

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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HOW OFTEN WOULD I HAVE GATHERED YOUR CHILDREN

Matthew 23:37-39

Jesus' great love for Israel is seen in a passage which is often known as 'Christ's lament over Jerusalem.' Let's read this passage. Matthew 23:37-39. Here Jesus sighed from the depth of His heart and wept.

Matthew 23:37. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!

38 Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate.

39 For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

O Jerusalem!

Jerusalem, the capital city of God's chosen people and the location of the temple, was about to be destroyed. Why? Because Jerusalem persecuted God's messengers. The Jews had abused and even killed many of His messengers. Yet God had not turned away from them. Time and again, He reached out to the people through His servants and each time they were rejected. But God's patience is running out. The measure of the cup had been filled and the time had now come... Jerusalem will be destroyed.

It was Jesus' mission to avert the punishment of Jerusalem by bringing Israel to repentance. Jesus says, 'Again and again I wanted to gather you together the way a hen gathers her little ones under her wings.' That is how a hen watches over her chicks when something dangerous is happening, such as a storm or when a hawk is getting ready to attack the young birds. But they refused to listen. Notice the contrast between 'I would' and 'you would not.' Jesus was willing, but they were not willing.

Why were they not willing? Here I would like to highlight the voluntary nature of our commitment to God's call. This is going to be the main point of our lesson, that when we say 'yes' to God's call, it is of our own free will. This may seem obvious but as we will see, sometimes theology has a way of making things complicated.

Hearing God's voice

These chicks that Jesus is talking about, if they did not regard the hen as their mother, then of course they would not go to her for safety. In the same way, if we do not regard God as our Lord and Savior, we would not respond to His call and go to Him.

Jesus uses the imagery of a shepherd and his sheep in John 10. The shepherd has authority over his sheep if, of course, the sheep recognizes his voice. *My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me*, Jesus says in John 10:27. And those who are not of His sheep do not hear. They do not believe (John 10:26). The word 'hear' (*akouo*) has a double meaning in Greek. To hear means to listen and also to obey. To hear His voice does not simply mean that you hear the vibrations of Jesus' voice. It means that you respond to His voice, that you obey the message which comes from Him.

Now, if you do not accept that what I am saying is God's message, if you think that I am just expressing my personal opinion, then of course, you will not be inclined to respond. 'Why should I respond to him,' you might say. 'My opinion is just as good as his opinion.' But if you have the feeling that the message is genuine, that it has the ring of truth, and you conclude that it is a message from God, then you are faced with a decision. Should I respond to it or should I not? Should I respond to the fact that God is the Creator of heaven and earth, and that He is our Redeemer?

God has authority over us as our Creator and our Redeemer. And yet, He does not press that authority upon us by some external means. We may accept or reject that authority on a purely voluntary basis. In other words, we can say 'no' to God.

This is absolutely amazing. Think about it. We, being puny creatures made of dust, can say 'no' to almighty God. How is that so? How can God allow us to say 'no' to Him? Why does not God compel us to obey Him? 'I am God and I demand that you listen to Me. If you say 'no' to Me, I will force you to say 'yes.'" That might be how man exercises his power, but that is not how God deals with us.

The apparent passivity of God

In the Bible, we see numerous people blaspheming against God, ridiculing God, saying all kind of things against God. But God does not do anything. We put ourselves in God's shoes and we are confused. We get indignant and we may have thoughts like, 'Why doesn't God just squash these people up as we would squash up an ant?'

Some people dare God to prove His existence. They say arrogantly, 'God, if you really exist, show it to me. You can strike me down if you want. I'm not afraid. Just do something that can be seen by everybody.' And because they can insult at will and nothing happens, they conclude that God does not exist. Why doesn't God do something?

Jesus preached to the Jews, warned the Jews of the judgment, but they did not listen to Him. In the end, people spat on His face. They whipped Him. They put Him on a cross. 'Come on, if you are who you claim to be, show your power. Come down.' And Jesus does not respond. He does not do anything to defend His honor. We are puzzled. We find it mind boggling, this ... 'passivity' of God.

Then there are God's people, who are the apple of His eyes, the Bible tells us (Zechariah 2:8). Believers are as precious to God as the apple of His eyes. But when they are persecuted, put in prison, put to death, what does God do? Nothing. He sees the suffering of His people, and He does not lift a finger. As parents, we feel like saying, 'If somebody were doing something harmful to my child, I would rush and grab this fellow by the neck and knock him down. But God, you see your children

being attacked. You see your children being mistreated. And you don't do anything! How can I understand that?'

Yes, how do we understand that? Here we see the wonderful wisdom and glory of God. It is here that the human mind finds it so offensive and so difficult to comprehend. And it is precisely here that God's power and glory are revealed. Jesus taught us to turn the other cheek when we are spat upon and insulted. How can He suddenly turn around and wipe out the person who insulted Him? He will not be consistent with His teaching. He will not be consistent with Himself. He tells us to endure humiliation and insult, and He Himself will not endure it?

You know, what we find incredibly difficult to understand is that the God of such power is willing to put up with the arrogance and the insults of insignificant man. That is what I find mind boggling. I can understand that God has the power to create the whole universe. But that He can stand the insolence of men, the arrogance of His creatures, without retaliation, that is extremely difficult to understand. And that is precisely where God's spiritual greatness is to be found.

Which is greater? If somebody hits you and you hit back vigorously, or if somebody hits you and you do not hit back even though you have the power to crush the other person.

We know in our head that God is all powerful. But when we look for a display of power in Christ, we do not see anything. What we see is the cross and someone who is badly injured and humiliated. The scene is impressive, not because it is so glorious. It is impressive because it is so pitiful. When you look at the cross and the person who is hanging up there, you just wonder what that man did to suffer all this.

The respect of man's freedom

Why does God work in that way? Why doesn't God show forth His power and impress the world into obedience? Clearly if God manifested Himself in the fullness of His power today, the whole world would instantly believe. Everybody would immediately collapse on the ground in submission. But God did not do that. There is no display of power. No display of glory. Only a display of what? A display of weakness. Of weakness. As Paul says in 2Corinthians 13:4 about Jesus, *He was crucified in weakness*.

You see, if God imposed His power, we would believe Him, sure, but we would believe Him under pressure either because of fear or because of purely carnal reasons. So God's 'problem,' if we can call that a problem, is this: what must He do if He is going to get from us an allegiance that is not motivated by fear or by being impressed with His power? How can He make sure that our allegiance to Him is a truly spiritual one, based on discerning the truth?

That is why I said that God's wisdom is so amazing. He invites us to believe and He removes every external pressure. If there is any reason that we are going to believe, it is because we have discerned the truth.

That puts God's truth at the mercy of man's will, i.e., man can accept or reject the message of God. He can say 'yes' to it, or 'no' to it. In other words, you can accept His sovereignty or you can reject it. How is that possible? Does the Bible not say that God is all sovereign? Yes, that is the teaching of the Bible, but it does not mean that He is an absolute Monarch who always gets His way and will force His sovereignty on us if we resist Him. God is a personal being who respects our integrity and who relates dynamically with us in the working out of His purposes for the world.

In the Five Points of Calvinism, there is one that is called 'irresistible grace.' This doctrine teaches that 'the saving grace of God is effectually applied to those whom He has determined to save and, in God's timing, overcomes their resistance to obeying the call of the gospel, bringing them to

faith in Christ.' In other words, whatever God has determined to do, He will do it, even in the salvation of individuals. The Holy Spirit 'irresistibly' draws sinners to Christ. If God has chosen you to be in His kingdom, you will be in His kingdom, period. He does not ask for your opinion.

How divine sovereignty and human freedom relate to each other is a topic that has divided Christians for a long time. We have to recognize that this subject stretches the human mind to its limits.

I take the position that God not only influences events in the world but is also influenced by those events. Not only God has plans for humanity, but He is also flexible to adapt them to the decisions that human beings make. Above all, God is love, and divine love respects human freedom, even to the extent of allowing man to be utterly irrational and perverse.

To talk about 'irresistible grace' is like talking about a 'square circle.' The two terms do not go together. It is difficult to see how grace can be 'irresistible'. Grace is the offer of a gift, not the imposition of another's will. And it is in the nature of a gift that it can be rejected. It is in the nature of love that it can be ignored or spurned.

God made us free creatures, able to accept or reject His purposes for us. Hebrews 4:2 tells us that even the good news of the grace of God will not benefit us unless *mixed with faith in those who heard it*. Reciprocity and conditionality are two important aspects of God's relations with us. Think of the numerous exhortations and warnings in the book of Hebrews, a book that was addressed to Christians. These exhortations and warnings can only signify that continuing in the grace of God is something that depends at least in part on the will of the disciple. And God is teaching us the importance of maintaining and not forsaking this relationship.

The consequence of the fact that our commitment to God is voluntary is that it can also be voluntarily terminated. If you freely said 'yes,' you also have the freedom to say 'no' in the future if you decide to put an end to the relationship. In John 6, when the disciples wanted to leave Jesus, the Lord did not put any pressure on them to stay. He said, 'You can go. You freely came; you may freely leave.' And He said to the others, 'If you want to leave too, you are free to do so.'

The possibility for man to say 'no' to God is what the Scripture calls the offense of the cross. You see, the offense of the cross is that man can put God on the cross. Not only man can humiliate and reject God, but he can crucify Him. Paul said, 'Why am I being persecuted by the Jews and the Gentiles alike?' Because of the offense of the cross. The cross is an offense to the Jews. It is an offense to the Gentiles. It is indeed an offense to our mind.

Discerning the truth

This brings me to talk about the question of discernment, of discerning the truth. Here is an important spiritual principle: our ability to discern the truth depends on whether or not we accept the offense of the cross. In order to discern the truth, we have to accept the offense of the cross. Why do I say that? Here is the reason. When God deals with non-Christians, He appears to be weak. He shows no sign of power. But He will show His power to those who, on the basis of their perception of the truth, have already committed themselves to Him. He will reveal His power to those who have accepted the offense of the cross.

Remember this principle of spiritual life. A person who shows no willingness to take up the cross and follow Christ will not see God's power. God will not reveal His power to this kind of person. But if you have yielded your life to His authority, if you have accepted the cross, God's power will be revealed to you. You will see His power.

One day, the situation will be different. One day, everybody will see His power. Look at Luke 21:24-27.

*Luke 21:24. They will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led captive among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.
25 And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves,
26 men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.
27 **And then they will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.***

Notice this last sentence. *They will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.* This is the moment that the disciples longed for: the Messiah coming in the totality of His authority. One day, on the day of Jesus' return, people will see Him coming in a cloud with great power and tremendous glory. The point here is that the Lord Jesus will display His power, but not at this present time. The present time can be called 'the time of God's weakness.' It is a period of grace where God chooses not to show His power. He wants to see whether we can trust Him by faith.

But there will come the day when He will reveal His power. Then every knee will bow to Him. Everyone will fall on his face before God. Every person will believe in God. But that believing will not save anyone because faith will not be needed anymore. There will be no more saving faith. The power and glory of God will make everybody to believe.

Right now, we live in the time of the Gentiles, this period of time between the fall of Jerusalem and the return of Christ, when the gospel is given to the whole world without any direct sign of God's power. This is the time to believe.

You can say 'no' to God, but Jesus is hoping that you will say 'yes.' He is saying, 'Come to Me. Take shelter under my wings against these fearful days of judgment which are about to come. Repent and follow Me.'