

Matthew 11:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced;
we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented.

Analysis

'For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.' Jesus elevates His disciples' privilege even higher: they witness what Old Testament saints longed to see but couldn't. The 'prophets and righteous men' include Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Daniel—spiritual giants who received and transmitted God's Word, yet lived in the era of promise rather than fulfillment. They prophesied Messiah, anticipated His salvation, longed for His appearing—but died before His incarnation. The verb 'desired' (ἐπεθύμησαν/epethymēsan) indicates intense longing, passionate yearning. Peter echoes this: prophets 'searched diligently' and angels 'desire to look into' what believers now experience (1 Peter 1:10-12). What do disciples see that prophets couldn't? Jesus in the flesh, miracles demonstrating His deity, His teaching, His death and resurrection, His indwelling Spirit. Reformed theology calls this 'progressive revelation'—God revealed truth gradually, culminating in Christ (Hebrews 1:1-2). Old Testament saints were saved the same way (by grace through faith in God's promises), but believers now enjoy fuller revelation and clearer understanding.

Historical Context

Old Testament figures operated under 'types and shadows' (Hebrews 10:1)—they practiced sacrifices pointing to Christ, celebrated festivals foreshadowing His work, followed laws illustrating holiness, heard prophecies predicting His coming.

They possessed genuine salvation but incomplete revelation. Abraham 'rejoiced to see Christ's day' (John 8:56)—through promise and vision, not physical presence. Moses wrote of Christ (John 5:46), but Christ hadn't yet come. David called Messiah 'Lord' (Matthew 22:41-45), but didn't meet Him. Isaiah saw His glory (John 12:41), but prophetically, not historically. These faithful saints died 'not having received the promises' (Hebrews 11:13, 39), looking forward in faith. Jesus's disciples, by contrast, walked with incarnate God, witnessed His works, heard His teaching directly, saw Him crucified and resurrected. The writer of Hebrews emphasizes believers' superior position under new covenant (Hebrews 8-10). This doesn't mean Old Testament saints were lost—they're now with Christ (Hebrews 12:22-24)—but that believers in Christ's post-resurrection church enjoy privileges they anticipated but didn't experience during earthly life.

Related Passages

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How does understanding that prophets longed to see what you have in Christ deepen your appreciation for salvation?
2. What specific privileges do you possess that even great Old Testament saints lacked?
3. How should this perspective affect your Bible reading—especially when Old Testament saints model faith despite less revelation than you have?

Interlinear Text

καὶ λέγουσιν Ἡυλήσαμεν ὑμῖν, καὶ οὐκ ὠρχήσασθε
And **saying** **We have piped** **unto you** **And** **not** **danced**
G2532 G3004 G832 G5213 G2532 G3756 G3738

ἐθρηνήσαμεν ὑμῖν, καὶ οὐκ ἐκόψασθε
we have mourned **unto you** **And** **not** **lamented**
G2354 G5213 G2532 G3756 G2875

Additional Cross-References

Isaiah 30:29 (Parallel theme): Ye shall have a song, as in the night when a holy solemnity is kept; and gladness of heart, as when one goeth with a pipe to come into the mountain of the LORD, to the mighty One of Israel.