

## What Was a "Woe" in the Middle East 2000 Years Ago?

In the **ancient Jewish** and **Middle Eastern context** (especially around the time of Jesus, ~30 A.D.), a "**woe**" ("οὐαί" in Greek, pronounced "oo-ah-ee") was:

### 1. An Intense Cry of Sorrow or Lamentation

- A **woe** wasn't casual — it was **emotional**.
- It expressed **deep grief, sorrow, shock, or compassionate mourning**.
- Imagine the sound of someone crying out at a funeral or in devastation — that's the *emotional force* behind the word.

#### **Example:**

Prophets would often cry "woe" over a city they loved but foresaw judgment falling upon.

### 2. A Formal Prophetic Warning

- A "**woe**" was **official language of prophets**.
- It was a **judgment call** — warning people that consequences were coming because of **rebellion, injustice, hypocrisy, or corruption**.
- It signaled that unless there was **repentance, calamity or divine judgment** was inevitable.
- This was common in Old Testament prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel — Jesus was continuing this prophetic tradition.

### 3. A Mixture of Pity and Justice

- A true biblical **woe** carried **both grief and judgment together**.
- It wasn't gleeful ("You deserve this!"), but tragic ("I grieve that this is coming upon you because of your own choices.").

- The prophets and Jesus often *hurt* to speak it, showing **mercy even in warning**.

#### 4. A Signal of Spiritual Blindness or Hardness

- A **woe** exposed **hidden sin, hypocrisy, or stubborn rebellion**.
- It wasn't just about bad actions — it showed that someone had become **spiritually deaf, proud, or hard-hearted** toward God.
- The "woe" was trying to *break* through that spiritual callousness.

#### 5. A Call to Urgent Repentance

- Every time someone said "woe," it implied:
  - *Turn now before it's too late!*
  - *There is still a door open to change if you will hear and see.*

Even when Jesus was speaking "woe," He was offering **a last invitation** for repentance — not simply condemning.

#### How It Differs from Today's Understanding

- Today, "woe" sounds old-fashioned, poetic, or dramatic (like "woe is me!"), often meaning just personal sadness.
- **Back then**, it carried **legal, spiritual, and prophetic weight** — **It was a life-and-death warning wrapped in a lamentation of love**.

#### Quick Example from Jesus' Spirit

When Jesus said "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees," He wasn't *enjoying* condemning them.

He was **weeping inside**, warning them that they were blind and close to ruin, even while offering a final, urgent chance to turn back.

The word "**woe**" (Hebrew: "*hôy*" — הוי) is used in the **Old Testament** approximately **50 to 55 times**, depending on the translation (somewhere in that range across Hebrew manuscripts and English Bibles).

- In the **King James Version (KJV)**, it's around **54 times**.
- In more modern versions, it's around **50–52 times**, because sometimes the word is translated differently depending on the context (like "alas!" or "ah!").
- "**Woe**" in Hebrew (*hôy*) could sometimes even be used at **funerals**, meaning it carried the emotional weight of **mourning** over **someone spiritually dead** even while they were still alive.
- This is exactly the deep sorrow Jesus carries when He pronounces His "woes" — *He's lamenting the spiritual death of those who will not turn.*

### "Woe" Usage in the Old Testament — By Book

- Isaiah - 22 times
- Jeremiah - 8 times
- Ezekiel - 7 time
- Amos - 5 times
- Micah 2 times
- Nahum - 2 times
- Habakkuk - 5 times
- Zephaniah - 2 times
- Lamentations - 1 times
- 1 Kings - 1 time depending on translation
- Proverbs - 1 time depending on translation

**Isaiah** uses "woe" **more than any other book** — **nearly half** of all Old Testament uses!

**Amos** and **Habakkuk** also have several important "woe" oracles, aimed at injustice and corruption.

**Jeremiah's** woes are often woven into laments over Jerusalem's coming destruction.

**Ezekiel** focuses on **false prophets, selfish leaders, and the downfall of nations.**

In the Old Testament, "**woe**" is tightly linked to:

- **Moral failure** (especially among leaders),
- **Spiritual blindness,**
- **Oppression of the weak,**
- **God's grief** over a people who refuse to return to Him.

**Jesus**, when He speaks His **woes** later on, is **stepping right into** this *prophetic tradition*, but He is doing it as **the Son of God Himself** — carrying not just the word of warning, but offering **Himself** as the rescue from it.

### **"Woe" Usage in the New Testament**

- In the **Greek New Testament**, the word for "woe" is **οὐαί** (*ouai*),
- Woe is used approximately 41 times
- It's an **exclamation of grief, warning, or denunciation**, very much carrying the same spirit as the Hebrew *hōy*.

## **Breakdown by Book:**

- Matthew - 13 times
- Luke - 15 times
- Mark - 4 times
- John - 0
- 1 Corinthians - 1 time
- Revelation - 8 times

The **spirit** of "woe" stays the same in OT and NT:

**A sorrowful warning — a call to turn before destruction falls — and a mourning over rebellion.**

## **How the Feeling of "Woe" Evolves from Old Testament to New Testament**

In the **Old Testament**, **"Woe"** is mostly prophetic warning:

- It's like a divine alarm bell ringing out: *You are walking toward disaster — stop!*
- It often speaks to nations or entire groups.
- It carries the weight of God's justice about to act.

In the **New Testament**, **When Jesus says "Woe,"**

- it becomes **deeply personal and sorrowful**.
- He is **not just warning — He is grieving**.
- His "woes" carry **tears** behind them, not just thunder.

- It's like He's saying: *"I see what will happen to you, and My heart is breaking because you won't turn."*

**The prophetic voice becomes a pleading voice, full of love, ache, and personal sacrifice.**

**In short:**

- **Old Testament** = *Woe against* sin. (external)
- **New Testament** = *Woe for* the sinner. (internal sorrow)

**Example:**

Old Testament (Isaiah 5:20):

"Woe to those who call evil good and good evil."

New Testament (Luke 19:41-44, after His woes):

"And when He drew near and saw the city, He wept over it..."

## **Old Testament "Woes" — Background to Jesus' Warnings**

**Isaiah**

### **1. Isaiah 5:8**

*"Woe to those who join house to house and add field to field, until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land."*

- **Theme:** Condemnation of **greed, land-grabbing,** and **economic oppression.**
- **Connection to Jesus:** Jesus often rebukes the rich and the religious elite for the same self-serving blindness.

## 2. Isaiah 5:20

*"Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness..."*

- **Theme: Moral perversion** — twisting truth, confusing light and darkness.
- **Connection to Jesus:** Jesus calls out the Pharisees for making traditions more important than truth, blinding people spiritually.

## 3. Isaiah 10:1-2

*"Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from justice..."*

- **Theme: Corrupt leadership and perverting justice**, especially against the poor.
- **Connection to Jesus:** Echoes Jesus' denunciations of the scribes and lawyers for burdening others while seeking status.

## 4. Isaiah 29:15

*"Woe to those who deeply hide their plans from the Lord, and whose deeds are done in a dark place..."*

- **Theme: Secret rebellion** — hypocrisy hidden under a cover of religion.
- **Connection to Jesus:** Exactly what Jesus exposes when He calls the Pharisees "whitewashed tombs."

## 5. Isaiah 30:1

*"Woe to the rebellious children," declares the Lord, "who execute a plan, but not Mine, and make an alliance, but not of My Spirit..."*

- **Theme: Trusting human schemes** instead of trusting God.
- **Connection to Jesus:** Jesus warns Jerusalem for seeking political alliances instead of spiritual repentance.

## **Jeremiah**

### **1. Jeremiah 13:27**

*"Woe to you, O Jerusalem! Will you not be made clean? How long shall your evil thoughts lodge within you?"*

- **Theme: Plea for cleansing**, mixed with grief.
- **Connection to Jesus:** Jesus weeps over Jerusalem and mourns its refusal to be gathered like "a hen gathers her chicks."

## **Ezekiel**

### **1. Ezekiel 13:3**

*"Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing!"*

- **Theme: False teachers and deceptive leaders.**
- **Connection to Jesus:** Jesus calls out false teachers, warning they are blind guides leading the blind.

### **2. Ezekiel 34:2**

*"Woe to the shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves!  
Should not the shepherds feed the sheep?"*

- **Theme: Selfish leadership** at the expense of the people.
- **Connection to Jesus:** Jesus calls Himself the "Good Shepherd" in contrast to these corrupt ones.

### **Patterns You Can See**

- **Woe = Grief + Warning + Call to Repentance**
- It always highlights **injustice, hypocrisy, false leadership, blindness,** and **moral corruption.**
- It always points to **coming judgment** if no change occurs — but with an open **invitation to return.**

### **How This Prepares Us for Jesus' "Woes"**

By speaking "woes," Jesus was stepping into the role of a **prophet in the full Old Testament tradition,** but **even greater** — because He wasn't just announcing judgment, He was offering **Himself** as the door to escape it.

Every "woe" from Jesus was actually a **plea to return** to the **Way, the Truth, and the Life.**

### **New Testament "Woes"**

#### **Matthew**

#### **1. Matthew 11:21 - Luke 10:13**

*"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes."*

**(Warning to unrepentant cities despite miracles.)**

## **2. Matthew 18:7 and Luke 17:1**

*"Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!"*

**(Warning about causing others to stumble.)**

**3. Matthew 23:13-29** - these are often called the "Seven Woes of the Pharisees." - some translations have 8. Also found in **Luke 11:42-52** (the "Six Woes" to Pharisees and lawyers)

These "woes" in **Matthew 23** are some of Jesus' strongest rebukes aimed at the **religious leaders** of His time — the **Pharisees** and **teachers of the law**. They represent a series of **warnings** about the dangers of **hypocrisy** and **misleading others** in their spiritual lives. Let's break down each of these "woes" for a deeper understanding:

- **1. Matthew 23:13 — Woe for shutting the kingdom of heaven in people's faces**

**"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in."**

**Explanation:** Jesus confronts the religious leaders because they don't enter the kingdom themselves since they reject Jesus, life, mercy, love, compassion, and by their legalistic practices, they make it difficult for others to follow the true path to salvation.

**Application:** This is a warning to anyone in a spiritual leadership position who blocks others from accessing the truth of the gospel or leads them astray with rules and traditions that don't align with God's heart.

- **2. Matthew 23:14 — Woe for devouring widows' houses and making long prayers for show**

**"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive the greater condemnation."**

**Explanation:** Jesus rebukes the **Pharisees** for exploiting vulnerable women, especially **widows**, by **taking advantage of their resources** (perhaps through manipulation or overcharging for religious services) while **pretending** to be pious with long prayers. This is **hypocrisy**: their outward righteousness is a **facade** for **selfishness**.

**Application:** This woe calls out **religious abuse** and **manipulation**, especially by those in power who exploit the vulnerable for personal gain.

- **3. Matthew 23:15 — Woe for making converts worse than themselves**

**"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves."**

**Explanation:** The Pharisees were so **focused on converting others** to their interpretation of Judaism, but in doing so, they **misguided converts** and **made them worse** than they were before. They **focused on external behaviors** and **legalistic rituals** rather than true righteousness.

**Application:** This woe warns against **making converts** who are **burdened** by religious systems that don't lead to true transformation or salvation — focusing instead on external actions rather than a transformed heart.

- **4. Matthew 23:16 — Woe for blind guidance regarding oaths**

**"Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.'"**

**Explanation:** The Pharisees twisted the laws regarding oaths, placing **greater importance on the material** aspects (gold, altar, etc.) than on the **spiritual truth** behind them. They **misguided others** by focusing on the **letter of the law** instead of the **heart** of it.

**Application:** This is a rebuke against those who **misinterpret or manipulate** Scripture for personal gain or to enforce rules that miss the deeper meaning of the faith. It warns against **blind leadership**.

- **5. Matthew 23:23 — Woe for neglecting justice, mercy, and faithfulness while being meticulous about tithing**

**"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others."**

**Explanation:** Jesus condemns the **Pharisees** for focusing on **minor, insignificant details** (like tithing herbs) while **ignoring more important matters** like **justice, mercy, and faithfulness** — the **core values** of God's law. They **obsess over outward rituals** but **fail to live out the heart of God's commands**.

**Application:** This speaks to **religious practices** that are done **out of routine** or **for show**, while neglecting the **deeper, more loving actions** that truly reflect God's heart — like **mercy, justice, and faithfulness**.

- **6. Matthew 23:25 — Woe for outward cleanliness but inward greed and self-indulgence**

**"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence."**

**Explanation:** The Pharisees were concerned with **outward appearances** (like cleaning their dishes or garments) but were full of **greed** and **selfishness** on the inside. Jesus uses this image to show that they were more concerned with **external ritual cleanliness** than **inner purity**.

**Application:** This rebuke focuses on **hypocrisy** — people who **appear righteous on the outside** but are not transformed in their hearts. It's a warning against **focusing on appearance** without **genuine inner change**.

- **7. Matthew 23:27 — Woe for being like whitewashed tombs — beautiful outside, dead inside**

**"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness."**

**Explanation:** The Pharisees were **beautiful on the outside**, like **whitewashed tombs** (which were cleaned and decorated), but **inside** they were filled with **corruption** and **death**. Jesus is condemning their **hypocrisy**, where their external actions don't reflect the **true condition of their hearts**.

**Application:** This is a powerful rebuke against anyone who **puts on a facade** of righteousness while **harboring sin and corruption** within. It's a call for **genuine transformation** from the inside out.

- **8. Matthew 23:29 — Woe for building tombs for the prophets but being just like those who killed them**

**"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.'"**

**Explanation:** The Pharisees **honored** the **prophets** of the past by **building monuments** to them, yet **their actions** revealed they were **just like the people who killed those prophets**. They were **spiritually blind**, claiming to honor the past while **rejecting the message of righteousness** in the present.

**Application:** This woe condemns those who **claim to honor godly leaders of the past** but **fail to live according to their teachings** or **follow God's true ways** in their own lives. It's about **lip service** to righteousness without **living it out**.

### **Summary of These Woes:**

In all of these rebukes, Jesus exposes the **deep hypocrisy** of the religious leaders of the time — their **obsession with outward appearances** while their **hearts and actions** were far from God's true purpose for them. Jesus is calling them (and us) to **genuine, heartfelt obedience** to God, one that aligns our inner lives with our outward actions.

### **4. Matthew 24:19 and Mark 13:17 and Luke 21:23**

*"And alas [woe] for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days!"*

**(Warning about the hardships during the Great Tribulation.)**

### **5. Luke 6:24-26 (Four Woes corresponding to the Beatitudes)**

## 1. Luke 6:24

**"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation."**

**Corresponding Beatitude: Luke 6:20** — "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."

**Explanation:** This woe is directed at those who are rich and self-sufficient, having placed their hope and satisfaction in their material wealth rather than in God's Kingdom. The Beatitude speaks to those who are poor (whether in spirit or material wealth) because they rely on God's provision and trust in His Kingdom. They may lack the comforts of the world but are promised the riches of God's eternal Kingdom.

## 2. Luke 6:25 — "Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry."

**Corresponding Beatitude: Luke 6:21** — "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied."

**Explanation:** This woe is for those who are satisfied with the things of this world — those who are full of material indulgence and pleasure. Jesus warns that their temporary satisfaction will fade, and they will long for true fulfillment. The Beatitude speaks of those who are hungry (whether physically, spiritually, or emotionally) because of their longing for righteousness and God's Kingdom. They are promised that they will be satisfied in eternity, where true fulfillment is found.

## 3. Luke 6:25 (second half) — "Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep."

**Corresponding Beatitude: Luke 6:21 (second half)** — "Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh."

**Explanation:** This woe is for those who laugh now — those who are indifferent to the suffering of others or who indulge in temporary pleasures

that ignore the realities of spiritual life. In the end, they will face mourning and sorrow when they realize their fleeting joy was empty. The Beatitude contrasts this by blessing those who weep now — those who are mourning the brokenness of the world, sorrowful over sin, or enduring hardship for the Kingdom of God. They are promised comfort and joy in the future, a joy that will never fade.

#### **4. Luke 6:26 — "Woe to you when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets."**

**Corresponding Beatitude: Luke 6:22** — "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil on account of the Son of Man."

**Explanation:** This woe is directed at those who seek the approval of the world and are praised by everyone. Jesus warns that this kind of approval is often given to those who speak falsehoods or compromise the truth, like the false prophets of old. The Beatitude contrasts this by blessing those who are hated and reviled for the sake of the Son of Man (Jesus). These individuals may be despised by the world for standing firm in God's truth, but they are promised great reward in Heaven.

#### **Summary of Correspondence:**

- The **woes** in **Luke 6:24-26** reflect the **danger of relying on worldly security**, comfort, and approval. They highlight that those who are **content in their earthly possessions** and **status** will eventually face **emptiness and loss**.
- The **Beatitudes** describe the **blessings** of those who **depend on God** and live for His Kingdom, even if they experience **suffering, hunger, or rejection** in the present. These individuals will be **fulfilled, comforted, and rewarded** in the future, when God's Kingdom is fully realized.

#### **4. Luke 17:1**

*"Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come!"*

**(Parallel to Matthew 18:7.)**

John has No direct "woe" sayings from Jesus recorded in John's Gospel. John's Gospel focuses differently — much more on personal dialogue and identity rather than public prophetic warnings.

#### **Summary of Themes in the Woes**

- **Warning against hypocrisy** (especially religious hypocrisy)
- **Warning about judgment and tribulation**
- **Warning to those who refuse repentance despite miracles**
- **Warning about harming others spiritually (temptations, false teachings)**
- **Warning about valuing worldly comfort, fame, and riches over truth**

**There are 6 woes referenced in the book of revelation, but for now we are just focusing on those pronounced by Christ during his ministry.**