

“For Ye, Brethren, Became Imitators ...”

“... of the churches of God which are in Judaea in Christ Jesus for ye also suffered the same thing of your own countrymen even as they did of the Jews; who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and drove out us, and please not God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, to fill up their sin always: but wrath is come upon them to the uttermost” (1 Thess. 2:14-16).

The Thessalonians were commended by Paul for receiving the word of the message, thus imitating their brethren in Judean churches, which in turn brought to the Gentiles in Thessalonica and Jews in Judea hatred and persecution: Judean Christians from their countrymen and Thessalonian Christians from theirs.

Paul charged of the Jews in Judea that they killed the Lord Jesus. This was the central theme of the gospel message in the first century — the atoning death of Jesus Christ. And yet, the results intended by persecuting Jews and our Loving Father were poles apart. Reflect upon the words of Joseph when he told his brethren that of their selling him into bondage that “ye meant it to me for evil, but God for good” (Genesis 50:20, paraphrased). Reflect upon the results intended by the Jews and Satan in killing Christ compared with the results God intended from them. The Jews had no thought of anything but silencing the voice of He whose messages pierced their seared souls, but God meant it for good: through Jesus Christ came the means of forgiveness for all mankind. When the Jews secured the death of Jesus, Satan felt he had won a great victory. How ironic that that which Satan envisioned as victory became the means of his defeat! “Since then the children are sharers in flesh and blood, he also in like manner partook of the same, that through death he might bring to naught him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might deliver all them who through fear of death were all their life time, subject to bondage” (Heb. 2:14-15).

The disobedient Judean Jews killed the prophets. Such was almost the unanimous testimony of all the prophets through the ages. Elijah said, “Lord, they have thrown down your altars, slain your prophets with the edge of the sword...I am alone and they seek my life” (1 Kings 19:20). Jesus lamented, “Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets ...” (Mt. 23:37). Stephen said, “Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears. Which of the prophets did not your father persecute? And they killed them ...” (Acts 7:51f).

As Paul continued his comparison between Judean and Gentile Christians and their respective persecutors, he declared that Jews in Judaea “drove out us” (Acts 8:1); please not God and are contrary to all men. The wicked deeds of the persecuting Jews were “filling up their sins always” (1 Thess. 2:16). In Jesus’ scathing rebuke of the Pharisees He said, “Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers” (Mt. 23:37). Paul wrote, “But the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost.” To what does the apostle allude?

It is true, of course, that in the final judgment each of the unrepentant persecutors of Christians will receive the just rewards for their deeds when they give account to God.

Yet it is my conviction that it is not that final day to which Jesus (and Paul) refer, but to the destruction which came upon Jerusalem, with the collapse of the nation in A.D. 70. Jesus warned that the Jews' rejection and crucifixion of Him, coupled with their persecution of His followers, would bring about the events of A.D. 70. He said, "Therefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city (witness Jewish treatment of Paul in Acts 17, jm): that upon you may come the righteous blood shed on the earth from the blood of Abel the righteous, unto the blood of Zachariah son of Berachiah, whom ye slew between the sanctuary and the altar. Verily I say unto you, all these things shall come upon this generation" (Mt. 23:32-36). Removing any doubt as to what He meant, Jesus' warning to His disciples of the fall of Jerusalem follows immediately in Matthew's account. Having been shown the marvels of the temple by His disciples, Jesus said, "See ye not all these things? Verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down" (Mt. 24:2).

Daniel's prophecy of the fall of Israel had been uttered over 500 years before Jesus lived. Jesus referenced Daniel in His dramatic warning about Jerusalem's destruction (Matthew 24:15) and the approaching tragedy was spoken of by His disciples: Stephen obviously did for his accusers charged that "... we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered unto us ..." (Acts 6:14). Jesus' warning weighed heavily on His disciples' minds and the Hebrew writer, showing the emptiness and futility of the law and its ordinances, urged his Jewish readers to turn to Jesus: "Let us therefore go forth unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For we have not here an abiding city, but we seek after the city which is to come" (Heb. 13:13f). This letter, written a decade (or less) before A.D. 70 when Jerusalem was destroyed, spoke of that city when he wrote "we have not here an abiding city." It was the heavenly Jerusalem he had in mind when he said "we seek after the city which is to come."

What an amazing prophecy! Spoken of by Daniel; by our Lord and then by the unknown writer of Hebrews — a unified voice of the truthfulness and trustworthiness of God's eternal word!

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