

## **Woe to the Impenitent Cities**

Call to Worship: Psalm 87

1st Scripture: Luke 10:1-16

2nd Scripture: Matthew 11:16-24

### **Introduction**

After His brief interaction with two disciples of John the Baptist, who were sent by John to ask whether He was truly the coming One, Jesus had turned to the multitudes to say some important things about John, and about all who are in the New Covenant Kingdom of God. And then, the Lord turned His attention toward addressing the hard-heartedness of the present generation, who like foolish children, had rejected both John and Jesus, leading them to miss the glorious Kingdom of God that was now at hand. They accused John of having a demon, because he came as an aesthetic, not eating or drinking, and they accused Jesus of being a drunkard and a glutton, because He came eating and drinking, and that, with tax collectors and sinners. But, in every case, those who rejected John and Jesus, were without excuse for missing the Kingdom of God, and wisdom would be justified by her children. The truth of the matter would soon be brought to bear, vindicating both John and Jesus, and condemning all who had foolishly rejected them.

This morning then, Jesus moves on to pronounce woes upon three such cities that have whole-sale rejected Him, in spite of the many signs and wonders that He had performed among them. And to this end, they serve as examples, both at the community and individual levels, of the type of judgment that will come upon those who have spurned the light of the Gospel that was shed upon them. Again, it is important to remember, both, from the broader context that we have already gone over, and the immediate context that we are now considering, that such rejections of Christ, are inexcusable, no matter what justifying reasons people may seek to use as a means of quelling their own conscience.

## **I. Woe to the Impenitent Cities**

Notice verse 20 again, which shows an indelible connection to what our Lord has just said about the present generation, which, like children, has sought to use foolish reasons for rejecting the ministries of John and Jesus. “*Then* He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent...”

And so, when Matthew uses the word “*Then*” here, he wants us to see that Jesus is now putting forth very specific examples of those who fit the description of the present, foolish generation that He had just spoken about. And as the Lord addresses these cities, we are further meant to be sobered by the fact that such individuals are without excuse, in light of the fierce pronouncements of eternal judgment and condemnation that Jesus issues against them. In other words, brethren, here Jesus provides very real, tangible examples, showing that He is not playing any games with His words. None of this is theoretical. He needed to be heard very clearly by His audience. And He needs to be heard very clearly by us, today.

Now, before we take special note of the three specific cities mentioned here, notice two important facts given to us in the opening of this portion of the narrative. After saying what He has just said about the present generation, we are told that Jesus then began to “rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent.” And so, there are two critical facts given here concerning the cities that our Lord rebukes, which line up with the context that we have already gone over:

1) We are told that most of His mighty works had been done in these cities. In other words, most of the miracles that Jesus had done (accompanied by much of His preaching), were done in these particular cities. And so, they were given a tremendous privilege, in being able to behold such great works of God; they were able to witness tremendous signs and wonders which had served to authenticate the office and teaching of Christ, which most other cities did not experience. To be sure, in the three and a half years time, within which, the Lord had ministered (before He was crucified), His ministry was not evenly dispersed throughout all of Israel. And furthermore, He did not perform signs and wonders all throughout Israel. Most of His time was, in fact, committed to a circuit of cities that were in Galilee, and especially near the Sea of Galilee, which is where all three of these cities happened to be located, as well.

And so, some cities were very privileged, concerning the amount of light they had received; concerning the great and powerful ways, in which, God had revealed the glory of His Son, by way of His presence, His teachings, and especially His great miracles. To this end, as the Scriptures teach, with greater light comes a greater accountability to properly respond to that light. And while everyone will be ultimately responsible for their own sins, there is certainly a greater measure of judgment that will come upon those who have received a greater amount of light. That's the very point of this text. It's not to excuse the guilt of those who have not had the privilege of beholding more of the light of Christ (they are still guilty of their sins), but rather, to highlight the tremendous weight of *added* guilt that would be added to the condemnation of those who had been given the greater privilege of having received greater light.

2) And so, most of the Lord's mighty works were done in these cities, and yet, here's the thrust of our Lord's rebuke... they didn't repent! They did not respond properly to the revelation that was attached to the mighty works that Jesus had done. They saw; they were amazed; they benefitted greatly from the light, and yet, they did not repent! They did not change their ways and embrace the Christ of those mighty works, by faith. In fact, even in spite of the mighty wonders, they ultimately rejected Christ.

Now, here is where addressing the specific cities becomes helpful to us. From a geographical standpoint, it is important to note first, that these three cities, Capernaum, Chorazin and Bethsaida are all located at the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, and they are right next to each other, with Chorazin being somewhat in the middle, and Capernaum and Bethsaida being on both sides, Bethsaida just to the east of the Jordan River, and Capernaum just to the west. And so, Jesus did, indeed, spend a lot of time at these cities.

But, what is further interesting is that the only miracle that is recorded in all four Gospels, was actually done in a deserted part of Bethsaida, where people from all of these cities would have participated in that great event. Now, what miracle am I speaking about? The feeding of the five thousand, where the Lord multiplied five loaves of bread and two fish, to feed over five thousand individuals. It's also worth noting that the Lord healed many people during that same time period. [Read Luke 9:10-14]. Now, after this had happened, notice where the Lord and His disciples had travelled (by boat), and where the multitudes had followed them. [Read John

6:15-18 & 22-25]. Here, we find that the same multitudes had followed Jesus to Capernaum. And so, after performing many signs and wonders (and feeding the five thousand) in Bethsaida, Jesus is followed into Capernaum, which is where the great dialog from John 6 takes place. These are two of the towns rebuked by Jesus, in our main text.

Now, what is highly noteworthy about this information, is that, if you recall what takes place in John 6, we find that it is this large multitude of people, from these towns, who ultimately come to reject Jesus, when He says things that are too hard for them to grasp. [Read John 6:60-68]. Remember, in spite of the signs and wonders that they had seen, these multitudes were not drawn to have faith in the Christ who had performed the signs and wonders. They simply wanted Him to be their personal “food truck.” Jesus rebukes them for this, and that creates the controversy that ultimately leads to their rejection and abandonment of the Lord. [Read John 6:26-59; Note vs. 59- Capernaum again].

Now, why do I point all of this out? These would have been the very people, from the three cities mentioned in our text, which our Lord would have included in His rebuke. In fact, in Luke’s account (which is more historically/chronologically in order), the events of John 6 take place in Luke 9, one Chapter before Luke 10, where we read our first Scripture reading, and the parallel account to our main text here in Matthew 11. And so, our Lord’s pronounced woes against these three cities, goes right in hand, with what had happened not too far before, in John 6. Jesus is rebuking those who had seen most of His signs and wonders; the multitudes who trailed Him wherever He went (by the Sea of Galilee), and indeed, those who actually ate of the bread and fish which He multiplied, until they had all rejected and abandoned Him, when He sought to lovingly rebuke them in John 6, for failing to properly respond to the signs and wonders, in repentance and faith.

Now, having a better appreciation for *who* our Lord was addressing in our main text, let’s look further into the specific rebukes.

“Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent: “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long

ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you.”

And so, the Lord lumps the first two cities that He mentions, together. And here again, the strength of His rebuke is grounded in the fact that these two cities had spurned the great light that they had received, after the Lord had done such mighty works in their presence. Notice, He states that if such works were done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Now, why does our Lord mention these two coastal cities up in the north? It was a well known fact that great destruction had already come upon these two, once great and luxurious cities, in accordance with prophecies made by God’s prophets. Tyre and Sidon were very successful, powerful and wealthy merchant cities that took advantage of the Mediterranean Sea, so as to import and export many resources and goods. And they were virtually untouchable. But, of course, their egos got to them, and God utterly destroyed them; literally brought them to nothing, by use of Alexander the Great and the Greeks. In fact, after taking the city, Alexander was so angered by their obstinate defenses that he leveled half the city of Tyre. That said, it was ultimately in fulfillment of God’s prophecies of judgment against the people of Tyre and Sidon, which led to their demise, because they failed to repent of their wicked ways and to seek the Lord.

And so, here, the Lord says that even Tyre and Sidon would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes; they would have been spared such great judgment, if they had seen the things that Bethsaida and Chorazin had seen. His point is that Tyre and Sidon were not given the privilege of receiving such light. And had they, even they would have repented and been spared judgment. And this being the case, it would be more tolerable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for Chorazin and Bethsaida, who had been given such great light, and yet spurned it. Indeed, the citizens of Tyre and Sidon would still be judged at the final judgment, but their judgment would be more bearable than the great judgment that would come upon those who had been given more light, and yet, failed to repent.

Our Lord then moves on to address Capernaum, that very proud and exalted city to the west of Bethsaida. “And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have

remained until this day. But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you.”

Now addressing Capernaum, the Lord speaks of the great humiliation which will befall this very proud city, on the Day of Judgment. And once again, he especially rebukes them for the great amount of light which they had received (and yet, spurned), stating that that horrible and wretched city of Sodom, which God had destroyed by fire and brimstone during the time of Abraham, would have repented and remained to the present day, had they been given the same light which Capernaum had been given. When one considers just how utterly wicked Sodom was, and how they continued to pursue the angels in Lot’s house, even after they were blinded, the power of this rebuke really hits home, doesn’t it? Had Christ come to them, doing the mighty works that He had done in Capernaum, Sodom would actually have repented, and it would have been spared even up to the present day!

Again, we see the great privilege which was afforded these cities, who had beheld the great and mighty works of the Son of God, and the severity of their gross sin of spurning that light. For, Judgment Day for Sodom (as bad as that will be), will be more bearable than Judgment Day for Capernaum! Again, greater light incurs greater accountability. What a sobering and frightening message for that generation! But friends, what a sobering and frightening message for *our* generation, as well!

## **II. Concluding Applications**

1) Recognize that Gospel light, itself, is provided by grace and never obligated. Now, what do I mean by this? I mean that no one is entitled to be given the privilege of obtaining Gospel light. As we have seen, Jesus did not follow an “equal distribution” policy, when determining where to perform signs and wonders, or where to preach the Gospel. There are places where He spent a lot of time, and there are places that He hardly stepped foot in, and in truth, He was under no obligation to go anywhere at all, if He had so chosen to reveal Himself to no one. Here, we find that there were places where He had performed most of His mighty works, in keeping with the will and design of God.

Now, why do I say all of this? Because, especially in our present thinking climate, it is easy to assume that God must embrace an “equal fairness” principle, in whatever way He relates to this world. That is not the case. That has never been the case, and that never will be the case. God is not obligated to do anything for this world, and all that He does do, is solely by His free grace.

And so, when we consider the fact that there are many places throughout this world that have never so much as heard of Christ or the Gospel, or certainly have not been given the same level of light as others, we don't want to think that that will somehow serve to excuse them from the consequences of their sins. Ignorance is not bliss. Sin is rebellion against God. Sin earns an eternal debt against our infinite, holy Creator, and sin will be recompensed regardless of how much light any individual has. And God is not obligated to provide the light that leads to salvation to anyone. Salvation is of the Lord. It is His free gift, gained by the sacrificial work of His Son, and it is owed to no one. This is important to recognize, not only to emphasize the fact that all of mankind is without excuse for his sin (Rom. 1), but also, to compel us who have been given much light, not to take that light for granted, which brings me to a second critical application.

2) While God does administer light in accordance with His perfect will and timing, those who are the gracious receivers of that light are all the more accountable for it! He who is given much, is expected much. And so, if you can imagine for a moment that God limits the extension of His light, at different times and in different places; and that, God sometimes provides much more light to certain nations than He does to others (no thanks to anything good in anyone), to then spurn that light when it is received, is one of the grossest and highest means of offending God. Let me say it this way. To have been given the great privilege of hearing the Gospel even once, let alone numerous times; and to have all kinds of Bibles and good Christian books in your own language, is a privilege beyond comprehension, which if spurned, will add significant weight to your judgment, in the end.

You see, friends, there are degrees of torment and suffering in hell. And those who dwell at the greatest depths, enduring the most painful level of agony and torment, are not necessarily murderers and people we might think are the worst. It's those who have been given the most

light, and have rejected that light. We all know how bad Sodom and Gomorrah were, don't we? And Jesus said, the day of judgment would be more tolerable for them, than for those who were in Capernaum. Was that because Capernaum had committed worse crimes? Probably not. It was because Capernaum was given a tremendous amount of light; the truth was so boldly seen and proclaimed there, and Sodom was not given such light. Indeed, had they been given that gracious privilege, they would have repented Jesus said!

Now, what about a people, who are living at a time when the completed Canon of Scripture is accessible so easily, even at the click of a button on our smart phones? Capernaum didn't have such a privilege. They didn't even have individual copies of the Old Testament readily available to all, let alone the New. And what about a people who have two thousand years of church history under their belt, where doctrines have been well examined and explained; where confessions and catechisms are in abundance, and where we have enjoyed the freedom to practice religion as we please? Friends, I want to suggest to you that everyone in this room is far, far more privileged than these three cities that Jesus rebuked, when considering the amount of light that we have. And you have the Word of God expounded freely before you, from a pulpit, week after week, with access to all kinds of means of grace, without the present threat of persecution. What do you think judgment will look like for you, if you reject Christ today? How much greater do you think your condemnation will be? [\*And we read about these cities now!\*

You might say, "Well, I haven't seen Jesus in the flesh, and I haven't witnessed His miracles firsthand." But, you have much much more. You live in the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, who came down upon the people of God at Pentecost. And you have the Word of God, which alone is able to convert the soul, unlike simply seeing a miracle done. You have much, much more! Suffice it to say that the "woes" which modify your name, are far greater than the woes that Jesus had pronounced upon these cities, if you continue to reject the Gospel!

[The Gospel!!!!]

Amen!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-25