jesus may be referring to the first and last murder in the Jewish canon. The Jewish canon

begins with Genesis and ends with 2 Chronicles. Abel is murdered in Genesis 4, and a Zechariah, is murdered in 2 Chron 24. Thus, first and last murder in the Jewish canon. However, an objection to this view is that the Zechariah in 2 Chron 24 is not the son of Berechiah but the son of Jehoida. Sometimes explanation is attempted to explain that his grandfather was Berechiah. However, a second explanation may be better. Jesus may be referring to the first and last murder in OT history. Abel is the first recorded murder in OT history and the prophet Zechariah, son of Berechiah, somewhere around 518BC. Either way, the point is the same, the judgment due had been put off for generations such that now it was filled up and with the crucifixion of Jesus and His followers it would overflow and come upon that generation, the generation that committed the unpardonable sin. Only one generation could commit that sin. It was the generation that saw Messiah, rejected Messiah, crucified Messiah and persecuted, scourged and crucified His followers. In AD70 the temporal judgment came when their city was burned and their Temple destroyed and not one stone left upon another. But even that is nothing compared to the eternal judgment that they will face for not believing in the only begotten Son of God. How dreadful a thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

In conclusion, what can we learn? The central lesson is against false religion erected on a failure to understand Scripture. All false religions add, subtract or distort the Scripture and therefore do not understand. This relates to the interpretation of Scripture. The way this is handled in modern times is to discuss how we ought to interpret Scripture. We maintain that it ought to be interpreted literally. This includes both ordinary literal and figurative literal but the bottom line is that there is always a literal referent to language symbols designated by context. We insist that only when this method is followed is Scripture rightly understood. All other methods of interpretation, whether described as allegorical, spiritual, tropological, ethical or theological, are simply forms of unbelief. As such, to the extent that they apply this method they do not believe the Scripture. It doesn't matter if it's the system of Covenant Theology, Roman Catholicism, Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, British Israelism or Islam. All these groups quote Scripture but misuse Scripture. They all claim Scripture as an authority but then skirt around it by tricky methods of interpretation. They all claim to believe in the gospel but they all sneak works in the backdoor. The simple truth is they are like the scribes and Pharisees. They look beautiful on the outside with their long robes of glory, beautiful temples, elaborate rituals and lengthy prayer books, but inside they are filthy places, unclean tombs of decaying flesh and dead bones. Those who follow them may feel safe from the fires of hell but in reality they are all sons of hell, sons of their father the devil. There is but one way of righteousness, it is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone apart from any works whatsoever. Without that one assigns himself to outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth in the everlasting torments of hell.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Metzger, United Bible Societies, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament (4th Rev. Ed.) (London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 50.

<sup>2</sup> John Walvoord, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p 171-2.

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 263.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 23:11.

<sup>5</sup> John Walvoord, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p 171.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Figart, *The King of the Kingdom of Heaven*, p 433.

<sup>7</sup> A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Mt 6:2.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 23:13.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Figart, *The King of the Kingdom of Heaven*, p 435.

<sup>10</sup> J Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 393-4.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Figart, *The King of the Kingdom of Heaven*, p 439-40.

<sup>12</sup> Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 23:27.

<sup>13</sup> J Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 394.

<sup>14</sup> Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 23:35.