

**“Not one stone will be left on another” - Jesus at the Temple**

Some Christians are rather nervous about expositions of judgement that are taken from the Old Testament. There is a general tendency to feel that all that sort of thinking must have been somehow superseded by the New Testament, and questions are raised such as, “Now that Jesus has come, aren’t things rather different?”, “Are the Old Testament prophetic statements on judgement really valid today?” It is highly important that these doubts are answered lest they should prevent us from fully grasping and accepting any word of judgement God has for our own nation today. The best way to answer such doubts is obviously to move into the New Testament itself and see whether we can find there anything like the lessons concerning judgement that come to us out of Amos and his fellow prophets. The fact is that we do find that such lessons are very definitely there. They are to be found in the ministry of John the Baptist, and even the ministry of Jesus himself.

**Jesus the Prophet of Judgement**

Jesus was known generally among the people of his day as “a prophet”; *“A great prophet has appeared among us”* they said (Lk. 7:16). Even his disciples referred to him by that title: *“He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed”* (Lk. 24:19). We know, of course, that he was very much more than a prophet, but unquestionably he did have a very powerful prophetic ministry: he was not one bit less a prophet than Amos or Isaiah. While it may be true that what marked him out as a “prophet” in the minds of the people was primarily his mighty works, it is equally true that the latter part of his ministry was marked by persistent and strong prophetic proclamations about the disastrous fate that awaited Jerusalem and its leaders. He spoke of a disaster coming to the Jews in ways that bear a very marked resemblance to the prophets of Amos’ era.

It was actually in the very last week of his ministry that we come face to face with his great “prophetic” proclamations of judgement. They began on the Sunday before his crucifixion (Palm Sunday) as he made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He paused on that journey at a point on the Mount of Olives where he could see Jerusalem spread out before him and he uttered the following word over the city:

**Jesus was not one bit less a prophet than Amos**

*“If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.”* Lk 19:41ff

This was, to say the least, a very strong word indeed: he was prophesying that the city would be surrounded, destroyed and taken apart stone by stone; the people, children included, would be dashed to pieces. The reason for this would be that it had rejected God’s call to repent and accept him as Messiah. Jesus re-iterated the pronouncement later on in that week:

*“Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, “As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.”* Lk 21:5-6

These words were only the prelude, however, to a major “apocalyptic” prophecy in which Jesus went on to announce once again that Jerusalem would be surrounded by armies and become desolate; people would fall by the sword and any taken prisoner would be dispersed among the nations (Lk. 21:20ff). There is a huge resonance in these words with those that were spoken centuries before by Amos, Isaiah Jeremiah etc. They constitute a clear, specific and devastating prophecy of judgement in exactly the same manner. Significantly, as with the prophets of old, he spoke such words with tears.

This word of judgement was not just for the ears of those who were close to him, his friends and disciples. Teaching openly in the Temple Courts, the public arena of the day, he related before all the people the Parable of the Tenants in which the tenants of the vineyard felt the full wrath of the owner because they would not receive either his servants or indeed his son. The chief priests and the scribes heard this and knew full well he was directing the parable at them and the nation, warning them with the wrath of God. Very much like Jeremiah’s generation of old, they reacted by seeking more eagerly to kill him. Jesus nevertheless responded with the parable of the Wedding Banquet (Matt 22), further emphasising his message. On one occasion, discarding the use of parable, he directly addressed the crowds with a full and lengthy condemnation of the behaviour of the Scribes and Pharisees, a condemnation which he couched in seven “woes”, a formula pregnant with a coming wrath (Matt 23). Yet even here, once again, within that note of wrath came the note of deep lament (so reminiscent of Hosea):

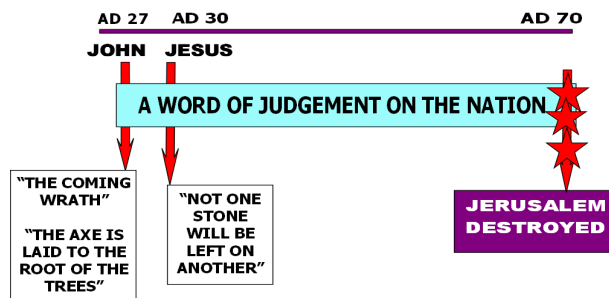
*“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”* Matt 23:37ff

Thus there was at the end of his ministry a strong, loud, repeated and uncompromising prophetic statement of a coming judgement. He had been with them for two or three years, and, despite all the response of the crowds to his mighty works, the city and its leaders had rejected his teaching. Such rejection would mean that the “Owner of the Vineyard” “would bring those leaders to a wretched end” (Lk. 21:41). He spoke of God’s wrath as plainly as any Old Testament figure. The nation would have to pay the penalty, and that meant appalling catastrophe on humanity, young and old.

**John the Baptist Sounds the Alarm**

Though it was Jesus himself who uttered the final pronouncement of judgement on his generation, it was John the Baptist who had uttered the first warnings shots. Luke records the strident words that John sounded from the very start of his

ministry: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” (Lk 3:7) and, “The axe is already laid at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and burned” (Lk. 3:9). These statements constituted a direct threat of imminent judgement. The figure of an axe laid to the root of a tree refers to the process whereby a tree which had proved to be no good for fruit was finally on the point of being cut down; destruction was imminent. John was saying that the nation had reached precisely that point. In the grace of God in its extremity it was going to be offered its Messiah; but it was to have only a very short “now or never” moment to respond! This is the meaning of John’s words in their context: what he was saying was not a generalized spiritual word about a future wrath for those who fail to respond to God, but a specific message to the nation of his day about imminent national judgement.



There is, of course, a huge similarity between John the Baptist and his Old Testament prophetic forebears, even if there were 600 years between him and Jeremiah. He is in the same mould, and the crowds knew it. That is why they flocked out to see him. After centuries without a prophet there was now a prophet in their midst: everyone, including the Scribes and Pharisees was stirred. He was dressed like an Elijah, he spoke with huge directness and authority, and he came out of the desert like an Elijah. Jesus was later to vindicate his ministry and message with the words, “a prophet, yes, and more than a prophet!” And like prophets of old he had a message of judgement for the nation.

The fact of the matter is, therefore, that with Jesus and John the Baptist we are watching, not the superseding of Old Testament prophetic activity and values, but an endorsement of them in the most affirmative way possible. Jesus and John expose the sin of the nation and its leaders, they call for repentance, they speak with great clarity and authority, they do it with tears, they warn of devastating consequences, and both of them pay for their honesty with their lives. They are clearly upholding an old tradition.

### The Vindication of New Testament Prophecy

And just as history vindicated the Old Testament prophets, so history vindicated John and Jesus. John spoke of a coming wrath and Jesus of a destruction of the city and desolation in the land. Events fell out precisely as were prophesied, though, once again as with the old prophets, not overnight. It was in fact some forty years, in AD 70, before the word of judgement was fulfilled. That compares with the 25 years or so between Amos’ word to Israel and the destruction of Samaria. The fulfillment, in AD 70, of Jesus’ prophesying came when Jerusalem was besieged and destroyed by the Romans. In the mid AD 60s Jewish extremists gained political control of the city and raised a flag of rebellion. They actually had early success, routing a Roman army. But the ultimate end was never in doubt, and neither was the punishment that Rome would bring to such a wayward corner of its empire. Vespasian one of the empire’s most formidable soldiers began a thorough and methodical campaign in which he reduced all the important cities of Galilee and Judah, before making a full scale siege of Jerusalem. In the midst of it he became Emperor, but his equally capable son, Titus, took over. It took several months for the starving city to be taken, and taken it was, piece by piece with appalling slaughter. The extremists fought on, hoping to the very end for a divine intervention which never came. Finally the temple itself was taken and smashed to pieces. The city was sacked and burned, its walls totally demolished. Thousands of Jews were then crucified around the city. Any left were sold into slavery, or taken off to die in the arenas of Rome. For the next sixty years Jerusalem was in ruins, simply providing a base for the Roman army. We have a detailed description of the process from the Jewish historian Josephus.

But not even the events of AD 70, however, completed Jesus’ prophetic words. In AD 130 the Emperor, Hadrian, started to rebuild Jerusalem intending to turn it into a modern Roman and pagan city with all traces of its Jewish history removed. The name “Jerusalem” was banned, and Hadrian renamed it “Aelia Capitolina” (Hadrian’s Capital). He began to build a temple to Zeus on the Temple Mount. Widespread revolt ensued under the leadership of Bar Kokhba, but the end result was a complete repetition of the AD 70 disaster. The whole of Judea was laid waste, a thousand of the bigger villages were ruined and some 600,000 men killed. Jerusalem was taken in AD 135 with great slaughter and all Jews were banned from the city as part of the renewed paganisation of the city. In the words of one historian, “These two catastrophes of AD 70 and AD 135 effectively ended Jewish state history in antiquity”, “Judaism ceased to be a national religion in any physical or visible sense”. The long exile had entered a new phase. The outworking of Jesus’ prophecy had proved to be much more devastating than anything Amos or Jeremiah or Isaiah had prophesied in their day. The Old Testament lessons of judgement had been indelibly underlined on a much greater scale in New Testament times.

**If anything should make us very concerned about the relevance of God’s judgement for our times it should be an appreciation of Jesus’ words of judgement to his own nation and generation. He underlines precisely every attitude and understanding that are to be found on the pages of the Old Testament. He who brought such grace through his death can nonetheless speak of imminent catastrophe. We should have no illusions about the fact that God has been and remains a God who has to deal with the utmost severity with those nations who continue to spurn his demands.**