

Matthew 23:37

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MATTHEW 23:37

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.

When the Arminians come against the biblical doctrines of divine sovereignty, election, reprobation, and so on, this is one of the verses that they frequently mention to support their position. What Jesus "wanted" was unfulfilled because the people were "unwilling." This is supposed to show that man possesses a free will that can oppose the divine will, so that God's desire can be finally frustrated, and that his grace can be successfully resisted. The following will not offer a positive exposition of the biblical system, but it will show only that this verse cannot be used to support Arminianism.

As for the scheme called Calvinism, we may distinguish between two forms. We shall call one the biblical or consistent view, and the other the popular or inconsistent view.

Consistent Calvinism affirms with Scripture that divine sovereignty is incompatible with human freedom, and since Scripture teaches that God is absolutely sovereign, this completely excludes and destroys human freedom. Man has no free will; he is not free at all. It is true that man exercises his will – he makes decisions – but his will is not free. Rather, his will – how he makes decisions and what decisions he makes – is directly and constantly controlled by God for both good and evil, both faith and unbelief. And God is righteous by definition in all the actions that he performs upon the creatures. I have offered full expositions of this biblical scheme elsewhere.

Then, there is the popular form of Calvinism. This is the inconsistent view that says divine sovereignty and human freedom are "compatible" in some sense, that moral responsibility presupposes some measure or sense of "self-determination," that God has desires that contradict one another, that God issues divine decrees to effect things *against* that which he desires, perhaps to establish that which he desires even more, that God could decree the reprobation of individuals, making it impossible for them to believe, but still "sincerely" offer them salvation as if they could believe, that God somehow rules over evil but have no direct causative relation with it, that Adam was created innocent and without evil but could somehow perform evil without God causing him to do so, that we can affirm the reality of evil but deny that God exercises any direct causative power over it and still somehow avoid lapsing into deism or dualism, that we can affirm both sides of an "apparent" contradiction, and that Scripture teaches "apparently" contradictory doctrines that are not real contradictions in the mind of God. We will make no attempt to defend this unbiblical and irrational bundle of confusion.

We should begin by noting the context in which our verse appears. You are advised to read Matthew 23 in its entirety before proceeding, but if you lack the patience, at least do it after reading this exposition. It will help you better grasp the points that we will make. Luke 13:34 is a parallel verse. There the context, in terms of the *topic* raised by the surrounding verses, is similar enough so that it does not demand a separate treatment. And because of this, I will pay no attention to this other verse in our discussion. After we have completed our discussion on Matthew 23:37, you should have no problem with Luke 13:34.

The chapter begins, in verses 1-12, with Jesus making some remarks about the hypocrisy of the scribes and the Pharisees. He says that insofar as they teach the law, the people must obey. Then, he adds, "But do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger" (v. 3-4).

In verses 13-32, he pronounces seven woes upon them, citing the charges that he has against them along with each woe. This portion of the chapter is essential to a proper understanding of verse 37. As you read through these verses, notice how Jesus pronounces one woe after another, and notice the intensity with which he does it. Then notice *to whom* he is addressing these woes in such an unrelenting manner: "Woe **to you**, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" Note all the instances in which he directs his statements to "you" – the scribes and the Pharisees. Pay special attention to verse 13, which says, "But woe to **you**, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for **you** do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in."

Then, in verses 33-36, he identifies them with those who, throughout Israel's history, had killed the prophets that God sent to the people. He says, "...so that **upon you** may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth...Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon **this generation**" (v. 35-36). Without doubt, he is referring to the impending destruction of the temple. The context bears this out, since only several verses later, we read, "Jesus came out from *the temple* and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. And He said to them, 'Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down'" (Matthew 24:1-2). This prediction was fulfilled in AD 70, that is, in the same generation to which Jesus ministered and preached, and the same generation that murdered him. The people were slaughtered and the temple was destroyed.

Jesus has not changed the subject by the time he gets to verse 37. The very next verse again refers to the destruction of the temple: "Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!" (v. 38). In fact, as we have just noted, he is still on the same subject as Matthew 24 begins. It is with *this* background in mind that we should read our verse: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling."

Here "Jerusalem" does not refer to the physical city, or to every person in the city individually considered. "Jerusalem" is said to be one that "kills the prophets," and in context, those who would kill the prophets are the leaders of the people – including the scribes and the Pharisees. They imitate their forefathers who "murdered the prophets" (see v. 29-32). In verse 34, Jesus says that he is about to send them prophets and teachers, and these leaders will mistreat them just as their forefathers mistreated the ancient prophets: "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."

As for the "children" in verse 37, naturally they are the people who live under the authority and guidance of these leaders. Religious and political leaders are sometimes called "fathers" in Scripture (Acts 7:2, 22:1), and those over whom they exercise power and influence are called "sons" and "children" (Matthew 12:27; Isaiah 8:18).

We should first observe, then, that this verse cannot refer to the willingness or the faith of individuals to accept the gospel, for otherwise the verse should say, "I wanted to gather *you*...but *you* would not," or "I wanted to gather *your children*...but *your children* would not." But the verse says, "I wanted to gather *your children*...but *you* would not." It is not the "children" who resisted, but the "you" who resisted in order to prevent the "children" from being gathered. The verse, therefore, is referring to the same thing that is already mentioned in verse 13: "You do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in."

The Arminians may affirm human freedom and deny that God directly controls a person to either believe or disbelieve. But having denied control to God, we suppose that even they are not foolish enough to then turn and attribute to the *human* religious and political leaders direct internal control over the minds of the people, as if the Pharisees could wield greater control than God over the people, so that they could have mercy on whom they wished to have mercy, and harden whom they wished to harden. No, it is evident that verses 13 and 37 are referring to how the religious leaders hindered the prophets on a purely human and external level, to prevent their message from getting through to the people, and to prevent the people from embracing their message. Jesus is speaking about a social and external influence, not a metaphysical and internal power.

It follows, then, that the "I wanted" in verse 37 is also referring to Jesus' relationship with these leaders and their people on a human and external level. There is no hint in this verse that the divine desire or the divine decree can be successfully resisted just because someone is "unwilling." The Bible is clear on the teaching that, if someone is unwilling, it is because God *makes* him unwilling (John 12:40; Romans 9:18, 11:7), and if someone is willing, it is because God *makes* him willing (John 6:44, 65). No one that God makes unwilling can come (John 6:44), and no one that God makes willing can stay away (John 6:37).

The objection might arise that what is attributed to the "I" here cannot possibly be performed by Jesus considered on a purely human level. But in almost any other context,

perhaps in a discussion about the deity of Christ, even the Arminians would admit that as the God-man, Scripture does not always meticulously distinguish between what is attributed to his divine nature and what is attributed to his human nature. We can make the distinction when we must, but Scripture does not always make a point out of it.

For example, in John 4:10, Jesus is at the same time someone who asks for a drink of water, and someone who gives living water. But Jesus in his divine nature cannot become thirsty. In Acts 3:15, Peter says to the Jews, "You killed the author of life" (NIV). But Jesus in his divine nature could not be killed. Of course, this is not a problem for the inspiration of Scripture, for the deity of Christ, or for the doctrine of the incarnation. Rather, it is a testimony to the fact that the divine nature and the human nature are indeed intimately united in Christ, and yet they remain distinguishable, so that there is no mixture or confusion. The one is not deified, and the other is not humanized.

At any rate, it is possible to answer the objection from the verse itself. Notice that the sending of the prophets is not attributed to the "I"; rather, only the gathering of the children is so attributed. And since the gathering is referring to the ministry on a human and external level, it does not demand a divine subject. The fact that a ministry is resisted on a human level says nothing about divine sovereignty or human freedom on a metaphysical level.

Although we may bring to the surface additional details to strengthen the case, our present effort is more than sufficient. We have shown that the verse lends no support at all to the heresy of Arminianism, and we urge its adherents to abandon their humanistic thinking in order to embrace the biblical doctrine.

Neither can the false scheme of inconsistent Calvinism find refuge here, since our case applies equally against them and their misuse of this verse, for example, in their teachings on the "sincere offer" of the gospel and on the tension between contradictory desires in the mind of God. We urge the adherents of this anti-biblical theology to forsake their irrationalism, and to finally remove all traces of the Arminian heresy from their thinking.