

INTRODUCTION

Our worship services are televised and the broadcast goes all over East Texas. It's very common for me to have a total stranger approach me and tell me they receive a blessing from our television ministry. A few years ago I was at Broadway Square Mall on a Saturday afternoon. I was dressed in my usual Saturday jeans and running shoes. An elderly lady stared at me and finally said, "You look familiar to me, have I seen you on TV?" I said, "Yes, ma'am I'm David Dykes, the pastor of Green Acres Baptist Church." She looked at me and said, "Well, I didn't recognize you because you sure look a lot better on TV than you do in person!" I don't go to the mall very often any more.

When we read the words of Jesus in Matthew 23, we almost don't recognize Him. We often picture Jesus as meek and mild and when we read these harsh pronouncements, we see a different side of Jesus. He repeatedly excoriated the Jewish leaders for their religious hypocrisy. Jesus looks a lot better to us when He shares the beautiful beatitudes in Matthew 5 than when He slams the hypocrites. But it's the same Jesus, as we shall see in our text.

Before we read our text, glance through Matthew 23 with me and notice the graphic word pictures Jesus painted to describe the hypocrites. In several verses He calls them blind guides. Then in verse 25 He compares them to cups that are clean on the outside, but filthy on the inside. In verse 27 He calls them whitewashed tombs: Shining on the surface, but below the surface they are filled with decay and corruption. He continues His colorful diatribe in our text today.

Matthew 23:33-39. "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation. 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.'"

After spending most of His message pronouncing doom and gloom upon the religious mafia, we finally see the tenderness of Jesus. One commentator writes, "The lightning and thunder of the seven woes ends in a soft rain of pity and tears." There is no vindictiveness in the words of Jesus. His heart was broken because the people of Jerusalem rejected Him. John 1:11 says, "He came unto his own and his own received him not."

The parable we're examining today is the word-picture of a hen gathering her chicks under her wings to protect them. In the nineteenth chapter of Luke, we're told that as Jesus looked at Jerusalem He wept over the city. On the slopes of the Mt. of Olives there is a beautiful church called Dominus Flevit, which means "The Lord Wept." The famous Italian architect Antonio Barluzzi designed the church to look like a teardrop. I love to go inside the chapel and look out

the single window that faces the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, where the beautiful Temple would have been shining in Jesus' day. Today, the Muslim Dome of the rock sits in that place. When you look through the window of the church, it looks as if the cross in the window frame is resting on the Dome of the Rock—a reminder that Jesus will rule over the nations.

But the other thing that always attracts my attention inside the church is the beautiful mosaic in the floor. It is a picture of a chicken sheltering her chicks beneath her wings. This is the only picture I've ever seen that portrays a chicken with a halo, but the halo is there to represent the deity of Jesus. There are a couple of powerful truths we can extract from this word picture.

I. GOD LOVES YOU THE WAY A MOTHER LOVES HER CHILD

The reason a hen protects her chicks is because she instinctively loves her chicks. God has placed this motherly instinct in all His creatures that give birth. We all know God is most often called our Father, but God's nature isn't restricted to masculine characteristics. The Bible clearly teaches that God loves us the same way a mother loves her child.

The Bible says, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you." (Isaiah 66:13) Not only is God's love for us like a mother loves a child, it goes even deeper than that. The Bible says, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you. See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands." (Isaiah 49:15-16)

The Bible says God loves you even *more* than an earthly mother loves her child. An earthly mother may possibly forget her children, or love them imperfectly. But God says He will never forget you. He has engraved you on the palms of His hands. When you want to remember something important, like a phone number, you might quickly write it on your hand in ink, but you can wash that off. We are engraved on God's palms, it's like a tattoo, but even more permanent. The word "engraved" really means "to cut." God has literally cut us into His hands. Did you notice, God said, "See, I have engraved you on the palm of my hands?" I can't help but recall that after the cross, when Jesus appeared to the disciples, He said, "See my hands?" When we get to heaven we'll see the nail-scarred hands of Jesus and realize just how much God loves us.

When Jesus was looking for a particular mother to illustrate God's love, He chose a hen. Even if you've never raised chickens, you probably have a basic understanding of how a hen protects her chicks. As a Baptist preacher, I consider myself to be an expert on chickens, especially fried chicken. Baptist preachers have a reputation for loving fried chicken, and I've never met a piece of fried chicken I didn't like! Someone said a preacher's belt is nothing more than a leather fence around a chicken graveyard! I heard one preacher say he knew at an early age he was called to preach because he had a taste for fried chicken.

There's a funny story about a rare preacher who actually didn't like chicken. He was the guest preacher at a church for a week and each evening he would eat dinner in the homes of church members. At every house he was served, you guessed it, fried chicken. Although he didn't like chicken, he ate it without complaining. On the last evening he was asked to give the blessing

before the meal, and as he looked at the platter of chicken he prayed, "Lord, I've had it hot; I've had it cold. I've had it young; I've had it old. I've had it tender; and I've had it tough. But thank you, Lord, I've had enough!"

But we can learn something about God by understanding a mother hen. Perhaps the greatest allegory ever written is *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan. In it a man named Christian is on a journey and in one section he learns several lessons from a hen. John Bunyan observed three things about a hen that can teach us something about God's care for us.

A. A hen constantly communicates with her chicks

My grandmother had chickens in her yard and I can remember the constant sound of them clucking. I thought they were clucking just to hear themselves cluck. Bunyan said each hen has a distinctive cluck and clucks constantly so her chicks can find her. Her chicks recognize her call. Jesus is constantly calling us to Himself. He said, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." (John 10:27) Do you recognize the voice of Jesus calling you today? He's saying, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28) If we are wise, we will recognize and respond to the call of Jesus.

B. A hen calls the chicks to feed

In every chicken yard there is a clearly established "pecking order." The most dominant chickens get the first chance at food. As you can imagine, little chicks are pretty far down the pecking order. A good mother hen will find some food and then call her chicks and then allow them to eat before she eats herself. In the same way, Jesus is constantly calling us to Himself and to His Word. The Bible says the Word of God is like milk, meat, and honey. We are to feed on it every day. Finally, Bunyan observed:

C. A hen shelters her chicks from harm

As I studied for this message I was amazed to learn just how protective a hen really is. If a chicken hawk flies near the chicken yard, the hen will squawk furiously to call her chicks to settle under her wings. As the hawk swoops down, the hen will face the hawk and spread her wings even wider daring the hawk to try to grab them from under her sheltering wings. Since the hen is too heavy for the hawk to carry, the hawk soon leaves—what courage!

One man who grew up raising chickens in Arkansas relates an amazing story. One day his chicken coop caught fire. They finally extinguished the fire before too much damage occurred. As they searched through the rubble, they found a dead hen near her nest. The hen's feathers were scorched from the smoke and fire. As he lifted the burned hen from the ashes, he was surprised to see movement below the mother hen. Four small chicks scurried out from under her outstretched wings chirping and cheeping. She could have escaped herself, but she chose to protect her young. When I read that I'm reminded that Jesus made a way to shelter us from eternal judgment—and He died in the process.

There is a great promise given to us about this in Psalm 91:4. The Bible says, "He will cover you

with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge.” (Psalm 91:4) Of course God doesn’t really have feathers or wings. But we use the same expression sometimes. When we have young person we’re going to mentor or train, we often say, “I’m going to take this person under my wing.”

So the first glorious truth we see from this picture of a hen caring for her chicks is that God loves you and cares for you the same way that a mother cares for her children. However, that doesn’t necessarily mean you are experiencing God’s love at this moment. The second truth is:

II. YOU MUST BE WILLING TO ACCEPT GOD’S LOVE

Jesus spoke of wanting to protect Jerusalem like a hen protects her chicks from a chicken hawk. But He wouldn’t force the Jews to accept Him. He gave them a choice and they made the wrong one.

A. The saddest words in the universe: “But you were not willing.”

The people of Jerusalem were not willing to accept God’s love. They made the wrong choice. Jesus offers you the same kind of love and protection. Are you willing to accept His offer? There is a heaven and a hell, and if a person lives their entire life rejecting His love, they will spend eternity in hell. But I suspect God will say to each person who goes to hell, “I wanted to protect you and shelter you like a hen protects her chicks...BUT YOU WERE NOT WILLING.”

Jesus also says something in this passage that has prophetic implications. In verse 39, Jesus says about Israel, “You will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’” God isn’t finished with the nation of Israel. Don’t you think it’s strange that a nation reborn in 1948, smaller than Vermont, with a population less than the Metroplex is in the news every day? It’s because Israel will play an important role in the end times. Basically, when Israel rejected Jesus it was as if they were blinded to the truth about Jesus. And to this day, most Israelites are blind to the truth about who Jesus is. We are now living in the age of grace where God’s message of salvation is being offered to the Gentiles, those who aren’t Jews. Paul writes in Romans 11:25: “Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.” That word “hardening” means they have put scales over their eyes so they cannot see and recognize Jesus. One day that will change. On the day Jesus returns at the Battle of Armageddon, He will stand on the Mount of Olives, perhaps at the very spot where He wept over Jerusalem. At that moment, an amazing thing will happen: the scales will fall off the eyes of the Jews and they will see Jesus and recognize Him as the Messiah they’ve been waiting for so long. They will cry out to Him and weep because they killed Him.

This is prophesied in Zechariah. I love to read this book when I’m in Israel, and it usually brings tears to my eyes as I contemplate God’s marvelous plan: God says, “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, (Zechariah wrote these words in 500 B.C., long before crucifixion was even practiced!) and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child...if someone asks him, ‘What are these wounds on your body?’ he will answer, ‘The wounds I was given at the house of my friends.’” (Zechariah 12:10; 13:6) One day, Israel will accept their

Messiah!

B. The safest place in the universe: Beneath the wings of God

What comes to your mind when you close your eyes and think about resting beneath the wings of God? This world is filled with all kinds of threats and we have a choice about how we face them. We can face them alone, or we can run to God and trust Him to give us His strength.

There was a time in the life of David before he became King when he lived as a fugitive. King Saul was jealous of David and pursued him to try to kill him. David was a man on the run when he found himself in a dark cave. But David didn't despair. Instead he started singing to God. We know what he sang because it's recorded in Psalm 57. Maybe this is the song you need to sing if you feel threatened. "Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, for in you my soul takes refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed." (Psalm 57:1)

You can find shelter under God's wings today. In 1912, the great Presbyterian preacher, J.R. Miller, preached a message on "The Wings of God." He said: "The wings of God are wide-spreading. You have seen a hen stretch out her wings to cover her brood; yet hers are not broad wings. They can shelter only her own little family. God's wings are infinitely broader. For thousands of years they have been gathering human souls under their blessed shelter—and yet there is room!" Indeed there is still room there for you today.

What is the result of rejecting God's love? Jesus said, "Your house is left to you desolate." God moved out of the Temple and it was later destroyed. Any person who rejects God's love will also experience the same result: spiritual desolation. When I think of the word "desolate" I imagine a dry, barren desert where there is no shade and no water. I've known people who seemed to be experiencing spiritual desolation. There are no springs of living water bubbling up in their personalities. There is no fruit, no joy, no peace—only barrenness and desolation.

Lee Strobel was once an agnostic and an investigative reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*. He set out to disprove the Christian faith and in the process became a Christian. He is now a pastor and best-selling author of books like *A Case for Christ* and *A Case for Faith*.

While he was writing *A Case for Faith*, he interviewed Billy Graham. Although Dr. Graham's health was failing, he told Lee that knowing Jesus was the most prized possession of his life. In his discussion he learned years earlier Chuck Templeton had been a friend of Dr. Graham and had helped him launch youth for Christ in Canada. But over time, Chuck Templeton denounced his Christian faith and became an agnostic.

Lee read one of Templeton's books, *Farewell to God: My Reasons for Rejecting the Christian Faith*. Lee wanted to meet Chuck, who was now 83, so he flew to Toronto to interview him. In their discussion, Templeton vigorously defended his rejection of a God who claimed to love, but would still allow suffering in the world.

Toward the end of their interview, Strobel asked Templeton point-blank how he felt about Jesus.

Here's how Lee described his reaction: "Instantly, Templeton softened. He said, 'In my view He is the most important human being who has ever existed.' Then his voice began to crack, as he haltingly said, 'I ... miss ... Him!' Then Templeton's eyes filled with tears and he wept with his shoulders shaking."

Lee wrote that he was moved by the contrast between those two men who had once been friends. One accepted God's love and joyfully claimed Jesus was his most prized possession. He was resting safely under the wings of God. The other rejected God's love, and chose to face the world alone, and now he weeps for having left Him long ago. But it's never too late. As long as you know you have a need for God, you can run to Him today and He will receive you with open arms.

CONCLUSION

I keep coming back to the five words Jesus spoke with a broken heart as He gazed at Jerusalem. He said, "But you were not willing." One of the strangest cases to reach the United States Supreme Court dealt with a man named George Wilson. In 1830 George Wilson and James Porter robbed a U.S. Mail carrier in Pennsylvania. They were arrested, tried and sentenced to death by hanging. That was a rather extreme punishment, because they didn't kill the mail carrier, only threatened him. But justice was often quick and severe back in those days.

James Porter was hung on July 2, 1830, and while George Wilson was awaiting his execution, some influential friends convinced President Andrew Jackson to offer a presidential pardon to Wilson. The pardon would stop the execution and instead, Wilson would serve 20 years in prison for his crime.

The strange thing about the case was that George Wilson refused to accept the Presidential pardon! Some lawyers argued he *had* to accept the President's pardon; he had no choice in the matter. But others argued he couldn't be forced to accept the pardon. This issue was argued in the lower courts for three years until it finally reached the Supreme Court. You can still read the ruling written by Chief Justice John Marshall.

In the case UNITED STATES v. GEORGE WILSON 32 U.S. 150 7 Pet. 150, 8 L. Ed 640 (1833) The U.S. Supreme Court ruled: "A pardon is an act of grace, which exempts the individual ... from the punishment the law inflicts for a crime he has committed ... delivery is not complete without acceptance. It may be rejected then by the person to whom it is tendered; and if rejected, we have found no power in a Court to force it upon him."

A few weeks after that ruling, George Wilson was led from his prison cell and walked up thirteen steps to the gallows. A few minutes later, he was dead by hanging. Why? Because he HAD to die? No. He died because he refused the pardon offered to him.

You may be thinking, "What kind of man would refuse a pardon? He must have been a fool." Well, he's no more foolish than people all around us who have been offered a pardon to have their sins forgiven, but, like George Wilson, they were not willing to accept it by faith. And as a result, they will spend eternity separated from God.

My story is a lot like George Wilson except for one important detail: Like Wilson, I committed a crime against my Creator. I sinned and rebelled against Him. I stood guilty and deserved the punishment. But the King of Kings offered me a full and free pardon, and even offered to take my punishment. His pardon was an act of grace, and I GLADLY accepted it.

My friend, no matter what you've done in the past, your Creator loves you with a tender love, like a mother loves a child. He is offering you a full pardon for your sin. 2 Peter 3:9 tells us that God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. Will you turn from your sins and place your faith in Jesus today? When you do, you can find shelter beneath His wings—and that's that safest place in the universe!

OUTLINE

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"As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you." *Isaiah 66:13*

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- B. A hen calls the chicks to feed
- C. A hen shelters her chicks from harm

II. YOU MUST BE WILLING TO ACCEPT GOD'S LOVE

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"Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, for in you my soul takes refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed." *Psalms 57:1*

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Dykes in Texas.” This simple citation may prevent any criticism that may be directed toward you.

To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes