

Text: Matthew 11:20-24

Title: Woe to Unrepentant Cities

Truth: Divine punishment is worse for those who know more.

Date/Location: Wednesday October 27, 2021 at FBC

The Text

²⁰ Then He began to **rebuke** the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, **because they did not repent**:

²¹ "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.

²² "But I say to you, **it will be more tolerable** for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you.

²³ "And you, **Capernaum**, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; [note the pride here, like Babylon's pride]

for **if** the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, **it would have remained** until this day.

²⁴ "But I say to you that **it shall be more tolerable** for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you."

I. Structure of Discourse

- A. Notice the parallel structure of the Lord's discourse here. He goes one round with Chorazin and Bethsaida, saying that because they did not repent, it would be more tolerable in the day of judgment for two historical cities that were utterly destroyed than it will be for these two contemporary cities.
- B. In the second round, He attacks Capernaum, and says that because they did not repent, they will go down to Hades. There is a second "it will be more tolerable in the day of judgment" statement. In this, one awful historical city will fare better than Capernaum!
- C. Both parts have a counterfactual statement: "if the works were done..." indicating that those works would have convinced the sinners in those ancient cities to repent. Not so in Jesus's day.

II. Historical Notes

- A. Chorazin and Bethsaida. These were cities on the north shore of the sea of Galilee which saw a lot of Jesus' ministry. See Mark 8:22 and Luke 9:10, for example.
- B. Tyre and Sidon. These were ancient cities in the far north of Israel on the Mediterranean coast. These both were subjects of divine wrath as described in Ezekiel 26, 27, and 28:1-19 (Tyre) and 28:20-24 (Sidon). There is no doubt these cities were destroyed.
- C. Capernaum. Matthew 4:13 indicates that the Lord left his hometown of Nazareth as an adult and moved into the village of Capernaum. He was not even accepted in His own town! See Matthew 13:54-58.
- D. Sodom (and Gomorrah). Genesis 19 records the destruction of these cities because of their wicked sin of homosexuality. They were completely shot through with immorality and were beyond recovery—in God's estimation—so He destroyed them. This and Tyre and Sidon were idolatrous, evil, pagan cities. Israel was behaving worse than they did! The evil of Israel does not excuse the evil of Sodom, so there is no hope that Sodom gets a "do over" because there has been found someone more hardened they they.

III. Theological Issues

- A. Are there levels of punishment in Hell? It appears to be so based on this text and others. Consider Isaiah 14:15 at which just prior is recorded the statements of Satan who wanted to be like the Most High. The highest levels of arrogance will lead to the lowest depths of Hell. If anyone deserves the worst "compartment" in the lake of fire, it is the Devil.

See Rev. 19:20, 20:10, Matt. 25:41, and Rev. 20:14-15. Isaiah speaks of the "lowest" depths of the Pit. Speaking of Egypt, the prophet is told by God that their graves will be in the "recesses" or "remotest parts" of the Pit (Ezekiel 32:23). Deut. 32:22 may also be involved here, although "depths of Sheol" is often used synonymously with "the grave" or "the world of the dead" generally without reference to levels of it (Psalm 86:13).

I do not know what the practical difference is for these levels of punishment. The “highest” or “best” level of punishment is still the wrath of God and is still highly unpleasant and to be avoided at all costs.

- B. Corresponding to the levels of punishment issue above, there is also a level of accountability that is elevated when you have additional revelation, and particularly additional direct, in-person revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ. “To whom much is given, much is required.” See Luke 12:47-48.

I have often said this, but it does bear repeating, that we, of all people on the earth and in world history, have been given the fullest divine revelation that has ever been available. We have it in static, written form so that we can examine it, think about it, study it, memorize it, etc. We have less than zero excuse. If we ignore what we are told, or disobey it, then that is “on” us.

- C. Repent. The whole issue was repentance. The simple issue is repentance. Repentance takes humility and honesty. It takes setting aside pride and self-deception. It is the response that you make at the Door (Jesus) that leads to the road of eternal life. Had the residents of those cities turned from their sins and believed in the Messiah who was among them, they would have been saved.

Conclusion

Compare responses of John earlier in the chapter to “this generation” in 11:16-19 and the whole cities full of people who did not repent. They wanted no change. John the Baptist needed confirmation for his weary and depressed soul. The cities actually saw the works of Christ as well—the same ones—and did not care about the implications of those works for their spiritual lives.

It is somewhat of a dissonance that there are large crowds, yet Jesus says this of the communities as a whole. Possibly the crowds were large, but the unbelief was larger! Perhaps large crowds came at first, but as the novelty wore off, they went back to their normal business.