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Matthew 23:34 - 23:39



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses Matthew 23:34-39 and the prophecy of the killing and crucifixion of prophets, wise men, and scribes. He notes that Jesus refers to Zechariah, son of Barakiah, who was killed in the temple due to prophesying. Gregg explains that this event is not mentioned in Luke's account and some scholars dispute the reference to Zechariah, son of Barakiah, suggesting that it may have been added for clarification. Gregg concludes by noting the different chronologies of events in Matthew and Luke and the significance of Palm Sunday.

Transcript

Today we're picking up our study in Matthew chapter 23 again, and beginning at verse 34. Some of these verses that we will read now, we looked at briefly in our previous session, but we did not really give thorough treatment to them. And we will extend our study to the end of this chapter, Matthew 23, verses 34 through 39.

Therefore indeed, Jesus said, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes. Some of them you will kill and crucify, some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Barakiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her, how often I wanted to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. See, your house is left to you desolate, for I say to you that you shall see me no more until you say, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Now, one of the most important bits of insight that Jesus gives us right here, or gives to Jerusalem and its leaders, whom he is addressing here, is in verse 36, where he said, Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

He is saying that he's not just like any of the prophets, just generally denouncing wickedness of their generation, but he's saying that the whole house of cards of phony

religiosity that is exhibited in the Pharisees and the scribes, and that wickedness that remains unrepented of in Jerusalem, having killed the prophets before and now being on the verge of killing Jesus himself, and as he points it out, even those that he sends to them, they will persecute. He said, All of that is going to be punished, and it's all going to come down on this generation. He is, of course, referring to the fact that within 40 years of the time that he uttered these words, the destruction of Jerusalem was a reality.

It became a reality. The Romans invaded Israel in 66 A.D. There was a protracted and bloody, horrendous war where the Jews were badly beaten. They were besieged in Jerusalem for a period of months.

During that time, there was great starvation, great chaos within the city, and finally the Romans broke through and slaughtered who they could. They took captives who they could. They destroyed the city.

They burned down the temple, dismantled the whole thing stone by stone, and that was the end. It has never been rebuilt. That is, the temple has never been rebuilt.

Of course, there are people today in Jerusalem, but there has been no restoration of the Jewish commonwealth that had been centered there. 1400 years, God had been working with the Jewish people from the days of Moses, where he had brought them out of Egypt, made a covenant with them, brought them into their land, established a monarchy, sent prophets to them to try to keep them in order. Basically, they killed the prophets, most of them.

There was, generally speaking, not a positive response to God, and therefore, judgment came. And that judgment came in great force and with great severity in 70 A.D., when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and put an end once and for all to the Jewish system. Now, that is what was about to come about.

That's what Jesus is warning them about. He says, all this is going to come upon this generation. Well, what was it they'd done wrong? Well, he had said, back in verses 29 through 33, he said that these Pharisees and scribes had respect for the prophets of former times, whom their ancestors, their fathers, had killed.

And they said, well, if we'd lived back then, we wouldn't have killed them. However, he says, you are really of the same bloodline as your fathers, and their evil runs in your veins, and you will finish out the work that they have begun. And he was, of course, referring to the fact that they would kill him and those that he sent.

And there, in verse 34, he says, therefore, indeed, I will send you prophets, wise men, and scribes. Some of them you will kill and crucify. Some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city.

Now, who are these prophets, wise men, and scribes? Well, I wouldn't be surprised if all

three of those designations apply to the apostles. The apostles were prophets, they were wise men, and they were scribes. Now, prophets, wise men, and scribes were the three categories in the Old Testament of offices that gave guidance to Israel, and particularly to the kings.

There were three ways that a king might know the will of God. He might consult the scribes or the priests who had the law, that is, the written code, the written law that God had given. That's what the scribes were involved with.

Or he might consult his wise men, his counselors, and just understand what is advisable from the point of wisdom. Or he might get a special revelation through a prophet, ask the prophets if God has revealed anything. And so, these are the three ways in which God made his will known to the Jews historically.

Through the prophets who had special revelation, through wise men who gave wise counsel, and through the law, which was in the hands of the priests generally, though in Jesus' days it was the scribes that handled the law. So, the written law, the revelation to the prophets, and wisdom of the wise were all means by which Jewish people knew what God wanted them to do. Now, all of these positions, in a sense, were wrapped up in the apostles.

The apostles received special revelation. They expounded the law of God because Jesus opened their understanding that they might understand the scriptures over in Luke chapter 24, verse 45. And they also gave wisdom.

They also gave opinions based on wisdom. Remember Paul saying in 1 Corinthians chapter 7, I have no word from the Lord about this, but I'll give my judgment as one who has obtained mercy to be faithful. He, as a wise man, giving his counsel.

The apostles were the principal propagators of Christianity shortly after Jesus died. We read of that in the book of Acts, even though there were also evangelists who did the same. It is essentially the apostles that we read of receiving the treatment Jesus describes here.

He says, I'm going to send you prophets, wise men, and scribes. Some of them you will kill and crucify. Peter was crucified.

James was killed. Now, these were, of course, Jews did not practice crucifixion. But they did deliver up people to crucifixion as they did Jesus.

The Jews did not personally crucify Jesus. That was a Roman method of execution. But the Jews were subject to the Romans.

And in order to get a man killed, they had to persuade the Romans to crucify him. And so the Jews persuaded the Romans to crucify Jesus. And therefore, the Bible says, the Jews

crucified him.

And likewise, Peter and James and so forth were put to death by the Romans, but at the instigation of the Jews. So some of the apostles were killed by them. Others were scourged in their synagogues and persecuted from city to city.

We read in the book of Acts of how Jewish people persecuted Paul and pursued him from city to city, causing trouble for him. He was beaten in the synagogues. So were John and Peter in Acts chapters 4 and 5. So what Jesus says is going to happen here, what the Jews are going to do to him, as he puts it, prophets, wise men, and scribes, actually we find the fulfillment is these things were done to the apostles.

So that the apostles themselves held an office that took in and included in itself all of those three offices, prophet, wise man, and scribe, that had been separate things in the Old Testament time. Now, in killing Jesus and the apostles, this was going to fill up the measure of guilt of the nation. And it says that on you may come all the righteous blood, verse 35, shed on the 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.

Now, Jesus did not live in the generation that had murdered Zechariah. He's referring to, I mean, if this is a correct reading, Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, well, that is a reference to the prophet Zechariah who had lived 500 years before Christ. And therefore, these Jews of Jesus' time had not killed him, although Jesus said, you killed him, you murdered him.

Jesus has seen a continuity in spirit between the Jews of his day and those of the earlier generations that killed the prophets. He says it was your fathers who did it. You have not repented.

You're no different than they are. It's one constant unbroken stream of unrepentant murderousness toward God's prophets that you and your fathers have perpetuated. Now, there is a slight problem in this text because Jesus speaks of the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.

Well, the fact of the matter is we do not have any record in the Old Testament of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah's death. And we do not know from at least any other sources whether he was murdered between the temple and the altar. We might just say, well, we don't need any other sources.

Jesus said he was, and that settles it. True, if Jesus said that, then it does settle it. One thing that complicates things is that there was another Zechariah.

This Zechariah was the son of Jehoiada, the priest, and he lived earlier than Zechariah, the son of Berechiah. That latter, the son of Berechiah, wrote the book of Zechariah in the Old Testament. But Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada, did not write any books of the

Bible, but he was a prophet, and he was the son of Jehoiada, the priest.

And he, we are told in 2 Chronicles 24, verses 20 and 21, he was put to death by the Jews in the temple itself, or in the place that Jesus suggests, between the temple and the altar. So, Jesus seems to refer to a death of a man named Zechariah that sounds like a reference to the death of this man, Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada, recorded in 2 Chronicles, chapter 24. The problem is that Jesus makes the comment and says it was Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, which is a different Zechariah of whom we have no record of his death, and we don't have any independent witness whether he died in the temple or some other place, or at whose hands.

Now, there's a number of ways that this has been taken. Some have felt, and I'm certainly not among them, that Jesus made a mistake here, that Jesus confused Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada, with Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, and that the story of the death of Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada, Jesus thought it was applied to the son of Berechiah, and therefore he made a historical error. Now, of course, those who are skeptical about the Bible always try to seize on this kind of thing and leap to this kind of a conclusion.

To my mind, this is not at all a likely conclusion to reach. That Jesus would make such an error seems extremely unlikely, because, well, I mean, it doesn't take a real Bible scholar to know the difference between Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, who wrote the book of Zechariah, and another much lesser known Zechariah of an earlier age, and to know the stories about him. Jesus would have to be extremely unfamiliar with the Old Testament to make such a mistake, and when we read the story of Jesus and his teaching, it does not sound like he was at all unfamiliar with the Old Testament.

He knew it very well, and therefore it is not likely that he would make such a mistake. So the question then is, is there a mistake here? Now, there is a possibility that a mistake exists here, but it would not have been Jesus that made it. So, it is possible that a scribal error exists here.

I'm not saying that this is the solution, but this is one consideration. That not Jesus, nor even Matthew, who recorded the words of Jesus, but a scribe sometime in more recent history, copying out the text, and one who produced the text as we have it now, may have added the words, in order to clarify that the scribe himself was mistaken, because he wasn't paying close attention to the Old Testament. Now, we don't have any proof that this is the case, and there is no reason that we have to appeal to it necessarily, but there is actually nothing to make it impossible that this explanation could be true.

A scribe could have, a copyist I should say, could have added the words, thinking to make a clarification, but in fact mistaking what he was doing. If he did that, then the text would have come down to us as it reads, with this mistake in it, but it would not be a mistake made by Jesus, or a mistake made by the writers of the gospel, but of merely a

copyist. There are such copyist errors that have entered the text.

There are very little consequence, generally speaking, but we know they exist, and it is not inconceivable that this could be one. But we don't have to appeal to that necessarily, because we know that there were many men named Zechariah in the Bible. At least 36 men in the Bible are named Zechariah.

That two of them may have died similarly is not at all inconceivable. That Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, could have died in the same way that Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada, died, is not at all implausible. Especially since it was very common for the Jews to kill their prophets, and it was very common for the prophets to prophesy at the temple.

And therefore, for more than one man to die in the same way that is killed by the Jews at the temple while he was prophesying, is extremely likely to have happened. And if it happened to Zechariah, the son of Berechiah as well, well then, that would explain it. Jehoiada's son and Berechiah's son, both named Zechariah, would both have suffered similar fates.

This is not the least bit unlikely in terms of the character of the Jews in killing their prophets. However, there is one slight problem with that that occurs to me, and that is that Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, who is the one that is mentioned in this text, actually was well received by the Jews of his day. He was one of the few prophets of the Old Testament who the Jews actually responded to his message favorably, and the Lord moved them to do what he said, and so forth.

And therefore, there's no evidence that the son of Berechiah ever met with any kind of negative resistance from the Jews of his time. And therefore, it would seem strange for them to kill him, if that is what happened. One thing I would say, there is a parallel account to this in Luke, in Luke chapter 11, verses 49 through 51.

And there, the mention of Zechariah does not say son of Berechiah. It just says from Abel to Zechariah, the blood of all these men will come upon this generation. Now, it's interesting because in Luke's version, it does not say Zechariah son of Berechiah, which designation is the thing that raises the question and the problem.

That may suggest that Jesus' actual words simply were Zechariah, without mentioning son of Berechiah, and that might add credence to the suggestion that perhaps a copyist who was copying the gospel of Matthew may have added the words. We do not know for sure. I would say this, though.

It certainly is possible that a copyist added these words. It is also possible that Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, did die in this way, and therefore, the words could be genuine. It makes really not a great deal of difference.

The only reason it would be a matter of concern would be if the only option open to us

was to say that either Jesus or Matthew made a mistake here. And that certainly is not the only option open to us. We can see ways in which this phenomenon could appear here without Jesus having made a mistake at all.

And it doesn't seem that anyone as acquainted with the Old Testament as Jesus would make this mistake. I'm less acquainted than he was with the Old Testament, and I wouldn't make that mistake, and I doubt that he would either, certainly not if he was the son of God, which we believe he is. Now, in the latter part of this section, he says, O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her, how often I wanted to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.

This statement, how often I wanted to gather you, no doubt takes into consideration the whole of Jewish history where God sent his prophets to gather his people to repentance so they would come to him and be protected under his wing like chickens, little chicks under the wing of a mother hen. He would have gladly protected them. He would have gladly received them.

He actually appealed to them through the prophets. He begged them. He wanted to gather them.

He said, but they didn't come. They would not come. This verse, in my opinion, is one of several that provide a very strong challenge to the doctrine of irresistible grace.

The Calvinist doctrine of irresistible grace teaches that if God has elected someone for salvation, they will come because God alone holds all the cards, as it were. He's the one who has all the votes, and that if he has chosen that you will be saved, then you inevitably will be saved, and he will draw you irresistibly by his grace. Well, if this is true, then God should never be disappointed by someone not coming because God is the one who determines who comes and who does not, and God should never have any complaints about the fact that certain people don't come because he doesn't choose to draw them.

In this case, however, Jesus says there were people he did choose to draw. He wanted to gather them. He appealed to them.

He tried to get them to come, but they wouldn't come. You were not willing, he says, and this is one of the, I mean, there are others, but this is one of the very strong verses to affirm that the Bible teaches free will of man, that God doesn't always get his way with man. God has something he wants men to do, but they are not willing to do it, and if they aren't, then it doesn't happen.

They did not come to him, and some say, well, what happens then to the sovereignty of God? Well, just this, the sovereignty of God means, it doesn't mean that he determines

everything that happens, but it means that like any sovereign, like any king, he has the authority to punish those who do what he chooses not for them to do. They make a choice different from what he wished, but they cannot escape his judgment because he is the sovereign, and therefore Jesus says, see, your house is left to you desolate, for I say to you, you shall not see me anymore until you say, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. There's reason to believe that Jesus left the temple at this point for the last time.

In Matthew 24, it says, then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and we don't have record necessarily of him ever returning, although the chronology of events is a little different in Luke, and therefore if you read Luke, there are times of Jesus being in the temple after this, but in Matthew, this is Jesus' last appearance there, and he says, the house is left desolate, the glory has departed, the Shekinah glory departed from the temple in the person of Jesus, in whom the glory resided and tabernacled among men. He left the temple, and the temple was no longer God's house. Remember earlier, Jesus said, my father's house, meaning the temple, is to be a house of prayer, but you've made it a den of thieves.

Notice here, in Matthew 23, 36, he doesn't say, my father's house, he says, see, your house is left to you desolate. The temple is no longer God's house, he's leaving, he's abandoned it, he's disowned it. It's their house now, they can do with it what they will.

He says, I say to you, you'll not see me anymore until you say, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. In other words, until individual Jews can come to recognize Jesus as the one who came to them in the name of the Lord, and can embrace him as their Messiah, they will not see him again. And so, now by the way, a lot of people had said those very words on Palm Sunday, they said, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

They were apparently believers, but these Pharisees and scribes to whom Jesus was speaking were rejecting him. And until they could embrace him, they would not have the presence of God in their midst again. And that is apparently what Jesus is telling them about here.

He left, and the next time, you know, anything significant happened in the temple there, it was when the Romans came and destroyed it in that generation, even as Jesus predicted would happen.