**“Ye Shut Up the Kingdom”**

*Actions of Religious Leaders at Christ’s first Coming*

*Actions of Religious Leaders at Christ’s Second Coming*

**By Arlen L. Chitwood of** [**Lamp Broadcast**](http://lampbroadcast.org/)

“*But woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye shut up the kingdom of the heavens against* [‘in the presence of’] *men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in*” ([Matthew 23:13](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Matthew+23.13&t=NKJV)).

At the time of Christ’s first coming, the Scribes and Pharisees, those to whom the people of Israel looked for leadership in the spiritual life of the nation, *completely misled* the Jewish people. And, as a result, these fundamental religious leaders heard words of condemnation from the lips of Christ *unlike anything* Christ had ever said to anyone at any time within any other religious group in Israel.

An entire chapter has been given over to this matter in Matthew’s gospel ([Matthew 23](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Matthew+23&t=NKJV)). And, after stating the position which the Scribes and Pharisees occupied in Israel — sitting “in Moses’ seat” ([Matthew 23:2](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Matthew+23.2&t=NKJV)) — Christ called attention to that which they were doing, along with their self-exalting ways ([Matthew 23:3-12](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Matthew+23.3-12&t=NKJV) [**Phylacteries\*\***]).

He then pronounced a “woe” on the Scribes and Pharisees, giving *the reason* for that “woe” and for seven more which would follow ([Matthew 23:13](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Matthew+23.13&t=NKJV)). Israel’s religious leaders had closed the door to the offer of the kingdom of the heavens to the nation. They were not about to relinquish their position to “the heir” of the vineyard.

And, resultingly, they had no interest in the proffered kingdom. They were not going to enter this kingdom, and they, throughout the course of Christ’s ministry, had done *all within their power* to prevent anyone else in Israel from entering as well.

Christ, continuing to call attention to their actions, then pronounced one “woe” after another upon the Scribes and Pharisees, referring to them as “hypocrites,” “blind guides,” “fools,” those likened to “whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and all uncleanness,” “the children of them which killed the prophets,” and a “generation of vipers” ([Matthew 23:14ff](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Matthew+23.14ff&t=NKJV)).

This was Christ’s analysis at His first coming, near the termination of His ministry, of the fundamental religious leadership in Israel. They held to and taught the very letter of Scripture; but, in the process, they didn’t understand anything beyond the letter and, thus, couldn’t teach the true content of these Scriptures at all.

These were the fundamental religious scholars of that day, the ones learned in the Scriptures. These were the ones to whom the people looked for spiritual leadership. These were the ones controlling the religious life of the nation.

These also were the ones who *could have, and should have*, taken the nation to the mountaintop in its spiritual life. But, instead of ascending *the mountain* and taking the nation with them, they had descended into *the lowest valley*; and, through their control over the spiritual life of the people, they had taken the nation down into this valley with them.

**Not Peculiar to Israel Alone**

And this is not something peculiar to Israel relative to the message surrounding the kingdom of the heavens at Christ’s first coming. Exactly the same thing was prophesied to happen, and is happening, in Christendom relative to the message surrounding the kingdom of the heavens immediately preceding Christ’s return (*cf.* [Matthew 13:3-33](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Matthew+13.3-33&t=NKJV); [Revelation 2](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Revelation+2&t=NKJV); [3](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Revelation+3&t=NKJV)).

The leadership in Christendom today will have no more to do with the message surrounding the kingdom of the heavens, immediately preceding Christ’s return, than would the leadership in Israel at the time of Christ’s first coming. And this isn’t something seen just in the liberal segment of Christendom but in the fundamental segment as well. This can be seen in *all of Christendom*, as it was seen among *all of Israel’s religious leaders* (the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians together) two millenniums ago.

This was that which the entirety of Israel’s religious leadership (fundamental and liberal alike) had *in common* when Christ was on earth the first time, and it is also that which the entirety of the Church’s religious leadership (fundamental and liberal alike) has *in common* immediately preceding Christ’s return today.

The Pharisees were not condemned for their adherence to the letter of the law, or for their legalism; nor, if it had been the Sadducees, would they have been condemned for their liberalism; nor, if it had been the Herodians, would they have been condemned for their political ambitions within Herod’s kingdom. Rather, the Pharisees were condemned for *closing the door to the offer of the kingdom of the heavens to Israel*. And it would have been for the same reason had it been the Sadducees or the Herodians who had been condemned after this fashion by Christ.

And, bringing all of this down into Christendom, the religious leaders of today who are misleading the people relative to the proffered kingdom of the heavens will be condemned for *exactly the same reason* Christ condemned the religious leaders in Israel.

Condemnation, after this fashion, will not result from fundamentalism, legalism, liberalism, or political ambitions within the present kingdom (*i.e*., in the kingdom ruled by Satan and his angels from the heavens through the Gentile nations on earth [[Daniel 10:12-20](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Daniel+10.12-20&t=NKJV); [Ephesians 3:9-11](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Ephesians+3.9-11&t=NKJV); [6:12-17](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Ephesians+6.12-17&t=NKJV)]). None of these things even enters into the matter in relation to that which is in view. Rather, condemnation will result from *their having closed the door to the offer of the kingdom of the heavens to Christians.*

**Sons of Gehenna**

Christ, at the very first part of His condemnation of the Scribes and Pharisees for their having misled the people relative to the proffered kingdom, referred to their making proselytes and to that which they, in reality, had done in the process:

“*Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell* [Gk., *huion Geennes*, ‘*son of Gehenna*’] *than yourselves*” ([Matthew 23:15](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Matthew+23.15&t=NKJV); *cf.* [Matthew 23:33](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Matthew+23.33&t=NKJV)).

“Sonship” in relation to *Gehenna* rather than “sonship” in relation to *the kingdom of the heavens* is that which is in view. “Sonship” implies *rulership*. Only “sons” can rule within God’s kingdom (*cf*. [Exodus 4:22-23](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Exodus+4.22-23&t=NKJV); [Job 1:6](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Job+1.6&t=NKJV); [2:1](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Job+2.1&t=NKJV); [Ezekiel 28:14](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Ezekiel+28.14&t=NKJV); [Matthew 3:17](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Matthew+3.17&t=NKJV); [4:3](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Matthew+4.3&t=NKJV), [6](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Matthew+4.6&t=NKJV), [8](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Matthew+4.8&t=NKJV); [Romans 8:19-23](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Romans+8.19-23&t=NKJV)). That’s the way it has always been, that’s the way it presently exists, and that’s the way it will always continue to exist.

At Christ’s first coming, a kingdom was in the offing; and only “sons” could rule within this kingdom. But the Scribes and Pharisees had “shut up” the proffered kingdom ([Matthew 23:13](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Matthew+23.13&t=NKJV)), and now *only one thing could remain* — an association of “sons,” an association with *regality* (having to do with the very reason for man’s creation in the beginning or his salvation following the fall), with *Gehenna* rather than with *the kingdom*.

The reference concerning the Scribes and Pharisees making proselytes would not pertain to a proselyte of the gate (the conversion of a Gentile) but to a proselyte from among the Jewish people to the Pharisaical way of life within the nation. And the thought behind a proselyte becoming twofold more *a son of Gehenna* than the Scribes and Pharisees themselves lies in the fact that converts of this nature often became more dogmatic than their proselytizers.

The Scribes and Pharisees themselves, insofar as sonship and the kingdom which had been offered to Israel were concerned, were themselves *sons of Gehenna*; but their proselytes were viewed in an even more condemnatory fashion in this respect. The Pharisees had misled them in relation to the proffered kingdom, as they had done the nation itself; and, apparently because of their dogmatism, proselytes found themselves in an even worse state than that of their Pharisaical proselytizers.

*Gehenna* was the place of refuse for the city of Jerusalem, located outside the city walls in a valley south of the city. “*Sonship*” in relationship to this place graphically pictured exactly where the Scribes and Pharisees would lead a proselyte, or where they had led the nation of Israel, relative to *the proffered kingdom*. Sonship, which was supposed to have been realized in the proffered kingdom, could now be realized only in relation to *Gehenna*.

*Gehenna*, located south of the city, was set on the opposite side of the city from the place God is seen in Scripture. God is always seen at a point north of the earth or of anything on the earth ([Leviticus 1:11](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Leviticus+1.11&t=NKJV); [Job 26:7](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Job+26.7&t=NKJV); [Psalm 75:6-7](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Psalm+75.6-7&t=NKJV)). And, beyond that, *Gehenna was a place of refuse in a valley* rather than *a place associated with God’s glory and a mountain* (signifying a kingdom [*cf.* [Isaiah 2:2-4](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Isaiah+2.2-4&t=NKJV); [Daniel 2:34-35](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Daniel+2.34-35&t=NKJV), [44-45](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Daniel+2.44-45&t=NKJV)]).

Thus, the expression, “sons of Gehenna,” could only picture *one thing*. It could only describe the state in which those who had been called to occupy positions in *the kingdom* would find themselves following their refusal. They, in relation to “sonship” (implying *rulership*), would find themselves in a place of *refuse*, not only *removed from the kingdom, the mountain*, but in a *valley* as well. Gehenna was a place diametrically opposed to that which they could have had, the place to which they had been called (*cf*. [Genesis 19:27](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+19.27&t=NKJV), [30](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+19.30&t=NKJV)).

**Israel Then, Christendom Today**

That’s where the fundamental religious leadership in Israel had led an entire nation, with the more liberal Sadducees at times being seen with them. And that is the exact same place where the fundamental or liberal leadership in Christendom today can be seen leading the people in a counterpart to that of Israel’s religious leadership at the time of Christ’s first coming.

Any attempt to ignore, to do away with, or to shut up the proclamation of the message surrounding the kingdom of the heavens to Christians today by Christendom’s religious leaders can only meet with the same dire consequences as it did in Israel with their religious leaders. And the end result, insofar as *sonship* *and the kingdom* are concerned, can only be seen associated with a corresponding place outside the heavenly Jerusalem as was seen outside the earthly Jerusalem — *a place of refuse outside the walls* of the heavenly Jerusalem, located on the *south side* of the city (*cf.* [Revelation 22:14-15](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Revelation+22.14-15&t=NKJV)).

(Note that *Gehenna* is being referenced in a metaphorical respect in the former usage [with the Scribes and Pharisees, taking the people down with them], which must be the case with the latter as well [as it would apply to religious leaders in Christendom today, taking the people down with them]. *Gehenna*, as “outer darkness,” is used in an antithetical sense to describe the place which will be occupied by the unfaithful during the Millennium as opposed to *the place* which will be occupied by the faithful.

The usage of both was seen in connection with Israel and the offer of the kingdom of the heavens in the gospel accounts. However, once the kingdom was taken from Israel [that facet of the kingdom offered to Israel, *the heavenly sphere of the kingdom* ([Matthew 21:43](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Matthew+21.43&t=NKJV))] a new entity was called into existence to be the recipient of that taken from Israel [[I Peter 2:9-11](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=I+Peter+2.9-11&t=NKJV)]. And now, exactly as in the past offer of the kingdom to Israel, thoughts surrounding the usage of *Gehenna* and *outer darkness* could only apply to the present recipients of this offer — to Christians.)

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

**\*\*Phylacteries**

Phylacteries, sometimes called tefillin, are small, square leather boxes containing portions of Scripture worn by Conservative and Orthodox Jews during prayer services. Phylacteries are worn in pairs—one phylactery is strapped on the left arm, and one is strapped to the forehead of Jewish men during weekday morning prayers. The word phylactery comes from a Greek word meaning “safeguard, protection, or amulet.”

The phylactery strapped to the arm is called the shel yad and has only one compartment; the one on the forehead, containing four compartments, is called the shel rosh. The letter shin (ש) is printed on either side of the head phylactery. Various rules govern the length and width of the connecting straps, the tying of the knots to secure the phylacteries, and the color of the boxes (black). Inside each phylactery are four passages from the Old Testament: [Exodus 13:1–10](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Exodus+13.1%E2%80%9310&t=NKJV), [11–16](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Exodus+13.11%E2%80%9316&t=NKJV); [Deuteronomy 6:4–9](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Deuteronomy+6.4%E2%80%939&t=NKJV); [11:13–21](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Deuteronomy+11.13%E2%80%9321&t=NKJV). The verses must be written in black ink on parchment specially prepared for this purpose, using the skin of a clean animal. Other rules specify the type of writing instrument to be used, the number of printed lines devoted to each verse, the arrangement of the pieces of parchment within each compartment, etc.

The wearing of phylacteries is based on some commands in Deuteronomy. Israel was told to love God and keep His commandments. In fact, they were to “tie [the commandments] as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads” ([Deuteronomy 6:8](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Deuteronomy+6.8&t=NKJV)). Later, God tells them, “Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads” ([Deuteronomy 11:18](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Deuteronomy+11.18&t=NKJV)). We take the wording of these commands to be figurative: whatever we do (with the hand) and whatever we think (with the head) is to be guided by the authority of God’s Word. But, at some point—possibly as early as the fourth century BC—the Jewish rabbis began applying this verse literally, and the practice of tying phylacteries onto their arms and heads commenced.

Phylacteries are mentioned in the New Testament. Jesus, warning His disciples about the hypocrisy of the teachers and Pharisees, said, “Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long” ([Matthew 23:5](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Matthew+23.5&t=NKJV)). The religious leaders of Jesus’ day had strayed from God’s intention in the Law. Phylacteries were being made larger for the sole purpose of drawing attention to the wearer—the larger the phylactery, the more piety it supposedly showed. Ironically, the very command to honor the Word of God was being used to dishonor the Word.

Jesus taught that God is not as concerned with the external trappings of religion as He is with the true nature of the heart. He pointed out that it was possible to wear large phylacteries containing God’s Word yet disobey God’s Word at the same time. Likewise, in the church today, it’s possible to wear a cross, pay a tithe, raise a hand, and quote a creed—all without truly acknowledging the Lord in our hearts. God knows the truth of our spiritual condition. “LORD Almighty, you . . . examine the righteous and probe the heart and mind” ([Jeremiah 20:12](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Jeremiah+20.12&t=NKJV)). May we be able to say with the psalmist, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” ([Psalm 119:11](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Psalm+119.11&t=NKJV)).