

January 2017

Frank W. Nelte

THE MEANING OF "WOE" IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

We are all familiar with the word "woe" in the New Testament. We know about **the three "woes"** in the Book of Revelation, and we also know that Jesus Christ repeatedly said "**woe to you**" to the scribes and the Pharisees.

But what did Jesus Christ actually mean when He addressed this expression to **the religious leaders** amongst the Jews during His ministry? Did Christ have anything specific in mind when He said this, or was it just some very general type of warning?

Jesus Christ said very clearly:

But I say unto you, That **every idle word that men shall speak**, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. (Matthew 12:36)

It follows that Jesus Christ Himself obviously did not speak any "idle words". Therefore when He repeatedly said "woe unto you" to those religious leaders at that time, then Christ must have had a reason for saying those words, and the statement He made must have had a very specific meaning to Jesus Christ Himself.

So what does this word "woe" in the New Testament mean?

THE GREEK WORD

Whenever we see the word "woe" in the New Testament, then it is always a translation of the Greek word "**ouai**". This Greek word "ouai" is used 47 times in the New Testament: 41 times in 33 verses it is translated as "**woe**", and six times in three verses it is translated as "**alas**".

Those are the only times "woe" and "alas" appear in the New Testament. So let's look at the meaning of this Greek word, and then see why the translators translated it as "alas" in six places.

The Greek word "ouai" is used in the following three ways:

- 1) It is used to express a denunciation; i.e. it is used to pronounce someone or something as **blameworthy and evil**.
- 2) It is used to express a **severe calamity**, a severe distress or affliction.
- 3) It is used to express **great grief**.

While these meanings overlap, each one has a somewhat different focus. And in each case it is always the context in which "ouai" is used that shows which specific focus is intended. Shortly we will look at the different contexts in which this word is used in the New Testament. But first let's briefly look at the meanings for our English words "woe" and "alas".

THE ENGLISH WORDS

Webster's Dictionary defines "**woe**" as follows:

- 1) An interjection used to express grief, regret, or distress.
- 2) A condition of deep suffering from misfortune, affliction, or grief.
- 3) Calamity, misfortune.

Under the word "sorrow" Webster's provides some synonyms, including the statement "WOE is deep or inconsolable grief or misery".

For the word "**alas**" Webster's states:

"An interjection used to express unhappiness, pity, or concern."

These are the dictionary definitions of the two English words that are used to translate the Greek word "ouai".

What should be immediately apparent is that these English words don't involve any responsibility or blame for the individuals involved. Mostly these two words imply that the situation being spoken about is due to misfortune or bad luck, things that are beyond the person's control. But our English words don't imply any real guilt on the part of the people that are afflicted, an implication that is included in the Greek word "ouai". The closest our English words come to hinting at any responsibility at all on the part of the people involved is to say that this word "woe" is also an interjection of regret. But regret is still a long way from accepting responsibility. And regret is not the same as repentance.

So in English we would not normally use the words "woe" and "alas" to express any kind of denunciation, something that does apply to the Greek interjection "ouai". In plain terms, in English we would not really address someone with the words "woe **to you** because ...", implying some responsibility.

In English usage, outside of the Bible, "woe" is something that comes upon people, but it is not something that is assigned to them for any conduct or actions.

WHERE "OUAI" IS RENDERED "ALAS"

Let's now look at the places where "ouai" is used in the New Testament. We'll start with the three verses where the translators translated it as "alas".

Standing afar off for the fear of her torment, saying, **Alas, alas**, that great city Babylon, that mighty city! for in one hour is thy judgment come. (Revelation 18:10)

And saying, **Alas, alas**, that great city, that was clothed in fine linen, and purple, and scarlet, and decked with gold, and precious stones, and pearls! (Revelation 18:16)

And they cast dust on their heads, and cried, weeping and wailing, saying, **Alas, alas**, that great city, wherein were made rich all that had ships in the sea by reason of her costliness! for in one hour is she made desolate. (Revelation 18:19)

These three statements are made by three different groups of people: verse 10 is said by "the kings of the earth" (i.e. leaders of governments), verse 16 is said by "the merchants of the earth" (i.e. leaders in business enterprises), and verse 19 is said by "every shipmaster" and by "sailors" (i.e. those working in the transport industry). All these people will make these statements when the end-time Babylon is destroyed. All of these people will be mourning and lamenting because they had profited greatly from doing business with the end-time Babylon.

It is quite clear that these three statements are made by people who are **expressing great grief**. They feel sorry **for Babylon**, and also for themselves. Therefore it was quite appropriate for the translators to translate these instances of "ouai" as "alas". The English word "alas" captures the feelings and emotions these people are expressing quite well.

That leaves us with the 33 verses in which "ouai" is translated 41 times as "woe". As far as the gospel accounts are concerned, we'll limit ourselves to the Gospel of Matthew, without considering the parallel statements found in Mark's and in Luke's gospel accounts.

THE THREE WOES

Notice the following three verses in which this word is used seven times.

And I beheld, and heard an angel flying through the midst of heaven, saying with a loud voice, **Woe, woe**, **woe**, to the inhabitants of the earth by reason of the other voices of the trumpet of the three angels, which are yet to sound! (Revelation 8:13)

One woe is past; and, behold, there come two woes more hereafter. (Revelation 9:12)

The **second woe** is past; *and*, behold, the **third woe** comes quickly. (Revelation 11:14)

In these verses the word "woe" is used to refer to the last three trumpets, i.e. Trumpet #5 and Trumpet #6 and Trumpet #7. Here it is an angel, speaking for God, who uses the word "woe". So in effect here it is God who uses the word "woe".

So note! In these verses the word "woe" is **not an expression of grief!** Rather, here the word "woe" is first of all a reference to **extremely severe afflictions** that are going to be poured out upon mankind as penalties for man's evil ways. Man's evil ways are entirely responsible for God deciding to pour out these severe afflictions. And secondly, in these cases the word "woe" also expresses **a denunciation from God!**

Most of us in God's Church readily associate the word "woe" in these verses with severe penalties being poured out on humanity. And that is correct. But we easily overlook that God is also using these last three trumpet calamities to focus attention on man's guilt for his evil ways by way of this denunciation.

Put another way, by using the word "woe" for each of the last three trumpets, God is focusing attention firstly on **the effect** or the consequences of man's sins (i.e. on the severe afflictions), and secondly on **the cause** for those severe afflictions (i.e. on man's perverse ways).

Further, with these three verses about "the three woes" we are told exactly what the word "woe" refers to in each case. The passages following these verses give us descriptions of **what those woes entail**. In these verses the word "woe" has very specific applications. The context shows us that here each woe involves a major war in which staggering numbers of people will be killed. In these verses the word "woe" is used in an impersonal way, without identifying anyone specifically.

In other verses which we will shortly examine the actual details implied by the word "woe" are not spelled out quite as directly. But those "woe" statements are directed at some very specific people, and the intended application in each case should be quite easy to see. Those are the "woe **to** ... (someone)" statements.

So note the following distinction:

When a "woe" statement is **not addressed to anyone specific**, as in the three woes, then this word is used first to refer to a severe affliction or divine penalty, as well as secondly indicating a form of denunciation from God.

But when the "woe" statements are **addressed to a specific individual or to a specific group of individuals** (i.e. "woe to you ..."), then the "woe" statements are first and foremost a denunciation from God for that specific individual or for that specific group of individuals. And secondly those particular statements focus on the divine penalty that is involved.

Simply put, the "woe to you ..." statements are references to total destruction in the lake of fire!

This is extremely important for us to understand. When we refer to certain sins that will not be forgiven, then we may say that the individual involved will eventually be burned up in the lake of fire. But Jesus Christ during His ministry generally didn't say to anyone "you will end up in the lake of fire", with the exception of Matthew 23 . Rather than using such a direct statement, Jesus Christ mostly used the expression "woe to you". But those two expressions are synonymous. Jesus Christ's words "woe to you" mean the same as the statement "you are heading for the lake of fire".

"WOE TO YOU ..." STATEMENTS

Let's look at some specifics.

The Son of man goes as it is written of him: but **woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed!** It had been good for that man if he had not been born. (Matthew 26:24)

Jesus Christ said these words about Judas at His last observance of the Passover. The statement "**woe unto that man**" is a direct reference to Judas being destroyed in **the lake of fire!** The proof that this is indeed the case is clear beyond question from the statement that followed.

The statement "it had been good for that man if he had not been born" is only true for people who will face death in the lake of fire. For anyone who does not end up in the lake of fire that last statement is simply not true! You cannot possibly say "it had been good if you had not been born" to anyone who eventually, by way of the second resurrection, ends up as a part of the Family of God.

Jesus Christ was not making an empty statement when He said "it had been good if you had never been born". That is in fact a devastating statement!

We need to recognize that Jesus Christ's statement "woe unto that man" is a very direct reference to destruction in the lake of fire! There is simply no other possibility! Put another way, with the expression "woe unto that man" Jesus Christ was saying: **the man who betrays Me will never, under any kind of circumstances, be a part of the Family of God.**

When this expression "woe unto you" is directed at specific people, then it is a denunciation of those

specific people in the strongest terms. Those statements focus very directly on the evil those specific people are committing, and for which they will end up in the lake of fire.

Let's look at what Jude wrote.

Woe unto them! for they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Korah. (Jude 1:11)

In this verse Jude is speaking about "ungodly men" who had crept into the ministry of the Church, and who were teaching the people heresies to draw the people away from God's true teachings. With this expression "woe unto them" Jude was likewise saying that those ungodly men **would die in the lake of fire**. And Jude is here indicating that Cain, Balaam and Korah will likewise end up in the lake of fire. Jude was not referencing people who will be in the second resurrection.

Here is a biblical principle.

For examples of evil the Bible does not reference specific people by name if those people are destined to appear in the second resurrection. When the Bible names specific individuals as **examples of evil**, then it means that those individuals will be destroyed in **the lake of fire**.

The proof that Jude is using the expression "woe unto them" to mean "death in the lake of fire" is presented in the next verse. In verse 12 Jude unequivocally says that these false teachers in the ministry of the Church are "**twice dead**"! That's an unmistakable reference to death in the lake of fire.

For a thorough discussion of the whole Book of Jude, see my short 2012 article titled "The Prophecy of Enoch".

So here is the point we need to note: Jesus Christ used the expression "woe unto you" to refer to death in the lake of fire for Judas Iscariot. Likewise, Jude, who grew up in the same house with Jesus Christ, very vehemently used this expression "woe unto them" to refer to death in the lake of fire. And Jude used this expression **for ministers who were teaching heresies** to people in God's Church.

While the Apostle Paul did not use the expression "woe unto them" to refer to false ministers, Paul was nevertheless equally strong in condemning such false teachers to the lake of fire. Instead of saying "woe unto them", Paul simply said "**let him be accursed**", and he said it twice for emphasis (Galatians 1:8-9). The effect is the same: people who teach heresies to God's people will end up in the lake of fire.

Paul did, however, use a "woe" expression to refer to himself. Notice what Paul wrote:

For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, **woe is unto me**, if I preach not the gospel! (1 Corinthians 9:16)

What did Paul mean? Did he mean that instead of being resurrected as a former apostle, he would instead come up in the second resurrection? No, of course not! Paul very obviously meant that if he stopped doing the job to which God had called him, then he would end up in the lake of fire, dying the second death. A few verses later Paul expressed the same thought in slightly different words, without using the word "woe". There Paul used the word "castaway" instead.

But I keep under my body, and bring *it* into subjection: **lest that by any means**, when I have preached to others, **I myself should be a castaway**. (1 Corinthians 9:27)

The word translated "castaway" (i.e. Greek "adokimos") refers to a reject, something that doesn't pass

the test. This is the Greek word that is elsewhere translated as "reprobate". Paul is basically saying: "...lest I end up in the lake of fire".

The point is that the New Testament expression "woe unto ... (someone specific)" is a denunciation that leads to the second death in the lake of fire. It is not an expression that we should use lightly. When people sometimes say "woe is me" they don't really understand what they are saying. For all of us in God's Church, not just for the Apostle Paul, it is really a case of "woe is me **if** I don't hold fast to the truth of God and to the commitment that I made at baptism".

Note also in verse 16 Paul's use of the expression "**necessity is laid upon me**". Paul didn't really have a choice. This is important to understand. Once God has called somebody, who has previously responded in some positive way to God, to perform a very specific job, then it becomes an either-or situation. Either the person willingly performs the specific job to which God had called that person, or the person will end up in the lake of fire.

We might think of Jonah, who hated doing the job God had called him to do. When God then "laid necessity upon Jonah", Jonah did not preach of his own free will. God had to force Jonah to preach. That makes it "woe unto Jonah".

There is no in-between ground. That's also the essence of Jesus Christ's statement "no man having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). Anyone who is "not fit for God's Kingdom" must end up in the lake of fire. There is no other option.

Now let's take a look at Matthew chapter 23.

WOE UNTO YOU, SCRIBES AND PHARISEES

Seven times in this chapter does Jesus Christ say these words to the religious leaders of that time, the scribes and the Pharisees. And in all seven cases Jesus Christ identified these religious leaders as hypocrites. In one additional "woe unto you" statement Jesus Christ called those people blind leaders (i.e. "blind guides").

What was Jesus Christ actually telling these scribes and Pharisees with these "woe unto you" statements? Did Jesus Christ mean the same thing He meant when He made this statement to Judas? Or are these statements to the Pharisees only a softened version of Christ's statement to Judas?

Can we call a spade a spade, and can we face up to the facts? Let's look at all seven statements.

But **woe unto you**, scribes and Pharisees, **hypocrites!** for you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for you neither go in *yourselves*, neither suffer you them that are entering to go in. (Matthew 23:13)

We should notice a number of things here.

1) The most outstanding characteristic of these religious leaders was hypocrisy. Hypocrisy refers to acting and pretending. Hypocrisy means **teaching things that they knew were not true**. It means not putting into practice in their own lives the things they authoritatively told others to do.

2) Their heretical teachings were shutting off access to God's Kingdom for people who potentially had access to God's truth. This point is also applicable in our world today. If people today are drawn into a church group that teaches heresies, then the ministers in that group are effectively shutting off access to

God's Kingdom for their followers.

3) The Pharisees were not going to be in God's Kingdom (i.e. "you neither go in yourselves"). That means that the Pharisees were **heading for the lake of fire**. Yes, at that particular stage those Pharisees still had the possibility of repenting and changing course. And a small number of them actually did (e.g. Paul). But as a group they were certainly heading towards the second death.

4) The expression "neither suffer you them that are entering to go in" means that the Pharisees did their damndest to persecute those who were trying to live by God's laws in sincerity and truth. **False teachers never like it when someone actually practices the truth**; they are incensed when people believe the truth. That type of response was also true for the Pharisees, where the Apostle Paul before his conversion was the most outstanding example of this trait.

One lesson here is: if you knowingly teach things that are false to God's people, then you will be in the lake of fire, and then it will be "woe unto you". Hypocrites always know better, but they teach falsehoods anyway. Let's move on.

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayer: therefore you shall receive the greater damnation. (Matthew 23:14)

They pray in public. **But they don't pray when they are in the privacy of their own homes**. Religious leaders who selfishly take advantage of others are obviously not practicing the teachings of Jesus Christ. "The greater damnation" means that they themselves are heading for the second death, while the people to whom they "shut up the kingdom of heaven" will be heading for the second resurrection. That's what "greater damnation" in this context refers to: the second death versus the second resurrection.

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, you make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves. (Matthew 23:15)

The word translated "hell" in this verse is "**gehenna**"! "Gehenna" is a reference to the lake of fire. So Christ didn't say "you make him the child of the grave"! No, Jesus Christ said "you make him **the child of the lake of fire**"!

So here is what Jesus Christ was saying:

When you put out enormous efforts to make converts by teaching things that you actually know are not true, then those converts become the children of the lake of fire even more strongly than you yourselves. In this verse the association between the expression "woe unto you" and the lake of fire is indisputable.

The lessons for us here are:

Anyone who sets himself up as a teacher of God's truths, and who knowingly refuses to teach what is right and true on one or more issues, who knowingly teaches traditions or the teachings of men instead, that person is also a child of the lake of fire. And on top of that anyone who teaches heresies to God's people is leading other people to the lake of fire "twofold more".

Today there are a staggering number of people heading for the lake of fire, if we accept the validity of Jesus Christ's admonitions here in Matthew chapter 23! Let's stop beating around the bush and tell it like it is.

Let's move on.

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier *matters* of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought you to have done, and not to leave the other undone. (Matthew 23:23)

The Pharisees were super-picky on the smallest of issues, something that is documented many hundreds of times in the Talmud (i.e. they "strained at a gnat"), and at the same time they treated the real issues with disdain (i.e. they would "swallow a camel"). In this verse Jesus Christ highlighted **the extreme hypocrisy** of those religious teachers. God will never condone hypocrisy, and hypocrisy is one of the worst forms of lying. And "all liars" are heading for the second death (see Revelation 21:8).

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. (Matthew 23:25)

Having the outside of the cup clean and shiny is great, if the inside of the cup is likewise clean and sparkling. But if the inside of the cup is filthy, then a clean outside is nothing but hypocrisy. The inside is always more important than the outside. A facade is a form of hypocrisy and of deception, by implying that it is something that it is not, implying that it is better than it actually is. And a clean outside is a facade for a filthy inside.

The Pharisees took great pains to look very devout and righteous. But they were hypocrites, constantly rationalizing any number of things that violated God's laws. Their private lives were "full of extortion and excess". This point is basically repeated in the next Scripture.

Once again, the "woe unto you" expression refers to the fact that these people were heading for the lake of fire.

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you are like unto whitened sepulchers, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead *men's* bones, and of all uncleanness. (Matthew 23:27)

This statement makes very clear that the Pharisees were leading double lives. To the world in general they looked pious and devout. But in their private lives they were perverse and utterly carnal. When religious leaders lead such double lives, then they are on the road to the lake of fire. That's what this "woe unto you" statement tells us. And in our age we have had our share of religious leaders leading double lives.

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because you build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchers of the righteous, (Matthew 23:29)

The Pharisees were extremely self-righteous, quick to condemn other people, and equally quick to justify themselves.

Those are the seven places in this chapter where the Pharisees are addressed directly by Jesus Christ. One more "woe unto you" statement in this context is also addressed to the scribes and Pharisees, but without naming them directly and without calling them hypocrites. That is verse 16.

Woe unto you, *you* blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor! (Matthew 23:16)

This is obviously also still speaking to the scribes and Pharisees, who are identified before and after this verse. By calling them "blind guides" Jesus Christ was saying that the Pharisees had no real understanding at all. **They were spiritually clueless.** And they were motivated by and impressed by

monetary value, by tangible wealth. Money meant a lot to those Pharisees, as was also already indicated by them "devouring widows' houses" (see verse 14). Once again this is something that leads to the lake of fire.

That's all for the "woe unto you" statements in Matthew 23. But then before concluding this particular occasion Jesus Christ added one more indictment for the Pharisees.

You serpents, you generation of vipers, how can you escape the damnation of hell? (Matthew 23:33)

Here the expression "the damnation of hell" stands for the Greek text "tes kriseos tes geennes". This Greek text literally means "... (escape from) **the judgment of Gehenna** (i.e. the lake of fire)".

Now when Jesus Christ Himself asks the question: just how do you think that you will escape the judgment of the lake of fire?, then it clearly means that the people He was speaking about **will not escape** that judgment! So in the concluding statement of this section about the scribes and Pharisees Jesus Christ once more makes clear that those religious leaders would end up in the lake of fire!

Next, Jesus Christ was not resorting to name-calling by throwing out offensive terms. When Christ used two different words to reference snakes (i.e. "serpents" and "vipers"), then He was spelling out specific information about these false religious teachers. The word "serpents" refers to these false religious leaders **poisoning the minds of people**, in the same way that snakes poison their victims. And in the same way that snake poison paralyzes its victims, so the false teachings **paralyze the minds** of people who look up to these false teachers.

The expression "generation of vipers" is a translation of the Greek expression "gennemata echidnon". The Greek word "gennema" is translated five times as "**fruit**" and four times as "**generation**". This noun has been formed from the verb "gennao", which means "to beget, to be born". Applied to the produce of the earth, this noun means "fruit", something the earth has produced.

The Greek expression "gennemata echidnon" refers to "**that which has been born of vipers**".

I am mentioning these things because in our common usage the word "generation" is frequently used to refer to people who are contemporaries, i.e. they make up "a generation". But that is not at all the meaning Jesus Christ had in mind when He used this expression "generation of vipers".

In plain terms:

The translation "**generation** of vipers" would label a whole generation, which would have included far, far more people than just the scribes and Pharisees, as "snakes". By contrast, translating this as "**fruit** of vipers" refers to the origin of the people about whom Jesus Christ was speaking, the origin of the scribes and Pharisees. "Fruit of vipers" refers to these scribes and Pharisees having come from "vipers", i.e. from Satan. This is simply another way of stating Jesus Christ's blunt statement "you are of your father the devil" in John 8:44.

So with these two expressions "serpents" and "generation of vipers" Jesus Christ was referencing **first the effect** these false teachers have on people (i.e. poisoning their minds), and **secondly the origin** of the poison these teachers were spreading, Satan being that original source. Their teachings glaringly declare the ideas of Satan.

The correct meaning of Matthew 23:33 is:

You serpents, you fruit of vipers, how can you escape the judgment of the lake of fire?

Let's not overlook that it was Jesus Christ Himself who brought up the lake of fire as the penalty those Pharisees would incur, and who identified them as "serpents" and as "the fruit of vipers". It wasn't some fanatical wild-eyed fire-and-brimstone preacher who stated that these Pharisees would not escape from the lake of fire. **It was Jesus Christ who said that.**

[COMMENT: As an aside, it is interesting that the people who vigorously defend the use of the Jewish calendar are in fact defending a calendar system that was devised by people who will end up in the lake of fire, and who were identified by Jesus Christ as snakes. Snakes are deceitful. Did God really use people, who Jesus Christ said were heading to the lake of fire, to institute and then preserve some calculated calendar, the determination of which is guided primarily by **a desire for convenience**? The most important part of the whole Jewish calendar calculations are the postponement rules. The rest of that calendar is just an adapted use of slightly inaccurate ancient Greek astronomical calculations.]

This statement in Matthew 23:33 also makes clear that all seven of Jesus Christ's "woe unto you" statements were likewise references to the lake of fire. That is what the whole chapter is about ... **seven different things, all of which lead religious leaders to the lake of fire.** And we should also recognize that all seven are different examples of hypocrisy, because every one of those statements is prefaced with the word "hypocrites".

MATTHEW 18:6-9

Let's now look at another "woe" statement in Matthew's gospel account.

Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence comes! Wherefore if your hand or your foot offend you, cut them off, and cast *them* from you: it is better for you to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire. And if your eye offends you, pluck it out, and cast *it* from you: it is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire (Greek = "ten geennan tou puros"). (Matthew 18:7-9)

Here the expression "**woe to the world**" means the world will suffer severe calamities "because of offences". That is the one meaning of "woe". But the expression "**woe to that man**" is a reference to Judas, and here the word "woe" is a denunciation, and it expresses blame and evil for that man. Here it is a clear reference to destruction in the lake of fire, just as we saw in Matthew 23.

The Greek expression "ten geennan tou puros" literally means "the Gehenna of fire". This is an unmistakable reference to death in the lake of fire.

But here, earlier in His ministry than Matthew 23, **Jesus Christ also held out hope!**

Jesus Christ obviously did not mean that people should literally cut off a hand or a foot, or pluck out an eye. What Jesus Christ was here saying is this:

People who are well on the road to the lake of fire can still recover from that and still end up in God's Kingdom ... but **only if they are prepared to take some extremely drastic actions!**

This applies to all the ministers who have started to teach some or other heresy, after having previously understood the truth. And it also applies to all the members who follow heretical teachings, likewise after having previously understood the truth.

Figuratively cutting off a hand or a foot or plucking out an eye is **an extremely drastic measure**, which is only taken when the continuation of life itself is at stake. Such a measure would never be considered if life itself was not in the balance.

Please understand that these verses here in Matthew 18 are not addressed to what we might call "average circumstances". These verses are directed specifically at people who have started down the road towards the lake of fire. It is only when the lake of fire is **almost** a certainty that then the only possible way out will require extremely drastic actions.

These verses applied to Judas! And they also apply to anyone who has forsaken one or more true teachings of the Bible, after having previously understood the truth on those particular issues.

Judas did have a way out. He could have repented (i.e. changed his way of thinking) back in Matthew chapter 18. But he didn't. And today ministers and members of God's Church who have abandoned one or more true teachings of the Bible in favor of some heretical teaching **can still avoid the lake of fire** ... but only if they will resolve to take some extremely radical actions. By that I mean: if they will cold turkey reject the heresies they have accepted, following the example of the Apostle Paul.

They are not in any position to "negotiate" with God. The destiny of the lake of fire is **staring them in the face!** They either resolutely and unequivocally denounce and reject the heresies they have accepted or they will remain on the road to the lake of fire.

The Apostle Paul took drastic action, as in repenting and doing a 180 degree turnaround within thirty seconds after having been knocked off his donkey on the road to Damascus. Paul's response was the equivalent of "cutting off his hand" or "plucking out his eye". But very few other Pharisees were prepared to make that kind of drastic break with their false ungodly beliefs and teachings.

So there is still hope for those who have started to go down the road towards the lake of fire. But it will not be easy! It will be the equivalent of losing a hand or foot or eye. And sadly, most people in that situation will never come back to the truths that they have walked away from. They will never acknowledge that they had left some true teaching and followed error.

SOME MORE SCRIPTURES

There is another well-known "woe to" statement, in Matthew 24.

And **woe unto them that are with child, and to them** that give suck in those days! (Matthew 24:19)

Here the word "woe" is not at all a reference to the lake of fire. Here it expresses great grief. It would have been equally appropriate to here translate this as "and **alas** to those that are with child, and to those ...". In the severe times that are being described here in Matthew 24 it will be even more difficult for pregnant women and for nursing mothers to just get through those times.

Here there is no moral condemnation involved in the "woe" statement. It is purely an expression of grief for those who will be more vulnerable in those devastating end-time circumstances.

Let's look at one more statement.

Therefore rejoice, *you* heavens, and you that dwell in them. **Woe to the inhabitants of the earth** and of the sea! for the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knows that he hath but a

short time. (Revelation 12:12)

Here the reason for the "woe" statement is also spelled out for us. The reason is **because** the devil will vent his insane anger and frustration on mankind in one last effort before he will be locked away for 1000 years.

So here the "woe to" statement is also not a denunciation. Here it is not a threat of the lake of fire. Here it is simply an expression of grief for the impending calamities that Satan will be responsible for stirring up human beings to instigate. In this verse it could also appropriately be rendered "**alas** to the inhabitants of the earth ...".

Well, that covers most of the "woe" statements in the New Testament. Here is what we have seen:

- 1) The word "woe" always refers to great calamities.
- 2) Sometimes it refers to the greatest calamity of all, which is destruction in the lake of fire. But this is not the case for every use of the word "woe".
- 3) Sometimes the word "woe" involves guilt and evil on the part of the people to whom the "woe" statement is addressed.
- 4) At other times the word "woe" does not imply any guilt or evil for the people to whom the "woe" statement is addressed.
- 5) When guilt and evil are involved, then the "woe" statement is a reference to the second death in the lake of fire.
- 6) When no guilt or evil are involved, then the "woe" statement is an expression of great grief because of impending severe calamities, but without any moral implications. And in these cases it is not a reference to the second death in the lake of fire.

When we consider all of the "woe" statements in the New Testament, the ones with the greatest significance are those that involve warnings about the lake of fire. We should recognize that Jesus Christ's severe indictments against the Pharisees mean that very likely the majority of the Pharisees will die in the lake of fire.

This should tell us that very many other religious leaders who lead people away from the true God will likewise perish in the lake of fire. That includes the religious leaders Paul was referring to in Galatians 1:6-9, and it includes the "ungodly men" Jude spoke about. And it will also include all false teachers throughout the ages, including our age today, who were or are responsible for leading people away from the true teachings of God.

Jesus Christ's warnings to the Pharisees in Matthew chapter 23 were written for our age as much as they were written for every other age.

Frank W Nelte