

# Matthew 11:20-24

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*Jesus rebukes the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum for their lack of repentance in light of the many miracles that He performed among them. He says that even the pagan and wicked cities of Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom would have shown more repentance. Each of their respective judgment days will reflect this.*

This event is unparalleled in the other gospel accounts.

Matthew tells us that after saying these things that Jesus *then began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done*. The reason He denounced them was because *they did not* accept His central teaching which was to *repent* [change their ways] for the Messiah has come and the kingdom of *heaven* is at hand. The cities where Jesus did most of His miracles were the three towns of *Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum*. All were located in the northern district of Galilee, on or near the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Matthew quotes Jesus's rebuke. *Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you Bethsaida!* These were the shoreline *cities* where Jesus called His first disciples (Matthew 4:18). But many in those towns, those amazed at the power and the spectacle of Jesus's *miracles did not repent*. Jesus's *miracles* served as a witness and a validation of *His* authority and the truth of *His* teachings. They testified that *He* was indeed the Messiah. And yet these *miracles* did not convince the citizens of *Chorazin and Bethsaida* to listen and respond to Jesus' message.

Jesus goes on to say to the shame of *Chorazin and Bethsaida*, that *if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes*.

*Tyre and Sidon* were ancient, coastal *cities* located north of Israel along the Mediterranean Sea. *Sidon* was founded by Canaanites (Genesis 10:15, 10:19, I Chronicles 1:13). Joshua and the generation that followed were unable to conquer these *cities* (Joshua 11:8, Joshua 19:29, Judges 1:31). Shipping goods appears to have been their major industry from at least as early as the time of Israel's Kings until the time of Christ (Nehemiah 13:6, Isaiah 23:2). Both *cities* were associated with the Philistines (Jeremiah 47:4, Joel 3:4) and the Phoenicians. *Tyre and Sidon* had a corrupting influence upon God's people and lead to worship false gods (Judges 10:6).

Interestingly Jesus will later visit the district Tyre and Sidon during His earthly ministry (Matthew 15:21).

Both of these towns are associated with wickedness and lack of regard for God, and Jesus testified that even *they* would not have remained so obstinate in their unbelief had they seen what Jesus had *done* in *Chorazin and Bethsaida*. The ancient cities of *Tyre and Sidon would have repented*. As a general rule, we as humans do not know what would have happened. But in this case, Jesus asserts His divine knowledge, and tells us what would have occurred.

*They would have humiliated themselves long ago in sackcloth and ashes* as a powerful demonstration of their repentance. *Sackcloth* was a type of plain course material more suited for holding goods than clothing. Covering oneself in *ashes* stains the skin sooty and black. Dressing in *sackcloth* and being covered in *ashes* was a universal expression of mourning throughout the ancient world. Job sat among the *ashes* after suffering his calamities (Job 2:8). After hearing Jonah's preaching, the King of Nineveh "covered himself with *sackcloth* and sat on *ashes*" (Jonah 3:6) and the people of Nineveh "put on *sackcloth* from the greatest to the least" (Jonah 3:5).

Given their idolatry with the world systems and religious pride, it would have been an appropriate response for the cities of *Chorazin* and *Bethsaida* to dress in *sackcloth and ashes* upon hearing Jesus's call for them to *repent* (Matthew 4:17). Had they done so they would have been "makarios" (blessed) (Matthew 5:4).

In introducing His next assertion with the phrase *Nevertheless I say to you*, Jesus indicated that what He was about to *say* came from His own authority and not another's. Jesus declared *It will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you*. This is a serious statement. *The day of judgment* refers to *the day* when everyone is judged by God. It is the final and ultimate reckoning of all things. As God, Jesus will be the Judge on *the day of judgment*, a fact that gives even more gravity to this claim. To claim that these Pagan *cities* will have a *better judgement* than the Jewish cities of *Chorazin* and *Bethsaida* would have been unthinkable to a Jew.

*Better judgment* could mean a *better* outcome, or it could mean a more lenient consideration in the case of *Tyre and Sidon* than *Chorazin and Bethsaida* by the Judge. This might indicate that because the ancient towns of Tyre and Sidon did not see the miracles of Jesus in their old days, God will hold them less responsible for their moral choices. *Chorazin* and *Bethsaida* on the other hand are more accountable for their rejection of God because they witnessed Jesus's miracles. This would fit Jesus' statement, "From everyone who has been **given much, much** will be required" (Luke 12:48). The principle seems to be that each person will be judged based on how they stewarded what they were given to know and what opportunities they were granted to steward.

Jesus then repeats a similar rebuke to the city of *Capernaum*. Capernaum was the town Jesus chose to be the headquarters for His ministry outreach (Matthew 4:13). As a result, it had the greatest witness, and therefore will receive the greatest chastisement.

*And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you?* The NASB captures the essence of Jesus's expression well. Literally, Jesus says "*And you, Capernaum, unto the heavens you will be exalted.*" But as He says this His tone is sarcastic. We know this is sarcastic, based on the surrounding context of what precedes and follows this remark. It is clear that *you, Capernaum will not be exalted on the day of judgement to glory in heaven*. Rather, *You will descend in hades*.

*Hades* is the Greek term for the place of the dead. It is a common and general reference to the afterlife. To *descend to Hades* is the opposite of being *exalted to heaven*. It seems apparent that

some of Jesus' followers and disciples were from Capernaum, as indicated in Matthew chapter 8. So, it seems unlikely that Jesus' intent was to condemn all inhabitants. In fact, we can discern that from the story of *Sodom*. *Sodom* was a grossly immoral and corrupt city that was so wicked that God destroyed by fire (Genesis 19:1-28). *Sodom* served as a dreadful byword and example of God's wrathful judgment. *Sodom* was the comparison Jesus used, since *Sodom* was spared until its lone righteous inhabitant, Lot, could evacuate. This judgement could apply to the town's leadership; the entire collection of wicked persons (who follow the leadership); or perhaps even the existence of the town itself.

It seems that Israel was deemed to have rejected Jesus because its leaders rejected Him.

We can see a possible example of Israel being deemed to have rejected Jesus due to the reaction of its rulers in Acts. In Acts 3:19 Peter told the Jews gathered there due to a miracle of healing to repent so Jesus will return and set up His kingdom on earth.

“Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you.”  
(Acts 3:19-20)

This makes clear that if Israel repented, Jesus would have returned even then. Many of the men who heard Peter's sermon believed; the passage says 5,000 were added to the church from that event (Acts 4:4). However, the rulers (leaders) arrested Peter and others, and commanded them not to speak the name of Jesus. Then in Acts 7, Stephen addresses the ruling council and accuses them of being hard hearted and rejecting the things of God. For this he was murdered. Of course, Jesus did not return again during the first century. From this we know that the belief by those 5,000, plus the 3,000 who believed at Pentecost (Acts 2:41), plus other Jews who believed was not considered as Israel believing. We could make an application from this that the leadership must believe and repent for Israel to have been deemed to have believed and repented. This seems a reasonable connection, since the leaders ultimately represent the people they govern; and if the leaders accept something, normally a substantial percentage of the people do as well.

Therefore, a possible application of this passage is that the judgement being pronounced upon these cities applies to its leadership. They will have a lot to answer for in the judgement, for seeing and knowing what is true, and not leading their people to the great benefit being offered.

It would seem that in condemning these towns, Jesus is likely not condemning all the inhabitants of the town—the righteous Centurion of Matthew 8, or Peter's family, for example.

This seems to be validated by Jesus's use of Sodom as an example. Jesus claimed that if Sodom had seen what Capernaum saw, *it would have repented* and changed its ways and not been destroyed. *It would have remained to this day*. Sodom was destroyed, but only after its lone righteous citizen was removed, Abraham's nephew Lot. It is interesting to note that God told Abraham He would defer judgement on Sodom if there had been ten righteous men, instead of one.

However, all of Sodom was destroyed, the people along with the leaders, with the lone exception of Lot and his family. Accordingly, the people who followed the leaders were all judged for their wicked deeds. So it could be that the judgement being pronounced is upon all the wickedness within the cities.

Another possible application is that the physical, literal continuation of the cities' existence will cease. Sodom's existence was terminated. All of these cities on the norther shore of Galilee no longer exist. They are presently ruins that can be visited. None of them remain as active cities. So this could be part of the judgement, that the cities' existence was ended. This seems to fit the use of Sodom as an example, in that Sodom's very existence was eliminated. And with respect to Israel's rejection of Jesus, the temple was destroyed in 70 A.D., toward the end of a forty-year period that might be considered a generation. Much of Jerusalem and Judah were killed or dispersed at this time as well. Many Jews who had believed had been run out of the city due to persecution, which could be viewed as a circumstance similar to the evacuation of Lot.

A third application could be that in the New Earth, cities and countries are part of what is judged. There is an intriguing passage in Revelation that hints at this.

"I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it."

(Revelation 22:22-24)

This passage indicates that in the New Earth, in which righteousness dwells, there will be "nations" and "kings." Perhaps there will be towns as well, and in some sense their earthly legacy will be represented in the New Earth.

The idea of a town descending to Hades might speak of it ceasing to exist. And the idea of a town ascending to heaven could speak of its prosperity and potentially even of its existence being reconstituted in the New Earth.

*He* claimed that *if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day.* Jesus said that even *Sodom*, the city with the reputation of being the worst sinners, a town that was so corrupt that not even ten righteous men could be found within it (Genesis 18:20-32), even *it would have repented* and changed their ways and not been destroyed. *It would have remained to this day.* The immediate sting of Jesus's statement to *Capernaum* was *You should be ashamed of yourself Capernaum, for even unrighteous Sodom would have responded better than you.*

Jesus ends his rebuke of *Capernaum* in an almost identical manner in which *He* concluded *His* rebukes of *Chorazin* and *Bethsaida*.

*Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you.*

The pattern and cadence of the rebukes are the same. They both begin are uttered on Jesus's authority, they both claim that the wicked *cities* (Tyre and Sidon; Sodom) will have some sort of advantage *in the day of judgement* than the Jewish cities (*Chorazin* and *Bethaida*; *Capernaum*). The key difference is that instead saying that *Sodom* will have a *better judgement*, Jesus says that it will have a *more tolerable judgement*.

### **Biblical Text**

**11:20-24 Then He began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent. "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you."**