



## “LOOKING BACK TO SEE FORWARD”

Matthew 11:20-30

by Pastor Tim Dodson  
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**Matthew 11:20** *Then He began to*

*rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent: 21 "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. 22 "But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. 23 "And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. 24 "But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you." 25 At that time Jesus answered and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. 26 "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight. 27 "All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. 28 "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."*

**We come to a point today in our account of the Life and Times of Jesus Christ**, which marks a change in Jesus' public ministry. There's an obscure yet emphatic transition between verse 19 and verse 20 that involves a dramatic shift in the way Jesus spoke to those who followed Him in His public ministry. He turns herein from expressing Himself merely as the meek and lowly "Teacher", to expressing Himself as the strong and stern "Judge."

Why? What precipitated this change? It appears that there was a reality that even though people saw Jesus' miracles and listened to His teaching, they did not change because of what they saw and heard. While Jesus is gracious and certainly patient, there essentially was no real reformation occurring in so many of his followers... no 'learning curve' in the lives of the people, and He would now call them out because of it.

Please note that Jesus always seemed to begin with tenderness and mercy, as should we. He healed, He ministered, He fed, He taught. He was gracious always. But there was also in his teaching ministry, the place for righteous rebuke and He herein delivers that rebuke!

**David said in Psalms 103 verse 2, “Praise the Lord, I tell myself, and never forget the good things He does for me.”**

David wanted to be sure that he never forgot what God had done in his life... where he had come from... and what God had brought him through. He seemingly grasped what so many of us fail to be able to hold on to, and that is the real desire... the NEED even, to never forget the good things God has already done in our lives! Thus David was literally reminding himself not to forget! Such an issue may seem to be trite and maybe even fairly inconsequential, but the reality is we DO forget or we begin to minimize those events that have passed. How often we can be guilty of trivializing the early pages in the novel of our lives, failing to see any longer the magnitude of the grace given and the redemption received.

With just a cursory read through the book of Psalms, we could note all the times such forgetting is mentioned (chapters 78, 103, 106, 137). Psalm 107 says when we forget, it “*tests God’s patience, frustrates the Holy One of Israel, and makes God’s anger rise.*” That should by all rights get our attention! The further we dig into this subject the more convinced we should become that forgetting God’s goodness and blessing is a sin. Here are some reasons why:

**Forgetting leads to unbelief and unrest.** In such a state, we naturally become inward looking and self absorbed. Our futuristic wants and desires soon override all spiritual calling and communiqué and ultimately...remaining unchecked, we will move into open rebellion. Even though the children of Israel had just witnessed the miraculous 10 plagues of Egypt, escaped 400 years of slavery, and watched God literally and figuratively 'part the sea before them' in an incredible act of redemption, they still “soon forgot his many acts of kindness to them. Instead, they rebelled against Him at the Red Sea.” (Ps.106:7)

Inexplicably, soon after their Red Sea miracle, the receivers of God’s incredible redemption grew angry and bitter when there was no water source. It was suddenly ‘all about them and what they wanted,’ not about God’s greater plan for them. Repeatedly, the children of Israel forgot the miracles God had just done for them, and they grumbled, wanted to pursue a different direction that God had laid out for them, and demanded new leadership. And of course, that leadership usually included them personally. (Read Numbers 12 and the story of Miriam!)

Forgetting makes us do foolish things! At Mt. Sinai, the people got tired of waiting for Moses and “*traded their glorious God for a statue of a grass-eating ox!*” (Ps. 106:20) They wanted God to look like, act like, and RE-act according to their own plans and agenda! How quickly the people forgot what God had done for them, and His power and His sovereignty. Forgetting causes us to get impatient and not wait on His direction, or worse, ignore his true will and calling for us, out of our personal desire and imagined status. (Ps. 106:13) Impatient people do stupid things.

And as we noted before, “forgetting” ignites God’s anger. The people had forgotten God, their Savior, who had done such great things, such wonderful things, such awesome deeds for them, so "He declared He would destroy them.” (Ps. 106:21-23) Thankfully, Moses, THEIR pastor, stepped in time after time and saved the people from God’s wrath. But the people could not look to Moses to forever stand in the breach. The people would have to grow up or die, (physically, spiritually, or both!), and like all of us today they all eventually did one or the other.

I must say that this issue is a mind-boggling one for me! I have witnessed some absolutely earth-shattering rescues at the hand of God, where people were redeemed out of some horrific life situations. But how often... as the years went by, those same individuals ironically grew prideful and self-entitled. They started out in awe that God would ever let them part of His family, but ended seeking not service and relationship but rather position and status! Like Miriam, they rejected authority and defiantly claimed "I hear from God too!"

Most, if not all of us, can say that God has done great, wonderful, and awesome things in our lives! But when the next trial or test comes, when we begin to desire what is clearly not for us, do we remember from where we have come? Are we still embracing what God has already done or are we being driven by the lust for more? Christ herein speaks of Capernaum as being 'exalted' in the heavens, and it was no doubt that that self exaltation and grandism that was their undoing.

I would expect that those who lived in these cities would have been insulted and shocked to be put in the same basket as Tyre, Sidon, Sodom and Gomorrah! For Christ not only draws the comparison but actually says that in many ways they were worse! Because the residents of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum had actually witnessed the presence and the miracles of the Savior, and they *STILL* failed to humble themselves! They *still* failed to allow God the full authority over the lives. They like so many of us, they had a 'form of godliness, but denied the power thereof.' Meaning they wore the mantle of religion, but rejected God's sovereign control.

How many of us have, like those cities, witnessed and even participated in the miraculous grace of Christ, only to ultimately 'dis' Him through our pride? How many of us have forgotten: forgotten the horror of our previous state, the ugly shame we had for those BC days, and how we were incredibly redeemed? How many of us forgot all of that and now stand with hands open seeking more than what He has already blessed us with?

Such no doubt did not happen over night. Satan is patient and methodical. Over time he will chip away at our resolve, blur the path behind us, and slowly build our self confidence and self importance, until the day that we finally stiffen our backs and plant our feet against **Him**, His **will**, as well as the authorities He had placed in our lives. And incredibly in our blindness, we can actually believe that we are 'doing God a favor' through our actions! (John 16:2) But the fact is, God abhors our self motivated actions. "Woa" to you that have forgotten who you are, from where you have come, and what God has done for you, with you, and in you already. You have forgotten, but God has not!

A man once came to D. L. Moody and said he was worried because he didn't feel God was there and that things were not happening as he thought they would. Moody asked, "Was Noah safe in the ark?" "Certainly he was," the man replied. "Well, what made him safe, his feeling or the ark?" The man got the point! We can often feel that God has somehow forgotten us. It is in those times like no other that we must stop and consider the salvation God has granted to us in Jesus Christ. All of that is, and was, never based on anything in you! Noah found grace, and so has every person who has trusted Christ as Savior. John Newton, preacher and author of "Amazing Grace," was a drunken sailor and slave trader when God saved him. He once wrote a note in bold letters and put it over the mantle of his study, where he could not help but see it constantly: "*Thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt and the Lord thy God redeemed thee.*" Newton wanted to remember God's faithfulness that had already been given to him!

Even after our rebirth we can so easily think and respond like the world. We want what we want and we want it now. We want all our problems resolved now, the illusive answers to our questions delivered posthaste and our desires furnished immediately. But God shapes us into maturity...whether we like it or not, by making us learn to wait on Him. After a year in a crowded, dark, smelly ark, Noah must have had a bad case of cabin fever. But he had to patiently and obediently wait for the Lord to give the word. God didn't dry up the water instantly, but used the wind and other natural processes. It took time. That's how God works.

Let us note that these cities that Jesus speaks of here were not known to be particularly hostile towards Him. That was not His complaint. Rather He was taking issue with them because they failed to respond to the degree to which the blessing and opportunities had been bestowed upon them. They had both witnessed and experienced the miraculous grace of God and yet they saw Christ as merely a means to an end. This biblical account warns us that God judges people according to the opportunities they have already had to respond to his truth and blessing. Scripture throughout speaks to those who know best as having greater accountability and responsibility (Lk 12:47-48; Rom 2:12-16; 12:19-20; Rev 9:20-21). Yet it is no secret that those who claim to be God's people are often the most hardhearted hearers of all! Tyre, Sidon and Sodom were closer to repentance than these, God's people, who took the signs and blessings for granted.

Jesus had performed many works and miracles before and *for* the people. They no doubt had enjoyed the blessings of it all. We know they marveled at His works. They followed Him and gathered regularly to watch them occur. But they didn't change their minds about Him. They didn't repent of their independent attitudes of heart. In the end, they hadn't turned from their own ways, and from their own thoughts, and from their own independent spirits. They had still yet failed to take **His** yoke upon themselves and they didn't seek to learn from Him how He wanted them to live.

Certainly we see that the same thing happens in church. Some people can attend church for years. They can enjoy the fellowship and marvel at the things that God does in their lives and the lives of the community of believers. They can even grow to know the Bible very well. They can behold His marvelous and great works - both in hearing them taught, and in seeing them displayed before their very eyes. And still, they often do it all without ever really surrendering themselves to Christ as the sovereign Lord over their living.

Ultimately it was the pride of these people...these cities, which would bring down upon them the condemnation of Christ. Having failed to truly grasp the blessing that God had bestowed upon them as well as the miraculous power that they had already been a part of, they would be passed up for those who were approaching God with a far more humble and simple heart. *"At that time Jesus answered and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight."* Thus God would use not the earthly talented, the best educated or the greatest earthly ability. He would use the baby's! Those that simply loved Christ and had repented of their earthly ways in lieu of God's ordained design and path for them. That's why it has always appeared that God's service is an 'upside down' world! Because it does not play by the same design as humanity operates.

Jesus is painting a clear picture herein that the character of one's heart is not revealed by having the privilege of seeing or even receiving the mighty works and grace of Jesus. It's not the knowledge of scripture or our skills, talents or even positions we may hold that reveals our character. But rather it's the impact those things have on our hearts that makes the difference and reveals the truth about us. Jesus says that they stand condemned - not because of what they *did*, but because of what they *did not do* because of what they saw. They ultimately still refused to be humbled and let Him lead them.

**"Woe!"** It's an expression of deep sorrow and compassion. Jesus is saying, "How terrible it will be for you, Chorazin! How terrible it will be for you, Bethsaida!" The Living Bible renders it "What horrors await you . . .!" That's a scary warning on any level, but especially when it comes from the lips of the Son of God! And to Capernaum - who thought that it was "exalted to heaven" . . .who thought they had it going on, He says, *"And you . . . will be cast down to Hades . . ."* Instead of a position of esteem and clout, they would instead be thrust down to the lowest! We therefore must acknowledge that there will be those who this world now admires and applauds for their outward show of religion, who will then be recipients of inexpressible astonishment and horror in the day of judgment - because, in spite of all their outward religion, they did not and would not repent of the pride in their hearts, nor surrender the control of their lives to Him. It means that there will be those on that great day of judgment who knew of Jesus' mighty works - but who did not repent when they could - who will be shocked to hear *"depart from me, I never knew you."*

*"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."*

Jesus was calling the people...*and calling us today*, to "come to HIM." It is HIS yoke we are to aspire to. It is HIS rest we are to find and embrace. Not our own plans or will!

*Frances Havergal, the hymn writer, could have easily felt forgotten by God. She died in her early forties. On the last day of her life, she asked a friend to read Isaiah 42 to her. When the friend read the sixth verse, "I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee," Miss Havergal stopped her. She whispered, "Called; held; kept. I can go home on that!" And she did go home on that, resting in the faithful remembrance of her God. One of her best loved songs is, "Like a River Glorious." The third verse reads,*

*Every joy or trial falleth from above,  
Trac'd upon our dial by the Sun of Love;  
We may trust Him fully all for us to do;  
They who trust Him wholly find Him wholly true.*

(Quote from Steven J. Cole)

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