

with the abusive parents pointing out the terrible condition of the children under their care. But regardless of their response, the police officer has a court order to take the children. The parents may protest, curse and swear at the officer and physically oppose the officer's efforts, but he still is going to take the children. He has every intention of removing the abused children from the home into his protective custody. He may eventually call in more policemen or use more forceful means to accomplish his mission, but he will carry out the court order.

It is this type of idea which is found in the text. The abusive parents represent "Jerusalem." The neglected children represent Jerusalem's "children." The police officer with the court order represents Christ ("I"). Failure to understand this vital distinction will lead to a faulty interpretation of what Jesus is saying. Since "Jerusalem" is distinguished from "her children," Christ cannot be said to desire the salvation of all the Jews. Even if you took "Jerusalem" for every single individual Jew, it still wouldn't prove Christ desired the salvation of the Gentiles (Samaritans, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, etc.). In other words, you cannot somehow substitute the word "mankind" for "Jerusalem" here. "Jerusalem" doesn't even mean every Jew! Thus, there is no divine desire for the salvation of all men to be extracted from this text. This is an unwarranted assumption without Biblical basis.

2. THE IDENTIFICATION OF JERUSALEM

What is the context in which these words of Christ are spoken? Who is our Lord addressing in this chapter? Christ opens this chapter speaking to "the multitude" and "His disciples" (V-1). He warns them specifically about the abuses of the Scribes and Pharisees (V-2-12). Then beginning with V-13 till the end of the chapter, the Scribes and Pharisees are being denounced by Christ in the strongest terms. No less than 6 times you read the words, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" (V-13,14,15,23,27,29). Thus, when you hear Christ speaking of "Jerusalem" opposing His efforts to "gather" the children, He is still berating the Jewish religious leaders. Furthermore, the identification of "Jerusalem" can be determined by the negative characteristics which describe it:

- 1) Killing the prophets and stoning God's servants (V-37)
- 2) Trying to prevent the gathering of the children (V-37)
- 3) Her "house" being left desolate (V-38)
- 4) Refusing to acknowledge Christ as the Messiah (V-39)

Are not these characteristics describing "Jerusalem" the very same crimes with which Jesus charged the Scribes and Pharisees?

- 1) Jesus condemns the religious leaders for killing the prophets and persecuting God's servants (V-29-35). He expects them to even intensify their efforts in the future (V-34).

- 2) Jesus condemns the religious leaders for attempting to turn those entering the Kingdom of God away from Him (V-13).

"Christ came to *open the kingdom of heaven*, that is, to lay open for us a *new and living way* into it, to bring men to be subjects of that kingdom. Now the scribes and Pharisees, who sat in Moses's seat, and pretended to have the key of

knowledge, ought to have contributed their assistance herein, by opening those scriptures of the Old Testament which pointed at the Messiah and his kingdom, in their true and proper sense...but...they perverted his doctrine, confronted his miracles, quarreled with his disciples, and represented him, and his institutes and economy, to the people in the most disingenuous, disadvantageous manner imaginable; they thundered out their excommunications against those that confessed him, and used all their wit and power to serve their malice against him; and thus they *shut up the kingdom of heaven*, so that *they who would enter* into it must *suffer violence* (ch. xi.12), and *press into it* (Lk xvi. 16), through a crowd of scribes and Pharisees, and all the obstructions and difficulties they could contrive to lay in their way" (Matthew Henry).

3) Jesus speaks of impending judgment coming upon the religious leaders (V-36) and this is closely connected with the Temple being destroyed (V-38, Matt 24:1-2). What was once the "House of God" is now "your house" (V-38) for they had made "the house of prayer" a "den of thieves." The Temple was the place the Scribes and Pharisees often gathered and ministered. Now their "pride and joy" would be left "desolate." Jesus has just spoken of this very thing in the Parable of the Marriage Feast (Matt 22:1-14). And it should be noted that He was addressing the "chief priests and the elders of the people" - i.e. the religious leaders (Cf 21:23). God is portrayed as the King who "sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city" because of the mistreatment of his servants (22:6-7).

4) Jesus promised to have nothing further to do with these religious leaders until they acknowledged Him as the Messiah (V-39). If by "Jerusalem" is meant, not the religious leaders, but all the inhabitants of the city, Christ's words wouldn't make much sense. After all, the multitude cried out these very words during Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matt 21:9-16). This phrase is a quotation from Psa 118:21-26 where "the Stone which the builders [religious leaders] rejected" is exalted by God to be the "head stone" of the spiritual Temple of God. Those who say, "Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the LORD" are recognizing Christ as the Messiah and Saviour. I believe that Jesus is saying to the Scribes and Pharisees, "The only way I'll have any further dealings with you is if you embrace Me as the Messiah."

So the characteristics describing this "Jerusalem" are the same characteristics found in the religious leaders. Just as it is common today to use the term Washington to refer to the center of the political scene and the political leaders, so Christ uses the term Jerusalem, where the Temple worship took place, to refer to the spiritual leaders of Israel.

"That by Jerusalem we are not to understand the city, nor all the inhabitants; but the rulers and governors of it, both civil and ecclesiastical, especially the great Sanhedrim, which was held in it, to whom best belong the descriptive characters of *killing the prophets*, and *stoning* such as were *sent* to them by God, and who are manifestly distinguished from their *children* ...[I]t belonged to them [the religious leaders] to take cognizance of such who called themselves prophets, and to examine and judge them, and, if false, to condemn them; hence that saying of Christ, Luke xiii. 33, which goes before the same words, as here, *it cannot be that a prophet perish out of Jerusalem*..." (John Gill).

Jerusalem therefore should be identified with the religious

leaders of the city in particular not the population in general. Thus there is no warrant for extending the term to include all mankind.

3. THE IDENTIFICATION OF "THY CHILDREN"

In Christ's day it was customary to call those who were the religious leaders or civil rulers of the people, "fathers." Those who were their disciples or subjects were considered "children." We do the same sort of thing today. We speak of the "fathers of our country" when referring to George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Calvin and Luther are commonly classified as "church fathers." The Scriptures clearly indicate that this manner of speaking was common. The Scribes and the Pharisees are being addressed as the RELIGIOUS GUIDES of the people throughout this chapter. Jesus twice called them "blind guides" (V-16,24) and observed how they "sit in Moses' seat" (V-2). In other words, they held a position of authority over the common people.

"All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not after their works: for they say, and do not. For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders..." (V-3-4).

So the common people were very much sitting as children at the feet of these religious leaders, who loved to be recognized as "rabbis," "fathers," and "masters" (V-6-10). The idea of the "parental authority" of religious leaders over those under their care is widely used in Scripture.

1) Jud 17:9-10 "And Micah said unto him, Whence comest thou? And he said unto him, I am a Levite of Bethlehem-judah, and I go to sojourn where I may find a place. And Micah said unto him, Dwell with me, and be unto me a FATHER AND A PRIEST..." The Levite in becoming a "priest" for Micah's family would be considered the spiritual leader or "father" providing religious guidance for them.

2) Acts 6:12, 7:1-2 "And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him [Stephen], and caught him, and brought him to the council...And he said, Men, brethren, and FATHERS, hearken..." (See also Acts 22:1). Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin council to be judged whether or not he was guilty of blasphemy. He addressed the whole assembly as "men" (witnesses who would testify were present), "brethren" (they were all fellow Jews) and "fathers" (he stood at the court of the spiritual leaders of the nation).

And the Bible speaks of those under the authority of religious leaders as "children":

1) Matt 12:27 "And if I [Jesus] by Beelzebub cast out devils, by whom do your CHILDREN [disciples of the Pharisees] cast them out?"

2) Mk 10:23-24 "And Jesus looked round about, and saith unto his disciples, How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God! And the disciples were astonished at his words. But Jesus answereth again, and saith unto them, CHILDREN, how hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God!"

3) II Jn 1,4 "The elder unto the elect lady and her CHILDREN, whom I love in the truth...I rejoiced greatly

that I found of thy CHILDREN walking in truth, as we have received commandment from the Father."

There is another New Testament passage which uses "Jerusalem" and "Children" in a similar manner: "For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children" (Gal 4:25).

"Agar, the bondwoman, fitly represents *Mount Sinai*, the mountain in Arabia, from which the law was given: and *Jerusalem which now is* answereth to Mount Sinai; for as in Mount Sinai the law was given in a terrible manner, so now in Jerusalem is the seat of the scribes and Pharisees, who are the doctors of the law, and rigidly press the observation of it, by which the Jews are kept *in bondage*. The apostle speaketh not here of the civil servitude that the Jews were in under the Romans, to whom they were now tributaries, but of that religious servitude in which the scribes and Pharisees kept them to their legal services." (Matthew Poole).

Summary: Christ's words are addressed to the religious leaders of Israel. Jerusalem and her children are to be distinguished as two different groups. Once this division is understood any argument for God desiring the salvation of all men evaporates completely.

II. CHRIST'S WORDS DO NOT PRECLUDE THE GATHERING OF JERUSALEM'S CHILDREN

1. SPIRITUAL GATHERING - "how often would I have gathered thy children"

The Greek word for "gathered" is "episunago." This term is only used seven times in the New Testament, two of which are identical passages. The use of the term is commonly associated with a PHYSICAL GATHERING of people (See Matt 23:37, 24:31, Mk 13:27, Lk 13:34, Mk 1:33, Lk 12:1, Lk 17:37). In its noun form (episunagoge) the word means literally to "synagogue" and is used of assembling for church (Heb 10:25). Since the mission of the "prophets" which were stoned by Jerusalem was to "gather" a people for the Lord, a spiritual gathering is in view. Christ's desire is to "gather" (synagogue) Jerusalem's children into His Church (called out assembly).

2. OPPOSED GATHERING - "how often...and ye would not"

The "common people" often came in "great multitudes" and heard Christ "gladly" (See Mk 12:37, Lk 8:40, Matt 4:23-25, 15:30, 19:2, 21:8). Yet the Scribes and Pharisees were envious of Christ (Matt 27:18, Mk 15:10, Jn 12:19). Not only was He taking "center stage" away from them, but He openly exposed their hypocrisy. He convincingly demonstrated that they were substituting the traditions of men for the truth of God. He exposed them as "blind guides" of the people. So they were vigorously opposed to Christ and His teaching. Continuous efforts were made ("how often") to turn people away from the Gospel which Christ proclaimed. The Pharisees had gone so far as to say, "that if any man did confess that He was Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue" (Jn 9:22). Yet unless someone confessed that Jesus was the Christ, there was no hope of salvation.

Do you remember the story of Christ healing the man who was born blind in John 9? After he received his sight he

was brought to the Pharisees. The religious leaders did all they could to dissuade this man from believing that Jesus was the Christ (V-22) and being His disciple (V-28). They said, “This man is not of God” (V-16) and “We know that this man is a sinner” (V-24). But the healed man clung to his faith in Jesus and refused to believe all the false accusations hurled at the Lord. “Now we know that God heareth not sinners: but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth His will, him He heareth. Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind. If this man were not of God, He could do nothing” (V-31-33). The incensed religious leaders then “cast him out” of the synagogue (V-34).

The Scribes and Pharisees did everything humanly possible to paint Christ as a blasphemer, demon-possessed, a false prophet, etc., in order to “shut up the kingdom of heaven against men.”

3. ACCOMPLISHED GATHERING - “as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings”

Our Lord portrays a barnyard scene of a hen and her little chicks. Picture the chicks scattered about the barnyard scratching the dirt and pecking for pieces of grain. They are simply going about their everyday routine. Everything appears calm and tranquil at the moment. Suddenly, some type of danger arises. Perhaps a fox approaches the barnyard. The mother hen immediately perceives the danger and gathers all her chicks under her feathers to protect them from destruction. Now a hen doesn’t seek to gather all the chicks in the farmyard, but only her own brood. She instinctively knows those who are hers.

Jesus portrays Himself by the symbol of a MOTHER HEN. Notice that the “chickens” are said to be “her chickens.” So that under the general heading of “thy children” are encompassed all the “chickens” which belong to the mother hen (Christ). The “chickens” do not belong to the Scribes and Pharisees, but to Jesus Christ. The symbolism has direct reference to the people of God or the elect.

“All that the Father giveth Me shall come to Me; and him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out. For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of Him that sent Me. And this is the Father’s will which hath sent Me, that of all which He hath given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day” (Jn 6:37-39)

Jesus could say of His chickens, “these are ‘the children which God hath given me’” (Heb 2:13). The Greek word for “gathered” here is only used twice in Matthew. Christ shortly uses it again in Matt 24:31 specifically of His elect.

“And He [the Son of Man] shall send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”

Jesus did indeed gather Jerusalem’s children. There is no reason to think otherwise. “Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power” (Psa 110:3). Not one of God’s elect ever fails to come to Jesus Christ. Some of the “children” had already been gathered. Jesus had already called His “disciples” (V-1). You should not forget, Nicodemus (Jn 3), the impotent man (Jn 5), the woman taken in adultery (Jn 8), the man born blind (Jn 9), Mary, Martha and Lazareth (Jn

11), the woman with an issue of blood (Lk 8), Zacchaeus (Lk 19), the man with palsy (Mk 2), the maniac of Gadara (Mk 5), and Bartimaeus (Mk 10) to single out a few. Let it be remembered that many Jews did believe on Christ to the great dismay of the religious leaders (Jn 11:45, 12:19). The day of Pentecost found 120 disciples gathered just in Jerusalem for prayer and worship (Acts 1:15). Consider the vast multitudes of Jerusalem’s children which were gathered during the days following Christ’s resurrection - at least 8000 (Acts 2:41, 4:4).

“Jesus expresses in this text the desire to save Jerusalem’s children. But the Scribes and Pharisees fought bitterly against this at every step of Jesus’ way. They resisted His efforts to do this so fiercely that they finally nailed Him to the cross. But does all this mean that Jerusalem’s children were never gathered by Jesus? Far from it. Jesus accomplished His purpose in spite of the wickedness of Jerusalem’s leaders. We have only to read of the thousands of Jerusalem’s children who were saved after Pentecost, to understand that Jesus did what He purposed to do.” (Herman Hanko).

Summary: All the Father has given to Christ will be gathered to Him. Jesus plainly declared to the Jews that some would not believe because they were not given to Him by the Father. “But ye believed not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow Me” (Jn 10:26-27). He never intended to gather every individual to Himself. He had been given “power over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as Thou [God the Father] hast given Him” (Jn 17:2). He knows very well that to some the things of God are hidden and will remain a mystery, for this is what seemed good in the eyes of His Father (Matt 11:25-26, 13:10-11). Christ is not working at cross-purposes with His Father. Jesus is not a frustrated Savior, but His righteous anger toward the Scribes and Pharisees is displayed here because of their opposition to the work of salvation He was carrying out. All Christ’s “chickens” will be safely gathered under His wings.

III. THERE IS HISTORICAL PRECEDENCE FOR INTERPRETING CHRIST’S WORDS IN THIS MANNER

1. AUGUSTINE (421 A.D.) - The Enchiridion [Handbook] on Faith, Hope and Love.

“Our Lord says plainly, however, in the Gospel, when upbraiding the impious city: ‘How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!’ as if the will of God had been overcome by the will of men, and when the weakest stood in the way with their want of will, the will of the strongest could not be carried out. And where is that omnipotence which hath done all that it pleased on earth and in heaven, if God willed to gather together the children of Jerusalem, and did not accomplish it? Or rather, Jerusalem was not willing that her children should be gathered together, but even though she was unwilling, He gathered together as many of her children as He wished: for He does not will some things to do them, and will others and do them not; but ‘He hath done all that He pleased in heaven and in earth.’ And moreover, who will be so foolish and blasphemous as to say that God cannot change the evil wills of men, whichever, whenever, and wheresoever He chooses, and direct them to what is good?”

2. TURRETIN, FRANCIS (1623-87 A.D.) - Theological Institutes: Selections. Trans. by G.M. Giger. Ed. and Abr. by J.H. Gerstner.

“...Christ willed to gather together those whom *Jerusalem*, that is the *chiefs of the people* nilled to be gathered together; but notwithstanding their opposition Christ did not fail in gathering those whom he willed: Whence Augustine Enchiridion. c.97, *She indeed was unwilling that her sons should be gathered together by him, but notwithstanding her unwillingness he gathered together his sons whom he willed.* Jerusalem, therefore, is here distinguished from her sons, as the words themselves prove, and the design of the chapter, in which from verse 13 to the 37th, he addresses the Scribes and Pharisees, and rebukes them, because *they neither went into the kingdom, nor suffered those that were entering to go in.*”

3. DICKSON, DAVID (1647 A.D.) - A Brief Exposition of the Evangel of Jesus Christ According to Matthew.

“When the Lord is about to save his elect children in the visible church, the body or the greatest part of the people may oppose his work and nill the work which he wills, and although they be not able to impede his effectual gathering of so many as he intends to save, yet may they make themselves guilty of impeding and resisting the will of God, which they cannot overcome; therefore, says he in this sense, O Jerusalem, how oft was I about to convert thy children, so many as I had elected, by the offers of mercy which my servants made unto you, the visible church their mother? And you would not, but opposed the work so far as you could, in slaying the prophets and stoning them who were sent unto thee for the elect’s cause who were in the midst of you...The Lord will pursue his purpose, and renew messages till he both gain his own and also make the reprobate inexcusable to the full...”

MAIN CONCLUSION:

“[T]he wicked leaders of the Jews did everything they could to prevent Jesus’ gathering of Jerusalem’s children. They stoned the prophets and opposed Jesus’ preaching and teaching. They discredited Jesus before the people and threatened reprisal against any who openly confessed Him. In no way does this imply, however, that these wicked leaders succeeded in preventing Jesus from gathering Jerusalem’s children. They were gathered and saved, that is, the elect among them, not withstanding the resistance of the wicked rulers” (Cammenga and Hanko).

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DOES GOD DESIRE THE SALVATION OF ALL MEN? MATTHEW 23:37 BY JACK A. WERTH

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord” - Matt 23:37-39 KJV

So many people come to this text and jump to an erroneous conclusion. The common interpretation given to this passage is that God desires the salvation of every individual of mankind and Christ’s attitude toward the city of Jerusalem reflects this principle. Is this really so? Does God desire to save all of mankind but cannot because of man’s opposition to the divine will? Is the omnipotent One frustrated because He cannot carry out His saving desires? Is this what this passage teaches?

I. CHRIST’S WORDS ARE ADDRESSED TO THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS OF ISRAEL

1. JERUSALEM AND HER CHILDREN

People misinterpret this text because they fail to see TWO GROUPS of people in it. In fact, Matt 23:37 is frequently misquoted. Even the most famous TV evangelists and preachers of our day often say, “How often I would have gathered YOU together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and YE WOULD NOT.” Look carefully at the passage. Jesus makes a clear distinction between “Jerusalem” and her “children.” It was the “children” which Jesus spoke about gathering, but “Jerusalem” vehemently opposed Him - “and ye would not”! If you read this passage in a superficial manner you may miss Christ’s point. The ones Christ desired to gather are not the ones opposing Him.

“Hence it is manifest, that they are not the same persons whom Christ would have gathered, who *would not*. It is not said, *how often would I have gathered you, and you would not*, as Dr. Whitby more than once inadvertently cites the text; nor, *he would have gathered Jerusalem, and she would not*, as the same author transcribes it in another place; nor, *he would have gathered them, thy children, and they would not*, in which form it is also sometimes expressed by him; but *I would have gathered thy children, and ye would not*, which observation alone is sufficient to destroy the argument founded on this passage in favour of free-will” (John Gill).

Suppose there are some parents in Pittsburgh who are abusive to their children. Let’s say Bob and Sue are neglecting their little children so badly that something has to be done about it. The children aren’t being fed, bathed, or clothed properly. They are left home alone for hours on end unsupervised. Now these young children are helpless to do anything about the abuse under which they find themselves. As long as the parents have authority over them they are going to suffer. One day a kind but determined police officer knocks on the door. He attempts to reason

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