

Introduction: There is a daily need on our part for God the Father and the Son to be active in defending us from Satanic attack, trials, temptation and sin. Were we left to ourselves for even one day, we would be lost in this world of punishing wickedness, fearful sin and despair. In human terms, it was the same for Jesus. Constantly His foes sought to trap Him in His words (Mt 22:15); constantly they sought to tempt Him into error or provoke Him into expressions of anger and impatience (Mt. 22:26). But God's oversight kept Him and keeps us! God the Father still expresses on a daily basis His oversight of our lives. As Psalm 121 puts it, "He who keeps Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps". We also see such oversight of our lives as we study Christ's care for His own – even in the midst of the fiery judgments of Matthew 23.

Mon/Tues/Weds: read Mark 12:36-40 & Matthew 22:43-23:23. In both Mark and Matthew's account, Christ's mighty judgment against His foes is performed to rescue His own sheep from a world of wolves and spiritual foes that seek to destroy them. In short, Christ wages war against the injustice and burdensome rule of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23 mainly because they neglect the weightier matters of the law when it comes to loving those whom Christ loves. Consider for example these verses, which demonstrate so clearly how these religious leaders routinely break the Golden Rule:

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. (Mt. 23:4)

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. (Mt 23:13-14)

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. (Mt. 23:23)

What then are we to conclude about such a sorry record of abusing those under their care? These religious leaders in Jesus' day disqualify themselves as unfaithful shepherds of God's sheep, breaking the Law of God by neglecting the greater matters of, "justice, mercy and faithfulness" (Mt. 23:23). Christ is against such abuse of His sheep, and speaks with a jealous love out of concern for the lowliest. No wonder they hear Him gladly (Mk 12:37), and no wonder Ps 110 is quoted for their refreshment, declaring that Christ's enemies (and ours) will be put under His feet in Mt. 22:44. What a joy when all such abusive false shepherds will be finally placed under Christ's feet on that Great Day. I love the way our Shorter Catechism puts it, describing the salvation and protection which comes to us because Christ is our victorious King:

Q. 26. *How doth Christ execute the office of a king?*

A. Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies.

Thursday: read Matthew 23:23-28. The power of this week's Bible notes rests upon Christ's penetrating verdict against hypocritical, self-righteous religion – which seeks to justify its adherents by their own good works and appearance of goodness, when their hearts are in reality full of unclean thoughts, motives and purposes. Jesus' words make this clear in Matthew 23:23 put it:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.

The key word in the Greek is that verb, “to neglect”. It literally means, “to abandon, disregard” or to discard as of no value. It is the verb used for divorcing one’s wife, and shows how far these scribes and Pharisees had departed from the heart of God’s law, where matters of “justice, mercy and faithfulness” are at the very heart of what it means to “love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39). They had divorced themselves from the heart of God’s law. No wonder Jesus says in Matthew 23:27 that these religious leaders were full of the polluting effects of death: dead good works; a dead profession of faith – with a deadly effect on innocent sheep who go astray through their terrible example.

Meditate and Pray: Lord, please rescue us from the blinding nature of sin, which can persuade men that they are doing good when they are full of the hypocrisy of an unregenerate heart. We pray this not just for ourselves, but for the sake of those who would stumble by our bad example, were you for one moment to abandon us to our inward uncleanness and pride of heart. Lord, you desire truth in the inner parts. Please never stop your deep, penetrating work of changing us from the inside out. Amen.

Fri/Sat: read Matthew 23:29-36. The verses before us today prompt a crucial question: What are the results of the false religion of the Pharisees? Here is a description of such a hypocrite’s life. A life which:

- Does its religious works for the eyes of men, instead of for the glory of the all-seeing God (Matthew 23:1-12)
- Promotes legalism and at the same time maintains a cruel disregard for those burdened down by its countless regulations (Matthew 23:4, 13-15 & 23:23)
- Shows an utter disregard for reverencing God while at the same time venerates the accumulation of wealth in the name of religion (Matthew 23:16-22)
- Hides deep, sinful corruption of heart under the guise of hypocrisy and white-washed externalism (Matthew 23:25-28)

What are we to conclude from this terrible indictment on the lips of our Lord? The answer is that such a deadly false religion produces blood-guilt, which accumulates on the heads of those who practice it. That is what Matthew 23:29-36 is about. Though these false shepherds claimed to honor the Word of God and the prophets who preached that Word in the Old Testament, decorating their tombs and revering their names, the reality is that their rebellion against God’s *final Word* in the person of His Son proves that they too would have rejoiced at the shed blood of all those faithful Old Testament servants who died for God’s Word. After all, this is precisely the same fate which Jesus will meet with at their hands on the Cross! Though they claimed to honor the prophets, they kill the Living Word of God!

But now note the most significant lesson from Jesus’ words about this “blood-guilt” which would cascade down on “this generation” (Matthew 23:36). It is because these “blood-guilty” men showed utter disregard for *God’s Altar* in Matthew 23:18-20, valuing the gift on the altar (for their own enrichment) but not the God behind it, that they then rejected *God’s own offering* on that altar of His Son! And without Jesus Christ as *their offering*, they were completely exposed to the flood of blood-guilt of all those generations which had rejected the Word of God before them. How terrible - to be without the refuge of God’s altar, and without the Son of God’s blood for a covering, when the Day of Judgment comes!

Meditate and Pray: What a precious meditation on God’s Word to realize that Christ’s blood is sufficient to cover and cleanse the worst of us, and expansive enough to provide refuge for the darkest soul at the greatest distance from salvation – if by faith they turn to that blood of Christ as their only hope. On the other hand, what profound nakedness for all self-

righteous religious people who seek to approach God's altar on their own merit – only to be exposed and condemned by the God who rejects *all* bloodless religion.

Sunday: read Matthew 23:37-39. It is important to properly assess Jesus' grief at the end of Matthew 23. Yes, from a human standpoint, as the Man of Sorrows familiar with grief, it has been a long road for our Lord, and He has endured resistance and hard-heartedness from His own people almost from the beginning of His earthly ministry. No wonder, then, that at the end of His public ministry (Mt. 24:1ff begins Jesus' Passion Week instruction to His disciples alone) Jesus breaks out into lamentation for His own people in their blind unbelief. His heart is grieved at such unbelief, and the terrible suffering which Jerusalem will bring upon itself because of it. Jerusalem's house will indeed be left desolate (Mt. 23:38) until one day when in repentance the nation of Israel turns back and mourns for the One they pierced!

But let us not think that Christ's grief is a sign of impotence and failure. Even the rejection of Christ by His own people Israel is part of God's plan. Their rejection will in fact mean riches for the Gentile world (see Romans 11:7-15). Because they have been broken off from the vine of salvation through their rejection of Jesus (Romans 11:17), there is now room for the Gentile world to be ingrafted! Christ now has become our 'Vine' – for all those who receive by faith the Christ whom Israel rejected!

Thus even Jesus' grief over Jerusalem in Matthew 23:37-39 is part of God's sovereign plan. Though right now He weeps in the shadow of the Cross, it is nevertheless a joyful moment when Christ speaks about 'spreading His wings' to cover sinners. And though Israel spurns Christ's desire to provide such refuge, His wings are nevertheless open to us. Instead of being *uncovered* by our unbelieving good works and self-righteousness, we can find refuge in the shadow of His wings right now!

For this weekend's concluding Scripture meditation, consider how the metaphor of the wings of the Lord as the refuge for His people dominates Scripture.

For example, was it not the purpose of the Cherubim, whose wings cover the ark, to be a visual symbol of refuge and safety for those for whom the blood of atonement was sprinkled on the mercy seat? The Psalmist takes the Cherubim's wings as a symbol of refuge, and speaks of "singing" under those wings (Psalm 63:7). And did not Israel of old understand the altar where the blood was first sprinkled before entering the Holy of Holies to be an altar that promised sanctuary, so that even men like Joab fled in their danger to take hold of the horns of that altar? Even the sparrow was said to be able to find refuge around God's altar (Psalm 84:3)! Most of all, at the beginning and at the end of the first 5 books of the Law, God describes Himself as the Redeemer who provides refuge for His people on His wings (Exodus 19:4 & Deuteronomy 32:11)!

Could it be, then, that Jesus in Matthew 23, in addition to speaking metaphorically of providing safety under His wings... was also speaking sacrificially of the refuge which the 'wings of His sacrifice' was to provide? As the Redeemer, in the very face of Jerusalem's *rejection* of His mighty atoning blood, Christ set up a tabernacle of protective blood for all nations on His Cross! His blood brings safety to us who believe.

The end result, then, is that Christ as our Redeemer can declare to us who are saved by His shed blood that He has indeed "carried us on eagle's wings" to the shadow of His abiding place! His altar as become our "mercy seat", and the place where we can abide in safety! Amen! Praise His Name!

