

Matthew 23:29-36

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-23/matthew-2329-36/>

Jesus's final woe of warning to the scribes and Pharisees was condemning. In it He demonstrated how they were just like their fathers who murdered God's prophets when they killed John the Baptist. He also said they would get their fill of even more prophet's blood—so much so that they would become as guilty as though they killed every righteous person from Abel to Zechariah.

The parallel account of this statement is found in Luke 11:47-51.

The eighth *woe* in Matthew 23 regarded the Pharisee's killing of God's prophets. It was addressed *to you, the scribes and Pharisees*.

The scribes were religious lawyers. They meticulously searched the Law and the Tradition to create loopholes for themselves and to manufacture more and more rules to control the people. *The Pharisees* were the teachers of these religious customs and the leaders of the local synagogues. They crushed anyone who defied their authority or who failed to follow *the scribes'* rules. Together, *the scribes and Pharisees*, were an unopposable and corrupt force of religious malpractice.

Jesus called them *hypocrites*. Hypocrite comes from the Greek term for “actor.” It is someone who pretends to be one thing but is really another. It describes someone who is fake. Jesus used this term to brand *the scribes and Pharisees* as religious frauds.

The reason He called them *hypocrites* in this *woe*, was because they acted as though they venerated God's prophets who were martyred for serving Him when, in actuality, they would enthusiastically murder the prophets that God was sending them. We will soon see them murder the ultimate prophet, Jesus, who was God come in the flesh.

Jesus said, *For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous*. The religious leaders erected *monuments* and memorials to commemorate *the prophets and the righteous* heroes of Israel's history. Many of these *prophets* and *righteous* heroes were persecuted and *murdered* by the religious establishments of their time. *The scribes and Pharisees* claimed, “*If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.*” They said that they would have followed the *prophets*, and not opposed and killed them as their forefathers had done.

Jesus continued, *So you testify against yourselves that you are the sons of those who murdered the prophets*. Although claiming that they would have not acted like their *fathers, who murdered the prophets*, Jesus pointed out that *the Pharisees* are testifying against themselves, because in reality they *are the sons of those* murderers. Jesus told them *you are just as guilty as your fathers*.

With blistering sarcasm Jesus prophetically assured them, “Don’t worry, you will get your opportunity to slay God’s prophets too!” when He said: *Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers.* This of course will transpire soon, when the Jews will conduct an illegal trial (breaking the weightier provisions of the Law) and convict Jesus of phony claims (Matthew 26:57-68).

Christ then echoed the sentiment of what John the Baptizer had said to them at the Jordan River a few years earlier when the Baptizer said, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” (Matthew 3:7). Here Jesus said, *You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?* This was possibly said to allude to the *Pharisees’* opposition to John and to implicate them in his murder. If this was the case, it undermined the *Pharisees’* entire argument that they were not like their *fathers* and *would not have shed the blood of God’s prophets.*

The phrase *the sentence of hell* is literally translated as *the sentence of Gehenna.*

Gehenna was the Greek name of the Hinnom Valley, located to the immediate south of Jerusalem’s city walls. It served as the city dump where waste and animal carcasses were burned and rotted. Jesus often used Gehenna as an image to contrast the blessings of His kingdom.

[\(To learn more about Gehenna, see our Tough Topics article “Gehenna, Hell, and Hades”\).](#)

A *sentence* is the punishment issued by a court or other legal authority for breaking the law. A guilty person receives a *sentence.* The *scribes and Pharisees* were guilty of the murder of John the Baptist. They would soon be guilty of the murder of the Messiah (Matthew 27:24-25) and other *righteous* men (Acts 7:57-60; 9:1-2; 12:1-3).

The sentence of Gehenna was likely a reference to the *Pharisees* being banished from the kingdom that Jesus came to usher in as Israel’s Messiah as a punishment for these murders. Jesus’s “Parable of the Vineyard” (Matthew 21:33-41) and the first half of His “Parable of the Marriage Feast” (Matthew 22:2-8) graphically describes their *guilt.*

So that *the scribes and Pharisees* would not miss their chance to *kill* even more of God’s *prophets* as their *fathers* had done, Jesus sarcastically said, *Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes.* These were a reference to Jesus’s disciples and the disciples of the disciples that *the Pharisees* would hunt down and *kill.* Jesus said *some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city.* Before he dramatically converted to belief in Jesus as the Messiah, Paul the Pharisee was in the process of doing these very things (Acts 9:1-2).

Jesus dramatically emphasized that the *scribes and Pharisees* would become *so* guilty murdering God’s *prophets* that upon them *may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed* in history *on earth.* Their *guilt* would stretch *from the blood of Adam’s righteous son Abel* who was murdered by his brother Cain (Genesis 4:8-10), *to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom,* Jesus said, *you murdered between the temple and the altar.*

Who was *Zechariah, the son of Berechiah*?

While we are not certain, He might have been referring to the prophet *Zechariah* who was the author of the Book of *Zechariah*. This *Zechariah* introduced himself as *the son of Berechiah* (*Zechariah* 1:1). He was active as a prophet from 520-518 B.C. and he urged the people to rebuild *the temple*. He was a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah during Judah's return from the Babylonian exile and may have even partnered with Ezra in bringing Levites back to Jerusalem (*Ezra* 8:16) and in teaching the law (*Nehemiah* 8:3-4). The Old Testament does not say when or how the prophet *Zechariah* died.

If *Zechariah, the son of Berechiah* was the same person as the prophet, then there is a symmetry in Jesus's condemnation. *Abel's* murder is told in Genesis, the first book of the Jewish scriptures. And the Book of *Zechariah* was combined with the Book of Malachi to form the final book of the Jewish scriptures. So if this was the *Zechariah* Jesus was speaking of, He was in essence using *Abel* and *Zechariah* to illustrate the beginning and end and all in between, and charging *the guilt* of every *righteous* person killed in the Old Testament upon the heads of the *scribes and Pharisees*.

Jesus concluded this eighth and final *woe* with a seal of authority: *Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.*

His expression *truly I say to you* was Jesus's way of referencing His own personal authority. Many Jewish Rabbis would reference other notable *scribes* and scholars as a way to bolster their arguments. Jesus did not do this. Instead of saying, "As Rabbi so-and-so says," Jesus said *Truly I say to you...* As God there was no higher authority than Himself.

Jesus frequently taught in this way (*Matthew* 5:18; 5:20; 5:22; 5:26; 5:28; 5:32; 5:34; 5:39; 5:44; 6:2; 6:5; 6:16; 6:25; 6:29; 8:10; 8:11; 10:15; 10:23; 10:42; 11:11; 11:22; 11:24; 12:6; 12:31; 13:17; 16:28; 17:12; 17:20; 18:3; 18:10; 18:18; 18:19; 19:9; 19:23; 19:24; 19:28; 21:21; 21:31; 21:43; 23:36; 23:39; 24:2; 24:34; 24:47; 25:40; 25:45; 26:13; 26:21; 26:29; 26:34).

Jesus promised them that *all these things will come upon this generation of Pharisees*. The phrase *all these things* could refer to the eighth *woe* alone and *the blood-guilt* of murdering God's prophets. Or it could have meant all eight of the prophetic woes that Jesus issued upon the *scribes and Pharisees* in this chapter.

In either case, unless they repented, they were in a world of trouble, as all men will be accountable for their deeds before God (*Romans* 2:6-11).

After Jesus's death and resurrection Peter encouraged these Jewish leaders to escape the *woe* that was to *fall upon* "this perverse generation" (*Acts* 2:40) by repenting and being baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (*Acts* 2:38). Some of them apparently did this and were saved (*Acts* 2:41; 21:20).

Biblical Text

²⁹“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous,³⁰ and say, ‘If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’³¹ So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.³² Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers.³³ You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?³⁴ Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city,³⁵ so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.³⁶ Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.