

Luke 13:31-35
Lament over Jerusalem

Jesus was hated from His birth. It is remarkable to consider, but the sinless, perfect Son of God was wanted dead almost as soon as it was known that He was born. That Jesus was invariably compassionate, kind, and devoted to others did not restrain those who wanted Him killed. That He came to provide grace, forgiveness of sins, and salvation from hell to eternal life was no matter. That He offered all of this as a free gift did not stay their hands.

The attempts to kill Jesus began with Herod the Great. Ruling in Judea, Herod as an ally of Caesar, was hated by the Jews. Naturally he hated and feared them in return. When it was reported that a potential rival to his throne had been born, he convinced the chief priests to tell him where this future king was to be born. Learning that it was Bethlehem, and also learning the approximate time of his birth, Herod took no chances and ordered the murder of all male children born in that area in the past two years. Scripture records that he “sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under” (Matthew 2:16).

God provided that the infant Messiah would survive this attempt on His life, but upon reaching adulthood and beginning His ministry, Jesus again encountered those who would have Him killed. When He first preached in His hometown of Nazareth, the people took such offense that “they got up and drove Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff (Luke 4:29).

It did not get better. As Jesus went about proclaiming the kingdom of God and validating His claim to be the Messiah with miracles, the religious leaders took offense. Before long ⁵³the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile and to question Him closely on many subjects, ⁵⁴plotting against Him to catch Him in something He might say” (Luke 11:53-54). The hostility increased so that after Jesus performed a miracle of healing on the Sabbath, “the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God” (John 5:18).

The Warning

In this passage yet another person seeks to kill Jesus, and Jesus found out about it in rather surprising fashion. A group of Pharisees approached. They did not start an argument or begin to dispute with Jesus about some theological or ceremonial issue. Instead they came with a warning to “go away, leave here, for Herod wants to kill You” (v. 31). This must have seemed curious. After all, the Pharisees wanted to kill Jesus, so why would they warn Him about another seeking to take His life? Wouldn't it work to their advantage to have the political ruler of the area do away with their religious rival?

We can presume that Jesus must still have been traveling and teaching in Perea at this time as He made His way to Jerusalem. He had left Galilee but had not arrived in Judea. So He was preaching in Perea, the area beyond the Jordan. The synoptic gospels bear this out.

The Herod referred to in this case is Herod Antipas. Herod Antipas was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea from 4 BC - 39 AD. Upon the death of Herod the Great, his kingdom had been divided among his three

sons. Archelaus ruled in Judea, Samaria, and Idumea. Philip ruled Ituraea and Trachonitis in the northeast. Herod Antipas ruled Galilee and Perea.



In the gospels, Herod usually refers to Herod Antipas. He hated, and was hated by, the Pharisees, in no small part because he had built his capital city (Tiberias) on the site of a Jewish cemetery. We can also remember that Herod had been rebuked by John the Baptist for marrying his brother's wife, Herodias. In return, Herod imprisoned John and later had him beheaded at the request of his step-daughter. The story is told in Matthew 14:1-12.

We are not told why Herod wanted Jesus killed. Perhaps Herod was concerned about the increasing significance of this potential rival (though Jesus never presented Himself as such, the people

wanted Him to become king). Maybe Herod was concerned about the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist, “⁷now Herod the tetrarch heard of all that was happening; and he was greatly perplexed, because it was said by some that John had risen from the dead, ⁸and by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen again. ⁹Herod said, “I myself had John beheaded; but who is this man about whom I hear such things?” And he kept trying to see Him” (Luke 9:7-9). He may have been concerned that Jesus might avenge the death of John the Baptist. After all, if Jesus was a rival to the throne and John had been his close associate, it is likely Jesus would want revenge as part of taking power Himself. Maybe John the Baptist’s influence on Herod Antipas had made him concerned that Jesus would cause some mysterious and miraculous harm to befall him. More practically, Herod Antipas may just have been eager to get rid of a potential troublemaker before the attention of Rome was drawn to the region. Since Jesus had refused to meet with Herod Antipas (Luke 9:9), it is likely that whatever tension there was had been increasing for some time.

The Response

Whatever Herod’s motives, Jesus did not thank the Pharisees for their efforts. He simply said “go and tell that fox, ‘behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I reach My goal’” (v. 32). This rather harsh comment expressed Jesus’ contempt for both Herod and his threat. To

refer to someone as a 'fox' was a slur that might find its equivalent today in the midwestern phrase of 'varmint.' Herod was not a real menace to Jesus, he was an arrogant man who could do no more trouble than God allowed. His threats were meaningless.

As an aside, One might wonder if in this case the words of Jesus toward a duly established ruler were sinful. After all, the Mosaic law forbade such comments, "you shall not curse God, nor curse a ruler of your people" (Exodus 22:28). In response, we might suggest that God often called out the rulers of both Israel and other nations,

"Your rulers are rebels
And companions of thieves;
Everyone loves a bribe
And chases after rewards.
They do not defend the orphan,
Nor does the widow's plea come before them" (Isaiah 1:23).

His prophets were kept quite busy chastising the kings of Israel. Think of Samuel as he rebuked Saul for sparing the best of the Amalek flocks, Nathan as he called out David for his sin with Bathsheba, and Elijah, who held Ahab accountable for the murder of Naboth and the theft of his vineyard. Jesus, Who was both God and prophet, had every right to speak as He wished about Herod Antipas.

As for the Pharisees, they clearly had evil motives. That Jesus sent the Pharisees back to Herod is evidence that Jesus understood the relationship between the two parties. Though Herod and the Pharisees were at odds religiously and politically, both agreed in seeing Jesus as a problem and worked together to rid themselves of Him, "the Pharisees went out and immediately began conspiring with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might destroy Him" (Mark 3:6). The Pharisees wanted Jesus to leave the area and go to Judea, because there they could hope to use the powerful Sanhedrin to more easily bring down this heretical rabbi.

Whatever the motives of His adversaries, Jesus pointed out that it was God's timetable that would work itself out, not Herod's. Jesus would reach His goal when God ordained - not a moment before or after. The phrase "today and tomorrow, and the third day" was not meant to be taken literally. It was a linguistic convention expressing the completion of a task. In other words, Jesus would go about doing what He had been doing (the will of the Father Who sent Him) until He was ready to go to Jerusalem. "Nevertheless I must journey on today and tomorrow and the next day" (v. 33). He would proceed at His own pace.

The reason Jesus gave, though, is troubling. He explained that "it cannot be that a prophet would perish outside of Jerusalem (v. 33). There was both irony and truth in the statement that Israel's prophets were killed in the city of the king. Scripture records that both Manasseh and Jehoiakim had ordered the killing of many in Jerusalem, including the prophets sent by God to reform them. Secular sources record that Isaiah was placed inside a log and then sawn in two. The death of Zechariah serves as another example, "²⁰Then the Spirit of God came on Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest; and he stood above the people and said to them, 'thus God has said, "why do you transgress the commandments of the Lord and do not prosper? Because you have forsaken the Lord, He has also forsaken you.'"

²¹So they conspired against him and at the command of the king they stoned him to death in the court of the house of the Lord” (2 Chronicles 24:20-21).

Being a prophet in Jerusalem was dangerous work.

The Lament

But Jesus was to proceed there anyway. And as He did so, He cried out “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it!” (v. 34). What a moving statement! What an emotional outburst? Yet the response should not surprise us. Having just been warned of a threat on His life, Jesus instead selflessly concerned Himself with others.

Compassion is a wonderful attribute of God. Scripture is filled with affirmations of His goodness expressed through loving compassion.

“The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness” (Exodus 34:6).

“The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness” (Psalm 103:8).

“Gracious is the Lord, and righteous;
Yes, our God is compassionate” (Psalm 116:5).

“Therefore the Lord longs to be gracious to you,
And therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you.” (Isaiah 30:18).

“Now return to the Lord your God,
For He is gracious and compassionate,
Slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness
And relenting of evil” (Joel 2:13).

Jesus, also, was known for His compassion. He felt compassion for the masses, “seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). He was concerned about their physical needs, “and Jesus called His disciples to Him, and said, ‘I feel compassion for the people, because they have remained with Me now three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way’” (Matthew 15:32). He healed out of compassion, “⁴⁰and a leper came to Jesus, beseeching Him and falling on his knees before Him, and saying, ‘if You are willing, You can make me clean.’ ⁴¹Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I am willing; be cleansed’” (Mark 1:40-41). He raised the dead out of compassion, “¹²now as He approached the gate of the city, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow; and a sizeable crowd from the city was with her. ¹³When the Lord saw her, He felt compassion for her, and said to her, ‘do not weep.’ ¹⁴And He came up and touched the coffin; and the bearers came to a halt. And He said, ‘young man, I say to you, arise!’” (Luke 7:12-14)

Here, Jesus used an agrarian metaphor that those who were listening would have recognized. His compassion for Jerusalem was like that of a mother hen protecting her young chicks. Despite the strict teaching of Jesus regarding the narrow way of salvation, and even despite His harsh words toward the unrepentant Pharisees, still Jesus was heartbroken to reflect on those who were lost. We never get a sense that Jesus rejoiced over the fallen. While those who are damned get what they deserve, there is no sense that God rejoices in that. Quite the contrary.

The emotional intensity of the moment is manifested by the use of repetition. In Jewish culture (among others), repetition was a poetic convention used to show emphasis,

“but the Lord answered and said to her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things’” (Luke 10:41).

“and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’” (Acts 9:4).

“he king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And thus he said as he walked, ‘O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!’” (2 Samuel 18:33).

Also, we ought to consider that the city of Jerusalem represented the people as a whole. It was the center of the kingdom. Jesus was heartbroken over the loss of Jerusalem. He concluded His lament, “behold, your house is left to you desolate; and I say to you, you will not see Me until the time comes when you say, ‘blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’” (v. 35).

The house also represented the Jewish people. There is a universality in this lament that encompasses all of the chosen people. As a people, they had set their course in opposition to the Messiah. Consequently, they would be abandoned to themselves. Since the Messiah “came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11), the Jewish people, as a people, would suffer. Beginning with the destruction of the temple in 70 AD and continuing throughout history, the Jewish people have been the particular targets of kings and emperors. From the persecutions under Theodosius, to the expulsion of Jews from England by Edward I, to the pogroms during the Crusades, to the accusations during the Great Mortality, to the modern holocausts of Hitler and Stalin, the Jewish people have paid dearly for their rejection of the Messiah.

Takeaways

The timing of the death of Jesus was entirely in the hands of God. And so is ours. We ought to be calm and trusting in difficult times. We ought to be neither fatalistic nor unfeeling, and we ought to make provision for the future or use whatever means God places at our disposal. But we must remember that while the work is ours, the outcome of all events are in God’s hands. Nothing can harm us unless God permits it, and nothing can save us when God calls us home. There is no such thing as luck or circumstance.

“The steps of a man are established by the Lord,
And He delights in his way” (Psalm 37:23).

“He will not fear evil tidings;
His heart is steadfast, trusting in the Lord” (Psalm 112:7).

Let us affirm the great compassion of God.

“I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live” (Ezekiel 33:11)

“The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9)

“³This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:3-4)

If people are lost it is not the fault of God. The eagerness of God to respond to save sinners is without doubt. Yet none are saved but those whom God calls. This is a mystery beyond our understanding, but we must acknowledge both halves of this great truth to be true. God is sovereign and man is responsible.